

The 'Elohim

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Jan 22, 2018

Ruth 1:15 – 16

(BHS)

וַתֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה שָׁבָה יְבַמְתָּךְ
אֶל-עַמָּהּ וְאֶל-אֱלֹהֶיהָ
שׁוּבִי אַחֲרַי יְבַמְתָּךְ:

וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת אֶל-תַּפְגְּעֵי-בִי לְעִזְבֹּךְ
לְשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרַיִךְ
כִּי אֶל-אֲשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי אֵלָיִךְ
וּבְאֲשֶׁר תֵּלִינִי אֶלָּיִךְ
עַמָּךְ עַמִּי וְאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי:

(ESV)

And she said, “See, your sister-in-law **has gone back** to her people and to **her gods**; **return** after your sister-in-law.”

But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to **return** from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and **your God my God**.”

“Return” is in blue. Although in context it means journeying back to somewhere, the word sometimes in other contexts denotes “repentance.” For Naomi to return to Bethlehem is, I think, more than a simple migration. It is a spiritual journey as well for her, and for Ruth.

I have marked *'elohim* in red. Note how ESV translates the same word differently in each verse. When speaking of Orpah in Moab, it is “gods.” But when speaking of Israel and Naomi, it is “God.”

Wouldn't a consistent translation be preferred? Alstair Hunter (email me for the bibliography) notes that Naomi urges Ruth to return to her Moabite gods—as if they were real. Then he argues that in Ruth's confession she adopts Naomi's (supposed) pantheon as her own, “your gods will be my gods.” He reasons that the book of Ruth is a sort of antidote to the anti-idolatry argument in the rest of Scripture. By this interpretation, the book affirms the validity of other gods. Go ahead and take a look at those two verses again. Hunter has a point, doesn't he?

How would you answer him? Are all religions alike? Are the differences between them insignificant? Is Chemosh, the god of Moab, the same as Yahweh the God of Israel? Is that what these verses assert? When I teach Ruth, I present this conundrum for my students to ponder.

There are a number of ways to respond, but the best way is to read these two verses in the light of the whole narrative. Remember the family history that led up to our text. Naomi in great bitterness of heart urged Ruth to go back to her people and to her gods. "Go back," she said, "Go back to your gods." Go back to your famine. Go back to your barrenness. Go back to your widowhood.

Orpah's gods in the book of Ruth are part of the death-complex that is the dark backdrop to the story. They belong with all of the other anti-life forces and conditions that Naomi experienced, having left the land of Yahweh.

But when the little sorority returned to Israel, they found life. A child is even born to Naomi there (4:17). The contrast with the land of Chemosh could not be starker. Naomi's husband had taken his family to Moab, thinking that they would fare better there. The grass, I suppose, is always greener on the other kingdom's lawn. But our story reveals that this was an illusion. They found only death there. Naomi was subject to disastrous circumstances in Moab until she "returned" to find life.

The same spiritual reality exists today. Within the church is life. To find oneself outside the community of faith is to be "delivered to Satan" (1 Cor 5:5). Outside the believing church things might appear "greener." Institutions and communities seem to be doing just fine without the gospel. But don't be fooled

into Hunter's thinking. Their gods—their ideology, their philosophy—are part of the death-complex of the unbelieving world.

It is difficult to live in a world where the famine seems to be in our own home—the church—and all of the exciting, rich, successful developments are elsewhere. It puts a constant stress on Christians who are trying to be in the world, but not of it. When you are tempted to doubt the wisdom of identifying with Jesus and his people, remember the book of Ruth. Remember where true life is found. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). With the genuine article clearly in mind, one can't be easily seduced by a counterfeit.

Living in a world full of false claims of life puts us in unremitting tension. But the day is coming when this strain will be over. For now, we do not turn aside. Where Jesus goes, we go. Where Jesus stays, we stay. His Father will be our Father, and we are united with him in his death. We are united with him in his resurrection too. We await his return so we can be with him always. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!