

NOTES

Problems in Ruth 2.7

“And I shall gather among the sheaves after the reapers. And she came and stood from then the morning and until now; this her sitting (in) the house a little while.”

This last part of Ruth 2.7 presents the most serious textual difficulty in the whole Book of Ruth. Many attempts have been made, at various times, to find a solution. The whole verse is composed of 17 Hebrew words; and only the first three words, “And she said, ‘Let me glean please’”, present no difficulty.

The problems to be considered here are as follows:

1. Is the Hebrew word *ba'omarim* “among the sheaves” inconsistent with verse 15?
2. What is the possible meaning of the word *'amad* “stand” in the context of verse 7?
3. Is the Hebrew expression *me'az haboqer* “from then the morning” a conflation of “from then” and “from the morning”?
4. What is the origin and meaning of the last four words, *zeh shibtah habayith me'at* “this her sitting (in) the house a little while”?

There have been many commentators and textual critics who have tried to solve these problems. The problems are closely connected with each other, and therefore they cannot be treated separately; but if we solve the problem of the possible meaning of the word *'amad*, then the rest of the problems can be solved in the light of that solution.

In this note I want to propose the literal and regular sense of *'amad* “to stand” for the translation of the Hebrew *vatabo vata'amod* “and she came and has stood” in our verse.

1. *ba'omarim* “among the sheaves”

Many critics note that the clause “I shall gather among the sheaves” is inconsistent with verse 15, because it is only in verse 15 that Ruth is given permission to glean “even among the sheaves”. Because Boaz arranges for Ruth to glean “even among the sheaves” it is out of place to have Ruth request and receive permission to glean “among the sheaves” here in verse 7. For this reason many scholars delete the word *ba'omarim* entirely. In *A Translator's Handbook on Ruth* de Waard and Nida express the view that the phrase “among the sheaves” was mistakenly introduced into this verse from verse 15. They encourage translators to omit the phrase, and to translate as in GNB: “follow the workers and gather grain”. This type of translation follows partly the evidence of the ancient versions, in that the phrase is lacking in the Syriac and in the Vulgate.

Some scholars propose taking the Hebrew word as *ba'amarim* “stalks, swathe or row of fallen grain” instead of *ba'omarim* “among the sheaves”.

Thus Rudolph translates the passage under discussion: "I will gather blades (of grain) behind the reapers." However Hertzberg observes that this particular meaning of the Hebrew is very questionable, and that this would be the only instance where the collective singular noun would have a plural suffix. Jack M. Sasson is certainly right when he maintains that such "improvements" of the text are not only quite unnecessary, but even miss a crucial moment in the development of the story (his commentary *Ruth*, page 48). Sasson understands the text in terms of the intentional ploy of Ruth to meet Boaz, the owner of the field. The request that Ruth brought could not be fulfilled by a mere overseer. All that he could do was to ask her to step aside and wait until the owner (Boaz) arrived. This was Ruth's ploy: in this way she was assured of meeting Boaz, since he could hardly fail to notice her as she was standing by. It should be emphasized that the Hebrew text has no problem of grammar or structure at this point. Inconsistency in the content cannot be any justification for altering the text or omitting a word from it.

2. *'amad* "stand"

The problem is to determine the meaning of this use of the word *'amad* in the context of verse 7. The verb itself is not a difficult word: it means "to stand, stand forth, tarry, delay, remain, continue, endure, be steadfast, persist, remain standing" (*Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Brown, Driver, Briggs). *'amad* in verse 7 could refer to the act of gleaning, as many translations have taken it; or it could refer to standing and waiting for the owner to come and give permission (Sasson).

Translators who understand that *'amad* refers to the act of gleaning translate *vata'amod* as "standing on her feet" (that is, "working without stopping"). But this stretches the meaning of the verb in a manner which has no parallel anywhere else in the Old Testament, as noted by Sasson and also Edward R. Campbell (*Ruth*, page 95). However, as Sasson notes, the translation of this verb as "wait for" or "wait" is supported by Old Testament parallels.

Commentators treat the word *'amad* in verse 7 in the following different ways:

- some omit the word entirely
- some take the word to be *vata'amor* "and she gleaned stalks" in place of *vata'amod*
- some translate as "standing on her feet" signifying that Ruth was gleaning without stopping
- some translate the word "continue", which is the traditional translation, signifying continual gleaning
- some translate the word "wait" or "wait for", indicating that Ruth was waiting for the owner, who could give permission to glean among the sheaves.

3. *me'az* "from then"

The literal meaning of *me'az* is "from then". Some scholars take this to mean simply "from". The context and parallel references might

support this rendering, but again Campbell has a different opinion: he points out that in parallels like Ex 4.10 *me'az* is followed by a suffixed infinitive construct in what is probably a fixed grammatical combination, while support for understanding “from the morning” for the expression in verse 7 is very weak. His alternative proposal is to take the text as *me'or* “from the light” and get “from the light of morning”.

Another possibility is to assume that there existed alternative forms of the text in two early Hebrew manuscripts, one having “from then and up to now” and the other “from the morning and up to now”. Conflation, that is the inclusion of both alternatives, would have resulted in the text as we have it (Campbell, page 95).

4. *zeh shibtah habayith me'at* “this her sitting the house a little while”

This part of the text is not clear as a Hebrew sentence. An RSV footnote says, “the meaning of the Hebrew text is uncertain.” The difficulty seems to be at least as old as the Septuagint translation; and the texts of the ancient versions appear to represent attempts to deal with the difficulty. The Septuagint says, “she has not ceased (working) in the field for a moment”; the Vulgate has “and she has not any time gone home”. We cannot be sure whether these ancient versions reflect different earlier Hebrew texts, or whether they had the same Hebrew source text but attempted to get around the difficulty they found in it. It seems more likely, as D.R.G. Beattie suggests, that the translators of the ancient versions encountered the difficulty which we are still facing, and that they tried to overcome it by providing a few words which they judged appropriate to the context, in place of the unclear Hebrew.

A proposed solution

1. Even if the Hebrew text is not very smooth, we should not omit the unclear words or replace them with the translation of the ancient versions. We can accept the Hebrew text as it is.

2. An explanation of the social background of gleaning in ancient Israel should be introduced, so that the text can be understood clearly. For example, the information may be given that gleaning is done in the field where the harvesting has been completed. And it is important to know that gleaning “among the sheaves” is not allowed, unless the owner of the field has given permission. In Ruth 2.15 Boaz gives orders to allow Ruth to glean “even among the sheaves”; but the Korean Version (1911, revised 1956) missed this point, and did not reflect the word “even” in its translation. To allow Ruth to glean “even among the sheaves” was a great consideration by Boaz for Ruth. But this point was not brought out in the traditional Korean versions because of the lack of knowledge about the social background of gleaning in ancient Israel. When the explanation is given, there is no need to change *'omarim* “sheaves” in verse 7 to *'amarim* “row of fallen grain”; and the word should certainly not be omitted.

3. The plot of the story indicates that the real intention of Ruth in going to glean is to meet Boaz. In contrast with chapter 1, where Ruth is

a polite daughter-in-law, she appears as a bold and risk-taking woman in chapter 2. Here she asks her mother-in-law if she can go gleaning (verse 2); and this already indicates that she has something else in her mind besides gleaning. The plot of chapter 2 is the dramatic meeting of these two lovers. Boaz is introduced (verse 1); Ruth goes gleaning (verse 2); Naomi gives permission to go gleaning (verse 3); Ruth happens to come to the field of Boaz, and at the same time Boaz arrives at the field (verse 4); Boaz finds Ruth (verse 5); Boaz hears about Ruth from the overseer (verse 6); Ruth is intentionally waiting for Boaz (verse 7); Boaz and Ruth meet and have lunch together (verses 8–10). When Ruth begins to glean, Boaz gives permission to glean even among the sheaves (verses 15–16); Ruth gleans till evening and returns home with her grain (verses 17–18). Naomi asks about gleaning, and yet the focus of attention is not on the gleaning but on the meeting with Boaz (verse 19): it is the field of Boaz in which Ruth gleaned, according to the special favor which Boaz showed her (verse 20); and Boaz has invited Ruth to continue gleaning with his workers until the harvest season ends (verse 21). The scenario is the meeting of Boaz and Ruth; and Naomi assists this process. But Ruth herself positively moves to meet Boaz through her actions. As Sasson says regarding verse 7, “Ruth had come with a request that could not be fulfilled by a mere overseer. All that he could do was to ask her to stand aside and wait until the ‘boss’ arrived. In this way Ruth was assured of meeting Boaz, since the latter could hardly fail to notice her as she **stood by** (*vata’amod*)!” (Sasson, page 48).

Suggested translation

(3) So Ruth set out and came to the field and gleaned behind the harvesters; and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech. (*Verse 3 is an introductory summary, and closes the first paragraph of the chapter. Verse 4 begins a new paragraph.*)

(7) “She asked me to let her glean and gather **among the sheaves** behind the harvesters. She came from the morning and **has stood by** until now. She was sitting for a while under the shelter.”

(15) As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, “Let her glean *even* among the sheaves, and do not humiliate her.”

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Wonderful Counsellor . . . (Isaiah 9.6)

Translators often have difficulties in rendering the meaning of the Hebrew words *pele’ yo’ets* “Wonder(ful) Counsellor”, as they find a great variety of equivalents in the different versions in English and French.

RSV has “Wonderful Counsellor” (note that both words are capitalized);