

BOOK REVIEW

The Dawn of Redemption: What the Books of Ruth and Yona Teach about Alienation, Despair and Return, Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin; Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2009. 235 pages. Reviewed by Mattan Erder.

Controversy about methodology and hermeneutics has always been a prominent feature of biblical studies. Recently, there has been a vigorous debate as to whether the stories in the Bible are primarily etiological or ethical; whether it makes sense to read the Bible as a source of instruction, or if it should be viewed primarily through a historical lens. While not explicitly, and perhaps not consciously, addressing this debate, Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin's new work *The Dawn of Redemption: What the Books of Ruth and Yona Teach about Alienation, Despair and Return* (originally a series of articles on www.torah.org) makes a powerful statement in favor of reading the Bible as a source of guidance and instruction on the most crucial issues of life. As the title of the book and his preface indicate, Levin's primary concern is to elucidate the Bible's messages about a certain set of pressing human concerns in a way that will furnish the reader with guidance and new perspectives.

Levin's goals combine with his chosen interpretative strategies to create a blend that is unique and often refreshing. In addition, he is forthright about methodology, stating exactly what methodological choices he is making and why he makes them. Levin makes extensive use of rabbinic literature to elucidate the texts of both biblical books, although this tendency is more pronounced in his commentary to Ruth. This choice means that, in addition to his own considerable talents, Levin has placed the textual, psychological, historical and spiritual wisdom of the entire rabbinic tradition at his disposal, and his commentary is much richer for it.

While the following description will not do justice to the sophistication and complexity of the detailed interpretations contained within, there are two main prongs of Levin's approach to the book of Ruth. He strongly emphasizes the rabbinic texts that highlight connections between the characters of Ruth and

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Moav and in Beth Lehem in the book of Ruth reflect and repair the past, and how they pave the way for the future. Thus, Ruth's marriage to Boaz is seen to make a contribution to history in various ways, whether by repairing or elevating the shortcomings and mistakes of characters from the past, or by setting the stage for the Davidic or Messianic future by allowing certain traits that are inherent in the Moabite nation to be absorbed into the Israelite royal family so that an effective monarchy can be created. The lives of the other characters are viewed in a similar sweeping historical context. The overarching message is that no one lives or struggles in a vacuum. All of humanity is involved in a long process of redemption; everyone is connected in intimate ways to both the past and the future.

The second major area that Levin puts his effort into is characterization. He uses rabbinic sources, as well as his own keen literary eye, to flesh out the sparse descriptions of the characters and their behavior that the biblical text provides us with. With the ubiquitous guidance of the rabbinic texts, he masterfully transforms small textual nuances and clues into full-blown profiles of dramatic individuals as they suffer, struggle, and triumph. One highlight is the way in which Levin is able to translate Ruth and Boaz's seemingly mundane conversation about gleaning and drinking water (Ruth 2:8-10, pp. 75-83) into a poignant dialogue about values, commitment and love.

There are times, however, when some of Levin's language regarding rabbinic literature is overstated. Throughout his discussion of the book of Ruth, he refers often to the "view of the Sages" or to "the Sages' interpretation," in a manner that seems to present the entire classical rabbinic tradition as a monolith. This language has the potential to blur the significant diversity that characterizes the rabbinic works that are utilized. Texts as different from each other in their provenance and orientation as the Babylonian Talmud, Midrash Rabbah, and Zohar *Hadash* are all quoted equally as representing the uniform view of "the Sages." Furthermore, Levin makes almost no use of any debate or disagreement between different rabbinic views in his commentary to Ruth. In the rare cases when he does mention rabbinic disagreements, it is usually only in order to emphasize the common denominators between the various interpretations. This is one unfortunate respect in which Levin under-utilizes the rabbinic sources, there is much to learn from the disagreements and debates between the sages, and

attention to those debates could uncover even more nuanced and multi-faceted readings of the texts at hand. In any event, while the rabbinic sources Levin cites are certainly extensive, they are not comprehensive enough to sustain the claim that they represent the exclusive view of "the Sages." This criticism, of course, does not detract from the substance or rabbinic authenticity of Levin's insights. Rather, the issue is that some of the language used to express these insights may impose a false image of uniformity on a diverse body of literature.

A more significant and substantive issue relates to the lessons Levin extracts from the book of Ruth. *The Dawn of Redemption* focuses much more on exegesis, on the process of extracting lessons from the text, than on the lessons themselves. This leaves many philosophical questions that Levin does not explore. One can rationally wonder how exactly the actions of one person can be understood to repair the sins of their ancestors, or somehow determine the futures of their great-grandchildren. Does this work through DNA, psychology, or mysterious spiritual forces, or perhaps some other way? While Levin demonstrates that the book of Ruth and the rabbinic tradition claim an intimate connection and causality between different generations, there is no explanation, let alone a defense, of this concept. Perhaps even more significantly, the reader is left without much guidance on how to integrate this insight into their own lives, beyond the vague sense of comfort that might be gained from knowing that one is part of a larger cycle.

The commentary on Jonah, while written in essentially the same spirit as the discussion of Ruth, differs in emphasis, and avoids some of the limitations we noted that were present in the sections on Ruth. When reading Jonah, Levin relies less exclusively on rabbinic sources, although he certainly does not abandon them. He also spends more time analyzing rabbinic disagreements, particularly the debate between the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmudim concerning the sincerity of Nineveh's repentance. However, the more prominent aspect of this commentary is the attention Levin pays to literary structure and intertextual parallels. Interestingly, he also seems more willing and eager to interact with modern biblical scholarship. This results in discussions of linguistics, archaeology, and theme in which Levin engages various viewpoints that depart from those of traditional rabbinic Jews. In these discussions, Levin takes on what can best be described as an open, confident, but very Orthodox approach: he feels free to

utilize the insights of modern scholars to further his understanding of the text, and equally free to reject their views and arguments when they conflict with his broader vision and worldview.

Substantively, the commentary on Jonah deals with issues that are more relatable and less esoteric than some of those discussed in Ruth. Levin portrays Jonah as a story of struggle with theological crisis. He understands the prophet as a man grappling with the age-old question of theodicy, although with a strange twist – rather than being outraged over the suffering of the innocent, Jonah rebels because of his disgust with God's mercy towards the people of Nineveh. The story of Jonah's flight from God, his descent to the sea, his encounter with the fish, his prophesying and his sojourn in the booth all tell the story of how the prophet dealt with this theological conundrum. Levin's careful dissection of the parallels and differences between the first and third chapter of the book are especially compelling, we see the transformation Jonah has undergone at sea by viewing his responses to similar events afterwards. While the prophet does not ever resolve his theological issues, Levin argues that he is able to grapple with them in progressively more elevated ways as the story unfolds. Jonah emerges as a model of how to grow religiously even when confronted with the most significant of challenges. While most readers will probably not share Jonah's dismay at the particular theological challenge, almost everyone will be able to identify with the larger issue and Levin's profile of how to constructively meet it.

There are, of course, various junctures throughout this book at which a reasonable reader would be justified in raising objections to, or even the occasional eyebrow at, one of Levin's readings. Not everything in the book works on the level of *peshat*. However, on the whole, *The Dawn of Redemption*, despite its limitations, is a worthy contemporary heir to the rabbinic and kabbalistic traditions that its author so reveres.