

# I AM RUTH

June 2020



## First Day at Bethlehem

I am Ruth, one of the daughters-in-law of Naomi, from the country of Moab. Naomi and I travelled from Moab near the Dead Sea to Bethlehem in the country of Judah. We came to Bethlehem with many expectations. When we entered town, people recognised my mother-in-law. They had already heard the news of the death of Naomi's husband and sons, and showed their sympathy towards Naomi. She was surrounded by many of their relatives but I was left on my own. They welcomed us to town. Some of the relatives even provided us with food, for a few days at least as well as a place to stay.

We settled in a relative's house which was left empty and we made that a home. People visited to see Naomi, as she had returned after a long period of time. But slowly the hospitality we received from relatives stopped and we had to find a way to survive by ourselves. When the time came for me to earn our living, the world outside of the house wasn't as I thought it would be. I'd had so many expectations when I stepped into Bethlehem. But the reality I encountered was different.

When I came out of the house and walked along the street, no-one spoke to me. Rather, they looked at me as if I was a stranger. I never felt an outsider when I married Mahlon. His whole family had accepted me, and my sister Orpah, as one of them. That was one reason why I had high expectations of the people in Judah. But reality did not match my expectations. People saw me as an outsider because of my culture, language, accent and colour. I felt an outsider only when they started to treat me as someone different and not as one of them. I was an outsider to the way they spoke, the way they looked and the way their culture was, even though our cultures weren't that different.

Our ancestral history had a common family root, because we were the descendants of Lot, who was Abraham's nephew.

The Israelites are descended from Abraham and the Moabites from Lot – practically cousins! But the Israelites looked down on us. Our ancestor, Moab, was conceived from Lot and his older daughter. In fact the Israelites were told to exclude our people from the company of the faithful.

I've come to experience all of these nuances in our encounters since arriving in Bethlehem. I hadn't even realised that there were so many things about me that set me apart from the local people. More than that, people made fun of the way I spoke and the way I looked, and of my ancestors' history.

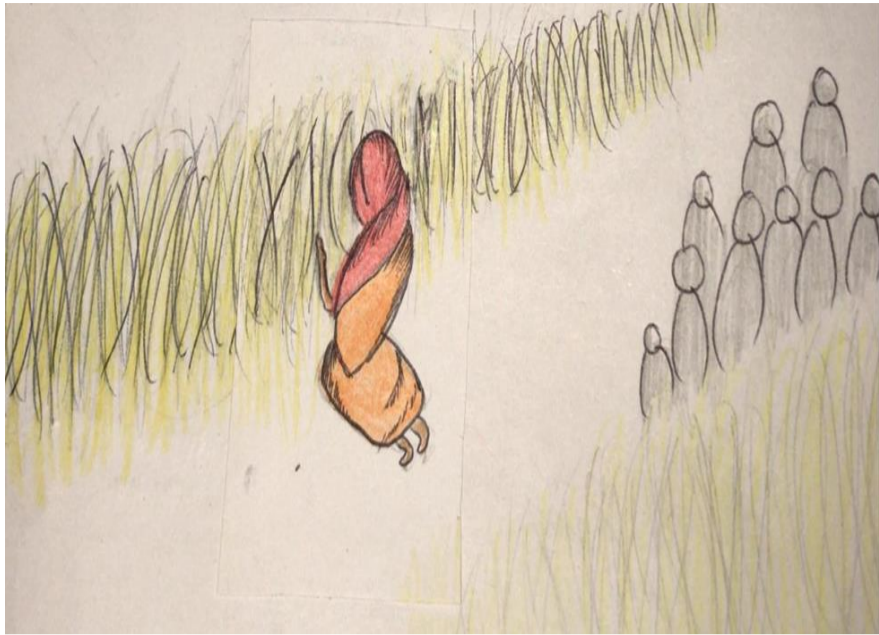
They didn't even consider me a Yahweh worshiper, although I worshipped the same Yahweh. They seemed to understand Yahweh as only their God and not a God for anyone else. Even when I tried to speak to the neighbours, they avoided speaking to me.

I left all my friends and relatives in Moab, thinking that I would make friends here; that Naomi's relatives would be my relatives and Yahweh, whom Naomi and her family worship, would be my God. None of this was easy in reality. I felt lonely and so many times I thought about going back to my country, like Orpah my sister had, so that I would be treated as someone who belongs again.

But then I remembered why I decided to stay in Bethlehem. I did not have any close family back in Moab, since I lost my parents before we left our country. And I wanted to see the world outside of Moab so it was a journey of adventure which I took boldly. So, I decided to stay here and fight for my survival in this foreign country, where I was treated as an outsider.



Continues...



## As a Migrant worker

When we started to settle into our new home, it was time for us to go out to find food for ourselves. We arrived in Bethlehem during harvest time. Bethlehem had recovered from the famine that had made my family-in-law leave Bethlehem. Settling here wasn't easy, as I discovered. There was no means to survive which wasn't I expected. Naomi used to say they got their own property in Bethlehem so I thought it should not be a problem. But in reality we were not allowed to do anything with the property as women. Although my mother-in-law had some family property, she couldn't own or use it. According to their laws, property belongs to the man of the family and if the man dies it goes to his son and not to his wife. So to get her property back, my mother-in-law would need to get married and bear a son, or I would need to be married and bear a son. As far as Naomi was concerned, she was too old to get married or have a child. Hence, Naomi had a plan for me, which I only figured out later on.

Before getting to the marriage plan, we had a big task ahead of us: how to feed ourselves. As Naomi was old, she couldn't go out to do any work; I had to go and find work to survive. There is a system in Judah to support widows, refugees and poor people who do not own land and struggled to earn their day-to-day food. During harvest time, they use a system called gleaning, where grains are left purposely for the poor and widows to collect and take home. This is done in two ways: by not picking up the grain that falls naturally when people harvest but also by leaving extra grain for the poor to pick up. Both helped the landless and widows and refugees and poor to collect enough food to survive

Naomi explained this system to me and directed me to a particular field, which was owned by one of her relatives called Boaz. The very first day I went to the field, other widows and poor from the local community were already there to collect the leftovers. I joined them but they looked at me as an underserving candidate, who wanted a piece of their share. They saw me as someone who took from what was theirs, and therefore they treated me as though I was unwanted. I felt an outsider, because they felt threatened by my arrival., others of a similar kind might come and do the same. Boaz, who was the owner of the field, watched all this. He asked his workers who I was and what I was doing there, and his workers told him about me as a Moabite woman, all of them referred me as a Moabite not by name. Boaz was so kind to me that he left extra grain for me to pick up. I wondered why Boaz was kind to me; was it because he was a relative of Naomi or for another reason? So I asked him, why are you so much more kind to me than anyone else? What he said to me was a surprise. He told me his mother was not from the Israelite community but a Canaanite woman called Rahab married to an Israelite. When Rahab settled in Bethlehem, she had an experience similar to mine. Boaz seemed to know how it was for a foreigner in an Israelite land to survive and so he showed me great kindness. Because he was a relative of Naomi, he was concern for me and asked his workers to leave extra grain, so that there was more for me to gather. I think he would have helped me in any case, as he was kind enough to support anyone who was in need of help, which I had understood from the words of my mother-in-law. I saw so many poor and widows gleaning at his field when I compared it to the fields nearby. That could have been one of the reasons for Naomi to send me there. She was not wrong, as Boaz's kindness provided enough grain for me and Naomi to survive.



## A story of Refugees

### Looking Back to Moab

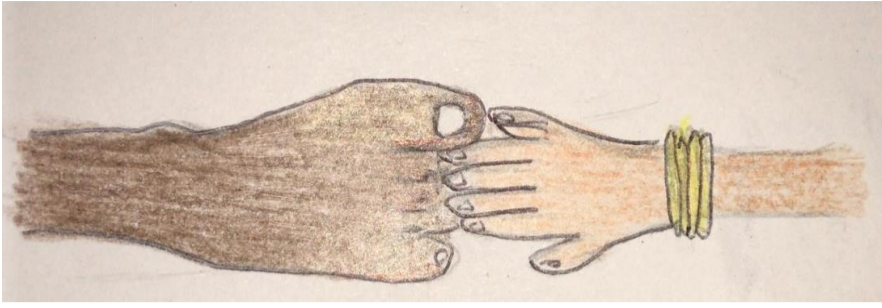
Let me share with you our experience in Moab. When I was very young, there was a famine in neighbouring countries, including some parts of Judah. Many people moved to our country to find food. Among those people were Naomi and her family, who travelled from a small town called Bethlehem in Judah. Naomi and Elimelek along with their sons Mahlon and Kilion arrived in Moab and settled there. They lived not too far from our house and our families became friends.

Sadly, Elimelek died suddenly not long after they'd settled in our country, unexpectedly leaving Naomi as a widow with two young boys. I felt sorry for her because living as a widow in our country – or in our neighbours' countries, for that matter – was not an easy life. But Naomi had two sons, who helped her to some extent. As a widow, she had to depend on her boys to survive. After some years, Naomi decided to take me as a wife for her son Mahlon and she asked my parents to give their daughter to her son. It was the usual practice that marriages were decided by the parents and no consideration was given to the wishes of us girls. My parents, knowing the family well, decided to give me in marriage to Mahlon. I married him and it wasn't bad at all. Mahlon was a good person and there was no reason to say no to the wedding, and, anyway, if I had said no, it wouldn't have made a difference.

I was now the wife of Mahlon and daughter-in-law of Naomi. My in-laws found another girl who was a distant relative my distant relative called Orpah. The family felt complete and we were set to live a happy life. But then, before we'd even recovered from the death of my father-in-law, my husband and the husband of my sister Orpah died from the same disease that my father-in-law had had. We three women were left as widows.

As I said earlier, a widows' life in our context was not an easy life. We women were often treated as secondary beings. We depended on men for our food, shelter and survival. There was no man in our family to provide any of those. My mother-in-law was too old to work outside of our home and therefore my sister and I went out to win the bread needed for life. We did not have any property or field that could give us something for living. There was no source of income that we could rely on. Our lives become so hard. Seeing us struggle, my mother-in-law felt sorry for us. To put an end to our troubles, she decided to go back to her home country, Judah, so that her relatives could look after her. She asked us to go back to our parents' houses so that we would have a better life too. We decided to stay with Naomi, wherever she would go, but my mother-in-law pressed us to go back to our families' place. Finally, Orpah decided to leave us. We three had a good relationship and it felt sad to see her go. But for the betterment of my sister we said our goodbyes to her and sent her away with our love and good wishes.

I couldn't leave my mother-in-law, because I was so close to her that I considered her my mother. More than that, I had got used to the Israelites' way of life and thought I would fit in more with their country than in Moab, I had become a worshipper of Yahweh and I was looking forward to being part of Naomi's family and people, and happy to worship her God. I felt I was one of them already, even if I had been born in Moab. They may have often referred to me as a Moabite, but I felt comfortable with the Israelites. And so I decided to go with Naomi wherever she went.



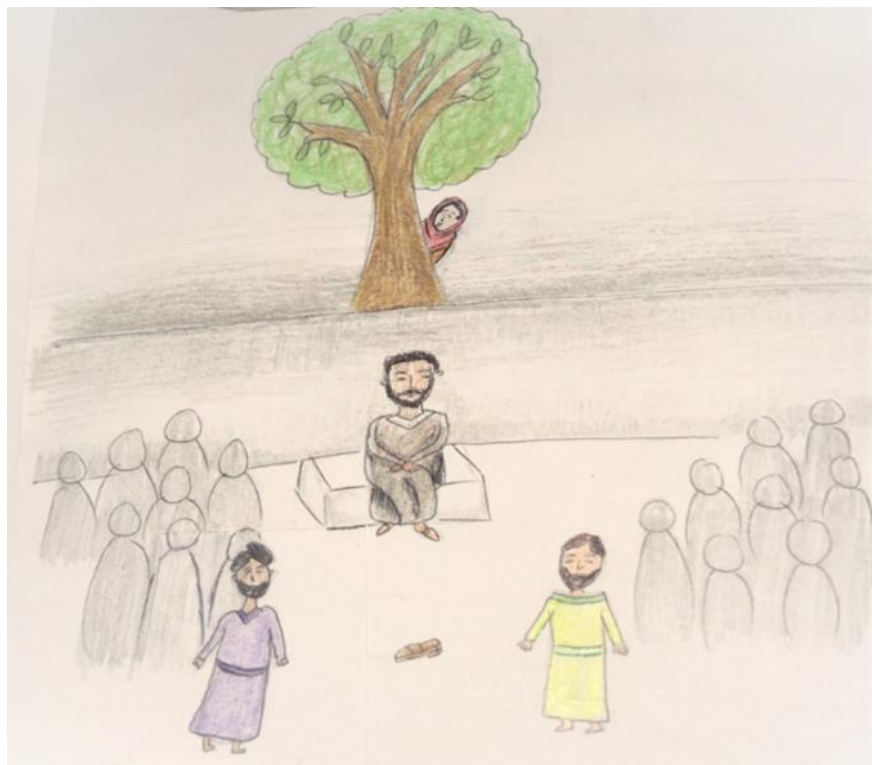
We arrived in Bethlehem, Naomi's native town. Although they were not interested in friendship with me immediately, I went out of my way to have conversations with the people around me. I made friends with some of my fellow workers in the field, which wasn't easy at first. Hearing their stories made me think that I was in so much of a better position than they were. Most of them were widows and poor women from Bethlehem and surrounding Judah, and in one way or another we shared the pain and sorrow of living life as a woman. But my story had an extra layer, as I was a migrant worker. I often thought about whether I liked the system of supporting widows and orphans by leaving grains for them to pick up, or whether it was wrong that this had to happen in the first place. Why couldn't they avoid orphans and widows becoming poor, making them suffer? If a widow had the right to inherit her husband's property after he died or if women could share in their father's estate, she wouldn't need to suffer without the means to survive, I wouldn't have needed to glean if my mother-in-law had had the right to inherit her husband's property. This may have been the same for some of the women who were gleaning with me. But the system had been there for ages and I couldn't change it, as I was powerless in a society dominated by men. I didn't have the means to go against the custom, and so I was forced to follow it.

While I made friends with fellow workers and neighbours, I also made the effort to develop a friendship with Boaz. Boaz was a rich man, who had many fields. He was also kind-hearted, which helped to make our friendship possible. We became even closer when we discovered how many wishes and aspirations, likes and dislikes, we shared. I liked him, even if he was much older than me. His concern for me and his acceptance of me as I was, paved the way for my interest in him. He liked me for who I was – my racial identity and even my status didn't matter to him. I could see how it might have looked to my fellow workers and the men in the field, but we liked each other for sure. Boaz did seem to respect the social mores of his community and didn't show a sign of the love he may have felt for me. He could only show me kindness, which meant that I got enough food for me and Naomi to survive. Obviously, my mother-in-law wanted me to marry and settle so that after her lifetime I would

have a companion. She was also concerned about redeeming her property. Unless I married, she would not be able to get her possessions back. So, I had to take the bold step of sharing my love for Boaz, to make my marriage happen.

Every evening, I shared what I'd heard in the field with my mother-in-law. One night, while talking to her about my day as usual, I told her that I loved Boaz and wanted to marry him. My mother-in-law wasn't surprised to hear that, as she had already understood from my stories that I was in love with him. So, I asked my mother-in-law how to go about marrying him. Naomi said that I couldn't propose to him as their culture did not allow a woman to propose to a man. Then I asked her how else I could marry him. She asked whether Boaz loved me. I guessed that, yes, he loved me, even though he had never said anything that made it obvious.

So, Naomi suggested that I indicate to him that I wanted to marry him rather than propose directly. My mother-in-law asked me to freshen up and put on the best clothes I had. She suggested that I go to Boaz that night at his threshing floor. When he slept, she said, I should uncover his feet, warm them up, and lie down near them so that he would understand my intention. This felt strange. Why couldn't I just say that I loved him and wanted to marry him? Why did I have to go in while he was sleeping? It felt a bit awkward and even dangerous. Only men were allowed on the threshing floor. What if the other men saw me? Still, I had to take this bold step to marry Boaz and so I went and sat at his feet. I warmed them up, covered them, and lay on them to indicate that I would like to marry him. When Boaz woke up, panic rushed over his face. But when he saw it was me, he calmed down. Boaz had understood my intention but I could see in his face that he felt hesitant to accept me. He explained that the reason for his hesitation was that he was neither Elimelek's nearest kinsman nor a brother of Mahlon and therefore he was not the person with the immediate rights to marry me. Only if Mahlon's older brother gave up his right to marry me, could Boaz take me as his wife. I panicked. What if this other man refused to give up his rights and wanted to marry me? Although Boaz said he would take care of the situation and would follow the community's proper procedure, I returned home with a heavy heart, scared for what would happen the following day



## Men at the City Gate

The next day, Boaz informed the elders of the town of his concerns. Along with the kinsmen of our family, they gathered at the city gate, where all the disputes within families and the community were dealt with. As a woman I wasn't allowed to be there and so I had to hide at a distance to watch what was going on. I wish I could have been there when my future was discussed but the system didn't let me take part.

One of the elders explained why they were gathering. He said that Naomi was back after the loss of Elimelek and her sons, and now there was a need to redeem Elimelek's property so that their family could survive. Following custom, the nearest kinsman needed to take responsibility for this redemption. Who was the nearest kinsman of Elimelek? One of the family's men stepped to the front. He was Elimelek's eldest brother and carried the legal duty to buy back what had belonged to Elimelek. Boaz opened negotiations. He asked the man whether he was happy to redeem Elimelek's property. I was wondering why only property. Or was I considered part of my mother-in-law's possessions? I waited for the next move. The kinsman seemed to agree to redeeming the property. Only then did Boaz ask the next question, whether he was happy to take me as his wife along with the property. The kinsman seemed startled. He seemed to have been aware of Naomi but had apparently not considered me as part of her family. It put him off and he said he couldn't take care of me. When I heard that, my heart felt light.

Now hopeful, I watched what would happen next. The elders of the town explained that if a kinsman-redeemer didn't want to act as a redeemer, he could give that right to the next kinsman in line. In order to do so, he had to remove his sandal and hand it to the kinsman who was willing to redeem the property. This sounded

strange to me, because I had heard from older women in the community that a widow had the right to participate in the act of sandal removing. Actually, the widow should be the one to pull the sandal off, and then she would spit in her kinsman's face and curse at him for not redeeming her. This wasn't happening here, though. Instead, the kinsman removed the sandal himself and gave it to Boaz, who was willing to redeem the property as well as marry me. Although the practice seemed unusual, in the end Boaz was given the chance to take me as his wife. I ran home to tell my mother-in-law and she joined me in sharing the happy news with our neighbours.

Boaz came to see my mother-in-law to tell her he was now responsible for her family, including her property. We were married and I bore a son called Obed. Not long after we had a child, Boaz died and again I was left a widow. But this time, I was left with a son. What a strange world I have lived in. Widowhood has been my way of life. I depended on my father, then my husband and now my son. I feel like I have never had a life of my own. There has been no-one who tried to understand how I felt and what I wanted. I've been expected me to act as if I didn't have my own wishes, other than to live for the family, community and culture I stepped into. Even now, Naomi claims my son Obed as hers and I don't have the right to call him my son. I came to this world of Bethlehem in Judah expecting that I would be included in their family and society but most of the time I have been made to feel a foreign, Moabite woman. I am proud to say that now I am part of the family that descends from Leah, Tamar and Rahab, whose boldness allowed the family to survive. The God whom I believe in is a God who sees everyone as the same and I am glad that I am part of God's family at least.

## Reflect....

- ✚ Can you think of a time when you felt like an outsider? How did you feel? How did you get through it? Did someone reach out to you?
  
- ✚ Now think of someone in your community who may be feeling alone, isolated (even think of people who have been affected by corona virus) - How can you help them?
  
- ✚ Are there people in your church who may feel an outsider and need practical help? If so What can you do to support them practically to feel they are part of the church family?

Acknowledgement: Picture by Shiny Darwin