The Gö'el Concept:
Comprehensive and Incarnational Redemption

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I. INTRODUCTION

While a variety of predications can be provided for the establishing and administering of justice for the poor, none is, or should be, more influential in Wesleyan thought than the Scriptures. Facilely the New Testament comes to mind, but the Old Testament also offers significant direction.

A promising and productive topic of the Hebrew Scriptures that I believe can contribute significantly to a biblical foundation of justice for the poor is the gō'el concept. It provides a model of principle and practice, establishing not only the appropriate action on behalf of the poor, but also determining the identity of the needy and the responsible and privileged respondent.

This paper will explore this gō'el concept in its Semitic context and will establish principles and procedures of justice applicable to our times.
II. ETYMOLOGY AND PARALLEL ROOTS

Go'el is the active participle of the Qal stem of the verb gā'āl which is used with its derivatives 118 times in the Hebrew Bible. While Go'ēl is a form of the verb, it is for all practical proposes, a substantive in its own right.

The root g'āl appears to be almost exclusively Hebrew so that its original meaning cannot be determined etymologically. Its synchronic use, rather than its diachronic use, must be determinative in establishing its meaning. Basically, this root means to deliver, to rescue. The main word that stands in parallelism with, and is almost synonymous to gā'āl is pādhā (to ransom). Further yāsha' (to save, deliver), nātsal (to save, rescue in the Hip'īl stem), and 'āzār (to help), also occur in parallel structure. The use of the Hebrew preposition min (from) also indicates that from which a person is rescued.

Go'ēl, used some 44 times in the Hebrew Bible, designates a person or God who rescues, who delivers, who redeems. A consideration of the passages in which this word occurs will reveal both the function of the redeemer and the relationship between the redeemer and the redeemed.
III. APPEARANCES IN LEGAL PASSAGES

The *gō'el* is found in five situations, depicting actions that a true man would take for a dependent kinsman.

a. The repurchasing of a field which had been sold in time of need, in order to restore the possession to the family.\(^ {10}\)

b. The freeing of an Israelite slave who had sold himself in a time of poverty.\(^ {11}\)

c. The avenging of a murder by familial retribution within the context of clan law.\(^ {12}\)

d. The restoration/redemption of a votive offering, dedicated to deity or the redemption of the firstborn of an unclean animal. In these cases the redeemer would have been the owner of the property.\(^ {13}\)

e. The receiving (rather than giving this time) as the responsible head of the family, of restitution for a wrong done to an injured party.\(^ {14}\)

These Pentateuchal passages emphasize that the family must be maintained both in terms of persons and possessions. Obviously, transmittible possessions are inconsequential if there is no family to receive and retain them. Both property and persons are viewed as God's possessions and therefore a special sense of stewardship surrounds not only the land, but also the relationships which human beings have one with another.\(^ {15}\)
But even in these judicial contexts, it must be noted that this responsibility of redeeming was social and not legal. There is no indication that failure to act resulted in legal penalty, nor that a person could be forced to respond by a legal process. While there was no legal consequence, clearly there was social consequence. Ultimately opprobrium was more attractive than suit for breach of duty.\textsuperscript{16}

IV. APPEARANCES IN FIGURATIVE PASSAGES

In contexts other than that of the Pentateuch, the \textit{gō'el} concept is used in a figurative sense. It is utterly critical for people to have a \textit{gō'el}.\textsuperscript{17} If they do not have such, there is no one to care for their rights and honor.\textsuperscript{18}

In such extreme cases \textit{Yahweh} is invoked. He is needed to plead the cause of the fatherless and widow\textsuperscript{19} and to save the worshipper from distress\textsuperscript{20} and death.\textsuperscript{21} But not only is this divine redemption personal, it is also corporate.

\textit{G'1} is used in connection with the exodus from Egypt, emphasizing the deliverance from the distress of bondage.\textsuperscript{22} Minimally then, the release from slavery is in mind, but perhaps also the restoration of an earlier relationship between \textit{Yahweh} and Israel is included since reference is made to the patriarchs with whom \textit{Yahweh} had already entered into a covenant.\textsuperscript{23} Further, Ps. 74:2 characterizes the exodus as God acquiring a congregation
which He in turn made His heritage. Whether restoring or acquir-
ing, the matter of relationship seems to be included, thus again
stressing the personal rather than the material aspect of redemp-
tion.

In Deutero-Isaiah g’l is used relative to the anticipated
release from Babylonian captivity, which the prophet describes as
a new exodus.24 Nine times gō’el is used as a title for God25—a
kind of stereotyped divine epithet, emphasizing a variety of
saving acts, such as the forgiveness of sin,26 resulting in
 glorification of Yahweh.27

While the Deutero-Isaiah passages are likely late, suggest-
ing that the secular use of gā’al preceded the religious use,28
the reference in Ex. 15:13—a twelfth-century triumph song—must
be early. Perhaps also early is Gen. 48:16 where God’s angel is
praised by Jacob as the one who redeemed him from all harm. Thus
this transition of usage to the divine probably began before
Deutero-Isaiah. As Campbell observes: "This language is old
enough to have been used about God very early in Israel’s history
with the full implication it bears in later legal formulations;
God shows familial concern and protects both people and property
(Israel is both to him!)."29 Gutierrez observes that the term
gō’el had the family for its initial setting and then subsequent-
ly found a place in the sphere of the covenant.30

Snaith objects to the idea of kinship between God and
Israel, for that relationship, as close as it was, was between
unequals.31 Indeed, yet even the covenant was one of non-parity,
but that did not prevent covenant language from depicting this relationship between God and Israel as spousal and paternal—rather close relationships. God represented as gō'el must be seen, I believe, as the responsible relative of Israel, thus underscoring the personal dimension of gō'el in the religious as well as the secular sphere.

V. APPEARANCES IN NARRATIVES

Narrative usage of the gō'el concept will further elucidate its meaning. The Pentateuchal laws are not complete or codified, but are given to be illustrative and didactic or for less than routine occurrences. As Mendenhall notes: "Laws are then mutual understandings among human beings, culturally determined and relative—as well as changeable."

This changeable quality is seen in the tale crafted by the wise woman of Tekoah in defense of Absalom. A widow, who had just two sons, one whom has killed the other in a quarrel, is confronted with the loss of the surviving son by gō'el haddam. Her appeal to David is heard as she is promised that the gō'el haddam, who seems to be prompted to action from self interest—to gain the inheritance, would be kept from acting.

Campbell observes:

Redemption practice, then, is seen with a specific set of mitigating circumstances, and principle must come to bear. The widow cannot claim that her surviving son is innocent,
but only that he is necessary for her own welfare and for the continuance of her husband's name. In effect, customary law is interfered with because it clashes with principle, a not infrequent circumstance in the Bible. The principle is that those whose needs can be easily ignored must be given special consideration in practice.

The narrative passages in Job and Ruth will be considered in this paper.

A. JOB

While it can be claimed that Job 19:25 is not narrative—indeed it appears in the dialogue part of the book, sandwiched in between the prologue and the epilogue—it can only be interpreted in the context of the narrative of the book. Job clearly qualifies as a person needing a go'el.

An examination of this verse will continue and intensify the personal dimension of the go'el. While translated "Redeemer" by the familiar KJV, it is better rendered "Vindicator" (NJPS, NEB and NRSV Footnote). Job does not primarily need to be rescued from death—in fact, he longs for it—but needs to be vindicated before the accusing Satan figure (of which he is unaware) and the three friends.

His possessions are not critical. He never seeks their return. It is his person, his name, his relationship to God (now strained) that is the focus here. The context of this passage is forensic. He expects God to rise in court and speak on his behalf. He waits not for physical relief, but for moral vindication. As Ringgren observes, the language here is the figura-
tive language of the lawsuit. That the anticipated Vindicator must be God can be seen in Job's strong language here in contrast to the more tentative language used when he wished for an arbiter or witness. As Hartley notes, "Choice of this term . . . . is an intentional allusion to the special nuances off deliverance and love that are associated with this title for God." Dhorme sees this role of Vindicator as one to which God is often invoked in the Psalms, being urged to defend the rights of the oppressed.

Job needs more than the return of his material possessions. While in traditional wisdom teaching material possessions are indicators of divine favor, and while Job had likely held such a view prior to his suffering, he never prays for their return, but rather that God will vindicate him before death—which God does. The restoration of his wealth in the epilogue does not rehabilitate Job. He is already rehabilitated even before the return of his wealth, which is necessitated by the artistry of the book. It is vindication that is critical.

Here in Job the gō'el concept again focuses on the individual rather than on his possessions.

B. RUTH

The gō'el concept is explicated most fully in the Ruth narrative where this participial form is found eight times. It gives us the underlying principles, and shows us the policy at work in ancient Israel. Further, it provides remarkable in-
sights which provide us with procedure for today. Nowhere is the personal dimension of the go'el function shown as here.

1. RELATIONSHIP OF BOAZ TO RUTH

This narrative fleshes out the Priestly materials, which apart from the release of debt in the Year of Jubilee, reflects old conditions. The P source alone provides information on the order of succession in filling the go'el role. The hierarchy of duty designates first, brother, then uncle, next cousin, and finally any fellow member of the mishpāḥāh.

Given these relationship and sequencing, what was it that made Boaz (and the unnamed nearer person) responsible to serve as go'el? They are not of the immediate house of Elimelech for all males of that house had perished. Apparently Boaz qualified as an instance of one of the fellow members of the mishpāḥāh.

Translating go'el as "kinsman" can suggest that only a blood relative had the go'el responsibility and that a person lacking such a tie was exonerated, but the narrative in Ruth shows otherwise.

Boaz is not a blood relative of Ruth or for that matter, Naomi. While in some English translations of Ruth 2:1, he is identified as a relative, it must be noted that this rendering is based on the Qere rather than the Ketib which has MYUDDā' - a Pu'al participle of YD' - a root associated
with covenant terminology. Thus Campbell renders the text as per the Kethib "covenant-brother."

This would then demonstrate the go'el responsibility goes beyond blood ties. As we noted above, Boaz would have qualified to assist by virtue of belonging to the same mishpāhāh - a unit larger than the bēth 'āv - the extended family. Clearly when the bēth 'av was unable to act on its own behalf, responsibility devolved upon the mishpāhāh, which Gottwald considers a technical term for a protective association of families.

The size of the mishpāhāh is difficult to ascertain. While larger than the bēth 'āv it is smaller than the šēbet. The figures of Numbers 26 where some 57 mishpāhōth are listed seem incredibly large, but Andersen states that a mishpāhāh must have had at least 10,000, by a conservative estimate.

Gottwald believes that the book of Ruth throws some light on the size of a mishpāhāh. He notes that Elimelech and his family are said to be "Ephrathites from Bethlehem." This gentilic form is also used to identify David, "son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem." Further, Rachel is "buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)." The witness to the transaction of Boaz prompted this response, "may you prosper in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem." Finally Ephrathah is associated with Bethlehem by Micah "O Bethlehem of Ephrathah."
While all these citations associate Ephrathah with Bethlehem, they also "... make it clear that Ephrathah was not simply an alternate name for Bethlehem, comparable to Laish-Dan or Bethel-Luz. Ephrathah appears as a place in its own right, near to Bethlehem, and encompassable within Bethlehem conceived as the city and its environs." 

Gottwald locates Ephrathah as south of Bethlehem and concludes that this region was inhabited by a single mishpāḥāh and that "... when Elimelech's family members are called 'Ephrathites' it means more than that they lived in Ephrathah; it means that they were of the protective association of families known as mishpāḥāh Ephrati ..." 

The gō'el responsibility is thus not limited to the extended family, but goes at least to the phratry. 

Mendenhall notes the limitations of kinship:

No one is likely to deny the constant importance of real kinship in ancient Near Eastern cultures, or for that matter in most societies of human history. Nevertheless, the function of real kinship ties in society is so limited that something larger is needed, particularly as population density increases and social conflicts become more complex. Furthermore, kinship ceases to be of much importance as the common ancestor of two persons becomes more remote ... 

Beyond the fourth generation of descendants there is no corporate responsibility, and probably no other important social function. Forms of social organization not based on kinship have already taken over in the earliest recorded historical societies.
Campbell summarizes well the extension of the go'el responsibility beyond the extended family:

... the complex societal framework in which this practice was to function probably included both blood and covenant ties, the latter reaching out beyond family interests to a circle in which ties were entered upon even more voluntarily and graciously than might be the case in a family.\(^70\)

2. RANGE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Not only is the personal dimension seen in the go'el, but also in the person receiving the assistance—in this case, Ruth.

Here levirate marriage is combined with redemption.\(^71\) Not only must a piece of property belonging to Elimelech and his family be redeemed, but the widow, Ruth, must be taken and provided a son.\(^72\) While no legal code juxtaposes the redemption and levirate practices, it is a natural one, based on principle.\(^73\)

Campbell observes that the levirate practice

... is not simply concerned with producing a male child, nor even with producing an heir to the dead man's property; it is concerned every bit as much with the care of the widow. Indeed, the care of widows is the main motive of Naomi's speculations in chapter 1 about the prospects of levirate marriage for herself. ... \(^74\)

The concern of the go'el again is not simply with possessions, but with the person. While Boaz has been seen by some to have acted out of self interest,\(^75\) the narrative is clear that he was both proper and considerate. He
respected Ruth whose own character was such that she des­erved such treatment.  

VI. SUMMARY

The purpose of this summary is not to be exhaustive, but rather selective of data which contributes to the concern of this paper—comprehensive and incarnational redemption. Three distinct ideas stand out:

A. The *gō’el* function is not simply concerned with possessions, but also extends to the person. Relationships are more important than things.

B. The *gō’el* function is not limited to blood ties, but extends out to covenant relationships.

C. The *gō’el* function is not to be implemented on legal pronouncements alone, but must be practiced on the basic principle of caring responsibility. It is not charity or pity, but the expression of a fundamental personal relationship.

VII APPLICATION

Space does not permit the development of these suggested applications. Nor do I feel totally competent functioning in the area of the social and economic. Hopefully, these practical conclusions with limited commentary, drawn from the *gō’el* func-
tion, will stimulate discussion and provide a basis for action.

It seems to me that the gō'el function moves us:

A. BEYOND RUGGED INDIVIDUALISM.

Alexis de Tocqueville, who may have coined the term [rugged individualism], found it alarming. He defined individualism as "a mature and calm feeling which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and friends. He willingly leaves society to itself. Individualism saps the virtues of public life and destroys all virtues."78

B. BEYOND A SENSE OF PRIDE WHICH REFUSES TO ACCEPT HELP.

In his Ethics, Aristotle advocates reluctance to accept service as a standard for the magnanimous person:

He is the sort of person who does good but is ashamed when he receives it; for doing good is proper to the superior person, and receiving it to the inferior. He returns more good than he has received; for in this way the original giver will be repaid, and will also have incurred a new debt to him, and will be the beneficiary.79

Jesus rejected such a position when He reminded the reluctant Peter that unless he allowed Jesus to wash his feet, Peter had no share with Him.80

C. BEYOND CONCERNS LIMITED TO THE NUCLEAR AND EXTENDED FAMILIES.

Rodney Clapp, in challenging the concept of the traditional family, observes:

Other aspects of the bourgeois family clash with family submitted to the redemptive and transforming gospel. Bourgeois family is exclusivistic, emphasizing its privacy over the good of others. It leaves the public
life of commerce and industry untouched by the ideals of the kingdom, while maintaining its private comfort and order. Bourgeois family is flawed to the degree that it helped us so long neglect the social implications of the kingdom. It is flawed to the degree that it encourages blithe individualism and erodes a sense of the common good.81

D. BEYOND CLINICAL AND TECHNICAL CONCERNS BASED UPON THE LETTER OF THE LAW.

Jesus criticized the legalists of His day, noting, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God...."82 By hiding behind legalisms83 they freed themselves from legitimate and appropriate demands. Barclay observes:

Jesus was attacking a system which put rules and regulations before the claim of human need. The commandment of God was that the claim of human love should come first; the commandment of the scribes was the claim of legal rules and regulations should come first. Jesus was quite sure that any regulation which prevented a man from giving help where help was needed was nothing less than a contradiction of the law of God.84

E. BEYOND NARROW AND MINIMUM ASSISTANCE, RECOGNIZING THAT THE ENTIRE BEING HAS TO BE ADDRESSED, RESULTING IN DIGNITY AND A SENSE OF WORTH.

Bruce Birch in his treatment of Shalom emphasizes this wildness:

Shalom is not only a spiritual condition, but the condition of well-being intended by God for all creatures. For humans, this includes food, health, security from danger, means of livelihood, shelter, clothing, family, community, and relationship to God. Thus, the vision of shalom as well-being forces attention to concrete dimensions of wholeness in day-to-day life. If the faithful community is to take up its task of embodying shalom,
then it must be deeply involved in the effort
to ensure this fullness of life for all.
1. *TWOT* I:144.

2. *TDOT* II:350-351.

3. *TDOT* II:351.

4. Hos. 13:14; Isa. 35:10, Jer 31:11; Ps. 69:19. But the participle of *pādḥā* never becomes a nominal term with any special role in law. With *pādḥā* the emphasis is on the action, not the subject. (*TDNT*, IV: 331). This is a crucial difference from the nominal *gō‘el* which places emphasis upon the subject, a near relative, whose duty and privilege it is to redeem. *TWOT*, I:144.

5. Isa. 60:16; Ps. 106:10.


8. Gen. 48:16; Jer. 31:11; Hos. 13:14; Mic. 4:10; Ps. 72:14; 103:14; 106:10; 107:2.


10. Lev. 25:25-34.


15. The Levitical Year of Jubilee emphasized both the restitution of land and the restoration of individuals. Lev. 25:25-55.


17. I Kings 16:11.


22. Ex. 6:6; 15:13; Ps. 106:10; Isa. 51:10. It should be noted however that pādhā is used more frequently than gā'el in speaking of the exodus, especially in the Deuteronomistic literature TDOT II:354.

23. Ex. 6:3,8. TDOT II:353.


32. Applied to God, the gō'el thus denotes in family law the dignity of the nearest relative whose duty it is to redeem His elect, whether it be the forefather Jacob (Gn. 48:16) or the people Israel. Understood thus, the term leads us to the very heart of the relation between God and man. This is here a bond of kinship which commits God to the duty of redemption, not, of course, by the law of blood, but by that of election. TDNT IV: 332. Johnson notes: "... ideally at least, Yahweh and His covenant people are one, and this being the case, He is their proper Protector, and they are properly His protégés." A.R. Johnson. "The Primary Meaning of gā'el." VT Sup (1, 1953) p.76.

33. Ibid., p.134.

34. Dr. Calum Carmichael, NEH Lecture, June 21, 1985, Cornell University.


36. II Sam 14:4-11.


42. *TDOT II:355.*


47. Rowley. *op.cit.*, p.266.


51. Lev. 25:40-49. This P source seems to see the mishpahāh as the widest social issue for gō'el responsibility. Gottwald, *op. cit.*, p.264.

52. Ruth 1:5. Rash' conjectures that Elimelech was an uncle of Boaz, with the closer kinsman being Elimelech's brother--but this is indeed conjecture.

53. The Qere form is MÖDA' which appears only one other time Prov. 7:4--where it is used in a parallel structure with sister, to designate the relationship of wisdom to the sage's pupil.

54. In Ruth 3:2 another noun derivative of YD occurs which Campbell renders as "one of our covenant circle." Campbell, *op.cit.*, p.114.


59. Andersen, *op. cit.*, pp.35.


61. Ruth 1:2.

62. I Samuel 17:12.

63. Genesis 35:19.

64. Ruth 4:11.

65. Micah 5:2.


67. Ibid.

68. One verse, Ps. 72:14, suggests that the go'el responsibility is national, extending to the king. Johnson, noting this verse, argues that in the extreme, the go'el principle is so far-reaching that it expresses the responsibility of the reigning house towards the nation. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p.72.


70. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p.137.

71. Such a combination is not found in a single text, but necessitates the linking of Deut. 25:5-10 with Lev. 25:25; 27:9:33.

72. Ruth 4:5.

73. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p.137. Rowley believes it significant that the other two references to the Levirate marriage are referred to in Ruth (Genesis 38/Ruth 4:12; Deuteronomy 25:9/Ruth 4:8) Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp.174-175.

74. Ibid., p.136.
75. Rowley, op. cit., pp.183-184. Rowley notes that Ruth's child--Obed--was by legal fiction regarded as Mahlon's, yet at the end of the book this child is reckoned as the child of Boaz.


77. Ruth 3:10. Here her hesed is recognized.


79. IV. 53.


82. Mark 7:9.

83. In this instance it is the use of Corban which is a difficult concept to define. Whatever its precise meaning, it designates a technical and legal way to escape a moral obligation.


SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


