

Ruth, Naomi, and the Refugee Experience

Shavuot 5782/2022



Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.

The Book of Ruth tells the story of refugees. The first refugees we learn about are Naomi, Elimelech, and their sons, who flee Bethlehem during a time of famine. Their need is so great that they go to the land of Moab, the historical enemies of the Israelites. The family is forced by circumstance to migrate to a place of uncertain welcome and perhaps even mortal danger.

Part 1: Naomi: Refuge and Repatriation

Ruth 1:1-2

(א) וַיְהִי בִּימֵי שָׁפָט הַשְּׂפָטִים וַיְהִי
רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ וְיִלְדָּה אִישׁ מִבֵּית לָחֶם
יְהוּדָה לְגֹוֹר בְּשֹׁנִי מוֹאָב הוּא
וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וּשְׁנֵי בָנָיו: (ב) וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ
אֱלִמֶּלֶךְ וְשֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ נָעֳמִי וְשֵׁם
שְׁנֵי-בָנָיו מַחֲלֹן וְכִלְיוֹן אֶפְרַתִּיתִים
מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׁנֵי-
מוֹאָב בְּיָהֳיוֹ-נָשָׁם:

In the days when the chieftains ruled, there was a famine in the land; and a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab. (2) The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. They came to the country of Moab and remained there.

Upon arriving in Moab, Elimelech dies, but Naomi and her sons are able to establish themselves and build lives there. But after the deaths of all the family she arrived with, and after learning that the conditions which had caused them to leave Bethlehem had changed, she decides to go back to her country of origin. In other words, she “voluntarily repatriates” once it is safe to do so.

Ruth 1:5-6

(ה) וַתֵּשָׂאֵר הָאִשָּׁה מִשְׁנֵי יְלָדֶיהָ
וּמֵאִשָּׁהּ: (ו) וַתָּקָם הֵיא וְכַלְתֶּיהָ וַתָּשָׁב
מִשְׁנֵי מוֹאָב כִּי שָׁמְעָה בְּשִׁנְהָ מוֹאָב כִּי-פָקַד
יְהוָה אֶת-עַמּוֹ לָתֵת לָהֶם לֶחֶם:

(5)...so the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband. (6) She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab she had heard that the LORD had taken note of His people and given them food.

UNHCR has called voluntary repatriation the “durable solution of choice for the largest number of refugees.” Refugees in precarious situations in countries of first asylum often lack long-term integration or resettlement prospects and would like to go home when they can. Unfortunately, some governments attempt to return refugees and asylum seekers or send them to another country without the necessary conditions in place for successful reintegration.

“RESOLVED: Government return and repatriation programs must be truly voluntary and safe. The international community and sending and receiving governments should ensure that returned and repatriated refugees are supported as they rebuild their lives.”

—*HIAS Board Resolution on Global Policy Principles*

“In 2020, 251,000 refugees were able to return to their country of origin, out of a total of 82.4 million displaced worldwide.”

—*UNHCR Global Trend: Forced Displacement, 2020*

International human rights law forbids countries from sending asylum seekers back to their countries of origin if doing so would place them in danger. And yet, as just one example of how these laws are violated in practice, the U.S. government used the excuse of COVID-19 to send Haitian migrants from the U.S.-Mexico Border back to Haiti, even though the government itself had earlier recognized that, “political unrest and human rights abuses had made it impossible for Haitians to safely return to their country.”

—*Human Rights Watch, 9/21/21*

Question for Discussion:

1. How does it shift your understanding of the story to think of Naomi, Elimelech, and their children as refugees?
2. Naomi was able to go back to Bethlehem because the conditions there had changed, and she was at a point in her life when she had fewer ties to Moab. For the small number of refugees today who are able to voluntarily repatriate, what kinds of support and conditions do you imagine they will need to make the journey home?
3. How would Naomi’s story have been different if she had been forced to go back to Bethlehem before she was ready, or before it was safe?

Part 2: Ruth and Boaz: Resettlement

Naomi returns to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Ruth is not fleeing persecution, violence, or natural disaster, but she nevertheless finds herself in a place where she feels isolated and alone. She doesn’t know the formal or informal community structures, has extremely limited access to resources, and is clearly understood to be a foreigner by those around her. She goes out to gather the grain that is leftover in the fields after the harvest, and encounters Boaz.

Ruth 2: 8-9, 15-16

(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר בְּעֹז אֶל־רוּת הָלוֹא שָׁמַעַתְּ בְּתִי
אֶל־תִּלְכִּי לְלַקֵּט בַּשָּׂדֶה אַחֵר וְגַם לֹא
תַעֲבוּרִי מִזֶּה וְכֵה תִדְבְּקִין עִם־נַעֲרָתִי: (ט)
עֵינֶיךָ בַּשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר־יִקְצְרוּן וְהִלַּכְתְּ אַחֲרֵיהֶן
הָלוֹא צְנִיתִי אֶת־הַנְּעָרִים לְבִלְתִּי נִגְעָךְ
וְצִמָּת וְהִלַּכְתְּ אֶל־הַכֵּלִים וְשָׁתִית מֵאֲשֶׁר
יִשְׁאַבּוּן הַנְּעָרִים:
(טו) וְתָקַם לְלַקֵּט וַיֵּצֵא בְּעֹז אֶת־נַעֲרָיו
לֵאמֹר גַּם בֵּין הָעֹמְרִים תִּלְקֹט וְלֹא
תְכַלִּימוּהָ: (טז) וְגַם שְׁלֹתָשְׁלוֹ לָהּ מִן־
הַצִּבְתִּים וְעִזְבָתָם וְלִקְטָהּ וְלֹא תִגְעָרוּ־
בָּהּ:

(8) Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen to me, daughter.^b Don't go to glean in another field. Don't go elsewhere, but stay here close to my girls. (9) Keep your eyes on the field they are reaping, and follow them. I have ordered the men not to molest you. And when you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink some of [the water] that the men have drawn."
(15) When she got up again to glean, Boaz gave orders to his workers, "You are not only to let her glean among the sheaves, without interference, (16) but you must also pull some [stalks] out of the heaps and leave them for her to glean, and not scold her."

In these verses, Boaz offers Ruth protection, sustenance, and instructions on how to gather her own food. Later in the story, he offers her a pathway to permanence and a place in the community.

Upon arrival in their new location, the resettlement agencies provide services such as meeting the refugees at the airport, preparing their housing arrangements, helping refugees find English classes, medical care, social services, and registering children for school. The USRAP [United States Refugee Assistance Program] model is built on the principle of self-sufficiency, and one of the biggest priorities for resettlement agencies is finding employment (often entry-level) for the refugee. Each refugee is given assistance finding an apartment and [financial support to assist in] paying for rent, food, and clothing in the first few months.

(adapted from the HIAS Guide to the US Refugee Admissions Program)

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does Ruth's experience of migration compare with Naomi's? How do each of their stories work (or not) to illuminate different aspects of the refugee experience?
2. How do the things Boaz does for Ruth compare to the list of services resettlement agencies offer refugees? What are the reasons for the similarities and differences?
3. Have you been a newcomer who had to establish themselves in a community? Or been part of a community welcoming someone new? What went well for you in those experiences? What would you hope to do differently next time?