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EDITOR: Paul Ellingworth

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Jocelyn Murray

THÉO R. SCHNEIDER

## TRANSLATING RUTH 4.1-10 AMONG THE TSONGA PEOPLE

The Rev. Theo Schneider is co-ordinator of a Bible translation project for the Tsonga-speaking people in South-East Africa (Southern Mozambique and the Transvaal). This article is the revised text of a paper presented at the UBS Translation Workshop in Crete in May 1981.

### **A familiar situation**

At first sight, the Tsonga-speaking Bible translators should find themselves at home in the small rural world of Elimelech and Naomi. Approaching the Book of Ruth with a certain amount of confidence, they have the impression that its text will lend itself easily to the process of analysis, transfer and reconstruction, and that the desired natural equivalence in the receptor languages will be readily available.

In traditional Tsongaland just as in the ancient land of Judah famines can drive families from home, fields and kin, in search of food. A young childless widow, faithful to the memory of the departed, will not hesitate to be inherited together with the fields and other properties of her first husband, if such an act of loyalty, of *pietas*, can perpetuate the name of the deceased among the living. From a Tsonga point of view the remarriage of Ruth, the young Moabite, to Boaz, a senior citizen (Ruth 3.10) of Bethel and a close relative of the late Elimelech, father of Mahlon, appears therefore highly proper. The palaver at the city gate, officially "for men only" although the fate of two women is directly at stake, sounds particularly familiar among Tsonga people—the two ladies have long made their free choice, manipulating the whole procedure while leaving the city elders with the illusion of being in full control of the situation. The fact is that Naomi and Ruth have at the right time taken certain specific initiatives which will yield the desired results, during the scene at the gate. All this seems to promise an easy task to the self-confident Bible translators—they would select the Book of Ruth as one of the first items in their Old Testament programme because the story of the young Moabite looks so simple, so close to countless similar life-stories in their traditional rural environment.

### **A strange case of inheritance**

This apparent simplicity however soon proves an illusion. A sharper look at the Book of Ruth reveals the skillful peculiarity, the uniqueness of its plot. Nothing is more subtle than what P. Humbert describes as "the art" of the

Book of Ruth.<sup>1</sup> With him most modern scholars underline the complexity of the legal and cultural situation reflected notably by the encounter at the gate in chapter 4.

No wonder therefore that a careful translation of these verses into contemporary African languages immediately raises a number of very significant cultural and linguistic problems. These center mostly around the behaviour of Naomi and Boaz in relation to the field of Elimelech and the widow of Mahlon.

### The field of Elimelech

In Ruth 4.3, Naomi is said, at least in English, to “have sold”, to “be selling” or to “want to sell” one of the fields possessed by the clan of Elimelech. This is how all the main Western versions and commentators render the phrase, with the exception perhaps of Luther and of some modern exegetes such as Rudolf, Lipinski, Sasson, etc.<sup>2</sup>

From the contemporary Tsonga point of view, the strange thing is not so much the fact that Naomi can offer her husband's land for sale, or that this land can be bought at a suitable price. Formerly, such a transaction would have greatly offended the traditional mode of land tenure. As all students of anthropology know, land possession in traditional societies rests on use—a particular field cannot be the object of commercial bargaining.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the cultural transition from a barter or subsistence economy to a monetary one has long penetrated the African continent, right to its remote corners. The local vernaculars have therefore not been long in evolving or creating the necessary terminology to express such modern developments concerning the ownership of land.<sup>4</sup> Elimelech's field might therefore very well be described nowadays as “on sale” or as “being bought”.

Nor is it strange to see an elderly widow like Naomi dealing with a particular field of her own (the *hel<sup>e</sup>qath hassadeh*, the “parcel of land” in v.3, distinct from the '*eth-kol-<sup>a</sup>ser le' elimelek*, in v.9, i.e., “the whole estate of Elimelech”

<sup>1</sup> P. Humbert, *Art et leçon de l'histoire de Ruth. Opuscules d'un Hébraïsant*, Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 2nd ed. 1958. See also J. Pedersen, *Israel: its life and culture*, I and II. London: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 1946, 91ff.; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: its life and institutions*. London: Darton Longman and Todd 1961, 21; Millar Burrows, *The marriage of Boaz and Ruth. Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, 1940, 445-454; H. H. Rowley, *The marriage of Ruth. Harvard Theological Review* 40, 1947, 77-99.

<sup>2</sup> Luther says 'sie "bietet feil"' = she offers for sale (venal, mercenary connotation) but also = she hands over, she surrenders. See W. Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth, Kommentar zum Alten Testament* 17 (1-3), 1962; E. Lipinski, *Le mariage de Ruth, Vetus Testamentum* 26, 1976, 126; I. M. Sasson, *Ruth*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1979, quoting R. Gordis, *Love marriage and business in the Book of Ruth, in A light unto my path: Old Testament Studies in honor of Jacob M. Myers*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1974, 241-264; R. Westbrook, *Redemption of land. Israel Law Review* 6, 1971, 367-375; W. McKane, *Ruth and Boaz, Glasgow University Oriental Society* 19, 1961-62, 29-40.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Schapera, ed., *The Bantu-speaking tribes of South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press 1956) 156ff., for instance, states that a household head can give any part of his land to relatives or friends, with the approval of headmen; he can also lend it, but he can never sell it or dispose of it in any other way in return for material considerations. See also M. J. Herskovits: "The formula for land ownership in non-literate societies—and also for property in general—is that title rests on use", and therefore not on purchase! (*Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Knopf 1958, 159).

<sup>4</sup> See notably Lucy Mair, *Modern developments in African land tenure, in Studies in applied anthropology*. London: Athlone Press 1957.

and his sons. Although, among the Bantu-speaking peoples of South Africa<sup>5</sup> as in ancient Israel,<sup>6</sup> widows do not legally inherit the property of their late husbands, they certainly possess the right to use the fields, huts and household goods of the deceased as long as they live.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, lawful wives have traditionally been allocated one or more fields by their husband; they will continue to cultivate these fields after his death, and their children will possess preferential rights over their mother's cultivated land. Moreover, a woman feels bound to her piece of land by the customary mode of agriculture—only the usual land-clearing operations and the care of the span of oxen at ploughing time will normally be reserved for male members of the household. This leaves women entirely in charge of the actual cultivation, i.e., hoeing, replanting, thinning, weeding, occasional collecting and harvesting. Naomi's position in Bethlehem might have been very similar, and she might have been free to care at will for her allocated portion of Elimelech's property. We shall come back to this when dealing with the exegesis of 4.3 and notably with the meaning of the verbal form *māk<sup>e</sup>rah*.

Yet Naomi's attitude as a whole becomes completely incomprehensible for Tsonga people, the moment she decides not only to ensure the proper cultivation of her piece of land, but to dispose of it, i.e., to "offer it on sale" (at least in English!), to part with it, to make money out of it. Normally, returning from an exile of ten years in Moab, she would immediately claim "her" field back for cultivation, as the Shunammite woman does in 2 Kings 8.1-6, after an absence of seven years among the Philistines. Far from parting with the field, and in case she failed to cultivate it herself, Naomi would entrust the piece of land to her beloved daughter-in-law Ruth; that would be her obvious traditional duty in loyalty to her late husband and his son. Instead of gleaning for subsistence from the fields of neighbours, Ruth in turn would use her right as Mahlon's widow, within the clan of Elimelech—she would start cultivating the field of Naomi at the next rainy season.

Quite apart from traditional land tenure, in a modern Tsonga society where land can be purchased outside tribally-owned farms, no individual owner would dream of selling what he bought at great cost for himself and his household. He would stick to it firmly and leave it in heritage, by will or by law, to his children. Moreover a clan as responsible as the one of Elimelech and Boaz would simply not allow a widow to dispose freely of her late husband's property without a proper "indaba". Besides, what would Naomi gain from the sale of her plot? A few shekels, quickly spent, leaving her more destitute than ever. Tsonga Bible translators will thus instinctively query an exegesis of Ruth 4.3 which describes Naomi as "forced to sell out of necessity". On the contrary, the poorer she is, the more stubbornly she would stick to any cultivated tract of land in her possession.

<sup>5</sup> Schapera *op. cit.*, 157ff.; *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*. London: British Association for the Advancement of Science, 6th ed. 1951, 116ff.

<sup>6</sup> Pedersen, *op. cit.*, 92; de Vaux, *op. cit.*, 87ff and note 45.

<sup>7</sup> The inheritance of property by daughters of the deceased in the absence of a male heir is documented by the case of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 27.1ff and 36.5ff. But the property remains in the clan.

### Locating the cultural gap

Facing such a peculiar cultural situation, sensitive Bible translators in Africa will first of all refrain from a "cultural translation" or adaptation.<sup>8</sup> If need be, they will render with the appropriate lexical means at their disposal, the strange Hebrew custom which apparently allows a widow such as Naomi to sell the property of her late husband. The institutions of ancient Israel might well have differed considerably on this point from those of traditional Bantu-speaking Africa. The "commercial transaction" implied by the vocabulary used in the Western versions of Ruth belongs perhaps to the original message of that passage; it would have to be rendered faithfully, possibly with an explanation in a footnote or an entry in the glossary.

Such translators may likewise be aware of the typical Hebrew custom of *ge'ullāh*, or repurchase of land sold in Israel under conditions of particular distress; the next-of-kin of the unfortunate seller is bound by custom to redeem the sold property, bringing it back into the heritage of the clan (Lev. 25.25ff). Ruth 4 could offer an example of such a generous redemption by purchase—she would simply invite her *go'el* to act and to actually pay for Elimelech's field.<sup>9</sup> The proceeds of that transaction would presumably go to Naomi as an immediate financial aid; alternately, it would be paid to an unknown Israelite or even to a foreigner (see Lev. 25.47), unrelated to Elimelech's clan who would have bought the field somehow in the past (but when and from whom, since Naomi had just returned from Moab?) and from whom it must now be repurchased. Yet this would be in contradiction with the MT which says twice that the *go'el* will buy *miyyad Nā'omi*, v.5 and 9, and also *ūmē'eth Rūth* (see HOTTP, Vol. II, p. 142). To the phrase "Naomi is selling" of v.3 would correspond, in the mouth of Boaz and the other anonymous next-of-kin, phrases such as "you buy" (v.5); "buy it, buy it for yourself" (v.4, 8) "I have bought" (v.9), all carrying, in the English of RSV at least, the semantic components of "commercial transaction" or "change of ownership". The Hebrew roots *mākar* (1 x, v.3) and *qānah* (6 x, v.4, v.5a, v.5b, v.8, v.9, v.10) would thus constitute a complementary set of meaning, of the converse type buy/sell<sup>10</sup> usually associated with a financial operation involving the use of money. To the same semantic domain would belong related lexical units such as "to purchase, to pay for, to acquire (for a price), to become the owner of."

But are we sure that Naomi is actually selling the piece of land? In the specific context of the Book of Ruth and notably of its chapter 4, do the Hebrew roots *mākar* and *qānah* really carry the diagnostic component of "cash transaction"? Would Hebrew culture allow such a transaction between a widow and her *go'el*, not in case of poverty and distress in general, but of inheritance from a deceased husband, and in conjunction with the levirate marriage of a daughter-in-law?

<sup>8</sup> E. A. Nida and C. R. Taber, *The theory and practice of translation*. London: United Bible Societies 1969, 110, 134.

<sup>9</sup>"Zurückkaufen" or "vorkaufen", repurchase or purchase in advance. See Rudolph, *op. cit.*, 63ff.

<sup>10</sup> E. A. Nida, *The componential analysis of meaning*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton 1975, 109.

Burrows and Rowley<sup>11</sup> have shown convincingly that the peculiarity of Ruth chapter 4 lies in the unique combination of three institutions of ancient Israel, namely inheritance, redemption and levirate marriage. (i) Elimelech and his sons have died without posterity; their estate must be cared for by relatives, waiting for a proper male heir; (ii) Elimelech's property has to be redeemed, maintained in the clan and protected by the next of kin; it should not be sold to an outsider; (iii) a husband must be found for Ruth in the clan of Elimelech, to look after her (and Naomi) and to give her a son, who will one day inherit Elimelech's property. These three customary institutions are of course closely related in the narrative of 4.1-10, and this explains the uniqueness and the complexity of the pericope.

#### The main lexical units of Ruth 4

It might be useful at this stage to make a linguistic digression; one should like to see whether the semantic analysis of some of the key terms used in the MT of Ruth 4 can confirm the above cultural analysis. It seems clear that one common component of meaning covers the three cultural institutions involved in Ruth 4. It is carried by the single lexical unit *gā'al* and its derivatives which are used not less than 23 times in Ruth.<sup>12</sup> This root obviously gives the clue to the interpretation of the whole Book of Ruth and notably its chapter 4; it refers to far more than a simple financial transaction.

To "act as the next-of-kin" or to "redeem" may involve, in some specific cases, the payment of a sum of money, for instance in the redemption of an Israelite from slavery, or the repurchase of a piece of Hebrew land sold under conditions of particular poverty (Lev. 25.25ff).<sup>13</sup>

Used in other contexts, however, for instance in the case of blood vengeance, the root *gā'al* loses completely the diagnostic component of "payment", or of "commercial transaction". When applied to the inheritance of an estate and the protection of a young childless widow, the root takes up an entirely new component of meaning, non-commercial, non-monetary this time, namely the duty to protect, to maintain, to care for. In the company of the root *gā'al*, the related and secondary set of conversives, the pair *mākar/qānah*, seem also to shed their usual diagnostic component of "commercial transaction" and to assume the supplementary component of "to surrender" (. . . the field to the care of the *go'el*), "to hand over", and conversely "to accept" (. . . the responsibility for the field, for its cultivation), "to care for", "to look after" (. . . the field and the young widow). The root *qānah* thus becomes a synonym of *gā'al*. Their supplementary meaning of "redemption-responsibility" overlap in the context of Ruth 4. This is perfectly obvious in v.4 where both roots are used in parallelism; see also the parallel expressions *g'e'al-leka* in v.6, and *q'neh-lak* in v.8.

<sup>11</sup> Burrows, *op. cit.*, 445; Rowley, *op. cit.*, 85ff.

<sup>12</sup> J. J. Stamm (article) *gā'al*, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*. Munich 1971, 383ff.

<sup>13</sup> A. R. Johnson, The primary meaning of *gā'al*, in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum I* (Leiden: Brill 1953). 67-77; Stamm, *op. cit.*, 383ff.; H. Ringgren (article) *gā'al*, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1973, 886-890.

### Redefining the cultural gap

We can come back now to the translation of Ruth 4 and try to deal with the cultural gap between ancient and modern conceptions of inheritance when capital goods and widows are involved.

On the one hand, we have a typical Western idea of inheritance with all its financial, legal and social implications, such as declaring and valuing the estate, disposing of its assets, paying estate duties, transferring title deeds, claiming a life insurance for the widow, wishing her perhaps a happy remarriage with any suitable partner of her own choice most probably outside the family of the first husband, etc. Financial considerations will feature prominently in the disposal of the estate.

On the other hand, inheritance in Israel and in traditional Tsonga society is closely linked with the survival of the clan. The main pre-occupation of the near relatives is to see that the property of the deceased (land, cattle, implements, etc.), as well as his widow or widows are properly cared for and that the material and spiritual future of the clan is assured. No disposal, no sale, no purchase (why should the *go'el* purchase what belongs to him?), no acquisition at a price, but protection, redemption-responsibility, maintenance, care for the clan's property and for its women. Such is the semantic domain covered by the diagnostic components of *gā'al*, *makar* and *qānah* in Ruth 4.

By using expressions like "selling, the seller", "buying, the buyer" (GNB!), "buying, acquiring Ruth", etc., Western versions and commentators, followed by many so-called "missionary versions" in South-Eastern African vernaculars, have been guilty of cultural distortion,<sup>14</sup> they have missed the point of the source message and transferred their misconception to the receptor language.

### Inheriting the widow of Mahlon

So far for Elimelech's capital possessions. What about Ruth, the widow of Mahlon? If Tsonga Bible translators wonder why and how Naomi could ever sell her field, they are even more astonished to hear that Ruth the Moabite is to be bought (AV, RSV, GNB 1966 edition corrected later on, Moffat, Smith-Goodspeed, Weiss 1964, Campbell 1965, etc.). Whether the so-called buyer is the anonymous close relative of Elimelech, or Boaz, makes no difference. By her marriage to Mahlon, Ruth has been received once and for all into the clan of Elimelech. If a "mohar", or bride-price (*lobola*; *ndzovolo* in Tsonga) has ever been offered to her parents in Moab at the time of her marriage to Mahlon, it was not the equivalent of a purchase. Every student of social anthropology knows that the *lobola* represents "a compensation to the group that has lost a member, to restore the equilibrium",<sup>15</sup> not a commercial bargain. The "mohar" of ancient Israel presumably fulfills the same function.

Moreover, in cases of inheritance, the bride-price is certainly not to be offered a second time to the woman's parents. This is never done among the

<sup>14</sup> W. L. Wonderly, *Bible translations for popular use*. New York: United Bible Societies 1968, 23ff; D. H. Weiss, The use of *q-n-h* in connection with marriage. *Harvard Theological Review* 57, 1961, 244-248; E. T. Campbell, *Ruth* (The Anchor Bible). New York: Doubleday 1975.

<sup>15</sup> E. J. Krige, in Schapera, *op. cit.*, 113.

Tsonga people, nor was it done in ancient Israel or among the pre-Islamic Arabs.<sup>16</sup>

The symbolic shoe offered to Boaz by the next-of-kin when he declines to marry Ruth represents of course the opposite of a purchasing price. It symbolizes the surrendering of the *go'el's* rights and duties to Boaz.<sup>17</sup>

If, in traditional Tsonga terms, Ruth, the widow of Mahlon, could never be bought or “lobolo-ed” a second time, she could certainly be inherited. The form of levirate marriage involved in the case of Ruth and Boaz seems entirely proper to Tsonga readers. Moreover a widow can be inherited, together with the property of the deceased, in one single legal move, similar to the one occurring at the gate of Bethlehem. Burrows<sup>18</sup> would like to distinguish sharply between a levirate marriage and the inheritance of property. For him Boaz fulfills his redemption-responsibility by purchasing the field from Naomi. In a separate move he accepts to raise a posterity for Mahlon by marrying Ruth. Such a distinction does not seem to be supported by the referential meaning of Ruth, where the same lexical units *gā'al* and *qānah* are used in parallel and alternately to express “caring for Elimelech’s property” and “caring for Mahlon’s widow”. The narrative covers one and the same semantic domain of “protection, redemption-responsibility, maintenance”, etc.

What appears even more out of place, in a Tsonga setting, is the contention of Koschaker and others<sup>19</sup> that Ruth was acquired as part of a larger commercial move, and that the root *qānah* has kept, in Ruth chapter 4, its basic and central meaning of “purchasing”. We have shown that culturally this is totally off the mark. Besides, a sound semantic approach will always beware of arguing from the point of view of a so-called “original” or “central” meaning. In this sense also, quality translation will always give priority to contextual consistency over verbal consistency.

Most commentators have sensed the problem and refrained from using the commercial terminology when speaking of the marriage of Ruth to Boaz. They often attribute to the root *qānah* in v.5 and v.10 (where it refers to Ruth being “acquired” as a wife) a meaning different from the meaning of the same root in v.4ff, when it refers to the so-called “purchase” of Elimelech’s field by the *go'el*. For a case in point, see the criticism of GNB implied in the commentary of J. de Waard and E. A. Nida, in Vol. XV of *Helps for Translators*.<sup>20</sup> With due respect to these masters in the art of translation, I feel that they have not gone far enough in their criticism. If our analysis is correct, it becomes evident that the diagnostic component of “commercial operation” is absent from the root *qānah* in all its occurrences in Ruth chapter 4 because the owner is and remains

<sup>16</sup> P. Joüon, *Ruth: commentaire philologique et exégétique* (Rome: Institut Biblique Pontifical, 2nd ed. 1953): “Dans le loi du lévirat, la femme n’est nullement achetée. Chez les Arabes préislamiques, l’héritier du mort évite de payer une dote [sic], en jetant son manteau sur la veuve, avant que celle-ci ne soit retournée chez ses parents” (p. 83).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Rudolph, *op. cit.*, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Burrows, *op. cit.* 449.

<sup>19</sup> P. Koschaker, *Eheschliessung und Kauf nach Alten Rechten. Archiv Orientalni*. 18, 1950, 210ff.

<sup>20</sup> J. de Waard and E. A. Nida, *The Book of Ruth* (Translators Handbooks). New York: United Bible Societies 1973.

Elimelech's clan to which Boaz also belongs. There is no evidence in the narrative itself that Boaz ever paid anything for "all that belonged to Elimelech", no more than he paid for Ruth. In fact, the supplementary meaning of *qānah* in that passage overlaps with the meaning dominant in the whole of the Book of Ruth, namely the gentlemanly care, the protection, the responsible action of Boaz, the perfect *go'el*.

### Concluding remarks

1. One should like to stress the remarkable proximity of the customs and institutions of ancient Israel and the traditional culture of south-east Africa. Very often a comparison of the two throws an amazing light on passages easily misunderstood and awkwardly translated by Western minds.
2. The need will be felt more and more for Bible commentaries written by African or Asian biblical scholars, with a thorough knowledge of Greek and Hebrew coupled with an instinctive and theoretical knowledge of their own cultural heritage.
3. The basic tools of componential analysis of meaning can be applied with great profit to the biblical source texts, and notably to Masoretic Hebrew, as this paper attempted to show, and this at the level of lexical units, paragraphs, and even a whole book such as Ruth. More guidance is however needed in this type of fascinating exercise and in a more critical use of available dictionaries.

## CAHIERS DE TRADUCTION BIBLIQUE

Sous le titre de *Cahiers de traduction biblique*, des représentants de la SIL (Société internationale de linguistique) et de l'ABU se proposent de publier une revue de langue française correspondant à TBT. Des articles parus dans TBT ou dans NOT (Notes on Translation) seront traduits en français et d'autres seront directement rédigés dans cette langue. On prévoit une parution de deux cahiers par année, avec 32 pages pour chacun. Cette revue sera spécialement destinée aux traducteurs de la Bible des pays francophones, mais elle devrait aussi intéresser des biblistes non directement engagés dans le travail de traduction. Un prospectus de lancement paraîtra à la fin de 1982. Les personnes qui désireraient en recevoir peuvent s'adresser à la rédaction de TBT.