



The 10th EKD (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland) – NCKK (National Council of Churches in Korea) - Ecumenical Joint Consultation, 16.-20.02.2023 in Seoul

Biblestudy: Ruth - company and solidarity for a better life

Exploring biblical guidance to questions of migration and integration

Introduction

Migration is one of the central subjects in biblical history. In a way one could say: The Bible is in large parts literature on migration. The space in which biblical faith is developed is the experience of migration. It starts with the idea, that the ancestors of faith (Abraham and Sara) are called to leave behind everything that is familiar to them: „Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you“ (Genesis 12, 1). It continues by relating the exodus from slavery in Egypt, and the experience to meet the one and only God as an eternal power that lends company and help to the wandering people (Exodus). In a way, God himself is a migrant, living with his/her migrant people. Later, the main crystallization of biblical faith with its big prophetic schools (Isaiah and Jeremiah) evolves during the Exile in Babylon. In the gospel, then, we meet an itinerant preacher without a place to lay his head (Matthew 8, 20), who calls on his disciples to leave behind everything that so far has been familiar to them in order to start a new and always wandering life (Luke 5, Mark 6, 7ff). Thus, it is not astonishing, that the expression parish - Parochie - is closely related to the Greek word paroikos which means stranger.

Of course, migration in our times is very different from migration experiences people made thousands of years ago. But in the light of actual phenomena of migration, biblical interpretations of migration can well enlighten our times. We can read the bible as a resonance chamber for vibrant experiences of today, understanding and reflecting them in the light of God’s will and guidance. Here, we can find impulses to develop helpful practice for our situation. So let us take a closer look to one biblical book, which deeply reflects the reality of many people of our times: leaving what is felt to be „home“ because of existential need.

The book of Ruth contains one of the most fascinating Hebrew short stories, told with high poetic and literary skills. It is one of the two biblical books named after a woman (the second one is Esther). It was probably written during the time of Exile, yet, the story is put to the time of the establishment of Israel's kingdom. Ruth is a stranger to Israel, she is a young woman of the people of Moab. Fascinating is that she is reported to be the great-grandmother of King David, and thus also an ancestress of Jesus as we read in Jesus' family tree in Matthew 1, v5.

In this way, the story around the personality of Ruth emphasizes a central idea of biblical anthropology and social understanding: being near to God, following God's path with humanity, is not a question of blood and birth but of the conformity of one's life to the will of God. As we will see, in Israel this intention is carried through above all, by searching for rules and regulations that help to support and integrate those who are marginalized or find themselves in difficult conditions. Early Christians, following their Jewish belief by defining themselves as „children of Israel“ in a widened sense and therefore integrating those who previously were regarded as „pagans“, even surpass this understanding, equalizing all humans to be the image of Christ. However, the importance of faithful love in human relationships is already pointed out in a beautiful way by this historical narrative in the book of Ruth. In „its compactness, vividness, warmth, beauty and dramatic effectiveness (it is) an exquisitely wrought jewel of Hebrew narrative art“¹.

Chapter 1 destiny of migration

Let's start by reading the first sentence of the book:

1 In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.

As you will have recognized, the book starts with a situation of migration caused by need and hunger. A couple - as we hear later, they are called Elimelech and Naomi - and their two sons (Mahlon and Kilion) flee their hometown and want to survive in a foreign surrounding, the country of Moab. The following verses tell that Elimelech dies in Moab. Their sons marry local women - Ruth and Orpa. Then, both sons die, too. A human catastrophe like it happens in many places in the world of our times - especially where war and distress rule.

¹ Commentary in <https://www.biblestudytools.com/esv/ruth/>

In those times, three widows were almost sentenced to death without a man that could protect them (a situation which did not change much till today). Therefore, Naomi decides to leave in order to go back to her hometown Bethlehem where she can expect solidarity of her family. She asks her two daughters in law also to return to their families. Orpa follows Naomi's advice, but Ruth responds with the famous saying which in Germany often is used as verse for weddings - please read Chapter 1, v 16+17:

16 But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."

First conclusion: We recognize two women in close solidarity with each other. Indeed, by the decision of Ruth, their destiny is bound together almost like through a matrimonial vow.

So we now follow these two widows, who again have to leave their home-place to migrate to another one - the original hometown, country and people of the elder one, called „Bethlehem“, which means „house of bread“. We meet this city again in the story of Christmas, where it again hosts two poor migrants, Mary and Joseph.

Ruth and Naomi's situation as „women with no men“ and without children is quite desperate - that is why Naomi, who's name actually means the „pleasant“, „comfortable“ or „enjoyable“ one - changes her name to „Mara“ which means „bitter“. Please read vv 20+21.

20 She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

21 I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"

Chapter 2: Searching for integration

Now we have this couple - Ruth and Naomi - living together probably under quite miserable circumstances as it mostly was the destiny of women in those times, as it is till today. But at least, there are family ties of Naomi that could help to survive. (Refugees today handle their decisions similarly: They try to find places, where there might be other people of their family that could help them on). A relative of Naomi's late husband, called Boaz lives in Bethlehem. Ruth and Naomi can expect help, support and protection from him.

Since it is the harvest time of the crop of barley, Ruth suggests to join the servants on the fields collecting the crop. There she meets the owner of the land, Naomi's far relative Boaz. The two exchange friendly words. One of the servants explains to Boaz who Ruth is. Since Boaz understands how precarious Ruth's situation is, he advises her to join his servants in order to get as much food and drink she and Naomi need. At the same time, he orders his male servants not to touch or harm her. Let us read, how Ruth reacts:

10 Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?"

11 But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.

12 The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"

13 Then she said, "I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants."

As we notice, we have several ethical lessons for a situation of migration.

On the side of the migrants

1. Solidarity and commitment between the suffering
2. Actively engaging for survival, searching for allies, asking for support.
3. Being rewarded with respect and help, which is received with grace and humility

On the side of the receiving people and society, personified by Boaz:

1. entering into dialogue,
2. showing interest in the destiny of a foreigner, recognizing her precarious situation;
3. responding with understanding and warmheartedness,
4. showing respect for the heroic decision and commitment of a foreigner.

In the next verses we see, how Boaz goes even further, giving abundance of wine and bread to Ruth and advising his servants to actively promote Ruth in finding good crops for her and her mother in law. (Vv 14-17).

In the evening, when Ruth comes home and tells Naomi what happened, her mother in law is full of joy and thankfulness. She tells Ruth, that Boaz is in a formal relation of a „redeemer“ to them - which is the name of a special position, granted by law. In those times a member of the clan was called „redeemer“, who could restore right and property of his relatives. For example, by releasing property that had to be sold at a time of distress. One of the possibilities to redeem was to marry a widow of a family-member who lost her right and entitlement after the death of her husband, in order to father a heir of the deceased.

Chapter 3: strategy for redemption

Now Naomi gives some special advice to her daughter in law, how to handle this situation. It starts off by getting her dolled up, being especially clean and fragrant and dressing in her best clothes. Then she goes to the place where Boaz is celebrating the harvest. Now, this delicious part of the story we should read in the original: Chapter 3, 6-13.

6 So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her.

7 And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down.

8 At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet!

9 He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."

10 And he said, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.

11 And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.

12 And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I.

13 Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning."

Chapter 4: Redemption, life and perspective

As you see, Boaz understood the message and is ready to redeem. After having talked to the other responsible person, he is willing to marry Ruth. In the story, we read that there are certain rules and laws how to proceed. They include a public declaration of the legal process to be carried out. It is interesting to see the details: Chapter 4, 9-11

9 Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon.

10 Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day."

11 Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem,

As we see, one part of the integration of a foreigner consists in rules and legal processes, another one in a public declaration. They all serve the main idea of preserving life and supporting the marginalized in order to be integrated into the community and helping them to flourish. Although times and social settings were quite different in the times of Ruth and Naomi almost 3000 years ago, even today we may take main points of structural advice from this procedure.

The end of the story is quickly told: after their wedding, Ruth becomes pregnant and gives life to a son. So, after all the misery we finally have the completion of the family again. This is much more than a happy end: It means the continuation of life and creation in a deeper redeeming sense. Let us read Chapter 4, 14-17.

14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel!

15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."

16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse.

17 And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

And, as I said in the beginning: by being the ancestress of David, she is also described as an ancestress of Jesus, as we see in Jesus' family tree in Matthew 1,52. We hereby recognize, that in a spiritual sense, a foreign women, a refugee is regarded as origin of the „Holy Family“, or - as we confess in the creed - of the „communion of the saints“.

Let us sum up the **main findings** of this poetic and touching biblical short story.

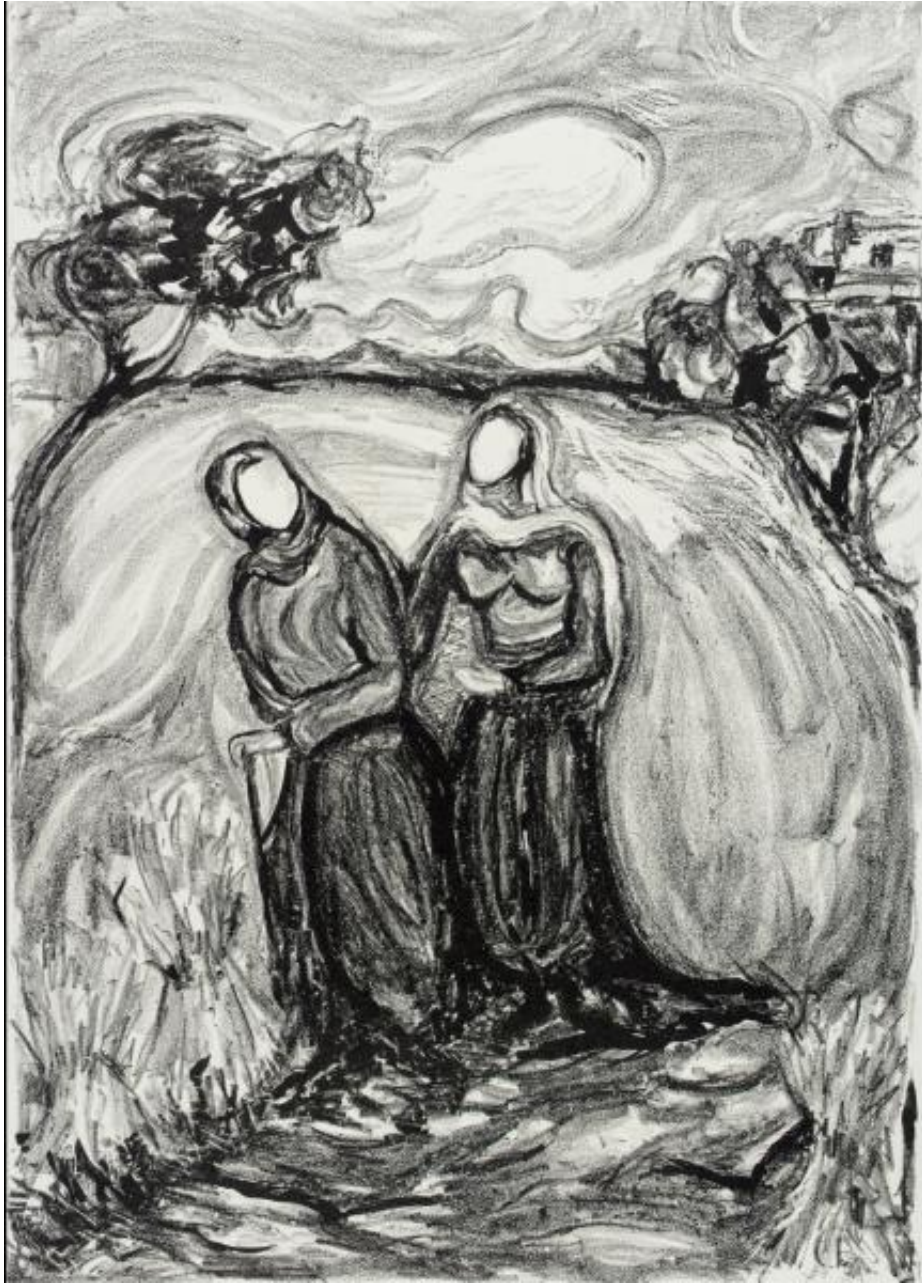
First, on a spiritual level, the level of our belief: being foreign, being a migrant is an important part of human existence as especially realized by believers. It is part of our being in this world, being pilgrims and foreigners. (Hebr 13,14). That is why the destiny of foreigners is our destiny, too.

Second: Solidarity and commitment between the distressed is an important step on the path to redemption. At the same time, cleverness, the awareness of measures to take and a strategic procedure turn out to be helpful.

Third: On the side of the so called „stable“ situation of the integrating society, we need respect, awareness and dialogue in order to discover pathways towards a good life for all. But we also need rules, laws and public recognition in order to stabilize the social situation as a whole.

So let us take these findings into our exchange on the situation of migrants in our countries, and let us see, how in concrete circumstances solutions for these often complex and complicated challenges on all sides can be developed. May God inspire our reflections. Amen.

2 It is of less importance, that this family tree is connecting Jesus by his patriachal line through Joseph, although Joseph is not regarded to be the corporal father of Jesus - much more important is the spiritual message in this lining up of the ancestors.



*Mary Ascher, Ruth and Naomi, 1963, lithograph, Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Gift of Mrs. Ralph Underwood, 1969.9.6*

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