

## Haggo'el: The Cultural Gyroscope of Ancient Hebrew Society

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### *Preliminary Lexical Considerations*

Some lexicographers divide the meaning of *ga'al* into two concepts. Koehler and Baumgartner<sup>1</sup> and Gesenius<sup>2</sup> assign two separate meanings to the word. The first centers around the idea of "redemption"; the second, around the concept of "defilement," suggesting a possible affinity with *ga'al*, "to reproach or rebuke."

Others claim to see a single root meaning,<sup>3</sup> a meaning which corresponds to its usage in the Hebrew Old Testament, i.e., "to cover, or protect." To illustrate, in Ruth 3:9 Ruth asks Boaz to spread (*parash*) his wings over her, for "you are *go'el*." That is, Boaz was the young widow's protector. He had already used this protection idiom by assuring her that the God of Israel, the God to whom she had come for refuge in 2:12, would spread his wings over her. This example, then, would illustrate a positive usage of this basic root, "to cover."

In the Old Testament, however, one can be covered with all sorts of things, good or bad. Whereas Ruth was covered with the wings of her protector (*go'el*), Job uses the term to lament the day upon which he was born:

Let that day be darkness. May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it.

Let gloom and deep darkness claim it (*yig'aluhu*). (Job 3:4, 5, RSV)

G. Beer further suggests, "*ga'al=ga'al*, cf. Mal 1, 7," a passage in which Malachi spoke about polluted food on the altar of God. Here

<sup>1</sup> *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, 1953 ed., S.v. "*ga'al*," by L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner.

<sup>2</sup> *Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, 1853 ed., s. Y. "*ga'al*," by Gesenius.

<sup>3</sup> *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Jerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, 1950 ed., s.v. "*ga'al*," by Marcus Jastrow.

again *ga'al* is the term used (*lehem mego'al*).<sup>4</sup>

The Job passage has been a thorny problem for translators. The RV, following LXX, Theodotian, and Symmachus, translates *yig'aluhu* "claim it for their own." Can this be the meaning? Can gloom and deep darkness even metaphorically reclaim the day of Job's birth? Perhaps. On the other hand, the AV, following Aquila and the Targumim, translates the phrase ". . . let darkness and the shadow on death stain it." This choice, however, disregards the context. Job wants the clouds, darkness, and gloom to blot out the light God was to shine upon the day of his birth, not stain it.

Johnson's view may shed light on the problem. Following the Peshitta Syriac and Latin Vulgate, he translates ". . . let darkness, let utter blackness cover it."<sup>5</sup> In sum, Johnson would define *go'al* thus: Qal- "to protect;" Niphal- "to be protected," later coming to mean in negative contexts "to be covered over; to be coated"; then Piel- "to coat something intensively, pollute, desecrate"; Hithpael- "to stain."<sup>6</sup>

The argument for one root meaning for *ga'al* is interesting, if not conclusive. It deserves consideration from a lexical standpoint, even if such consideration leads one to conclude no more than that such an argument proves more palatable than the various attempts which have been made to link *ga'al* with *ga'al*. Ringgren concludes: "It seems better to begin with actual linguistic usage than to postulate an original meaning."<sup>7</sup>

#### *Go'el* in the Old Testament

Several models have been proposed to break down the meanings of this word by its various contexts in the Old Testament. Ringgren suggests it should be examined in the two broad categories of secular usage and religious, figurative usage.<sup>8</sup> Lieber deduces five basic activities of the *go'el* in the Old Testament:

- (1) He acquires the alienated property of a kinsman (Lev. 25:25)

<sup>4</sup> *Biblia Hebraica*, 7th ed., edited by R. Kittel (Stuttgart: Wurttembergische Bibelanstalt, 1973), p. 1108, nt. 5a.

<sup>5</sup> A. R. Johnson, "The Primary Meaning of *ga'al*," *Supplement to Vetus Testamentum* 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953): 73. Cf. also R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. by J. McHugh (New York: McGraw-Hill 1961), p. 21: ". . . fundamentally its meaning is 'to protect.'"

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 73, 74.

<sup>7</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 1974 ed., s.v. "*ga'al*," by H. Ringgren.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 350-355.

- (2) He purchases property when it is in danger of being lost to a stranger (Jer. 32:6ff.)
- (3) He is morally, if not legally, obligated to support the widow of his next-of-kin in the event of her becoming dependent on this estate for her livelihood (Ruth 4:4ff.)
- (4) He redeems a clansman who has been reduced to slavery by poverty (Lev. 25:47ff.)
- (5) He avenges blood when it has been shed (Num. 35:17ff.).

### Spiritual Equilibrium

Leviticus 25 is the usual starting point in discussions concerning the meaning of *ga'al*.<sup>10</sup> Predictably, all the legal material which deals with the duties of the *go'el* is predicated by Israel's relationship to Yahweh. Israel is to perform Yahweh's statutes and ordinances (25:18). If this is done, Israel will experience economic and social equilibrium as Yahweh's chosen people (25:17, 20ff.). Yahweh owns the land; Israel merely sojourns there (25:23). This land (*'eres*) is to be treated as a *ge'ullah* by Israel (25:24).<sup>11</sup>

In the book of Isaiah, Israel is reminded of this peculiar relationship. In Isaiah 41:14; 43:14; 44:6 and 24, the writer refers to Yahweh as Israel's *go'el*, i.e., he whose responsibility entailed that of protecting, restoring, and bringing Israel back into a state of spiritual equilibrium with himself.<sup>11a</sup> This spiritual relationship was foundational to the Israelite's social and economic existence.<sup>12</sup>

Luzbetak defines equilibrium thus:

a state of balance. . .a feeling of "well-being" characterized by an over-all steady-

<sup>9</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Redemption," by D. L. Lieber.

<sup>10</sup> One has to decide however, if the Leviticus material is a compilation of ancient or contemporary laws. In addition, one's concept of the relative personality or impersonality of Yahweh enters the picture here.

<sup>11</sup> The inclusion of all these elements, land, cult, clan, and security, led H. C. Brichto to conclude that these elements make up a Biblical complex (an anthropological technical term), "Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife--A Biblical Complex," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 44 (1973): 1-54.

<sup>11a</sup> On Job 19:25 cf. Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 15 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973), p. 146: "It is not clear here whether Job has in mind a human agent who will act as his vindicator. The strongest point in favor of taking the vindicator and guarantor as God is the specific reference to seeing God in 26b. . . . The application of the term *go'el* to God in this context is questionable since elsewhere in Job's complaint it is God himself who is Job's adversary rather than defender."

<sup>13</sup> Brichto, *op. cit.*, p. 23: "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." In Brichto's schema, then, the *go'el* "was not merely a close-kinsman obligated to blood-vengeance or privileged to redeem property. The *go'el* is he who redeems the dead from the danger to his afterlife by continuing his line," p. 21.

ness in the culture, a high morale, self-confidence, and a sense of security.<sup>13</sup>

One feels justified in using this technical term for several reasons, but it is not the purpose here to enter into an extended anthropological analysis of ancient Hebrew society. This paper is primarily a philological study of the meaning of a particular word and its usage in the Old Testament literature. Luzbetak is an anthropologist and “equilibrium” is an anthropological term, yet the overall usefulness of this term ought to be evident after further inspection. “Equilibrium” incorporates the many analogous meanings attested by a solid consensus of Biblical scholarship on the matter.

### Social Equilibrium

Interfamilial, interclan, and intertribal relationships can better be understood in terms of social equilibrium, as ramifications of Israel’s spiritual relationship with Yahweh. Again, several analogous concepts can be found in the relevant literature. Johnson<sup>14</sup> talks about the Israelite’s *nephes* as something which was extended spatially and temporally, through one’s *bayith*, *‘ebhed*, or *mal’ak*; temporally, through one’s *dabhar* (including either *berakah* or *‘ararah*), and the Israelite sem. “Corporate personality,”<sup>15</sup> “grasping of a totality,”<sup>16</sup> “vitality of extended family group,”<sup>17</sup> “total contents of the soul,”<sup>18</sup> “interests of his kinsman”<sup>19</sup>—these are some of the parallel phrases one finds.

Is it not more accurate today to posit that where manslaughter occurs, or where one’s husband or male children perish, or where one is forced by poverty to sell his ancestral real estate--that where anything of this nature occurs in the Old Testament--that these are characteristics of social dysfunction, i.e., social disequilibrium? When this has been established, the function of the *go’el* can be more clearly seen: to work through the proper channels, whether spiritual, social,

<sup>13</sup> L. J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1970), p. 221.

<sup>14</sup> A. R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1961), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its life and Culture*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press), : pp. 106-133.

<sup>17</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Redemption."

<sup>18</sup> Pedersen, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

<sup>19</sup> Pope, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

or economic<sup>20</sup> and serve as the society's "cultural gyroscope."<sup>21</sup> The solidarity of the Israelite family, clan, and nation depended upon his assuming this responsibility.

The *go'el* functions as a restorative agent whenever there is a breach in the clan's corporate life. In Lieber's model, this would include his obligations a) to support an Israelite widow who is a blood relative and b) to redeem a clansman who has been reduced to slavery by poverty.<sup>22</sup> In this paper only the first of these obligations will be examined.

H. H. Rowley's study on the book of Ruth reveals how entangled this problem has become.<sup>23</sup> His survey shows that some are divided over whether Ruth's marriage was levirate or *ge'ullah*. I. M. Epstein sees it as *ge'ullah*; J. A. Bewer does also, even to the point of dismissing all references to the levirate law in the book as interpolations by partisans of Ezra and Nehemiah. On the other hand, H. A. Brongers believed that one of the book's purposes was to bring the two institutions together. J. G. Frazer and J. F. McLennan even see polyandry or group marriage as having evolved into levirate and *ge'ullah* arrangements. A. Bertholet and G. Margoliouth see ancestor worship behind all of this.<sup>24</sup>

Rowley concludes that, if one dates Deuteronomy late,

the law of Deut. 25:5-10 reflects a limitation of something that was once wider in Israel, and this view is further supported when we look beyond the question of the childless widow to the wider duties devolving on the next-of-kin.<sup>25</sup>

Within the schema of this paper it is irrelevant as to whether levirate marriage is separate from or included in *ge'ullah* or whether the book of Ruth represents a "transitional stage between redemption-marriage as an affair of the clan and levirate-marriage as an affair of the

<sup>20</sup> These divisions reflect a Western tendency to catalogue and fragment. The Hebrew *go'el* probably perceived no such distinctions.

<sup>21</sup>"Cultural gyroscope" is Luzbetak's phrase, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. above, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> H. H. Rowley, "The Marriage of Ruth," in *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), pp. 161-186.

<sup>24</sup> Any further discussion of this point is outside the bounds of this inquiry, except to note that Brichto, *op. cit.*, p. 50, draws a sharp distinction between the Jewish and pagan models of afterlife: a) Pagan belief (incl. ancestor worship) was magical, mechanical, amoral; b) Hebrew belief was based entirely upon the individual's moral relationship' to Yahweh.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Rowley, *op. cit.*, p. 170ff., for all pertinent information, explanations, and bibliographical data concerning these many diverse points of view.

family," as M. Burrows suggests.<sup>26</sup> Broader perspectives are called for--"wider duties," to use Rowley's terminology.

Naomi's role in the story of Ruth has perhaps been misunderstood or underplayed. After all, it was Naomi who first encouraged Orpah and Ruth to find husbands of their own, houses of their own a people of their own, and gods of their own (Ruth 1:8-15). In other words, the Israelite widow wanted her non-Israelite daughters-in-law to find some semblance of normality and well-being again. It was Naomi who mourned the true depth of her calamity by stating to the women: "I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty"; i.e., the *bayith* and the *sem* of Elimelech were in danger of being wiped out in Israel. The depth of this disgrace must have been communicated to Ruth, for Boaz quickly recognized that Ruth was a woman of worth (3:10, 11) and was delighted that she had come to him as her *go'el* for help (3:9).

The writer points out that Boaz was Naomi's kinsman (2:1), a fact Naomi joyfully proclaims to Ruth (2:20). Boaz was their "near one" (*qarobh*), the one who was able to restore their family, ravaged by famine and death, to a state of equilibrium.<sup>27</sup> It was Naomi who engineered Ruth's meeting with Boaz (3:2-5), and it was Naomi whom the women congratulated, not Ruth, because the Lord had provided her with a *go'el*. Some of the other elements necessary for social equilibrium are mentioned also: *sem* (4:14); restoration of the clan's *nephes* (4:15); a male heir has been born to Naomi (4:17). Indeed, one of the main themes of the book is God's kindness to the living as well as the dead by mercifully restoring Elimelech's family to a state of equilibrium, a theme which is all the more dramatized when one realizes in genealogical perspective who Obed, Naomi's *go'el*, really was.

One of the most interesting functions of the *go'el* was the responsibility to restore justice. Murder, manslaughter, and war are crimes punishable by the State in western society, i.e., by an external system of justice. Hebrew culture was much different. J. Pedersen discusses the difference:

<sup>24</sup> M. Burrows, "The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59 (December 1940):445-454.

<sup>25</sup> N. B. (as per Brichto's thesis) Naomi is grateful that Yahweh has not forgotten the living remnants of the family as well as the dead; viz., the *sem* of Elimelech, extended through Mahlon, and later extended through Obed (Ruth 4:14).

The law of restoration belongs to a community which is not held together by external powers above it, but by inner forces creating the harmony.<sup>11</sup>

When that harmony is disrupted by any of these crimes, it is again the responsibility of the *go'el* to see to it that equilibrium is restored. Two examples may be cited.

Whenever possible, revenge was to be systematically carried out against the individual who robbed the offended party of part of the clan's *nephes* as stated in the Torah (Num. 35:19). Yet, because an individual's nephew extends through his *bayith, sem*, and personal possessions in Semitic cultures, there are instances in the Old Testament where the avenger of blood (*go'el haddam*) not only kills the guilty party, but also all of his family, as well as confiscating or destroying his possession's. In 1 Kings 16:11 Zimri destroys the whole house of Baasha, leaving him no kinsman to wreak counter-revenge. In a similar case, Yahweh directs the camp of Israel to stone Achan with his family and his personal possessions for disobeying his clear command (Josh. 7:1ff.). Such total vengeance is difficult for western minds to comprehend and may underlie much of the Occidental world's attempts to see a different God in the Old Testament from the God revealed in the pages of the New Testament. To Hebrew minds, however, the disruption of social equilibrium meant simply that it had to be restored. The principle remained the same. Whereas western societies restore justice by means of external laws imputed by the State, ancient Israelite society restored justice by means of the divinely appointed agent of restoration (Lev. 25:25ff.).<sup>29</sup>

#### Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

Although there are no cognate forms for *ga'al* in the contemporary Near Eastern texts which have been discovered so far,<sup>30</sup> the redemption of property and persons is fairly commonplace.

In the Laws of Eshnunna, for example, paragraph 39 states:

<sup>28</sup> Pedersen, op. cit., p. 392;

<sup>29</sup> Cf. T. B. *Kiddushin* 20b. In commenting on Lev. 25:47, 48 R. Ishmael suggested that even though the human tendency is to reject an idolater who happens to be an Israelite, maybe Yahweh commanded his redemption so that he would not be absorbed by the heathens.

<sup>30</sup> However, cf. H.B. Huffmon, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 179, for an exception found in the Amorite personal name Ga'alalum.

If a man is hard up and sells his house, the owner of the house shall (be entitled to) redeem (it) whenever the purchaser (re)sells it.<sup>39</sup>

This law is similar to that of Leviticus 25, except for the conditional character of this law compared with the unconditional right in Leviticus for the original owner to redeem what was originally "given" to him by Yahweh. Khafajah text 8231 places another qualification on the reselling of property. Under this legal code one cannot "redeem the field with money belonging to another person."<sup>33</sup> Again, the Levitical law makes no such demand.

A closer parallel can be found in the Laws of Hammurabi,<sup>34</sup> where the sale of patrimonial land is banned altogether. Greenberg comments that this custom might have been based on a feudalistic economy in which all land belonged to the king and was held only as a grant or fief by his subjects: "They had possession, but not ownership of the property entrusted to them."<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Israel's God claimed to own the land himself (Lev. 25:23) and was unwilling for Israel to set up a monarchy like their Near Eastern neighbors (1 Sam. 8:10-18). Several other examples of property redemption could be cited, but perhaps Stamm's summary can suffice:

The *ge'ullah*, as a right or duty to buy back lost family property or slaves, was not limited to Israel. The Babylonian law knows this with regard to land which was sold, as well as persons. In Babylonia the verb "paturu"-"to release, redeem," takes the place of the Hebrew *ga'al*.<sup>36</sup>

Yahweh never unconditionally gave the land of Canaan, modern-day Palestine, to Israel. He merely allowed them to take possession of it, to be stewards of it as strangers and sojourners in it with himself, according to the covenant agreement they ratified through Moses. There is a world of difference, practically speaking, between giving something to someone and temporarily loaning it, until the time for the giving of a much greater gift.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> J. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 163.

<sup>32</sup> R. Harris, "The Archive of the Sin Temple in Khafajah," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 9 (1955): 96,97.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>34</sup> Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>35</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, S.v. "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee," p. 577.

"Theologisches Handwörterbuch des Alten Testament, S.v. "ga'al," by J. Stamm, cited in D. Leggett, *The Levirate and Go'el Institutions in the Old Testament* (Cherry Hill, N.J.: Mack Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 63-65.

<sup>37</sup> Heb. 12: 18-24.

### Conclusion

It is hoped that this fresh treatment of the word *ga'el* as well as the institution for which it stands can clear away some of the misconceptions orbiting around it and allow it to be seen in a clearer light: a referent for the divinely appointed agent of restoration; a cultural gyroscope in an amphictyonic confederacy built on the cornerstone of a firm relationship with Yahweh and extending through the family, tribe, and providing solidarity, security, and justice for Israel.

It is further hoped that the anthropological concept of equilibrium can serve to provide an investigative framework broad enough in perspective to allow the institution to be seen more distinctly in its various spiritual, social, and economic dimensions. In this way others continue their investigations within a more scientifically accurate schema.

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