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Ruth 2,7: Why the Overseer Was Embarrassed

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Comments

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Ruth 2,7: Why the Overseer Was Embarrassed

Michael Carasik

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D. R. G. Beattie's suggestion¹ that the difficult phrase *זה שבתה הבית מעט* is a midrashic gloss was, it seems to me, effectively refuted by the observations of Avi Hurvitz² that (1) *זה ש* to draw a conclusion from a proof-text is not attested, and (2) *בית* could not take the direct object. I would add that the verb seems quite inappropriate for anything other than an overnight stay, let alone one which is *מעט*. Hurvitz' own suggestion, that the words are an author's deliberate device to depict the overseer as confused and apologetic, would be cogent if only the reason for the man's embarrassment were clear. But, as Beattie has correctly pointed out,³ in this part of Hurvitz' proposal »he has created a new midrash.«

The key to the solution is provided by Edward Campbell, who explains why he deliberately did not translate most of v. 7: »The bracketed blank space may help the reader to see where things stand before these words and where they stand after them. Somehow the intervening words provided the transition.«⁴ The immediately succeeding verses should tell us what these four words were meant to convey. Boaz' response, in vv. 8,9, is not to the overseer, but to Ruth herself, and contains the following five points: 1) don't glean in another field; 2) don't leave my field, but glean with my female workers; 3) don't leave the women's field; 4) I've seen to it that the men will not molest you; 5) feel free to drink my workers' water when you are thirsty. We may conclude (from points 1 and 2) that Ruth was leaving the field as Boaz arrived; (from points 3 and 4) that something done to her by the male reapers had made her uncomfortable enough to leave; and (from point 5) that Ruth's attempt to get a drink of water had provided the occasion for the reapers' action.

In plain terms, the situation which so embarrassed the overseer that he stumbled over the explanation of it was this: as he was speaking, Ruth was at some distance from them, with her back turned to Boaz, and on her way out of the field, because of an incident of what today we would call sexual harassment,⁵ which she experienced when she sought

¹ D. R. G. Beattie, »A Midrashic Gloss in Ruth 2,7«, ZAW 89 (1977), 122–124.

² A. Hurvitz, »Ruth 2,7 – A Midrashic Gloss?«, ZAW 95 (1983), 121–123.

³ D. R. G. Beattie, »Ruth 2,7 and Midrash«, ZAW 99 (1987), 422–423.

⁴ E. F. Campbell, Jr., Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary, AB 7, 85. This procedure was actually adopted by G. Kuhn, »Ruth 2,7«, ZAW 46 (1928), 79–80, who, however, drew his hint from v. 9b and failed to consider vv. 8,9a.

⁵ I am certainly not claiming that sexual harassment was a category of behavior recognized in the Israelite legal system, or even one which had a name in Biblical Hebrew. But that the *phenomenon* of sexual language or contact that could make a woman uncomfortable existed in reality in the ancient world there can, I think, be no serious doubt.

to slake her thirst with a drink of water. This scenario is quite plausible in light of Ex 2,17, where the shepherds drive Jethro's daughters away from the well until Moses shows up and rescues them. According to this explanation of the overseer's words, הַי might refer either to the situation in general or to the man primarily responsible for the incident; שְׂכַחָהּ is probably a distortion of שָׁכַח. It is impossible to reproduce this effect in translation, but the overseer probably began to explain what had happened, became embarrassed, and tried to make some lame explanation: »This fellow ... she's just going home for a bit.«

This hypothesis can no more be proven than Beattie's or Hurvitz'. But I have seven reasons for advancing it: (1) It explains why Boaz noticed Ruth; (2) It makes Boaz' remarks in vv. 8.9 a response that is immediately appropriate to its context; (3) It explains the current form of the text and the inability of the versions to translate it; (4) It is a *useful* hypothesis – this interpretation would add significance to other parts of the book;⁶ (5) It brings the passage up to the marvelous stylistic level of the rest of the Book of Ruth; (6) It adds another element to one of the major themes of the book, Ruth's untenable and even dangerous social status as long as she lacks a connection to a male provider; (7) It adds another element to the other major theme of the book, that over and over again chance might have prevented Ruth and Boaz from meeting and marrying, had not providential interference invisibly guided the story along to its conclusion with the birth of Obed, the ancestor of David.

Campbell has quite legitimately warned that »a hundred conjectures about a badly disrupted text are all more likely to be wrong than any one of them absolutely right!«⁷ Still, I have found no previous hypothesis on these four words that fits the problem as well as this one.

The difficult phrase *זוה שְׂכַחָהּ הַבַּיִת מֵעַט* of Ruth 2,7 likely represents a deliberate device to depict confused and apologetic speech because of an incident of sexual harassment. This hypotheses (1) explains why Boaz noticed Ruth; (2) makes vv. 8.9 appropriate to their context; (3) explains the current form of the text and the inability of the versions to translate it; (4) is a *useful* hypothesis, adding significance to other parts of the book; (5) brings the passage up to the stylistic level of the rest of the book; (6) reiterates Ruth's untenable social status; and (7) reiterates the element of providential interference guiding the fate of David's ancestors.

⁶ E. g., it would explain *לֹא תַעֲרֹרְבָה* of v. 16 as a warning to the harvesters against even a remark that would make Ruth uncomfortable (as opposed to the actual physical contact implied earlier in *לְבַלְתִּי נִגְעַךְ*).

⁷ Ruth, p. 96.