

5.

For Daily Livelihood: Ruth Trafficked and Prostituted¹⁰

Ruth 1:16-17

¹⁶ But Ruth said,

“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die—
here will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

Introductory Narrative

For many women especially in the global South, widowhood is not just the death of a spouse but also the degeneration to desperation. The realities of unjust global economic systems that deprive the majority while rewarding the privileged few has helped paint this desperation in clearly distinguishable contrasting colours. In the colours of the desperate, the women often are the most vivid – as they are the most desperate. Among the Ngoni-Tumbuka in Malawi, when a widow sitting next to the coffin containing the remains of her spouse narrates her mourning story “Muyeni wane! (My beloved)” with heaving and trembling, she can already envision the utter desperation for survival that this departure means for her, her children, and other dependents.

¹⁰ A 2010 Lenten Study compiled by the World Council of Churches, the World Student Christian Federation, and the World YWCA. At: <http://women.overcomingviolence.org>.

The book of Ruth in the Hebrew Testament articulates this widowhood desperation in ways that should help today's Christian reader to contextually address questions such as the following: How do we meet the challenge to transform social systems that have unjustly subjected widows to desperation – to the extent that sometimes the selling of their bodies for food is the only viable option? Why should some women consider being trafficked to foreign unknown lands as the only way to gain food sovereignty?

The story of Ruth is familiar to many. It is most often quoted in weddings (“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. [Ruth 1:16-17]). But it also offers a variety of interpretations, especially if it is read in the current context of human trafficking.¹¹ For while many see this as a text that demonstrates devotion of a daughter to her mother-in-law, they often do not see the reality of the deprivation of these two women that leads them to acts that could be construed as prostitution.

Background Notes

Although the actual authorship of the book of Ruth is uncertain, it is widely believed that Ruth was probably written during David's reign, since Solomon's name is not included in the genealogy. It seems to segue from the period of the judges into the monarchy and further concretizes the notion of God's preference for David as king. This is especially highlighted at the end, where Boaz' descendants are named and we hear of the birth of David, giving the impression that the location of the monarchy within Jesse's line is a reward to Ruth's family

¹¹ According to the UN, trafficking in persons refers to “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs, ” At: <http://www.unodc.org/southeastasiaandpacific/en/topics/illicit-trafficking/human-trafficking-definition.html>.

for her grace in a period of extreme crisis. Ruth, a Moabite, married Mahlon, probably a privileged Hebrew migrant who offered possibilities of a better life. When he died, she decided to remain with her mother-in-law and go to a foreign land. Naomi and Ruth were two desperate dispossessed widows who had to find food. As sonless widows, they had no means of reclaiming “their” land. They had each other, but without a man, this solidarity was not enough for their survival. The name Ruth means “mercy.” The story shows that God’s grace and mercy extend beyond Israel to include all peoples, for the Moabites were descended from Lot and worshipped Chemosh and several other pagan gods.

A first reading of the book reveals a fast-paced story, almost like a television drama, set in four distinct locations, each bringing its own set of issues that culminate in the marriage between Ruth and Boaz: (1) the country of Moab (1:1-18); (2) a field in Bethlehem (1:19-2:23); (3) a threshing floor in Bethlehem (3:1-18); (4) the city of Bethlehem (4:1-22).

The first segment introduces some of the key players in the drama, including Naomi the Jewess, who relocated to Moab with her family during a famine in the land. This was not uncommon in those days, for we will recall that Abraham and Sarah relocated to Egypt when the famine became intense in the land of God’s promise. However, intermarriage is not a key feature of the previous flights. Both Abraham and Jacob maintained marital purity within their ethnic group. While Naomi and her husband were both Jewish, their sons, Mahlon and Chilion, both married into the Moabite community. Was this choice of the Moabite wives a strategy of adjusting their status in the Diaspora? If the choices of Ruth and Orpah, as young widows, are a test of it, one could argue that these two inter-marriages were successful. After the deaths of their husbands, both Ruth and Orpah remained with their mothers-in-law. When Naomi decided to return to her peoples, Ruth decided to stay with Naomi, her mother-in-law, while Orpah courageously went back to her people.

As the story shifts to Bethlehem, Naomi’s hometown, we become conscious of the fact that Naomi’s situation has not changed; she is

perhaps even more dependent on others than she was before. And her situation makes her desperate. One cannot escape the fact that Naomi's and Ruth's gender and identity as sonless widows prohibit their ability to amass a fortune, or even to claim that which previously belonged to their husbands. They are left at the mercy of their husbands' ethnic group, especially the land and farm owners like Boaz, who were willing to leave some grains behind during the harvesting process.

Naomi, not unlike human traffickers, has to use the young, beautiful, and exotic Ruth. In the story, Ruth's body is commodified in a subtle way: She uncovers Boaz's feet and lies down (Ruth 3:7). This action carries sexual overtones that capture the act of selling sex, but both Naomi and Ruth hoped for a more legally binding end that would ensure repossession of land for Naomi.

This experience of being unable to access property that belonged to a male spouse might not be a common or relevant case in countries in which women and men have equal access to inherited property. However, even in places where such equal access is affirmed by laws and policies, the interpretation of certain laws is affected by unwritten codes, conditions, expectations, and attitudes. These tend to be gender-specific, and often favour men over women. This therefore means that even places with gender equality may still lack gender justice, because the measures of equality leave out so many community-specific, often social constructionist, injustices that make it more difficult for women to access these "equal" opportunities. In many cases, oppression and injustice are exhibited not only in the tangible acts of legislation, but often in the way traditions and moral expectations are sustained and perceived in given communities, whether faith-based or not. This is also particularly true because gender in general can be defined as the values, attitudes, and roles attributed to women and men: the power relationships and the wide set of characteristics that distinguish men and women, extending from biology to social role or gender identity.

Ruth's Story in the Context of Human Trafficking

Read the second chapter of Ruth in silence and then aloud for everyone to hear. How would this text be understood if it were to be transposed into a 21st-century reality? Can you see/hear the headlines: Are you familiar with similar situations in your context? To what extent can the events of chapter 3 be considered a case of human trafficking?

You are invited to reflect on some aspects to human trafficking by retelling the story of Ruth. This retelling is from the understanding that most trafficked humans are women and that most of them end up sacrificing their bodies in what can be called sexual slavery.

Naomi and Ruth are two desperate widows dispossessed by death. Their solidarity with each other as women is not enough. They need a man's intervention. And with the blessing of youth in her favour, Ruth provides the necessary "key" out of their desperate situation. Not only does she uncover Boaz's feet, at dawn she walks away with a sack filled with food (probably enough for sale and consumption) and her identity is camouflaged. How do we respond to Boaz' act of generosity?

A second interpretation of the passage suggests that Ruth marries an exotic husband who offers her the opportunity to experience life anew. How many girls/women marry men who seem to offer the possibility of a better life? How many men/women think that they can solve residency problems through marriage? Are we really in a position to condemn Ruth and Naomi before attempting to walk a day in their shoes? Is this still very prevalent in your context?

When a people believe that their options are limited and there is no way to a bright future, they often seek to find a solution outside of their context. Many people are trapped in loveless unions, awaiting their "green card" (US/European/ Canadian residency status). And while we don't know Ruth's social status in Moab, we are conscious of her job description in Bethlehem: she is on welfare. All too frequently, the best educated relocate to the West, exchanging their titled positions for jobs as street-cleaners, janitors, and cabbies in the hope of a better life.

Questions for Reflection

1. According to you, what is this story about?
2. What possible themes come out of this story?
3. Who are the main characters of this story and what do you know about each one of them?
4. Do we have women like Ruth and Naomi in our communities?
5. What are their stories?
6. How can faith-based communities respond to women like Naomi and Ruth?
7. What structural measures can faith-based communities advocate for so that no one ends up in such desperate situations?
8. What resources do faith-based communities have to address such injustices and work for women's human rights?
9. What are the challenges?
10. How can faith-based communities partner with others to address such injustices (for example, to mitigate the impact of the feminization of poverty: At policy level? At a grassroots level?
11. Now that we have done this Bible study, what will we do differently?