

# THE PLOT OF THE BOOK OF RUTH<sup>1</sup>

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THE Book of Ruth, like the other books of the Hebrew Canon, has been subjected to intensive scholastic dissection. This process is, of course, a necessary concomitant to any thorough-going study of a book of the Bible, and tribute must be paid to the many careful and exact scholars, Jewish and Christian alike, who have combed its text, isolated its features, attacked its problems and contributed so much to its understanding. But there is always the danger when dividing the whole into parts, of separating the parts from the whole and treating them as free—or at least, semi-free—units. We think—and this must serve as justification for our thesis—that there may still be something to learn from a fresh consideration of the book as a whole.

The place which the Book of Ruth occupies in the English Bible between the books of Judges and Samuel it owes to the Greek Bible of the Jews of Alexandria in which it occupies that place. In the Hebrew Bible it is found amongst the *Kethūbhīm*. Its place in the Greek and English Bibles is due to its narrative being concerned with the period of the Judges. Its opening words proclaim this fact. “And it came to pass when the judges judged”. . . . The Hebrew text literally translated is: “in the days of the judging of the judges”, which some Rabbinic opinion, as, e.g. Midrash Rabba, held to mean a period when the people judged their judges. The judges in question were held by various opinions to be Barak, Deborah, Edud or Shamgar. The Talmud attributed its authorship to Samuel, and Christian scholars of the first half of the last century regarded it as of early date. But since then the date has been gradually driven farther and farther downstream until, of recent times, one in or about the fourth century B.C. seems to find general acceptance.

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 14th of December, 1949.

This date appears to be supported by the literary flavour and quality of the book and by its reference to customs which had passed out of use, and even of common knowledge, at the time of the writer. Traces, even if slight, of Aramaic influence point silently in the same direction. If the book loses by being later by centuries than the happenings it records, it yet gains by belonging to a time when Jewish literary consciousness was crystallising in great writing. Goethe expressed great admiration for the book. In his view the Book of Ruth can be regarded 'als das lieblichste kleine Ganze, das uns episch und idyllisch überliefert worden ist'.

If then we recognise, as I think we are compelled to do, that the Book of Ruth is of late date, is far removed in time from the events it portrays, and has, to all seeming, been fashioned under literary influences which elicited the graces of art in the development of both theme and style, we must expect to find—and cannot afford to ignore—the existence of fictional elements, and the much embellishing of fact to produce effect.

The scene opens with the vision for the reader of an ordinary Jewish family, father, mother and two sons, living peacefully in Bethlehem-Judah. A succession of meagre winter rains supervenes—so we may infer at least—which causes a dearth and induces, or it may be compels, Elimelech, his wife and family to betake themselves to Moab. What associations they may have had with Moab which determined that they should go there in preference to anywhere else, we are not told. It is not necessary that we should know, and the story, like other Old Testament stories, gives only the essentials.

Famine is here given as the cause of migration. War, pestilence, persecution, or even the seeking of an inheritance to dwell in, such as induced the Danites to seek a settlement in the northern corner of Palestine, were other implied or recorded causes of migration in the Old Testament. It was famine that led to Abram going down to Egypt, as it was the cause of the eventual settlement there of Jacob and his sons. Thus, famine could be an effective means in the hands of the Jewish narrator for moving the characters of his tale from one place to another. The well, on the other hand, was a convenient place to arrange

a meeting for characters whom it would be difficult otherwise to bring together, plausibly, by chance encounter. Thus, Abraham's servant meets Rebecca, and Jacob and Rachel are conveniently brought together, at the well. The 'gate' (*sha'ar*) is another convenient rendezvous, and it appears to be so used by the writer of the Book of Ruth. The word *sha'ar* has, however, a wider denotation in this book, as we all know.

Famine, then, whether actual fact or the device of the narrator, transports this Bethlehem family to the land of Moab. There misfortune overwhelms them. Elimelech dies, the sons marry Moabite wives, and within the short space of a decade, both are dead, leaving their mother, Naomi, with two foreign daughters-in-law. In its devastation, their tragedy is reminiscent of Job's series of afflictions. It was surely an unexpected, and in every way extraordinary, calamity which struck down the three male members of the family and them only. Another curious circumstance is that neither Mahlon nor Chilion left any family. Yet Ruth was not barren, as we learn from later events. Of Orpah we know nothing.

Has this situation been created by the author of the book? If not, then fate played in a most remarkable way into his hand. For the theme of the book is the upward struggle of a weak widow woman with the dice heavily loaded against her from a pit of despair to ultimate triumph. It is essential to the story, after the manner of the Book of Job, that the family should be plunged into dire distress—the direr the better. The picture of destitution must be painted as black as possible.

And it is black enough—not one widow but three. And the fate of Jewish widows and orphans was such that there had to be constant appeals to compassion in dealings with them, as exemplified in Hebrew legislation. And of the three widows, not one of them had offspring to whom she could look for present or future support. It was unnecessary for the writer to satisfy the curiosity of the reader by expatiating upon the situation. Its tragedy was there for all to see.

It was natural for Naomi, living amongst foreigners, to think now of returning to her former home in Bethlehem. Her roots could hardly be deep enough in Moab, and amongst friends, and

particularly kinsfolk, there was the possibility of that assistance which she so sorely needed. The writer makes it more easy for the reader to understand her decision. He tells us that Naomi had news that the dearth was ended and there was once more abundance in Bethlehem, since "the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread". This little aside is intended to forestall the query in the mind of the reader. Naomi left Bethlehem because of famine. Was she not taking a grave risk in returning, possibly to the same conditions?

In the course of the tale it emerges that Elimelech had some property, which it was in Naomi's power to dispose of, if she wished. It is not, however, given as one of the reasons for Naomi's decision to return.

Her daughters-in-law express a wish to accompany her. That too, was but natural. They were part of her family and probably shared the same home. It required no stressing to bring home to the reader that Naomi's daughters-in-law, both of Moab, would be only an embarrassment, and an added burden to her in the future she was envisaging for herself. She would have to make provision for them—get them husbands—and what chance had she of doing that? The only security for them lay in marriage—and they were foreigners as well as widows.

It was natural for the Jewish reader to think of a widow in the situation of Naomi, in terms of levirate marriage. What then was her position relative to this? It was a legal provision for the continuance of the family name that a man should, where necessary, marry his deceased brother's wife to raise a son to carry on the name of his brother. The writer must needs satisfy the reader on this point, and this he does do. He takes it up and discusses it by means of a conversation between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. Naomi is depicted as having this solution in the forefront of her mind, when she advises them to return to their former homes and remarry. They have no hope through her of the consolations of levirate marriage. She has no other sons to whom this duty would fall. She is now too old to bear children, and even if she could have borne them, was it to be expected that her daughters-in-law in their turn should refrain from marriage till the sons were full-grown?

Obviously there was no solution to the family difficulties in levirate marriage. Whatever solution is found, the reader is well and truly warned, it does not lie in that direction. Nor could the reader really expect it, for if it did provide a way out for Naomi the story would collapse at this point. The fact that escape for Naomi is thus cut off only adds to the hopelessness of her situation, and intensifies the interest and curiosity of the reader.

Naomi has been denied the benefits of levirate marriage by fate, but there was an instance in the story of the nation when a woman was denied the same benefits, not by the hand of fate, but by the whim of a diffident father-in-law. Everyone knew the story of Tamar and Judah. Tamar, in a less difficult position perhaps than Naomi, did not quietly accept rebuff, but used her ingenuity and her womanhood to triumph over Judah. Can Naomi succeed by the employment of similar means? That the writer has the story of Judah and Tamar very much in mind is made clear as the story develops later, by the words he puts in the mouths of the witnesses: "And let thy house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore unto Judah of the seed which the Lord shall give thee of this young woman" (iv. 12).

But marriage was almost the only road to security for a Hebrew woman of that time. If marriage is to provide the solution for the family difficulties, clearly it could not be achieved in the person of Naomi. From her there could come no offspring to re-establish the family name and the family fortunes. One or other of the younger women must play a part. The writer tells us Ruth clave to her mother-in-law. For him this was enough as it left him with the situation well in hand. The continued presence of the other would only deflect the main current of the tale into minor channels. Orpah has played her part in being the relict of her husband, an additional encumbrance to Naomi, and a foil to Ruth. The writer has no more need of her. So Orpah returns home and disappears from the pages of the narrative.

The writer makes the best literary use of the arrival of Naomi in Bethlehem to give final emphasis to her hopeless situation.

The home-coming is not a happy one for Naomi. Her troubles have so altered her appearance that the women she formerly knew have difficulty in recognising her. So wretched is Naomi that she is described as making a word-play on her name, whose root meaning was kindness, and suggesting that another name, *marah*, "the bitter one", would better describe her since the Lord had dealt so bitterly with her. Her grievous condition has brought her to such extremity as to impugn the justice of her God. In the eyes of the Old Testament writers, the female mind was more easily provoked to violent outburst. It was Job's wife who urged him to curse God and die!

Did Naomi return to the house and plot of land that was Elimelech's? We must infer from the later details of her story that she did so. The writer does not tell us, for it is not material to the narrative at this stage. It is true that there seemed to be no provision in the Jewish law of the time for widows to inherit property, but the daughters of Zelophehad made legal history by obtaining recognition of the right of daughters to inherit where there were no sons. There was always the possibility then that Naomi could have possessed the property in her own right before her marriage to Elimelech, when it would become his. The narrator does not think it necessary to discuss the matter. Since it was not impossible for Naomi to have possessed property, that was sufficient for his purpose.

There is no mention of Ruth in the description of the home-coming. She is taken for granted. It is Naomi's unhappy state which has to be emphasised. The real crux of the matter and the theme of the book, we must again remind you, is the manner and method in and by which Naomi with the odds so heavily against her, emerged triumphant from a situation so gloomily bleak and so utterly hopeless. Whilst Naomi has an added responsibility in Ruth's attachment to her—one of which she is made to appear anxious to relieve herself when she urged her to turn back with Orpah—Ruth is essential to the tale, for she, in her person, provides the only means for the preservation and continuation of Elimelech's family. Only by proper provision for Ruth through marriage with a near kinsman of Elimelech's could this be accomplished. But at this stage that

was not in sight. We are told, however, with a purpose, that the home-coming coincided with the beginning of barley harvest.

Then abruptly the writer tells us that Naomi had a kinsman of her husband's, a man of substance, named Boaz. By this introduction the reader, of course, recognises that Boaz is going to play a leading part in what follows. Here is the necessary relative to save Elimelech's family, and his name, from extinction. But how to bring Boaz and Ruth together? Not so easy under the conditions prevailing in the Judah of that time. And even if they were brought together it would not necessarily follow that Boaz would be anxious, or even willing, to marry Ruth. All material power in the Jewish community was in male hands, and womankind was rated low in the scale of importance. But Naomi, like Tamar, knew of a power which can bend men to woman's will—the power of sexual attraction. For Naomi was a woman, and to quote the words of a modern woman novelist describing one of her characters: "she was a woman, and knew best how to make use of that simple commonplace fact". The traditions of her people recorded several cases of its effectiveness. Through its exploitation Tamar achieved the end she had in view. Later Judith used the same power to serve her people, as also did Esther. That same power, but with less exalted motives, was used by Delilah to bend Samson to her will.

The interest of the reader having been duly aroused, the stage set, the characters introduced and the problem presented, the writer now proceeds to tell us how exactly Naomi solved it. We are shown Naomi and Ruth in desperate circumstances and Boaz in easy circumstances. The reader eagerly awaits the denouement. The significance of the mention of the barley harvest soon becomes apparent. Ruth at her own request and with Naomi's consent goes to glean in the harvest fields. Gleaning was a privilege of the poor and was permitted and supported by Jewish legislation. She will go forth trusting to find a field where she will be welcome. But the reader has already a feeling that the chance is going to be good and that this will be Ruth's lucky day. And sure enough, 'by hap' she lighted upon the field of Boaz. The reader is made to feel that this is no mere accident but is due to divine guidance, just as Saul was divinely

guided to a meeting with Samuel when following asses that had strayed. That this is in the writer's mind is made clear by the words he puts in Naomi's mouth when she learns of the day's happenings from Ruth and how she had chanced to glean in the field of Boaz: "Blessed be he of the Lord, who hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead". Naomi has her situation in mind and her problem—how she and Ruth were to live and how the family of the dead was to be preserved. With the volatility of womankind, Naomi has now turned her reproaches against the Lord into blessings! If it was Ruth's hap to light upon the field of Boaz, the reader recognises it as a good 'hap', fraught with all sorts of pleasant possibilities. Ruth in all this is a commendable figure. She comports herself with modesty, restraint and praiseworthy industry, coupled with the shyness and self-effacement which might be expected in a foreigner and a stranger to the locality.

The reader has been told that Boaz is a well-to-do man, and this is borne out by the writer's description of him. He has an overseer in charge of his reapers, and he himself merely makes a visit of inspection. As becomes a man of superior station he is polite and greets his harvesters politely. The effect on Boaz of his first encounter with Ruth is skilfully implied rather than described. Boaz is shown as being interested in her and attracted to her from the first. That is not stated in so many words, but his inquiries about her, addressed to his overseer, reveal it. He knows of her, of course, when told who she is, but he does not reveal his relationship to Naomi when speaking to Ruth. That he admits her claim on his generosity is evident from the orders he gives to his reapers to treat her well. The effect on his feelings is also disclosed in his inviting her to share the meal with him and his reapers, and in urging her to glean now-where else save after his reapers, to the end of the harvest. That he is an elderly man, and much older than Ruth is shown by the form of address, *bitti*, 'my daughter', which he uses towards her. It is a familiar address used by the elderly to the young. The reader is made to feel that the interest of Boaz in Ruth has been aroused. But it is not clear that it goes beyond that. It can be described only as a benevolent interest. The ice



has been broken. The distance between them has been diminished—but the behaviour of both is correct. Boaz maintains an air of superiority and condescension. And there the situation for the time being remains. The narrator does not think it necessary to expatiate on the progress, if any, of the romance. We are not told of further meetings and further conversations. The feelings of Ruth are not subject of special interest or concern.

In an age and in a community where woman was regarded as an inferior being, her feelings would be of no particular interest. That Boaz was free to marry is implied but not expressly stated. According to the Talmud: "On the very day when Ruth, the Moabitess, came to Palestine died the wife of Boaz" (*Baba Bathra*, 91 a). Very convenient and very dramatic! At any rate, there is no suggestion that any approach was made by Boaz to Naomi on the matter, for the impression left on us by Naomi is that she would have brought things to a head quickly if given but half a chance. Meantime the harvest continues, and the gleaning of Ruth behind the harvesters of Boaz presumably goes on. The reader is left with the uncomfortable feeling that time is passing and little progress is being made towards Naomi's goal. And now the harvest is over and the time of winnowing the grain is at hand. With the winter approaching, the prospect of the contact between Boaz and Ruth being sundered looms up ahead. Clearly something will have to be done and done quickly if Naomi's hopes and expectations are to blossom.

Obviously, Naomi must try some other expedient and force matters along. This is conveyed to the reader in Naomi's words: "My daughter, shall I not seek a settlement for thee, that it may be well with thee?" Naomi has her plan, a truly feminine plan; her mind is made up, and she has resolved to carry it out. She no doubt confides in her daughter-in-law the scheme she has formed. Boaz is the quarry and the hunt is afoot. If he cannot be induced to move in the matter of marriage of his own accord, there may be means of forcing him. If that could be accomplished, all Naomi's troubles might well be over and her problem solved. To bring about the marriage of Boaz and Ruth meant everything. To attain that end, any means

must have appeared to her justifiable. And when a woman like Naomi exercises her wits in a matter such as this she will go to any lengths to achieve her purpose. The reader is by this time convinced in his mind that Naomi will succeed. But it still raises for him the intriguing question, how can she, a lone widow, so heavily handicapped, ever hope to succeed?

The wheat harvest has come to an end and the winnowing of the barley is in process. The end of harvest, harvest home, is recognised in most agricultural communities as a time of rejoicing and festivity. It is a happy time for the harvesters, a time of gaiety and merrymaking, of junketing and the abandonment of all restraint. Hosea directs attention to the practices of the threshing floor. Speaking of Israel personified—as so often in the prophets—as a fickle woman, he says of her “that she loved the harlot’s hire on every threshing floor of corn”. He speaks of this in a manner that suggests the accepting of the harlot’s hire at the threshing floor as a practice well known and recognised, so much so that he can use it as a simile for Israel’s conduct—one that everyone could understand and appreciate. Such manners and customs were of the cultivated land and were no doubt part and parcel of the Canaanite civilisation. That there was licentiousness on harvest festival occasions he seems to want us to believe, and that the women who resorted to the threshing floors to join in the orgies received grain as hire or as gift—whichever term you prefer—is to be inferred from Hosea’s words. Grain is money in the country and more serviceable than coinage.

Naomi, as well as the whole countryside, knows of those practices, and she determines to turn them to advantage. She issues her instructions to Ruth. The writer is careful to emphasise that the responsibility for what is to follow rests squarely on Naomi. Ruth, he says, did all that her mother-in-law *commanded* her (*šivvathah*). Ruth expresses willingness to obey, but does nothing from choice. He is anxious to protect Ruth from possible censure for what she is about to do. Naomi now takes Ruth in hand. She is bidden make herself as attractive as possible—washing, anointing, and putting on her finest raiment—and go down to the threshing floor. She is to keep

away from Boaz until he has finished his merrymaking and has laid himself down to sleep it off. She is to mark the place where he lay, and in the darkness she was to go to him and then do what she had directed her to do.

When the swift eastern darkness had closed over the threshing floor and those who took part in the festivities had removed themselves from the immediate area, Boaz, too, who had eaten and drunk till 'his heart was merry', staggered to the end of the heap of corn and lay down in deep drunken slumber. In the darkness Ruth went to him. It would be well if we could draw a veil here and leave the scene—but we are not at liberty to do so. The narrator—or it may even be due to those Rabbis of a later age who laboured to remove indelicacies from the Hebrew text—has treated the subject so prudently and so delicately that the real import of Naomi's instructions to Ruth has escaped notice. There can be little doubt however, having regard to the euphemistic use of the Hebrew word *reghel*, what (the) *margelōthāv* of the text really means.

Boaz awakens from his drunken sleep and discovers Ruth's presence. She explains that she is there with him because he is her *gō'ēl*. She speaks of herself as his '*āmāh*', which may merely be a polite form of self-depreciation before a superior. She invites him to 'cast his skirt over her'—in other words to marry her. The full significance of the crude phrase of *paras kanaph* is made clear from Ezekiel xvi. 8, where it has that meaning.

Boaz is both pleased and flattered, and commends her for what she has done, revealing by his repeated reassurances his recognition of the seriousness of Ruth's offence against the accepted canons of conduct. He is almost fulsome in the protestations of his belief in her innocence. Indeed, he protests overmuch. He describes her conduct as more commendable even than her devotion to Naomi, praiseworthy as that was. He is at pains to reassure her that he is not disposed to misinterpret her action. He does not regard her as a woman of light virtue, for everyone knows she is of good repute. Had she consulted her inclinations instead of acting from a sense of duty, she would have attached herself to a younger man. He then

urges her to remain there for the night. (The word used in the text is *lūn*—an ameliorative term under the circumstances). Although she has come to him inviting him to marry her on the score that he is her *gō'ēl*, there is in fact a nearer kinsman. If he will act the part of guardian in the way she wishes, well and good. If not, he himself will assume the responsibility. In any case she will be provided for and can remain where she is with an easy mind till morning.

Ruth has made a mistake in appealing to Boaz as her *gō'ēl*. That might be a mistake, natural enough in Ruth, but Naomi should have known, indeed, must have known, better. The reader is left to assume that Naomi would know, but it suited her purpose to be ignorant, or at least to encourage Ruth to use it as an excuse for her conduct. That Ruth had no claim on either Boaz or the nearer kinsman to marry her must be inferred, since obviously Naomi would ere this have claimed her legal rights. There would, then, have been no need to stoop to the device she was forced to employ.

Ruth remained with Boaz. She arose to depart before the light was sufficient for a man to recognise his neighbour. The official test for break of day was when the light was sufficient to distinguish a white thread from a black. Boaz was naturally anxious that it should not be spread abroad that Ruth had passed the night with him at the threshing floor. According to the Syriac version it was Ruth who felt concern. It reads: "And she said, 'Let it not be known that I came unto thee'". In any case it was not too dark to prevent Ruth receiving six *seahs*, or it may be six *omers*, of barley. The Hebrew text has only 'six barleys', and Jewish literalists have seen the six grains of barley as symbols of many things—thus amongst others that six righteous men, each possessing six outstanding virtues, would arise from her. Others, like Bar Kappara, held that he gave her six barley grains in order to betroth her. There would appear to be substance in the betrothal idea. Boaz seems to imply that when he says in giving it: "Go not empty to thy mother-in-law".

Ruth returns to her mother-in-law to be greeted with: "Who art thou, my daughter"? On the face of it, it seems

strange that Naomi should not recognise Ruth when she returns home—but perhaps it is only the writer's way of telling us that Ruth contrived to reach home so early that in the darkness or half-light her mother-in-law failed to recognise her. The expression *bitti* would be the natural greeting of an elderly woman to one much younger, even if a stranger—as witness Boaz' use of the same form of address in the same way.

The question arises: how comes it that the *gō'ēl* is here brought into association with marriage? The duties or obligations of the *gō'ēl* nowhere seem to be closely defined. It would appear that he was the trustee, the guardian to whom those he protected looked for the preservation of the family fortunes.

As such, it might devolve on him to see that a suitable marriage was arranged for Ruth. A go-between was necessary to complete arrangements for the marriage of a Jewish maiden to some suitable spouse. This duty would naturally devolve on a near male relative. It may be there is the underlying suggestion here that Boaz, as *gō'ēl*, should have undertaken this duty for Ruth. Having failed to do so, his position anent Ruth could be likened to that of Judah anent Tamar. Judah by his neglect had denied Tamar marriage, so Boaz by *his* neglect was denying marriage to Ruth. It was fitting that his neglect should be brought home to him in the same way as to Judah. But, whatever the explanation, Ruth can make the *ge'ullah* the excuse for her conduct on this occasion.

When Ruth returns home with the barley she quotes Boaz' words that he was not giving the barley to her—an act that under the circumstances might well be misinterpreted. As sent to her mother-in-law it could only be understood as a present supporting an offer of marriage. Boaz no doubt perceived in Ruth's actions the guiding hand of Naomi.

At this point there is clearly a gap in the sequence of events as they are narrated. There should now have come an account of the meeting which would necessarily take place between Boaz and Naomi. The story clearly demands this. How otherwise could Boaz know that Naomi was willing to sell her property, or from what source, otherwise, could he obtain his power of attorney to act on her behalf? Agreement between the two on

financial arrangements and on the date of the marriage would be necessary. For various reasons the marriage must be immediate. It must appear also to have come about in a natural way. The hasty marriage of a man in Boaz' position with a dowerless Moabitess might well occasion talk and provoke scandal. Is there not the proverb of Solomon which the man of Hezekiah, King of Judah, copied: "The words of the whisperer are as dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body" (Prov. xxvi. 22). Boaz and Naomi must, also, have agreed that Naomi's property should be sold and that Ruth's hand in marriage would go with the property. That would be a condition of sale. The purchaser must be prepared to marry Ruth. The one difficulty that lay ahead was that the nearer kinsman as *gō'ēl* had the first option on the property. Was he likely to buy the land, to purchase the property with that condition attached? Boaz and Naomi no doubt had reasons for believing that he would not—otherwise we may be sure they would not have persevered with the project. The nearer kinsman must be induced to surrender his option—in other words his right as *gō'ēl*—to Boaz. Thus on the morrow of the *contretemps* at the threshing floor the meeting of Boaz and Naomi would take place, their plans would be laid, and action taken to carry them out. All this is not mere conjecture. It is based on the events which followed. Boaz departs to execute the stratagem and Naomi returns to her anxious daughter-in-law to tell her: "Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall; for the man will not rest until he have finished the thing this day." She knows the position, the urgency, and Boaz' attitude.

Has all reference to a meeting of Naomi and Boaz been suppressed by the writer purposely? That seems quite probable. Had details of this meeting been given it would have robbed the encounter of Boaz and the nearer kinsman of all, or almost all, piquancy. As it is, the reader goes forward to the meeting of these two uninformed and brimful of curiosity.

With his plans prepared Boaz proceeds to the place of justice, perhaps in the market place, for that is probably the meaning of *sha'ar* here. He set himself down there, waiting for the nearer

kinsman to pass by. He no doubt had an inkling of his movements and when and where he could expect to find him. He invites him to discuss a matter of business in the presence of witnesses. Boaz then informs the nearer kinsman that Naomi is anxious to sell the land which belonged to her husband Elimelech. He, the nearer kinsman, is the *gō'ēl*. Is he willing to act in that capacity and buy it to prevent it passing out of the family, for such is his privilege? He has first option on purchase, whilst he, Boaz, comes next. If the nearer kinsman will not take up his option, then he (Boaz) is prepared to do so in his place. The *gō'ēl* promptly indicates his willingness to purchase and having done so in the presence of witnesses, the property would become legally his, as it would in any normal transaction. This denouement, so little hoped for by the reader, who has been left in the dark about the plans of Boaz and Naomi, adds greatly to the drama of the narrative, and keeps him on tenterhooks. It is made to appear that the romance which he has seen developing with the prospect of a happy marriage so near, seems likely after all to be rudely shattered. But Boaz now plays his trump card. He reveals the hidden conditions attaching to the sale. He explains that Naomi is indeed selling the land, but only on condition that the purchaser marries Ruth. The nearer kinsman is nonplussed. He hadn't bargained for this. The newly revealed conditions are not at all to his liking. He quickly excuses himself on the ground that its purchase would mar his own heritage. This might of course have been for domestic reasons, as is generally urged, but we need not read into the repudiation more than the narrator possibly intended to convey. It was probably the first thing that came to the nearer kinsman's mind. Under the circumstances one excuse was as good as another.

The nearer kinsman is glad to seek the way out which Boaz had so obligingly but cunningly offered him beforehand. He is glad to transfer the property which he had undertaken to purchase with all the redemption rights and obligations of the *ge'ullah* to Boaz, who in the presence of the witnesses purchases the property on the terms stipulated. He has in effect purchased Ruth with the property. And this he makes clear to all present.

“Ye are witnesses this day that I have bought all that was Elimelech’s and all that was Chiliōn’s and Mahlōn’s of the hand of Naomi. Moreover, Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlōn have I purchased (*qānīthī*) to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place : ye are witnesses this day.”

Boaz finishes on a heroic note. He is comparing himself to the levir who takes upon himself the responsibilities and obligations of a levirate marriage. His marriage to Ruth is thus rescued from sordidness—and Boaz shines in the role of a noble benefactor. It is all very cleverly done. The writer even introduces a further suggestion of levirate marriage. When the widow’s brother-in-law refused to perform the duty of levir, his shoe was forcibly removed by the widow who also spat in his face. On this occasion the nearer kinsman, when renouncing the *ge’ullah* removed his shoe to give it to Boaz. That, says the narrator, was “the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging, for to confirm all things, a man drew off his shoe and gave it to his neighbour”. The whole is a parody of levirate marriage well-sustained to the end.

Naomi had triumphed. Ruth was provided for, but whether the family name of Elimelech was destined to be preserved, only the future could show. Naomi’s complete triumph came when Ruth’s son was laid in her arms, and the women, her neighbours, said, “There is a son born to Naomi”. Surely no one deserved the implied compliment more. Here in the person of the child was the continuation of the family assured. He was the restorer of its life. And the women, too, said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord which hath not left thee this day without a near kinsman, and let his name be famous in Israel. And he shall be unto thee a restorer of life and a nourisher of thine old age : for thy daughter-in-law which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath borne him.” Thus was born Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David.

The plot of the Book of Ruth has been cleverly conceived and skilfully executed. If it is founded on fact its manner of presentation has given scope for an able writer to display his



literary talent. Throughout the book he exhibits a strong sense of the dramatic which is reflected in the portrayal of his scenes and his characters. There are three characters in the book around whom everything revolves: Naomi, Ruth, Boaz—but particularly Naomi. She is the central figure. It is not too much to say that the book would have borne the name Naomi more appropriately than Ruth.

The language used by Naomi, Ruth and Boaz is quite unlike anything we should expect from country people of their position and education in the time of the Judges. It is permissible to expect the utterances of such people to be given in cultured Hebrew by the writer for the purposes of the narrative, but even with that concession, it is difficult to convince ourselves that the characters of the book are consistent with the roles they play. They act reasonably well, but underneath their rustic garb they are educated townees. It may be that that is what the writer intends them to be—but if so, the countryside is not their proper setting.

The scenery that backs the stage is well painted. It reveals the golden grain and the sunlight, the harvest and the winnowing, the reapers with their merry voices and the gleaners with their hard toil and pitiful reward. The speeches of the three main characters have all been drafted to stir the emotions of an audience in response to their histrionic declamation, even if the audience is but the silent body of readers—Naomi urging her daughters-in-law to return home and painting the hopelessness of a future in her company—Ruth rejecting the counsel and dramatically asserting her resolve to cleave to her mother-in-law, who at that stage most evidently did not want her—Naomi addressing the women at her home-coming—Boaz addressing Ruth in the harvest field: “The Lord requite thy deed and may thy reward be complete from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to take refuge”. It is, perhaps, significant that the highly poetic conception of “taking shelter in the shadow of the wings of the Lord” occurs six times elsewhere in the Old Testament, and all in the Book of Psalms. The writer of the Book of Ruth no doubt thought it fitting to put the phrase on the lips of the great grandfather of David, from

whom David might thus be presumed to have inherited his poetic talent. The exhortations of the elders, a sort of male chorus, are appropriate only to the stage. The women, too, in their final salutation to Naomi are reminiscent of a Greek chorus.

Ruth's well-known response to her mother-in-law vowing that she will never leave her, and that death alone could part them, suggests part of some ancient marriage service—the vow taken by the bride to follow the fortunes of her bridegroom: “Whither thou goest I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people and thy God my God; where thou diest, I will die and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.” With marriage so much the theme of the book, and so much in the forefront of the writer's consciousness, it should not seem surprising that he chose to introduce a marriage formula, the words of which, though misapplied, were so well fitted to the situation he was describing.

Naomi walks the stage a lone, tragic, but solid figure. At first overwhelmed by misfortune, she appears to be embittered, inclined to rail at her fate, and blame the Almighty for neglect. Then comes the dawning of hope with the interest displayed by Boaz in Ruth. Soon she is in command of the situation and the events that follow are in response to her dictation. She reveals herself as a clever, capable, determined, stick-at-nothing woman, but warm-hearted, loyal, and with a strong sense of duty. Ruth is colourless. The fact that she is a foreigner assists in this impression. She is subservient before Boaz as befits her age and station, and she is clay in the hands of Naomi. She is a clinging vine. Her appeal to Naomi to permit her to go with her to Bethlehem would stamp her as someone out of the ordinary in mental equipment, were it not that the words she uses are so obviously borrowed.

The emphasis on Boaz is on his wealth. He walks in the countryside, but he is not of the countryside. He is a man of education and culture, of good social position and generally esteemed. He is farmer enough to mix with his men at their work and human enough to indulge in their revelries. He is,

however, outwitted by Naomi, who takes him at a disadvantage. When acting in conjunction with Naomi he shows himself a shrewd and knowledgeable man of business. He carries through the affair of marriage with Ruth in business fashion and emerges from what might have been a sordid and sorry situation with all the credit and acclaim that usually go only to one who has rendered a great public service at much cost to himself.

As we have already observed, the writing of the Book of Ruth has given scope for the literary talent of an unknown Jewish writer. He has given form and life and character to figures which may have been little more than names in the story of his people. Here is an early and perhaps the earliest instance of the historical novel—or should we say novelette? Under his skilful fingers the dry bones take on flesh, and the figures breathe and move. He knows and employs all the devices of literary art—the proper choice of diction, the regular employment of colloquy, the exploitation of the intriguing situation, the cunning interplay of the forces which find expression in human conduct, the dramatisation of the emotions of fear, pity, love, despair, joy, triumph, contentment. He knows how to use effectively the stimulus of curiosity and the thrill of suspense. He can make effective use of contrast—the famine of the leave-taking and the abundance that greets the return—the going out full and returning empty—the contrast in the characters of Ruth and Orpah—the destitution of Naomi and the wealth of Boaz—Boaz, the proud lord of the harvest field and Boaz in drunken slumber at the threshing-floor—the keenness of Boaz to marry Ruth and the indifference of the nearer kinsman—the contrast of Ruth as an anticipated burden and Ruth who brought salvation.

Indeed, the whole book is an interesting mixture of sunshine and shadow, of the gay and the grim. The sunshine falls on the joyous landscape where the Lord has restored abundance to his people. The shadow rests heavily on the life of a lone widow, deprived of all that makes life worth living, returning forlorn from foreign parts in embittered mood, to a home where she is hardly recognised. And the book is the story of her upward climb to the sunshine.

If the story of the Book of Ruth is founded on a tradition,

as we should expect it to be, what would be the basic facts on which the writer relied and on which he built? That a widow woman, hard hit by affliction, bereft of husband and sons, returned from Moab to Bethlehem-Judah accompanied by a Moabite daughter-in-law, for whom she contrived by her ingenuity to find home and settlement, and thus secured the continuance of a Jewish family whose existence was threatened, and that this tradition was further linked with national history in that the daughter-in-law was identified with King David's great-grandmother! Such may be regarded as the bare minimum. Less would reduce the whole story to fiction. How much above this minimum may be looked upon as coming within the realm of fact must depend on the credibility to be attached to the writer's portrayal of events. And there we are in the region of conjecture and surmise.

If we were to be asked whence we thought the writer drew his inspiration in shaping his plot, we should be inclined to reply—from three sources. In the first place he had the tradition to which we have just referred. In the second place, he had the tale of Tamar and Judah from which he drew much. In the third place, he had Hosea's reference to the "harlot's hire on every threshing-floor of corn". These three could provide him with all that he needed to fashion his story.

Observe how he has made use of the Tamar-Judah story. Tamar, denied the right of marriage—which meant so much to the women of the period—by the neglect of Judah to make that provision for her which was her legal right, took revenge by inveigling him into an association with her. And the popular opinion of the age laughed, and said in effect, "Serve him right". And Judah, to his credit, bowed to popular opinion and recognised the justice of her action. It was a good story which everyone enjoyed. That Tamar had any legal justification for her conduct I do not for a moment believe, yet Old Testament scholars have displayed extraordinary ingenuity in attempting to provide her with one. The writer equates his story of Ruth and Boaz, as far as he can, to that of Tamar and Judah. Ruth, he presents as a young widow deprived of the consolations of marriage, on which the fate of Elimelech's family depended. Unlike Tamar,

she has no claim on a brother-in-law in levirate marriage, for there is none. She has looked in vain to the *gō'ēl* for assistance in procuring a husband. He has not proffered help. Well, he, too, must pay for his neglect and in the same way as Judah. This appears to be Ruth's argument—or rather, Naomi's line of argument *for Ruth*. It is a reasonable deduction from the record of the happenings.

The problem of the writer was how to contrive a situation where Ruth and Boaz could be brought together as were Tamar and Judah. Tamar, disguised as a harlot, seated herself at the wayside and entrapped Judah. But that ruse could not be repeated with Boaz. Then he bethought him of Hosea's words about the harlot's hire on every threshing-floor of corn. It is not necessary for us to believe even that there were such orgies, although they may well have existed, for Hosea was probably using figurative language. But Hosea's utterance supplied him with the cue he wanted. The threshing-floor festivities provided both an excuse for Ruth to visit the place, and an occasion for the drunkenness of Boaz. That Boaz should be in a drunken stupor was essential for the purposes of the narrative. Thus in a plausible manner the two are brought together in the way desired by the writer and paralleled in the tale of Tamar and Judah.

There remains the moral aspect to consider, and in passing judgment on the characters of the book we are in all likelihood passing judgment on its writer.

We must not condemn Naomi by Christian moral standards for the manner in which she solved her problem and the means she employed. Public opinion of that age would certainly not have condemned her. *Autres temps, autres mœurs*. Ruth was a mere pawn in the game, and Ruth was a young widow, not a virgin. If any moral obloquy should fall on anyone, it must fall on Naomi, not Ruth. There are evident attempts to shield Ruth from possible hostile criticism or condemnation. The writer, we have already seen, was anxious to do this by stressing her complete subjection to her mother-in-law. And there is an interesting indication—or so at least it seems to me—that the Jewish guardians of the Hebrew text of a later age tried to divert

the very suggestion of guilt from Ruth. For in the text there are two significant *ḳethībhs* which bear on this point. When Naomi issues her instructions to Ruth prior to her departure for the threshing floor, she bids her : “ thou shalt go ”, and also “ thou shalt lie down ”. These are the *qerēs*, but the *ḳethībhs* make Naomi say : “ I shall go ”, and “ I shall lie down ”.

The narrator feels no need to apologise for, or to excuse the conduct of, either Naomi or Ruth. Far from being condemned, Naomi's methods were condoned and justified by the moral standards of the age and the land in which she lived. They were applauded as contributing to an achievement which merited recognition and deserved to be commemorated. The end justified the means. It was a woman's way of solving her problem. She had no other weapons to use in the struggle but womanhood, and of that she made clever and effective use.

And, permeating the book, as a sweet savour, is the deep satisfaction that all human nature the world over feels in the triumph of weakness over strength. It is the response to the cravings of the human heart beset by forces that bear heavily upon it—out of weakness being made strong—the weak things of the world confounding the things that are mighty.