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The Book of Ruth and the “Grandmother Hypothesis”

The biblical Book of Ruth contains a birth narrative and a template for a mother and daughter-in-law relationship. It also provides a fascinating example of surrogacy, grandmothereing and/or othermothering. Naomi, the mother-in-law and grandmother in the book, is the agent effecting the birth of Ruth's child, a child who will become an ancestor of King David out of whose lineage the messiah is said to come. “The grandmother hypothesis” described in the scientific journal Nature (March 11, 2004), which suggests that grandmothers have wielded enormous power over human evolution, is exemplified in this biblical text. The “grandmother hypothesis” shows that older women traditionally remained an important, indirect reproductive force long after they stopped having children of their own. Older women enabled their own children to breed earlier, more successfully and more frequently. The longer older women lived, the more grandchildren were born. The family assistance provided by grandmothers is a central determinant of our longevity. Naomi is beyond her own childbearing years and her two sons have died so she directs Ruth to build a relationship with Boaz in order to produce progeny. Ruth follows her mother-in-law's instructions, marries Boaz and delivers a child, Obed, who is named by a community of women. The birth narrative in the Book of Ruth offers a window into the biblical experience of mothering and of the “grandmother hypothesis.”

There are many birth narratives in the Hebrew Bible, the most familiar of which are connected with the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. There are also narratives in the *Tanakh* that deal with the births of “special children” who are then dedicated to the service of God, including, in a broad sense, Moses (Exodus 1:8-2:10), Samuel (I Samuel 1:11-2:11), and Samson (Judges 13:1-25). The narratives of these “special children” and the son born to Tamar after her liaison with her father-in-law Judah describe the often

dramatic events leading to the birth of some prominent figures in the Torah, Prophets and Writings. Mothering in the Hebrew Bible is not limited, however, to giving birth in the literal sense of the words. In the Book of Judges Deborah, a prophet, judge and military leader, is called a “mother in Israel” (Judges 5:7) although there is no biblical record of her giving birth to children.

The Book of Ruth provides us with an extraordinary birth narrative and template for a mother and daughter-in-law relationship. It also offers a fascinating example of surrogacy, grandmothering and/or “othermothering.” To borrow a concept from the African experience,

within African communities, mothering is not necessarily based on biological ties. Established African philosophy suggests that children do not solely belong to their biological parents, but to the community at large. This philosophy and tradition inform what we refer to as “other-mothering” and “community mothering.” (Wane, 2000: 112).

Ethiopian Jews, the *Beta Israel* as they called themselves, followed biblical laws strictly, and because they were isolated from other Jewish communities since the eighth century B.C.E. their form of religious practice might offer insight into the experience of much earlier times. Ethiopian-Israeli women practised othermothering in Africa and perhaps reflect a form of biblical mothering embedded in the birth narrative recounted in the Book of Ruth. In the Book of Ruth we see a community of women coming together to celebrate the birth of a baby; this baby is an ancestor of King David out of whose lineage will come the Messiah. It is the loving relationship between the mother-in-law Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth as well as the devotion of the community of women in caring for the child, Obed, that makes redemption a possibility.

In the biblical text Naomi and her husband Elimelech and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion leave Bethlehem for Moab because of a devastating famine. During their ten-year sojourn in Moab Elimelech dies, Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, and then both sons die. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem and tells her two daughters-in-law to return to their mothers’ households and get on with their lives. Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes that Naomi is speaking as the head of their household by releasing them from their obligations to her,

and as a mother in setting them on this path to new marriage, and her repetition of the phrase “my daughters” [*benotay*, rather than “daughters-in-law,” *kalotay*] emphasizes the spirit in which she sends them off. Naomi is bitter that she will have to lose them too, but they can have lives to lead. (2002: 240).

Orpah tearfully heeds Naomi’s advice and returns to her home. Ruth, however, clings to her mother-in-law, “*veRut davka bah*” (Ruth 1:14),¹ reciting

lines that are among the most eloquent and moving in the Bible, “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you” (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth’s clinging to her mother-in-law depicts female bonding within a text where “clinging between women determines the movement of the plot” (Pardes, 1992: 102).

Ruth returns with Naomi to Bethlehem and they arrive in time for the barley harvest. The crops have flourished, especially in the fields of Boaz, a kinsman of Elimelech, where Ruth gleans in order to bring food home to her mother-in-law. Boaz notices her and tells his men to treat her kindly and not to molest her. The fact that he needs to caution his men to treat Ruth with respect offers insight into the social conditions of young women gleaning in the fields and the dangers that they encountered because of their gender and position. Boaz makes it clear that because of Ruth’s relationship with her mother-in-law she will be protected from harm. At the end of the season, Naomi tells Ruth to go to the threshing floor, where Boaz and his men are spending the night. Frymer-Kensky notes that

Naomi is sending Ruth to do something which is totally inappropriate behavior for a woman, and which can lead to scandal and even abuse. Prostitutes might come to the threshing floor in the middle of the night, but not proper women, and if Ruth were to be seen, the gossips would be busy. Moreover, if Boaz took advantage of her, what recourse would she have? Who would believe that a woman who came to the threshing floor was raped? Naomi’s plan presumes that Boaz will prove trustworthy and will continue to act in the spirit of benevolent *hesed* that he has shown so far. And her plan demands enormous trust from Ruth, who must truly believe that Naomi wants only good for her, and is not using her for prostitution; and she must also share Naomi’s faith in Boaz. But Ruth agrees to do whatever Naomi suggests. (2002: 251)

Ruth finds Boaz sleeping and lies down beside him. When Boaz awakes she informs him that he is her next of kin, referring to the law of levirate marriage between a widow whose husband died without offspring and the brother of the deceased.² He replies that there is actually a closer kinsman and promises to discuss the matter with him in the morning. If the other man is prepared to redeem Ruth and the land his claim takes precedence but if not Boaz will do so. In the meantime he suggests that Ruth spend the night with him, leaving before dawn, presumably to preserve her reputation. Before she leaves he gives her extra grain to take to Naomi. Ruth returns home and the women wait to see how the situation will resolve itself. The close relative, who

remains unnamed, declines to redeem Ruth, conceding his right to Boaz. Amid praise and rejoicing, Boaz marries Ruth. A child is born to them, although the child is said to be born to Naomi, rather than to Boaz or Elimelech. The women name him Obed and Naomi nurses him. The book ends with a genealogy growing out of this union, concluding with the birth of King David.

The Book of Ruth is a woman-centred text. Naomi is a wise elder, and she guides Ruth whose youth makes it possible for her to renew her life through a relationship both with Naomi and with Boaz, the *go'el* or redeemer. There is a great deal of dialogue in the Book of Ruth: 55 out of 85 verses. This is the highest ratio of dialogue to narrative in any biblical book (Sasson, 1987: 320) and the voices heard are primarily women's voices in conversation with one another. Both of the major protagonists in the text are women and their speech reflects the experiences of their journey and return to Judah and their integration into the community of Bethlehem. The book was included in the Hebrew Bible because of the genealogy leading to the birth of King David, out of whose house would come the Messiah.

It is a text that is concerned with redemption and in this beautiful story the relationship between two women, a mother and daughter-in-law, effects redemption. The story of Ruth opens on the road; the women are situated in liminal space where they are temporarily beyond the reach of patriarchy. There they cement their friendship and commitment or love for one another. Once they return to Bethlehem, however, they will have to search for a male “redeemer.” Ruth and Naomi live in a patriarchal society and require a son to carry on their husbands' names. Within these parameters they demonstrate considerable agency. Naomi and Ruth's mutual motherhood is a model for the kind of behaviour that will lead to a world embodying the values of a messianic age: love, generosity, loyalty and courage. The love of God in this text is manifested as a love between two women of different countries of origin, different backgrounds and different ages. Their journey is a quest for redemption through the birth of a child to both of them as well as to the community at large as reflected in the naming of the baby by the community of women.

Naomi and Ruth are among the most marginalized members of society—women, widows, childless, and in the case of Ruth, a stranger and convert to Judaism. But they take the destiny of the Jewish people into their hands and succeed in effecting redemption on a personal level, on a national level, as the ancestors of King David, and on the religious level, as purveyors of *hesed*—benevolence, loyalty, fidelity or trustworthiness. The drama in this text is a profoundly religious one. The choice made by Ruth to cast her lot with her mother-in-law Naomi, is a supreme act of *hesed*, a term often used to describe the intimate relationship between God and the children of Israel. The *hesed* shown by the youthful Ruth in her relationship with her mother-in-law is then matched by the behavior of Naomi and Boaz. Naomi is beyond childbearing age, as she tells Ruth and Orpah when she encourages them to return to their mothers' houses: “Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have

I any more sons in my body, who might be husbands for you? Turn back, my daughters for I am too old to be married. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons, should you wait for them to grow up? Should you on their account debar yourselves from marriage (Ruth 1:11-13)? Ruth becomes her surrogate in order to ensure the continuity of Naomi's family, the line that has been severed by the deaths of Naomi's sons, one of whom was Ruth's husband. Ruth takes Naomi's place in a relationship with Boaz in order to provide the progeny that will rescue the two women from poverty, restore Naomi to her former position in the community and help Ruth, a convert, be accepted as a member of the Jewish people.

These women are articulate and active. They transform our vision of what is possible and offer new paradigms regarding relationships between in-laws, especially the most demonized dyad of all, the mother and daughter-in-law. As Marianne Hirsch writes: "Nowadays, mothers-in-law bear the brunt of the pervasive fear of and contempt for mothers—and therefore of women—that define our culture. The mother-in-law is the adult version of the evil step-mother in the fairy tales of our childhoods. Our culture projects onto her all its discomfort with maternal power and powerlessness. She is a comic figure, the subject of sitcom humor" (Hirsch, 1994: 309). In traditional societies mothers-in-law are often resented by their daughters-in-law because they socialize the younger women to be docile, passive and silent. The mothers are only doing what they believe will ensure the respect of their family as they wield some power within the domestic sphere yet they are ultimately powerless to effect change. In the Book of Ruth, however, Naomi counsels her daughter-in-law to go out into the fields at night to Boaz's bed, to take chances, and Ruth follows her directions and takes them a step further by suggesting to Boaz that he is a redeeming kinsman (Ruth 3:9). Ruth is an assertive woman who has learned well from her mother-in-law. The Book of Ruth permits us to view the mother and daughter-in-law relationship with new eyes and also reconsiders the status of the surrogate mother in the Hebrew Bible.

The stories of Sarah and Hagar and of Rachel and Leah and their handmaids Bilhah and Zilpah are earlier instances of surrogate motherhood. But there is an innovation in the case of Ruth and Naomi because there is a difference between these instances of surrogacy where a woman gives her handmaid to her husband in order to produce a child, in her name, and the model of Ruth who provides a grandchild for her mother-in-law. In the former cases, especially in the Sarah-Hagar story, there was resentment and competition between the women and struggles around ownership and legitimacy of the child to inherit his father's legacy. This time, however, the experience is a cooperative venture. "Naomi took the child and held him to her bosom and she became his nurse. The women neighbors give him a name, saying, 'A son is born to Naomi'" (Ruth 4:16-17). Ruth may not be the first surrogate mother, literally, but she provides us with a new vision of what surrogacy might evoke and describes a loving mother and daughter-in-law bond. The relationship

between the two women makes a transformative fertility possible. Naomi is determined to become a grandmother by helping Ruth find a mate so that she can give birth to a child. Her behaviour in this regard is presented as an act of supreme *hesed*.

Unlike the troubled relationship between Sarah and Hagar, friendship between women is the key to the *hesed* at the core of the Book of Ruth. By accepting Naomi’s God, Ruth is also affirming the importance of the very legacy over which Sarah fought Hagar. The Book of Ruth revises the Hagar story and reconsiders the issue of old age. Not only is Naomi fulfilled once more, but she becomes the baby’s nurse. There is a precedent for an old woman nursing a baby in the birth narrative of Isaac. The biblical text makes note of Isaac’s weaning party when Sarah stopped nursing him (Genesis 21:8) although we know that Sarah was over 90 when he was born. In the Book of Ruth we see Naomi, too, as a nurse, *omenet*, as well as a mother-in-law, grandmother, mentor and friend. Old age is presented as a time of fullness and plenty if there are children. Abraham, for example, enjoyed good, old age, *seva tovah* (Genesis 25:8), and Naomi, too, is now more whole thanks to her role as grandmother to Obed.

The importance of the grandmother in this text may indeed reflect the importance of this role in ancient Israel. Evidence for the central role of grandmothers in traditional societies has been corroborated in the scientific journal *Nature*. A recent study (March 11, 2004) suggests that grandmothers have wielded enormous power over human evolution. The study shows that older women traditionally remained an important, indirect reproductive force long after they stopped having children of their own. Quebec and Finnish grandmothers were studied and the results revealed that the women were such crucial contributors to the family unit that the longer they lived, the more grandchildren were born. The discovery indicates that grandmothers were key drivers of the evolutionary process that led to humans’ long life spans.

Most animals reproduce until they die, but human females typically live for decades after they stop having children. The new findings, researchers say, provide the strongest support yet for the “grandmother hypothesis”; that older women enabled their own children to breed earlier, more successfully and more frequently. This, in turn, favored the evolution of women who lived long, productive lives after menopause. The family assistance provided by grandmothers is a central determinant of our longevity. We see a clear and forceful example of the “grandmother hypothesis” in the Book of Ruth where Naomi’s machinations—in tandem with her daughter-in-law, Ruth—make possible the Davidic line that will lead to redemption.

We have moved a great distance from the earliest surrogate motherhood recorded in Genesis, that of Hagar and Sarah, where jealousy prevailed and where in order to fulfill God’s prophecy that Isaac would inherit Abraham’s religious legacy, Hagar and her son were cast out into the desert. From there the text takes us to the next dyad, Rachel and Leah, not enemies but sisters,

whose rivalry over their shared husband and children or lack thereof gave way to cooperation and fertility for both, individually and with the participation of their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah. Finally, however, The Book of Ruth reimagines for us the paradigm of surrogate motherhood and grandmothership by the inclusion of the *besed* effected by Ruth, Naomi and Boaz which extends to the entire community who share the pleasure, the celebration, and the naming of the baby conceived by Ruth, and nursed or cared for, by Naomi. The word *omenet*, can be translated as nursemaid, governess or caregiver. One becomes a mother not only through biology but by behavior. Caring for a child whether it is adopted, biological, or a grandchild, makes one a mother. The birth is one component, but the caregiving is here recognized as equally relevant and the concept of othermothering is evident in this scene.

There is a midrash on Ruth 4:16-17: “Naomi took the child and held him to her bosom and became his nurse. The women neighbors named him, saying, ‘A son is born to Naomi’” suggesting that one might rewrite the conclusion of the verse to read “and a grandson is born to Naomi” (Sohn, 1994: 27).³ There is also a midrash that addresses the issue of what constitutes motherhood and mothering. It says that Ruth did not die until she sat by the side of her great grandson, King Solomon, during the judgment of the two women who were claiming the same child. Ruth taught her great grandson how to distinguish a real mother: the real mother is one who loves the child and wants what is best for it. In the famous judgment rendered by King Solomon of the two women each of whom claimed to be the real mother where he suggested cutting the baby in two, evoking the real mother’s plea not to harm her child, he showed his wisdom in determining maternity (*Ruth Rabba, bet, bet*). He had a good model in his great grandmother Ruth, who shared her baby with Naomi. The birth narrative of Obed offers a window into the biblical experience of mothering and expands the term “mother in Israel” to include mothers-in-law, grandmothers and othermothers within a community of women celebrating the birth of a child together.

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¹The Hebrew text is in the past: “Ruth clung to her.” The translation and translations from the Book of Ruth that follow are taken from *The Five Megilloth and Jonah*.

²The law of levirate marriage is found in Deuteronomy 25:5-6 (cf. *Encyclopedia Judaica* 11: 122-131). Ruth also alludes to some land belonging to the family which would also be redeemed through their marriage. For a discussion of this see Frymer-Kensky (2002: 250-252).

³Sohn quotes the Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 620b: 27.

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