



# The Conversion of Ruth in Targum Ruth

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## Abstract

In the book of Ruth there is no doubt that the title character is a central figure. Targum Ruth re-presents her as the Rabbinic proselyte *par excellence*. This is accomplished primarily through additions to 1:16–7. But Ruth's status as the ideal convert is also confirmed through Boaz's announcement that she would be "saved from the judgment of Gehenna so that [her] portion may be with Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Leah" (TgRuth 2:12) and that she is "a righteous woman and there is in [her] strength to bear the yoke of the commandments of the LORD" (TgRuth 3:11). Examining these and other changes to the biblical text introduced by the Targumist, this article demonstrates how, in the Targum, Ruth becomes not just an admirable woman who acts out of kindness to her mother-in-law but is truly the Rabbinic exemplar for all converts.

## Keywords

Ruth, Targum Ruth, Conversion, Proselyte, Aramaic, Targum, Rabbinic

## 1. Ruth and Her Targum

Ruth is a central figure and a key character in the book that bears her name. There is little debate about that fact. Over the millennia, however, her role and that of Naomi have been minimized, in some cases inadvertently and in others deliberately, through the aggrandizement of Boaz, himself a marginal figure in the book of Ruth.<sup>1</sup> The Targum of Ruth certainly raises Boaz to a new level as he is made one of the ancient judges of Israel (Ibzan, TgRuth 1:1), a prophet

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<sup>1</sup> I presented a paper on the character of Boaz in TgRuth at the 2010 meeting of the International Organization for Targumic Studies. I then presented a more general paper on the history of interpretation of the character of Boaz at the 2010 Mid-Atlantic Regional meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. "The Character of Boaz in the Book of Ruth and its Targum" is a forthcoming article on the subject.

(TgRuth 2:11), a man “strong in the law” (TgRuth 2:1, some MSS), and the reason God lifted the drought and famine that God had visited upon the land of Israel (TgRuth 1:6, 4:21). Yet the Targum also elevates Ruth and transforms her into the daughter of a king, the proselyte *par excellence*, and the mother of kings and prophets.

The first reference to Ruth in TgRuth, as in the biblical text, occurs at 1:4. After an expansive start, the Targumist adds just a few details to this verse. He tells the audience that Mahlon and Chilion took “foreign” wives, thus providing the explanation for their ultimate deaths, and provides Ruth with a royal lineage.<sup>2</sup>

*4 They transgressed the decree of the Memra of the Lord and they took for themselves foreign wives from the house of Moab. The name of one was Orpah and the name of the second was Ruth, the daughter of Eglon, the king of Moab. And they dwelt there for a time of about ten years.*<sup>3</sup>

The identification of Ruth with Eglon is well attested in a variety of Rabbinic sources.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the Targumist simply mentions it in passing likely means that he assumed his audience would be well aware of this tradition; it is not new or unique to TgRuth.<sup>5</sup> Her status as a princess does serve to further support the tradition, also in the Targum, that Elimelech and his sons were “lords from Bethlehem of Judah, and they came to the country of Moab and they were *governors* there” (TgRuth 1:2).

<sup>2</sup> The Targum appears to be unique in offering this explicit explanation for why they died, but see Ruth Rabbah 2:9.

<sup>3</sup> All translations of TgRuth are mine. Aramaic that I consider to be an addition to the biblical text is represented in italics.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, B. Hor. 10b: “R. Yose son of R. Hanina said: Ruth was the daughter of the son of Eglon who was the son of the son of Balak the King of Moab.” All quotations of the Talmud are from Epstein and Simon, *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*. B. San. 102b. B. Sotah 47a, and B. Naz. 23a.

Ruth Rabbah 2:9 also contains this tradition. “R. Bibi said in the name of R. Reuben: Ruth and Orpah were the daughters of Eglon, as it is said, *I have a secret errand unto thee, O King. And he said: Keep silence*, etc. (Judg. III, 19), and it is written, *And Ehud came unto him . . . and Ehud said: I have a message from God unto thee. And he arose out of his seat* (*ib.* 20). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: “Thou didst arise from thy throne in honor of Me. By thy life, I shall raise up from thee a descendant sitting upon the throne of the Lord.” All quotations from Midrash Rabbah are from Freedman, et al., *Midrash Rabbah* (New York, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> See D.R.G. Beattie, “Towards Dating the Targum of Ruth,” in *Word in Season* (Sheffield, 1986).

## 2. Practically Perfect Proselyte

While modern scholars debate whether or not Ruth 1:16–17 actually describes Ruth's conversion to the Israelite religion,<sup>6</sup> within Rabbinic tradition there was no question that Ruth is the proselyte *par excellence*.<sup>7</sup> The first chapter of Ruth provides for the Rabbinic exegete the prototypical framework for conversion, including Naomi's rejection of the would-be proselyte. Ruth Rabbah, commenting on Ruth 1:12, states, "R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Judah b. Hanina: Three times is it written here 'turn back,' corresponding to the three times that a would-be proselyte is repulsed; but if he persists after that, he is accepted."<sup>8</sup> The three statements of "turn back" are contained in Ruth 1:8, 11, and 12. Interestingly, the Targumist changes little in the text with respect to this command. He does, however, begin to develop the theme of proselytization in other ways, even extending to Orpah the desire to convert.

When Ruth and Orpah declare that they will go back with Naomi to her home country (TgRuth 1:10), they state that their purpose is to become followers of her God.

And they said to her, "No, we will not return to our people and our god, but rather we will return with you to your people to become proselytes."

Ruth and Orpah state that they are not simply going to remain loyal to Naomi. They want to go to Israel with her *in order to become* followers of the Lord. Orpah ultimately turns back, but the reason for their going to Israel is clearly stated in terms of becoming proselytes.

Throughout the Targum the value of Ruth's conversion is made prominent and often elevated above her other good deeds. Ruth's faithfulness and *hesed* to Naomi, which some scholars view as the central theological theme of the biblical text,<sup>9</sup> is subordinated to this "higher calling" of becoming a proselyte.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Eskenazi, Cohn, and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia, 2011), pp. xlii–xlvi.

<sup>7</sup> See Ruth Rabbah 2:22–24, Ruth Zutra 48 and 49, and B. Sot. 42b. The latter quite explicitly extols Ruth's virtue over that of Orpah. In reference to 2 Sam. 21:22 "And they fell by the hand of David, and by the hand of his servants," as it is written, *And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clave unto her*. R. Isaac said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, spake, May the sons of the one who kissed come and fall by the hand of the sons of the one who clave."

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Rabbah 2:16.

<sup>9</sup> This sentiment is found already in Ruth Rabbah 2:14: "R. Ze'ira said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness."

Central to this development of the character of Ruth is, of course, Ruth's declaration of fealty found in Ruth 1:16–17.

This famous passage would stand in relief from the rest of the book of Ruth for its poetic style alone,<sup>10</sup> but its content makes it a pivotal passage. The biblical text reads as follows.

- 16 But Ruth said,  
 “Do not press me to leave you  
 or to turn back from following you!  
 Where you go, I will go;  
 Where you lodge, I will lodge;  
 your people shall be my people,  
 and your God my God.  
 17 Where you die, I will die—  
 there will I be buried.  
 May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
 and more as well,  
 if even death parts me from you!”  
 18 When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Much has been written about whether this represents what in modern terms we might call a “conversion” or rather simply Ruth's statement of her loyalty and commitment to Naomi.<sup>11</sup> The statement of “your God [will be] my God” and her invocation of the LORD in her closing oath might suggest the former. The fact that in praising Ruth for her good deeds (Ruth 1:11 and 3:10) Boaz refers not to her becoming a follower of the LORD but rather her supporting and standing by her mother-in-law supports the latter view. The Targumist understands exactly what this passage represents (her conversion) and makes it completely clear through additions and translational choices.

What in the biblical text had been Ruth's soliloquy with a silent response from Naomi (“When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her”) in the Targum is a dialogue in six parts with an introduction and conclusion. The first half of 1:16 now opens this dialogue with Ruth's declaration that she intends to convert.

<sup>10</sup> See Todd Linafelt, “Narrative and Poetic Art in the Book of Ruth,” in *Interpretation* 64.2 (2010), pp. 117–129, particularly pp. 123ff.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, 1975), pp. 80ff; Mark S. Smith, “Your People Shall be My People: Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16–17,” in *CBQ* 69.2 (2007), pp. 242–258; and most recently Eskenazi, Cohn, and Frymer-Kensky, pp. 18–19.

16 Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you, to go back from after you, for *I desire to be a proselyte.*”

Naomi then responds with the beginning of the proselyte’s examination.

*Naomi said, “We are commanded to keep Sabbaths and holy days such that we may not walk more than two thousand cubits.”*

Due to the constraints of Targum, the nature of Naomi’s challenges to Ruth have to be based upon the biblical text. The MT’s “Where you go, I will go” yields Naomi’s statement that “we may not walk more than two thousand cubits.” This is in the context of the most fundamental of commandments, the observance of Sabbaths and holy days. Thus the first part of the dialogue reads:

[Introduction] 16 Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you, to go back from after you, for *I desire to be a proselyte.*”

[1] *Naomi said, “We are commanded to keep Sabbaths and holy days such that we may not walk more than two thousand cubits.”*

*Ruth said, “Wherever you go, I will go.”*

This is the pattern that follows for the remaining five parts of the dialogue.

[2] *Naomi said, “We are commanded not to lodge with Gentiles.”*

*Ruth said, “Where you lodge, I will lodge.”*

[3] *Naomi said, “We are commanded to keep six hundred and thirteen commandments.”*

*Ruth said, “What your people keep I will keep as if they were my people from before this.”*

[4] *Naomi said, “We are commanded not to worship foreign gods.”*

*Ruth said, “Your god is my god.”*

[5] 17 *Naomi said, “We have four death penalties for the guilty: stoning with stones, burning with fire, execution by the sword and hanging on a tree.”*<sup>12</sup>

*Ruth said, “How you die, I shall die.”*

[6] *Naomi said, “We have a cemetery.”*

*Ruth said, “And there I will be buried.”*

[Conclusion] *And do not say any more. May the Lord do thus to me and more against me if even death shall separate me from you.*”

Naomi’s challenges presented in TgRuth are almost identical to those found in B. Yeb. 47b. A detailed comparison of these two texts is beyond the scope of this study and is tied up in contentious questions about the relative dates of the two texts.<sup>13</sup> But a few brief comments should be made. Obviously if one

<sup>12</sup> I.e., crucifixion.

<sup>13</sup> For a good summary of the dating issues and similar exegetical comparisons see Beattie,

could prove that the Targum is reliant upon the Talmudic interpretation then we might have a *terminus a quo* for TgRuth. If, on the other hand, one could demonstrate that the Talmud is based upon the Targumic interpretation, we would have a *terminus ad quem*. As Beattie has pointed out, however, it is impossible to make such a determination. The reason for this is quite simple. Both interpretive traditions begin at the same point: the biblical text of Ruth 1:16–17. In this particular case, however, I believe a tentative argument might be made for the likelihood that this particular reading arose from within a Targumic setting.

The reason is that, as noted above, Naomi's challenges to Ruth have to be crafted around Ruth's comments found in the biblical text. The biblical text *must* be represented within the Targum. The Talmud, on the other hand, had no such constraints. In fact, it is not very common to find such a sustained interpretation of a biblical passage in the Talmud. A word or a fragment of a verse is usually all that is needed as the "hook" upon which to hang a ruling or interpretation. B. Yeb. 47b, on the other hand, presents the entire dialogue, much as we find it in TgRuth. This *might* be evidence that this particular interpretation was found first within the Targum and was taken over more-or-less *in toto*.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Why *This* Reading?

As with any addition found in a Targum, we must ask ourselves why the Targumist chose this particular interpretation. Often there are many and various interpretive traditions around any given passage that might have been chosen, or the Targumist might well have introduced his own reading into the text. In this case the Targumist is attempting to address one of the most fundamental questions presented by (or perhaps even being answered by) the book of Ruth: How is it that Boaz should marry a Moabite and that she should be the great-grandmother of King David?<sup>15</sup>

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"Towards dating the Targum of Ruth." Shaye Cohen refers to the midrashic tradition found in B. Yeb. 47b, but does not cite TgRuth, only noting it in passing, "The Rabbinic Conversion Ceremony (Chapter 7)," in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 41.2 (1990), p. 230, n. 80. This is odd since the midrash found in Ruth Rabbah 2:22 is quite different from either that of the Bavli or TgRuth.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen as well seems to suggest as much, at least with regards to the midrashic tradition itself. "The conversion ceremony in Yevamot is following (or establishing) the tradition found in the midrashim on Ruth." *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>15</sup> Already within the biblical text is the implicit tension that Ruth, the great-grandmother of David, is not simply a non-Israelite, but a Moabite. The biblical author reminds the reader of this by referring repeatedly to Ruth as *המואבית* "the Moabitess." Ruth's "confession" is never explicitly described in the biblical text as a conversion nor does Boaz or anyone else cite it as a

This matter is of great consequence to the Targumist, and he deals directly with the issue of her ethnicity in TgRuth 2:10–12, to which I will return shortly. In this passage, by presenting Ruth as a willing and eager proselyte, the Targumist ensures his audience that, regardless of her national origins, Ruth is ready and willing to take on “the yoke of the commandments of the LORD” and become an Israelite. Furthermore, the references to 613 commandments and the Sabbath laws, which are Rabbinic rather than strictly biblical regulations, and Ruth’s willingness to take them up show her to be the Rabbinic ideal.<sup>16</sup>

Ruth’s statements are thus framed in such a way as to provide the model for others who wish to convert. They must resist initial rejection (“turn back”) and willingly accept the restrictions and commandments required of Jews, even unto death. When we consider the festival and synagogal context in which TgRuth was likely read, this provides a powerful example of faithfulness to Rabbinic Judaism for the entire congregation assembled, Jew and proselyte alike.

#### 4. Why Has She Found Favor?

While TgRuth 1:16–17 shows Ruth to be a willing and model convert, the legal concerns about her nationality remain to be addressed within the Targum. When Boaz first meets her he immediately tells her to remain with his girls and glean in his fields.

And Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen to me, my daughter. Do not go to glean *ears of grain* in another field and do not pass from here *to go to another nation*, but remain here with my girls.”

Ruth reasonably wonders why this man should take such notice of her and show her such kindness.

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reason why a marriage with her might be acceptable. The biblical author never resolves the legal problems that arise from her nationality.

There are several well-known passages in the Torah that forbid intermarriage with non-Israelites. Deut. 23:4 [3 Eng], “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.” Deut. 7:2–3, “...and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons.” See also Ex. 34:12 and Judges 3:5.

<sup>16</sup> See Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Ruth* (Rome, 1973), pp. 57–59, who points out that many of the 613 commandments would not apply to a convert *or* a woman. He goes on to build a case for a sectarian origin of TgRuth, but, in this case at least, it seems far more likely that the Targumist is simply presenting an idealized conception of the convert.

10 She fell on her face and bowed to the ground and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your eyes that you should befriend me since I am *from a foreign people, from the daughters of Moab, who are not permitted to enter into the congregation of the LORD?*”

The Targumist extends the biblical image of a humble Ruth by also indicating her developing knowledge of Torah. Ruth is not simply questioning his generosity and the recognition of her foreignness, she is acknowledging that her status as a Moabite ought to make her particularly loathsome. She is referencing, of course, Deut. 23:4 [3 Eng.], “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.” This is, as noted before, a significant tension in the book of Ruth and one that the rabbis, and all biblical interpreters, had to address.<sup>17</sup> The Targum of Ruth, of course, has to address this concern directly and does so through Boaz’s response to Ruth in 2:11–12.

11 Boaz replied and said to her, “It has surely been told to me *concerning the word of the sages that when the LORD decreed concerning them he did not decree against any but the men. And it was told to me by prophecy that there will come forth from you kings and prophets because of [all] the kindness that you have done for your mother-in-law, that you have supported her after your husband died and you forsook your god and your people [and your father and mother] and the land of your birth and went to become a proselyte and to dwell among a people who were not known to you before.*

12 “May the Lord repay *you a good payment in this world for your good deeds and may your reward be perfect in the next world from before the Lord, the God of Israel, to whom you have come to become a proselyte and to shelter under the shadow of his glorious Shekhina. And by that merit you will be saved from the judgment of Gehenna so that your portion may be with Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Leah.*”

Before even mentioning her conversion, Boaz offers two reasons why he has shown Ruth such favor. (And remember that she was simply asking why he was being so nice to her!) That two reasons are given may be the result of MT’s repetition of the verb in the phrase *huggēd huggad li*. Boaz’s first assertion is that he has learned from “the word of the sages” that the decree of Deut. 23:4 was only against men, so that Ruth is exempt.<sup>18</sup>

This interpretation is found in many other Rabbinic sources, but within the Targum it leads to a curious paradox. If it is the case that Moabite women

<sup>17</sup> Bamberger even felt that the aggadic material has a “certain lack in warmth” towards Ruth perhaps because of the legal difficulty presented by Deut. 23:4. “This embarrassment may explain in part the reluctance of the Rabbis to place too much emphasis on the figure of Ruth.” Bernard Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (New York), pp. 198–199.

<sup>18</sup> See Levine, *Aramaic Version of Ruth*, p. 74, n. 2; PK 16, 124A; B. Ned. 37b; Y. Yeb. 8:3; Ruth Rabbah.



were not the subject of God's edict, then why should Mahlon and Chilion have been killed? The Targum insists in TgRuth 1:5 that "*because they had transgressed the decree of the Memra of the LORD and married into foreign nations, their days were cut short.*" And both Mahlon and Chilion also died *in the unclean land.*" While such conflicting interpretations are not uncommon in Midrashic literature, the Targumim are usually more consistent within any given text. It seems our Targumist felt it was more important to resolve these two key questions (why did Mahlon and Chilion die and why was Ruth allowed to enter the community and marry Boaz) than to resolve apparent exegetical inconsistencies.<sup>19</sup>

It is generally assumed by Rabbinic commentators and modern scholars alike, such as Levine and Levey,<sup>20</sup> that in declaring this "word of the sages" Boaz is addressing Ruth's suitability to marry an Israelite. Yet Deut. 23:4 is concerned specifically with those who may enter into "the assembly of the LORD." This is usually understood in broader terms than marriage and, in fact, often is used in reference to conversion. So inclusion in the community may or may not include marriage. Knowing the rest of the story of the book of Ruth, it is understandable that we should read this into the text, but Boaz's response seems directed to her status as one able to be accepted into the community. Ruth's suitability as a marriage prospect is addressed in Boaz's second pronouncement.

In addition to receiving the word of the sages Boaz also received word directly from God concerning Ruth. The Targumist thus reveals that Boaz is more than just learned in the Law. He is also a prophet.

And it was told to me *by prophecy* that there will come forth from you kings and prophets.

Here even tradition is trumped by direct revelation from God. The justification for her being blessed in this way brings us back to the biblical text. The Targumist cites Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi and her support of her mother-in-law even after her own husband died. But where the biblical text states that Ruth left her "father and mother and native land," the Targumist

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<sup>19</sup> Other Rabbinic sources do attempt to address this question. Ruth Rabbah 2:9 specifies that Mahlon and Chilion "neither proselytized them, nor gave them ritual immersion, nor had the new law . . . been propounded." Boaz's statement that he received the "word of the sages" implies that this law preexisted Boaz, and thus presumably it was in effect during the time of Mahlon and Chilion, just ten years earlier. That being said, the effort is being made to distinguish between Boaz's circumstance *vis-à-vis* Ruth and Mahlon.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74, and Samson Levey, *The Targum to the Book of Ruth: Its Linguistic and Exegetical Character* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, 1934), p. 17.

extends her journey into a new religion. “[Y]ou forsook your *god and your people* [and your father and mother] *and the land of your birth* and went to *become a proselyte*.” Ruth’s good deeds (*hesed*) of faithfulness to Naomi are now subordinated to her burgeoning faithfulness to the LORD.

## 5. The Value of Conversion

Ruth’s conversion is efficacious far beyond preparing her for marriage. The “full reward” that the Boaz of the biblical text assures Ruth she will receive from the LORD is developed by the Targum to include reward in the world-to-come.

Ruth 2:12 “May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!”

TgRuth 2:12 “May the Lord repay *you a good payment in this world* for your good deeds and may your reward be perfect *in the next world* from *before* the LORD, the God of Israel, to whom you have come *to become a proselyte and* to shelter under *the shadow of his glorious Shekina*. *And by that merit you will be saved from the judgment of Gehenna so that your portion may be with Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Leah*.”

Guided by MT, the Targumist skillfully creates as parallelism (echoed in Ruth’s response in TgRuth 2:13) in which Ruth’s good deeds, her physical acts of *hesed*, faithfulness, and loyalty to Naomi, will yield “a good payment in this world,” while her conversion provides her with a reward in the world to come. Note that it is “by that merit” of her becoming a proselyte and sheltering “under the shadow of his glorious Shekhina” that Ruth will be “saved from the judgment of Gehenna.” The Targumist is very careful not to diminish in the slightest the value of Ruth’s actions for and towards Naomi, to encourage his audience to do well in this world, but at the same time emphasizes that it is because of her acceptance of the LORD as her god that she will be granted life in the world-to-come.<sup>21</sup>

Ruth’s response in verse 13, as noted, follows the pattern both of the biblical text and the theological path set by the Targumist.

TgRuth 2:13 She said, “May I find favor before you, my lord, for you have comforted me *by deeming me worthy to be admitted to the congregation of the LORD*, and you have spoken *consolation* to the heart of your maidservant *in that you have assured me of inheriting the next world in righteousness*, when I have no merit to have a portion in the next world, *even with* one of your maidservants.”

<sup>21</sup> In fact, we are told that Ruth’s status will be raised to that of a matriarch!

The verse begins by following the biblical text closely and adds the acknowledgement that Boaz's declaration now means that she may be fully admitted into the community of Israel. She then goes on to speak of her reward in the "next world." In all of this her humility remains (even after she has just been told kings and prophets will descend from her and she will be like a matriarch) and is, in fact, extended. In the biblical text she acknowledges that she is "not one of your servants," but in the Targum she further states that she does not have "merit to have a portion in the next world."

## 6. The Last Deed is Better than the First

The meeting between Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor is pivotal for the story and for understanding the character of Ruth. Much has been written about what the author intends us to believe actually happened that night. For this study it is sufficient to say that the biblical author has accomplished exactly what he set out to do: keep the audience intrigued and engaged without giving too much away. Of course if one concludes that Ruth went to the threshing floor with the intent of consummating a relationship with Boaz (or even compromising him) then Ruth would likely be seen as a somewhat licentious or amoral figure. On the other hand, if one believes that, under Naomi's direction, Ruth is simply being crafty by carefully waking Boaz up, perhaps putting him in an awkward situation, in order to force him into action then we might have a different view of Ruth. Or again, if one thinks that Ruth is simply following Naomi's directions, regardless of the consequences, then we will have yet another perspective on the character of our heroine. The Targumist can have none of this ambiguity.

Ruth 3:9 He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." 10 He said, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. 11 And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman.

TgRuth 3:9 "Who are you, *my daughter?*" he asked. She said, "I am Ruth, your maid-servant. Let your name be called over your maidservant *by taking me in marriage*, for you are a redeemer."

10 He said, "May you be blessed *from before* the Lord, my daughter. You have made your latter good deed better than your former one, *the former being that you became a proselyte and the latter that you have made yourself as a woman who waits for a little brother-in-law until the time that he is grown up*, in that you have not gone after young men *to commit fornication with them*, whether poor or rich.

11 “Now, my daughter, do not fear, all that you say to me I will do for you, for it is known *before* all *who sit at the gate of the great Sanhedrin* of my people that you are a righteous woman *and there is in you strength to bear the yoke of the commandments of the LORD.*”

It is immediately clear that the Targumist wants to reassure the audience that Ruth’s intentions were chaste. “Spread your cloak over your servant” has been replaced with the more prosaic but less offensive, “Let your name be called over your maidservant *by taking me in marriage.*” The crafty and creative aspect of this tryst is not diminished, yet Ruth’s goal is now made clear and culturally acceptable. The sexual innuendo is replaced with an overt request for marriage.

Boaz, as in the biblical text, replies by praising Ruth’s actions and declaring that she continues to amaze him, performing one righteous act after another. In the Targum, however, Ruth’s first good deed is not her loyalty to Naomi; rather, it is her conversion. It may seem odd at first that her having become a proselyte is declared *not as great* as making herself “as a woman who waits for a little brother-in-law until the time that he is grown up.” It is no doubt considered meritorious that Ruth took up the yoke of the Torah, but Boaz seems to be saying that, in waiting to marry him, Ruth is *living out the life commended by the Law.* She has truly become an Israelite.

It is worth taking a few moments to consider the Targumist’s addition to the final Hebrew phrase of verse 10, “you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.” In the Targum it becomes, “that you have not gone after young men *to commit fornication with them,* whether poor or rich.” Whereas the Targumist wants to play down the sexual innuendo in verse 9, he is happy to be sexually explicit in verse 10. These changes are both to the same end: to demonstrate Ruth’s chastity. The biblical text is, of course, implying with its reference to going “after young men” that once she had caught up with them, sexual hijinks would ensue and so, to a certain extent, the Targumist is simply making the vague explicit. But it does serve to further separate Ruth from the view prevalent, at least among Rabbinic authors, that Moabite women were libertine.<sup>22</sup>

The Targumist further adds to Ruth’s great attributes throughout the remainder of this scene. Boaz reassures Ruth that he will do all that she says and adds that “it is known *before* all *who sit at the gate of the great Sanhedrin* of my people that you are a righteous woman *and there is in you strength to bear the yoke of the commandments of the LORD.*” The biblical texts already states that all the people know Ruth to be אשת חיל (which parallels the description of

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Ruth Rabbah 4:6.

Boaz offered in Ruth 2:1 (אִישׁ גִּבּוֹר חַיִל), but the Targumist further specifies that she is a “righteous woman” (אִינִתָּא צְדִיקָתָא) specifically because she has the “strength” (חֵילָא) to bear “the yoke of the commandments of the LORD.”

## 7. More Strength and Prophecy

Finally, the last significant addition offered by the Targumist with respect to Ruth occurs the next morning, as she prepares to leave. The biblical text states that Boaz generously gave Ruth שש־שְׁעָרִים, literally “six barleys.” The amount was great enough that Ruth had to use her shawl, so most commentators assume and most English translations read something like “six *measures* of barley.” The Targum uses this ambiguity to further demonstrate Ruth’s unique strength.

TgRuth 3:15 Then he said, “Bring the scarf which you are wearing and hold it.” She held it, and he measured out six *seahs* of barley and put them on her. *Strength and power were given to her from before the LORD to carry them, and immediately it was said to her prophetically that there would descend from her six of the most righteous men of all time, each of whom would be blessed with six blessings: David, Daniel and his companions, and the king Messiah.*

It was not some vague six “measures” of barley that Ruth carried home in her shawl; it was six *seahs*! In modern terms this would be 1.2 US bushels, far more than she could have been expected to carry herself. So the Targumist tells us that God provided her with divine strength to accomplish her task. He further spoke to her prophetically to reveal that her descendants would not just be the generic “kings and prophets” Boaz told her about, but would be the six most righteous men of all time.<sup>23</sup> By the end of this encounter the audience should have no doubt of Ruth’s chastity, charity, and conversion.

## 8. Conclusion

From this point on, the Targum is silent with regards to Ruth’s conversion. The Hebrew text itself has Boaz being somewhat crafty with the “redeemer” who has prior rights, not telling him about Ruth until after he had agreed to buy Naomi’s land. Perhaps the biblical author is showing that the kinsman’s true motivations were to expand his wealth rather than to ensure the

<sup>23</sup> See Christian M.M. Brady, “The Use of ‘Eschatological Lists’ within the Targumim of the Megilloth,” in *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 40 (2009), pp. 1–17.

continuance of Mahlon's name. Whatever the reasons may be, the Targumist did not take the opportunity at any point in chapter 4 to mention Ruth's status as a proselyte. This might seem somewhat odd since in TgRuth 3:11 Boaz reassures Ruth that her righteousness is known "before all who sit at the gate of the great Sanhedrin;" but perhaps it is nothing more than remaining close to the biblical text's own description of Boaz's coy behavior.

In the Targum, Ruth's conversion serves as a template for others who would follow her example, from the rubric presented in her dialogue with Naomi, to Ruth's quickly developing knowledge of Torah, to her *hesed* and humility, and the ultimate assurance of her place with Israel in the world-to-come. The Targumist readily adds the details of her conversion at the appropriate place in her statement of faithfulness to/with Naomi (TgRuth 1:16–17) and includes further reference to her status as a proselyte at various other points. Yet the Targum also ensures that the reader understands that it is not just the *words* of Ruth in confessing her willingness to convert that are important. It is also her living out the Law, and she is commended for her ability "to bear the yoke of the commandments of the LORD." Thus, in the Targum, Ruth becomes the very model of Rabbinic proselyte.