

YHWH and behave in accordance with the spirit of the prescriptions of the law, they can be part of the Jewish people. How can people like Ezra defend closing the frontiers to others, when David, whose worth they can hardly deny, also had a Moabite ancestor? According to Ezra's rules, David should be excluded. Such an inward-looking ethnic legislation is absurd.

Furthermore, were not Abraham and Sarah foreigners who converted to belief in YHWH? Did not Rachel and Leah, both of whom are mentioned in Ruth, come from Mesopotamia, and did not they too become ancestral mothers of Israel? What would Ezra do about that? No, the narrator wants to make clear by his story of Ruth to anyone who will listen that faith and good behaviour are the only things that count. So according to the narrator, membership of Israel need not be limited to ethnic Israelites. Had not the prophets already said before the exile that the important thing was not the formal religion of sacrifices or belonging to the elite group of the rich and the believers, but one's attitude towards the weakest in society? Anyone who, like Ruth, seeks protection under YHWH's wings, forms part of Israel. So those who are Israelites by birth can be inspired in their behaviour by Boaz, the prototype of a good YHWH believer.

The narrator did not choose to write a polemical pamphlet, as that would have been to adopt the same style as Ezra and his followers. With Ruth he has made a book which radiates a kind of inner harmony and power, and he contrasts this rest and equilibrium with the ethnic cleansings and the xenophobia. He is opposed to the rigid criterion which is applied to everyone. In the end, he says, they measure only themselves. He sets the book of Ruth against the closed system of measurement, the certainty of one's own descent and identity. He tells his readers and hearers an attractive story, which carries them along by its style and imagery, and especially by the many possibilities of applying it. From now on people can no longer say, 'We don't know how foreigners see things'; from now on they need to listen to foreigners and look at them, as YHWH himself had listened to them and looked at them when they were themselves foreigners.

Alternative ancestors

The narrator narrates his text with a view to a particular public of readers and listeners, but that audience is not empty-headed. These people themselves have views, convictions and stories going through their heads. By alluding to texts from the tradition the narrator can reinforce the meaning of his own story and give it an extra dimension. Therefore not only has the historical context influenced the meaning of Ruth but also the 'inter-textual' context, i.e. all the other texts which were resonating in the heads of listeners or readers and to which the narrator refers.

Tamar and Ruth

In Ruth 4.12 the narrator makes the men in the gate mention the names of Perez, Tamar and Judah. Prompted by this, the listener or reader compares the story of Judah and Tamar with the book of Ruth. In both stories an Israelite man leaves the place of his birth and his son marries a non-Israelite woman. Sadly, in both cases the son dies childless, and the widow, in the one case called Tamar and in the other Ruth, is left alone. Without a husband and children she finds herself in a hopeless situation. She can only escape from it by attracting the attention of an older member of the family. Ruth succeeds by undressing at night on the threshing floor and Tamar by sitting veiled at the entrance to the city. The result is the same in both cases: the older man of Judah (Boaz or Judah) has sexual intercourse with the young foreign woman (Ruth or Tamar) and she bears a son, who in both cases is referred to as 'seed', what is needed for procreation from the dead husband. Thus both stories give the impression that women are more dedicated than men to the continuation of the Israelite people, whereas they are really outsiders.

But both in Genesis and in Ruth, the Israelite men have good reasons not to feel responsible for the continuation of the family. They are not brothers of the dead husband and therefore they have no obligations under the law. Moreover there is another candidate who comes before them, and they expect him

to father a child to the widow. Unfortunately, however, this closest relative who is a candidate in Genesis 38 and Ruth 4 does not feel responsible for the continuation of the family. In Genesis 38.8-9 this is Onan, Judah's second son:

- 38.8 Then Judah said to Onan,
 'Go in to your brother's wife,
 and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her,
 and raise up offspring for your brother.'
 38.9 But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his;
 so when he went in to his brother's wife
 he spilled the semen on the ground,
 lest he should give offspring to his brother.

This Onan is just like 'Mr So and So' in Ruth 4. Like this anonymous kinsman, Onan does not want to father a child who will continue the name of his dead brother. They both want the pleasures, but not the burdens: Onan is certainly prepared to have sexual intercourse with the widow (often) and 'Mr So and So' to buy Naomi's land, but neither of them wants to do the right thing by the dead man, far less by his widow. All they have in view is their own self-interest, not the interests of any other man or woman.

So there the foreign women sit. One man of Judah does not feel responsible for the continuation of the family because the law puts no obligations on him (Judah or Boaz), while the other (Onan or 'Mr So and So') avoids the obligation. The result is that there are no children. The women have no more possibilities within the law (we can see this in the case of Tamar: if she had been pregnant by another man then she would have been burned by Judah!). They have to take fate into their own hands. And they do this by covering themselves completely or undressing completely. By doing this they disclose both their wishes and their identity. But only in the first instance does this uncovering relate to the women themselves, since on closer inspection it becomes clear that by their behaviour they are above all uncovering the others.

In both texts, Genesis 38 and Ruth, for this we find the key word *nachar*, which means 'see', 'observe', or 'take notice of'. In 2.10 Ruth says to Boaz: 'Why do I find grace in your eyes, that

you should take notice of me (*nachar*), when I am "one who is seen", or a foreigner (*nochria*, from the same root *nachar*)?" And later in 2.19b, Naomi says, 'Blessed be he who took notice (*nachar*) of you.' As 'one who is seen', Ruth makes people, including Boaz, see her. In the denouement of the Judah-Tamar story in Genesis 38.25-26, *nachar* plays an even more important role. The moment that Tamar shows Judah his signet, cord and staff, which he has given her as a pledge, 'Judah recognized (*nachar*) them and saw (*nachar*) that Tamar had right on her side'. Thus the word *nachar* forms the nucleus of both stories. As non-Israelite women, Tamar and Ruth are called women who 'are seen', but they are in fact the instruments through whom Boaz and Judah begin to see. Precisely by being outsiders, they hold up a mirror to those within. Although strictly speaking Boaz and Judah have no obligations, Ruth and Tamar indicate that the intention of the law, which is to secure the continuation of the generations, counts more heavily than the letter of the law. Like the men at the centre of government in the gate, Judah and Boaz concentrate all their attention on the obligations and the legal situation according to the rules of the law. If there is a hitch and the legal possibilities are exhausted, the women are the ones who mark out an alternative way in these texts. They succeed in maintaining the people in an inventive way.

The narrator of the book of Ruth pays close attention to Ruth's alternative approach, and various exegetes conjecture from this that the narrator is a woman. In their view, otherwise it is difficult to explain how a narrator can make the readers look so clearly through the eyes of Naomi and Ruth. It would also be difficult to understand otherwise how there is so much attention to the creative contribution of these women to the history of Judah and appreciation of it. By making the men in the gate say that Tamar and Ruth have made the history of Judah possible, the (possibly) female narrator hopes to convince the male readers that these foreign women are indispensable links in the chain of the history of Judah. Without Tamar the people of Judah would not have existed, and without Ruth they would never have got a King David.

Rachel and Leah, Naomi and Ruth

The men in the gate compare Ruth not just with Tamar, but also with Rachel and Leah. Thus they extend Ruth's ancestral function still further. Whereas Tamar is the ancestor of one tribe, namely the tribe of Judah, Rachel and Leah are the ancestors of twelve tribes. The people in the gate refer to them in Ruth 4.11:

4.11 'May YHWH grant that the woman
who comes into your house
shall be like Rachel and Leah,
who together built up the house of Israel.'

Rachel and Leah are the wives of Jacob, who is also called Israel. Leah bears him ten sons and Rachel two, and together these are the twelve tribes of Israel. The men in the gate compare Boaz with Jacob and Ruth with Rachel and Leah. What do we know of these women? Their story is told in Genesis 29-30. Rachel is the attractive woman whom Jacob chooses as his wife on their first encounter, but for whom he has to work seven years. Her sister Leah does not attract him, and moreover her name means 'dull' or 'unattractive'. After seven years' hard labour, Jacob gets Rachel as his wife; at least, that is what he thinks, but hardly is the wedding night over than he discovers that he has not slept with Rachel but with Leah. The night must have been very dark for Jacob not to have noticed that the two sisters had been exchanged and that he had got the dull one and not the attractive one. After a week he also gets Rachel as his wife, but for her too he has to work for her father Laban another seven years. During these years Leah has many children, whereas Rachel remains barren. At her wits' end, Rachel says to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die' (Gen. 30.1). Finally Rachel becomes pregnant twice, but a poignant aspect of the story is that she dies giving birth to her second son. Thus it is not her infertility but her fertility which proves the death of her.

What connects Ruth with Rachel and Leah? First, of course the tricks in the night which make Tamar, Ruth and Leah notable women. But in addition there is a more impressive

agreement. Just as Rachel and Leah between them have built up the house of Israel, so Ruth and Naomi between them carry on the people. Both pairs of women are also exchanged: Rachel and Leah in the night, and Ruth and Naomi (by Boaz) in the gate. But there is also a difference. 'Between them', Rachel and Leah make their contribution towards building up Israel, but not in a harmonious collaboration. As two quarrelling sisters they produce two series of children, and these children stand for the twelve tribes of Israel. Ruth and Naomi, as one mother, produce the child who more than anyone else will help to build up the unity of the house of Israel.

To some degree, Ruth and Naomi have grown together here. In the first chapter of the book they were still distinct. The change begins in the second part of that chapter with Ruth's unconditional choice of Naomi, after which the two go on the way together. Later they grow even closer together as a result of the events on the field and on the threshing floor. And finally in the last chapter they become one in the words of others, since Boaz lumps the widows together and the women of Bethlehem make the mothers coincide. This is quite different from the story in Genesis about Sarah and Hagar, who quarrel over motherhood and build up two divergent peoples. It is also different from Rachel and Leah, who as jealous sisters together build up the twelve tribes of the people of Israel. Through a harmonious collaboration, Ruth and Naomi are able to become the ancestral mother of the king who will bring together the twelve tribes of Israel under one name. So in this sense, too, the alternative of these ancestral mothers Ruth and Naomi becomes clear: two women, one foreign and one from Judah, are as one woman, the ancestral mother of David. Perhaps it is not such a crazy idea to think that the author and narrator of the book of Ruth is a woman, for here women are not played off against each other, as is usual in the (patriarchal) literature of this time, but work together.

Abraham and Lot, Ruth and Boaz

The relationship between the book of Ruth and the patriarchal narratives in Genesis goes even deeper. This is a matter not just

of direct similarities between persons or terms, but of an underlying pattern. One network can be recognized in which both stories can be included and which the narrator offers us in a convincing way.

The book of Ruth as a whole is very like the stories about Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12-25. In Genesis 12 YHWH chooses a foreigner to become the tribal ancestor of his people and makes him go to Canaan. Moreover we hear of an extra handicap, since Abraham and his wife Sarah are already very old when Sarah finally becomes pregnant. The same is also the case with the book of Ruth. God chooses an outsider to be the ancestral mother of David. This time the woman is not old (through she is childless), but her husband Boaz is old and has remained childless. Being a foreigner and being old characterize both these stories about ancestors. That becomes even clearer if we take account of Naomi as an ancestral mother, for in that case again an aged couple is the basis for the history of Israel.

Abraham goes to a foreign land the moment that YHWH says, 'Go, go' (*lech lecha*, Gen. 12.1). Similarly, Ruth opts for YHWH by going to a strange land (Ruth 1.17). She goes with Naomi and says, 'Where you go, I shall go' (*telchi 'elech*). Both resolve to live in a new land and opt for a new God, YHWH. In the first instance there might seem to be a difference, in that Abraham is chosen, whereas Ruth herself chooses. However, at the end of the book of Ruth it proves that Ruth, too, is chosen by YHWH, to bear a son who will be the forefather of David. In both situations, however, we hear of 'going abroad', of going from the familiar to the unknown. This characterizes both Ruth and Abraham. Here belief in YHWH is indissolubly bound up with going on the way. That this involves great uncertainty emerges from the sequel to the two stories. Abraham gets the promise of land, blessing and descendants; Ruth does not get a single promise. The first piece of the promised land of which Abraham gains possession is the place where Sarah is buried. Ruth

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the great point of uncertainty remains childlessness of barrenness hangs over all. What use is a land and if you can't hand it on to anyone? Isaac has yet Certainly at the moment when he departs from the birth, Abraham has the son of his dead brother, his nephew as his son. In the clan and family association he carries some reassurance, because in any case he can live Lot. However, unfortunately there is a break-up between Lot and Abraham. This far-reaching event is described in 13. There the narrator uses the word *parad*, cut, three times, to indicate this. The emphasis on this 'separation' is evident, and 13.11 expresses this poignantly: how is it for one man to cut himself off from his next of kin in a neighbouring region, and from that moment on can no longer live on in him.

Furthermore Lot's fortunes are described separately of Abraham, and he does considerably less well than Abraham. The city in which he lives, Sodom, is described as a place where he loses his wife in the landscape, where she remains a pillar of salt. Only he and his two daughters survive of Sodom. They retreat into a cave, far from the world. The daughters have no husband and father. The women are therefore afraid that the family will avoid that they plan a trick (Gen. 19.30-38). They father drunk, go to lie with him in turns, and have intercourse with him without his noting it. The result of this nocturnal escapade is that they become pregnant. The daughter of Lot gives birth to Moab and the daughter of Lot's nephew Ammon. Thus at a great age Lot has become father of Ammon and Ammon.

At first sight there seems to be little similarity between the experiences of Lot and those of Ruth. Of course the situation of Lot and his daughters is like those of Judah and Tamar and Ruth. In all three cases the women are childless and the men are old. In all three cases the women are

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man drunk, covering oneself with a veil or taking one's clothes off), the fertilization takes place and the men become the fathers of sons.

However, on closer inspection it proves that the narrator of Ruth makes a connection between the patriarchal narratives in Genesis and his own story which gives the book of Ruth a totally new dimension. The narrator brings out this line at the beginning and the end of the book of Ruth. At the beginning, the narrator puts into Ruth's mouth the key words of the book:

1.16b 'Where you go

I shall go.

Where you spend the night,

I shall spend the night.

Your people is my people,

your God is my God.

Where you die

I shall die,

and there shall I be buried.

Thus may YHWH do to me

and thus may he continue to do.

Nothing but death will separate me from you.'

Ruth says that she will always stay with Naomi, since 'Nothing but death will separate me from you.' The word 'separate' used here, one which does not occur much in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, is the same word *parad* as appeared in Genesis 13. 9, 11, 14. Here the narrator of Ruth brings out the contrast between Lot's behaviour and that of Ruth. Ruth does not opt for a separation but for a union with Naomi until death, whereas Lot opts for a separation from Abraham during their lifetimes. Ruth makes an unconditional choice for Naomi's people and God and for Naomi herself. At no moment does she consider a separation.

Ruth is a Moabite woman and thus a descendant of Moab.

Lot is the father of Moab and thus at the same time Ruth's fore-

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So Boaz stands in the genealogy that goes back to . . . Through the union of Ruth the Moabite woman with a man of Judah, and through the birth of Obed, the first son of Abraham come together again for the first time. [T]he new redeemer is born with Obed, since he redeems the history of the clan of Abraham.

In the network of connections that the narrator between Ruth and Genesis we look back on the history of the people. This people was one until Abraham and nephew/brother Lot separated (Gen. 13) and until peoples formed with the birth of Moab (and Ammon 19). Through Boaz and Ruth and their child Obed there is a sorry break between the families of Lot and Abraham restored. Obed redeems the history of the long-standing and restores its unity. Thus Obed paves the way for the king of all Israel.

Hebrew would not be Hebrew if it did not make itself visible by a verbal image. The name Moab, *mo'ab* means 'going out from the father'. In Genesis 19. 3 the name indicates that the child Moab has sprung from the father of his mother. In relation to Ruth, however, *mo'ab* gets a wider significance. Originally Abraham belongs to one people, since they come from one (Genesis 12. 1). Their descendants, Israel and Moab, are thus also children of one father and therefore one people, who have gone their separate ways as a result of the separation of Lot and Abraham. Moabite, someone from the people of Lot, Ruth's father, falls in with a woman of Judah. She opts for her people for her God, and in so doing creates the conditions of a new people of the Moabite people to the people of Judah (and Abraham). Both through her connection with Naomi and through her gradual fusion into one mother, and through her union with Boaz, there is an end to the split in the people which comes from one father. These people now return as one people to the one root, and from now on they can begin one

The God of Abraham and Ruth

GoGoGod

Many people have a positive picture of God: God is someone who reinforces us, who gives us the ground of our being, who intends the best for us and creates harmony in his creation. But from Genesis and Ruth it proves that God also has other faces.

In Genesis 12.1 God summons Abraham: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.' This is a very hazy summons; Abraham doesn't yet know where he has to go. He is given the promise of much land and many children, but he doesn't get this land during his lifetime; only the tiny plot of land that he buys for his wife's grave. As we read it and experience it from Abraham's perspective, God's command is not easy. Abraham has to go, and he does go, but all his life he remains 'on the go', a 'transient'. That is in fact the meaning of the word 'Hebrew' or '*ivri*'. The word comes from the root '*avar*', which means pass or go through. Abraham is the traveller who always remains a foreigner, because he never lives on his own land. And Abraham is childless, since he is already ninety-nine and his wife is ninety, and they still have no children. They want to believe in God's promises, but they have to laugh when for the third time God promises that they will have a child. And God says, 'Laugh, but you'll see.' And Sarah becomes pregnant and bears a son, who is called Isaac, 'Laugh'. They laugh again, but now for joy.

The God of Abraham proves to be a God who is not always intent on harmony and stability. This God appears again in Genesis 22. 'Go,' God says to Abraham, 'Go and take your son with you and sacrifice him to me.' And wonder of wonders, Abraham goes. Crazy, one wants to say. You've waited all your life for a child and then you're ready to sacrifice him. Perhaps he has such trust in this God who continually keeps breaking into his personal life that he thinks, 'I'll wait and all will turn out well.' Just like the first time, things don't seem to go well. The

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hand. A more painful picture is almost impossible to father who is about to cut the throat of his only son. God of love? This God is not a God who make comfortable, but one who makes you feel uncomfortable a God who, the moment that you have taken a great trouble to get some order and structure into your life, you feel the chaos underneath. He is a God who brings your life in a painful way the very moment that you hold it in your hands. He is a God who keeps telling you to *GoGoGod*.

Now and then God breaks into Abraham's Abraham time and again lets God descend on him what he is told. 'Go,' and he goes. 'Circumcise,' and he circumcises. 'Sacrifice,' and he sacrifices. This Abraham is man. Only we don't come across God so often in our lives. We think that God never breaks in on us. We aren't used to it. We aren't called to sacrifice our child. We would never be so crazy as to obey. So we can't do it. Good we are (or are not), or what good believers we are (or are not). But perhaps God broke into your life yesterday and didn't happen to notice. Possibly he will call you to do it after tomorrow and then you will have an eye or an ear

God who breaks in

Just imagine that now, in 1997, you're carrying out a task people in the street, 'What do you live for?' people answer 'to be happy'. In New Age thinking it is expressed in terms of 'being completely yourself' or 'being in yourself'. In the hedonistic or materialistic thought propagated above all among young people with 1990s values: 'You're young and you want something', personal happiness is also central: you want excitement and sensations happiness, pleasure and prosperity, health and health

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does not lie in herself, either in personal happiness or in her becoming herself; but she wants to make Naomi and her past husband live on in an appropriate way. Moreover she opts for YHWH, Naomi's God, and allows this God to break into her Moabite order, into her safe home and the fixed system of rules. She expressly opts for this YHWH, whose very name indicates that he is a God of movement. For the word YHWH is a form of the verb to be, *hayā*; to be precise it is the third person masculine singular of 'to be', i.e. 'he is'. But because the form at the same time indicates an action which is not yet complete but is continuing, you can translate YHWH as 'he is going on', 'he will be' or 'he becomes continuous'. In Exodus 3.13-14 this name is interpreted as follows:

- 3.13 Moses said to God,
 'If I come to the people of Israel,
 and say to them,
 "The God of your fathers has sent me to you,"
 and they ask me,
 "What is his name?"
 what shall I say to them?"
- 3.14 God said to Moses:
 'I am who I am.'
 And he said,
 'Say this to the people of Israel,
 "I am has sent me to you."'

YHWH explains his name as a form of the verb 'to be', but because he himself is speaking, he puts it in the first person singular. Unlike the English form, this 'being' is not definitive or complete, but still active, and therefore it is better to translate Exodus 3.14 as 'I am who I am becoming' or 'I am becoming who I am'. YHWH is then the 'God who always becomes more who he is', a dynamic God who always becomes more who he is. This YHWH keeps calling people to get moving and go on the way and thus to become who they are.

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their actions but even their perceptions are directed getting a grip on the world around them: they (and we) net over something and think that they can catch ever it. Other people perceive things differently, have different cultures and principles of ordering, and thus nets over reality. They feel, experience and think differently. And yet at the same time we human beings have the capacity to allow ourselves to be broken open, to let other people live. Thus 'revelation' is a form of God's breaking into life. God is the one who breaks in.

In the (post)modern period in which we live, becoming increasingly aware that we are all tied to perspective. We recognize that almost everything is done by the person who looks or perceives, that everything on the time and context in which something is said, and cannot detach ourselves from ourselves. But this sense of the beginning of a relativization of our own perspective possibility of changing our perspective. Despite this which we are tied to our perceptions we are in a position to allow ourselves to be broken open by someone who feels quite differently. Events which affect us and we look at us therefore confront us most with our selves; therefore break open the way in which we look. Go such a foreigner, and God can even be a Moabite widow.

The book that you are now holding has shown you a new perspective and allowed you to feel what it looks like through the eyes of other individuals. Its aim has been to break open the way in which you look at things and to go on the way. So it is time now for us, too, to go.