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Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah

Glenna S. Jackson

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When one looks to the Bible for ideal relationships between friends, one often thinks of the story of Ruth and Naomi. As a paradigm for all relationships, the story has become so popular that there are several wedding songs based on Ruth's words to Naomi:

Entreat me not to leave thee,
nor to return from following after thee.
For whither thou goest, I will go,
And where thou lodgest, I will lodge.
Thy people shall be my people,
and thy God my God.
And where thou diest, I will die;
and where thou liest, I will lie;
and nought but death shall part thee from me.

(paraphrase of Ruth 1:16-17)

The wedding song is a modern tribute to the inclusion that the story projects because the words are spoken within the context of a relationship between two women, women of two different generations and two different social and religious backgrounds. The account of friendship and commitment also embodies an important old tradition: it is the source of a rabbinic formula for becoming a member of the Jewish religious community.

The Story

Naomi and her husband Elimelech, along with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, leave the famine-stricken city of Bethlehem in Judah and journey to the country of Moab. The men in the family die, leaving Naomi alone with her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Naomi decides to return to her native land of Judah when she hears that the Lord has visited the people and provided them with food. As the three women set out, Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah to return to their mothers' homes. Both of the young widows at first refuse to leave Naomi, but eventually Orpah kisses her mother-in-law goodbye; Ruth continues on with Naomi to

Bethlehem.

Naomi and Her Daughters-in-Law

Ruth and Orpah are not ordinary daughters-in-laws. They are Moabites, traditional enemies of Israel. Moabites serve other gods. The Israelites are often in trouble for mingling with the foreigners: “And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, . . . and they forsook the LORD, and did not serve him” (Judg 10:6). Psalm 83 lists the inhabitants of Moab, along with nine other nations, as conspirators against Israel. Moabites cannot enter the assembly of the LORD “because they met you not with bread and with water by the way, when you went out of Egypt” (Deut 23:4-5).

It is significant, then, that as Naomi is on her way from Moab to Judah, she tells the women to go back, not only to the house of their mothers (Ruth 1:8), but also to their own people and their own gods (Ruth 1:15). It is not easy, however, for the women to separate themselves from one another. The close friendship between Naomi and her daughters-in-law is obvious from the outset of the story despite the differences in their backgrounds. While the link between the women revolves around the ten-year marriages to Naomi's sons, they have obviously fared well together, as evident in Naomi's blessing: “May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find a home, each of you in the house of her husband” (Ruth 1:8-9)

The description of Ruth and Orpah's reaction to Naomi's request reinforces the notion of a good relationship: “Then [Naomi] kissed them and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people’” (1:9-10). After Naomi tries again to convince them to leave, the younger women weep a second time (1:14).

Orpah decides to return to her own people and gods; Ruth clings to Naomi and Naomi's God. Naomi makes another plea to which Ruth replies with the well-known “entreat-me-not-to-leave-thee” soliloquy. Naomi finally accepts Ruth's resolve to stay with her, and the two journey in search of a more prosperous land.

Israel and Its Enemies

The rabbis of the first century were so impressed with this story of friendship and commitment that they used it to explain how the encodes of Israel could become a part of the house of Israel though certain laws prohibited it. The story became a paradigm for conversion into the faith. Naomi's requests and Ruth's rejections

make up a rabbinic form for a prospective convert to follow when becoming a Jew:

[1] *Request:* But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to the house of her mother.” (1:8)

Rejection: And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” (1:10)

[2] *Request:* But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; Why will you go with me?” (1:11)

Rejection: “Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?” (1:11)

[3] *Request:* Turn back, my daughters, go your way, ...” (1:12)

Rejection: Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. (1:14)

[4] *Request:* And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” (1:15)

Response: But Ruth said, “Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” (1:16)

Acceptance: And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. (1:18)

According to rabbinic tradition, this request and rejection pattern became a formula for conversion to Judaism. Noting that Naomi told Ruth three different times to “turn” or “return,” early rabbis correspondingly said that a would-be proselyte was to be repulsed three times. If the proselyte persists after that, he or she would be accepted. Prospective converts were to be discouraged to determine their sincerity and to let them know that it is not easy to be a Jew. But the discouragement was not to be for too long because when Naomi saw that Ruth was steadfastly minded to go with her, “she said no more.” The Moabite Ruth is, therefore, the model convert because of her declaration of fidelity to Naomi

The Role of Foreign Women

Boaz, the Israelite whom Ruth later marries, recounts the ways in which Ruth has been faithful: “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before” (2:11). Thus, according to Boaz, Ruth proves her faithfulness by staying with Naomi and by leaving her own parents and homeland and going into a foreign country. In that same speech to Ruth, Boaz concludes with the following: “The LORD recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (2:12).

The phrase, “under whose wings you have come to take refuge,” is also a formal metaphor for conversion meaning “in your protective care.” The watchful care of a mother bird is the basis for this image. Other Old Testament writers use the phrase:

Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the LORD alone did lead him, and there was no foreign god with him. (Deut 32:11)

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in thee my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of thy wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by. (Ps 57:1-2)

Many scholars agree that it is in the Book of Ruth that the phrase first appears with the meaning “to be converted to Judaism.” As with other foreign women in the Old Testament (for example, Tamar the Canaanite [Gen 38], Rahab the Canaanite [Josh 2-6], and Bathsheba the Hittite [2 Sam 11]), God chooses Ruth the Moabite to fulfill properly the obligations of the Israelite community.

Relationships within the House of Israel

The community asks a blessing on Boaz as he tells the people and elders of his plans to marry Ruth: “The LORD make your wife who goes into your house, as Rachel and as Leah, who both together built the house of Israel . . . and let your house be as the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, of the seed which the LORD shall give you of this handmaid” (Ruth 4:11-12). Although Ruth belongs to a people who are enemies of Israel, her commitment and friendship with Naomi wins God's favor, and God uses her to “build up the house of

Israel.”

It is interesting that while Ruth and Boaz do build up the house of Israel and are the great-grandparents of King David, the house is also built by Naomi. Although she is old and cannot bear more children and her sons are dead, the Lord has blessed her with a child through her daughter-in-law, Ruth: “Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next of kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age' for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him” (Ruth 4:14-15). What greater compliment could a daughter-in-law have in that society than to be worth more than seven sons! “Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi’” (4:16-17). What greater act of friendship and devotion can a mother show than to share her child with her mother-in-law?

Friendship, Conversion, and Diversity

The Book of Ruth begins and ends with stories about women’s relationships. The emphasis has always been on the principal character of Ruth, and rightly so. However, Naomi’s attitude toward the Moabites should not be overlooked. She and her daughters-in-law from Moab are obviously good friends in spite of their different religious backgrounds.

Accepting the fact that their own Moabite families and gods may be what Ruth and Orpah need most when their husbands die, Naomi encourages them to go home. However, the daughters-in-law go in opposite directions: Orpah returns to her own people and gods: Ruth stays with her mother-in-law. Each receives Naomi's blessing. The story of Ruth's persistent loyalty to Naomi becomes a paradigm for conversion. In turn, Naomi’s attitude of tolerance and acceptance toward Orpah is a model for diversity within friendship.

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