

A Note on the Book of Ruth

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The origins of the Book of Ruth have been much discussed, with some scholars seeing the book as originating from circles opposed to Ezra and/or Nehemiah. According to this interpretation, while Ezra and/or Nehemiah opposed marriages between Jews and the neighboring peoples, Ruth argued that such marriages were permissible, claiming that King David himself descended from such a marriage (Ruth 4:17).¹ Others have seen the book as a folktale in which is discussed the fortunes of two women who nobly withstand a serious test with YHWH's aid and protection. Intermarriage, in this view, is not the book's main concern.²

Whatever the interpretation, the acceptance of Ruth into the canon of Jewish scriptures required that some biblical passages be reinterpreted in order to accommodate the information in the book. The best known of these passages is Deuteronomy 23:4: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord." This prohibition now had to be understood as applying to male Ammonites and Moabites, and not to females.³ This article proposes to investigate the Jewish exegesis of the story of Lot and his daughters in a similar light.

Lot and his daughters: Genesis 19:30-38

The story of Lot and his daughters has been understood by critical scholars as a piece of anti-Moabite and anti-Ammonite polemic.⁴ The ancient Israelites, closely related yet often hostile to both nations,⁵ explained the origins of these peoples in highly uncomplimentary terms.⁶

Since Gunkel, however, scholars have emphasized that the Bible pronounces no clear judg-

1 Cf. the Davidic genealogy in 1 Chronicles 2:4f., from which Ruth is omitted.

2 See S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York, 1956), 453-56; O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament, An Introduction*, translated from the German by P. R. Ackroyd (New York, 1965), 478-83; M. Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (New York, 1971), 161.

3 See Sifre Deuteronomy, par. 249, 277 (Finkelstein). See, further, the sources cited by Finkelstein, ad loc.

4 See A. Dillman, *Genesis*, trans. W. B. Stevenson (Edinburgh, 1897), 2:112-16.

5 See Psalm 83. For examples of the secondary literature, see J. Liver, *Encyclopedia Miqrait* (1962), 4:707-22; H. Van Zyl, *The Moabites* (Leiden, 1960). On Ammon, see B. Mazar, *Encyclopedia Miqrait* (1971), 6:254-70.

6 Cf. Genesis 9:20-26 on the Canaanites.

ment against Lot's daughters.⁷ Their behavior is apparently justified by their conviction that all mankind, save they and their father, had perished in a universal cataclysm.⁸ Gunkel and others suggest that the story was originally Moabite, a proud account of the origins of that nation.⁹ This Moabite story, once known to the ancient Israelites, was retold in the Bible in order to subtly denounce Ammon and Moab.¹⁰

Jewish exegesis of Genesis 19:30-38

The plain meaning of the biblical texts can thus serve as the basis for at least two different exegetical tendencies—one condemning Lot, his daughters, Ammon and Moab, the other excusing or perhaps even praising their actions. One would expect to find the former tendency developed and emphasized in the Jewish exegesis of this passage, as the Jews should have considered themselves heirs of the ancient Israelite hatred of Ammon and Moab.¹¹

It is therefore not surprising to read the following in Jubilees 16:7-9:

But Lot we saved; for God remembered Abraham, and sent him out from the midst of the overthrow. And he and his daughters committed sin upon the earth, such as had not been since seen the days of Adam till his time; for the man lay with his daughters. And, behold, it was commanded and engraven concerning all his seed, on the heavenly tablets, to remove them and root them out, and to execute judgment upon them like the judgment of Sodom, and leave no seed of the man on earth on the day of condemnation.¹²

7 H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Reprint: Göttingen, 1964), 217-20. Cf. the clear condemnation of the Canaanites in Genesis 9:20-26. Gunkel has been followed by J. Skinner, *Genesis* (Reprint Edinburgh, 1969), 312-14; A. Lods, *RHR* 95 (1927), 204-19; R. Kilian, *Die vorpriesterlichen Abrahamsüberlieferungen* (Bonn, 1966), 136-45; R. Graves and R. Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (New York, 1966), 171-72.

8 The Rabbis also suggested that Lot's daughters believed that they were the survivors of some universal catastrophe—like the Flood. See Genesis Rabbah 51, 8, 537 (Theodor-Albeck). For critical scholars the key to this conclusion is the recognition of the intrusive nature of the Zoar episode (Genesis 19:18-23, 30a); for if Zoar had been saved, Lot's daughters would know that there were other people left alive. The first to clearly recognize the intrusive nature of this episode was Kilian, *Abrahamsüberlieferungen*, 144-45. Idem, 141-44, goes too far in his attempts to separate the destruction of Sodom from the episode in the mountain cave, for the events in the mountains make no sense without some preceding calamity.

9 Gunkel, *Genesis*, 218. Gunkel suggests that the etymology of Moab, "from my father" (Genesis 19:37), was a proud boast of purity of blood—no other family was involved. I would also suggest that the pride is in being direct descendants of the survivor of the calamity. Cf. Pindar *Ol.* 9,41f., where the town of Opoos is praised as having been founded by Protogeneia, the daughter of Pyrrha and Deukalion.

10 Gunkel, *Genesis*, 218.

11 Hostilities between Jews and Ammon and Moab continued down to the Maccabean period. See 1 Maccabees 5:4-6. On these verses, see M. Avi-Yonah, *IEJ* 2 (1952), 5, notes 55 and 56. See also Y. Yadin, *The Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness*, trans. B. and C. Rabin (Oxford, 1962), 22.

12 *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, trans. R. Charles (Reprint: Oxford, 1964), 2:37. The hatred of Ammon and Moab was shared by the authors of the DSS. See IQM I, 1, and the comments of Yadin, *Scroll of the War*, 258. A new and totally victorious campaign against the Ammonites and Moabites may have been part of a standard view of the end of days. See Numbers Rabbah 14, 1.

Nor is the following anonymous comment in the Mekhilta surprising:

He is exalted above all those who exalt themselves. For with the very thing with which the nations of the world pride themselves before him, he punishes them So too it says, "Before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gommorah they were like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt" (Genesis 13:10). Then what else is written? "And they made their father drink wine, etc." (Genesis 19:33). Now, where in that cave could they get wine? But it was the Holy One blessed be He, who provided them with wine, even as it is said, "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the mountains shall drop sweet wine" (Joel 4:18). If this is how the Holy One, blessed be He, provides for those who infuriate Him, how much more will He do so for those who carry out His will.¹³

A different but nonetheless comprehensible note is sounded by a group of Midrashim which excuse Lot and his daughters while condemning them. Midrashim in *Pesikta Rabbati*¹⁴ and *Aggadat Bereshit*,¹⁵ for example, stress that had God judged Lot's daughters by their actions alone they should have merited execution. God, however, took account of their intention—of their desire to repopulate a world whose inhabitants they believed to have been annihilated—and therefore did not punish them as they deserved. Nevertheless, God did not totally exonerate them, but decreed (in Deuteronomy 23:4) that the offspring of their unions could not marry Israelites.¹⁶

There are also Midrashim which virtually praise Lot and his daughters. These texts, which are genuinely surprising, even show God as aiding their plans. For example, much like the passage from the Mekhilta cited above, R. Judah b. Simon cited Joel 4:18:

Whence did they procure wine in the cave? . . . R. Judah ben Simon said: A specimen, as it were, of the Messianic age was provided for them, as you read, "And it shall come to pass in that day that the mountains shall drop sweet wine" (Joel 4:18).¹⁷

Comparing R. Judah's version with that of the Mekhilta, one sees that R. Judah omits the negative context of the statement and the strongly negative argument a fortiori found in the Mekhilta. According to R. Judah, God's help was not a means of punishing Lot or the

13 Mekhilta, Shirta, Chapter 2, 35b-36a (Friedmann). Translation after J. Goldin, *The Song of the Sea* (New Haven, 1971), 89 and 93. Cf. Sifre Deuteronomy par. 43, 94 (Finkelstein). This passage is cited by Graves-Patai, *Hebrew Myths*, 171, as proving that God aided Lot's daughters. The context, however, as Graves and Patai apparently did not recognize, indicates that the "aid" was only a means of punishment. Joel 4:18 will be cited in a more positive sense below. The passages below are the ones Graves and Patai should have discussed.

14 *Pesikta Rabbati*, *Pesikta* 42, 176a (Friedmann).

15 *Aggadat Bereshit*, Chapter 25, 51 (Buber). Philo, *Quaest. in Genesis* 4:56, also excuses Lot's daughters while condemning them.

16 In *Pesikta Rabbati* the punishment is understood in the light of the Rabbinic exegesis of Deuteronomy 23:4 (see above, n. 3). Since Lot's daughters had good intentions, the prohibition on intermarriage did not apply to Ammonite and Moabite females.

17 *Genesis Rabbah* 51, 8, 538 (Theodor-Albeck). Translation from H. Freedman and M. Simon, *Midrash Rabbah* (London, 1961), 1:448.

Sodomites, but was without ulterior motive.

A clue to the meaning of this surprising divine cooperation is provided by another text, the *derasha* of R. Tanhuma in Genesis Rabbah 51:8:

"That we may preserve seed of our father" (Genesis 19:32). R. Tanhuma said in Samuel's name: It is not written that we may preserve a child of our father, but, that we may preserve *seed* of our father: viz., the seed that comes from a different source,¹⁸ which is the King Messiah.¹⁹

The "incest" of Lot and his daughters is positively judged because it is connected with bringing the Messiah, and the Messianic connection must be from Moab (born of this union) through Ruth the Moabitess to King David and the Messiah.²⁰

This interpretation is confirmed by our final text, an unusual Midrash of unknown origin in Sefer Hasidim:²¹

Why did Ammon and Moab have the privilege of David's descending from Moab and Solomon's sons [descending] from Ammon?²² For it is written: "The end is better than the beginning" (Ecclesiastes 7:8) when something is good from the beginning [the end is also good]. [Where is the good beginning of Ammon and Moab?] For [Lot's daughters] said, "Let us preserve seed of our father" (Genesis 19:32), which was explained in reference to the Messiah in Genesis Rabbah. For they had a tradition from Lot their father who received it from Abraham that the son of David would not come until all the souls in bodies would die, prior to which there would be four

18 The crucial phrase for R. Tanhuma is *zr'*=seed, which he interprets in a Messianic sense. As Professor Morton Smith has called to my attention, this exegesis of *zr'*=seed goes back at least as far as St. Paul, Galatians 3:16. R. Tanhuma calls this messianic seed *zr' mmqm ahr* "seed from a different source." There are at least two possible meanings of this phrase. The first would assert that the Messiah would come from a different national stock, that is, from some non-Israelite nation. According to this meaning, R. Tanhuma would be referring to Davidic descent from Ruth the Moabitess. The second possible meaning would take *mqwm ahr* as an allusion to God. Compare the comments in Esther Rabbah on Esther 4:14, and see L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1925), 6:470, n. 139. According to this meaning, R. Tanhuma would place the Messiah under divine aegis, or perhaps even derive the Messiah from a divine source. On the possible meanings of the phrase, see H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Reprint: Munich, 1965), 1:26-27. See also the following note.

19 Translation from Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 1:448. For other citations of this and similar *derashot*, see J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba* (Jerusalem, 1965), 537. Given the possible meanings of "a seed from a different source" discussed above, it should not be surprising that R. Tanhuma's statement was much used in medieval Christian polemics. R. Martini quoted it twice in his *Pugio Fidei* (Lipsiae, 1687), 354 and 758, and J. Lorkia used it in his *Contra Iudaeos* (Zurich, 1552), 62. Both authors saw R. Tanhuma as supporting the Christian belief in the divine origin of the Messiah. For an example of a Jewish response, see Abarbanel, *Yeshuot Meshiho* (Königsberg, 1861), Part II, item 3, chapter 5, 53a. Abarbanel argues that R. Tanhuma intended "a seed from a different source" to refer to the Moabite origins of the Messiah.

20 Cf. Matthew 1:6.

21 On this Midrash, see L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:243, n. 188.

22 Rehoboam's mother was Naamah the Ammonitess—1 Kings 14:21.

kingdoms. When they saw the four kings fighting the five kings they said that [the prophecy] that four kings would rule has been fulfilled. And after that [another prophecy] was fulfilled. For they said we have a tradition from our father who received it from Abraham that the Messiah will not come until five cities have been destroyed, as it says in *Pereq Heleq*, and behold five cities have been destroyed—Sodom, Gommorah, Admah, Zvoim and Zoar. And the Messiah will not come until all the souls in bodies have died. Since they saw that “there is no man on earth to come unto us” (Genesis 19:31) for all the souls in bodies have died, therefore “let us preserve seed of our father” and the numerical value of the Hebrew letters of the phrase “let us preserve seed of our father” equals the value of the letters of “this is the King Messiah.”

“Let us preserve seed of our father.” Since their intentions were for the sake of heaven, for they had no lust for their father as he was an old man, therefore Boaz who was [also] an old man, came to Ruth. And Ruth did not desire Boaz lustfully, as it is said: “you have not turned to men” (Ruth 3:10), but only in order that a son might be born for Naomi. And Boaz only had intercourse with her on one night, like Lot with his daughters. Therefore were David, Solomon, the Messiah and other righteous men descended from [Lot’s daughters].²³

The explanation of the phenomena is obvious by now. Once Ruth is accepted as canonical, Ruth’s Moabite ancestry becomes part of the ancestry of King David and hence of the Messiah. Therefore, some Jewish exegetes of the account of the birth of Moab chose not to denounce, but rather to praise, that story and its actors.

23 E. Wistinetzki (ed.), *Sefer Hasidim* (Berlin, 1891), 461.