

Moab

Two young Moabite women stood back from the several other damsels at the water cistern and waited for the shepherds to finish watering their flock. A heavy urn sat on the ground at their feet as the wind whipped around their light robes revealing soft tunics with some handwork on the borders.

One of them was adorned with dark hair that trailed in long curls down her back, and her sharp eyes, the color of the sea and dark with flecks of green, found the object of their desire. He was handsome, dark of skin and strong of stature. He wore the tunic of a shepherd, and slung over his shoulder was a kaffiyeh used to keep the sun off his head.

His dark hair came almost to his shoulders and lay in soft waves. In his hand was gripped a twisted shepherd's staff.

Ruth watched as he used the staff to move his herd away from the cistern. Her head rose higher with delight at the sight of him and it was as if she felt his movement

inside of her. When the herd was bunched off to one side, his eyes began to search for her and found her by the urn. He grinned broadly, left the flock and came to her. She watched his coming with anticipation. The sharp features of his face were hidden behind a short beard and his dark eyes held hers.

“Shalom, my love,” he sent forth as he drew near. His voice sent a rush through her like a swift stream flowing into the sea. She could hardly wait for him to draw nearer. He swept her into his embrace and his lips found hers, full and soft, waiting for his kiss. It left her feeling light and carefree.

“Greetings, my husband.” She studied the dust clinging to his beard. “How was the day?”

“Well enough, but I missed you.” The young man of Hebrew appearance grinned at the fair Ruth of Moabite descent.

They were completely unaware that they were the objects of nearly everyone’s attention. Some looked on in wonder and others with scorn engraved upon their faces. It was bad enough that Ruth’s father had given her in marriage to this Hebrew, but it was disgraceful the way the man dishonored her by this act that belonged in the bedchamber of a house or tent.

Orpha nudged Ruth, her-sister-in-law, slightly from beside her and whispered. “Have you no shame? All are watching!”

Orpha was a lovely young woman and three years younger than Ruth. Her long dark hair was straight and black like a raven. It picked up the sunlight and her dark eyes flowed over the crowd of women standing some distance away. “They will not even stand near us.” Her voice carried a tone of bitterness.

“Let them watch,” Mahlon grinned at the light in Ruth’s eyes. “They need something to talk about in the marketplace.” Ruth giggled and bore no shame on her face.

“Where is Chilion?” Orpha sighed.

“Over by the well, I suspect.” Mahlon drew his eyes away from his love and looked at the perturbed Orpha. “If I know my brother, he is casting lots with some herders to see if he can win a sheep this day. He will be along soon.”

“I wish he would hurry. I hate coming for water,” Orpha shifted uneasily.

“Why?” Ruth blinked at her from where she stood, still enfolded in Mahlon’s arms.

“They look down their noses at us like we are oxen fodder. Does it not bother you?”

“It does not. I pay them no attention. I do not care what their thoughts are, and you should not care, either.”

At this point Chilion came up at a run with a broad grin, carrying a lamb on his shoulders. “I have won a lamb from Rechab. The Lord has blessed my lot this day.” His face was a little broader than Mahlon’s, but it was not hard to tell that they were of the same father. Chilion being the younger by two years, his beard was somewhat shorter, and his eyebrows were heavy where Mahlon’s were not.

“Let us go on to the house with the flock,” Chilion said joyfully and then looked at Orpha and touched her cheek. She smiled at him and looked pleased.

Ruth and Orpha watch them heard the sheep away and Ruth sighed. Mahlon was a wonderful husband, and Ruth never regretted her father’s decision to accept Elimelech’s offer. Even after his father’s death, Mahlon’s love for her had grown and she loved him deeply in return.

The fathers of a couple usually arranged their marriages. The children had little or no say as to whom they would marry. This was called “being espoused” and was usually done at a young age, but at least some time before the marriage date. The marriage then took place at an appointed time. Ruth’s father had been reluctant to give Ruth to a husband, so she was well above marrying age.

The deity in whom they worshipped had made Elimelech’s family prosperous, and they could afford a few luxuries, such as fine silk from which to make clothing, and

Mahlon loved to buy her trinkets of bracelets, necklaces and ear rings. Elimelech, Mahlon's father who was now deceased, had built a nice house for them and life was good.

Although they had been married for three years, Ruth had not conceived to give Mahlon a child. Orpha was barren also, and Chilion was anxious for her to give him a son, for they were in their second year together. Naomi, the wife of Elimelech, assured them that in the Lord's time a child would come.

Elimelech's death two years before was very hard on his wife of many years, and she still wore mourner's clothing. Ruth had found her in grief many times, bringing her deep sorrow to see Naomi so distraught. Although there was nothing she could do to ease her pain, she would sit down on the floor beside her and lay her head in Naomi's lap.

Ruth was the youngest of five children and had lost her mother at a young age, birthing another child. Not until she came to live in Elimelech's house did she know the tender touch of a mother's hand or the soft voice of comfort in times of distress. Many times Naomi would draw her to her breast and pray to Yah, their deity. And many were the times she would see the results of her prayer.

In Ruth's father's house was a god of silver, which sat in the family shrine that was to protect the house and the family. But in Elimelech's house, there was no shrine and for a long time, Ruth did not understand this. Secretly she worried that something evil would happen because of it, but Naomi kept telling her that their Yah was in heaven and was the creator of all things. There was no need for an idol of gold, silver or stone to represent him, for all things living represented him, for he was a living god.

Ruth saw the strength of Naomi's devotion to her Yah, but when her husband died, her prayers turned bitter, because her Yah had forsaken them. She was steadfast in saying that the Lord knows what is best, but for the life of

her, Ruth could not see how that the death of her husband was best for anyone. Chilion grieved deeply, as did Mahlon, and Ruth could but comfort him with her love.

Naomi had told her and Orpha that their deity, Yah, fills all things and their shrine was in their heart, so they did not go to a special place in the house to pray, but prayed where they stood, sat or wherever they were when they needed to pray. This was very strange to Ruth, but she soon became comfortable with it.

Now the shepherds had moved away from the cistern and the women could draw water for the households. However, the Moabite women rushed forward and took the cistern first and would not let her and Orpha draw until all of their urns were filled. They did not say anything to them, but shoved them away until they were all finished. Because of this, it was late when they arrived home carrying their urns on their shoulders.

The house Elimelech had built for them was of hued planks a half a span thick, and it was large with many rooms. Because of the thickness of the wood walls, it kept the sun at bay in the summer and was warm in the winter. There were many windows and two doors. The first room was the family room where they sat at a table for meals and warmed themselves by a fire pit in the center of the room in the winter.

There was a low table to the right of the door where a pitcher of water and a basin sat. Water was poured into the basin from the pitcher and used to wash the dust off the feet of guests as an act of hospitality. It seemed a strange custom to Ruth, but she did not question it. Naomi taught her how to perform the customary act and when Orpha joined the family, Ruth taught her.

In this room, tapestries depicting a harvest scene and shepherds watching their flock covered the walls. To the left in this room was the door that led into the three bedchambers, and to the right, an opening into a preparation room where the meals were prepared.

“Children,” Naomi watched them set down their urns in their place in the preparation room. “Why are you so late in coming? I was beginning to be concerned.”

Naomi was an aged woman with a kind face slightly creased from her years. Her face was always pleasant and looked soft and caring. Even though in her heart she still carried the pain of her husband’s death, she could offer a soothing word and a comforting smile. Her smile could bring lightness to the heart and her face was round with blushed cheeks. Her long hair was streaked with gray and her words seasoned with wisdom.

“Those hateful women would not let us draw water until every one of them had their urns full,” Orpha grumbled.

Naomi smiled and went to her, embracing her with a kiss on the cheek, “Do not be angry, little one. Anger spoils your beauty, and you are more beautiful than them all.” Orpha grinned and returned the kiss. “Why were they hateful this day?” Naomi asked tenderly.

“Because Ruth and Mahlon kissed right there at the cistern and all were watching.”

Naomi’s soft brown eyes went to the youthful face of Ruth with the look of understanding and Ruth smiled, dropping her eyes. “It is never shameful to show your love for someone, but you should be chaste in doing so.”

“He only greeted me with a kiss,” Ruth defended. “It was not a bedchamber kiss.” With that, Naomi smiled and embraced her.

After the evening meal was finished and Chilion had told of winning the lamb, Naomi called for prayer, and while they worshiped the Yah of heaven, Naomi asked him to bless the women at the well with good health and with prosperity and to remember her, a widow. Ruth thought upon this while they continued worshiping and wondered at the love Naomi had for everyone. The Hebrews were such a strange people, because they blessed those who did harm to them.

One day Chilion came home in the middle of the day and he was very sick. His brow was hot with fever and his clothes stuck to his clammy body. Orpha was very upset and put him right to bed and began to wash him with cool water. Naomi took a prayer cloth, draped it over her head and sat on the floor, rocking back and forth in prayer. Mahlon sat by his brother's side and awaited his recovery. Ruth cared for their needs, cooking and bringing fresh cool water to Orpha. For two days, Chilion lay in the grip of a fever and became increasingly weak, but Naomi never moved, nor ceased to pray. She would take no food and refused to be comforted.

Ruth would comfort Orpha as much as she could, but Orpha just sat cooling her husband's brow, constantly in tears. She would not eat and would not leave her husband's side. On the third day as the sun was high, Chilion opened his eyes and took the hand of Orpha as she was washing his face with a cloth and said weakly, "You have been a good wife, but I fear that when I am gone you will be abused in the marketplace." Then he looked at Mahlon and said, "Take care of her for me." Mahlon swore an oath to him and squeezed his hand. Then he looked at Ruth and said, "It is my time, go bring my mother so that I may say parting words to her."

Orpha burst into tears, begging, "Do not leave me a widow as is Naomi. I need you," and then she laid her head on his chest. He stroked her hair and said, "Do not cry for me, my love, I go to paradise and there I will be with my forefathers."

When Naomi came in with Ruth behind her, Chilion looked at her with his sunken eyes and said, "Mother, I hear the voice of Abraham calling for me to enter his bosom. It is my time to join him."

Naomi nodded, removed her prayer shawl from her head and kissed her son on the cheek. Then she said, "May the will of the Lord be done."

With that Chilion raised his voice and praised Yah, the father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and released his spirit. Orpha screamed and beat upon his chest shouting, “No! No! Chilion, no!”

Tears streamed down Ruth’s face as she watched on, listening to the anguish in Orpha’s voice as she pleaded with her husband to come back to her and told him she had not yet given him a son to bear his name. But Chilion was gone and there was no breath of life left in him. That evening he was placed in a shroud with spices and frankincense, wrapped in a burial cloth and laid to rest beside Elimelech in the ground beneath the tree not far from the house.

Orpha’s family came to the house to mourn with her, her father and mother and younger sister. Her four brothers and their wives came only for the burial. Then they left the next morning to go back to work in the fields and tend the flocks. The house was set in mourning and they mourned day and night until the day of his death had passed another time. There were a few of those from the village who came to mourn for a while, but soon all that was left was the family.

Ruth tried to comfort Orpha, but she remained withdrawn and would not come from her bedchamber. Naomi would go in and talk to her, but she would not come out. Then Ruth went in to her and sat down on the bed beside where she lay upon her stomach and stroked her hair.

“Why,” Orpha asked, sobbing, “did their god forsake them and not hear the prayer of Naomi? He is a cruel god and I will never pray to him again! He does not care for the living, though they call him god of the living.”

“Naomi said his ways are far above our understanding,” Ruth soothed in a soft voice. “There is reason in all that he does, even when he allows death.”

Orpha rolled over and looked up at Ruth with red swollen eyes, “You are a fool to believe all that she says.”

“You are speaking out of your grief. I know you love Naomi just as much as I, and her words speak wisdom and are seasoned with age.”

“What good are her words when my womb is empty and my heart longs to feel the touch of my husband? What good is her Yah, if he does not hear her cries?”

“Do not speak so of what you do not understand,” Ruth chided. “Your father’s god allows death and you are not angry at him when people die.”

“But,” Orpha sobbed, “Yah is the god of the living.”

“Yes, and what did Chilion tell you? That he was going to paradise. He is not out there in the ground; only the body is out there.”

“Do you truly believe that, Ruth?”

“Yes, I truly believe that.”

“Why, Ruth? Why do you believe that?”

“Because love comes from inside of us; it is not flesh. The coming together is flesh, but the love is not. The love Chilion gave to you was not flesh. There is more to a man than flesh. There is an inner man that is the seat of real life and this flesh just covers it so it can be seen.”

“You talk just like Naomi.”

“That is because Naomi is right, and I can feel it is right.”

Orpha studied her a moment and blinked. “You are very much like her.”

“It would do you good to be more like her also,” Ruth smiled. Then she rose from the bed and went out.

That evening Orpha joined the family for the meal and worship time. Ruth looked at her out of the corner of her eye and saw that she was praying. She had repented of her scornful words and Ruth’s heart leapt in praise.

Two new moons came and went and then as Ruth and Orpha were going for water, two young men came toward them and they were carrying someone. A rush of fear ran through Ruth and she strained to see who it was they were carrying. His clothes looked familiar. A tight hand gripped

Ruth's breast and her stomach lurched. She threw down the urn and began to run toward them, "Oh Yah, no, please," she pleaded as the forms drew near. There in the arms of the two young men was Mahlon. His face was pale and his chest rose and fell quickly. His eyes were rolled back in his head and his mouth gaped and dulled.

"It was an adder," one of the young men reported.

Ruth scarcely heard his words; her mind was on Mahlon and she was faint unto death. Then she felt an arm around her giving her strength and Orpha said to the young men, "Take him on to the house."

The women that had come for water at the cistern watched with big eyes. Later, Orpha told that they were saying that the gods were destroying the cursed people.

Mahlon did not recover and died before the sun went down. There was no farewell for Ruth, no last minute request from his lips. Ruth fell across him and wept bitter tears and they had to remove her from him.

Though Ruth's father and two brothers came to mourn with the family, Ruth lay upon her bed, sick for many days. Food would not stay in her stomach and she did not care. Her father talked with her and she refused to be consoled. She did not want to live. After a few days her father gave up and went back home, leaving her to her grief.

She too had not given Mahlon a child and now only Naomi, Orpha and Ruth remained. After a few days, Naomi came in to her and said sternly, "Rise up, child. The time of mourning is over. Now it is a time for life. Come, dress yourself, wash your face and let us reason together at the evening meal."

The table was set with a tough, fresh baked loaf of bread seasoned with olive oil and there was a platter piled high with fresh fruit, greens, nuts and cheese. A large bowl of light gravy made of a base of olive oil and spices and called "sop" was set in the middle of the table to moisten

the bread. Everything was eaten with the hands and dipped in the sop.

Though Ruth could hardly face food and she desired only to be alone to remember the times she spent with Mahlon, she obeyed Naomi and came to the table. It was a solemn meal and scarcely a word was spoken. Ruth tried to eat but the food kept getting stuck in her throat where a lump formed. The place beside her was empty and she felt abandoned. Not since her mother's death had she felt so alone, so full of dread. What would she do with the rest of her life?

Theirs had become a household with no men, no one to tend the flock, no one to tend the field to provide for the family. They left the table to a pile of fleece on the floor where fellowship took place, as was their custom. What were they to do? Naomi said unto them after the meal, "What shall we do, daughters? I am too old to tend the field or sheep. Do you want to tend the flock so that we can have a livelihood?"

Orpha replied, "I know not how to tend the flock."

"Neither do I," Ruth confessed, "but I shall learn."