

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

his own life also, he cannot be my disciple," we shall not complain of that as a hard saying, to be interpreted as an injunction of unnatural hatred, any more than as an exhortation to suicide; but as a gracious warning, in every time of trial, when we are drawn different ways by conflicting motives, to choose that good part which shall not be taken away from us.

---

## THE BOOK OF RUTH.

## IV.—IN THE THRESHING-FLOOR.

*Chapter iii. verses 1-18.*

IT is somewhat difficult to handle the main incident of this Chapter. Not that there is any, even the faintest, touch of impurity in the Story itself. If, as we read it, we think of Ruth as guilty of an immodest boldness, or of Boaz as in any way lacking in manly honour and virtue, that can only be because we judge these ancient worthies by the standard of modern conventions, or because we ourselves are wanting in true delicacy and refinement. If we would do them justice, it is above all things requisite that we should carry our thoughts back through more than thirty centuries, and bear in mind the patriarchal simplicity of the manners and customs of that antique world in which they lived. An age in which the wealthy owner of a large and fertile estate would himself winnow barley, and sleep among the heaps of winnowed corn in an open threshing-floor, is, obviously, an age as different from this as it is remote from it. And Ruth, in creeping softly

to the resting-place of Boaz and nestling under the corner of his long robe, was simply making a legal claim in the approved manner of the time. No doubt the custom was a hazardous one; and we are expressly told that the heart of Boaz was "cheerful" with food and wine when Ruth came to him, to indicate both the risk she ran and the virtue of the man who was able to master both inclination and opportunity, even when they combined their forces in a single moment of temptation, rather than betray the confidence reposed in him. The very words which he addressed to her are reported, moreover, that we may catch their simple piety, the fatherly tenderness of the tone in which he spake to his "daughter," the pure devotion with which he invoked on her the blessing of God; and so be saved from any misconception whether of her conduct or of his.

There are but two words in the Chapter which call for detailed explanation; and in explaining these perhaps all may be said that the reader needs to enable him to peruse this section of the Story with an intelligent apprehension of its meaning. In the Hebrew these two words are *menuchah* and *goel*: *menuchah* means "rest," or, rather, "a place, or asylum, of rest;" and *goel* means "kinsman," or "redeemer," or "avenger," according to the connection in which it is found.

I. Let us take the word *Menuchah* first. Naomi said to Ruth (verse 1), "My daughter, shall I not seek a *place* [or an *asylum*] of rest for thee, that it may be well with thee?" What she meant by that question we learn from other passages of Holy Writ. For, in the Old Testament Scriptures, the word

*menuchah* is used to designate the asylum of honour, freedom, and peace which the Hebrew woman found in the house of her husband. The position of an unmarried woman in the ancient Oriental world was, as I have already remarked,<sup>1</sup> an unhappy one, so unhappy that, in some Oriental tribes, the birth of a girl brought no joy with it, but grief and lamentation; and even among the Hebrews the daughters counted for little; it was the sons, who could work for them and fight for them, in whom the family and the nation rejoiced. Only in the house of a husband was a woman sure of safety, respect, honour. And hence the Hebrews spake of the husband's home as the woman's *menuchah*, or place of rest, her secure and happy asylum from servitude, neglect, and license. In like manner they regarded a secure and hereditary possession of land as the *menuchah*, or rest, of a nation. Thus Moses said to the Children of Israel, when they wandered in the Wilderness, "Ye have not yet come unto *the rest* [*menuchah*] which the Lord your God giveth you:" by which he meant that they had no secure possession, no asylum of repose and freedom, no settled and well-defended inheritance, in the Desert; *that* was not their rest, but only the way to their rest. King Solomon was the first Hebrew chieftain who could bless God for the gift of a complete "rest" to his people. But as, in his reign, every man sat under his own vine and under his own fig-tree, none daring to make him afraid, he could thankfully acknowledge that the whole land had, at last, become the secure and tranquil inheritance of the

<sup>1</sup> See EXPOSITOR, vol. ii. p. 96.

Hebrew race. And hence, at the opening of the Temple, in his sublime dedicatory prayer, he said : "Blessed be the Lord who hath given a rest [*menuchah*] unto his people Israel, according to all that he promised." The Prophets rose to a still higher conception and use of the word. For them, God Himself, God alone, was the true rest, or *menuchah*, of men. And hence they predicted that when God came, in the person of the Messiah, the golden days of Paradise would return, and the whole world would enter into its true *menuchah*, its final and glorious "rest." When the Messiah came, when Christ dwelt among men, He invited the weary and the heavy-laden to come to Him, on the express ground that He was their rest ; that in and with Him they would find such an asylum of freedom and honourable repose as the Hebrew wife found in her husband's home ; such a rest as the Hebrew race found in the promised land when it was wholly their own ; nay, such a rest as the Prophets had taught them to look and hope for only in God.

This is the history of the word which Naomi uses in verse 1. When, on her way home from the Field of Moab, she was fain to bid her daughters-in-law farewell, she had prayed that, in return for their kindness to the dead and to her, "the Lord would grant them each to find *an asylum* in the house of" a new husband.<sup>1</sup> When, despite her entreaties and commands, they refused to leave her, she had had the hard task of warning them that no such asylum of rest would be open to them in the land of Israel ;

<sup>1</sup> Chap. i. ver. 9.

that, if they *would* go with her, they must give up all the hopes which women held most dear, since the Hebrew law forbade the men of Israel to marry the daughters of Moab.<sup>1</sup> The prospect was too dark for Orpah's love to encounter; but Ruth clave unto Naomi, despite the darkness of her future lot. And, now, Naomi sees that the time is come in which the fidelity of Ruth may receive a reward beyond the reach of hope. Ruth is known "in all the Gate" *i.e.*, in all the city of Bethlehem, as "a good and brave woman,"<sup>2</sup> a woman distinguished by an heroic love and virtue. She has been recognized and blessed by Boaz himself as an Israelite indeed, as having "come to take shelter under the wings of the Lord God of Israel."<sup>3</sup> So that now Naomi sets herself, with courage and hope, to find a *menuchah*, an asylum of rest and honour, for the daughter who had clung to her with a love so rare. She knew, or suspected, perhaps, that Boaz looked with kindness, with respect and admiration, on Ruth. Perhaps, too, she knew of the two considerations which held him back from seeking a wife in Ruth. These considerations were, as we learn from this Chapter, first, that there was a nearer kinsman than himself, who had a prior legal claim on Ruth; and, secondly, that he was very much older than Ruth, and hesitated to place himself in the way of a more suitable and equal match.<sup>4</sup> The tone in which he addresses Ruth,— "my daughter,"—and the fact that he had observed she did not respond to the advances of any of the "young men, whether poor or rich," indicate that

<sup>1</sup> Chap. i. vers. 11-13.

<sup>2</sup> Chap. iii. ver. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Chap. ii. ver. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Chap. iii. ver. 10.

he was many years her senior, and had waited to see whether she would not select some man younger than himself, before he offered her a *menuchah*, or resting-place, in his house.<sup>1</sup>

It was, I suppose, this hesitation on the part of Boaz, and perhaps some glimpse of the generous and kindly motive that prompted it, which induced Naomi to resort to a decisive and somewhat dangerous expedient, although an expedient fully warranted by the law and custom of the time.

What the legal claim which stood in the way of Boaz was, and how the expedient of Naomi drove him to take immediate action, we shall better understand when we have looked at the second of the two notable words of this Chapter.

II. This word is *Goel*. Like the word *menuchah*, it has a history, and a history that runs on and up into the Hebrew conception of the Messiah. According to its derivation, *goel* means "*one who unlooses*"—unlooses that which has been bound and restores it to its original position. The *goel* did his duty, for example, if he redeemed a promissory note by paying it and handing it back to the man who had given it; or if he redeemed a piece of land by paying off the liens upon it and restoring it to its original owner; or if he redeemed a captive by paying his ransom and setting him free. So that the fundamental idea of a *goel* was that of a man who *redeemed*, or set loose, that which had in any way been bound.

This general conception was specialized in two different ways. (1) In virtue of an ancient custom in Israel, a custom sanctioned by the law of Moses,

<sup>1</sup> Chap. iii. ver 10.

when a man died without issue, his brother, or, if he had no brother, his nearest kinsman, was bound to marry his widow. This singular custom was based on a fine principle. Whatever the defects of their political economy, the ancient Hebrews firmly grasped a conviction which it were well that our modern statesmen held and acted on far more stedfastly than they do. They heartily believed that the true strength, wealth, and glory of a nation lay, not in the breadth of its possessions, nor in the victorious conduct of its wars, nor in the fortunes amassed by its citizens, but in its *men*, and in their manliness and virtue. And hence they would not lose a single man, if they could help it; and, above all, they would not suffer a single family to become extinct: for they knew that it is the families of a land, holding the ground held by their ancestors for many generations and trained in the habits of their pious fathers, which are the very heart and substance of the national life.

For myself, I wish we all held this conviction closer to our hearts. I never hear of the thousands who emigrate from our shores without a feeling of shame and regret that we are carelessly losing many of our most industrious and skilful citizens because, in this wealthy England of ours, they can earn no sufficient livelihood. A time may come when we shall only too bitterly rue what we have lost in losing our *men*; and, so far from taking any pride in hearing of the swarms which we annually throw off, I can but feel with how little wisdom we are ruled when the enormous wealth of the country cannot be so distributed as to ensure for every man



born into our midst a fair field and a due reward for his industry.

Among the many laws by which the Hebrew legislators sought to preserve their families from extinction was the law of the *goelim*, the law which made it incumbent on the nearest kinsman to take a childless widow to wife, and ordained that any son born of this marriage should inherit the name and possessions of the first husband. This kinsman was called the *goel* because, by "by raising up seed to his brother," he *redeemed* his brother's name and inheritance from being blotted out. It is easy to understand how in process of time this title came to be applied both to Jehovah and to Jesus. Jehovah was the *Redeemer* of Israel; for, again and again, He interposed to save them from captivity, or to ransom them when they had been carried away captive, and to preserve them a name and a place in the earth. Jesus is the *Redeemer* of the whole world; for when we were captive to divers lusts and groaning under the oppressions of Evil, the Son of Man proved Himself our true kinsman by paying a ransom for us and setting us free from our intolerable bonds.

(2) It is easy, moreover, to understand how the kinsman who redeemed had a dark and miserable counterpart in the kinsman who avenged. For the very man who was bound, by the ties of kinship, to keep his brother's name alive, was also bound, by the self-same ties, to avenge his brother if he were slain or wronged. Thus it came to pass that in the Bible the word "*goel*" is used both for the kinsman-redeemer and the kinsman-avenger, or "the avenger of blood."

These, then, are the two special meanings of the word *goel*: it means "one who redeems;" it also means "one who avenges." But it is only in the first and happier of these two senses that it is used in the Book of Ruth. Boaz was among the *goelim* of Naomi and Ruth. He was not *the goel*; for there was a nearer kinsman than he; but he was *a goel*, and if this nearer kinsman should refuse to do his duty, then Boaz might step in and do it for him.

Mark, then, how the case stands. On the one side we have the two noble women, Naomi and Ruth, both widows and both childless; on the other side we have the two men, Boaz and the unnamed kinsman, the latter of whom is bound, according to the Hebrew law, to take Naomi, or, if she should refuse, to take Ruth to wife, in order that the family of Elimelech may not perish out of the land. Of the women, Naomi has the first claim. How is she to shew that she waives her legal claim in favour of Ruth? Of the men, the unnamed kinsman has the first right to redeem. How is Naomi to indicate that she would prefer Boaz to this nearer kinsman? She achieves both points at a stroke by sending *Ruth* to make the claim instead of making it herself, and by sending her to make it of *Boaz* instead of the nearer kinsman. By sending Ruth, instead of going herself, she shewed that she waived her own prior claim; and by sending her to Boaz she shewed that she wished Boaz, rather than the next of kin, to play the part of *goel*.

This is, I believe, the true secret motive and reason of Ruth's hazardous adventure in the

threshing-floor of Boaz. Happily, the adventure, hazardous as it was, ran to a happy close. Ruth puts off her widow's weeds, arrays herself in holiday attire, to shew that the days of her mourning are past. She creeps, unseen, to the feet of Boaz, makes her claim in the usual form, thus constraining him to see her righted or himself to be put to shame. And Boaz is charmed to have the duty of the *goel* thrust upon him. He says to her, "Blessed be thou of the Lord, my daughter, *for thy latter kindness is better than thy former, inasmuch as thou didst not go after the young men, whether poor or rich.*" By which he meant, I suppose, that Ruth had shewn even a nobler fidelity and love in claiming his services as *goel* than in leaving her native land to follow and comfort Naomi. Had she been set on her own pleasure or advancement, with her strange foreign beauty she might easily, it would seem, have won to herself any of the young unmarried men of Bethlehem, and have gained a suitable and wealthy mate. But on Naomi's bidding she had carefully observed the law of Israel, the law which bade her, as a childless widow, claim alliance with her husband's kinsman. And in thus sacrificing the natural preference of a young and attractive woman, she had shewn even a finer kindness to Naomi and her family, and a nobler devotion to the law and God of the Hebrews, than in leaving Moab for Bethlehem.

But Boaz does not simply laud her fidelity and piety. He promises, he swears, that, should the nearer kinsman refuse the duty and honour, he

himself will redeem her dead husband's name and inheritance. Probably Boaz found it hard to utter the words, "There is a nearer *goel* than I;" for, obviously, by this time, as his allusion to "the young men" indicates, he was deeply attached to his fair young kinswoman. And it illustrates the nobility of his character, his honour and integrity, that he should propose to give this "nearer kinsman" his legal due, although to give it might cost him no small sacrifice. We may be sure, I think, that there was a good deal of quiet heroism in the words of Boaz: "Truly I am a *goel*; but there is a nearer *goel* than I. Tarry here to-night, and it shall be in the morning that if he will redeem thee, well; let him redeem: but if he will not redeem thee, then, as the Lord liveth, I will redeem thee."

In the morning, at break of day, before there was light enough for "a man to recognize his friend," they "rose up," that Ruth might be home before any one was stirring, lest any breath of suspicion should blow on the woman whom all the city pronounced to be as good as she was brave. Still farther to divert suspicion, Boaz bids Ruth take off her shawl and hold it out while he pours barley into it. When it is full, he lifts the load on to her head, and Ruth goes homeward, bearing her burden with a joyful heart. And now, should any early neighbour meet her, he will but think that she has been to fetch away her gleanings from the field of Boaz; he will only see what he has often seen before, a woman stepping lightly along beneath a load of grain.

But so much stress is laid (verses 15 and 17) on the number of measures which Boaz gave Ruth,—*six*,—and Ruth is so expressly told to take them to her mother-in-law, and numbers are so significantly used in the Bible, that we can hardly doubt that this emphasized *six* has a symbolical meaning which Naomi would be quick to read. If there were any such meaning in it, as probably to Hebrews there would be, it would be this: “The number *six* is the symbol of labour and service, and is followed by *seven*, the symbol of rest: for did not God make the heavens and the earth in six days, and rest from his labours on the seventh day? Was not the land of Israel diligently tilled for six years, and was not the seventh a sabbatical year, or year of rest?” Naomi, then, would probably find in the *six* measures of barley a hint that Ruth’s term of labour and service had come to an end, and that she was about to find, what Naomi had desired for her, a *rest* (*menuchah*) in the house of a husband.

Naomi seems to have read the symbol thus; for, in the last verse of the Chapter, she bids Ruth “stay at home,” as the Hebrew bride had to do until her affianced husband came to fetch her. In past years, when Elimelech and Boaz were friends and companions as well as kinsmen, Naomi had learned enough of the character of Boaz to be sure that he would not “let the grass grow under his feet,” that he “would not rest” till he had finished the matter of Ruth’s redemption and found her a “rest.”