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Removing Ruth: *Tiqune Sopherim* in Ruth 3.3-4?

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Abstract

Commentators on Ruth 3.3-4 often pause to note the *kethib-qere* found in these verses, explaining the unusual form of the *kethibs* יִירְדְּתִי and וְשָׁכַבְתִּי as archaic second feminine singular perfects. This article suggests that the *kethib* forms found in Ruth 3.3-4 are not archaic, but are the result of an intentional emendation of the text by a scribe intent on reconciling the passage with the teaching of the Torah. The effect of this change is to remove Ruth from any possible intimate encounter with Boaz and replace her with Naomi. Thus, these two readings should be considered as an unrecognized occurrence of *tiqune sopherim*.

Keywords: Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, *tiqune sopherim*, scribal emendation, *kethib-qere*, threshing floor, sex in the Bible.

When it comes to ch. 3 of Ruth, scholarly interest has focused primarily on the strange incident in which the Moabite Ruth approaches Boaz by night and uncovers his ‘feet’.¹ Attracting less attention in this chapter are

1. For arguments in favour of a sexual interpretation of the threshing floor incident, see T. Linafelt and T.K. Beal, *Ruth and Esther* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical

the *kethib* and *qere* found in vv. 3 and 4. In 3.3, the Masoretes re-point the consonantal text, וַיֵּרְדָּהּ, to read וַיֵּרְדָּהּ ('you go down'). Similarly, in 3.4, the editors of the MT re-point וַשְׁכַּבְתָּ to read וַשְׁכַּבְתָּ ('you lie down'). Attempting to explain the odd forms reflected in the *kethib* in these verses, most scholars maintain that in both cases, the *yodh* of the *kethib* may preserve an archaic form of the second feminine singular ending of the perfect.² The advantage of this approach is that it allows one to read an expected second feminine form without altering the consonantal text.

This proposal, however, is not without its problems. First, while the ending וְהִי on a perfect does conform to an archaic second feminine singular, this exact form appears nowhere else³ in Ruth and occurs elsewhere in the MT only in Ezekiel and Jeremiah.⁴ Second, if these forms are genuinely archaic or archaizing, one must then ask why none of the twenty other occurrences of the second feminine singular perfect in Ruth are similarly rendered. Third, it may be noted that the tendency within the MT of Ruth is to drop letters,⁵ an inclination which runs counter to the retention of a longer supposed archaic form. Other explanations also

Press, 1999), pp. 49-51; K. Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), pp. 69-71.

2. See, e.g., F.W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC, 9; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1996), p. 145; E.F. Campbell, Jr, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (AB, 7; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), p. 120; G. Gerleman, *Ruth Das Hohelied* (BKAT, 18; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2nd edn, 1981), p. 29; R.L. Hubbard, Jr, *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 197; P. Joüon, *Ruth: Commentaire philologique et exégétique* (Subsidia Biblica, 9; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 2nd edn, 1986), p. 69. Sasson, while doubting that the forms are genuinely archaic, nonetheless translates them as second feminine singular perfects based on context; see J.M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (The Biblical Seminar, 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2nd edn, 1995), pp. 63, 68-69, 71.

3. In Ruth 4.5, the *kethib* קָנִיתִי is corrected in the *qere* to קָנִיתָ ('you acquire'). In this instance, however, context and the Masoretic correction to a second *masculine* form demonstrate that the *kethib* cannot be taken as an archaic form of the second feminine singular.

4. In these latter two books, most contend that these forms are archaisms influenced by Aramaic. On the question of Aramaisms, see E.Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), §53; F. Rosenthal, *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* (Porta Linguarum Orientalium, NS 5; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), §101. For a list of these forms, see J.M. Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1955), p. 11.

5. Myers notes examples in which *he*, *waw*, and *yodh* are omitted; see Myers, *Book of Ruth*, p. 12.

prove to be unsatisfactory. The strange forms represented by the *kethib* cannot be intended to mimic rustic or foreign speech, for if they were, they would be in the mouth of Ruth and not Naomi. Neither is it likely that the forms are intentionally placed to reflect nervous speech as suggested by LaCocque.⁶ In other passages where this is the case (e.g. 1 Sam. 9.12-13),⁷ awkward syntax and grammar are more prevalent than is found here. At any rate, if nervous speech were to be found here, one again would expect it in the mouth of the young foreigner Ruth, not that of the older and more experienced Naomi.

An alternate solution is to take the words וַיִּרְדֹּתִי and וַשְׁכַּבְתִּי as they appear in the *kethib* and see them as first common singular perfect forms.⁸ Understanding the text in this way has in its favour the fact that it leaves the consonantal text intact and avoids the problem of having to posit an inexplicable and unexpected⁹ use of an archaic verbal form. The obvious objection to such a reading is that it significantly alters the passage to minimize the role of Ruth and include Naomi in the nocturnal events that unfold at the threshing floor. Such an objection becomes moot, however, if one posits that the first person forms represent an early emendation designed to remove a perceived theological problem from the text.

The deliberate alteration of the text in order to avoid a problematic reading is a well-established practice in the history of the Hebrew Bible. Various rabbinic sources, for example, note as many as eighteen cases of *tiqqune sopherim* or ‘emendations of the scribes’. These passages have traditionally been regarded as instances in which the scribes intentionally

6. A. LaCocque, *Ruth* (CC; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 90.

7. A. Hurvitz, ‘Ruth 2.7: “A Midrashic Gloss”?’, *ZAW* 95 (1983), pp. 121-23.

8. A survey of manuscript evidence reveals that the unusual forms found in vv. 3 and 4 did not pose a problem for ancient translators. The immediate context and the fact that the odd form of the *kethib* coincides with that of a rare, but recognized, form of the second feminine perfect undoubtedly assisted the task of translation. As a result, the evidence from the texts and versions contributes little to the question under discussion. Vaticanus and Alexandrinus translate with the *qere* in both instances with the exception that each has Ruth going ‘up’ (ἀναβήσῃ) to the threshing floor rather than ‘down’ to it (3.3). The Peshitta, Old Latin, and Targum also understand the verbs to relate to Ruth. 2QRuth^a preserves portions of Ruth 3.3-4, however, the terms under discussion fall within the lacunae of the text. For its part, the Midrash, followed by Rashi, recognizes the effect of reading with the *kethib* and from this imagines a conversation in which Naomi states that her merits would accompany Ruth to the threshing floor (*Ruth R.* 5.12/52.1.3.A-B).

9. Myers notes that an appended *yodh* to mark the second feminine singular verb occurs less than two dozen times in the entire Hebrew Bible; see Myers, *Book of Ruth*, p. 11.

altered the consonantal text in order to avoid readings that were theologically problematic.¹⁰ Recent opinion is divided, however, on the text-critical value of these readings. While some maintain the traditional view that sees these passages as containing scribal emendations,¹¹ others argue that the biblical readings as received are original and that the alternate readings represent midrashic interpretation.¹² In the most comprehensive study to date, Carmel McCarthy has established a middle ground by examining the *tiqqune sopherim* individually and concluding that at least some should be regarded as genuine scribal emendations.¹³

The three texts that McCarthy accepts as authentic illustrate the impetus behind the *tiqqune sopherim* and other scribal changes. One motive for emending the text seems to have been to avoid anthropomorphism. So, for example, at Zech. 2.12 (Eng. 2.8), Yahweh's statement, 'one who touches you touches the apple of *his* eye' is thought to be an alteration of an original '*my* eye'—the rendering found in the NRSV and other English translations.¹⁴ In other cases, the emendation prevents the reader from uttering a potentially blasphemous phrase. Into this category falls 1 Sam. 3.13, where Yahweh's statement that Eli's sons 'were cursing *themselves*' stands in the place of an original 'were cursing *God*'. This same impulse presumably motivates the *tiqqun sopherim* at Job 7.20, where Job's

10. In such cases, the change introduced is not required to remain consistent with the context as a whole, simply to remove the immediate theological or interpretative problem.

11. See, e.g., A. Arez, 'Tikkun Sopherim', in *EncJud*, XV, pp. 1139-40; C.D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (repr., New York: Ktav, 1966 [1897]), pp. 347-67; S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs, and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E.—IV Century C.E.* (Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 18; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), pp. 28-37; J. Weingreen, *Introduction to the Critical Study of the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 26-27.

12. W.E. Barnes, 'Ancient Corrections in the Text of the Old Testament (*Tikkun Sopherim*)', *JTS* 1 (1900), pp. 387-414; E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 2001), pp. 64-67.

13. C. McCarthy, *The Tikkune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament* (OBO, 36; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981). Of the 18 *tiqqune sopherim*, McCarthy regards only three—1 Sam. 3.13; Job 7.20; Zech. 2.12—as authentic cases of textual emendation. So also E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 1995), pp. 17-18.

14. A similar motivation clearly underlies the reading in a passage deemed by McCarthy to be inauthentic. At Ezek. 8.17, 'they put the branch to *their* nose' is understood to be an alteration of 'they put the branch to *my* nose'.

question to God, ‘Why have I become a burden to *myself*?’, replaces, ‘Why have I become a burden to *you*?’, and so avoids questioning God’s compassion.

In other cases, words not formally designated as *tiqqune sopherim* nonetheless clearly reflect an emendation designed to protect the reader from inadvertently cursing God. Foremost among these are places such as Job 1.5, 11 and 2.5, 9 where the scribes introduced the word בָּרַךְ (‘to bless’) where the text obviously called for קָלַל (‘to curse’). A further example of this practice is found at 1 Kgs 21.10, 13, where early on, a scribe altered the text to read, בָּרַכְתָּ אֱלֹהִים (‘you have blessed God’) in place of an expected קָלַלְתָּ אֱלֹהִים (‘you have cursed God’). Recently, several scholars have suggested adding to the canonical number of eighteen *tiqqune sopherim* by identifying what they regard as previously unattested instances of the phenomenon. Commenting on Isa. 8.21, H.G.M. Williamson argues that an editor has introduced a pair of *beth* prepositions to the words בְּמַלְכוֹ and וּבְאֱלֹהָיו in order to avoid the statement ‘curse his king and his God’.¹⁵ A. Schoors proposes solving the interpretative difficulty posed by Hagar’s words in Gen. 16.13b by arguing that the word אַחֲרִי (‘back’) has been substituted for an original פָּנַי (‘face’). The resulting translation, ‘Did I really see here the back of the one who sees me?’, elegantly removes the difficulty posed by having a human looking directly upon the face of God.¹⁶ In a more complicated and obscure example, Saul Levin has suggested that at Num. 26.29, the possible but redundant, אֵלֶּה represents a scribal alteration of the name of Jochebed’s mother—which he reconstructs as אֵלֶּה based on a comparison with the τούτους of the LXX. Levin maintains that, faced with a name that might be misconstrued as ‘goddess’, a scribe changed the *lamed* to *taw* to arrive at the more benign reading of the MT.¹⁷ As part of her thorough-going and cautious study of *tiqqune sopherim*, McCarthy identifies at least a dozen additional cases in which the biblical text has been altered on theological grounds.¹⁸

Alterations of the text were not limited to instances where the deity was directly in view. In Judg. 18.30, the Masoretes suspended a *nun*

15. H.G.M. Williamson, ‘Isaiah 8.21 and a New Inscription from Ekron’, *BALAS* 18 (2000), pp. 51-55.

16. A. Schoors, ‘A *tiqqun sopherim* in Genesis XVI 13b?’, *VT* 32 (1982), pp. 494-95.

17. S. Levin, ‘An Unattested “Scribal Correction” in Numbers 26.59’, *Bib* 71 (1990), pp. 25-33.

18. McCarthy, *Tiqqune Sopherim*, pp. 197-243.

above the text in order to change the reading from 'Moses' to 'Manasseh' and so absolve a descendant of Israel's lawgiver from a charge of idolatry.

In the passage under discussion, the problem is one of contradiction with the Torah.¹⁹ A clear example of this kind of alteration is given by Emanuel Tov. At Gen. 2.2, the MT, various Targums, and the Vulgate share the view that on the seventh day God completed the work of creation. Apparently concerned that some might understand this to mean that God laboured on the Sabbath, the reading 'sixth day' arose and came to be reflected in the Samaritan Pentateuch, LXX, and Peshitta. Tov suggests that comparable changes may be observed at Exod. 24.4 and 1 Sam. 2.16, 22-23.²⁰ A similar dynamic may have been at work in the book of Ruth where the incorporation of a Moabite woman into the nation of Israel, let alone into the line of David, would have struck many Israelites as nothing less than scandalous. In fact, the very situation described in the book of Ruth is an act specifically forbidden in Deuteronomic legislation (לֹא-יָבֹא עַמּוּנִי וּמִצְרִי בִקְהָל יְהוָה, Deut. 23.4 [Eng. 23.3]).²¹ That such an injunction was indeed put into effect is clear from Neh. 13.1-3, which describes how in the post-exilic Jerusalemite community, foreigners—including Moabites—were forcibly expelled from the congregation of Israel. The above factors would have provided ample motivation for a pre-Masoretic hand to attempt to minimize the role of Ruth—a goal that is achieved if Naomi replaces Ruth in the sexually-charged atmosphere of the threshing floor.

If the verbs in question are taken as first common singular forms,²² the passage reads as follows,

19. Intertextual conflicts were at times the source of much concern within Judaism. The Babylonian Talmud (Ḥag. 13a) records how some questioned the inspiration of the book of Ezekiel on the grounds that its details contradicted the Torah. According to tradition, it was Rabbi Hananiah b. Hezekiah who reconciled the differences and cleared the way for the book's acceptance.

20. Tov, *Textual Criticism*, pp. 270, 272-74.

21. The conflict between the marriage of Ruth and the Torah has prompted some scholars to maintain that the occurrence of levirate marriage in the book was inserted by traditionalists to show that Boaz was forced by law to marry Ruth and so prevent the book from being used to justify marriage to foreign women. See J.A. Bewer, 'The Go'el in Ruth 4.14, 15', *AJS* 20 (1904), pp. 202-206; A.A. Anderson, 'The Marriage of Ruth', *JSS* 23 (1978), pp. 171-83.

22. Sasson (*Ruth*, p. 245) states that the, 'sufformatives in 3.3 and 3.4 have permitted some to retain a first person singular translation of the verbs' and offers Volz and Gunkel as examples. Neither Volz (P. Volz, 'Review of Nowack, D.W., *Richter-Ruth übersetzt und erklärt* [HKAT, I/4; Göttingen, 1900]', *TLZ* 26/13 [1901], pp. 345-49) nor Gunkel (H.

Dress, anoint yourself and put on your cloak. *I will go down* to the threshing floor. Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. Then, when he lies down, take note of where he lies down and go up and uncover his feet. Then *I will lie down*. He will tell you what you should do.

According to this rendering, both Naomi and Ruth are present at the threshing floor and it is Naomi, and not her daughter-in-law, who lies beside Boaz. For a later scribe committed to the letter and spirit of Deut. 23.4, these changes remove the rather unpalatable prospect of having a Moabite widow incorporated into the Israelite community and the line of Israel's greatest king.

In favour of such a view, it is worth asking why these first person forms occur here and nowhere else in vv. 3-4. Here it is helpful to observe that if one were wanting discreetly to alter an original text of second feminine singular forms to minimize the role of Ruth and introduce Naomi, then the only place to do this is where the forms *וירדה* and *ושכבה* now appear. For example, although there are second feminine singular perfect forms at the beginning of v. 3 (*וְרָחֵצְתָּ וְסָבַת וְשָׁמַת*), these verbs are part of a sequence culminating in a phrase that can refer to no one but Ruth (*שָׁמַלְתָּךְ שָׁמַלְתִּיךְ qere עַל־יךְ*). Changing any of the verbs in this sequence, therefore, would not have the desired effect of inserting Naomi in a logically consistent way. The only way to introduce Naomi in this verse is to alter the one verb that governs the movement of characters in the verse—*ירד* ('go down'). Likewise, in 3.4, the one word that must be altered in order to remove the idea that Ruth lies beside Boaz is *שכב* ('lie down')—the one word that bears the unexpected *הִי* ending. If the *kethibs* *וירדה* and *ושכבה* are indeed archaic second feminine singular perfects, then it is a remarkable coincidence that they appear at the only spot where as first person common singular perfects they would serve the interest of someone wishing to minimize the role of the Moabite Ruth.

Unlike other cases of *tiqqune sopherim*, where the change is made without regard to the coherence of the overall narrative, there is much in

Gunkel, 'Ruthbuch', in *RGG* 2 4 [1930], pp. 2180-82), however, make any reference to the *kethib-qere* of 3.3-4. Both Volz and Gunkel maintain that in its original form, the book of Ruth featured only Naomi who was rescued by her kinsman, Boaz. Only later was the storyline of Ruth woven into the text, with the Moabite supplanting Naomi as the one redeemed. In drawing these conclusions, both scholars focus on the material related to the redemption of Ruth and the property in ch. 4, rather than on anything in ch. 3. In addition, it is important to note that for both interpreters the character of Ruth is added later for literary effect, not expunged for theological reasons.

Ruth that would assist a scribe in introducing an emendation such as the one outlined above. Darkness and Naomi's command that Ruth not reveal her presence to Boaz provide an enticing background for one interested in introducing a literary substitution of women. Indeed, it may be noted that anyone introducing such a change to the text could find literary precedent for such a scenario in Gen. 29.20-30 where darkness and the effects of feasting permit a similar substitution of women. The shape of the story itself would also assist a scribe in introducing such a change. At the close of the book, for example, the townswomen cry, 'A son has been born to/for Naomi!' (4.17). Here, it is also indicated that the new-born Obed will function as *goel* in relation, not to Ruth, but to Naomi (4.14). Also compatible with such an emendation is the notice that the infant Obed is placed on Naomi's lap (4.16)²³ and the fact that in his words to the reluctant *goel*, Boaz refers to Naomi's property (4.3). A final element allowing for such a change is the fact that women appear nowhere in the genealogy of David that concludes the book. The changes in 3.3-4, therefore, deftly exploit ambiguities of the broader narrative.

While the proposal outlined above does not resolve all of the tensions in the text, it should be remembered that *tiqqune sopherim* and similar scribal alterations are not intended to contribute to a coherent literary whole, merely to eliminate a specific theological problem. That the changes in Ruth 3.3-4 are aided by compatibilities within the larger narrative simply made the task of emendation that much easier. As it stands, the existence of two scribal emendations at Ruth 3.3-4 provides a reasonable explanation for two otherwise problematic grammatical features. If the above argument is accepted, then the odd verbal forms in Ruth 3.3-4 should be understood as first person common singular perfects introduced into the text by a scribe committed to the anti-Moabite ethos of Deut. 23.4 (Eng. 23.3). Such an alteration perhaps occurred as early as the post-exilic period when anti-Moabite sentiment ran high and was reflected in official government policy in Jerusalem. For their part, by offering the *qere*, the Masoretes reintroduced the original reading of the text and restored Ruth to her full place in the history of Israel.

23. On the meaning of יָצָא (4.16), see the discussion in Sasson, *Ruth*, p. 172.