

Gaining a sense of the Hebrew meaning of redeem (gā'al)... The love of Ruth and Boaz
A Series on What is Atonement: Part 4

1. Consult a concordance. What does the Hebrew verb “gā'al” (English “redeem”) mean?

The Hebrew verb “gā'al” has a central meaning in “to regain possession of by payment” or “buy back something that was lost.” In the Old Testament, the verb “gā'al” has been translated as “to redeem”, “ransom”, and “do the part of a kinsman”.

The Hebrew verb “gā'al” has another meaning of “to avenge bloodshed” or “to require blood”, and has been translated as “avenge” or “revenge” (Num 35:19).

2. Study Ruth 1:1-22. What is the background to Naomi?

Naomi was married to Elimelech who left Bethlehem during the famine and resettled in Moab, which was about 50 miles east. However, he died and his two sons married Moabite women. After ten years, the sons died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law destitute and without hope and an heir.

When Naomi hears that the famine has ended in Bethlehem, she sets for a return to her homeland. She urges her two daughters-in-law to stay in Moab, and asks God to bless them with new husbands and peace. While Orpah reluctantly stays in Moab, Ruth chose to follow Naomi back to Bethlehem despite the unlikelihood of finding a new husband or ever having children.

3. Read Ruth 1:14-2:23. Who is Ruth and what makes her distinctive to the Jewish community in Bethlehem?

In leaving Moab, Ruth turned her back on her own people and their idolatry and chose to make the Jews and their God as her own; she was a Gentile who became a Believer. While in Bethlehem, Ruth, who must have known how Moabites were treated, knew that she was there by grace. Against this background, Ruth's humble loving care and kindness towards her mother-in-law was notable and probably unusual for this period of Judges.

4. The narrative touches upon three Jewish laws that originated from the Mosaic Law: The Law of Sowing and Reaping (Lev 23:22; Deut 24:19-22), Redemption of Land (Lev 25:23-28), and Levirate Marriage (Deut 25:5-10). What are these laws?

The Law of Sowing and Reaping (Lev 23:22; Deut 24:19-22)

As a reminder of their former status as a slave in Egypt, Mosaic legislation required that landowners reap their land with only one pass. What remained was to be made available for widows and destitute to glean.

The Law of Redemption of Land (Lev 25:23-28)

While Moses spoke the words in Leviticus during the wanderings of the Israelites, God intended the nation of Israel to understand that the Promised Land was the property of God's. God's gift of the use of the Land was established by the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 15:7; 17:8; 24:7; Ex 6:4). The land granted to the various tribes was intended to remain under their stewardship; thus, genealogies were essential for maintaining their property rights.

If a Hebrew sold his land, he was merely selling a lease and intended to eventually get the land back. Mosaic legislation established the process by which a male Hebrew can get the land back: 1) the male Hebrew can redeem the land and determine its cost according to the prescribed formula, 2) the nearest male relative (kinsman) could redeem the land or 3) the Hebrew could wait until the Year of Jubilee when the ownership rights are restored.

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The Law of Levirate (Latin for "brother-in-law") Marriage (Deut 25:5-10)

Under certain circumstances, a brother-in-law marriage to a widowed or divorced sister-in-law is allowed. The fulfillment of this law was initiated by the widowed sister-in-law and intended to provide a male heir for the deceased's family property and care for the mother in her old age.

5. How did Ruth make her marriage proposal? Study Ruth 3:1-18.

Instructed by her mother-in-law, Ruth meets with Boaz privately as he is sleeping and guarding his grain at the threshing floor. She comes upon him secretly (to protect Boaz's reputation if he declines to fulfill the Law of Levirate) and uncovers his feet which was an act of submission.

Ruth asks Boaz to fulfill the Law of Levirate, "I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative." With figurative speech, Ruth asked Boaz for protection and security in the similar manner that Boaz wished God would protect Ruth (Ruth 2:12).

Hebrews understood the hem of a garment to be an extension of a wearer's person and status. The hem, at one time, represented the person's identity and its impression into a clay tablet was as good as a signature on a contract and was legally binding. This perspective provides a better appreciation for the instances the Bible speaks of hem of clothing (1 Sam 24:11; Matt 9:20-22; 23:5).

6. There were two objects that required redeeming: 1) Naomi's land (Law of Redemption of Land) and 2) taking Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth as a wife (Law of Levirate). Why was Boaz considered the kinsman redeemer? What was the monetary price paid by Boaz? Read Ruth 4:1-12.

The noun form of the verb "gā'al" (redeem) is "gō'ēl" (redeemer). The "gō'ēl" (kinsman redeemer) must meet four conditions to fulfill his obligations:

1. He must be a blood relative. Boaz was related to Naomi's deceased husband Elimelech.
2. He must be capable of redeeming. In this case, Boaz must have the financial means to redeem the land and must be able to marry Ruth.
3. He had to be willing. Boaz was very glad that Ruth asked him to be the kinsman redeemer "gō'ēl".
4. He must complete the transaction and process. Boaz redeemed the land, married Ruth and provided an heir.

There was another kinsman who was closer than Boaz; however, while the nearer kinsman was capable of redeeming the land, he was not willing to marry Ruth. In front of the community's elders, the nearer kinsman forfeited his right to fulfill his obligations.

It is important to note that this story does not mention the monetary cost or price of redemption. It is all about the redemption of Naomi and Ruth from the bondage of widowhood and poverty.

7. Occurring during the period of Judges, the Book of Ruth is significant within the context of its neighboring books Judges and 1 Samuel. What do you observe of its significance?

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The book of Judges depicts the nation of Israel as having several cyclical periods of spiritual decline with occasional revival. At its end, the nation is corrupt and is in moral and social anarchy. "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25).

In stark contrast, the book of Ruth was the highest example of responsible living: faithful obedience to God and gracious acts towards others. In establishing that Ruth was the great grandmother of David, the book of Ruth serves as a prologue into 1 Samuel by affirming King David's rights to the throne of Israel.

Note: The story of Ruth is seen as an Old Testament illustration of Jesus Christ's work of atonement. However a distinction should be made; the story of Ruth illustrates a *subjective* aspect of atonement, because it is directed towards Believers and how they are redeemed or freed from slavery.

The Moabite Ruth is seen as figuratively representing the New Testament Gentile. The nearer kinsman is seen as figuratively representing the Mosaic Law; but, because the Law could not redeem the penalty for the sins of human beings, Jesus Christ is the next kinsman in line who could redeem. Boaz is seen as figuratively representing Jesus Christ the kinsman redeemer "gō'ěl" who frees Ruth from bondage.

1. Because He was born a human being, Jesus was a blood relative.
2. Because of His sinless state, Jesus was capable of purchasing and redeeming the penalty for the sins of man.
3. Because of His obedience, Jesus came willing to be the "gō'ěl".
4. Because of His crucifixion, Jesus completed the atonement and provided the means for the salvation of Believers.

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