

Examining the Afro-Hebrew Religio-Cultural Affinity as reflected in the Book of Ruth: a comparative approach

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ABSTRACT: This paper is an analysis of the book of Ruth indicating the close affinity between the African and Biblical (specifically Hebrew) cultures. The paper contains arguments that are geared towards highlighting the striking closeness between the cultures of these two communities that lived worlds apart and without any known means of cultural exchange. The objectives guiding this work include an examination of the theme of suffering as portrayed through the persons of Naomi and Ruth, an analysis of the theme of vulnerability among women as portrayed through the experience of Naomi, Ruth and Orpha, a determination of the relationship between African and Hebrew cultures in regard to the treatment of women by society and to highlight lessons that can be learnt from this text and which can be used to enhance the fight against gender-based injustices in Africa. This work is based on the capability approach model as presented by Martha C. Nussbaum (2000), research was carried out using sources and literary perusal and was interpreted using the grounded theory approach. The paper argues that there is validity in African cultural practices, contrary to what European missionaries wanted us to believe. It argues that Christian mission work today should consider African culture as a point of departure to plant Christian values, rather than a blanket condemnation of anything African. Consistent with the strong character displayed by the Naomi-Ruth-Boaz triangle, present day governments and Christian bodies should put in place measures to ensure gender equity and equitability in the distribution of resources. The paper concludes by advancing the view that the close affinity between African and Hebrew cultures may be a pointer to a common origin for humankind.

KeyWords: *Vulnerability, integrity, capability, resilience, kinsman-redeemer*

I. INTRODUCTION

There are two things that stand out about the story of Ruth. First, the story, though highly spiritual, does not depict the life of an important person such as a prophet or judge or a leader in the community. Instead, it is a story that centers on the life of an ordinary person. The story serves as a suitable mirror through which we can glance at the world of ordinary Israelites. Naomi and the people around her reveal a lifestyle that is heavily anchored on the belief that God is the creator and sustainer of human life. Secondly, the book of Ruth, a heavily patriarchal society, the Hebrew nation treated women in a subservient manner. Ruth is only one among two of the books in the Bible which bear the name of a woman. Ruth and Esther are the only few biblical narratives focusing on a female protagonist. The narrative in the book of Ruth, just like that in the book of Esther, goes a long way to demonstrate the inherent capability in women to bring about social change within the society. It also demonstrates that women can overcome socio-economic and cultural obstacles that society has elected on their way to bring meaningful change in the community.

The story of Ruth is rooted in the family of a man called Elimelek who had a wife called Naomi, and who is presented as a fugitive living in Moab. He and his entire family migrated to Moab to escape from the biting famine that had come to bear on the land of Israel due to God's wrath. Elimelek hailed from Bethlehem of Judah. It is in the same Bethlehem that Jesus, a descendant of Ruth is to be born some centuries later. Soon after their settlement in Moab, Elimelek dies and leaves Naomi as the sole breadwinner for their two children, Mahlon and Kilion.

Naomi appears to have maintained her integrity as a loving, caring and decisive woman for, even with the absence of her husband, she guides her sons into picking wives from among the Moabites. From the language in the text, it can be deduced that marriage to non-Israelite women was a normal, though not a popular practice. Misfortune, however, strikes again and both Mahlon and Kilion lose their lives leaving their young wives widowed and without anyone from within Elimelek's family to marry them. It appears, things happened too quickly for Naomi, who had to fight against feelings of dejection. She was glued to this foreign land since things at home had not yet improved.

It is not clear what motivated Elimelek to migrate to Moab to escape the famine. It is also not clear whether there were other families that moved alongside him to Moab or to any other country for that matter, for similar reasons. As we know from the text is that the famine was strong enough to make someone of Elimelek's caliber to contemplate migration to a more favourable country. It can be assumed that the famine did not affect Moab.

Finally, when the food situation at home improved, Naomi decides to return to her homeland and sought to separate from her daughters-in-law and go back to her homeland alone. Then Ruth, one of the daughters-in-law, insists that she would not allow any such a separation to happen and Naomi had no option but to succumb. Once they arrive in Ephrathah, the native land of Naomi, the two women are welcomed with great joy, especially by the women in that town to whom Naomi was still familiar. Naomi, overtaken by a deep sense of loss and bitterness – having lost both her husband and sons in the foreign land – implores the women to reconsider their views towards her as things had changed for the worse. She preferred to adopt a new and less prestigious name of Mara which was reflective of the kind of hollowness and bitterness she harboured inside herself.

The first few days in Ephrathah presented the first challenge to Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth. It is, however, out of this hardship that Ruth finally meets with Boaz who finally marries her. And from the lineage of Ruth and Boaz came three very key figures, that is David, Solomon and Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus was a divine figure who became incarnated as a human being in order to save mankind. Joseph, in whose family Jesus was born, traced his ancestry to include Boaz and Ruth.

II. IDENTITY OF RUTH

Not much is said about Ruth's background except that she is a Moabite. Her parents were apparently alive, as is alluded in Boaz' kind words to her. Her husband is Mahlon, presented as Elimelech's older son. When Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Kilion migrated from their Ephrathite home in Bethlehem of Judah and settled in Moab in search of better living conditions, it was not meant to be a permanent move. They would return when food situation in Bethlehem improved. For now, the stinging famine in their homeland was enough to cause them seek some refuge in some foreign land, Moab. It appears that living conditions in Moab did not favour Elimelech's family and soon he himself succumbed to death within their few years of settlement in Moab. Upon their father's death, Naomi must have urged her two sons to take wives from the locality since travelling back to Judah was still untenable as the famine was still unrelenting.

Mahlon picked on Ruth as a wife while Kilion married Orpha. The two ladies were Moabites. Identity of an individual is of great significance both in the Bible and in African cultural setting. In the African setting, an individual was identified first according to his family lineage, his village, clan and ethnic affiliation. Sometimes reference could also be made to relations that are based on marriage affiliations especially when these include names of repute. As Mbiti observes, a homeless or nameless person was alien to African tradition. A person mainly identified himself or herself with a given group of tribe since, in Mbiti's words, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am". Another important analogy to draw from Ruth's story is the theme of sociality. Whenever there was famine or any other type of trouble that faced a nation, individuals were free to migrate to another foreign land for refuge reasons. These types of migrations of convenience could take place either intercommunally (that is from one part to another within the same community) or intercommunally or migrations across ethnic divide. Some of these migrations could be permanent but mostly they were on a temporary basis, with hope of one day returning home to one's ancestral land. Elimelech's family planned to return home once the food situation in Ephrathah improved.

III. THINGS THAT RUTH SAYS ABOUT HERSELF

1:10 (with orphan –while weeping) we will go back with you to your people

1:16 then Ruth replied "Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go, I will go. Where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."

Talk about the narrative can pass as a highly spiritual one. Evidence is in the fact that God is mentioned 22 times (as for his people God = x2, as the Lord = x18, as almighty = x1). A more significant way of expressing this spirituality is in the way almost everyone in story appears to recognize the centrality of God in people's lives. Eg Naomi = God rescues (comes to the aid of his people 1:5) provides (food 1:6 cf 2:3) for his people; shows kindness to those who show kindness to others (1:8), Provides husband (1:9). Causes bitterness 1:20, renders empty 1:21; Strikes with misfortunes (1:13, 21), brings afflictions 1:21, can bless 2:20. Ruth; God punishes wrongdoers, is potentially wrathful 1:17 Boaz; God upholds 2:4; repays good with good 2:12, rewards the righteous 2:4, protects those who take refuge under his wings 2:12, blesses 3:10, his existence is certain, his the guardian of justice and the warrantee for nonbreaking of promises 3:13 harvesters; God blesses 2:4 elders and all those at the gate; God can make one great 4:11, enables a woman to conceive, gives

offspring 4:12 of 13 the women : God is worthy of praise, it is he who facilitates people to have a lineage, descendants 1:14

IV. WAYS IN WHICH AFRICAN RELIGIO-CULTURAL PRACTICE IS REFLECTED IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

Although Ruth was a Moabite, the cultural setting that forms the background of her story is Jewish. Hence this section can be treated as an examination of the relationship between African and Jewish cultures as manifested in the book of Ruth. Since the story focuses on the life of a woman, this paper borrows heavily from John S Mbiti's article, "The Role of Women in African traditional Religion" in which he examines the role and place of women in society. The following section discusses some of the ways in which African religio-cultural practice is reflected in the book of Ruth.

1.1 The depth of religion

In African traditional set-up, people were deeply religious. According to Mbiti (1991), African Religion so permeated into all aspects of culture that it was difficult to separate the two. Thus, Mbiti gives this religious diagnosis of the Traditional African as being notoriously religious (Mbiti, 1990). African religiosity was expressed through myths, proverbs, prayers, songs and dance and so on. It was transmitted through written script but rather through oral narratives.

From the above discussion, it can be said that Africans were very spiritual people. Every social phenomena was interpreted spiritually. This spirituality sprang from their firm belief in the existence of God or the supreme being. A similar scenario is depicted of Hebrew culture through the Book of Ruth.

In the Book of Ruth, we find a demonstration of popular religion, that is religion as viewed and practiced among the population. The material in the Book of Ruth is a far cry from high-rank books like those of the prophets which concentrate on communicating a message or messages from God. In Ruth, the characters are portrayed as simple folk with no priestly ranks theirs is an expression of the knowledge of God that runs through all the activities they are engaged in. Their spirituality appears to flow naturally from inside their hearts. Mbiti (1990) observes that Africans carried their religion not in books but in their hearts. Wherever, they went and whatever they did, their religion was the guide. This is different from today's world where you find that religiosity does not run that deep in some of those who profess to be religious. Religion nowadays is carried more in books and symbols than in people's hearts.

The book of Ruth is a short passage but it is so infused with spirituality that virtually every verse communicates a message about the spirituality of the people of Israel. A significant proportion of the individuals mentioned in the passage (for example Naomi (1:6, 21; 2:20), Ruth (1:17), Boaz (2:4, 12), the women in Ephrathah (4:14), the elders and all the people at the gate (4:11), among others) display a deep-rooted belief in and knowledge of the workings of God, to whom they owe their very being. This aspect of Hebrew spirituality resonates with the nature of spirituality in African traditional society.

1.2 The providence of God

The belief that God provides humankind's various needs is widespread within the African traditional society. God is good because he does only what is good (Igbo, Ila, Kpelle). The Abagusii, Maragoli and Langi view God as the source of rich harvests. Among the Banyarwanda, one finds marriage through God's help. These African beliefs find their parallels in the story of Ruth. God is depicted as the provider of food (1:6), husband (1:9; 4:14), companionship (2:4a), blessings (2:4b, 20a; 3:10a), a good wife (4:11) children (4:12,13). God also sustains life – even unto old age (4:15). Under his wings, one finds refuge (2:12b). The Lord renews – that is restores whatever has previously been lost (4:15a), is a custodian of promises (3:13), repays good deeds (2:12a), shows kindness (1:8). Comes to the aid of his people (1:6) and richly rewards the upright (2:12).

1.3 God as the source of afflictions

In African thought, afflictions like drought, locust invasions, floods and epidemics such a view is held, for instance, among the Nyanja, Suk, Ngoni and Luo. Similarly, in the book of Ruth, national calamities and individual misfortunes are attributed to God. God brings emptiness (1:21a), afflictions (1:21b), and misfortunes (1:21c). God can deal with – punish (1:17) and his punishment can sometimes be severe (1:17) and he punishes those who break promises (1:17a). In this aspect, however, there is some variance with African culture in regard to personal misfortunes. Unlike the Hebrews who considered this category of afflictions to God, most African traditional communities associate such calamities to human agency or some spiritual beings (Abagusii, Ameru, Akan)

1.4 Man as head of family

In regard to family set-up, there appears to be no variations between Hebrew and African traditional practice. In both cases, man is the head of the family. Even in terms of the functions assigned to the head of the family – man, there is a lot of similarity between the two cultures. Decision-making and leadership appear to be

their key functions as illustrated in the opening verse of the first chapter. Elmelek, decides to lead his family into the foreign country of Moab for temporary refuge as a result from verse 6 of Chapter one, the the raging famine in the land of Bethlehem. Key decisions on matters affecting the town of Ephrathah are seemingly made by the elders at the town gate (4:2-4, 11).

It is important to note the emphasis in the story of Naomi and Ruth as a game changer in the roles allocated to women the two ladies display a rare sense of responsibility and leadership. From the verse six of chapter one, the return journey from Moab is planned and well executed under the leadership Naomi, who appears to have taken over as head of whatever is left of Elmelek's family. "with her two daughters-in-law, (Naomi) left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that will lead them back to the land of Judah." Elmelek was from the village of Ephrathah, in the town of Bethrehem in the country of Judah. On their way, Orpha (one of the daughters-in-law) decided to go back to her 'people and her gods' (1: 15), leaving Naomi only with Ruth (1:22). And when the two women arrive in Bethrehem, they are received in style by other women in that town. Naomi, as head of family, shows that she is in firm control. She is quick to appreciate the welcome they were granted but also points out about the misfortunes that befell them while they were away in Moab. She had lost her husband and two sons, something that made her feel empty (1:21) - and therefore underserving of such a grand welcome. It is also as a result of Naomi's initiative and guidance that Ruth finally identifies and acquires a new husband "so Boaz took her husband and she became his wife" (4:13). In showing such unprecedented loyalty, Ruth becomes to Naomi one like seven sons (4:15). Ruth also makes a rare entry into the list of David's (and subsequently Jesus Christ's) family tree.)In Africa, women became heads of the family only when a male was not available in the family membership. Thus, in this aspect (of subjugating women), both the Hebrew and African cultural practices are in congruence.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the story of Naomi and Ruth contains a variety of aspects or themes that reveal the similarity between Hebrew and African traditional worldviews. This is indicative of the fact that there exists plenty of usable resources within the African traditional society that can benefit modern Christian thought. The apparent close affinity between African and African traditional cultural reality is an affirmation of the validity of all cultures of which Christianity comes only to illuminate but not replace.

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