"EXCEPTION TO A UNIVERSAL TABU"
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by
Rabbi Jerome D. Folkman, Ph.D., D.D.

The mobility of modern man has threatened his value systems and morality, shaking and sometimes shattering their very foundations. Man has always been a traveler, but twentieth century man has annihilated distance on this planet and conquered outer space. Man has always been willing to move from place to place, from one environment to another, under the constraints of survival needs, but in this century, more human beings are called upon to cope with more different environments in the course of their lifetimes than ever before in human experience. To the mobile man of this century, varieties in systems of values and morals are patent, and, in a pluralistic culture like our own, conflicts between them are inevitable.

For example, the United States Supreme Court recently declared that legislation denying or restricting abortions in early pregnancy is an unconstitutional invasion of private rights. Immediately, a storm of protest broke; the Court was denounced for what was called an "immoral" opinion. Actually, the Court's opinion was a legal interpretation of the Constitution of the United States. In itself, it was neither moral nor immoral. The Court was not calling abortions "good" or "bad." The Court simply held that the "goodness" or the "badness" of the operation was a private matter, of concern to a woman and her physician. Those ethnic and religious groups that hold that a person's life begins with the fertilization of an ovum regard abortion as a form of murder; they denounce the Court for what they call the "legalization of murder." Those who hold that a foetus in utero is a member of the mother's body until it is delivered and begins to function as an independent system see abortion as a surgical procedure similar to amputation or any excision required for the saving of the life of the mother. Others are concerned with the right of a child to be born wanted by parents who are ready, willing and able to take responsibility for his life. Who is right? Who is wrong? What is good? What is bad? What is moral? What is immoral?

More than two decades ago, Clyde Kluckhohn was a guest lecturer before our Sociology Department at The Ohio State University and described his search for universal values and norms. His investigations discovered some, but they were not necessarily consistent with our Ten Commandments. One of the universals discovered by Professor Kluckhohn was the "mother-in-law tabu." Its expression may vary from one culture to another, but, in one form or another, it is found in every culture. The tabu is necessitated by the closeness of the relationship between the mother and child; when the status and roles of the offspring are shifted in marriage, the residual bonds become a threat to the new family unit. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the first divine command regarding family life expresses this tabu: "Therefore shall a man forsake his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh." (Genesis 2:24)

The relevance of this tabu to our culture is illuminated by the finding of Dr. Evelyn Duvall that of all of the sources of excessive extended family influence the husband's mother is the most troublesome personality, with the wife's mother in second place, and the husband's sister, third. (Evelyn Duvall, In-Laws: Pro and Con, New York: Association Press, 1954) In spite of all of the sociological and anthropological data supporting the mother-in-law tabu, the Bible offers a notable exception

in the Book of Ruth. It is astonishing to note that this Biblical book features two women, a Jewish mother and her non-Jewish daughter-in-law. Can you imagine what Jerome Weidman or Philip Roth would do with this situation? Can you conjure up in your mind's eye a novel or a motion picture entitled: "Good-bye, Bethlehem?" In the first five verses of the Book of Ruth, a decade in time, both women become widows. No contemporary Jewish writer would have constructed such an idyllic relationship between these two women. But the author of the Book of Ruth would not want to be classified as a "realist;" there is no doubt about it - the Book of Ruth is tendenz-literatur.

Date and Purpose

What did he have in mind? Why did he write the Book? To understand the author's purpose, we must first determine the approximate date of the Book of Ruth and understand the social, political, and economic background against which it was written.

Even the casual reader of the Bible can perceive at once that the Book of Ruth could not possibly have been written in the period covered by the Book of Judges. The author has placed his story in that period, the twelfth and eleventh centuries before the Christian era, but the society subsumed by the author of the Book of Ruth has little or nothing in common with the society discovered in the Book of Judges. The latter, the Book of Judges, was written in and about a relatively primitive period, when there was no continuous national government, when there was only a feeling of kinship uniting tribes, especially in times of emergency, and when there was no king in Israel and each man did what was right in his own eyes. "And the Israelites did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baalim. And they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the peoples that were round about them, and worshipped them; and they provoked the Lord." (Judges 2:11-12)

In fact, those called "Judges" in the Book of Judges were not judges at all. They were chieftains. Obviously, in the twelfth and eleventh centuries before the Christian era, the Hebrew word "Shoftim" was applied to local chieftains in whom total political power was vested. Their judicial functions are not even mentioned in the Book of Judges. It should have been called the "Book of the Chieftains." But when national government was developed out of the federation of the tribes, the local chieftains were stripped of all their political power except the judicial, and the meaning of the word "Shoftim" was altered to fit the new job description for the local political leaders. In my translation of the original Hebrew text of the Book of Ruth, I have restored the original meaning of the word "Shoftim;" unfortunately, I had to take some liberties with English grammar and rhetoric in order to transmit the flavor of the Hebrew text. The Book of Ruth was not written "when the chieftains 'chiefed.'" The community subsumed for the Book of Ruth was orderly and polite, God-fearing and law-abiding, hard-working and productive. It was an established agricultural economy unlike anything reported in the Book of Judges, really the Book of the Chieftains.

To anyone who knows Hebrew, the names of the principal characters of the Book of Ruth immediately suggest tendenz-literatur rather than history. The name of the man who went forth from Bethlehem in Judah was not unusual; "Elimelech" or "My God

is King," is a name that any Jewish mother might give to any Jewish boy. The name of "Naomi," meaning "sweetness" or "pleasantness," might have been given to any Jewish girl by her mother. But what mother would name her sons "Mahlon" ("Cancer") or "Chilion" ("Tuberculosis")? Obviously, no mother in Israel would have chosen such names for her sons. Those names were selected by an author for characters of his own creation destined by his own plot to die prematurely. That they did, in five verses. With remarkable economy of language, the author set the stage on which he presented Naomi with two daughters-in-law, Orpah, which means "deceitful" or "disloyal," and Ruth, which means "friendly" or "loyal."

Both girls were Moabitish. But the author leaves no doubt as to his purpose. He certainly was not writing in the twelfth or eleventh century; obviously, he was writing in the fifth century before the common era. He was writing against a decree of Ezra whose program of reconstruction of the post-exilic community included a compulsory divorce law, requiring all who wished to become part of the reconstituted community to put away their foreign spouses. The author of the Book of Ruth made no extravagant claims for all the foreign wives. By creating Orpah, he admitted that some might be deceitful; his presentation of Ruth was designed to show that a Moabitish maiden could become a friendly and loyal Jewess, continuing her loyalty to the people of Israel through her mother-in-law, of all people! (Cf. Ezra IX ff..; Nehemiah XIII:23; and Deuteronomy XXIII:4)

The rest of the Book is designed to present Ruth, of Moabitish extraction, as a loyal daughter of Israel, obedient to Hebrew law in some of its subtle and often misunderstood details.

The Author

The Book of Ruth is written in excellent Hebrew, truly the finest in the Bible. The author was undoubtedly a man of some culture. The finest index of the true intellectual with the broadest comprehension is a sense of humor. Consider the attempt of Naomi to persuade her widowed daughters-in-law to return to their own families. (Cf. Chapter I, v. 8 and ff..) How could she obey the Hebrew law with respect to childless widows? (Cf. Leviticus XVIII:16; XX:21; and Deuteronomy XXV:56) "Have I any more sons in my womb who could possibly become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, it is the best way, for I am too old to remarry. Even if I had any hope, indeed, if I were to acquire a husband this very night, would I conceive? Even if I did, would I bear sons? In such remote possibilities, would you wait, remaining single, until they were mature enough for marriage? No,,my daughters, for it is a bitter pill for me to swallow! The hand of the Lord has gone against me." (Ruth I:8-13) Both young women wept aloud. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law before she acted upon her sage advice, but Ruth embraced her and refused to go. At this point, Ruth affiliated herself with the people of Israel. She gave her pledge to God with her mother-in-law as witness. Her words are still used today in the conversion ceremony in which Judaism is embraced by those who were not born to Jewish parents.

From Moabite to Israelite

The rest of the Book of Ruth, beginning with the second chapter, is designed to show Ruth as a God-fearing, law-abiding daughter of Israel. The law of the next of

kin is difficult for us to understand. The Hebrew word for the next of kin, "goel," is more or less accurately translated as "redeemer." Since this word, "goel," or, "redeemer," was later applied to God and His agents, it is difficult for those who do not read Hebrew to appreciate the significance of the word in the earlier texts. Consequently, I have employed the Hebrew word, "goel," as a noun and a verb. Now, what is a goel?

In ancient Israel, there were no civil, criminal or probate courts, and no welfare apparatus. All of their functions were performed by the nearest of kin, the "goel." He was not only required to avenge wrongs committed against dependent kinfolk, but he was also responsible for the protection of their rights and their property. He was to marry the childless widow of his deceased brother and preserve her property for her posterity, legally interpreted as the descendants of the dead brother. (Cf. Leviticus 25:47-49) Adding another wife was not difficult in a society in which polygyny was not uncommon, but keeping a dead brother's estate intact could become a very expensive undertaking.

The whole community of Israel was charged with the responsibility of the indigent poor. (Cf. Deuteronomy XXIV:19 ff., and Leviticus XXIII:22) Corners of the field were not to be harvested. Whatever the gleaners missed or dropped was not to be picked up. Whatever grows by itself after the harvest is not to be marketed. All this belongs to the indigent as of right. How large is a corner? That definition depended upon the generosity of the landowner. How rigidly was the Mosaic law enforced? Jeremiah was not very happy about its neglect. Apparently, the law was more honored in the breach than in the observance. Naomi's kinsman, Boaz, was a generous man who obeyed the law beyond the letter.

So, the author called him "Boaz," which means, "In him there is strength." Now, he was a kinsman on the side of Elimelech, but he was not the next of kin. He was not the goel. The author did not take the trouble to find a name for the actual goel. For him, the author uses the name "p'lonee almonee," which is the Hebrew equivalent of our term, "John Doe." This is the way in which I have translated the term. In most English translations, the effect is achieved by calling him "such a one," or so-and-so." But the author did not trouble to give the actual goel any character. He was like anyone else. He was an Everyman. He was perfectly willing to add a wife, particularly an attractive girl like Ruth, but he was not willing to preserve any estate for her dead husband.

Rituals

The author is not a deviant. He is for the establishment. In the early post-exilic community, life was too precarious to permit of excessive carping criticism of what feeble establishment there was. The ritual of the transfer of the rights and obligations of the goel is carefully performed. The same author who covered ten years and three deaths in five verses of chapter one devoted seventeen verses of chapter four to a detailed description of the ritual and law of conveyance and transmission.

Again, when Naomi suggested the correct manner for Ruth to invoke the duties of the goel in the third chapter, she was not suggesting anything immodest. In our sexist society, casual readers of translations of the chapter put a prurient implication upon what is really an old Semitic adoption ritual. Obviously, the author

has created Ruth as his protagonist. He would not allow her to do anything immodest. Nor would he permit Naomi to suggest any immodest procedure to her. Naomi did not have a Ph.D. in pyschology, but her suggestions revealed a profound understanding of male psychology. "Wash yourself well, put your make-up on carefully, put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but be careful not to identify yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, make a mental note of the place he chooses; after he has gone to sleep, go, uncover his feet and lie down there yourself; he will tell you what to do." (Ruth III:3-4) Our teen-agers from sixteen to sixty usually smirk at this suggestion. But this is a perfectly proper ritual of adoption used by the ancient Semites and described by Robertson Smith. You can be sure that the author would never let Naomi or Ruth do anything improper.

The Seal of Divine Approval

The author has a dramatic way of showing that a "solid citizen" like Boaz fully accepted Ruth as a loyal daughter of Israel. He also shows that the Lord Himself accepted her. In the second chapter, Boaz did more than permit Ruth to follow after his gleaners, which any indigent person had a right to do by Hebrew law; he invited her to share of the food and beverage of the gleaners, a privilege not generally accorded strangers.

The Lord God made Ruth the ancestress of David, the ideal King in the early post-exilic times. Could anything more be expected of a young lady who came from the fields of Moab back to Bethlehem in the company of her mother-in-law?