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THE BOOK OF RUTH. MEGILLAS RUTH:
A NEW TRANSLATION WITH A COMMENTARY
ANTHOLOGIZED
FROM TALMUDIC, MIDRASHIC, AND RABBINIC SOURCES

The Book of Ruth. Megillas Ruth: A new translation with a Commentary anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources. Translated and compiled by Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz. Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2nd edition. New York, 1976, lvii + ninety-four pages.

A good starting point for judging the work under review would be its stated aims. The preface calls it an “unadulterated traditional commentary, lucid, dignified, literate, aesthetic and attractively packaged” (p. xii). The book is also “without recourse to so-called ‘scientific’ or other untraditional sources” (p. xvi). It is the task of the critic to see if the book lives up to its claims, taking its self-imposed limitations into account.

But a biblical translation and commentary must be measured by external yardsticks as well: what does the biblical book of Ruth demand in terms of its explication? Does this work deal with the problems of the text and does it convey any message to the reader? Finally, this is not the first translation and commentary of the Bible ever written and we would be remiss not to seek out the new or unique that it offers to its readers.

The book contains a Preface, Overview, Translation, and Commentary. The preface runs five pages, the introduction (“Overview”) 39, and the next two parts take up 74 pages. The introductory material is thus out of all proportion to the body of the

In memory of Simon Friedberg, z”l, a *ba'al hesed*, born on Shavuot.

work, taking up 40 percent of the volume, and should be considered an integral part of it.

While a proper review should limit itself to the material between the covers, it is clear that the plethora of praise lavished upon this series by the author includes the full color dust jacket as well. For this reason, we cite the jacket blurb in full:

The Book of Ruth is a story of loyalty and kindness, but it is much more.

Beneath the story of the Moabitess who sought refuge under the Wings of the Divine Presence, the mother-in-law who nurtured her spiritually and guided her maternally, the aged judge who married her in the last act of a great life, it is the story of the hidden spark of the Messiah.

From the humblest of origins through mysterious pathways, it emerged in the persons of Ruth and Boaz.

Deceptive in its simplicity, profound in its depth—the Book of Ruth.

The reader can judge for himself if this excerpt is lucid, dignified, literate or aesthetic—but packaging it is. The style of the blurb places it in a context of pulp novels and movie ads, certainly something the author did not intend. Incidentally, I believe the writer meant “deceptively simple” and not as stated. Such poor word choices, like the phrase “Chazal’s-eye view” (xii), impugn the claim to lucid and literate presentation.

In the preface, the author compares Ruth to Megillat Esther, the first Artscroll publication. He claims that “Ruth is more laden with Halachic implications.” This is a strange claim: There is a tractate of Mishnah and Talmud for the Book of Esther but none for Ruth, and no less than twelve *simanim* in *Shulhan Arukh* on the subject of Purim; the custom to read Ruth on Shavuot is tucked away in the Laws of Passover. Further, we have Rabbi Zeira’s statement that “this scroll has in it neither *tum’ah* nor *taharah*, neither *issur* nor *heter*.”¹ The author presumably meant that Ruth presents us with knottier halakhic problems: conversion, levirate marriage, laws of inheritance; these are dealt with in the Overview.

The Preface enjoins us from understanding the Book of Ruth “as a ‘love story,’ God forbid”; it is “aglow with inner meaning and understandable only in the light of our Sages who expounded every word *bikedushah ubetahara*” (xxvi). Why should a love story “make any Torah Jew shudder with disgust” (xxvi)? Is love opposed to *kedushah* and *taharah*? Besides, which commentator, traditional or “so-called scientific,” ever characterized the Book of Ruth as a love story?

The 40-page Overview, the next section of the book, deals with a host of topics: The Period of the Judges, the Sins of the Ancients, Monarchy in Israel, the Murky roots of Monarchy, the Marriage—Levirate and Moabite, and more. In a word, it can be described as wide-ranging *musar shmooz*. It is too wide-ranging for an introduction, since most of the topics have very little connection to the Book of Ruth. The topic of monarchy, for example, runs on for 15 pages, though the Book of Ruth is set in the period of the Judges.

And yet, if one manages to get through it all (I have my doubts how many readers do), a central theme emerges, encapsulated in the general title “Ruth and the Seeds of Mashiach.” In sum, the story of Ruth is the last in a series of “tainted origins” (xxxviii) in the genealogy of David. First Lot slept with his daughters and fathered Moab; next, “Judah’s tryst with Tamar” (xxxix), his daughter-in-law; finally, “a stealthy night-time visit by the Moabite woman” (xl) in which “the spark of Lot and the brilliance of Judah were united” (xliii). One by one, the topics of the overview serve to clear the hurdles of this remarkable thesis. The major theme shared by all the characters is that of forbidden sexual relationships, if not downright incest. Here is where the chapter entitled “The Sins of the Ancients” comes in. Its point can be summed up on a single quote: “One of our great scholars, of recent generations expressed the Torah view succinctly and well: “If only our *mitsvos* could be as holy as their *aveiros*” (xxiii).

At the outset, the author does not include the act of Lot and his daughters in the category of “holy *aveiros*.” But this act, too, is redeemed under the subtitle “A Bribe for the Satan” (xl). In this chapter we learn that “The Satan must be appeased” (xlii). By using Satan’s methods, he can be fooled. In this version of “the end justifies the means,” base acts are performed for a good cause. Another chapter is called “Drawing out the Sparks”; Lot, Judah and Boaz were the bearers of “sparks of goodness” that had to be redeemed (xliiii[sic.]). We are tracing a subterranean spark that makes its way to the surface in illicit sexual relations, in “holy *aveiros*,” to confound Satan and produce the Messiah.

Where is such a bold theme taken from? The introduction is interspersed with sources, many from the Zohar, but there is no acknowledgment of the origin for the entire thesis. The Megillah itself draws an analogy to Judah and Tamar (4:12) but its intent is very different. The entire thesis can be found in a few lines of rhymed verse in the Alshekh’s introduction to his commentary.²

The catchwords “mystery,” “sparks,” “redemption of sparks” (i.e. *tikkun*), and “the hidden spark of the Messiah” are all popularizations of Lurianic-kabbalistic ideas. It is therefore no surprise that the entire thesis is to be found in the commentary to Ruth of Moshe Alshekh, who was in close contact with all the major figures of 16th century Safed, including Rabbi Isaac Luria himself. Now, Alshekh uses the term *averah lishmah*. By doing him one better with a theology of “holy *aveiros*,” Artscroll has opened the door to the realm of Sabbatian and Frankist mystical heresy. As Gershom Scholem noted:

The consequences which flowed from these religious ideas were purely nihilistic. . . the process of *Tikkun* can no longer be advanced by pious acts; Evil must be fought with evil. . . I am referring to the fatal. . . doctrine of the holiness of sin. . . .³

Indeed, anyone who has read Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* knows how dangerous these notions were and to what lengths they were carried. Given the readership of Artscroll, which the authors describe as people who cannot read Hebrew sources, this brew of the esoteric spiced with antinomian theology is hardly the fitting introduction to the Book of Ruth. The presentation of such ideas as “traditional” Judaism, when not one of the motifs used appears in Mishnah, Midrash, Talmud or Rishonim, is in itself a remarkable naivete. Just as alarming though is the attempt to present such specialized material in a translation and commentary, as if it were the *peshuto shel miqra*, the plain meaning of the text.

What should a traditional commentary offer by way of introduction to the Book of Ruth? Perhaps we should cite Rabbi Ze’ira’s observations in full: “And why was this *megillah* written? to teach us the reward granted to those who do good deeds (*gomle hasadim*).”

Rabbi Zeira wants to express that the spirit of the Torah in its loftiest form radiates throughout Megillath Ruth. The laws of the Torah are, as it were, only foundations. . . . Out of the letter of the Law should grow a spirit of Love, tenderness, and selflessness.

It would certainly ease matters if we could ascribe the above quote to a Reform or conservative “preacher”; we should then write it off without any consideration of its contents (“untraditional source”). It is, however, cited in a fine little work, *The Book of Ruth*

as Reflected in Rabbinical Literature,⁴ in the name of Rabbi Joseph Carlebach, scion to a family of illustrious Orthodox rabbis.

It follows from Rabbi Zeira's words that *gemilut hesed* is the true theme of this megillah: The helping hand Ruth extended to Naomi, the kindness Boaz displayed towards Ruth in allowing her to glean from his field, Ruth's kindness in choosing Boaz over all the youths available to her, and Boaz's act of *hesed* in marrying a poor girl of no social standing, thereby redeeming the property of Elimelech and restoring Naomi's dignity. In fact if there is any basis of comparison between the story of Lot and Ruth's actions, it is the very contrast between the two, as a recent analysis has attempted to show.⁵ Both have the motif of a woman approaching the male. But Lot is presented as drunk while Boaz is in full possession of his senses. Ruth does not seduce Boaz though he is aroused,⁶ but asks for marriage in quite formal terms.

Following this line of thought, repeated insinuations in Artscroll that something untoward happened at the nighttime encounter (xxvi, xl, xliiii) are unfounded and are the very opposite of *peshuto shel miqra*.⁷ There is no basis for seeing a chain of "illicit" relations from Lot to Boaz. The case of Lot and his daughters is the forbidden *hesed* of Lev. 20:17; the case of Boaz and Ruth is true *gemilut hesed*.

"Rabbi Judah says: He who translates a verse literally is a fabricator, but he who makes additions is a blasphemor" (*Kiddushin*, 49a). Whatever the exact meaning of this statement, it certainly implies that translation is a tricky business. The author describes the Artscroll translation as "not literal, but true to the interpretation of our Sages" (xiii). This would mean a close connection between the commentary and the translation. While this is found occasionally (e.g., 2:3 *vayyiqer miqreha*) there are many places where it is lacking.

The opening verse *vayyelek ish mibbet lehem yehuda* is rendered "a man went from Bethlehem in Judah." All other English versions offer: "A man from Bethlehem went." The commentary notes that the phrase *vayyelek ish* appears only twice in the Bible, the other place being *vayyelek ish mibbet levi* (Ex. 2:1). Now, it is clear that this phrase means "a man from the tribe, or place so-and-so," with the intent of describing his origins, not the geography of his journey. To describe the actual port of exit, the Torah always writes *vayyetse*, e.g., *vayyetse ya'akob mibbe'er sheva*. The commentary concedes that "the verse could also be translated 'A man from Bethlehem...went.'" Why wasn't it?

Or another example: The word *te'agena* in 1:13 is translated “would you tie yourselves down.” The commentary notes that this follows Rashi who explains “to encircle, to constrict.” But this is not the same as “tie down,” a different root altogether.

All these are minor criticisms, however, when compared to an overall assessment of the English text. A superficial reading of what is billed as “a new translation” certainly looks like the Soncino version in a more colloquial form. The Soncino translation is the old JPS translation, which Soncino duly acknowledges. Now, using a more spoken English surely justifies the phrase “a new translation.” Whether you prefer 1:15 “Behold, thy sister-in-law has returned” (Artscroll) is a matter of taste. However, “So off she went” for *vattelek vattabo* (2:3) or “has been on her feet” for *vattabo vatta'amod* (2:7) was a bit much for me. I believe I detect a wry smile on H.L. Ginsberg’s face, for these are his translations.⁸ So that there be no doubt about our claim, we offer the following selection:

Verse	Old JPS	Ginsberg New JPS	Artscroll
1:9	that ye may find rest	that each of you find security	that you may find security
1:14	but Ruth cleaved to her	clung to her	clung to her
2:23	and she dwelt	then she stayed at home	then she stayed (at home)
2:1	a mighty man of valour	a man of substance	a man of substance
2:7	save that she tarried a little in the house	she has rested but little in the hut	except for her resting a little in the hut*
2:19	he that did take knowledge of thee	who took such generous notice	that took such generous notice
4:1	now Boaz went up to the gate	meanwhile Boaz	Boaz, meanwhile
4:8	so the near kinsman said	so when the redeemer said	so, when the redeemer said
4:14	the Lord gave her conception	The Lord let her conceive	Hashem let her conceive**

*the translation . . . follows Ibn Ezra and Malbim (91)."

**lit. Hashem gave her conception (131)."

It is only natural to refer to earlier works when preparing a new translation, but due credit should be given in the preface. The sin of omission is compounded here by the statement that no use was made of untraditional and scientific sources, and these adjectives are certainly the hallmarks of H.L. Ginsberg's various commentaries on the Bible. The fact that Artscroll's Ruth is based on the new JPS is something for Artscroll's readership to ponder; in the last analysis, it is the best proof of the necessity for scientific and scholarly biblical study. The pious disclaimers to the contrary have become the imprimatur of "Torah-True" books, publisher's equivalent of the glatt-Kosher *hechsher*. The fact that no acknowledgment is made, however, is not only a matter of scholarly procedure but a seeming violation of *mi-dvar sheqer tirhaq*.

COMMENTARY

The assemblage here is very comprehensive and commendable. The only fault may be the inherent contradictions such as "anthologizing" must include. On the question of Elimelech's sin,

Elimelech's additional sin was that he took only his nearest kin . . . not being concerned about anyone else (63).

They were all punished because they left Eretz Yisrael (63).

The reader is left to decide which explanation is to be followed. The commentary does not stress that one opinion (the latter) is from the Talmud and the other, medieval. Once again, we are dealing with an audience that could use such guidelines.

Unlike the Overview, the commentary often deals with the simple meaning of the text. One such area we would like to examine is grammatical comments. People who have some knowledge of Hebrew are bound to be disappointed by several of the explanations. Some examples:

(a) The word *shabah* with accent on the second syllable is called the imperfect tense, which means future (79). In fact, *shabah* is the participle form, or present.

(b) *Umtsena menukhah*—"The *K'siv* of the word is . . . without the suffix *heh* i.e. in singular" (73). With or without the *heh*, *metsena* is the plural imperative. The singular is *mitz'i*.

(c) In 1:9, the masculine suffix is used twice even though the subjects are Ruth and Naomi. This usage is repeated in 1:19. The explanation that they dressed up as men is fanciful: why is there no

discussion of *beged ish*? At any rate, a commentary grounded in the Oral Law might note that Mishnaic Hebrew uses masculine forms for women as well. Be that as it may, *shtehem* in place of *shenehem* or *shtehen* is a problematic form that admits of no easy explanation.

(d) in 3:3 the forms *vesamt(i)*, *veyaradt(i)* that Naomi addresses to Ruth are called “first person,” as if Naomi were speaking of herself. It is true that the Midrash gives this interpretation of herself. But a commentary should point out that such spellings appear some 20 times in the Bible and are archaic forms of the second person. (They are the norm in literary Arabic.) The *qre*, or vocalization, is *vesamt*, *veyaradt*.

(e) The word *efratim* “may be derived from the word *apiryon*” (64). “Homiletically related” would be a better phrase, for *apiryon* seems to have “a non-Semitic origin.”

(f) While on the topic of Semitic languages: “In the Moabite language, like English, most nouns do not have separate male and female forms” (105). Moabite, unlike English, is a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew. It is axiomatic that all Semitic languages distinguish between genders. In the only Moabite document we possess, the Mesha stele, the words *gbrn*, *gbrt* (men, women) appear, which show gender differentiation.

We do not propose that Artscroll get involved in language studies. First, these areas involve scientific studies, something Artscroll has foresworn. Secondly, this is not proper fare for readers with a casual knowledge of Hebrew. But there is a literary approach that relies on a close reading of the text that even the casual reader of Hebrew would appreciate. This is the approach “key words” publicized in the works of Professor Nehama Leibowitz. As she has shown, the technique of word comparisons was used extensively in Midrashic literature and is therefore traditional *le-mehadrin*.

Rather than presenting the reader with a myriad of comments, unrelated to each other in content or approach, this type of literary analysis aims at extracting a unity of structure and motif that has been locked in just beneath the surface by the author of the Megillah. He did this by choosing certain works over others and these works hold the key to interpretation.

We offer one example of this approach to a problem we have already touched upon. Every reader, every year, senses the ambiguity in the meeting of Boaz and Ruth on the threshing floor. Was this a sexual encounter or not? The use of the key words *shakab* (eight times), *yada* (four times), *margelotav* (four times) and their sexual

connotation elsewhere in the Bible leave no doubt that the Megillah intended this ambiguity. Yet, the resolution of this incident is made equally clear: the innocent *lini halalah* (3:13) after the heavy use of שכב drives home the point that the trait of *hesed* once again overcomes baser human instinct, a motif repeated throughout the Megillah.

Granted, many of these points are buried here and there within the Artscroll commentary, but there is no didactic method, no ordering of the comments in an overall framework that would heighten the reader's appreciation. The Artscroll reader, we think, would prefer fewer points better made than an encyclopedia of comments.

Without doubt, tens of thousands of people who would not otherwise study Tanach will look into the Artscroll volumes. The editors should take this rare opportunity to offer the best, not only in quantity, but also in the approaches to study Tanach.

This means a major re-thinking of purpose and method for future volumes.

NOTES

1. Yalqut Shimoni, Ruth, 601.
2. Five Megillot (Warsaw, 5635), in a few lines of rhymed verse in the introduction to Ruth.
3. Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (N.Y.: Schocken, 1954), p. 315. See also p. 317.
4. Yitzhak I. Broch, *The Book of Ruth as Reflected in Rabbinical Literature* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1975), p. 8.
5. Yair Zakovitch, "The Threshing-Floor Scene in Ruth," *Shanaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* III (Jerusalem, 1978-79), pp. 29-33.
6. This is the interpretation of the Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 19b, for the word *vayyillafet* (3:8) and not as incorrectly given by Artscroll (112). See Rashi *ad loc.*
7. Yalqut Shimoni II, *remez* 136, pairs off Joseph and Boaz as two who resisted temptation. *Tanhuma Beha'aloteka* 10 says that Boaz swore that he would not touch Ruth on that night.
8. *The Five Megilloth and Jonah: A New Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969).
9. James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1968), p. 103.