

Naomi's Relative (Pronoun)

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Ruth 2:20a

(BHS)

וַתֹּאמֶר נְעֻמִי לְכַלְתָּהּ
בְּרוּךְ הוּא לַיהוָה
אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חֶסֶדוֹ
אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַמֵּתִים

(NASB)

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law,
“May he be blessed of the LORD
who has not withdrawn his kindness
to the living and to the dead.”

You may readily discern Naomi in line 1 and Yahweh in line 2. Note the passive participle *baruch*, “May he be blessed.” *Barach* means “to bless”—an apt name for a President. Line 3 begins with the relative pronoun, “**who**.” Who has not withdrawn his *hesed*, “covenant loyalty” or “fidelity” (in NASB, “kindness”). Note two direct object markers in line 4. *Chayim* is “life,” which you may remember from the song in *Fiddler on the Roof*, “To life, to life, le-chayim / Le-chayim, le-chayim to life!” (“le” is “to” in the song but not in our text of course).

On hearing Ruth's report, Naomi blessed the man who helped her (2:19). Then Ruth revealed the name of her benefactor: Boaz. Naomi replied, “May he be blessed of the LORD, who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead.” Then she told Ruth that Boaz was a relative, close enough to be a kinsman-redeemer. The question is, who had not withdrawn his kindness? Does Naomi's relative pronoun (“who”) refer to Yahweh or Boaz? Who is the antecedent of the “who”?

Some scholars persuasively argue that it refers to Yahweh. (Email me for the bibliography). It is God who is faithful to the living and the dead. But others persuasively argue that Boaz was true to Ruth, Naomi, and Elimelech her dead husband. But some (wisely) admit that the referent cannot be determined. It is an ambiguity in the text which could refer to either. That is why I chose the NASB for this one. Too many translations were failing to preserve the indeterminate syntax.

In Ruth there are only two actions that the narrative directly ascribes to Yahweh: he gave his people food (1:6), and he gave Ruth conception (4:13). The former was actualized in Boaz' fields, and the latter could hardly have happened without Boaz. Ruth found shelter under the *kanaph* ("wings") of Yahweh (2:12)—and under Boaz' *kanaph* (3:9). Yahweh and Boaz gave them rest. Yahweh and Boaz restored the family. Yahweh and Boaz redeemed the land. And Boaz enacted Yahweh's *hesed* to the living and the dead. The acts of God and his redeemer cannot be separated; they work in concert.

This has special significance for a Christian of course. The gospel is about how God actually was the Redeemer that he sent. The actions of Jesus and the actions of God cannot be separated. "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14:10). For Christians, what was a grammatical ambiguity in the ancient tongue of the Hebrews echoes the gospel of Jesus the God-man.

We are invited to enter into this reality as active participants. To continue the quote from John above,

Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:11 – 12)

The Father continues to call and reach the lost through his people. The works of God and the works of his church, in this sense, cannot be distinguished either. Jesus actually says in the quote above that we will do greater works than his. Why? Because he goes to the Father, and from there, he sends his Spirit into his people. In them, the work of reclaiming this whole world continues.

Some years ago a family steadfastly showed kindness toward a neighboring family whose adult daughter had spread malicious gossip about them. One day, after yet another act of kindness was shown, the gossip's younger sister asked a member of the wronged family why they continued to act positively. The gracious family member replied, "Because of what God has done for us in Christ." As a result of experiencing the good neighbors' *hesed*, the sister's entire family came to know the Source of the *hesed* shown to them.

The watching world can see the Father's *hesed*—in us. We are what they know of Christ; "we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Cor 5:20).

So let's let them see!