

Three Forms of Redemption in *Megillat Ruth* By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Ruth's Personal Redemption

In the fateful nighttime encounter on the threshing floor, Boaz is startled to find someone lying at his feet:

And he said, "Who are you?" And she replied, "I am Ruth, your maidservant. Spread your wings (*khenafekha*) over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer." And [Boaz] said, "...And now, even though truly I am a *go'el*, there is a *go'el* who is closer than I. Lie here tonight and in the morning, if the redeemer shall redeem you, good, but if he shall not desire to redeem you, I myself shall redeem you, I swear by God. Lie until the morning." (Ruth 3:9-13)

What is the meaning of Ruth's request that Boaz spread his wings over her, and her statement that Boaz is a redeemer? Targum, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban¹ assume that Ruth's request for Boaz to spread his *kanaf*² over her is a request for marriage.³ Indeed, a corresponding expression is found in Ezekiel 16:8 in an allusion to the metaphorical marital relationship between God and His people:⁴

And I passed over you and saw you, and behold, it is your time for love. And I spread my wings (*khenafi*) over you and I covered your nakedness and I swore to you and entered a covenant with you, says God, and you became Mine. (Ez. 16:8)

¹ See Ramban, Deut. 27:20.

² In Tanakh, the word *kanaf* often means wing or the hem of a garment. Both of these meanings connote protection, and may well allude to marriage.

³ The notion that spreading one's *kanaf* over someone connotes marital protection may likewise be indicated in several passages in which having sexual relations with one's father's wife is referred to as uncovering of the *kanaf* of one's father (e.g., Deut. 23:1; 27:20). Malbim (Ruth 3:9) regards Ruth's request as a solicitation for marital relations: "This [word] is taken from the birds, who spread out their wings on their partner during cohabitation." This is consistent with Malbim's general perception of this scenario as a fulfillment of the mitzva of *yibbum* (see his explanations on Ruth 3:4, 9, 10, 11; 4:5). Malbim (Ruth 4:13) later qualifies this by explaining that this is not *yibbum*, but rather a custom related to *yibbum*, and therefore operates with a different legal procedure.

⁴ The metaphor of a marital relationship for the man-God relationship appears throughout the Bible. See e.g. Is. 62:5; Hosea 2:21-22. Most traditional sources (e.g. *Shir HaShirim Rabba*; Targum of *Shir HaShirim*) maintain that all of Song of Songs is written as a metaphor for the love relationship between God and His people. This parallel to the book of Ezekiel, in which marriage is a metaphor for the covenant between God and His people, may suggest that Ruth is asking for more than marriage. Ruth's request for Boaz's protection can imply a request to draw her into the covenantal community. Compare to Ruth 2:12.

Nevertheless, it is less clear what Ruth means when she states plainly, “For you are the *go’el*.” In what way does this relate to Ruth’s previous request?⁵ Is it also a bid for marriage, which Ruth terms her redemption, or does this refer to Boaz’s ostensible duty to buy Naomi’s property?

The Word *Go’el*

In order to understand what Ruth means, we must turn our attention to the meaning of the word *go’el*, which I have translated “redeemer.” This word first appears in Jacob’s description of the divine personal salvation that he has received (Gen. 48:16): “The angel who has redeemed (*ha-go’el*) me from all evil, he shall bless the lads.” Nevertheless, in the Torah, the word *ga’al* usually refers to human intercession on behalf of a kinsman.⁶ The kinsman is obligated to intervene as a *go’el* when a relative has fallen on dire economic straits and has been forced to sell his ancestral land,⁷ his house, or himself into slavery (Lev. 25). Sometimes, the word *go’el* refers to a relative who is seeking to avenge (literally, redeem) the blood of his kinsman (Num. 35; Deut. 19; Josh. 20).⁸

The Torah only uses the word *go’el* twice to describe God’s intercession on behalf of the nation of Israel (Ex. 6:6; 15:13). The prophets and the psalms, however, tend to employ the word *go’el* to refer to God as the redeemer of His nation (see especially Isaiah, chapters 40-66).

In the context of the book of Ruth, the ubiquitous term *go’el*⁹ clearly refers to a human redeemer. Therefore, it is not surprising that many biblical exegetes assume that Ruth’s statement that Boaz is the *go’el* refers to Boaz’s obligation to redeem the property of Naomi, who has returned impoverished from the fields of Moab:

⁵ This question also hinges on the meaning of the word *ki*, which may be understood in different ways in the Tanakh. (See e.g. BDB, *Lexicon*, pp. 471-474.) The word *ki* may be understood here either as a causal connection, “because you are the redeemer,” or in an exclamatory or emphatic sense, “Indeed, you are a redeemer!”

⁶ Robert Gordis, “Love, Marriage, and Business in the Book of Ruth: A Chapter in Hebrew Customary Law,” in H. N. Bream and R. D. Heim (eds.), *A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), p. 253-254, maintains that the primary meaning of the biblical root *ga’al*, is “the restoration of an object to its primal condition.” See also David Daube, *Studies in Biblical Law* (New York: Ktav, 1969, reprint edition) pp. 39-62. Since the responsibility to restore the object devolved upon a kinsman, the root *ga’al* developed a secondary meaning of kinsman.

⁷ See also Jeremiah 34.

⁸ The word *ga’al* is also used when someone wishes to extricate himself from a vow that he has taken (Lev. 27). This usage of the word seems to have no relation to the acts of a close kinsman and therefore does not pertain to our discussion.

⁹ The pronominal use of the word *ga’al* appears nine times in the book, while the verbal usage appears twelve times. The nominal use appears twice. Altogether, this root appears twenty-three times in the book of Ruth.

And he said, “Who are you?” And she said, “I am Ruth your maidservant.” He said to her, “What have you come here to do?” And she said, “To uphold the Torah, as it says, ‘If your kinsman is in straits [and has to sell part of his land inheritance, his closest redeemer shall come and redeem that which his brother has sold]’ (Lev. 25:25). Stand up and uphold the Torah!” (*Tanchuma, Behar* 8)

Rashi suggests that Ruth’s statement links the redemption of the field to her marriage:

“For you are a redeemer” – To redeem the inheritance of my husband, as it says (Lev. 25:25): “The nearest redeemer shall come and redeem...” And I and my mother-in-law need to sell our inheritance. Now it is upon you to buy; buy also me along with [the inheritance] so that the name of the deceased will be recalled upon his inheritance. (Rashi, Ruth 3:9)

In this reading, Ruth’s midnight request of Boaz contains two parts: the first pertains to her marriage, and the second to the purchase (redemption) of Naomi’s lands. According to Rashi, it is Ruth who links the responsibility to buy Naomi’s land with her own hand in marriage. This linkage has no legal basis whatsoever. Nevertheless, Boaz will also connect these two duties, and this will become a major theme in chapter four. At the end of the book of Ruth, the two themes of land and progeny (marriage), which are presented separately in chapters two and three, will fuse together and reconfigure Elimelekh’s family within the Abrahamic nation.

Finally, Ruth’s proclamation that Boaz is a *go’el* may be causally linked to her previous statement. In fact, Ruth may be explaining to Boaz that he should marry her because he is a redeemer – that is, the one who bears the responsibility to marry her. The Targum on this verse has this reading:

And she said, “I am Ruth your maidservant. Let your name¹⁰ be called over your maidservant by taking me as a wife, for you are a redeemer.” (Targum, Ruth 3:9)

According to the Targum, the redemption involves marriage to Ruth and does not refer to the redemption of land. While there is no indication of this usage of the word *go’el* anywhere else in the *Tanakh*, Ramban maintains that this is in fact one usage of this word, albeit employed in this fashion exclusively in Ruth. In discussing the situation of *yibbum* in the story of Tamar and Judah,¹¹ Ramban suggests that due to the importance of *yibbum*, early sages developed a *yibbum*-like custom that was called *geula*. Ramban explains that a *yibbum*-like marriage could be performed among any

¹⁰ The Targum shows sensitivity to a central theme in Ruth, namely, having a name. Ruth’s request for Boaz (the landowner with a name) to assume responsibility for her, and act as a redeemer, will ultimately mean that Boaz will bequeath a name to Ruth, and to Naomi’s family as well.

¹¹ See Ramban, Gen. 38:8.

relatives who are in line to inherit the land (so long as there is no forbidden incestuous relationship involved). His proof for this custom is in fact the marriage of Boaz and Ruth.

In Ramban's reading, the word *go'el* here indeed refers to Boaz's obligation to marry Ruth and has little to do with his obligation to redeem the land. This understanding of the word *go'el* is derived by broadly applying the idea of familial responsibility inherent in the biblical concept of *geula*. In this schema, the principle of *geula* should be applied in any situation in which the extended family is required to assume responsibility for the continued well-being of a relative. This includes concern for a relative's ancestral land, his sale into servitude, and presumably also the matter of his family's continuity. As Ramban notes, the laws of *yibbum* support the notion that the extended family shoulders responsibility for the continuity of the family line. As a kinsman, Boaz must act as a *go'el* in this case by marrying Ruth, and thereby delivering the house of Elimelekh from the threat of oblivion.

Ruth and National Redemption

As noted, the word *go'el* is a pivotal word in our narrative, thereby implying its conceptual centrality. Not only does Ruth's singular speech in this scene revolve around the word *go'el*, but Boaz's response employs this word six times in short succession:

“And now it is true that I am a redeemer (*go'el*), but there is still a redeemer (*go'el*) who is closer than me. Lodge here tonight, and it will be in the morning, if he shall redeem you (*yig'aleikh*), good, he shall redeem (*yigal*), but if he shall not desire to redeem you (*le-go'aleikh*), I myself shall redeem you (*u-ge'altikh anokhi*), I swear by God. Lie until the morning.” (Ruth 3:12-13)

Ruth's redemption will receive due attention in the next chapter as well, where the narrative revolves around the question of who will step up to fulfill his responsibility as redeemer. Indeed, the goal of redemption appears to be a primary objective of the narrative. What can account for the centrality of the idea of redemption in this book? How can it deepen our understanding of the broader goals of the book of Ruth?

It seems to me that the notion of redemption in Ruth should be understood on three separate levels: its simple meaning and two deeper layers of meaning. The primary sense of the text records Ruth's own intention. She seeks her personal redemption, which is also the redemption of the house of Elimelekh. I would like to propose that there are two supplementary meanings to the idea of redemption embedded within the narrative, even if they are not Ruth's intended meaning.

One deeper level of meaning refers to the urgently needed national redemption during the period of the Judges, a devastating time for the nation of Israel. Ruth's declaration that Boaz is a redeemer may, then, unwittingly refer to the ultimate goal of the union of Boaz and Ruth. The son who is born to them at the conclusion of the book will provide the solution for the reigning chaos: the beginning of a dynasty that can

restore stability to the land, build the Temple,¹² and create a strong religious and social infrastructure. In this scene, Boaz may function not merely as the *go'el* of Ruth and the house of Elimelech; he may also act as the *go'el* of the nation.

The “*Geula*”

The final layer of meaning for the word *go'el* in this chapter may refer to the ultimate, future national redemption, which is, of course, the conventional usage of the term “*geula*.” This last level of understanding offers an insight into the subtext of this brief book, one that bears upon the most fervent aims of the *Tanakh* narratives: the manner in which the nation of Israel can arrive at an ideal society.

Ruth should be regarded as a book that facilitates the future *geula* of the nation, the eschatological vision often referred to as “the end of days.” This idea, featured prominently in rabbinic literature, draws inspiration from the tranquil picture drawn by Isaiah in chapter 11. It is a vision of justice and righteousness, faithfulness, and peace between creatures. Above all, the end of days is a time in which all creatures are awash with knowledge of God, an existence that generates the erasure of evil and perversions (Is. 11:9). However, this vision does not erupt spontaneously. Rather, it revolves around the appearance of an ideal king, a shoot that will grow from the stump of Jesse (father of David) and will facilitate this idyllic scenario. In other words, this king will emerge from the Davidic line. This king is described as a man upon whom rests the spirit of God, which grants him the spirit of wisdom and insight, counsel and valor, knowledge, and reverence for God (Is. 11:2). For our purposes, it is important to bear in mind that this king is also a product of our narrative, born of the union of Ruth and Boaz, who have thereby produced national redemption both for their current situation and for the future.¹³

The meeting between Boaz and Ruth on the threshing floor, then, contains the stirrings of the ultimate redemption of the Israelite nation.¹⁴ Boaz’s words to Ruth resonate with deeper layers of meaning:

“Lodge here tonight, and it will be in the **morning**, if he shall redeem you, good, he shall redeem, but if he shall not desire to redeem you, I myself shall redeem you, I swear by God. Lie until the **morning**.” (Ruth 3:13)

¹² The fact that the place where Boaz promises Ruth redemption takes place in a *goren*, a threshing floor, may point forward to the moment when David buys the *goren* from Aravna (II Sam 24:18, 21), which is the place where the Temple is to be built.

¹³ A midrash, cited by Rashi on Ruth 3:15, notes the connection between this scene of Ruth and Boaz and the birth of the ideal king described in Isaiah 11. The midrash suggests that when Boaz gives Ruth six stalks of barley, he is alluding the birth of the king, whose six traits are listed in Isaiah 11.

¹⁴ Another midrash (*Zohar Ruth* 48b) likewise sees this as a scene that presages the exile and yearns for its end. This midrash confers upon Ruth a constructive role in bringing the misery of Israel’s exile to God’s attention. Ruth’s pain and suffering on Israel’s behalf during the exile is so central to her persona that this midrash offers it as the etymology of her name.

The imagery of night and day is often used to connote exile and redemption in *Tanakh*.¹⁵ Accordingly, the Zohar draws our attention to the deeper meaning in the book of Ruth by offering a homiletic reading of Boaz's words to Ruth. In this reading, these words are actually spoken by God, who is addressing His nation during the course of their long years in exile:

Lodge here tonight – You are presently in exile and are occupied informing your sons [in exile] of Torah and good deeds. If your good deeds shall testify in your favor to deliver you, then you shall be delivered. But if not, I shall redeem you Myself, swears God. **Lie until the morning** – Until the light comes and lights [the way for] your delivery. (*Zohar Chadash*, Ruth 8)

This midrash suggests that this narrative is not solely occupied with Ruth and Naomi's individual deliverance or even merely with the salvation of the nation during the period of the Judges. One layer of our narrative aspires toward ultimate salvation of the nation of Israel. This eventual deliverance will be facilitated by the emergence of a scion of the Davidic dynasty, the Messiah, who will sprout from the seeds of this narrative.

While it is certainly important to distinguish between the simple sense of the text and the subtexts of the narrative, to omit the deeper levels of understanding this narrative would result in neglecting a significant stratum of the story along with its theological aim. Indeed, the coexistence of these different layers of this narrative is one of the most compelling lessons that emerge from the book of Ruth.

[Adapted from [Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy](#) (Maggid, 2015).]

¹⁵ While this topic can easily comprise an essay in its own right, I will suffice with referring to several salient examples in the Tanakh. See, for example, Isaiah, especially chapters 59 and 60, and images of darkness/night and bright morning in the Exodus narrative detailing redemption from Egypt (e.g. Ex. 12:29, 41). Because Song of Songs is also treated as a book about exile and redemption, it is intriguing to examine the manner in which images of night and day are consciously employed in Song of Songs 2:17; 4:6; 6:10. See also Talmud Yerushalmi, *Yoma* 3:2.