**Profound Poverty and Structural Inequity Examined through Ruth**

*“I am because we are; if we are not, then I am not.”*

**Scripture**

***Ruth 1:1–22***

1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. 2 The man’s name was Elimelek, his wife’s name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

3 Now Elimelek, Naomi’s husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

6 When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. 7 With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

8 Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. 9 May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” Then she kissed them goodbye, and they wept aloud 10 and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

11 But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? 12Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— 13would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you because the Lord’s hand has turned against me!”

14At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

15“Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

16But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. 17Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” 18When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

19So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?”

20“Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara because the Almightyhas made my life very bitter. 21I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflictedme; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

22So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.—Ruth 1:1–22 (NIV)

**The Text in Its Context**

The Book of Ruth, largely seen as a testament to female solidarity, is also a story of food insecurity that informs our theological principles of justice today. The context for this story begins with the writer informing us of a famine, which prioritizes the issue of food insecurity in the very first verse.

The story immediately introduces the main characters—a married couple and their two sons. The husband dies, and the two sons marry Moabite women. If the daughters-in-law were in their mid-teens when they married as is likely, they would have been around 25 years old when their husbands die after 10 years of marriage (v. 4).

Naomi is in survival mode due to her extreme loss. Her daughter in-law Ruth represents a seed of promise for her. This story serves as a testament of faith because

* Naomi creates survival strategies to benefit both women;
* God’s faithfulness continues even though survival can make us bitter; and
* in working through the bitterness, God creates the conditions for others to reflect that faithfulness back to us.

***Naomi Creates Survival Strategies***

Naomi is broken-hearted by the losses she has endured, yet she continues to explore survival strategies (vv. 6–7). As she explores her own options, she encourages her daughters-in-law to return home to their people where they can remarry and have a means of support. True community relies on empathy as an expression of God’s love. Remarrying within the family or returning home to the care of her father was the cultural norm for a wife after the death of her husband. When Ruth refuses to return home, Naomi allows her daughter in-law to accompany her. They arrive in Bethlehem (v. 22) at the start of the harvest. Of interest to note here is that Bethlehem actually means “house of food.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The women leave from a famine to go to a feast of opportunities and new beginnings.

***Survival Often Breeds Bitterness***

Mere survival, often a sign of tremendous loss, can breed bitterness. Children who are working as sex workers, helping drug traffickers, or toiling in labour camps endure the loss of a joyful childhood during which they might have had the time to be nurtured into adulthood. Adults who do not have enough to pay their basic expenses operate in what we think of as survival mode, in which they have less than they require to survive. This survival mode, when one is deeply aware that one is suffering due to loss, tends to be distressing.

Naomi says, “Call me ‘Mara’ because the Almighty has made my life very bitter” (v. 20). Her bitterness is connected to the loss she has experienced. The Shunammite woman loses her son, and Elisha tells his servant Gehazi that the woman is in “bitter distress” (2 Kings 4:20–27). It is the same word used here in the Book of Ruth.

***Ruth’s Empathy Challenges the Bitterness***

Ruth has exhibited empathy (v. 16), which is rewarded. Her act of selflessness mirrors the acts of selflessness we often see among the working poor and vulnerable among us. The reader is left to contemplate what Naomi must have done to create such steadfast and unwavering loyalty from Ruth.

More importantly, however, resolving food insecurity requires us to start with empathy. Naomi stopped trying to “urge” Ruth to think of herself first (v. 18). This means that Naomi was convinced of the sincerity of Ruth’s decision to help her.

Like Ruth, we must also be willing to put ourselves at risk. Ruth puts everything at risk for someone who can give her nothing, according to Naomi’s thinking (v. 13). The normal course of action, after a woman’s husband dies, is to return to the safety of her father’s home and possibly remarry.

**The Text in Our Context**

Today, solving issues of food insecurity might require that we put ourselves at risk by including others in our church budgets, our fundraising efforts, and our legislative priorities. The hunger of one leaves us all a little empty.

Profound poverty leaves one feeling abandoned. Those who are impoverished are especially vulnerable because desperate people will often do anything to survive. Naomi’s economic precarity without a husband is further exacerbated with the deaths of her sons.

Though this Bible study focuses on chapter one of the Book of Ruth, the brief story has a few additional turns worthy of notice. When she returns to Bethlehem with Ruth, Naomi initiates a process whereby her daughter in-law marries Boaz, the family kinsman (according to levirate law, Deut. 25:5-10). In a contemporary context, however, we might view Naomi’s actions as putting Ruth at risk. Ruth is vulnerable to sexual exploitation—not only by Boaz but by other men who might sense she is sexually available. The encounter on the threshing floor (Ruth 3:3–14) is still debated in theological circles, as the term “feet” is a euphemism for a sexual encounter. Yet, it is through the character of Naomi that we sense she has faith in the wisdom shared with Ruth. We believe Naomi has assurance of her family’s reputation, and we believe her belief that God will move them from a position of needy to satisfied with adequate food and security.

For the working poor, but particularly for those whose poverty is tied to racial inequity, this bitterness is palpable. In our contemporary moment, the world is becoming more aware of such issues as the loss of Black Wall Street, a segment of Tulsa, Oklahoma (United States), where white residents burned down the businesses and homes that represented a haven from white supremacy and its oppressive modes of existence. The encroachment of violence upon this thriving city created generations of inequity and poverty. Likewise, Black farmers in the US have endured the loss of thousands of acres due to direct and unapologetic racial structures that provided financial support solely based on race.

Inequity reaches to every social experience, even childbirth. Black maternal morbidity is four times higher than that of white women in both the US and the United Kingdom.[[2]](#footnote-2) The health inequity has been largely under-reported until recently.

**Questions**

Sexual- and gender-based violence is exacerbated by economic disadvantage. People without money are more likely to stay in dangerous situations, often with little hope of getting out safely. But even further, women in the U.S. and in various other countries have critiqued the way domestic violence can be exacerbated by inappropriate usage of Bible text. Women of African descent, for example theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye, Mary Getui, Esther Mombo, and countless others have often had a fraught relationship with the Bible with regard to its usage to justify both racial and gender hierarchies. In addition to texts that are easily read to negate women as fully human, the Bible is often read through a Eurocentric lens that challenges the connectivity that African-descended women have to the Bible. Ruth’s story is relatable for any woman who has approached her own metaphorical threshing floor to lay down in vulnerability with hope of rising to the promise of greater survival strategies.

In this text, sexual- and gender-based violence is an implied undercurrent. Some of the questions we should consider are:

* When have you endured the bitterness of loss, only to have the Lord open up new opportunities for you? What have you considered as your own “new harvest” in the midst of a financial drought?
* Can you think of anyone who has endured food-based insecurity? What strategies of survival have they demonstrated that you observed?
* What are strategies to end food insecurity that you fear might put you at risk? How can you overcome that sense of insecurity?
* What are some of the gendered issues of food-based insecurity?
* Are women coerced into pursuing men to secure their survival, and if so, how can this lead to injustice?
* Does the story paint a fair portrait of the vulnerability of these women?
* How might we be contributing to the food insecurity of the most vulnerable in our communities? In the world?
* What steps can we take to eliminate food insecurity?

**Activities to Promote Economic and Food Justice**

What are options we can consider for better economic and health outcomes for people who are dealing with food deprivation?

* Identify your local farmers and find ways you and others can support them.
* Consider how the Bible talks about food inequity and our responsibilities. Explore ways that you can leave behind food for others to glean and how you can participate in programs including food banks or soup kitchens used to combat food insecurity.
* Explore the issue of food waste in your local area with your church and include other churches, charity groups, and activists. Invite experts to come and explore ways to eliminate food waste by sharing more with the economically vulnerable.
* Identify your local political representative and ask them to identify programs enacted to address both food waste and food insecurity. Find out how you can be more involved.
* Consider global efforts such as fair trade. Churches can participate and advocate for fair trade activities as a means of providing a global partnership with vulnerable communities and countries. Identify specific ways you and your church can partner with these global efforts.

**Prayer**

Dear Lord,

We pray now for those who are made vulnerable by systems of inequity and inequality, which create both material and spiritual bondage. Those who are weighted by unfair systems require Your steady love and courage. But they also require advocates who will speak favour over their lives. We ask that You break the yoke of bondage for those who believe they benefit from unjust systems that also cause them pain in ways they do not yet see.

We ask that You would prompt a reckoning with the individualist culture that has permeated Your church. As the African proverb says, “I am because we are – and if we are not, then I am not.” So we also say this today.

We look at Naomi who advised against her own interest to demonstrate Your love for those around her. By Your Spirit, please embolden Your disciples across the globe. Help us advocate for Your Spirit of love and not simply our own interests.

Bless us to practice a restorative justice, a *mishpat*, that lifts up the needs of the most vulnerable among us: those who are living with racial inequity, those who lack access to opportunities in education, healthcare, housing, and food. Give us wisdom to help women avoid the vulnerability of the threshing floor. May we assist them in securing the promise and restoration they require to live full and healthy lives, unencumbered by hunger and insecurity. Amen.

**Short Bio of the Author**

Dr. CL Nash is ordained in the American Baptist Church and has a PhD in historical theology. She has published in various theological blogs including with the Centre for Religion and Public Life, and the University of Leeds; in journals including the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*; and magazine articles with *Mutuality Magazine*. In addition to several articles and chapters being released throughout 2021, her first book is scheduled for release in 2022 with SCM Press. Visit her website at <https://misogynoir2mishpat.com/>.

**Resources**

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1. Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Black Women in the UK Four Times More Likely to Die in Pregnancy or Childbirth,” *The Guardian* website, 15 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jan/15/black-women-in-the-uk-four-times-more-likely-to-die-in-pregnancy-or-childbirth>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)