

On Ruth ii. 8.

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COMMENTATORS have experienced some difficulty in explaining the exact meaning of the words addressed by Boaz to Ruth in Ruth ii. 8. Some, like Bertheau (*Kurzgefasstes Handbuch*, ed. 2, p. 301), take the question of Boaz as a strong assurance, 'Hast thou not heard, my daughter,' etc., *i.e.* 'I now tell thee.' Similarly Oettli (Strack & Zöckler series), *Höre doch nur meine Tochter*, etc.; and Reuss (*La Bible*, vii. 9), *Alors Boaz dit à Ruth, écoute bien, ma fille, ne vas glaner dans un autre champ*, etc. Others (so apparently Wright, *Book of Ruth*, p. 26), clinging more closely to the form of the question, render, 'Hast thou not heard, my daughter?' *i.e.* 'surely thou hast been told,' etc. It is interesting to note that both these views are reflected in the Greek and Latin versions. The Septuagint renders literally as a question, *Οὐκ ἤκουσας θυγάτηρ*; Hieronymus as an assurance, *Audi, filia*. The Targum, agreeing with the Septuagint, renders somewhat freely *הלא קבלת מני*.

But there are obvious objections to both interpretations. In the first place, *הלא* with a verb in the perfect is always used as an assertion, never as an address (Gesenius, *Grammatik*, ed. 22, § 153. 2; Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, § 123). Boaz can therefore only mean, 'Surely thou hast heard,' etc.; but since this is the first time that he meets Ruth, he cannot have given any orders to his men with regard to her,¹ nor can he expect his men without explicit orders to tell her 'not to glean elsewhere.'

In the second place, on the basis of either interpretation there is a strange redundancy in the speech of Boaz. Whether we render, 'Hear! my daughter' or, 'Surely thou hast heard,' there is no reason

¹ The case is different in vs. 9, *הלא צייתי*, an assertion which Boaz could make in anticipation of his intention, but which he does not expect Ruth to know in advance.

why Boaz should state one and the same proposition in three different ways, as

- (1) Do not glean in another field.
- (2) Do not leave this place.
- (3) Remain here with my maidens.

The redundancy is somewhat stronger if we follow the syntactically improbable rendering as an address, 'Hear, my daughter'; but it is also noticeable if we take the opening words as an assertion. In either case it would have been sufficient for Boaz to add, 'Do not leave this place,' or, 'Remain here with my maidens.'

The difficulty vanishes, however, and the verse receives an entirely different aspect if we follow the exceedingly interesting Syriac version. The Pešittô takes the words *אל תלכי ללקט בשדה אחר* as a familiar saying which Boaz aptly introduces, but to which he gives an unexpected turn. This version reads, "Hast thou not heard the proverb, In a field that does not belong to thee, do not glean"? The Arabic version shows its dependence upon the Pešittô. As a matter of course, the words 'the proverb' have merely been added by the translators in order to make the interpretation clearer; but accepting this interpretation, one can understand the words of Boaz, 'Surely thou hast heard,' etc. There is certainly nothing improbable in the assumption that such a proverb as 'Do not glean in another's field,' was current among an agricultural people. The Book of Proverbs is full of sayings suggested by agricultural customs and conditions,² and as an interesting parallel to the saying in question, one thinks of Jud. viii. 2, "Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?"

Nor is it difficult to see to what such a saying as 'do not glean in another's field' could be applied. R. W. Gilder in a recent poem entitled 'Reform,' in asking the question whether it is wise to take an active part in improving conditions, uses a metaphor very much like the one we are considering,

And whether to pray or preach . . .
To plow in my neighbor's field . . .
 Or to sit with my hands in my lap.

To 'glean in another's field' is to concern yourself with an affair with which, from a certain point of view, you have nothing to do. 'Do not glean in another's field,' therefore, is the equivalent of our

² *E.g.* x. 5, xiii. 23, xiv. 4, xxiv. 27, etc.

colloquial 'Mind your own business,' or the still more colloquial 'Shinny on your own side.'³

Two further remarks in regard to this supposed proverb must be made before coming back to the passage in question. Firstly, the use of the verb *lākaʿ* in such a saying was probably of a general character, 'to glean' in the sense of 'to gather.' There are indications of this more general application in the Old Testament by the use of the more restricted and technical sense, as implied in the 'gleaning' laws of the Pentateuch (Lev. xix. 9, xxiii. 22). In fact, outside of the passages containing the 'gleaning' laws, the word means simply to 'harvest' or 'gather' in general, so *e.g.* Ex. xvi. 4, 18, 22; Cant. vi. 2; Isa. xvii. 5. In Assyrian likewise *lakātu* (with 𐎶) is used for 'gathering together' in general (see Delitzsch, *Handwörterbuch*, s.v.). In Arabic, on the other hand, the word appears to be confined to the restricted sense of 'gathering the remains' (the technical 'gleaning' of the Pentateuch). Moreover, so far as the Hebrew is concerned, it is to be observed that for the restricted sense of 'gleaning,' the Piel⁴ is used, whereas the Kal means to gather in general. Ruth ii. 8 is the *only* instance of the use of the Kal in the Book of Ruth. We are justified therefore in rendering 'gather' or 'harvest,' rather than 'glean,' and in seeing in this use of the Kal as against the Piel in the rest of the Book (ii. 2, 3, 7, 15, 16, 17^b, 18, 19, 23) a further justification for the interpretation of the Pešittô.

Secondly, it will be observed that the Syriac version reads *בְּשָׂדֵה אֲחֵרִי* 'in another's field,' and not *בְּשָׂדֵה אֲחֵרִי* 'in another field.' The proverb, of course, would have a meaning only if *שָׂדֵה* be placed in a construct relation to *אֲחֵרִי*. But it is just this ambiguity in the reading of the two words that constitutes the basis for the application of the old saying to the situation unfolded in the second chapter of Ruth. The chief trait in the character of Boaz is amiability. He is full of kindness. In cheerful spirit he greets his workmen, 'Jahwe be with you.' His heart is touched by the sight of the Moabitish stranger and by the accounts given to him (ii. 6, 7) of Ruth's untiring industry. How shall he best approach her? He begins by teasing her. In a tone of apparent reproach he says, 'Hast thou not heard, Gather not in another's field?' What, then, art thou doing here in a field that is not thine? The words might well have frightened Ruth, a poor woman standing in the presence of the rich and mighty Boaz, had the

³ Quoted in *The Century Dictionary*, p. 5575 a.

⁴ So Lev. xix., xxiii., but not exclusively. Gen. xlvii. 14, 1 Sam. xx. 38, and elsewhere, the Piel means 'to gather completely.'

speaker not added the tender address, 'my daughter.' Before Ruth has a chance to weigh the meaning of the words, Boaz playfully gives the proverb a different turn. With full intent he says, 'Gather not in another field' (שָׂדֵה אֲחֵר) and hastens to explain, 'I mean, Do not leave this place'; and in order to further reassure Ruth, who may still have been somewhat nonplussed by the strange turn given to the familiar saying, Boaz adds, 'Stay here with my maidens.'

In this way the passage becomes clear. Boaz no longer expects Ruth to know of an order which he has never given and could not have given. The redundancy is accounted for, and an assurance is given to Ruth for the future in a manner at once delicate and positive by the touch of humanity introduced into the situation by Boaz. The interlarding of conversation with popular sayings is a feature in the talk of the Semites. Its continued use among the modern Arabs is emphasized by Snouck-Hurgronje in his interesting paper on *Arabische Sprichwörter und Redensarten* (in the *Proceedings* of the Seventh Oriental Congress, Semitic Section, pp. 108-114). In the orations of the prophets, familiar sayings are frequently quoted, more frequently than has as yet been recognized.⁵ The assumption therefore that Boaz introduces a well-known and intelligible saying in his address to Ruth is perfectly justifiable.

⁵ The writer is collecting material on 'Popular Sayings and Songs introduced as quotations in the prophetic and historical portions of the Old Testament,' which he hopes to present to the Society at one of its future meetings.