

Ruth and the Impact of Desperation

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As a part of my Master of Theological Studies degree at Emmanuel College, I had requested to work with the Canadian Council of Churches on the topic of human trafficking. It was a struggle to comprehend human cruelty in the midst of desperation. Also, the existence of suffering and oppression in our world challenges my own understanding of the nature of God and the redemptive of the cross. Through studying biblical texts through diverse lenses, I have come to experience the resurrected hope in Jesus resides in and with those who are suffering and the vulnerable ones are calling us to “seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8).

Although the Bible presents ethnical concerns in the ancient Jewish and Palestinian contexts, the impact of patriarchal system remain prevalent in our contemporary settings. The commoditization and devaluing of human life led to international trade in persons, but I would suggest that desperation is the major underlying cause. Having attended a United Nations Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery in 2003, I heard personal witnesses of young children and women coerced into working under subhuman conditions and it was out of desperation that the parents “sold” the children to these agencies. Despite the testimonies, delegates from the identified countries refused responsibilities and as a theological student and Christian, I asked, “Where is God in the midst of this oppression and suffering?” Jesus walked among us to establish an alternative social order where the vulnerable and marginalized may rejoin the community as valued individuals and one of the beloved. As a theology student at Toronto School of Theology, I remember the passage from Micah that says, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). In the following biblical reflections, I will use the story of Ruth and Esther to illustrate the vulnerability of persons in disadvantageous circumstances due to oppressive social structures, practices, and ethics. Most importantly, if viewing the accounts with the understanding of desperation and powerlessness of the women in the stories, we can recognize the parallel experiences of women and children in the contemporary practice of human trafficking and sex trade. It is my hope that we will not address the issue of human trafficking as a gender issue because both genders are traded within the labour market. When it is the choice between exploitation and death, human survival would rather be mistreated than to perish. Such is the impact of human desperation.

The story of Ruth emphasizes the obedience, commitment, and dedication of a Moabite woman, especially in her relationship with her mother-in-law, Naomi. We first encounter Naomi’s family when her two sons and husband have all deceased and she was left with two Moabite daughter-in-laws. Naomi’s plan was to return to Judah and therefore, requesting the two young women to similarly return home. Ruth insisted on remaining with Naomi even though she had the choice to return to her mother’s house. She committed with the words,

*“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. Where you die, I will die*

– there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” (Ruth 1:16-17).

One must consider human preference to return home instead of relocating to an unknown country. Furthermore, as a woman within the Jewish social context, neither Naomi nor Ruth had any rights to property or access to family assets. Hence, Ruth’s decision to go to Judah was not influenced by the promise of prosperity or social security. What would have been some factors that influenced Ruth’s decision? Possibly, her situation at her mother’s house could not afford to care for her as well. Instead of becoming a burden to her community, she took the risk to remain with Naomi because in Judah, her exoticism potentially could attract her next husband easier than in her home context. Considering the only method to establish social security is through marriage or children, Ruth had to be certain of the possibilities. Furthermore, Ruth could be aware of the family assets in Judah, which suggested a better life. In situations of desperations, a “better” could be only an illusion or a hope that may be based on very slim factors but it remains more hopeful than familiar and dire circumstances.

Although there are various perspectives that we could read about Ruth’s experience in Judah, I would like to address the process of acquiring Boaz as the next husband for Ruth. First, Ruth offered to glean in the fields saying, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor” (Ruth 2:2). We can see that this practice of gleaning is one based on mercy of kinsmen and workers in the fields. If Ruth and Naomi could not establish themselves in the social context, their property would be lost and since women did not hold ownership of land, then Naomi needed a male in order to redeem the land rights. Without the ability to bear children, Naomi did not have similar opportunities to find a new husband and Ruth became the last hope for either woman to find stability for the future. Ruth’s presence in the fields signaled her widowed status and indirectly, she was on display for interested parties.

Boaz took note of Ruth and her persistent in gleaning. He complimented her on her dedication to Naomi and the bond that the two shared. With communities of both men and women, who have extreme oppression and exploitation, they find alternative ways to care for one another. Even in desperation, they are able to extend themselves beyond normal means and Ruth displayed this bond in her relationship with Naomi. Although Naomi had no choice but to use Ruth as a means to redeem family properties, Ruth must have understood the severity of the situation and quietly submitted to the strategy of

“When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily, uncovered his feet, and lay down. At midnight the man was started, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet was a woman!” (Ruth 1:7-8).

If we read this account without knowing the biblical context, we would assume the incident to be a contemporary form of forced prostitution or even possibly something recounted from the experiences of “Comfort women” during the

Pushing beyond the dedication and commitment of Ruth to Naomi, we observe a similar love as Jonathan and David where one “loved [another] as his own soul” (1 Samuel 18:1). In a way, Ruth recognized that by offering herself would they be redeemed in the Jewish context.

Without disregarding the depth of Ruth’s relationship with Naomi, we must recognize the desperation of these two women who had to resort to commoditize themselves for means of survival. Ruth complied because this was also her only option, beside gleaning for food and living as a foreigner under the mercy of the Judeans. Without secured social status, both Naomi and Ruth recognized the impossibility to survive in this setting and the unnamed bond that the women shared because without naming the reality in which they lived, both women knew that Ruth and her sexuality was the answer to their dilemma. Out of desperation, Naomi pushed her daughter-in-law to offer herself to Boaz. With the intention to “seek security” for Ruth and being without alternatives, Naomi plotted the positioning of Ruth at the disposal of Boaz (Ruth 3:1-4). One can imagine the risk of this offer because Boaz did not necessarily need to commit to Ruth or to request her to become his responsibility because he was not the next in line. Having been truly a blessing of God that Boaz became the solution for the women and the exchange of responsibility for Naomi and Ruth was smooth. That said, I am not praising the effectiveness of the social structure as encountered by Ruth and Naomi, but we need to be realistic about the inability of vulnerable individuals to find alternatives to exploitation. The task is to address factors that contribute to human desperation.

Discussion:

In our contemporary society, women who exist under similar circumstances as Ruth and Naomi do not experience frequently the grace and mercy displayed by Boaz. Instead, these women and girl-children are traded as products, supplying a demand within a global economy, and destroying generations of delicate spirits. If we are to see God in all creation, do the people who buy sex workers and migrant labourers also see the face of God in those helpless eyes? This addresses the question of treating human beings as goods for trade. Human trafficking is a contemporary form of slavery where the rights of the individuals are ignored and hopelessness force families to offer their children for job opportunities abroad or arranged marriages to strangers through agencies, in hopes that it would promise an improvement of life circumstances. How do we, as people of faith, to address the continual objectification of people, the disregard for the justice-seeking ministry that Jesus established through his hospitable words and deeds? In our daily lives, how have we participated in the “system” that continue to benefit from the exploitation of the impoverished and yet benefiting the grossly wealthy? If we take a moment to consider the impact of our actions on a child across the globe, there is hope for humanity to learn just sharing of resources and right to access all life’s necessities.

Continuing with the themes of desperation and exploitation within the relationship of Naomi and Ruth, can you identify contemporary examples of similar situations and circumstances that are affecting our societies locally, nationally, and globally?

Within your own communities, what may be some ways to explore further the topic of human trafficking in Canada and to increase the engagement of Christian churches to eradicate the treatment of human beings as a form of commodity?