

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

solar days? For how many centuries was it an article of the faith that the sun went round the earth every four-and-twenty hours? Yet it is now admitted on all hands that the Bible teaches neither the one nor the other. It is quite possible, therefore, that the interpretation sanctioned by long prescription may be at fault on other questions as well as these.

“It is not at all incredible,” says Bishop Butler, “that a book which has been so long in the possession of mankind should contain many truths as yet undiscovered. . . . Possibly it might be intended that events, as they come to pass, should open and ascertain the meaning of several parts of Scripture.”¹

The interpretation, then, of the Vindictive Psalm must depend upon evidence, not upon authority.

JOSEPH HAMMOND.

THE BOOK OF RUTH.

V.—IN THE GATE.

Chapter iv. verses 1-22.

THE gates of ancient cities played many parts: they were guard-houses; they were markets; they were courts of justice; they were places for public deliberation and audience. Necessarily, therefore, they were massively built, with recessed chambers, or divans, in the sides, and often with chambers also above the arch. Here the inhabitants of the city were wont to assemble either for the transaction of business or to hear and tell the news. Here the

¹ “Analogy,” Part ii. chapter 3.

judges sat and administered justice to all comers. Here even kings came to give audience to other kings, or to their ambassadors. So that the Gate played a great part, not only in the defence, but also in the public economy, of the city. Some faint resemblance to these ancient Gates may be found in the structures called "Bars," in London and Southampton, though these modern gates are much smaller than their ancient prototypes; and some faint reminiscence of their character as seats of judicial and royal authority, in the titles Sublime "*Porte*," or the Ottoman "*Porte*"—*porte* meaning *gate*—by which the Government of Turkey is still designated.

The scene of Chapter iv. is the Gate of Bethlehem. We have already followed Boaz to the Harvest-Field and the Threshing-Floor; we have found in his bearing many illustrations of the simple and primitive customs of the antique time in which he lived. And as we now study this Chapter—a veritable cabinet of antiquities—and follow him to the Gate, and mark how he prosecutes a legal suit, we shall once more be impressed by the simplicity of the ancient Hebrew manners, a simplicity, however, quite compatible with a certain dignified and stately formality.

As we are to "assist" at a legal suit, it will be well for us to acquaint ourselves, at the very outset, with the law to which an appeal is to be made. This law is the law of the *Goelim*,—the law which governs all acts of exchange and redemption. So far as we are at present concerned with it, this law demanded that the nearest kinsman of a childless widow should marry her, even though he himself were already married;

and that the eldest son born of this marriage should, in due time, enter on the inheritance and perpetuate the name of his mother's *first* husband.¹ The law was designed to prevent the extinction of any Hebrew family and the alienation of any family estate. All male blood-relations of the deceased man were reckoned as among his *goelim*, or redeemers; but the nearest of all was *the* goel, and was the first who was bound to redeem his kinsman's name and inheritance. If, however, he refused to redeem, then the next kinsman succeeded to his right and duty; but he himself, for his refusal, was put to an open shame. But let us have the very statute itself before us. It is recorded in Deut. xxv. 5-10, and runs thus:—

If kinsmen dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry

¹ This singular, and, if judged by modern standards, immoral, law of Levirate marriage, like other of the laws of Moses—*e.g.*, the law of divorce—which have been called in question, was a concession to “the hardness of their hearts” for whom he legislated; and so far from being a license to immorality, it was really a limitation of the current immoralities of the time. In ages long anterior to his, a wife, being *bought* from her parents, became the property of her husband, and too valuable a property to be given up at his death. With other property she descended to his heirs, commonly his brothers, any one of whom might possess her; some tribes going even to the shameful excess of all possessing her in common. Michaelis, in his Commentaries on the Laws of Moses (Book iii. Chap. v. Art. 98), has well brought out the process and advance by which this hateful custom grew into a legalized system of Levirate marriages. This system obtained among the Canaanitish tribes for centuries before the time of Moses, as is proved by the shocking story recorded in Genesis xxxviii. All that the great legislator of the Hebrews is responsible for is, that he set still straiter limits to the prevailing custom, including among the duties of the Goel that he, and he only, should “raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead might not be cut off from among his brethren.”

outside [i.e., outside the family circle], unto a stranger; her husband's kinsman shall go in unto her, and take her to wife, and perform the duty of a husband's kinsman unto her. And it shall be that the first-born whom she beareth shall stand upon the name [i.e., take the place, or arise in the place] of the kinsman who is dead, that his name be not wiped out of Israel. And if the man like not to take his kinsman's wife, then let his kinsman's wife go up to the gate, unto the elders, and say, My husband's kinsman refuseth to raise up unto his kinsman a name in Israel; he will not do the duty of my husband's kinsman. Then the elders of the city shall call him, and speak unto him; and if he stand to it, and say, I like not to take her; then shall his kinsman's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot, and spit in his face, and shall answer and say, So let it be done unto the man who will not build up his kinsman's house. And his name shall be called in Israel, House of the Shoe taken off [i.e., any one might call him "Baresole," without committing a legal offence; his family would be stigmatized as the family of a shoeless or barefooted vagabond,— "shoeless fellow" being equivalent to "miserable fellow," since it was only in extreme penury and misery that the Hebrews went barefoot].

This is the statute to which Boaz is about to appeal; and the one provision of it which still calls for explanation is that symbolic act, the taking off of the shoe. The custom was even thus early a very ancient one, as we are reminded in this Chapter (verse 7), and was observed in all cases of redemption and exchange: in fact, it was the legal form for con-

firming or binding legal or commercial transactions. And this custom had its origin in the fact, that when a man took possession of landed property, he did it by planting his shoe on the soil ; he asserted his right to it by treading on the land he had bought. Thus the shoe symbolized a possession or estate which a man actually held, and which he could tread with his feet at will. Naturally and easily, therefore, the taking off of the shoe and handing it to another came to signify that a man renounced his own legal claim to a possession and transferred it to the neighbour to whom he gave his shoe : with the shoe he gave the right to tread and till the land. This singular custom was not peculiar to the Jews ; it also obtained anciently among the Germans. But among the Hebrews of the earlier times it grew into common use as a symbol of exchange, and was employed as a sign of the transfer of rights of any kind, and not only to denote the transfer of land : in short, it seems to have been as common as signing a deed or handing over a warrant is with us. And if we bear this fact in mind, we often get a new light on even the most familiar passages. Thus, for example, the Prodigal Son, in our Lord's parable, has shoes put on his feet to denote that he is reinstated in the inheritance he had left.

Of course a custom so common was not of itself ignominious. But to the Hebrew there was as wide a difference between taking off his own shoe and having it taken off by another, as there is with us between lifting off one's own hat and having it knocked off by another. And in the case of the kinsman, who refused to do a *goel's* duty by his

brother's widow, the shoe was *taken off*, before the Elders, by the woman whom he had refused to marry. He was thus publicly and ceremoniously branded as one who had broken the law, as having failed in the sacred and imperative duties of kinship, as having preferred his private interests and aims to the welfare of the Commonwealth. And this public disgrace was enhanced by the indignity of being spat upon by the woman he had wronged, and having his whole family saddled with a nickname—"House of the Shoeless," or "Baresole's Kin"—which exposed them to general ridicule and contempt.

This severe law was not enforced by Boaz in all its severity. But, in order to make his own marriage with Ruth lawful and legal, he was obliged to appeal to it, and, in part, to put it in force. His mode of action shews how primitive the time was, how simple the social organization. Obviously there was as yet no king in Israel, no accessible judge even, before whom he might carry his suit. And so, very early in the morning, Boaz hurries from the threshing-floor that he may seat himself in the Gate in time to catch those who, like himself, had slept outside the walls, and will be returning into the city, and those who may leave the city for the fields. He has not long taken his seat before the *goel*, the unnamed kinsman, passes by. Boaz calls on him to sit down,—using a legal form of summons from which his kinsman would understand that he had some legal business to transact with him.

We translate the summons. "*Hò, So-and-so,*" or,

"*Ho, Such-an-one*, turn aside, sit down here." But it is difficult, if not impossible, so to translate the Hebrew form as to convey its full significance. In the Original we have two Hebrew words, *Peloni almoni*, and these two words, apparently, embody one of those legal obliquities of which most ancient systems of law retain some trace; as, for example, in those fictitious personages, John Doe and Richard Roe of the English action for ejectment, who have only recently been abolished, and in the custom which, till a few years since, obtained in the German courts of suing, not in one's own proper name, but in some common and familiar name, such as *Hans*.

The ancient Hebrew form of procedure was of this oblique kind. Instead of summoning even his near kinsman by his personal name, Boaz cried "*Peloni almoni*, turn aside, and sit down,"—the words meaning literally "*such*" and "*nameless*;" the effect of using this antique form being, so far as we can now recover it, very much as if he had summoned a certain anonymous person before the Elders instead of giving him his proper name; just as a few years ago certain fictitious personages, John Doe and Richard Roe, might have been, and were, summoned into an English court. What the origin of the form was, whether it denoted that only a *friendly* suit was to be tried, or whether it was intended to cover errors of misdescription, or whether it grew out of the solemn Eastern courtesy which would shrink from naming a man when threatening him with vexation or harm, it is impossible to say: but, in any case, we have here, in this phrase, an old legal fossil, a remnant of a still more

ancient legal form in one of the most ancient systems of jurisprudence.

Peloni almoni, in the person of the unnamed kinsman of Boaz, responds to the summons. And now, his legal adversary or respondent being secured, Boaz sits and watches the citizens as they pass in and out, asking now this and now that grave elder to sit down, until he has ten, the legal number, of the best reputed men of Bethlehem to act at once as judges and witnesses of his procedure. In accordance with Oriental custom, many other citizens, seeing these grave elders assembled, and understanding that the wealthy and pious Boaz had some business of grave importance to transact, would add themselves, unbidden yet not unwelcome, to the company, that they too might hear and see what was going on.

Boaz opens the proceedings by formally announcing to his kinsman that Naomi has sold the field, the parcel of land, which formerly belonged to their common kinsman, Elimelech. Naomi may either have sold this land to supply her necessities, though, if that were so, one hardly sees how she should have come to extreme want in the lapse of a single year; or, more probably, she may have sold it for the express purpose of putting the law in motion, and compelling her kinsman to redeem it. In either case the kinsman was legally bound both to redeem the estate and to marry Naomi, or, should she waive her claim or be past child-bearing, to marry Ruth. Each of these two women was a childless widow, and each had a claim on the estate. Should neither of them

have a child, the family of Elimelech would become extinct, "his name would be put out of Israel." Here clearly, then, was a case in which the *goel* was bound to come forward and do his duty. And, indeed, the *goel* of Naomi admits the claim; nay, more, so long as he thinks it is only the redemption of Elimelech's land that is in question, he is willing to satisfy the claim. To the appeal and inquiry of Boaz, "Wilt thou redeem?" he formally replies, "I will redeem it."

Now Boaz had set his heart on marrying Ruth, and therefore he must have heard his kinsman's reply with some dismay. But one resource is left him. His kinsman may not admit that he is bound to marry Ruth, or he may not care to marry her, even if he admit the obligation. And hence Boaz now rejoins, "But, if you redeem the land of Elimelech, you must also take Ruth, *the Moabitess*, to wife, and raise up the name of the dead man on his inheritance. Are you prepared to do this also?" The kinsman is not prepared to assume *this* function of the *goel*. And, in an ordinary case, he would have been in no little embarrassment between his reluctance to marry his kinsman's widow and his fear lest, should he refuse, she should inflict the disgraceful penalty of his refusal upon him. But Boaz has made the way easy for him. He has brought neither Naomi nor Ruth with him, so that his kinsman has no indignity to fear. For the present, at least, his shoe will not be pulled off, nor will the slighted and injured woman spit in his face. And, moreover, Boaz has expressed his perfect willingness to discharge

all the duties of the *goel* should his kinsman decline them. His motive in thus sparing his kinsman is not simply, I suppose, either a kindly consideration for a man closely related to him or his love for Ruth, but also the conviction that an Israelite, caring only for the letter of the law and not for its spirit, might honestly doubt whether he were bound to marry his "brother's" widow *when that widow was a daughter of Moab*. True, Ruth had come to put her trust under the shadow of Jehovah's wings. True, she was known as a good and brave woman in all the city of Bethlehem. But, none the less, she was by birth an alien, one of the heathen women, with whom the sons of Israel were forbidden to intermarry. The law was doubtful: if the appeal to it were pushed too far he might defeat his own end.

We need not think over hardly, therefore, even of this anonymous kinsman. He may have been, probably he was, a just man according to his lights. Walking by the strict requirements of the law of Israel he may have honestly doubted whether he were bound to marry Mahlon's *Moabitish* widow. Undoubtedly it was a sin against Hebrew law for Mahlon to have married her while she was a heathen, even if it were not a sin to take her to wife now that she was a proselyte. Could, then, the widow of an illegal marriage claim quite the same rights with the widow of a legal marriage, even though she afterwards became a proselyte to the Hebrew faith? And if he was not bound to marry her, would it be prudent to marry her? Evidently he thinks it would not be prudent. He declines to

redeem, on such terms, the inheritance of his dead kinsman, "*lest I mar mine own inheritance.*" By which he meant, I think, that his doubt as to the right conferred on Ruth by the Hebrew law was reinforced by a Hebrew superstition. For, in Israel, marriage with the daughter of an alien race was held to be "unlucky," even when it was lawful. Many such marriages had proved unhappy and disastrous. And, by expressly calling Ruth *the Moabitess* in his challenge, Boaz seems to have touched his kinsman's superstitious fears. No doubt, the calamities which had befallen Elimelech and Naomi were popularly attributed to their sojourn in the Field of Moab. No doubt, the popular voice of Bethlehem affirmed that Chilion and Mahlon had been cut off before their time because they had married "strange women." Here, then, was one Hebrew family in imminent danger of extinction solely because of such a marriage as was now proposed. The *goel* fears a similar fate. He fears that, should he marry Ruth, he may "injure his own inheritance,"—fears that he too may die before his time, and his name be put out of Israel. He, therefore, will run no such risk: let Boaz run it, if he will.

This, I believe, was his real reason for refusing to discharge the duty of the *goel*. And it is a curious comment on his narrow selfish ambition that, of this man who was bent on preserving his name and fame, who would run no risk of having his name cut off from the gate of his place, neither Israel nor the world knows even so much as the mere name. He is unnamed in the very Book which recounts his

story ; we know him simply as the "anonymous kinsman :" while Boaz, who had no such selfish ambition, who held that in every nation they who trust God and work righteousness are acceptable with Him, lives for ever on the sacred page, and is enrolled, together with Ruth, in the pedigree of Him whose Name is above every name.

The anonymous kinsman refuses to redeem Ruth and her inheritance ; and, as a symbol and attestation that he cedes all right to the inheritance, he draws off his shoe and hands it to Boaz, transferring to *him* the legal right to plant his foot on the parcel of laud left by Elimelech.

With profound and solemn emotion Boaz calls on the Elders, and the circle of bystanders, to observe and remember this legal transfer of rights and duties, expressing himself, however, with legal fulness and precision : 'Ye are witnesses this day that I have acquired all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi. Moreover, Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I acquired to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren and from the gate of his place. Ye are witnesses this day.' They replied : "We are witnesses,"¹—thus completing the legal transaction,—and break out into a profusion of good wishes which amply verify the statement of Boaz concerning Ruth in the previous Chapter : "All the gate of my people

¹ It is probable that in the appeal of Boaz and the response of the Elders we have another "survival" of an ancient system of jurisprudence.

doth know that thou art a good and 'brave woman." They lift her to the level of the most famous women of Israel by praying that she may be like Rachel and Leah, the mothers of the twelve tribes. And though the words, "The Lord make the woman that cometh into thy house like Rachel and like Leah, which two did build the house of Israel," may probably have already become the usual formula of congratulation and benediction when an Israelitish marriage was announced, yet the fact that this sacred formula was conceded to Ruth *the Moabitess* shews that, at last, the inhabitants of Bethlehem had learned to value her at her true worth. They would not have uttered this prayer if they had not come to esteem her, for her love and piety, as an Israelite indeed.

Boaz, being now the recognized *goel* of Ruth, marries her; and, in due time, a son is given them. And now the shadows, which lay so thick on the opening incidents of the Story, clear off, and both Naomi and Ruth receive a full reward for their rare and heroic love. It is one of the many fine points of the Story that its concluding sentences are almost wholly devoted, not to the young and happy wife and mother, but to Naomi, who had suffered so many calamities, and who, by the piety and resignation with which she bore them, had drawn Ruth from the idolatries of Moab. It is Naomi, not Ruth, whom "the women her neighbours" congratulate on the birth of Ruth's son. In him they see Naomi's *goel*—Ruth already had her's in Boaz; and they pray that, as he grows up, he may restore her to her former happiness and be the stay and gladness of

her old age. But though they speak to Naomi, and pray for her, they do not utterly forget the singular virtue of Ruth. In the words, "Thy daughter-in-law, *who loveth thee, who is better to thee than seven sons,*" they pronounce on her an eulogy such as few "strange" women could have heard from Hebrew lips. It is because the boy is Ruth's son that he is Naomi's *goel*; for how can he fail to love and cherish the woman whom his mother has loved with a love even passing that of women?

And so the Story closes, not simply leaving these two brave and noble woman happy in each other, and in Boaz, and in Obed his son, but weaving for them an immortal crown of honour in that it marks their intimate connection with David, the "darling of Israel," and with Him who was at once David's Son and Lord. "Boaz begat Obed, and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David;" and of David, concerning the flesh, came Jesus the Christ, the Light of the Gentiles and the Glory of the people of Israel.

It is not every story of faithful love and piety which mounts to so happy a close, at least in this world. But before we complain, as though our virtue had been passed over by our God, it will be well for us to ask ourselves whether our virtue can compare with that of Ruth. It will also be well for us to remember what Ruth did not know, that godliness has the promise of the life to come as well as of that which now is, and to rest in the conviction that the longer the promise tarries the richer and sweeter will be its fulfilment. Most of us, probably, get quite as much happiness as is good for us even

here, certainly as much as we have deserved; but we may all get a blessedness far larger than we have deserved hereafter, and shall get it, if only we follow those who, through faith and patience, now inherit the promises. S. COX.

*THE EPISTLES TO
THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA.*

II.—SMYRNA. (*Revelation* ii. 8-11.)

THE messages that follow that to the Church of Ephesus stand in one respect in very striking contrast to it. There we are able, through the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of St. Paul, to follow the history of the Christian community from its very birth; to trace the influences that had acted on it; to see in what way the picture brought before us in the Apocalypse was the result of those influences. Here we know nothing of the previous history. But for this mention of the Churches we should not have known that any Christian congregations had been planted there. Knowing that they were so planted, we can at best conjecture that they owed their origin to the evangelizing activity of St. Paul or his associates in the mission-work of the Church during his residence at Ephesus, and that they had become personally known to St. John when he succeeded to the care of the Asiatic Churches.

Nor does it help us here, any more than in the case of Ephesus, to fall back upon the pre-Christian history of Smyrna as a city. That it had been wealthy, populous, commercial, from the remote