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Q&A#7 Ruth the Moabite and the Moabite Women of Nehemiah

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Today's Question: Having recently read both Ruth and Nehemiah, I was struck by the very different ways they relate to the recurring entanglement of Moabite women and Israelite men. Nehemiah seems to replay the old story, whereas Ruth seems to invert it (the faithful pagan woman, redeemed that she might birth the future redeemer). Do you have any thoughts on this or on the related issue of how David and Jesus were admitted into the congregation of Israel in spite of Moabite ancestry?

Leave your own questions in the comments, on my blog, or on my Curious Cat account.

<http://alastairadversaria.com/>

<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>

Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm going to answer the following question. Good question.

And a very interesting one. It has an interesting train of biblical theology that opens up. Well, first of all, it's worth thinking about where the Moabites came from.

They were descended from Lot following the destruction of Sodom. I'll read from Genesis 19.30 following. Then Lot went up out of Zohar and dwelt in the mountains and his two daughters were with him.

For he was afraid to dwell in Zohar and he and his two daughters dwelt in a cave. Now the firstborn said to the younger, our father is old and there is no man on the earth to come into us as is the custom of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine and we will lie with him that we may preserve the lineage of our father.

So they made their father drink wine that night and the firstborn went in and lay with her father and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. It happened on the

next day that the firstborn said to the younger, indeed I lay with my father last night. Let us make him drink wine tonight also and you go in and lie with him that we may preserve the lineage of our father.

Then they made their father drink wine that night also and the younger arose and lay with him and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father. The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab.

He is the father of the Moabites to this day and the younger she also bore a son and called his name Ben-Ammi. He is the father of the people of Ammon to this day. Now this is taken up in the story of later on in scripture the Moabites with the story of Balaam.

The Moabite women's coming to the camp of the Israelites and seduce Israelite men and lead them to be unfaithful to the Lord. And in Deuteronomy 23 we read the following. He who is emasculated by crushing or mutilation shall not enter the congregation of the Lord.

One of illegitimate births shall not enter the congregation of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the congregation of the Lord. An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the congregation of the Lord.

Even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the congregation of the Lord forever. Because they did not meet you with bread and water on the road when you came out of Egypt and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia to curse you. Nevertheless the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam but the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the Lord your God loves you.

You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity all your days forever. You shall not abhor an Edomite for he is your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian because you are an alien in his land.

The children of the third generation born to them may enter the congregation of the Lord. And then Nehemiah which is the other passage that was mentioned. On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people and in it was found that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the congregation of God because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water but hired Balaam against them to curse them.

However our God turned the curse into a blessing. So it was when they heard the Lord that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel. And then later on.

In those days I saw also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and could not speak the

language of Judah but spoke according to the language of one or the other people. So I contended with them and cursed them struck some of them and pulled out their hair and made them swear by God saying you shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves.

Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him who was beloved of his God and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin. Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women? And so there's a thread in the scripture of biblical theology related to this.

And Ruth is a Moabite. She's married by Malon if I remember correctly. She's the wife of Malon and she later allies herself to Naomi and then marries Boaz.

Now the passage of the book of Ruth treats this as a very positive thing. It treats this as a positive story of a Moabite woman marrying an Israelite or two Israelite men although the marriage to Malon is not discussed in the same way. It's seen as a positive event, this union of Boaz and Ruth.

So what is going on here? Is this to be seen as in conflict with the story of Nehemiah and with the rules of Deuteronomy? Well it's worth noting that the book of Ruth is very much aware of the commandments of Deuteronomy. The whole law of the Levirate is something that's referenced within this context and it goes back to Deuteronomy 23 and or to Deuteronomy 25 which is just two chapters later after this passage concerning the Moabites and Ammonites and the congregation of Israel. So it's not as if the author of Ruth is aware of this law we must presume.

He knows this law, he plays off the background of Deuteronomy and the case law there. I believe he does this in a number of different ways not least by the emphasis upon the uncovering of the feet of Boaz. That's a play on the uncovering of the feet of the ox that treads out the grain.

So the ox treading out the grain is the one who raises up seed as it were. The unmuzzled ox that treads out the grain is the one who raises up seed for the dead brother and has to use the brother's property for that period of time and so with his feet uncovered he is treading out the grain on the threshing floor with Ruth at his feet and the symbolism there is that of the threshing floor, that of the ox who is Boaz treading out the grain and then he delivers to Ruth at the end of that particular episode, he delivers a big container of grain, he gives her lots of grain that she holds in front of her like a pregnancy and so there's various literary themes and things going on within that passage that need to be attended to. Within the story of Genesis there are further things to pay attention to.

First the story of Moab or the birth of Moab and Ammon. These are not stories that are without resemblance to other stories. So the story of Noah is maybe the first one that

comes to mind.

After the great disaster of the flood Noah gets drunk and Ham, his son, comes in and uncovers his nakedness to the other brothers who come in and cover him up. Now he's judged as a result of and the same themes of drunkenness and uncovering nakedness, these are the themes that occur within the story of Lot and his daughters. But there's another story that comes to mind or should come to mind and that's in Genesis 38 with Judah.

He has three sons and then he takes a wife for his firstborn son Ur and that son has the wife called Tamar. Ur dies and then the youngest son takes Tamar but does not raise up seed. He rejects the duty of the leveret and he is judged by God.

And then Tamar is told by Judah to remain a widow and he doesn't actually provide her with another son to raise up seed for the dead husband Ur. And so what she does is she disguises herself as a prostitute and has relations with Judah himself. Now again this is a perverted sort of relationship much as we see with Lot and his daughters.

This is not a proper relationship. It's a an inappropriate relationship, a form of adultery among other things and then also a form of incest. And at the end there's this reveal when it is revealed that Judah has actually slept with Tamar and that Tamar although she has been presumed to be playing the harlot that she has actually used deception to sleep with her father-in-law so that she might have seed for the husband that has died.

And we read at the end of the story. Now it came to pass at the time for giving birth that behold twins were in her womb and so it was when she was given giving birth that the one put out his hand and the midwife took a scarlet thread and bound it on his hand saying this one came out first. Then it happened as he drew back his hand that his brother came out unexpectedly and she said how did you break through this breach be upon you therefore his name was called Perez.

Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand and his name was called Zerah. Now this background is significant because the book of Ruth is playing off the narrative of Genesis with the story of the Moabite and it's also playing off the background of the law of Deuteronomy. Now a few things to pay attention to here that the law in Deuteronomy did not just affect Ammonites and Moabites it also affected illegitimate children and illegitimate children are children such as Perez and Zerah the children of Judah and so Judah has a problem and Moab and Ammon have a problem the sons of Judah cannot enter the congregation until the 10th generation and the sons of the Moabites and the sons of the Ammonites have the same problem.

So there is this twofold problem the problem of the Ammonites and Moabites and the problem of the Judahites and this story of Ruth is dealing with both of them together. Now as you read the story of Ruth what you'll notice is there's a plot that takes place

there's a trick that's played and that trick is played upon the man who is the nearest potential kinsman redeemer. Ruth and Naomi have formed a bond Ruth has allied herself with Naomi and this is a key passage for thinking about the differences between the case of the women in Nehemiah and the woman Ruth.

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law but Ruth clung to her and she said look your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods return after your sister-in-law but Ruth said entreat me not to leave you or to turn back from following after you for wherever you go I will go and 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 will I be buried the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts you and me. When she saw that she was determined to go with her she stopped speaking to her. Now this is an important distinction between the women in Nehemiah and Ruth.

The women in Nehemiah were still embedded within Moabite and Ammonite culture they were still speaking the language they were still serving the foreign gods whereas Ruth allied herself with Israel she converted. Israel was never a sort of ethnically pure society that's not what the covenant was about. The covenant was about a faithful allegiance to God it was based around the children of Israel but it was also a nation that had a mixed multitude that had become part of that had become knit into the nation and so as we see the Israelites leaving Egypt they left with a large multitude of people who came from other backgrounds who became part of that nation who became part of the tribes who knit into the wider society and this is important to notice first of all because it pushes back against a sort of theory of Israelite ethnic purity as the foundation of the nation but it also pushes back against the idea that people were held out purely on the basis of their ethnicity.

Someone like Ruth who converted to serving the God of Israel was someone who was allowed to participate in his life this was not the same thing as someone who was taken from outside and only came to assimilate over many generations this is a different sort of case and so Ruth is someone who converts and she's not like the Moabite women that we see within the other stories. So what else is taking place here? What else we see is that Ruth plays the part of the Moabite she comes to Boaz by night when he's asleep and lies down next to him at his feet there are sexual overtones to this passage there are themes that are suggestive she uncovers his feet and feet can occasionally be used as a euphemism there is a significant preparation that she goes about in order to go before she goes there it's a setup that is designed to have these sort of sexual overtones the fact that it occurs on the threshing floor that was a place where what was associated with prostitutes as well so these were themes that recall various stories from the Old Testament from earlier in the Old Testament it recalls the story of the Moabites the birth of the Moabites with Lot and his daughters it also recalls to some extent the story of Judah and Tamar and Ruth is playing these sorts of roles now since she has allied herself

to Naomi she can play the part of the one who raises up seed for a limalac the dead husband of Naomi the dead husband of Naomi whose land has been needs to be preserved and whose stake in Israel needs to be upheld now the nearest kinsman redeemer would have thought that he would need to marry he would need to marry Naomi in order to raise up seed for a limalac whereas because Ruth had allied herself to Naomi Boaz could marry Ruth and through Ruth raise up seed for a limalac and for Naomi and this is a twist in the tale that many people miss that there is a trick played upon that there is a plot that's designed or a plan I mean it's not a devious or wicked sort of thing or it's not an attempt at deep deception but it's a shrewd plan in order to get a righteous man Boaz to act the part of the kinsman redeemer so the action of Ruth and going to the threshing force signals to Boaz that he can play the part of the kinsman redeemer for her and for Naomi through her now at the end of the narrative what we notice is that this is seen as raising up seed for Naomi so Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife and when he went into her the lord gave her conception and she bore a son then the women said to Naomi blessed be the lord who has not left you this day without a near kinsman and may his name be famous in Israel and may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of you and old of your old age and for your for your daughter-in-law who loves you who is better to you than seven sons has born him then Naomi took the child and laid him in on her bosom and became a nurse to him also the neighbor women gave him a name saying there is a son born to Naomi and they called his name Obed he is the father of Jesse the father of David now this is the genealogy of Perez and it's significant this is the son of Tamar and Judah Perez begot Hezron Hezron begot Ram Ram begot Aminadab Aminadab begot Nashon Nashon begot Salmon Salmon begot Boaz and Boaz begot Obed Obed begot Jesse and Jesse begot David and so we see these themes the theme of the Moabite who is held outside of the congregation of Israel for 10 generations and we see the Israelite the Judahite rather the Judahite who as a result of the sin of Judah and Perez being and Zerah being sons born out of wedlock that they are out of the congregation of Israel for 10 generations with according to the law of Deuteronomy and so if you look at this genealogy you have Perez Hezron Ram Aminadab Nashon Salmon Boaz Obed Jesse David number 10 and so David is the 10th generation the 10th generation who comes after that act and so this is a story of how God sets right what was set wrong he sets right what was set wrong in the case of Judah and Tamar and the cutting out of their sons from the line of from the congregation of Israel he also sets right by bringing in to the congregation of Israel what was set wrong through the sin of Lot's daughters and so Moabites is brought into the congregation of Israel the one who liked Lot's daughters is someone who comes to someone by night when they're unawares and has this meeting with them that has sexual overtones but this time it's a reversal of that theme it's taking what was set wrong and setting it right and so the story of Ruth is a story of God mending what was broken it's a story that takes the foundation of the law the structure of the law and shows how grace and God's purpose operates within the structure of that law it shows how the shrewdness of two women can be used to achieve a righteous and a good result within the structures provided by the law things

like gleaning things like the law of the leveret and how all these things serve the purpose of God's greater of God's greater end that the end of that story is the birth of David and that story naturally leads us it's the bridge between the story of the judges and the story of the birth of the kingdom as we see first Samuel starting immediately after that so I believe the differences answering the question the differences are primarily because of the conversion of Ruth that Ruth has allied herself to Naomi she has identified herself with Naomi she has turned her back upon her people and she has become one of the people of Israel she is not identified as one from outside of the people but rather has become an Israelite she has taken on the God of Israel as her God and she has converted and whereas the in the case of the Moabites in Nehemiah we see that they there is no conversion there at all they are outside of the camp of Israel they are people who are not faithful they are people who do not even speak the language they're not part of the culture they mixed up some of them are speaking the language of Ashtar others are speaking the language of Israel and so these are not people who have turned to the God of Israel become part of that people like Ruth did but rather there's a sort of syncretism that is occurring there and so there's a different sort of situation and so the generations after them would suffer as a result of that original sin they would not be made part of the congregation of Israel that doesn't mean they wouldn't be part of Israel's more general life but they wouldn't be part of the ruling congregation and so they wouldn't be able to be king for instance so David can only become king because he's the 10th generation after the sin of Judah with Tamar so as we look back through these genealogies and as we relate them to the stories of the story of Ruth and the stories earlier in Genesis of the birth of the Moabite of Moab and the birth of Perez and Zerah through Tamar and Judah we can see the structures of the law and we can see the trains of God's redemption both at work and when we get to the New Testament these things are seen too particularly in Matthew 1 where both Boaz and Ruth where Tamar and Judah are mentioned and where Boaz and Ruth are mentioned alongside Rahab and characters like that these people who are brought into the nation who become part of it who converts to the people of God but also the ways that the broken threads of history are set right how God restores what went wrong how God repairs the damage of these two peoples the two peoples were their sort of paralleled history and both births that led to a cutting off from the congregation of Israel the birth of Perez and the birth of Moab and in both cases in the book of Ruth these two peoples are brought back into the congregation in the story which in the birth ultimately of David and David represents these two peoples brought together and brought into the congregation of Israel that God has set right the sins of Judah and the sins of Lot and now he has restored and brought goodness and blessing out of what man had done wrong and so I think there are great themes of grace here themes of grace that are not just a matter of jots and tittles of laws but a matter of God's redemption and how that plays out in history I hope this helps to answer your question