

The Goël in Ruth 4:14, 15

Julius A. Bewer

Oberlin Theological Seminary, Oberlin, Ohio.

[p.202]

The question who the Goël is in Ruth 4:14, 15 is a part of the problem which I discussed in an article on the "G^oullāh in the Book of Ruth" in Vol. XIX, No. 8 (April, 1903), pp. 143-8, of this JOURNAL. Two answers are possible: the Goël was either Boaz or Obed.

Bertholet (in Marti's *Kurzer Handkommentar zum Alten Testament*, Die fünf Megillot, p. 68) decides for Obed: "The Goël, for whose sake the women praise Naomi, is not Boaz, but because of בן־החיה the new-born; to him refers also the suffix in בן־נחמן becomes Naomi's next Goël who takes upon himself all the duties of such a one) because he is regarded as the son of her son Mahlon, being born of Mahlon's wife."¹ Nowack (in *Handkommentar zum Alten Testament*, "Richter, Ruth und Bücher Samuelis," p. 199) agrees with Bertholet.

It cannot be denied that there is some force in the arguments, Nevertheless, they are not convincing, And that for the following reasons:

In the first place, up to this point in the story it is Boaz who is the Goël of Naomi and Ruth, or better, Boaz is the one who is not only a Goël, but has also performed the duty of the Goël. This is emphasized still through the story; in fact, the whole of it hinges on it. In 2:20 Naomi remembers that Boaz is her and Ruth's Goël; in 3:2 she calls him "our Goël;" in 3:9 Ruth reminds Boaz of his duty as Goël; in 3:12 he acknowledges his obligation, and in 3:13 he declares that he is willing to perform the duty if the other Goël, who is a nearer 'kinsman than he, is unwilling, and. in 4:10 *sqq.* he fulfils his promise. Surely, Naomi has not been left without a Goël, for the brave Boaz has acted faithfully as such. Indeed, the exclamation of the women

[p.203]

"Blessed be Yahweh, who bath not left thee this day without a Goël!" would sound rather strange, in the light of the previous story. if we should now have to suppose that Obed is meant and not Boaz. If the declaration is not made before the birth of Obed it comes decidedly too late. For she had already had the benefit of a true Goël in the person of Boaz. Moreover, "*the day,*" to which the whole story moves from the beginning, is the day when the fortune of Ruth is made,

¹ "Der Goël, um dessentwillan die Weiber Naomi preisen, ist nicht etwa Boas, sondern wagon בן־החיה" dar Neugeborene; auf ihn bezieht sich auch das Suffix in בן־נחמן. Er wird Naomi's nächster Goël (der aun alle Pflichten eines solchen auf sich nimmt) weil er als Sohn ihres Sohnes Machlon's Weib geboren."

that is, the day when Yahweh has not left Naomi without a Goël. It will be remembered that the whole planning of Naomi was to this end, that she might help Ruth to become happy. And this end was attained on the day of Ruth's marriage. It is true that happiness for the ancients would not have been complete without the birth of a son. Thus the culmination of Ruth's happiness is not reached until Obed is born, and indeed the climax of the story is not reached till we know that Obed becomes eventually the ancestor of David! But the whole story bears witness that Naomi had not been planning how to raise seed for her son Mahlon, hut how to secure Ruth's fortune, and this was secured on the day when Boaz married her.

With this we have already touched the second objection to Bertholet's and Nowack's position. The marriage is not a Levirate marriage at all. The connection of the Levirate with the G^eullāh in the hook of Ruth is not original, but due to a later interpolator. For the arguments of this assertion, I may be permitted to refer to the above-mentioned article, and also to an article on "Die Leviratehe im Buche Ruth" in the *Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, 1903, Heft 2. If this is accepted, then it follows that this Levirate element cannot be used as an argument and we cannot say any longer, "He will be Naomi's next Goël who takes upon himself all the duties of such a one, because he is regarded as the son of Mahlon, being born of Mahlon's wife," for according to the original story he is not Mahlon's, but Boaz's son; he is not the offspring of a Levirate marriage.

One other argument may be adduced against the identification of Obed with the Goël, It need not be denied that this third argument is rather more of a subjective character. If it is maintained that the Goël in vss. 14, 15 is Obed and not Boaz, we have the strange fact that the writer introduces the women twice and makes them say practically the same things twice, in vss. 14, 15 and in vs. 17a, only how much iess forcibly in vs. 17! This

[p.204]

would provoke no comment with a great many writers, but can it be really assumed of a man who is one of the masters in the art of story telling, a man who by his wonderful art can charm even one of the world's greatest poets so much that he pronounces his story "Das lieblichste, kleine Ganze, das uns episch und idyllisch erhalten wurde" (Goethe)?

This last point gives us a hint in what direction the solution of the difficulty must be sought. For it seems to me that somehow a little confusion has come into the text, which has made, the difference of opinion possible. But this may easily be removed by rearranging the verses in the following order: vss. 11, 15a (to "old age"), 13, 17a (to "Naomi;" לֹא omit לוֹ), 15b, 16, 17b, so that the whole would read as follows:

And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be Jehovah, who bath not left thee this day without a Goël: (and) let his name be famous in Israel; (and) he shall be unto thee a restorer of life and a nourisher of thine old age.

And Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and he went in untu her, and Jehovah gave her conception and she bare a son.

And the women her neighbors, shouted, saying, There is a son born to Naomi! For the daughter-in-law, who loveth thee, who is better to thee than seven sons, hath borne him. And Naomi took the child and laid it in her bosom and became nurse unto it. And they (the women) called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

This rearrangement removes not only the difficulty about the Goël, but makes the narrative better in two other points: (1) it removes the blemish in vs. 17 referred to above; (2) it gives a beautiful climax: first, all, the people who were in the gate said, use are witnesses, then the elders offer their congratulations to Boaz, Ruth and Naomi being, of course, not present at the gate-scene, and then the women come to Naomi and rejoice with her over Yahweh's kindness to her and praise Boaz.

If this suggestion is valid, the question confronts us, How, did the confusion existing in the present Hebrew text come about? Was it accidental or intentional? It cannot well be due to an accident or to the carelessness of a copyist, because there, is system in it. The person who is responsible for it intended to create a definite impression on the readers of the story, and he has succeeded so well that even such scholars as Bertholet and Nowack cannot get away from it. The impression is that the marriage that has here taken place is a Levirate marriage. In

[p.205]

other words, the confusion is due to the, interpolator of the Levirate passages. Originally there was nothing of the kind in the story, but by a few touches, which he added here and there, and by the rearrangement of vss. 13-17 the interpolator has brought it into the text. As the text now stands the Goël in vss. 14, 15 seems to be, as Bertholet and Nowack assert Obed and not Boaz ("today" comes after we have been told that Ruth had borne a son), and, moreover, the reasoning that Obed is regarded as Naomi's son, because by virtue, of the Levirate he is Mahlon's son, has some foundation, *if the verses are taken by themselves* as they stand - but into what a number of inconsistencies this will involve us has been shown in the above-mentioned articles. Originally the Goël was Boaz and not Obed, and the sentence, "a son is born, to Naomi" has no Levirate implication. Nor is the adoption of Obed by Naomi implied in the statement, "And Naomi took the child and laid it in her bosom and became nurse unto it."

But what is the reason for these Levirate interpolations? That is a question which is bound up with the larger question in regard to the age and the purpose of the book. Of late it has become fashionable to regard the little book as a polemical treatise which originated in the struggle of the two parties at the time of Ezra's and Nehemiah's vigorous reaction against the intermarriage of Jews and foreigners. It is the protest of the liberal party against the extreme actions of these reformers. The story meant essentially the following: You strict rigorists assert that such marriages are absolutely forbidden and call down the wrath of Yahweh; have you then altogether forgotten how Yahweh has blest in a most, wonderful manner the marriage of Boaz and the Moabitess, Ruth, which was exactly one of those marriages that you oppose so vehemently? Do you not remember that they became *David's* ancestors?! Can you then rightly say that Yahweh curses such marriages?

This hypothesis is very attractive indeed, for it supplies a historical situation for the origin of the book, But it is to be noticed that there is absolutely no indication of polemics in the book; and no special stress is laid on the fact, that Ruth is a foreigner, at least not as much as we should expect in a polemical treatise. Still, that might very well be an evidence of supreme art. The book would thus be all the more, convincing. But it

[p.206]

must not be overlooked that the objector might. reply, "Yes, but, this was an extraordinary case; Boaz, you will agree, would never have married the Moabitish woman if he had not been obliged to do so by the ancient custom of the Levirate." It does not seem possible that the author who wrote this story for this polemic purpose should have laid himself open to such an objection.

Now we have seen that, the Levirate idea is not an original part of the story, but has been inserted later on. It may, perhaps still be possible to maintain so much of the above hypothesis that the book was used in this controversy by the opponents of Ezra, and that it was felt to be quite a weapon in the conflict. In order to take away this weapon from the liberal party one of the rigorists inserted the few apparently harmless interpolations about the Levirate, inserted them so finely that they would probably be taken merely as little hints bringing out the meaning of the text more clearly, if they were at all noticed; and now by virtue of these interpolations it was possible for the rigorists to ward off the attack by referring to the altogether extraordinary case of Boaz, Mahlon and Chiljon, who had taken Moabitish wives, had really sinned thereby - so they might now say - as you can clearly see by the swift punishment that has overtaken them both die and leave no children; plainly the result of Yahweh's wrath! But Boaz cannot help marrying Ruth; he was bound by the ancient law of the Levirate. You, cannot cite his case as a parallel.

It will be seen that the interpolator has succeeded very well in carrying out his plan. That we would today not rest content with this answer, but press further, need not trouble us here.

This work in public domain and may be freely copied and distributed. Prepared for the web in March 2006 by Robert I Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
