

***The Go'el in Ancient Israel:  
Theological Reflections on  
an Israelite Institution*<sup>1</sup>**

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In his delightful book *Hunting the Divine Fox*, theologian Robert Farrar Capon warned of a special danger—overfamiliarity with the Bible:

Mere familiarity does not necessarily produce understanding. It is perfectly possible to know something (or someone!) all your life and still never really comprehend what you're dealing with. Like the Irishman in the old joke who received a brand-new toilet from his American cousins: He used the bowl for a foot washer, the lid for a breadboard, and the seat for a frame around the Pope's picture.<sup>2</sup>

Among Bible scholars, there is nothing more familiar than the concept of *gō'el* or "kinsman-redeemer." Proper interpretation of the book of Ruth requires its treatment,<sup>3</sup> and Leggett has devoted a major book to it.<sup>4</sup> As Capon warned, however, familiarity does not automatically mean understanding. Indeed, recent scholarly discussion reveals that, though understood in broad outline, some details of the *gō'el* institution still elude precise definition.<sup>5</sup>

1. The Annual Old Testament Lecture given November 18, 1989 at the Institute for Biblical Research, Anaheim, CA. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of two students, Messrs. Alwyn Bull and Fred Bertram, in its preparation.

2. Robert Farrar Capon, *Hunting The Divine Fox* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1985) 44.

3. For detailed discussions and bibliography, see E. F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth* (AB 7; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975) 132-37, 158-59; W. Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth, Das Hohelied, Die Klagelieder* (KAT; 2nd ed.; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1962) 60-63; H. Witzel, *Das Buch Rut* (SANT 40; Munich: Kösel, 1975) 265, n. 116; R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 48-63.

4. D. Leggett, *The Levirate and Goel Institutions in the Old Testament with Special Attention to the Book of Ruth* (Cherry Hill, N.J.: Mack, 1974).

5. See A. A. Andersen, "The Marriage of Ruth," *JSS* 23 (1978) 171-83; D. R. G. Beattie, "The Book of Ruth as Evidence for Israelite Legal Practice," *VT* 24 (1974) 251-67; idem, "Redemption in Ruth, and Related Matters: A Response to Jack M. Sasson," *JSOT*

Preoccupation with its legal and sociological background, however, has shunted aside reflection on its theology. In my view, discussions in Old Testament theologies and theological dictionaries are distressingly brief and untheological.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in this paper I aim to explore the theology of that Israelite institution. First, I will define and describe Israel's idea of *gō'ēl* in general terms. Second, I will explore the theological insights of two key texts—applicable sections of Leviticus 25 and the book of Ruth. Time constraints, however, require that the examination of others be left for another occasion. Finally, I will attempt to summarize the results gained from the exegesis of those texts. Hopefully, a deeper appreciation and theological understanding of the *gō'ēl* practice will replace that dangerous overfamiliarity of which Capon warned.

## I

The term *gō'ēl* derives from the realm of Israelite family law.<sup>7</sup> It describes a close relative, a "kinsman-redeemer," who takes upon himself the duties of *g'ulla*—"redemption" or "recovery"—on behalf of a needy family member. Actually, at any given time, a pool of *gō'ālim* stood available for duty because many close relatives could perform the tasks. Of those tasks, I mention only three here since the others will emerge in my remarks below. According to Numbers 35,

5 (1978) 65-68; M. S. Moore, "Haggo'el: The Cultural Gyroscope of Ancient Hebrew Society," *ResQ* 23 (1980) 27-35; E. W. Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," *VT* 31 (1981) 138-44, 257-68; idem, "Ruth 4:5 and the Duties of the *gō'ēl*," *VT* 33 (1983) 231-34; E. Lipinski, "Le Mariage de Ruth," *VT* 26 (1976) 124-27; H.-F. Richter, "Zum Levirat im Buch Ruth," *ZAW* 95 (1983) 123-26; J. M. Sasson, "The Issue of *Ge'ullah* in *Ruth*," *JSOT* 5 (1978) 52-64; idem, "Ruth III: A Response," *JSOT* 5 (1978) 45-51.

6. See O. Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949) 131-32; L. Koehler, *Old Testament Theology* (tr.; London: Lutterworth, 1957) 234-35; G. A. F. Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959) 235; W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 104-5, 126; W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 1.96-97; E. Martens, *God's Design* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 104-5, 108-9; J. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1974) 236-39. W. Zimmerli examines the idea of holiness in Leviticus 25 ("Heiligkeit' nach dem Sogennanten Heiligkeitsgesetz," *VT* 30 [1980] 506-7). For Yahweh as *gō'ēl*, see F. Holmgren, "The Concept of YHWH as 'Gō'ēl' in Second Isaiah," (Ph.D. diss., Union Seminary in New York, 1963); J. D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66* (WBC 25; Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 106-7. Cf. J. J. Stamm, "*ga'al*," *THAT* 1.383-94; H. Ringgren, "*ga'al*," *TDOT* 2.350-55; R. L. Harris, "*ga'al*," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (ed. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, and B. K. Waltke; Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) 1.144-45.

7. For what follows, cf. Ringgren, *TDOT* 2.351-52; Stamm, *THAT* 1.384-87. The term's heaviest concentration occurs in Leviticus 25 and 27, Ruth, and Isaiah. In Isaiah, the term refers exclusively to Yahweh as *gō'ēl*.

the *gō'el* was to avenge the death of a relative—the so-called "redeemer of blood" (*gō'el haddām*; cf. vv. 16-21). He did so by tracking down and putting the killer to death, provided, of course, that the gates of a city of refuge did not get in his way.<sup>8</sup> Also, as head of his clan, the *gō'el* would receive any monetary restitution due a deceased relative for a wrong committed against him (Num 5:8). Finally, the *gō'el* also assisted his relatives in obtaining justice in a lawsuit.<sup>9</sup> As for its purpose, the institution served one main goal—to keep tribal solidarity intact by recovering its losses, whether of people or property.<sup>10</sup>

## II

Leviticus 25 falls near the end of the so-called "Holiness Code" (Lev 17-26).<sup>11</sup> Literarily, it consists of Yahweh's commission of Moses at Mt. Sinai to instruct Israel (vv 1-2). Instructions concerning the *gō'el* duties fall within the treatment of the Jubilee Year (vv 8-55).<sup>12</sup> Though the date of the chapter's final form is a matter of dispute, the issue need not detain us here.<sup>13</sup> Whatever its date, most scholars concede that the

8. Cf. Num 35:12, 19-27; Deut 19:6, 12; Josh 20:2-3, 5-9.

9. The word's metaphorical usage suggests this; cf. Job 19:25; Ps 119:154; Prov 23:11; Jer 50:34; Lam 3:58.

10. Scholars commonly refer to the union of Ruth and Boaz as a levirate marriage (cf. Gen 38; Deut 25:5-10). In my view, however, the book portrays their relationship as marriage of *g'ulla* or "redemption," not levirate. By definition, the term levirate describes the marriage of a widow to a brother of her late husband (Latin *levir*, "brother-in-law"). Boaz, however, is not Elimelech's brother nor is Ruth his widow. Further, the book uniformly describes the marriage in the language of redemption (*g'l*), not levirate (*ybm*). For discussion, see Hubbard 50-51, 57; cf. E. Kutsch, "the legal institution involved is not levirate marriage but *ge'ullā*, 'redemption'" ("*ybm*," *TDOT* 5.371); contrast Leggett, "there is nothing which is in contradiction to the law of levirate in Deuteronomy" (290).

11. Contrast V. Wagner, who disputes the existence of the Holiness Code as an independent entity, believing the larger context to be Exodus 25—Leviticus 26 ("Zur Existenz des sogenannten 'Heiligkeitgesetzes,'" *ZAW* 86 [1974] 307-16).

12. The chapter's other subject concerns the sabbath year for the land (vv 1-7). Concerning Jubilee, see R. North, *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee* (AnBib 4; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1954); R. Westbrook, "Jubilee Laws," *Israel Law Review* 6 (1971) 209-26; A. Meinhold, "Zur Beziehung Gott, Volk, Land, im Jubel-Zusammenhang," *BZ* 29 (1985) 245-61; R. Gnuse, "Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus: Israel's Vision of Social Reform," *BTB* 15 (1985) 43-48. Vv 29-34 also treat the subject of redemption (specifically, of houses) but without the intervention of a *gō'el*. Hence, I have excluded them from consideration here. The rest of the chapter covers the observance of Jubilee (vv 8-22), the prohibition against charging interest (vv 35-38), and instructions concerning self-indenture to a fellow Israelite (vv 39-46).

13. Most literary critics trace the chapter's final form to exilic or postexilic priestly editors; cf. the analyses in K. Elliger, *Leviticus* (HAT 4; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1966) 14-20, 338-49; R. Kilian, *Literarkritische und formgeschichtliche Untersuchung des Heiligkeitgesetzes* (BBB 19; Bonn: Hanstein, 1963) 130-48; H. Graf Reventlow,

chapter represents concepts and practices which Israel observed during the monarchy if not earlier.<sup>14</sup>

Vv 23-28, the instruction concerning the redemption of property, concern us first.<sup>15</sup> Structurally, the section divides into two parts: the twofold orders (vv 23-24) and the instruction itself (vv 25-28). Formally, the instruction begins with a casuistic—that is, conditional—clause, *kî yāmûk 'āhîkâ ûmākā mē* <sup>a</sup>*huzzātô* ("if your fellow clansman becomes poor and sells some of his property").<sup>16</sup> This statement raises two questions. First, what circumstances underlie it? As the case of Naboth's vineyard shows (1 Kgs 21), Israelites clung to their ancestral property even in the face of royal pressure.<sup>17</sup> Thus, one suspects the direst of circumstances here. The formula *kî yāmûk 'āhîkâ* ("if your kinsman becomes poor," cf. vv 35, 39, 47; 27:8) provides a clue.<sup>18</sup>

*Das Heiligkeitgesetz formgeschichtlich untersucht* (WMANT 6; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1961) 123-42; cf. also L. E. Elliot-Binns, "Some Problems of the Holiness Code," *ZAW* 67 (1955) 26-40; W. Thiel, "Erwagungen zum Alter des Heiligkeitgesetzes," *ZAW* 81 (1969) 40-73. I side with those who date the chapter much earlier. For a discussion and literature, see G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 8-13. Cf. North, "The jubilee law was not the original composition of an *author*, but a rearrangement of existing economic and calendar usages by an *authority* of the Occupation era" (212). He dates it to the twelfth century B.C. (211).

14. According to Reventlow, the Jubilee practice originated soon after Israel's conquest of Canaan (125); cf. J. van der Ploeg, "There can be no doubt indeed, that most of the contents of the Law of Holiness must be very old, and must have been practiced in ancient times" ("Studies in Hebrew Law," *CBQ* 13 [1951] 39). Others believe the Jubilee law reflects legal practice during the monarchy; cf. Elliger 349; Elliott-Binns 39-40 (late monarchy but pre-Josiah); M. Noth, *Leviticus* (E.T.; rev. ed.; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 185; J. R. Porter, *Leviticus* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976) 197; H. Wildberger, "Israel und sein Land," *EvT* 16 (1956) 404-22. On the other hand, many believe it to be an ideal practice created during the exile; cf. Kilian 146; E. Kutsch, "Jobeljahr," *RGG*<sup>3</sup>, 3.800; Thiel, "eine sehr jungen Potenzierung der Sabbatjahridee" (61).

15. Most commentators believe that v 23 opens the following section rather than closes the preceding one; so North 12; Leggett 83; Elliger 338, 354; Porter 200, 201; Wenham 316, 320; et al.; against Noth 188-89; N. H. Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers* (NCB; Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1967) 164.

16. As in other Semitic languages, here *'āh* means not "brother" but more generally "kinsman, close relative"; cf. E. Jenni, "'āh," *THAT* 1.99-100; Leggett 83 n. 3. Reventlow believes that the laws in Leviticus 25 which begin similarly once formed an independent corpus of casuistic laws (136, 141).

17. H. Brichto has shown that, in a metaphysical sense, Israel understood the quality of afterlife to be tied to the possession and size of one's inheritance. He comments, "Death does not constitute dissolution but rather a transition to another kind of existence, an afterlife in the shadowy realm of Sheol. The condition of the dead in this afterlife is, in a vague but significant way, connected with proper burial upon the ancestral land and with the continuation on that land of the dead's proper progeny" ("Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife—A Biblical Complex," *HUCA* 44 [1973] 1-54, esp. 23).

18. For the form, see G. Liedke, *Gestalt und Bezeichnung alttestamentlicher Rechtssätze* (WMANT 39; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1971) 22, 31-32, 35 n. 1.

Unfortunately, the root *mûk* occurs only five times in the Old Testament, four times in Leviticus 25 (vv 25, 35, 39, 47), once in Leviticus 27:8. Ugaritic, however, offers a suggestive cognate (*mkk* or *mk*) meaning "to become weak" or "to deteriorate."<sup>19</sup> A parallel line in v 35 here confirms the validity of that cognate and further illumines the meaning of *mûk*. Taken literally, *mâtâ yādô* means "his hand shakes" (root *mût* "to waver, shake"), a metaphor which probably refers to economic weakness.<sup>20</sup> Hence, in this context, the root *mûk* means—in modern terms—to become "shaky" financially, to be unable to support oneself.

Thus, a case of severe indebtedness probably lies behind the surrender of land here.<sup>21</sup> Apparently, to repay a debt which has come due, the landholder has mortgaged his inheritance. A measure of his desperation, he preferred to suffer the loss of land rather than the cruel consequences of an unpaid debt. This leads to a second question: what is actually sold here, the land itself or something else? Vv 14-15 suggest that the landholder sold only the land's revenue—its produce or yield—not the property itself (cf. also v 27). In effect, the person only rented out the land—at most, for forty-nine years until the next Jubilee—but did not surrender its title. He received the rent in advance, a single lump sum payment, just as if there had been a sale.<sup>22</sup> The difficulty, of course, is how to get his mortgaged land out of hock later.

The instruction (vv 25-28) provides the answer. (To borrow a Latin expression, we might call them *ad hoc* provisions!) First, a *gō'ēl* of the "mortgage buyer" may "redeem" (*gā'āl*) the property (v 25). Presumably, he is one of the relatives listed later in vv 48-49—a brother, an uncle, a cousin, or any blood relative.<sup>23</sup> Second, if he lacks a *gō'ēl*, yet somehow gathers the necessary means, he may redeem

19. J. Aistleitner, *Wörterbuch der Ugaritischen Sprache* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1974) no. 1561 (p. 184); cf. *UT* no. 1473 ("to be vanquished"); BDB 557 ("be low, depressed, grow poor"); KB 526 ("to become poor," i.e., to come down, deteriorate).

20. So KB 526; NIV ("is unable to support himself"); but cf. BDB 556 ("of feebleness"). That the expression also implies weakness is clear from the verb which follows (*w<sup>e</sup>heh<sup>e</sup>zaqtā*, lit. "and you shall strengthen"). In other words, the fellow Israelite who "becomes weak" (*yāmûk*) must receive strength from someone else (*heh<sup>e</sup>zaqtā*).

21. So most scholars; cf. Noth 187; Leggett 88; Wenham 317. The partitive *min* in *mē<sup>a</sup>huzzātô* shows the sale of only some of the land.

22. Wenham 317; so also Meinhold 254; Noth 187-88; C. F. Keil, "every purchase of land became simply a lease for a term of years" (*The Pentateuch* [2 vols.; Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949] 2.461). Lipinski points out that no actual transfer of property ownership for a price takes place here. Hence, as elsewhere in the OT, *mkr* here means "to hand over" or "consign," not "to sell"; cf. E. Lipiński, "Sale, Transfer, and Delivery in Ancient Semitic Terminology," in *Gesellschaft und Kultur im alten Vorderasien* (ed. H. Klengel; SGKAO 15; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1982) 175.

23. But cf. Porter, who believes that the redeemers in vv 48-49 come from a wider circle than the one in v 25 (206). For a critique of the view that v 25 deals with the right of preemption as in Jeremiah 32 and Ruth 4, see Leggett 89-92.

himself (v 26). Most likely, he would acquire the funds through some sort of inheritance rather than by frugally saving some of his wages.<sup>24</sup> The cost of living would probably leave little, if any, of his earnings to be saved—a predicament typical of modern life as well. In this case—and presumably in the first case as well—he must repay the buyer part of the rent originally advanced him (v 27). Based on the number of years left until Jubilee, the amount would be the sum first borrowed less the amount which the mortgage holder had earned from the land during his tenancy. The third case concerns the "worst case" scenario. If the mortgage buyer lacks a *gō'ēl* and fails to amass sufficient funds to redeem himself, the property remains with the buyer until the year of Jubilee (v 28). Only then does the original landholder regain full possession of it.<sup>25</sup>

This brings us to consider the twofold theological basis for the legislation (vv 23-24). The first is a prohibition against the permanent sale of land:<sup>26</sup> "The land shall not be sold permanently for the land is mine, for you are resident aliens and settlers with me."<sup>27</sup> Obviously, the statement outlaws the permanent transfer of ownership of real estate in Israel. Strikingly, however, to support it, Yahweh appeals to an ancient social analogy, the contrast in status between a landowner and a resident alien. Yahweh is the landowner, he says. Yahweh alone holds title to the property; Israel only works it on his behalf. Yahweh alone enjoys the full rights and privileges of ownership; Israel only lives there by his grace. By contrast, Israel is just a resident alien (*gēr*) and settler (*tōšāb*). Now, in Israel, a resident alien enjoyed a status somewhere between the full rights of a citizen and the few rights of a foreigner.<sup>28</sup>

24. As Daube points out, "Once you were ruined to such an extent that you had to sell your land . . . , the chances of recovery by your own, unassisted exertions were, it is to be supposed, slender" (D. Daube, *Studies in Israelite Law* [reprint; New York: Ktav, 1969] 44). The poverty of such a person would leave little left over to be set aside toward redemption.

25. In this context, the verb *yš'* may be a technical term of release; so Leggett 84 n. 11; F. Horst, "Das Eigentum nach dem Alten Testament," in *Gottes Recht* (TBÜ 12; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1961) 220 (*Terminus der Haftungsatiflösung*); vv 28, 30, 31, 33, 41, 54. Leggett ably argues the case that the property reverts, not to the *gō'ēl*, but to the original owner (92-95).

26. According to Elliger, this fundamental sentence is very old (*uralt*) (354); so also Porter, "probably the old basic law" (201); cf. J. J. Rabinowitz, "Biblical Parallel to a Legal Formula from Ugarit," *VT* 8 (1958) 95.

27. Elsewhere, *s'mitūt* only occurs in vv 23 and 30. For the meaning of *lismītūt*, cf. J. E. Hogg, "without right of redemption" or "in derogation of the seller's right of redemption" ("The Meaning of *lsmitt* in Lev. 25:23-30," *AJSL* 42 [1925-26] 210); Horst, *unwiderruflich Gültigkeit* (220); Rabinowitz, 95.

28. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (E.T.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 74-76; I. Kellerman, "gūr," *TDOT* 2.443 ("protected citizen"); cf. R. Martin-Achard, "gūr," *THAT* 1.410. The Old Testament often associates the *tōšāb* with the *gēr* (Gen 23:4; 1 Chr 29:15; Ps 39:13). According to de Vaux, they enjoyed a similar, though not identical, social status (75-76).

Significantly, however, the alien could not possess land; only full Israelite citizens could. Hence, for work, he had to hire himself out, and for food, to glean in the fields (Lev 19:10; 23:22; Deut 24:14, 19-21). The point, then, is that Israel lives, not on her own land, but on land that belongs to someone else. Since she holds no title, she has no right to sell it.<sup>29</sup> Only Yahweh, the true owner, does.<sup>30</sup> Thus, to sell it permanently is to infringe on Yahweh's rights.

The second basis for the instruction is the command (v 24): "Throughout the land of your possession, you shall permit (*titnû*) redemption (*g<sup>e</sup>'ullâ*) for the land." If the prohibition outlaws the Permanent sale of property, the command permits its return when temporarily separated from its holder. The three cases discussed above implement its permission. In one sense, the command logically follows up the prohibition: the latter implicitly establishes Yahweh's authority as landowner, the former articulates his policy concerning it. On the other hand, one wonders why such an order need be issued. What would the situation be like without it? Apparently, without it, Israel was not likely to permit such redemption. Indeed, quite the opposite scenario seems probable. Unforeseen, unavoidable bankruptcy would compel the poor to mortgage some of their land just to survive.

In turn, the rich would bankroll such mortgages and increase their land holdings. Over time, they would reap a handsome profit, a profit to be turned into other purchases, perhaps of more land. Eventually, a great social division would result—on one side, a few wealthy land barons, on the other, the landless poor who work for them.<sup>31</sup> In short, it is that accumulation of property and economic power which the redemption requirement here seeks to prevent. Whether accomplished by the *gō'el*, by self-redemption, or by Jubilee, Yahweh intends redemption to maintain a social and economic equilibrium in Israel.

In addition, the chapter also legislates the redemption of persons (vv 47-55). This additional "ad hoc provision" resembles that concerning the land. Here, too, repayment of a debt probably stands behind the crisis (*ûmāk 'āhîkā*, "and your brother becomes poor," v 47). In this case, however, the source of capital is not an Israelite but a settler, a

29. According to R. North, v 23 does not mean that private property was excluded or unlimited. Rather, it simply regulated property relationships between people so that everyone, not just a few, could live in true freedom ("jôbēl," *TWAT* 3.558).

30. For God's ownership of the land, see Josh 22:19; Jer 16:18; Ezek 36:5; Hos 9:3; Ps 85:2. Interestingly, Yahweh asserts, but does not explain, the basis for his claim. Other texts based ownership on his creation of the world (Ps 24:1-2; 95:5), and that idea may underlie this statement.

31. So Wenham 317.

resident alien, or a member of his family.<sup>32</sup> To obtain funds, the threatened Israelite "sells himself" (*nimkar*) into servitude to his foreign financier. In other words, he agrees to "work off" the monetary advance by laboring in the alien's employ.<sup>33</sup> Now the fact that he sells himself rather than land may be significant. It may imply that he has already mortgaged his property since his only remaining asset appears to be his labor. If so, his case represents an even more extreme example of insolvency than the one in vv 25-28.<sup>34</sup>

As before, the problem is how to regain his economic independence. In response, v 48 dictates that the Israelite still has the right to redemption (*g<sup>e</sup>'ullâ*; cf. v 24).<sup>35</sup> The same three avenues that vv 25-28 offer make it possible (vv 48b-54). First, his relatives—one of his brothers, an uncle, a cousin, or any blood relative—may redeem him from servitude (vv 48-49). Second, if he comes into money, he may redeem himself (v 49b). In this case—and probably in the first case as well—the number of years between the start of his servitude and the next Jubilee form the basis for calculating his redemption price (v 50a). Though vv 50b-52 lack some needed details, essentially the price amounts to what, at the going rate, a hired man would earn in the years left before Jubilee. The text views it as a refund of that part of the original cash advance which the borrower had not yet worked off.<sup>36</sup> Once the financier is paid off, the person goes free. Finally, as in the case of mortgaged land, if the above two means fail, the next Jubilee effects his release (v 54).

Now two other comments enable us to gain some theological insight. First, v 53 specifies the special treatment due an enslaved Israelite. It forbids the boss to treat him harshly. He is to handle him, not

32. Precisely why the debtor sought that source is unclear. Further, one wonders how the foreigner rose to such affluence. As noted above, the law forbid foreigners from owning land in Israel. Thus, the aliens probably obtained their wealth through business ventures or through personal technological expertise (e.g., metalworking, etc.). Deut 28:43 also foresaw the rise of foreigners to wealth.

33. Vv 39-43 offer instruction concerning the case where an Israelite sells himself to a fellow Israelite. For some reason, however, nothing is said of his redemption, as if the latter did not apply (so Daube 43). Self-indenture for financial insolvency was common in the ancient Near East. For details and bibliography, see Leggett 98-101. For more recent studies, see I. Cardellini, *Die biblischen 'Slaven'-Gesetze im Lichte des keilschriftlichen Slavenrechts* (BBB 55; Bonn: Hanstein, 1981). For an ancient Near Eastern parallel, see R. Yaron, "A Document of Redemption from Ugarit," *VT* 10 (1960) 83-90.

34. So Wenham, "a last resort in cases of serious debt" (322). For the relation of these slave laws and others in the Pentateuch, see North, *Jubilee* 135-57. For additional bibliography, see Leggett 102 n. 75.

35. Noth suggests that the regulation may reflect Israel's inability to impose on foreigners the requirement for manumission of slaves after six years (192).

36. So Leggett 101, 105. The key phrase is *yāšīb ('et)-g<sup>e</sup>'ullātô* (vv 51, 52). Here *g<sup>e</sup>'ullâ* means "price of redemption" (so Elliger 343).

like an ordinary slave, but like a *š<sup>e</sup>kîr*, a "day laborer," an employee hired for a fixed period of time (cf. Deut 24:14-15). In other words, Yahweh places the Israelite under protection, limiting his master's control and defining the rules of the workplace (cf. vv 39-40). Put differently, Yahweh decrees that, despite his misfortune, the Israelite is still a full citizen under hire, not a lowly, foreign slave. More important, in v 55 Yahweh gives the twofold reason for the Israelite's release. Says Yahweh, "The children of Israel are mine; they are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt . . ." (v 42). Obviously, Yahweh recalls the famous liberation of Israel at the Exodus (Exod 14). Simply put, an enslaved Israelite should go free at Jubilee because Yahweh owns him as a servant.

This statement is striking in several respects. First, it implies that for the foreigner not to release the Israelite infringes on Yahweh's rights as master. Whatever business binds the two men, ultimately the Israelite is Yahweh's property, subject to his wishes. No less than any Christian, no Israelite could serve two masters (Matt 6:24). Second, the statement implies that the Jubilee release is the social mechanism whereby Yahweh protects his interests. It is a social statement that he owns Israel and defends his rights. Third, there appears to be an important wordplay between two forms of the verb *yš'* in the context. According to v 54, the redeemed Israelite is to (lit.) "go out" (*w<sup>e</sup>yāsā'*, qal)—that is, to go free. According to v 55, at the Exodus, Yahweh "brought out" Israel (*hōsē'tî*, hiph.)—that is, set her free. Implicitly, the wordplay links the Exodus with the institution of *ge'ullâ*. It portrays the redemption of this chapter as a follow-up to what Yahweh did in Egypt.<sup>37</sup> Now, if this is so, two additional insights into the nature of redemption follow. Put simply, redemption amounts to an institutional Exodus in Israel. On the one hand, it perpetuates the first liberation—that from Egyptian slavery—within later, settled Israel. It frees her from unending servitude to later Pharaohs within her own ranks. On the other, each instance, of redemption amounts to a fresh moment of divine liberation—as it were, a miniature Exodus.

That insight, in turn, casts the role of the Israelite *gō'el* in a different theological light. In essence, the human kinsman carries out the redemption policy of the "Great Kinsman," Yahweh himself.<sup>38</sup> One might even say that the human kinsman personally represents Yahweh

37. Cf. Exod 6:6; 15:3, 13 where *g'l* describes the rescue. Daube even believes the way the Old Testament pictures the Exodus (i.e., a redemption of slaves) derives from its teaching about *g<sup>e</sup>'ullâ* (39-62).

38. The expression is that of McKenzie, who says, "the idea of a Great Kinsman who defends the life, liberty, and property of his kinsmen is very probably a reflection of an early idea of Yahweh; it can scarcely be anything but an archaism in Second Isaiah, the biblical writer who uses the term most frequently" (237).

in such transactions. On the other hand, when human redemption, whether by *gō'ēl* or by oneself, fails to free an enslaved Israelite, the Jubilee provision intervenes. In effect, at that moment, the Great Kinsman himself steps in to perform redemption, just as he did at the Exodus.

Let us sum up the theological insights gained from Leviticus 25. First, the *gō'ēl* institution implements Yahweh's rights and policies toward his land and his people. Specifically, he decrees limits on the human inclination toward greed and power. Since he owns Canaan, his policy is that families retain, not lose, their inherited land. Since he owns Israel, his policy is that his people never see perpetual slavery again. He is their only master, a God of liberation. For Israel, the implications are twofold. On the one hand, she must accept economic dependence on Yahweh. She must content herself with the portion of Yahweh's land allotted her by him. While citizens of neighboring nations expand their holdings, Yahweh calls her to trust him to make those assigned plots productive. On the other hand, Yahweh calls her to live out the "Exodus ethos." Once she was an impoverished victim of Pharaoh. Should she attain wealth, however, her mandate is to not play Pharaoh against her fellow, former slaves.<sup>39</sup> Rather, she is to allow and to effect their redemption.

Second, the purpose of the institution is restoration. As North put it, "In the jubilee the dominant note is *home-coming*."<sup>40</sup> In this regard, the key Hebrew expression is *šûb 'el/l'ē 'ahuzzâ*, "to return to (one's) possession" (vv 27, 28; cf. vv 10, 13, 41).<sup>41</sup> In this context, *'ahuzzâ* ("possession") refers specifically to the property inherited by an Israelite from his ancestors.<sup>42</sup> Whether "to return to (one's) possession" connotes an actual reoccupation of ancestral land or simply its repossession is uncertain.<sup>43</sup> In any case, the point is that, either through redemption or Jubilee, the Israelite recovers the family property previously mortgaged. He returns to the state of affairs before

39. Cf. Wenham, who compares the servitude assumed here to modern imprisonment, that is, a means to work off a fine in confinement (322).

40. North, *Jubilee* 158; cf. Noth 183.

41. The word *d'rôr* ("liberty," v 10) is related, although it envisions a broader restoration, that of both property and personal freedom. For the word, see R. North, "derôr," *TDOT* 3.265-69.

42. Cf. *'ahuzzâ 'bōtāyw* (v 41). Elsewhere it refers primarily to possession of land (Gen 47:11, 30; Josh 22:19); but cf. Lev 25:45, 46 (of slaves). For the term, see F. Horst, "Zwei Begriffe für Eigentum (Besitz): *nahalâ* und *'ahuzzâ*," in *Verbannung und Heimkehr* (ed. A. Kuschke; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1961) 153-56; H. H. Schmid, "'ahaz," *THAT* 1.108, 109.

43. Apparently, Noth favors the former (187), Porter the latter (199). Twice the return also entailed a return to one's "clan" (*mišpāhâ*; vv 10, 41). That might confirm that "return" referred to actual physical reunion of land and landholder.

circumstances forced its surrender. However achieved, redemption gives Israelites with financial woes a chance to start over. In that regard, Wenham has observed that the average Israelite would probably live to see one Jubilee observance in a lifetime.<sup>44</sup> By implication, if not freed earlier, an Israelite would enjoy a fresh financial start once in a lifetime. From a human standpoint, one should not underestimate what a giant relief that offers. It would lift an otherwise impossible burden of debt from poor, sagging shoulders. In that moment, he would experience his own Exodus—the sweet taste of economic freedom at last!

In short, through this institution, Yahweh provides—to borrow a modern phrase—a "safety net" for vulnerable Israelites. In so doing, he shows himself to be the Great Kinsman, the powerful protector of the weak. Through redemption, he saves hopelessly poor citizens from an endless cycle of poverty.<sup>45</sup> He prevents a reversal of the Exodus—a relapse into the cruel hands of Israelite Pharaohs.<sup>46</sup> In effect, he provides Israel with what Moore called a "cultural gyroscope," a guidance system to maintain her social equilibrium—her sense of wholeness, well-being, or *šālôm*.<sup>47</sup> The institution enables Israel to live out her two great national charters—the promise of blessing to Abraham (Gen 12) and the Sinai covenant of freedom (Exod 19-24).

### III

In the book of Ruth, we enter quite different literary terrain. We leave the craggy slopes of Sinai for the fertile fields, fragrant threshing floor, and buzzing city gate of Bethlehem. Suddenly, the stern, divine voice which lectured at Sinai gives way to a narrative about Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Immediately, two things are striking. First, in Ruth one sees, not abstract legislation, but actual legal principles—the

44. Wenham 317. There seems to be no evidence, however, that Jubilee was ever actually practiced (so Wenham 318). North, however, offers this argument in favor of its having been observed: "The very formulations of Lv 25 . . . imply that the proclamation was to be merely normative; and that in fact most of the bankrupt tenants would have been already rehabilitated with the help of more prosperous relatives. Of the cases which remained strictly subject to the law, presumably the number of holders who refused to obey was neither smaller nor larger than the predictable mean for violations of this kind. Hence neither a miraculous unanimity of observance nor a conspiracy of contempt is to be imagined from the lack of historical record . . ." (*Jubilee* 209). Alternatively, B. Uffenheimer argued that, though only fully realized in the Kingdom of God, the legislation challenged Israel continually to seek maximal approximation of its ideal (cited from Meinhold 15-16).

45. A. Daum, "'Sisterhood' Is Powerful," in *Spinning A Sacred Yarn* (ed. A. Abernathy et al.; New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), 46.

46. Wenham 323.

47. Cf. Moore 29-31.

application of legal background to a live situation. One may wonder whether Israel ever observed Jubilee, but Ruth leaves no doubt that Israel observed *g<sup>e</sup>'ullâ*.<sup>48</sup> Second, one observes that God hardly seems present at all in the story.<sup>49</sup> He directly intervenes in only two places—he gives Judah food (1:6) and Ruth conception (4:13). Were Yahweh not occasionally invoked by characters, one might presume him to be totally absent from the story.<sup>50</sup> Closer inspection, however, reveals that God is very much present. Though hidden behind the scenes, his is the firm hand quietly guiding events.<sup>51</sup>

To begin, we consider the emergence and role of the *gō'ēl* in Ruth. Chapter 1 confronts us with the book's main problem, the lack of an heir. Pointedly, v 5 stresses that only Naomi survived her family's sojourn in Moab.<sup>52</sup> Her bitter outcry (vv 11-13) drops a painful hint: what this story needs is a husband to produce a child (cf. also vv 20-21). The word *gō'ēl* first appears, however, in 2:20 where Naomi applies it to Boaz. Though ambiguous, the reference at least introduces the prospect of his future action on behalf of the two widows.<sup>53</sup> Further, it occurs in a significant context, Naomi's praise of Boaz for his *hesed*. In 3:9, it is Ruth herself who petitions the action implicit in 2:20 when she proposes marriage to Boaz as *gō'ēl*. This is not the place to review the discussion concerning that verse.<sup>54</sup> The point is that Ruth sought to marry Boaz in order to give Naomi the heir she needed. In response, Boaz introduced a surprise—the existence of another *gō'ēl* with a prior right to the duty (3:12)—then promised to arrange her redemption one way or the other (3:13). The important scene at the city gate reports how Boaz legally obtained the redemption right for himself (4:1-12). Finally, 4:14 provides the last mention

48. As T. and D. Thompson point out, legal narratives actually provide better evidence for ancient practices than legal instructions. The former portray actual legal activities, the latter only practices on the day of promulgation ("Some Legal Problems in the Book of Ruth," *VT* 18 [1968] 83-84); cf. M. Burrows, "Law is often artificial and sometimes idealistic, and it is not uncommonly more consistent than custom" ("The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth," *JBL* 59 [1940] 452).

49. Hubbard 66-67; R. M. Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 3-19; idem, "Ruth, Book of," *IDBSup* 758-59; W. S. Prinsloo, "The Theology of the Book of Ruth," *VT* 30 (1980) 340-41.

50. For examples of such invocations, see 1:8-9, 20-21; 2:19-20; 3:13; 4:11-12, 14.

51. For more details, see Hubbard 68-71; Hals, *Theology* 3-19.

52. *wattiššā'ēr hā 'iššā mišš<sup>e</sup>nē y<sup>e</sup>lādeyhā ūmē'išāh*.

53. Most scholars believe that *gō'ēl* anticipates the eventual provision of an heir. In my view, however, her primary concern is with the happy prospect of a marriage for Ruth (cf. 3:1-2). For details and bibliography, see Hubbard 186-88.

54. See Hubbard 51-52; 212-13. For an alternative view with major interpretive implications, see J. M. Sasson, *Ruth. A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1979) 80-82.

of *gō'ēl*, specifically, praise of Yahweh for giving Naomi the newborn son of Boaz and Ruth as her *gō'ēl*.<sup>55</sup>

Now several important things emerge in this survey. First, like Leviticus 25, it is a tragic human crisis which eventually summons the *gō'ēl* to action. The family line of Elimelech lacks an heir to continue itself. Hence, it teeters perilously on the brink of annihilation.<sup>56</sup> As is well known, Israel regarded such an event as a great tragedy, one to be avoided at all costs. When a family died out physically, it ceased to exist metaphysically. That robbed Israel of one of her most prized possessions, her tribal solidarity. A secondary crisis, however, is the possibility that Naomi faces old age without anyone to care for her. That potential tragedy is implicit in her angry outcries (1:11-13, 20-21), and explicit in the joyous exclamation of her neighbors (4:14-15). They rejoice that the newborn will "revive [her] spirits and sustain [her] in old age." In short, as in Leviticus 25, here the *gō'ēl* delivers an unfortunate Israelite, not from loss of land or lengthy servitude, but from annihilation.<sup>57</sup>

Second, the book sets this redemption in a theological framework different from that of Leviticus 25. In the latter, *g<sup>e</sup>'ullâ* formed a part of the practice of the Jubilee year. In Ruth, it forms part of what I call "the life of *hesed*," the ideal lifestyle which the book reveres.<sup>58</sup> This is evident in 2:20 where Naomi first identifies Boaz as a *gō'ēl*. In the pre-line, she praises Yahweh for the fact that Boaz had "not abandoned his kindness (*hesed*) toward the living and the dead."<sup>59</sup> The juxtaposition of *hesed* and *gō'ēl* here implies that, should Boaz later carry out *gō'ēl* duties, such actions would constitute acts of *hesed*. Though *hesed* nowhere else occurs with reference to Boaz, two other evidences imply that the book views his performance as fulfilling that

55. This is the only instance in the Bible where an infant bears the title *gō'ēl*. Set beside Leviticus 25, Ruth also expands our understanding of the *gō'ēl* institution by providing details about the practice unattested elsewhere. For example, only in Ruth does a *gō'ēl* marry a widow to provide the heretofore childless family an heir. Further, the linking of that marriage to inheritance of ancestral land (4:5)—sadly, the cause of much scholarly discussion!—is also unique to this lovely book (see Hubbard 52-62).

56. As is well known, the threat of starvation also plays a large role in the story (1:1, 6, 22; chap 2; 3:15, 17). In my view, it is secondary to the problem of familial survival (cf. 1:11-13, 20-21; 3:9; 4:5, 10, 13-17). The same may be said of the ancestral land, which appears in the story almost as a surprise (4:3).

57. As Brichto notes, the *gō'ēl* "was not merely a close-kinsman obligated to blood-vengeance or privileged to redeem property. The *gō'ēl* is he who redeems the dead from the danger to his afterlife by continuing his line" (21).

58. For details, see Hubbard 72-74; Campbell 29-30.

59. Here I depart from the consensus which sees Yahweh, not Boaz, as the antecedent of the *šer* clause. For a defense of this view, see B. Rebera, "Yahweh or Boaz? Ruth 2:20 Reconsidered," *BT* 36 (1985) 317-27. Hubbard provides bibliography of the alternative view (186 n. 28).

ideal. In 3:18, Naomi again lauds Boaz, this time for his conscientious follow-through. He promised Ruth redemption (3:13), and he will not relax until she has it. In addition, the closing genealogy lists Boaz seventh in the list, a position of honor second only to that of the tenth place.<sup>60</sup> In sum, according to the book, by serving as *gō'ēl*, Boaz performs an act of *hesed* worthy of honor.

Now this is what is particularly striking about the *hesed*-framework in Ruth: contrary to expectations, it seems to rest theologically, not on a covenant basis, but on a cosmic one. That is, its roots lie more in Yahweh's role as king of the universe than as Israel's covenant God. Two evidences point in this direction. First, a cosmic basis for *hesed* seems to underlie Naomi's petition in 1:8 that Yahweh repay Orpah and Ruth for their *hesed* toward her. At that point, neither woman is a member of Israel's covenant community. Indeed, Naomi herself expects them to worship Moabite gods if they obey her urging to "go back" (1:15). Her plea assumes that Yahweh rewards *all* peoples, not just Israelites, for *hesed*. Thus, the book understands *hesed* as a constituent element of the world's underlying moral order, the order which Yahweh oversees and of which Israel's own *hesed*-ideal (cf. Mic 6:8) is a specific expression.<sup>61</sup> Further, it assumes (as does the entire Old Testament) that Yahweh himself is a God of *hesed*.<sup>62</sup> Naomi appeals to him to dispense *hesed* because he is that kind of God.

The second evidence is the divine title Shaddai which Naomi twice invokes (1:20-21). A brief review of the Old Testament usage of Shaddai confirms that it reflects the idea of Yahweh's cosmic, not just covenant, rulership.<sup>63</sup> By nature, Shaddai is great and mysterious (Job 11:7). He not only promised the patriarchs great destinies (Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14), but decrees appropriate fates for the righteous and the wicked (Job 27:14; 31:2). As cosmic ruler, he maintains justice in the world (Job 8:3; 24:1; 27:2), hears appeals for legal intervention (Job 8:5; 13:3; 31:35), and metes out terrible punishments (Job 6:4; 23:16; 27:14-23). In sum, the Old Testament associates Shaddai with Yahweh in his role as cosmic ruler. Now if this is so, I would argue that the above two cosmic references, concentrated as they are in chapter 1, create a subtle literary effect. Should Yahweh later act in the story,

60. So J. M. Sasson, "Generation, Seventh," *IDBSup* 354-56; idem, "A Genealogical 'Convention' in Biblical Chronography," *ZAW* 90 (1978) 171-85.

61. Cf. Gen 21:23; Josh 2:12, 14; Judg 8:35; Ps 33:5-9; Prov 3:3; 11:17; etc.

62. Exod 20:5-6; 34:6; Deut 7:9, 12; Ps 25:10; 103:8; etc.; cf. H. J. Stoebe, "*hesed*," *THAT* 1.612-18; H.-J. Zobel, "*hesed*," *TDOT* 5.54-58.

63. Num 24:4, 16; Ps 68:15 [14]; Job 34:12-13; 40:2; cf. Hubbard 124-25; M. Weipert, "Shaddai," *THAT* 2.880-81; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1973) 52-60.

whether to reward or to punish, the reader assumes that he does so in the same role as king of the cosmos.<sup>64</sup>

Two final observations conclude our analysis of the theology of the *gō'el* in Ruth. First, the book assumes that Yahweh acts in the acts of the story's human characters.<sup>65</sup> Though supportive evidence is plentiful, one example must suffice. I refer to the clever repetition of the word *kānāp* ("wing, garment-corner") in chapters two and three. In 2:12, addressing Ruth, Boaz wishes that Yahweh would repay Ruth for her actions. He specifies that Yahweh is the God "under whose wings" (*kēnāpayim*) Ruth has sought refuge. The word "wings" probably conjures up the image of a bird tenderly protecting its young.<sup>66</sup> Like a defenseless starling, Ruth sits securely under Yahweh's mighty wings. In Ruth's marriage proposal (3:9), she asks Boaz to spread his *kānāp*—here, meaning "garment-corner"—over her.<sup>67</sup> Like "wings" of 2:12, this gesture probably also symbolizes protection of the woman (and perhaps sexual readiness as well).<sup>68</sup> By repeating the key word from his own lips, Ruth essentially asks Boaz to answer his own prayer!<sup>69</sup> Now theologically, the word repetition implies a relationship between the two petitions. Thus, by covering Ruth with his *kānāp*—that is, to marry her—Boaz implements Yahweh's *kānāp*—that is, his protection of Ruth. Or, to weave in a thread dropped earlier, the *hesed* of Boaz toward Ruth is the form in which Yahweh conveys his *hesed* to her.

The second and final observation is that, in the end, Yahweh receives the credit for the story's happy ending. In the closing scene, Naomi's neighbors exult, "Praise the Lord! He has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer today!" (4:14).<sup>70</sup> For our purposes, the

64. Cf. 2:4, 12, 19, 20; 3:13; 4:11-12, 14.

65. Cf. Hubbard 71; Campbell 29-30; B. Green, "A Study of Field and Seed Symbolism in the Biblical Story of Ruth" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1980) 96.

66. See Deut 32:11; Isa 31:5; Matt 23:27; A. van der Woude, "kanap," *THAT* 1.835; O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, tr. T. Hallett (New York: Seabury, 1978) 190-92. Ancient Near Eastern texts commonly apply the metaphor to gods. Alternatively, the image may allude to the winged cherubim, symbol of the asylum offered by the temple; so G. Gerleman, *Ruth. Das Hohelied* (2nd ed.; BKAT 18; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981) 27. For other views, see Hubbard 167 n. 81.

67. The idiom *pārās kānāp 'al* ("to spread a garment-cover over [someone]") means "to marry" (Ezek 16:8; cf. Deut 23:1 [22:30]; 27:20; Mal 2:16).

68. Green (142) against C. Carmichael, covering as comparable to the symbol of a woman as a sandal covering a man's feet ("Treading' in the Book of Ruth," *ZAW* 92 [1980] 258-59).

69. Similarly, Campbell 29, 138; cf. L. Morris, "Ruth had put herself under Yahweh's 'wing' when she came to Judah. Now she seeks also to put herself under that of Boaz" ("Ruth," in A. Cundall and L. Morris, *Judges and Ruth* [TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968] 290).

70. Insightfully, Sasson observes that the Hebrew phrase *lō' hišbît lāk* (lit. "did not cause to cease for you") portrays Yahweh's intervention as preventative; that is, it prevented the end of Elimelech's line (*Ruth* 162-63).

significant point is that the women credit Yahweh with directly giving the *gō'ēl* to needy Naomi. Now in the preceding verse (4:13), the narrator had said that "Yahweh gave her [Ruth] conception." Thus, at first glance, the women's praise seems simply to reinforce the point that Yahweh had provided the newborn. In my view, however, it offers a terse theological commentary on the book's entire prior chain of events. Granted, Yahweh's help enabled Ruth to conceive. But there would be no birth at all without human actions—sexual consummation by the newlyweds (4:13), Boaz's day in court (4:1-12), the meetings of Ruth and Boaz (chaps. 2 and 3), and her migration to Judah (chap. 1). In short, the book implies that divine guidance lay behind everything, even the actions of human characters.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, let us summarize the theological insights concerning the *gō'ēl* gleaned from Ruth. As with Leviticus 25, *g<sup>e</sup>'ullā* responds to desperate human need—a bitter widow facing old age alone and, worse, a permanent breach in tribal solidarity. Significantly, however, the book understands the basis of that redemption to be a cosmic one, the universal idea of *hesed*. The implication is that, in the book of Ruth, the Israelite institution implements that larger ideal. Specifically, the human *gō'ēl* is the means whereby Yahweh, the Great Kinsman, achieves his purposes. On stage, Ruth and Boaz faithfully live the lifestyle of *hesed*. Backstage, however, behind them, moves the Great *gō'ēl*, pained by famine, death, and old age, gently acting to alleviate them. His broad, powerful wings protect those, like Boaz and Ruth, who please him.

Before leaving Ruth, however, I must add a speculative footnote. Since the story's ultimate climax is the birth of David, I wonder if the neighbors' joyful cry in 4:14 literarily anticipates that event. In other words, did the author view David, grandson of Naomi's *gō'ēl* Obed, as the greatest *gō'ēl* of all? Did he anticipate his redemption of Israel from the slavery evident in Judges—tribal jealousies, idolatry, and foreign oppression?

#### IV

In his *Studies in Biblical Law*, David Daube observed that,

the idea of God or Jesus redeeming mankind from sin and damnation, apparently a purely religious idea, derives from those ancient rules on insolvent debtors and victims of murder, on the preservation of the existing clans and the patrimony of clans.<sup>72</sup>

71. In addition, the infant represents part, perhaps even the climactic part, of Yahweh's reward of Ruth for her *hesed* (1:8; 2:12; 3:10).

72. Daube 59.

Clearly, Daube spotted the fingerprints of the old Hebrew *g<sup>e</sup>'ullâ* on the pages of the New Testament.<sup>73</sup> As we have seen, the Israelite *gō'ēl*-institution guarded Yahweh's rights to his land and expressed his policy concerning the liberty of the poor among his covenant people. It also sought to reward those who lived the life of *hesed* among them.<sup>74</sup> It offered the Exodus in institutional form—the Exodus in miniature—to perpetuate the freedom originally won from Pharaoh. Through it and its human *gō'<sup>a</sup>lîm*, the Great *gō'ēl* freed Israelites from poverty, old age, and even lost afterlife. At the same time, the institution threw Israel a provocative challenge to give up greed, hubris, and apathy for the Exodus ethos. It presented her a more excellent way and called for a kinder and gentler Israel. Thus, from a New Testament perspective, it anticipated the advent of the Great Redeemer, the one who paid for redemption with his own life. Similarly, the challenge thrown Israel remains relevant today. The world could use more *gō'<sup>a</sup>lîm*—protectors of the weak, defenders of the poor. Indeed, knowledge of the Israelite *g<sup>e</sup>'ullâ* makes even more provocative Paul's familiar exhortation, "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God with your body" (1 Cor 6:19-20).

73. Specifically, he cited 1 Cor 6:20; 1 Pet 1:18-19; 1 Tim 2:6; Tit 2:14 (cf. Daube 73, n. 168).

74. Cf. Daube, ". . . it is hardly going too far to say that all those commands, which would have had an enormous stabilizing effect and led to the alleviation of much distress if carried into practice, during the greater part at least of the nation, were a social programme rather than actually functioning as law" (45).