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HAZON NAHUM

Studies **in** Jewish Law, Thought, and History  
Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm  
on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday

edited by  
Yaakov **Elman** and Jeffrey S. Gurock



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# *HESED*: DIVINE OR HUMAN? THE SYNTACTIC AMBIGUITY OF RUTH 2:20

MORDECHAI COHEN

Clarity may be cherished by biblical interpreters; but ambiguity evokes their ingenuity, generating vibrant debate. Ruth 2:20, a turning point in the tale of two destitute widows who suddenly perceive a silver lining on their cloudy horizon, vividly illustrates this maxim. Listening to Ruth's casual report of gleaning in the fields of a man named Boaz, her mother-in-law, Naomi, perceives the import of his identity as a redeeming kinsman and invokes an ardent benediction, **ברוך הוא לה' אשר לא עזב חסדו את החיים ואת המתים**, followed by a successful plan to redeem her family heritage. The benediction can be translated in the following way:

(A) Blessed is he to the Lord, who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and with the **dead**.<sup>1</sup>

I wish to acknowledge a number of individuals for their contributions to this essay, in particular those who read the manuscript critically: Prof. Richard Steiner, my teacher, whose course on syntactic ambiguity provided valuable methodology, sources, and the initial impetus for my research; Prof. **Elie** Wiesel, whose comments helped clarify Naomi's ambivalent attitude; Prof. Robert **Salter**s, who aided my research of the early versions; Prof. Y. Elman, my editor, who shared with me his broad erudition and critical acumen; and my students, Mrs. Rebecca Allen and Mrs. Shifra Schapiro, whose review enhanced the substance and style of **this** essay. My colleagues Professors **Hayim Tawil** and Moshe Sokolow provided useful advice, especially on Arabic passages; and I am indebted to Prof. Louis Feldman for translating the relevant Greek and Latin sources. Mr. Zvi Erenyi of the Yeshiva University Library located the rare volumes necessary for my research.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations in this essay are my own. Ancient and modern translators have generally assumed that **חסדו** is the object of the verb **עזב**, similar to I Chron 17:13, **מעמי TDK לא חסדי לא** ("I shall not withdraw my kindness from him"). But

The main clause blesses Boaz for his generosity, while **the** relative clause celebrates the Lord, invoking one of the thirteen divine attributes of mercy, **נוצר חסד** ("preserver of kindness"; Ex 34:7). Naomi's negative formulation, **לא עזב** instead of **אשר נוצר** ("who has preserved"), is noteworthy, and reflects a fundamental transformation in her outlook. Earlier, when returning to Bethlehem bereft of husband and sons, she indeed felt that God had forsaken her (1:20-21); but upon hearing of the fortuitous meeting with Boaz, Naomi senses that God, in fact, "has not abandoned his kindness."

But Naomi's benediction admits another reading. Although the main clause, **ברוך הוא לה'**, is unambiguous, the relative clause, **אשר לא עזב** **חסדו את החיים ואת המתים** (**הוא**) rather than the Lord (**ה'**), yielding a second translation.

(B) Blessed to the Lord is he who has not abandoned his kindness **with** the living and with the dead.<sup>2</sup>

According to this reading, Naomi praises Boaz alone for his generosity in the fields, but says nothing about God, whose providence brought Ruth there in the first place. The pivotal position of this verse, spoken at the moment Naomi's despair turns to hope, makes it imperative to determine whether it radiates religious significance or simple gratitude for human kindness. To evaluate these two readings, this essay traces them in (1) the Jewish exegetical tradition and (2) modern scholarship.

Prof. Richard Steiner (in an oral communication) argued that **חסדו** should be taken as the *subject* of the verb **עזב**, as in II Sam 7:15, **חסדי לא יסור ממנו** ("My kindness shall not depart from him"), since **עזב את** ("to leave," "to abandon") is a synonym of **סרמן** (*qal*; "to depart from"), not **מנן** (*hif'il*; "to remove from"). In **that** case, **את** would be the direct object marker, indicating **החיים והמתים** as the (compound) object, yielding **the** translation, "Blessed is he to **the** Lord, whose kindness has not **left** the living or the dead."

<sup>2</sup> Reading A takes "**the** Lord" to be **the** antecedent (and implied subject) of the relative clause, whereas reading B makes "**he**," i.e. Boaz, the antecedent. Reading B, like reading A, can be modified slightly to accommodate R. Steiner's analysis (see above, n. 1). The syntactic ambiguity of the relative clause is noted in most modern commentaries. See P. Jøuon, *Ruth: Commentaire Philologique et Exégétique* (Rome, 1953), 63; E. Campbell, *Anchor Bible: Ruth* (New York, 1975), 106; J. M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Sheffield, 1979.), 60; Y. Zakovitz, *Mikra le-yisrael: Rut 'im mavo u-perush* (Jerusalem, 1990), 83

Since neither reading is proven decisively, we (3) use the arguments for both to propose that the ambiguity is an intentional literary device, designed to heighten the dramatic tension at this crucial point in the story.

### 1. *History of Jewish Exegesis*

The Jewish exegetical tradition can be traced in ancient translations and medieval commentaries; we begin with the latter, since they address the ambiguity in Ruth 2:20 most directly. Only one medieval author identifies both readings as viable alternatives; others choose one, either explicitly or implicitly, by addressing a related issue. The medieval tradition provides a perspective for subsequent analysis of the ancient translations, which indicate either reading more subtly (if at all) by simply adding or removing a word.

#### The Medieval Tradition

*Yephet ben 'Ali*, the tenth-century Karaite exegete, is the only medieval author who observes that Ruth 2:20 is ambiguous. He provides an Arabic translation, followed by a commentary in Arabic, punctuated by untranslated Hebrew words from Scripture, a feature reflected in our English translation.

And נעמי said to her daughter-in-law: May he be blessed by the Master of the World, who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and the dead . . . .<sup>3</sup>

Her saying *אשר לא עזב חסדו* (“who has not abandoned his kindness”)—it is possible that it refers to God, may He be exalted; or it may refer to Boaz, [in which case] this indicates that Boaz had performed *חסד ואמת* (“kindness and faithfulness”)<sup>4</sup> toward Elimelekh and his sons, who are the *מחים* (“dead”).

<sup>3</sup> Although this English translation looks like reading A, *Yephet's Arabic*, like the Hebrew, is actually ambiguous (a feature that cannot be reproduced in English). See below, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Yephet* introduces *אמת* here with no basis in Ruth 2:20, evidently influenced by the parallel *חסדו ואמתו אשר לא עזב חסדו ואמתו* (Gen 24:27); there he translates *חסד* as Ar. *ספיל* (“grace,” “kindness”; as in Ruth 2:20), and *אמת* as *אמאנה* (“faithfulness”); see below, n. 56. Modern hebraists take *חסד ואמת* as a hendiadys, meaning “true kindness” or “steadfast kindness,”

And her saying **אֵת הַחַיִּים** ("with the living")—refers to herself and to Ruth.<sup>5</sup>

Yephet observes that the relative clause modifies either God or Boaz and, without favoring either reading, elaborates only on the second, attempting to identify Boaz's acts of kindness.<sup>6</sup> As indicated in the pericope, s.v. **אֵת הַחַיִּים**, it is likely that his "kindness with the living" refers to his generosity to Ruth in the fields. But the more elusive "kindness . . . with the dead" forces Yephet to posit a prior history of kindness during Elimelekh's lifetime not recorded elsewhere in Scripture.

It is noteworthy that Yephet infers Boaz's prior kindness from the phrase **אֵשֶׁר לֹא עָזַב חֲסֵדוֹ** rather than **אֵת הַמַּחֲיִים**, as might have been expected.<sup>7</sup> Evidently, he reasons that the verb **עָזַב**, which he takes in its most specific sense, i.e., "to abandon," necessarily implies prior support or protection.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the New Jewish Publication Society translation (NJPS), "who has not *failed* in his kindness," reflecting earlier

rather than "kindness *and* truth." See E. Z. Melamed, "Shenayim sh-hem ehad," *Mefharim ba-mikra, be-targumav u-bi-mefareshav* (Jerusalem, 1984), 142–51, who also notes (144n) that this was recognized by the Rabbis in their paraphrase of **חֲסֵד רַמְתָּ** as **חֲסֵד שֶׁל אֱמֶת** ("true kindness" [lit. "kindness of truth"]).

<sup>5</sup> Original Arabic in N. Schorstein, *Der Commentar des Karäers Jephet ben Ali zum Buche Ruth* (Berlin, 1903), xxxi. English translation my own; compare translation in L. Nemoj, *A Karaite Anthology* (New Haven, 1952), 106. The Arabic reads: **فَكَالَتْ نَعَمِي لِكُنْهَاتِهَا مَبَارَكٌ** **هُوَ مَنْ عَنَدَ رَبِّهَا أَلْعَلِّمِي، أَلَدِّي لَمْ يَتْرِكْ فَعِيلًا مَعَ أَلْحِيَاةٍ وَأَلْمَوْتِي . . .** **قَوْلَهَا أَسَدٌ لֹא عָזַב חֲסֵדוֹ יִחַמְלָא אַנְהָא תְּשִׁיר בְּהָ אֵלִי אֵלֵּהָ תְּעַלִּי יִחַמְלָא אַנְהָא תְּשִׁיר בְּהָ אֵלִי בְּעוֹ שְׁוֹ יִדֵּל אֵל בְּעוֹ קֵר פִּעַל חֲסֵד רַמְתָּ מִעַ אֵלִיםֶךָ וּבְנֵי וְהֵם אֵלְמַתִּים. וְקוּלָּהָ אֵת הַחַיִּים תְּשִׁיר בְּהָ אֵלֵּיהָ וְאֵלֵּי רוּת.**

<sup>6</sup> If God is the subject of the relative clause, it is reasonable to take **אֵת הַחַיִּים** as a reference to all people, living and dead, rather than to Elimelekh's family (see below, n. 31). God's kindness, unlike that of Boaz, is not limited to specific individuals or acts, which is perhaps why Yephet does not elaborate on his first reading.

<sup>7</sup> In Yephet's language, "her saying **אֵשֶׁר לֹא עָזַב חֲסֵדוֹ** . . . indicates (Ar. **יִדֵּל**) that Boaz had performed **חֲסֵד רַמְתָּ** with Elimelekh and his sons." It is clear that this inference is based solely on the phrase **אֵשֶׁר לֹא עָזַב חֲסֵדוֹ** and not the words **אֵת הַמַּחֲיִים**, because he subsequently analyzes **אֵת הַחַיִּים**, which precedes **אֵת הַמַּחֲיִים** in our verse. Cf. the Hebrew translation of Yephet (cited below), which rearranges the commentary.

<sup>8</sup> In Yephet's Arabic translation of this verse, the verb **עָזַב** is rendered **יִתְּרַךְ** ("to abandon"). Compare Sa'adia's translation of Ps 9:11 **לֹא עֹזֵב דּוֹרְשֵׁךָ** (Ar. **לֹא תִתְּרַךְ טְאֵלֶכְךָ**; "you do not abandon those who seek you").



people ("the living" and "the dead") are recipients of Boaz's kindness.<sup>14</sup> While one can only conjecture what motivated Yepheth to record such a problematic reading, it is conceivable that he found it attractive because it most fully captures the sense of the phrase **לא עזב**. According to this reading, Boaz indeed *continued* his kindness toward *the very same people*, while the first reading must view this continuity in a looser sense, applied from one group of people to another.<sup>15</sup>

A twelfth-century Hebrew translation of Yepheth's commentary, which differs slightly from *the* Arabic version, illuminates the implications of Yepheth's analysis.<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew version reads:

ואמר אשר לא עזב חסדו—ישוב אל הית"ש אוישוב אל בועז ואמר nx החיים—ישוב Vs נעמי  
ואל רות.  
ואמר ואת המתים—וזה יודיע כי בועז עשה חסד ואמת עם אלימלך ובניו, והם המתים, במענה  
כי הוא עשה חסד עם נעמי בעבור המתים.

of the sentence and connoting persisting "evil and madness" in **the** hearts of the dead, **ואחריו אל המתים** appears to be an independent clause indicating that death brings man's tormented existence to an end. NJPS thus translates, "while they live; and **then—to the** dead," reflecting the views of Sa'adia (*Hamesh Megillot*, ed. J. Kafih [Jerusalem, 1962] *ad loc.*) and Rashi (*Mikra'ot Gedolot ad loc.*). R. Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York, 1968), 301, explains that **the** last phrase (**אל המתים**) constitutes a consciously fragmentary clause—and then off to the **dead—which** breaks off like life itself."

<sup>14</sup> Apart from the fact that **החיים** and **המתים** mean "the living" and "the dead," this is also indicated by the fact that **the** two nouns are coordinated with a conjunctive *waw* and a second preposition (**את**).

<sup>15</sup> My student, Mrs. Shifra Schapiro, suggests that Yepheth may have also found this reading appealing because it preserves the chronological order of Boaz's kindness, first to Elimelekh and his sons, and now to **Ruth** and Naomi.

<sup>16</sup> This commentary was mistakenly attributed to Yepheth's older Karaite contemporary, Salomon b. Yeruham, under whose name it was published by I. Markon, *Livre d'hommage a la memoire du Dr. Samuel Poznanski* (Warsaw, 1927), Hebrew section, 78-96; English translation in D. R. G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth* (Sheffield, 1977), 47-101. L. Nemoj, "Did Salomon ben Jeroham Compose a Commentary on **Ruth?**" *Jewish Quarterly Review* 39 (1948): 215-16, argues convincingly that this is simply a Hebrew translation of Yepheth. He attributes the minor discrepancies between **the** two versions to (a) liberties taken by **the** translator, and (b) possible differences between the Arabic *Vorlage* of **the** Hebrew translation and the extant Arabic MS. See also Beattie, 25-27, who accepts Nemoj's arguments, but retains the attribution to Salomon "as a convenient method of distinguishing readily between **the** Hebrew version of the commentary and **the** Arabic version."

And it says, "who has not abandoned his kindness"—this refers either to God, may his name be blessed, or it may refer to Boaz.

And it says "with the living"—this refers to Naomi and Ruth.

And it says "and with the dead"—this indicates that Boaz performed "kindness and truth" with Elimelekh and his sons, and they are "the dead," with the meaning **that**<sup>17</sup> he performed kindness with Naomi for the sake of the dead.<sup>18</sup>

The Hebrew, like the Arabic, begins by noting the syntactic ambiguity and elaborating only on reading B. But the translator took liberties with the commentary on **ואת החיים nx**, making three significant changes: (1) The inference that "Boaz performed 'kindness and truth' with Elimelekh and his sons" is derived from the words **המתים nx**, not **אשר לא עזב חסדו**. (2) The Hebrew omits the alternative reading that **nx המתים ואת החיים** means "during their lifetime and in their death"; and (3) it appends Yephet's final comment, "... that he dealt kindly with Naomi for the sake of the dead," to **the first** reading, whereas in the Arabic it relates to the second.<sup>19</sup>

Due to these changes, the Hebrew actually presents a new reading, which may reflect the translator's own thought. Following Yephet's first reading, the Hebrew identifies "the living" as Naomi and Ruth, and "the dead" as Elimelekh and his sons. But by inferring the "kindness with Elimelekh and his sons" from the phrase **המתים nx** rather than from non **אשר לא עזב**, it avoids the necessity of positing Boaz's *prior* acts of kindness. Hence, the translator adds that his "kindness toward the dead" merely implies that he "dealt kindly with Naomi for the sake of

<sup>17</sup>The Hebrew **כי במענה nx** is an Arabism ( $f/s$  **במעני**); see E. Ben Yehuda, *Millon ha-lashon ha-'ivriha-yeshana ve-ha-hadasha* (New York, 1960), 3188, s.v. **מענה**

<sup>18</sup>Hebrew in Markon, 88; English my own, cf. Beattie, 69.

<sup>19</sup>It is possible that the translator, or a later copyist, simply omitted **the** alternative reading, but failed to realize that it includes this final comment, which should have been omitted as well. According to this hypothesis, the translator or copyist erred by mistaking **אלמתים (= המתים)** in the first reading for **והם מתים (= והם מתים)** in **the second**, which immediately precedes **אן במעני nx**. But a different **theory** would **authenticate** the Hebrew version as a reflection of Yephet's own analysis. Perhaps the *Vorlage* of the Hebrew was Yephet's original text, to which a copyist added the second reading ("But it is said also [by others] **that** . . .") appearing in **the** Arabic MS. The second reading was originally written in **the** margin, and later inserted into **the** text as a second gloss on the words **nx החיים**, interrupting the first reading as represented in the Hebrew version

the dead." In other words, a single act, Boaz's *recent* generosity to Ruth and Naomi, represents kindness both toward the living and toward the dead.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Yepheth's Arabic, then, the Hebrew takes **אשר לא עזב חסדו** in the looser sense of "who has **not failed** in his kindness."

*Abraham Ibn Ezra.* Whereas Yepheth kept **both** syntactic options open, Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) definitively asserts that the relative clause modifies Boaz, not God. It has been noted that Ibn Ezra's commentary on Ruth in general manifests Yepheth's influence;<sup>21</sup> and indeed, Yepheth's thorough analysis was his point of departure here.

ברוך ה' אשר לא עזב חסדו—לאות כי עשה חסד בתחילה us אלימלך כי שופט היה.  
החיים-נעמי ורות.

"Blessed is [he to] God,<sup>22</sup> who has not abandoned his kindness"—this is evidence that he had performed kindness beforehand Elimelekh and his sons, for he was a chieftain.<sup>23</sup>

"... the living"—Naomi and Ruth.<sup>24</sup>

This amounts to a partial Hebrew translation of Yepheth, more faithful, in fact, than the actual Hebrew version of Yepheth's commentary, since it infers from non **אשר לא עזב** that Boaz had been kind to Elimelekh *in*

<sup>20</sup>The Hebrew **בועו עשה חסד** ("Boaz performed kindness") is simple perfect, not pluperfect ("Boaz *had* performed kindness"); cf. Ibn Ezra's formulation, **בועו עשה חסד בתחילה**, cited below. Yepheth's Arabic **בעו קד פעל חסד** seems to indicate **the** pluperfect, **although the** prefix **קד** can be construed **otherwise**; see W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* (New York, 1967), II:3–5.

<sup>21</sup>See Schorstein, 5, Beattie, 37.

<sup>22</sup>It is surprising that this **incipit** omits the crucial words, **ל הוא** ... , leaving **ברוך ה'** **חסדו אשר לא עזב חסדו**, which would imply that God is the subject of the relative clause (see discussion of the *Peshitta*, below) But this is clearly not Ibn Ezra's view, as indicated by his commentary on **this** verse. It is likely that the laconic **incipit** is the result of a copyist's error.

<sup>23</sup>Biblical Hebrew (BH) **שופט** has a more general connotation than English "judge"; see NJPS on Ruth I:1; Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (BDB)*, s.v. **שפט**.

<sup>24</sup>Hebrew from *Mikra'ot Gedolot*; English my own; cf. Beattie, 140.

the past.<sup>25</sup> But by omitting Yephet's deliberation over the syntactic ambiguity, Ibn Ezra uses his predecessor's language selectively to indicate reading B,<sup>26</sup> which he supports with the rabbinic tradition that Boaz "was a chieftain," and was thus in a position to have assisted Elimelekh.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps because reading B depends upon information not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, Yephet equivocated, and cited reading A as an alternative. But Ibn Ezra, embracing the rabbinic tradition that a Karaite like Yephet ignored, committed himself to reading B.<sup>28</sup>

*Rashi.* Like Ibn Ezra, Rashi (1040-1105) chooses only one reading; but his language suggests that he attributes religious significance to Naomi's words by making God the antecedent of **the** relative clause. Independent, of course, of Yephet's influence, Rashi introduces a **fresh** perspective in his commentary.

\*nan החיים ואח המתים-שון ומפרנס nx החיים ונטפל בצרכי

"With the living and with the **dead**"—that he feeds and supports "the living" and attends to the needs of "the **dead**."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Ezra understood Yephet's Arabic **בעו קד פעל חסד** as a pluperfect and clearly rendered it as such in Hebrew (**בועו תחסד בחילה**), in contrast to **the** translation of Yephet's commentary, which reads, **בועו עשה חסד** (see above, n. 20).

<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, he omits the alternative reading of **החיים ואח המתים nx**, discouraged, no doubt, by **the** linguistic difficulties it entails.

<sup>27</sup> The **view** of **the** Rabbis (b. *Bava Batra* 91a), who identify Boaz as **the** Bethlehem chieftain **Ivzan** (Judg 12:8), is originally cited by Ibn Ezra at the first mention of Boaz (Ruth 2:1).

<sup>28</sup> Despite his professed deference to the Rabbis and criticism of the Karaites for lack thereof, Ibn Ezra's attitude toward rabbinic exegesis was complex. See his introductions to **the** Pentateuch and Lamentations; see also U. Simon, "Avraham Ibn 'Ezra," in *Parshanut ha-mikra ha-yehudit: pirkei mavo*, ed. M. Greenberg (Jerusalem, 1983), 51-52. It is **noteworthy** that Ibn Ezra cites rabbinic tradition here, since he normally refrains from relying on midrashic views without scriptural basis; and he might have been able to support reading B using **the** biblical depiction of Boaz as "a man of substance" (**איש חייל**; Ruth 2.1). Perhaps Ibn Ezra was motivated, if only subconsciously, by polemical considerations. Setting himself apart from Yephet, he undermines **the** Karaite ideology by demonstrating that the Rabbis' historical tradition agrees **with** the implications of the plain sense of Scripture, identified by Yephet himself.

<sup>29</sup> Hebrew in *Mikra'ot Gedolot*; English my own; cf. Beattie, 107. This comment, a paraphrase of *Ruth Rabbah* (see below), does not appear in early printed editions of Rashi, nor in some early MSS. Some scholars believe **that this** situation, common in

Unconcerned with syntactic analysis, Rashi defines the kindness celebrated by Naomi **without** explicitly identifying the antecedent of the relative clause. Yet he seems to have assumed reading A, since his formulation, שזון ומפרנס nx החיים, echoes כי הוא לכל וx ומפרנס לכל ("for He is a God that feeds and supports all [beings]") from *Birkatha-Mazon* (Grace After Meals), a praise of God's kindness. By identifying the "kindness . . . with the dead" as "attending to the needs of the dead," Rashi also seems to reflect reading A, since it is unreasonable to assume that Boaz was involved with **the** burial of Elimelekh and his sons,<sup>30</sup> whereas God's acts of kindness, according to rabbinic tradition, include "burying the dead" (*b. Soṭa* 14a).<sup>31</sup>

Much as Ibn Ezra borrows from Yepheth, Rashi derives his comment from *Ruth Kabbah* on this verse:

שזון ומפרנס nx חיים. ואת המתים—שנטפל ana בתכריכהו

. . . who fed and supported the living.

"And with the **dead**"—who attended to their burial shrouds.<sup>32</sup>

Rashi's Pentateuch commentary, strongly indicates a later copyist's addition, **although** *tiiir* conclusion has been disputed; see A. Grossman, *Hakhmei Zarefat ha-Rishonim* (Jerusalem, 1995), 184-93; see also B. Y. Levy, "Rashi's Commentary on the Book of Samuel: Critical Edition and **Supercommentary**" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yeshiva University; New York, 1987). Even if *tiiir* comment is not **authentically** Rashi's, it can be said to represent a medieval **exegetical** stance based on midrashic tradition.

<sup>30</sup> See below, n. 33.

<sup>31</sup> An important aspect of reading A becomes apparent when we compare Rashi **with** reading B as presented by Yepheth and Ibn Ezra. The main clause, בריך הוא לה, clearly celebrates Boaz. Reading B makes him **the** subject of **the** relative clause as well, which thus amounts to an explanation for **the** main clause: Boaz is blessed *because* he acted kindly "with the living and . . . dead." Since Naomi must enumerate Boaz's kind acts precisely to establish his praiseworthiness, specificity characterizes the analysis of Yepheth and Ibn Ezra, who identify "the living" and "the dead" as specific individuals toward whom Boaz acted kindly at specific times. But reading A makes **the** relative clause an *incidental* tribute to God, which need not be taken as **anything** more **than** a general praise for His beneficence toward **all** beings. Hence, Rashi does not identify *Ruth* and Naomi in particular as "the living," nor Elimelekh and his sons as "**the** dead."

<sup>32</sup> *Ruth Rabbah* 5.10. For variants and notes, see M. B. Lerner, *Aggadat Rut u-midrash Rut Rabba* (Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University; Jerusalem, 1971) I:142, II:50. *Ruth Rabbah* in its current form may have been composed as late as the eleventh century, but is generally believed to contain ancient rabbinic traditions (Beattie, 21).

Rashi apparently took this to be an ancient precedent for reading A, which he modified by substituting the participle, **ומפרינס** JT, for the past tense, **ופרינס** JT, in order to highlight the parallel with *Birkat ha-Mazon*. He also exchanged the specific, concrete formulation, "who attended to their burial shrouds," with the more comprehensive, intangible one, "who attends to the needs of the dead," which better befits God's kindness.<sup>33</sup>

### Ancient Translations

After tracing readings A and B in the medieval tradition, we examine four ancient translations: the **Targum** (Aramaic), Septuagint (Greek), Vulgate (Latin), and Peshitta (Syriac). Of these, only the Targum can claim absolute Jewish provenance, since the Septuagint and Peshitta, while perhaps written by Jews, were transmitted and modified by the Church, and the Vulgate was penned by Jerome.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, all incorporate ancient Jewish traditions, and must be considered in an attempt to delineate the history of Jewish interpretation of Ruth 2:20.

The Targum indicates neither reading A nor B, since it simply reproduces the ambiguous Hebrew.

<sup>33</sup> Theoretically, these "revisions" might simply reflect a variant midrashic text Rashi used; we note, however, that none of the variants cited by Lerner matches his language. Although Rashi's understanding of *Ruth Rabbah* is plausible, his revisions point to the fact that the existing text also admits reading B, as some commentators have noted (see Lerner, II:50). As opposed to **ומפרינס** |t, which implies continual support, **ון ופרינס** (past tense), one might argue, indicates specific acts of kindness more befitting a human agent. It might also be considered surprising that the Rabbis would speak of God providing burial shrouds. This perhaps motivated L. Rabinowitz, *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth* (London, 1961), 69, to infer that, according to the Midrash, Boaz purchased burial shrouds for Elimelekh and his sons. But Beattie (177) observes the difficulty in suggesting that "Boaz might have paid for the shrouds which were made . . . presumably in Moab" (see also below, n. 54). Nor is the notion of God providing burial shrouds truly foreign to rabbinic thinking, since *b.Sota* 14a, which depicts God "burying the dead" (**קובר מתים**), also speaks of Him "dressing the naked" (**מלביש ערומים**).

<sup>34</sup> On the origin and Jewish traditions reflected in the Septuagint and Vulgate, see B. Roberts, *The Old Testament Text and Versions* (Cardiff, 1951), 101-119; 247-258. On the Peshitta, see Y. Maori, *The Peshitta Version of the Pentateuch and Early Jewish Exegesis* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1995). The Old Latin, on the other hand (cited below), does not reflect substantial Jewish influence (Roberts, 237-246).

מברך הוא מפום קודשא דה' דלא שבק טיבותיה עם חיא ועם מתיא

Blessed is he from the **holy** mouth of the Lord, who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and with the **dead**.<sup>35</sup>

Because Aramaic **לאל** is an exact translation of Hebrew **לא** אשר, the Targum is open to the same interpretations as the original.<sup>36</sup>

But **the** Septuagint is more helpful, since it does not render **אשר** simply as a relative pronoun ("who").

Εὐλογητός ἐστὶν τῷ κυρίῳ, ὃν οὐκ ἐγκατέλιπεν τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν ζώντων καὶ μετὰ τῶν τεθνηκότων.

Blessed is he to the Lord, because (**δτι**) he has not abandoned (lit. "left behind") his mercy with the living and with the dead.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Text of Targum from E. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Ruth* (Rome, 1973), 31; on the addition "from the Holy mouth of the Lord," see Levine, 83.

<sup>36</sup> As noted above (n. 3), this ambiguity cannot be reflected in a single English translation. Yepheth's Arabic translation (cited above, p. 13), also preserves **the** ambiguity of the Hebrew, which is not surprising, since he viewed readings A and B as viable alternatives. Sa'adia's Arabic likewise preserves the ambiguity: **יכון מבארכא ללה אלרי למ יכיל** פצלה **פ** אלחיא ואלמותי ("Blessed be he to **the** Lord, who has not withheld his kindness from the living and from **the** dead") Sa'adia's translation (see H. Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works* [New York, 1926], 323–24) appears in M. Peritz, "Zwei alte arabische Übersetzungen des Buches Rûth," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 43 (1899): 215, reprinted in J. Kafih, *Hamesh Megillot* (Jerusalem, 1962), 145. Compare **לא תכלא רחמך ממני** here with Sa'adia's translation of Ps 40:12 **לם תכלא רחמך** ("Do not withhold your mercy from me") as **לם תכליימן רחמתך**. Despite the clear phonetic connection, **this** translation is surprising since **Ar. خلو** (fourth form) means "to empty" or "to deplete," while **Heb. תכלא** in this context means "to withhold." Y. Ratzaby, *Ozar ha-lashon ha-Aravut be-tafsir R. Sa'adia Ga'on* (Ramat Gan, 1985), 62, conjectures that Sa'adia viewed **the** two roots as cognates and employs **خلو** here in the (admittedly rare) sense of "to withhold." Kafih on Ps 40.12, on the other hand, explains that Sa'adia (poetically?) speaks of God "depleting" His kindness toward David (perhaps akin to the notion that divine kindness based on "merit of the fathers" [זכות אבות] is depletable [b. *Shabbat* 55a]). And, in fact, in his commentary on Gen 23:1, Sa'adia (surprisingly) associates **the** Hebrew roots **כלא** ("to withhold") and **כלה** ("to deplete"); see M. Zucker, *Peirushei Rav Sa'adia Ga'on li-Bereishit* (New York, 1984), 145.

<sup>37</sup> Greek text from A. Rahlf's ed. (Stuttgart, 1935).

Translating אֲשֶׁר as the causal particle ΟΤΙ ("since, because") makes the relative clause a *justification* of that which is stated in **the** main clause.<sup>38</sup> Since the main clause states that Boaz is blessed and predicates **nothing** of God, the relative clause must explain why Boaz is blessed, reflecting reading B.<sup>39</sup>

This becomes clearer in the Vulgate, which also employs the causal particle (*quoniam*, equivalent to Greek ὅτι).

*Benedictus sit a Domino quoniam eandem gratiam quam praeberat vivis servavit et mortuis.*

May he be blessed by the Lord, because the same grace which he had shown to the living he preserved also to the dead.<sup>40</sup>

Using the subjunctive ("May he be blessed"), the Latin construes the main clause as a *prayer* that God bless Boaz. Naomi justifies this prayer in **the quoniam** clause, in which, by relating Boaz's steadfast kindness, she indicates what, in her view, makes him worthy of being blessed.

An entirely different approach, which reflects an ancient precedent for reading A, appears in the Peshitta.

<sup>38</sup> On אֲשֶׁר as a causal particle, see *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, trans. A. E. Cowley (Oxford, 1909), 492. Unlike a relative clause, which generally modifies a specific noun, a causal clause is a sentence modifier, hence, the clause "because he has not abandoned" must modify *that which is predicated* in the main clause.

<sup>39</sup> Surprisingly, Campbell, *Anchor Bible*, 106, fails to observe this decisive factor in **the** Greek, although he does mention that Boaz is probably **the** antecedent of **the** relative clause, since the Septuagint "usually adds a name when a change of subject occurs."

<sup>40</sup> My thanks to Prof. Moshe J. Bernstein for this translation. Interestingly, the Latin formulation, "the same grace which he had shown to **the** living he preserved also to the dead," indicating praise for Boaz's continuous kindness, is a precedent for Yepheth's assumption that the phrase לֹא עָזַב חֲסֵדוֹ, taken in its strongest sense ("he has not *abandoned* his kindness"), implies Boaz's earlier acts of kindness. The Vulgate, in fact, adopts Yepheth's alternative reading, which takes הַחַיִּים וְאֵת הַמֵּתִים nx to mean "in their lifetime and in their death." The "grace which he had shown to the living," **the** Latin equivalent of הַחַיִּים nx Hon, was in the remote past, when Elimelech was alive. The kindness "he preserved also to the dead," the Latin rendering of וְאֵת הַמֵּתִים, thus refers to Boaz's recent generosity, which can be construed as "kindness . . . with the dead" because, as Yepheth explains, "he performed חֲסֵד with Naomi for the sake of **the מֵתִים**." (On this basis, one might even conjecture that **the** anonymous alternative reading cited by Yepheth actually originated from the Vulgate.)

71a הו מריא דלא אעבר חסדה ק חיאומן מתיא.

Blessed is the Lord, who has not removed his kindness from the living and from the dead.<sup>41</sup>

Since Boaz is not mentioned in the main clause, "the Lord" must be the subject of the relative clause. But the most striking feature of the Peshitta is its rendering of ברוך הוא לה as "Blessed is the Lord," a translation unfaithful to the Masoretic Text (MT). Although some scholars assume that the Peshitta's *Vorlage* differed from the MT and actually read ברוך הוא ה',<sup>42</sup> it is conceivable that the Syriac translator himself took liberties in translating the MT.<sup>43</sup> To begin with, the Peshitta, which typically

<sup>41</sup> This and other citations of Peshitta on Ruth are from A. Hubsch, *Die Fünf Megilloth nebst dem syrischen Thargumgemant Peschitto* (Prague, 1866). The anonymous medieval Arabic translation in the Walton Polyglot, *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta* (London, 1655) reads similarly: תבארך אללה אלדרי לם יצרף רחמתה ען אלאחיא ואלאמואת ("Blessed be the Lord, who has not removed his kindness from the living and from the dead"); this, however, cannot be considered a separate source, since it is translated from the Peshitta, not the Hebrew text (Roberts, 269). On the other hand, independent corroboration seems to be provided by the Old Latin (OL) version: *Benedictus est dominus qui non derelinquit misericordiam suam cum vivis et cum mortuis* ("Blessed is the Lord, who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and with the dead"); *Vetus Latina-Rut: estudio critico de la version Latina prejeronomiana del libro de Rut*, ed. J. C. Ortiz de Urbina [Madrid 1965], 42-43), on the implications of this consensus, see the following note. Yet some scholars conjecture that the OL itself was influenced by the Peshitta (Roberts, 239), a view supported by this example.

<sup>42</sup> Adopting this view, BHK also cites the OL (see n. 41) and a single Hebrew MS that actually reads ברוך הוא ה' (J. B. de Rossi, *Variae lectionis Veteris Testamenti* [Parma, 1784-88], II:236).

<sup>43</sup> It is now recognized that discrepancies between ancient versions and the MT may reflect exegesis rather than a variant text, particularly in versions that otherwise appear to be free paraphrase rather than literal translation, a trait noted in the Peshitta on Ruth (Roberts, 221). See Y. Maori, "Methodological Criteria for Distinguishing Between Variant *Vorlage* and Exegesis in the Peshitta Pentateuch," in P. B. Dirksen and A. Van Der Kooij, eds., *The Peshitta as a Translation* (Leiden, 1995), 103-20. Adopting this approach to our verse, Zakovitz, *Miqra le-Yisrael*, 83, cites the Peshitta, OL, and even de Rossi's Hebrew MS, as those who "interpret these words as referring to 'the Lord'" (TOTS ה' מלים אלו על; emphasis added). OL in particular, it has been suggested, "must be used circumspectly for Masoretic textual criticism" (Roberts, 242), which (given the possible exegetical motivations discussed below) might explain why BHK omits reference to OL (unlike earlier BHK; preceding note), although it does cite Peshitta and de Rossi's Hebrew MS to suggest a variant text.

harmonizes similar biblical verses,<sup>44</sup> was evidently influenced by the parallel in Gen 24:27, said by Abraham's servant:

ברוך ה' אלהי אדוני אברהם אשר לא עזב ואמתו מעם אדוני.

Blessed is the Lord, God of my master Abraham, who has not **withdrawn** his kindness and **truth** from<sup>45</sup> my master.<sup>40</sup>

The Peshitta may have also been motivated by exegetical considerations, making two assumptions attested separately elsewhere in the exegetical tradition: (1) "the Lord" is the subject of the relative clause (Rashi, following *Ruth Rabbah*); (2) the relative clause is a *justification* of Naomi's benediction (Septuagint and Vulgate).<sup>47</sup> Combined, these two premises require that "the Lord" be the recipient of the benediction in the main clause.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> See Maori, *Peshitta and Jewish Exegesis*, 37-40. On this tendency in the Aramaic Targumim, see M. Klein, "Associative and Complementary Translation in the Targumim," *Eretz Israel* 16 (1982): 134\*-140\* (my thanks to Prof. Richard Steiner for this reference).

<sup>45</sup> The preposition מעם ("from," instead of ns ["with"] in Ruth 2:20) precludes translating עזב into proper English as "abandoned," since one does not "abandon kindness" from someone else. The verb עזב is thus translated here as "withdraw."

<sup>46</sup> The Peshitta there translates, ברך הו אלהי דמרי אברהם דלא כלא סיבותיה וקושתהמן xna ("Blessed is the Lord, God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld his kindness and truth from my master"; C. Heller ed., *Peshitta on Genesis* [Berlin, 1927]). The main clause is rendered identically in both verses as ברך הו מריא, although אשר לא עזב non מרי is translated differently, perhaps a result of the multiple authorship of the Peshitta on different biblical books (see Roberts, 221). The claim here is that the translator of Ruth 2:20 was influenced by the Hebrew of Gen 24:27. While equating ברוך הוא לה' and ברוך ה' is dubious, it is reasonable to assume that אשר לא עזב חסדו, functions identically—as a praise of God—in both verses, a point raised in modern scholarship, and perhaps adumbrated by Sa'adia (see below, p. 29).

<sup>47</sup> The Syriac translator may have made these assumptions independently, or been influenced by the Septuagint and Midrash, which he often used. See Maori, *Peshitta and Jewish Exegesis*.

<sup>48</sup> Hiibsch reflects this reasoning in his comment here (הרגם p בעבור שלא ידע לכוון) (אם לא עזב וכי, אלא על הקביעה UPS). The Peshitta adopts a similar approach on I Sam 15:13, ברך הו לך הקימותי xna דבר ה' ("Blessed are you to the Lord; I have fulfilled the word of the Lord"), in which the connection between the independent clauses is not entirely clear. (Abarbanel ad loc. argues that "I have fulfilled the word of the Lord" justifies Saul's praise for Samuel, who communicated God's word to Saul, whereas Joseph Qara suggests that the "benediction" is merely a formal greeting introducing the subsequent

## 2. Modern Scholarship

Does Naomi praise God or Boaz in her words non **לא עזב**? The exegetical tradition hardly resolves this matter, since the Peshitta and Rashi (following *Ruth Rabbah*) adopt reading A; the Septuagint, Vulgate, and Ibn Ezra adopt reading B; while Yepheth equivocates, recognizing both as valid possibilities. The debate continues in modern scholarship, which occasionally retraces earlier arguments, but otherwise contributes greatly to the analysis of Naomi's benediction by addressing its ambiguity more scientifically, citing evidence from within the text of Ruth and elsewhere in Scripture.

### Implications of the Phrase non **לא עזב**

The immediate context of Ruth 2:20 supports reading B, since (1) Boaz had just exhibited generosity in the fields, (2) Naomi confers her benediction (**ברוך הוא לה**) upon him, and (3) he is discussed in the next verse as a potential "redeemer." Yet a wider perspective of Ruth, advocated by P. Joion, invites reading A, since Naomi had earlier viewed God as a source of anguish, saying, "The Lord's hand has struck out against me. . . . Shaddai has made my lot very bitter . . . and has brought misfortune upon me" (1:13, 20-21). This attitude is reversed, Joion argues, when Naomi perceives the beneficent hand of God in the chance encounter that created a possibility for redeeming her family lineage.<sup>49</sup>

phrase, which was Saul's actual message to Samuel ) The Peshitta, which reads **ברוך מריא דאקים פתגמה** ("Blessed is the Lord, who has established His word"), resolves the dilemma by doing violence to the Hebrew, construing it as if the *Vorlage* were **אשר הקים ברוך n** *van nx*. (Following the Peshitta, the Arabic version in the Walton Polyglot [see above, n. 41] reads **חבארד אלרב אלרי חקק קולה** ["Blessed be the Almighty, who has established His word"].) As in **Ruth 2:20**, the Peshitta turns the first phrase into a benediction of God, and makes the second a justification of the benediction. Given the drastic discrepancy between the Syriac and Hebrew on I Sam 15:13, and the lack of other textual evidence of variation from the MT, it seems clear that this example reflects the Peshitta's conscious divergence from the Hebrew on the basis of an exegetical stance. (It is thus not surprising that even *BHK/S* do not cite the Peshitta as a variant from the MT.)

<sup>49</sup> Joion, *Ruth*, 63; see above, p. 11.

The very words **לא עזב חסדרו** discussed by Ibn Ezra, the staunch medieval advocate of reading B, bring **Jouon** to support reading A. "One cannot say," he argues, "that Boaz had preserved his kindness toward Naomi, and certainly not toward Ruth, whom he did not know, nor toward Elimelekh and his sons."<sup>50</sup> Like the Vulgate, Yephet, and Ibn Ezra, **Joiion** takes **לא עזב חסדרו** in its strongest sense, "[he] *has preserved* his kindness," which credits the subject of the phrase with prior *hesed*. But unlike his predecessors, **Joiion** infers that **this** points to God, whose record of prior beneficence is beyond question. Naomi now recognizes that God had never, in fact, abandoned her entirely, and regards this display of providence as a *continuation* of His earlier kindness, which she had failed to perceive. Boaz's prior kindness toward Naomi, Elimelekh, and their sons, on the other hand, is unattested; and he could not have previously acted kindly toward Ruth, whom he did not know until this point.

Although **Joiion's** reading is *literarily* sound and religiously profound, the evidence he marshals is not decisive. To begin with, if Boaz's prior kindness toward Naomi, Elimelekh, and his sons is established, we could regard Ruth as its (indirect) beneficiary as part of their family.<sup>51</sup> The critical problem, then, is the absence of any independent biblical record of Boaz's prior kindness; but even this can be resolved if one assumes, as Yephet and Ibn Ezra did, that it can legitimately be inferred from Ruth 2:20 alone.

<sup>50</sup> "On ne peut pas dire que Boaz *ait* garde sa bonte envers *Noëmi* et surtout envers Ruth qu'*il* ne connaissait pas, *ni* envers *Elimelek* et ses fils" (*ibid.*).

<sup>51</sup> Compare Ibn Ezra's rule that "Scripture speaks only about the majority" (**לא דבר** **הרוב** **כי על הרוב** **הכתוב** **ox** commentary on Gen 46:27), which allows a generalization to ignore an exception. We should note that the medieval exegetes actually answer this criticism differently. Adopting the understanding reflected in the Vulgate ("the same grace which he had shown to **the** living he preserved also to the dead"), they take the words "who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and with the dead" to mean **that** Boaz's recent kindness toward (1) Naomi and Ruth is an extension of his kindness in the past with (2) Elimelekh and his sons *alone*. But **Jouon** assumes that the kindness toward both groups, i.e., Naomi, Ruth, Elimelekh, and his sons, is said to have continued from the past into the present.

### *Hesed* in Scripture

Rejecting Jolion's God-centered reading, N. Glueck observes that nowhere else in Scripture is God said to direct *hesed* toward the dead, which conforms with the biblical perception that the dead are devoid of any relationship with God.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, human beings are said to perform *hesed* toward the dead, for example, in Ruth 1:8, **יעש'נ עמכם** **י'עש'נ עמכם** ("May the Lord perform kindness with you, as you have done with the dead and with me"), where Naomi praises her daughters-in-law for their kindness toward herself and the dead.<sup>53</sup> The parallel between this verse and 2:20, both uttered by Naomi, is noteworthy. In 1:8 Naomi describes kindness "with the dead and with me," i.e., herself; in 2:20, Ruth is appended to Naomi, yielding "with the living"—i.e., Naomi and Ruth—"and with the dead."<sup>54</sup> In 1:8, the kindness was performed by human agents; Glueck thus reasons that in 2:20, as well, a human agent, i.e., Boaz, must have performed the kindness "with the living and with the dead."

But Ruth 1:8 does not conclusively rule out reading A; in fact, it may even suggest that reading. The phrase **יעש'ה עמכם חסד** is a prayer that God will reciprocate with His own kindness toward Ruth (and Orpah) for their kindness. It is thus conceivable that 2:20 represents Naomi's acknowledgment that God has fulfilled her prayer that kindness be done to Ruth, who now, as a source of divine beneficence, brings hope to Naomi herself, and the legacy of her deceased husband and

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., Is 38:11, 18; Ps 6:6, 88:12. *Hesed in the Bible*, trans. A. Gottschalk (Cincinnati, 1967), 40-42.

<sup>53</sup> See also II Sam 2:5, referring to the burial of Saul, and Gen 47:29, Jacob's request that Joseph bury him in Canaan.

<sup>54</sup> *Ruth Rabbah* also highlights this parallel, since the gloss on 2:20 (cited above, p. 20) echoes a similar one on 1:8, which reads: **עם המתים - שנטפלוהם בחכריכיהם. ועמרי** . . . with the dead—that you tended to their burial shrouds." "and with me—that they absolved her of their marriage settlement" [*Ruth Rabbah*, 2:14; Lerner, I:68].)

But rather than drawing Glueck's conclusion, the Midrash can be said to demonstrate a connection between divine and human kindness. Naomi later praises God as He "who attended to . . . burial shrouds," precisely the actions performed by her daughters-in-law, indicating that their behavior reflected a divine quality. (Claiming, instead, that *Ruth Rabbah* on 2:20 credits Boaz with purchasing burial shrouds for Elimelech and his sons [see above, n. 33] leads to a contradiction between these two midrashic sources.)

children. Nor is the argument from the lack of divine **חסד** toward the dead elsewhere in Scripture conclusive, since, as Glueck himself admits, Ruth 2:20 could be taken as the biblical source for this concept, which surfaces in the rabbinic tradition that credits God with "burying the dead."<sup>55</sup>

### Syntax of the Formula **ברוך הוא לה'**

The most compelling evidence for either reading of Ruth 2:20 derives from other biblical verses that manifest similar language and structure. To support reading A, Joüon cites Gen 24:27, **ברוך 71 אֵלֵהי**, **אֲדוֹנֵי אַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא עָזַב** non **וְאִמְתּוֹ מִעַם אֲדוֹנֵי** ("Blessed is the Lord, God of my master Abraham, who has not withdrawn his true kindness from my master"), said by Abraham's servant, the verse that evidently influenced the Peshitta, as mentioned above.<sup>56</sup> The benediction **ברוך ה'** in the main clause there allows for only one antecedent of the relative clause, namely **ה'**, which would seem to demonstrate that **ה'** is also the antecedent of Naomi's relative clause.

Yet this parallel is inconclusive precisely because of the difference in construction that makes Gen 24:27 unambiguous. God is the recipient of the benediction **ברוך 71 אֵלֵהי**, whereas **ברוך הוא לה'** bestows a benediction upon Boaz. If the phrase non **עָזַב** xV **אֲשֶׁר** always modifies God, then it functions differently in the two verses. In Gen 24:27 it serves to justify the benediction in the main clause; God is praised *because* of His kindness to Abraham. But in Ruth 2:20, reading A makes the relative clause an *incidental* praise to God, rather than an explanation for the benediction—of Boaz—in the main clause. More compelling proof for

<sup>55</sup> See above, p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> Jouon, 64; see also Campbell, 106. Sa'adia may have also believed that Ruth 2:20 can be interpreted in light of Gen 24:27, since he translates the words non **אֲשֶׁר לֹא עָזַב** identically in both (as observed by S. Poznanski, *Zeitschrift für hebraeische Bibliographie* IV [1900]: 167). His translation of Ruth 2:20 appears above, n. 36; his translation of Gen 24:27 reads: **תְּבַאֲרֵךְ אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹרָהִים אֲדוֹנֵי אֲבֹרָהִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא עָזַב וְאִמְתּוֹ מִעַם אֲדוֹנֵי** ("Blessed be the Lord, God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld his kindness and goodness from my master"; J. Derenbourg, *Oeuvres complètes de R. Saadia ben Josef al-Fayyūmī* [Paris, 1893], 35). Yepheth, on the other hand, does not treat the relative clause identically; on Gen 24:27 he translates: **עַד מִי יִסִּיב מִיִּיבֵהוּ וְאִמְתּוֹ מִעַם אֲדוֹנֵי** ("who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness from my master Abraham"; MSS), his translation of Ruth 2.20 appears above, p. 13.

either reading of Ruth 2:20 must come from a closer match, a verse manifesting the structure  $\text{לה} X \text{ברוך}$  (where X is the recipient of the benediction), followed by an  $\text{אשר}$  clause.

Such a parallel occurs in II Sam 2:5,  $\text{לה} \text{אשרשיחם החסד}$   $\text{onx}$   $\text{ברוכים}$   $\text{הוה}$  ("Blessed to the Lord are you who have performed this kindness"), cited by N. Glueck to support reading B.<sup>57</sup> Although it lacks the phrase  $\text{אשר}$ , its basic structure is identical to that of Ruth 2:20 and it is unambiguous, since the subject of the relative clause must agree with the verb  $\text{onx}$  and can only be  $\text{אשר}$ .<sup>58</sup> Given the formulaic nature of biblical benedictions, it is reasonable to assume that the  $\text{אשר}$  clause functions identically in both verses, i.e., to justify the choice of the recipient of the benediction,  $\text{לה} X \text{ברוך}$ , which yields reading B in Ruth 2:20.

To evaluate this reasoning, we must further investigate the biblical formula,  $\text{לה} X \text{ברוך}$ , followed by an epithet. Although II Sam 2:5 suggests that an epithet following this formula justifies the choice of the recipient of the benediction, two examples indicate another possibility, reintroducing reading A. In both Ps 115:15,  $\text{לה} \text{אדל}$   $\text{ברוכים}$   $\text{וארץ}$  ("Blessed are you to the Lord, maker of heaven and earth"), and Gen 14:19,  $\text{ברוך}$   $\text{אברם}$   $\text{לאיל}$   $\text{עליון}$   $\text{קונה}$   $\text{שמים}$   $\text{וארץ}$  ("Blessed is

<sup>57</sup> *Hesed*, 41 To support reading B, one might consider adducing Ruth 3:10,  $\text{ברוכה}$   $\text{לה}$   $\text{בתייטבה}$   $\text{חסדך}$   $\text{האחרון}$   $\text{מן}$   $\text{הראשון}$   $\text{nx}$  ("Blessed are you to the Lord, my daughter, your latest deed of loyalty is greater than your first"), which manifests the formula X  $\text{ברוכה}$   $\text{לה}$ , followed by a clause in which X is the subject. This verse has the advantage of reflecting the particular style of the author of *Ruth*, which theoretically makes it a strong proof-text; but since it does not include an TOK clause, II Sam 2:5 is actually a closer match for *Ruth* 2:20. More importantly, the phrase  $\text{היטבת חסדך האחרון}$   $p$   $\text{הראשון}$  is an independent clause and therefore does not serve to modify an element in the preceding clause, as  $\text{אשר}$   $\text{לא}$   $\text{עזב}$   $\text{חסדו}$  does. On the other hand, the epithets in Ps 115:15 and Gen 14:19 (cited below), while not actually appearing in  $\text{אשר}$  clauses, each do modify an element in the preceding main clause.

<sup>58</sup> Not surprisingly, the Septuagint supplies the causal particle,  $\text{οτι}$ , to clarify the function of the relative clause, yielding: "Blessed are you to the Lord, because you have wrought this mercy." The Septuagint thus equates II Sam 2:5 and Ruth 2:20 with I Sam 23:21,  $\text{ברוכים}$   $\text{אדם}$   $\text{לה}$   $\text{כי}$   $\text{חמלתם}$   $\text{עלי}$  ("Blessed are you to the Lord, because you have been merciful to me"), where  $\text{οτι}$  is required as a literal translation of 'כי'. We should note, however, that the Septuagint tends to employ this causal particle without a direct parallel in the original Hebrew, as it does, e.g., in *Ruth* 3:10 (see preceding note), yielding, "Blessed be thou of the Lord ... for ( $\text{οτι}$ ) thou hast made tiiy later kindness greater."

Abram to Most Exalted God, creator<sup>59</sup> of heaven and earth"),<sup>60</sup> the main clause directs a divine benediction toward human beings, while the epithet provides an incidental praise of God. This analysis, applied to Ruth 2:20, implies that Naomi blesses Boaz "to the Lord" in the main clause, and then utters an incidental praise to God in the epithet.

Yet the syntactic structure of these examples would seem to preclude this analogy, since their epithets are in apposition to the divine name, whereas the epithet in Ruth 2:20 is a relative clause, as in II Sam 2:5. Although the appositive cannot be formed from a negated verb (לא עוב), the verbs שמר and נצר<sup>61</sup> yield the appropriate appositive epithets non נוצר or non שומר.<sup>62</sup> Had Naomi intended to praise God, she should have used one of these formulations, patterned after Ps 115:15 and Gen 14:19. The fact that she employs an אשר clause would thus seem to support Glueck's contention that Ruth 2:20 is indeed patterned after II Sam 2:5.

Yet even this argument is not decisive, since Naomi may have wished specifically to employ the negative formulation אשר לא עוב, which cannot be expressed in an appositive phrase. Perhaps she intended to reflect a reversal in her initial belief that God had forsaken her.<sup>63</sup> Or, perhaps, she wished to invoke the words of Abraham's servant, ברוך ה' אלהי אדוני אברם אשר לא עזב חסדו ואמתו מעם אדוני Gen 24:27 was not actually on her mind, it is conceivable that the phrase לא עזב חסדו had, by her time, become a formulaic praise of God, which would remain unchanged despite being used in different contexts and syntactic constructions.

<sup>59</sup> See *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah*, ed. H. M. Orlinsky (Philadelphia, 1970), 87–88, for this translation of קנהו.

<sup>60</sup> Despite the slight variation in the divine name (איל עליון) as appropriate for a non-Israelite, this should be considered an example of the formula אלהי X ברוך.

<sup>61</sup> Both verbs, used in the sense of "preserving" *hesed* (see, e.g., Ex 34:7, I Kgs 3:6, Deut 7:9, Ps 89:29), are antonyms of עזב. The three verbs are cleverly juxtaposed in Prov 4:6, השמר וחסדו וחסדו וחסדו (Do not abandon her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will preserve you)

<sup>62</sup> Either would be rendered in English as "preserver of kindness."

<sup>63</sup> See above, p. 12.

### 3. A New Approach: Deliberate Ambiguity

The long history of readings A and B, supported by exegetical intuitions and hard biblical evidence, precludes definitively favoring one reading over the other. Yet there is still one possibility left in the quagmire of unprovable contentions, one that in fact builds upon their very inconclusiveness. Instead of regarding the ambiguity as a stylistic flaw and exegetical nuisance, we can exploit it by viewing Ruth 2:20 as deliberately ambiguous, specifically designed to simultaneously convey both readings.

The abundance of ambiguities in the Bible is self-evident; but *intentional* ambiguity, a sophisticated literary technique, is more difficult to prove. The best argument for its existence entails (1) establishing the cogency of two separate readings based on linguistic and contextual factors, and (2) showing how the ambiguity contributes to its literary context by expressing something that could not be expressed by unambiguous language. A number of modern scholars, fulfilling these criteria to varying degrees, have identified cases of intentional ambiguity in the Bible, usually involving a single equivocal word.<sup>64</sup> Is 5:11, for example, rebukes the indolent wealthy, saying, *שכר ירדפו*. . . *יין ידליקם*, "They chase liquor . . . wine *inflames* them." This translation, based on the meaning of *דלק* in *hif'il* attested in Ez 24:10, *הדלק האש* ("Kindle the fire!"), stems naturally from the context, taking fire as a metaphor for intoxication. But the verb is also attested in the *qal* form in the sense of "pursuing," e.g., in Lam 4:19, *על ההרים דלקנו* ("In the mountains they pursued us"). And indeed, the parallel with *ירדפו* suggests taking *ידליקם* to mean "it *pursues* them," a more pointed depiction of addiction to alcohol. This *double-entendre* powerfully illustrates how wine causes both pleasure and pain; initially a source of delight, it ultimately torments those who imbibe it incessantly.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> See D. Yellin, "Mishne ha-hora'a," *Kitvei David Yellin*, ed. E. Z. Melamed (Jerusalem, 1983), 254-68; M. Paran, "Le-mishne hora'aba-mikra," *Beer Sheva* 1(1973): 150-61, who formulates rules to confirm that a given example of ambiguity is indeed intentional; S. Paul, "Polysemous Polyvalency in Poetic Parallelism," *Sha'arei Talmon: Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon*, ed. M. Fishbane and E. Tov (Winona Lake, 1992) 147-63 (includes bibliography).

<sup>65</sup> Yellin, 258-59; Paran, 154.

Unlike the preceding example, the ambiguity in Ruth 2:20 is syntactic rather than semantic, since Naomi's words, quite clear when taken individually, become ambiguous only when combined. Ambiguous syntax, not uncommon in the Bible, has also been recognized as a conscious literary technique. Potiphar's wife, for example, alleging that Joseph attempted to rape her, tells her husband, **אלי העבד העברי אשר** **והבאת לנו לצחק בי**, "The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to **dally** with me" (Gen 39:17). This reading, adopted by most translators, assumes that the phrase **לצחק בי** modifies the main clause **בא אליהעבד העברי**, rather than the relative clause **אשר לנו** immediately preceding.<sup>66</sup> The alternative syntactic construal, which yields, "The Hebrew slave you *brought into our house to dally with me* came to me," an outrageous accusation, appears unlikely.<sup>67</sup> But an earlier verse, **הביא לנו איש עברי לצחק בנו** ("He brought us a Hebrew to **dally** with us"; 39:14), said by Potiphar's wife to her servants, points specifically to that construal.<sup>68</sup> Potiphar's wife, M. Sternberg argues, uses ambiguous language to avoid direct confrontation with her husband, whereas her true intent is discernible to an attentive reader.<sup>69</sup>

We can now return to Ruth 2:20 and the two criteria for establishing deliberate ambiguity. It is precisely the deadlock emerging from the exegetical tradition, which can reject neither reading A nor B, that fulfills the first criterion.<sup>70</sup> What remains is to demonstrate that

<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., NJPS and Rashi

<sup>67</sup> Rashi rejects this reading in his paraphrase of this verse, **אלי לצחק בי העבד העברי** **והביא לנו** **אשר**, by rearranging the clauses, thereby removing their syntactic ambiguity.

<sup>68</sup> This approach is actually adopted by A. E. Speiser, *Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York, 1964), 302, who translates, "The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us only to make love to me, broke in on me."

<sup>69</sup> M. Sternberg, "Mivne ha-hazara ba-sippur **ha-mikra'i**," *Ha-Sifrut* 25 (1977): 142; see also R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), 110; D. T. Tsumura, "Literary Insertion (A X B) Pattern in Biblical Hebrew," *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1981), III:3.

<sup>70</sup> One might argue that this supposed ambiguity results from our ignorance of biblical style (see R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch* [Sheffield 1987], 57). Without dismissing this objection **altogether**, we must keep in mind that the methodological assumption underlying the entire exegetical tradition, including modern scholarship, is that a reasonably accurate reading of the biblical text can be derived where literary evidence is available. In our case, the ambiguity results from contradictory **prooftexts**, not from a lack of relevant data.



first the two girls, and then Ruth even more so, who carry out that *hesed* (1:8 and 3:10).<sup>72</sup>

Underlying the words of Naomi and Boaz is the belief that people performing kindness strive for the ideal of *imitateo dei*, and are thus agents of God Himself.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, they recognize **that** it is God's providence that makes human efforts *of hesed* successful, even possible.

This theological orientation is expressed in Naomi's words, **אשר לא** **החיים ואת המתים** **עזב** **nx non**, which, by virtue of their very ambiguity, simultaneously reflect **both** human and divine kindness. In precisely the type of "combined effort" that typifies the entire story of Ruth, Naomi, in this pivotal verse, acknowledges both Boaz for his *hesed* and God for providing the context in which it could be performed.

Another, more nuanced reading, which takes fuller advantage of the ambiguity in Naomi's words, arises in light of recent studies of biblical narrative that draw upon contemporary literary theory.<sup>74</sup> These studies address the ubiquitous role of dramatic irony in biblical narrative, i.e., the typical disparity between the perspectives of the reader and the characters created by cues revealed to *the* former but hidden from the latter. Within the book of Ruth itself, noted in modern scholarship for its subtle literary artistry, M. Bernstein identifies two cases in which ambiguous language creates dramatic tension and irony.<sup>75</sup> In light of this pattern, it is conceivable **that the** ambiguity in Ruth 2:20 was designed to produce dramatic irony. Naomi herself, directing a benediction toward Boaz in the main clause, thinks only of reading B; but the reader, who will recognize the parallel to Gen 24:27, must consider reading A as well. This underscores the fact that Naomi,

<sup>72</sup> Campbell, 28-30, 80, 112. According to *Ruth Rabbah*, a similar pattern occurs in Ruth 2:20, where Naomi acknowledges God as **the** ultimate caretaker of the dead, whereas in 1:8 she praised Ruth and Orpah for actually tending to **the** needs of her dead sons (see above, n. 54).

<sup>73</sup> The notion that kindness is a form of *imitatio dei* is most clearly expressed in Jewish tradition in **b.Shabbat** 133b, which takes the thirteen divine attributes of mercy in Ex 34:7 as a model for human behavior.

<sup>74</sup> E.g., A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, 1983); M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, 1985).

<sup>75</sup> See M. Bernstein, "Two Multivalent Readings in the **Ruth Narrative**," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 (1991): 15-26. Bernstein (15n) cites recent studies that focus on the literary artistry of the book. To his list, we can add Zakovitz, *Miqra le-yisrael*.

directing her praise toward the human agent, *overlooks* the divine will that has been orchestrating events behind the scenes.

The role of this dramatic irony in Ruth is illuminated by analysis of the parallel in Gen 24:27. The narrative of Abraham's servant meeting Rebekah manifests dramatic irony of its own, as observed by M. Sternberg.<sup>76</sup> Arriving in Mesopotamia at a time when the "women came out to draw water" (v. 11), the servant devises a plan to identify the proper wife for Isaac and prays for divine assistance, "Grant me good fortune (הקרה נא לפני) this day, and act kindly with my master Abraham" (v. 12). The servant's language, הקרה נא לפני, literally "arrange a chance occurrence for me," underscores the fact that, as chance would have it, Rebekah is the very first girl he encounters. "Before he had finished speaking," the narrator tells us, "Rebekah came out . . . with her pitcher upon her shoulder" (v. 15). At this point, though, her identity is known only to the reader; the servant has yet to discover that the answer to his prayers is (literally) standing before him. The reader now witnesses what Sternberg calls the servant's "progressive discovery of God's benevolent control," the dramatic force that motivates the subsequent exchange between the servant and Rebekah. And indeed, upon discovering Rebekah's identity, the servant articulates his realization of God's providence, "Blessed is the Lord, God of my master Abraham, who has not withdrawn his true kindness from my master."

An echo of the servant's initial prayer reverberates in the story of Ruth's encounter with Boaz, which she, not knowing who he is, could only regard as an insignificant coincidence. The reader is initially told that Boaz is Naomi's kinsman (2:1), and views this "coincidence" as divine providence, which will ultimately lead to the redemption of Naomi and Ruth.<sup>77</sup> But in order to capture the dramatic tension of the scene, the narrator switches to Ruth's perspective and tells us how she comes to a field, which, "as chance would have it (ויקר מקרה), [was] the field of Boaz" (2:2). Even upon Ruth's return home to Naomi after having spoken with Boaz, the reader's perspective has yet to be discovered by the characters in the story, each of whom sees only one piece of the puzzle. Ruth knows that she met Boaz, Naomi that he is a potential redeemer; but each is ignorant of the detail known by the

<sup>76</sup> *Poetics*, 131–43.

<sup>77</sup> See Campbell, 112; compare Sternberg, 142.

other. The limited points of view converge, and the puzzle yields its picture when Ruth mentions Boaz's name to Naomi, which prompts her to exclaim, ברוך הוא לה' אשר לא עזב חסדו, an echo of the servant's praise of God.

The reader will recognize the double parallel between the phrases ויקר מקרה and non לא עזב TOR in Ruth 2 and the servant's הקרה נא לפני and non לא עזב TOX in Genesis 24.<sup>78</sup> Like Abraham's servant, Naomi now has the information necessary to recognize the "chance" encounter as divine providence. But does *she* draw **this** conclusion? The words ויקר מקרה were obviously unavailable to her; and she did not necessarily know (or think about) the words of Abraham's servant, TOX.. ברוך ה'. non לא עזב xV. The syntactic ambiguity of Naomi's benediction makes the reader wonder whether she recognizes the import of her own words. In other words, did she recognize reading A as a valid interpretation?

In Genesis 24, the servant's benediction resolves the suspense; but Naomi's heightens the tension, motivating the reader to wonder when God's hand **will** finally be recognized. Alas, the reader must await an unambiguous signal that "the progressive discovery of God's benevolent control" in the book of Ruth is complete. This occurs only at the conclusion of the story:

ויקח una רות ותהי לו לאשה ויבא אליה ויתן nV ה' הריון ותלד p. ותאמרנה הנשים אל נעמי ברוך ה' אשר דאהשביח לך גואל היום.

And Boaz took Ruth; and she became his wife; and he cohabited with her, and the Lord let her conceive (lit. "gave her conception"), and she bore a son. And the women said to Naomi: "Blessed is the Lord, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today." (4:13-14)

The unusual language "and the Lord let her conceive"<sup>79</sup> indicates that God's providence has, by now, become apparent to all, and inspires the women's benediction directed exclusively toward Him. Returning to Ruth 2:20, we can imagine Naomi's initial benediction, ברוך הוא לה', אשר לא.. as a ray of light that, when refracted through the lens of unmistakable divine intervention, yields the formula .. ברוך n' אשר לא.

<sup>78</sup> This parallel is noted by G. Cohen, *Iyyunim bi-megillat Rut* (Jerusalem, 1980), 28.

<sup>79</sup> The usual formulation is "she conceived and bore a son" (p ותהר ותלד).

The Bethlehemite women's benediction is a derivative of reading A on **Ruth** 2:20, which at that time may have been little more than a faint possibility in Naomi's mind.

The exegetical tradition, culminating in modern scholarship, produced two viable readings of Ruth 2:20, but could interpret this verse no further. Literary criticism, which introduces the technique of intentional ambiguity, provides an environment in which readings A and B can coexist. The concept of dramatic irony **further** contributes a vocabulary for defining precisely how the two readings interact, forming a motivating force within the drama of Ruth, essential to its religious meaning.