

# Ruth 1:1–5 read in the context of challenges of the migration of Nigerians



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This study used Ruth 1:1–5 as a lens in the study of the increasing challenges Nigerian migrants face. Famine was ravaging the land, and hence Elimelech moved his family away from Israel to the country of Moab so they would be fed (Rt 1:1–2). While this was a decision made out of a desire for survival, Moab was not the best place for Elimelech to take his family. He was leaving the Promised Land that God had given him, and the Moabites did not worship the Lord. After only 10 years in Moab, Elimelech's sons died, and the household comprised of three widows. This is similar to what is evident in Nigeria. Most Nigerian migrants, due to famine and other economic hardships, migrate out of Nigeria to destination countries as regular or irregular migrants. There are cases of Nigerian migrants who ended up in destination countries as touts, prostitutes, and drug financiers and pedlars. Some were even executed in destination countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. The recommendations include public awareness and sensitisation of individuals by the government and concerned faith-based communities.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This study examined the Nigerian migrant crisis in the light of Ruth 1:1–5. The study implicated Old Testament Exegesis, contextual biblical studies sociology and migration studies.

**Keywords:** Ruth 1; Naomi; Elimelech; famine; Nigerian migrants; poverty.

## Introduction

The text of Ruth 1:1–5 focuses on the migration of Elimelech and his household from Bethlehem to Moab in search of a greener pasture. The seemingly harsh economic situation that engulfed the region of the Judean society at that time obviously prompted this movement. The movement of people from their country of origin to settle down or reside in a foreign land as migrants is an internationally acclaimed human enterprise that has been in practice from time immemorial. To live in a foreign country as a migrant, one is required to be law-abiding and submissive to the constituted authority and lives in harmony with everyone in the country of his or her residence. An objective reading of Ruth seems to disclose that the book shares a similar theme of famine and voluntary migration with the book of Genesis (Gn 12:10–20; 20:1–18).

A close survey of the pericope of Ruth 1:1–5 shows that Elimelech and the members of his household respected the law of Moabite society and lived in harmony with everyone. This affirmation holds sway judging from the fact that Elimelech's two sons took wives from Moab, a country of their residence.

In the contemporary Nigerian society, many of her citizens reside as migrants in different parts of the globe in search of a better life. Obiorah (2019:127) writes aptly that the dynamic nature of human beings galvanises many people to migrate from their country of origin to other countries in a quest for survival and improvement in their situations. This article therefore aims to explore the literary unit of Ruth 1:1–5 *vis-à-vis* challenges of Nigerian migrants. The study employed a narrative analysis which is one of the approaches of literary analysis that studies a biblical text as it appears in its final form (Gorman 2005:13; Mbonu 2013:107; Murphy 1981:83–96; Mundeley 2012:11; Obiorah 2015:90; Steck 1995:21). This methodology was complemented with an approach of African biblical hermeneutics (ABH) which attempts to explore the contextual or theological relevance of a biblical text for today's African society in its reading of Ruth 1:1–5. This article is organised into six units. The first part is a survey of the literary context of Ruth 1:1–5. The second unit is the examination of the structure of Ruth 1:1–5. The third segment is the close reading of Ruth 1:1–5. This is followed by an examination of the Nigerians and international migration. The next

part borders on the causes of Nigerian migration while the last segment takes a look at Ruth 1:1–5 *vis-à-vis* Nigerian migrants.

## Structure of Ruth 1:1–5

Ruth is a didactic novella and Jewish literary piece of four chapters written in a narrative form, with the exception of 1:16–17 and 1:20–21, which are fashioned in poetic styles (Berquist 1993:23; Fischer 2007:141; Linafelt 2010:117). According to Odo (2021:2), the ancient literary exposition of Ruth is as an emotive and gorgeous literary construct that eludes any degree precision of its date of composition or the author, as this is not mentioned in the text. Ruth chapter 1 has a total of 22 verses. This first chapter of Ruth could be broadly segmented into five parts. The first unit of the chapter covers from vv 1–5. The second section of Ruth 1 begins from vv 6–15 and it narrates the conversation between Naomi and her two daughters-in-law as she persuades them to return back to their parents' houses following the death of their husbands. The third part (vv 16–18) focuses on the dialectics of Ruth soliciting Naomi, her mother-in-law to stop pressing her to leave her or to turn back from following her. The next unit (vv 19–21) discloses that Naomi and Ruth get to Bethlehem and the whole city was stirred because of them. This part records the lamentable anguish of Naomi who told the women gazing at her to call her 'Mara' [bitterness] because of the misfortune that has engulfed her in the land of Moabites. The last part of this chapter informs the reader that two women return to Bethlehem at the inception of the barley harvest.

The literary unit of Ruth 1:1–5 is segmented into three units. The first part of this literary construct (vv 1–2) introduces Elimelech and the members of his household as the Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. The severe economic reality that struck the Judean society compelled Elimelech and his household to migrate out of Judah to Moab in a quest for better life and improvement where they hoped to stay until the famine was over (Hale 2007:511). Crossley (2002:220) affirms that it was as a result of famine and out of desperation of having lost their ancestral land to pay debts that led Elimelech and his family to leave Judah. The second division of the text which covers vv 3–4 speaks of the calamity that engulfed Naomi and her two sons, namely Mahlon and Chilion following Elimelech's demise. With this development, Naomi was left alone with her sons in Moab, a country of their residence as migrants. This unit records that Chilion and Mahlon took two Moabite women as their wives respectively. The third part of the pericope (verse 5) discloses with pathos the tragic passing away of Chilion and Mahlon which left Naomi bereft of both husband and her two children.

## Close reading of Ruth 1:1–5

A close survey of the first line that introduces verse 1 of this pericope shows that the Hebrew word וַיְהִי is encased in waw consecutive. Understood in this perspective, it is translated

along with the verb הָיָה, thus 'and it happened' (Holladay 1988:80; Kohlenberger 1987:146) in the past because its status in the imperfect has been transformed to the perfect tense. The Hebrew word הַשְּׁפָטִים stands for 'the judges'. So, taken along with the words וַיְהִי בַיָּמֵי שְׁפָט the sentence could be translated as, '[and it happened in the days when the judges judged]'. The period of judges was punctuated with manifold iniquities in the land because of Israel's unfaithfulness and disloyalty to the ways of God (Victor 2004:187). Substantiating this line of thought, Guzik (2022:1) writes that 'the days when the Judges ruled were actually dark days for Israel; the period was characterised by the phrase everyone did what was right in his own eyes'. This period, according to Okwueze (2001:117), was when 'the Israelites adopted cult prostitution as a way to worshiping Yahweh in order to make him an effective God of agriculture'. The author intends to transmit across to the reader that it was when the judges were judging in the land that a man and the members of his household went out from Judah to reside [לְגוֹר] in the country of Moab because there was a famine in Judah. In verse 2 of the pericope, the identities of this man and members of his household that journeyed out from Judah to Moab are disclosed. The narrator presents this in Hebrew thus:

וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִמֶלֶךְ וְשֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ נְעֹמִי וְשֵׁם שְׁנֵי בְנָיו מַחְלֹן וְכִלְיוֹן אֲפָרָתִים מִבֵּית לָחֶם הַיְהוּדָה וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׁדֵי מוֹאָב וַיְהִי־שָׁם:

This could be rendered in English as:

[A]nd the name of the man is Elimelech and his wife's name is Naomi. And names of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites from the house of Bread (Bethlehem) Judah. And they arrived to the field (land) of Moab and settled there.

The narrator in verse 3 of the pericope communicates the sad news of Elimelech's death to the reader. The death of Naomi's husband made her a widow, thereby making her to live alone with her two sons. A careful analysis of the Hebrew construct וַתִּשָּׂא brings to the limelight the agony with which Elimelech's death causes to Naomi. The Hebrew word וַתִּשָּׂא is a niphal verb which stands for a third person feminine singular and is in waw consecutive. It means 'and she was left out'. Interestingly, it is translated along with the Hebrew words וַיִּשָּׂא הִיא thus 'and she was left out, and her two sons'. What this entails is that following the vacuum which Elimelech's death has created in the family, Naomi becomes a woman without a husband and lives alone with her two sons in Moab. The narrator expresses in verse 4 that both Mahlon and Chilion took Moabite women, namely Orpah and Ruth as wives. An interpretation of the Hebrew words וַיִּשְׁבוּ [they dwelt] underscores that after Mahlon and Chilion took Orpah and Ruth as wives, they resided there (in Moab) perhaps like 10 more years. וַיִּשְׁבוּ is a qal verb and is in waw consecutive which means [and they dwelt]. Taken together with the words שָׁם כְּעֶשְׂרִי שָׁנִים it is rendered 'and they dwelt there like ten years'. It should be noted that the text did not state clearly if the 10 years mentioned in the narrative refers to the whole time the family spent in Moab or to the time they resided there after the marriage of the two sons. The last part of the pericope (verse 5) records the great misfortune that

engulfed Naomi as two of her sons died afterward in Moab. The narrator's utterance *וְנִשְׂאָרָהּ אִשָּׁה מְשֻׁבֵּי יְלָדֶיהָ וּמְאִישָׁהּ* [and the woman was bereft of two children and her husband] speaks with pathos the immensity of this calamity that enveloped Naomi. It discloses that the woman was left without her two children and husband [*וְנִלְדָה וּמְאִישָׁהּ*]. It is quite pathetic that Naomi who is 'already a refugee, an alien, and a widow now becomes childless as well' (Victor 2004:191). Commenting on the misfortune that struck Naomi, Laffey (2000:55) writes that 'with the death of Naomi's husband and sons, all that remains is an old woman who lacks the protection of father or husband or sons', an old woman who lacks even the protection of her own land and her own people, a truly powerless person and two young women, both attached through marriage to Naomi but now widowed and childless.

*Synthesis:* The text of Ruth 1:1–5 focuses on the voluntary migration of Elimelech and his household from Judah to Moab. The harsh economic reality that enveloped the Judean society which perhaps became intensified, shortly, before the inception of Gideon's judgeship (Jdg 6:1–6) led this household to migrate out of Bethlehem and settle in the country of Moab as residence. This movement was a responsive reaction to escape famine and improve their economic situation.

## Nigerians and international migration

Young Nigerians are the largest immigrant population from Africa into developed countries, with thousands of Nigerians migrating every year. The most popular destination for Nigerian migrants is Canada, followed by the United States and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, other popular destinations include: Australia, Germany, Spain, Italy, and South Africa [The Guardian 2021]. There are different types of migration in human history. Firstly, migration can be categorised as emigration (moving out) and immigration (coming in). Secondly, migration could be seen as voluntary or involuntary depending on the situation under which the migrant left. Under involuntary migration, the person has no intention to migrate but was forced to do so. Migrants are described as either having little choice but to migrate [involuntary migrants] or migrating out of their own free choice [voluntary migrants] (Verkuyten et al. 2018b:1).

Nigeria continues to experience high internal and external migration due to the size of its population, economic climate, as well as its porous borders (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2015). In Nigeria, many of the young men and women who seek to leave the country on a daily basis, in search of economic survival, fall into either the push or pull categories. Forced migration induced by push factors are a function of prolonged conflicts, such as the Niger-Delta crisis, the Boko Haram insurgency and election violence, among others. It seems obvious that a quest for better economic conditions is the reason why Nigerians, and other Africans, continue to move en masse to other parts of

the world, despite the associated negative consequences, including the modern slave trade to which West Africans are subjected to in Libya (Egbuta 2019).

There are two polar causes of Nigerian migrant crisis. There are voluntary factors which can be described as social or economic. Some examples of social factors are better living conditions, access to health care, and access to good education. The economic factors include better employment prospects and higher wages. Also, there are the involuntary factors which include war, terrorism, and genocide.

One of the motivating factors for migration is the unfavourable macro-political economy. This might be seen by a look at the lack of good and responsive governance in Nigeria. Poverty level continues to be on the increase with its attendant unemployment and underdevelopment. A World Bank report has noted that the number of poor persons in Nigeria will rise to 95.1 million in 2022. The number of poor people was 89.0 million in 2020 and would be 95.1 million in 2022. This would mean that 6.1 million more persons would have fallen beneath the poverty line between 2020 and 2022, a 6.7% increase (Oyedemi 2022). A report published by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in the first quarter of 2021, on its website ([www.nigerianstat.gov.ng](http://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng)) noted that Nigeria's unemployment rate has risen from 27.1% in the second quarter of 2020, to 33%. Aside from making it the second highest on Global List, the NBS report, going by analysis, shows that more than 60% of Nigeria's working-age population is younger than 34. Unemployment for people aged 15 to 24 stood at 53.4% in the fourth quarter and at 37.2% for people aged 25 to 34. The jobless rate for women was 35.2% compared with 31.8% for men (Jerome-Mario 2022). Providing more lamentation, Egbuta (2019) is of the view that those seeking economic survival see irregular migration as the best alternative, given the difficulty and resources involved in migrating through regular and legitimate routes. In many instances, very few of the original number who set out on these dangerous journeys live to tell their stories. While many regularly drown in the Mediterranean Sea, many also die in the deserts, and others are sold as slaves in a modern slave market. Most of the victims of this trade are from West Africa. Increasingly, educated Nigerians are struggling to find employment opportunities in the country. While unemployment rates have increased substantially for Nigerians across all education levels over the years, it has become progressively challenging for educated Nigerians to find employment opportunities. 'Between 2010 and 2020, the unemployment rates for Nigerians with secondary and post-secondary education increased by more than 30 percentage points, preventing new educated entrants in the labor market from earning returns on human capital investment' (Channels TV 2021:1).

Human-induced crises and natural disasters such as wars, violence, strife, armed conflicts, natural disasters, and/or extreme famine that pose existential threats to life and

livelihoods compelling people to involuntarily move or flee from their countries is considered as forced migration (Akinnesi 2018). This may affect both rural as well as urban dwellers. The industrialised nations of Europe preach free trade and have unimpeded access to the natural resources of Nigeria (Obi-Ani, Anthonia Obi-Ani & Isiani 2020). In recent times, Nigeria has been plagued with strife, conflicts, and crises. Nigeria is confronted by multiple security challenges, notably the resilient Boko Haram Islamist insurgency in the north east, long-running discontent and militancy in the Niger Delta, increasing violence between herders and farming communities spreading from the central belt southward, and separatist Biafra agitation in the Igbo south east (International Crisis Group 2022).

## Ruth 1:1–5 as it relates to Nigerian migrants

It was famine that forced Elimelech, his wife and two sons to migrate out of Judah to Moab in a search for a greener pasture. But unfortunately, all the three male members of the family died in their country of residence. Desperation forced them to move to a potentially hostile country, though no fault of their own, and this type of situation creates dilemmas for those who move and those who end up hosting them (TOW 2022). In the same vein, economic challenges force Nigerians to migrate into other countries. According to v.1b, Elimelech went 'to live for a while in the country of Moab'. Ruth 1:1–5 simply states that during a famine in the land of Israel, a certain man, Elimelech, moved with his family from Bethlehem of Israel to Moab, perhaps 60 miles east. The word 'sojourn' in verse 1 is rendered 'reside temporarily', so he apparently intended to return to Israel after the famine ended. However, the move itself is not the only issue that is often discussed concerning this passage (Olson 2006). This is similar to what is happening in Nigeria. Many people that migrated had the intention of only staying for a while in the destination country. This is the reason most Nigerians request for temporary work permit during their visa application process. Temporary work permit is one of the visas allowing the applicant to stay and work in the destination country, usually issued to expatriates on a short-term basis (Ayeni 2022). Looking at the casualties that Elimelech's household suffered, life was not the same again for his wife – Naomi. This is similar to what is happening in Nigeria. Nigerian migrants in their thousands get drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in their bid to get to Europe. Some of these Nigerian migrants are captured in Italy, Mali and Tunisia, and turned into sex slaves. Nigerians were among 75 migrants feared dead in shipwreck on Mediterranean Sea in the year 2021. In this misfortune, only 15 survived as others drowned (Sahara Reporters 2021). According to Ani (2021):

These Nigerians, desperate for a taste of good life which appeared to have largely eluded them in their home country, braced all odds to make the long and immensely dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea to cross over into Europe to become economic refugees. Many of them, sadly, lose their lives in the process. In 2017, 26 Nigerian women, mostly

teenagers, lost their lives while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. In an autopsy carried out in Salerno in southern Italy, 25 of the females died of asphyxiation in the water, when the inflatable ship they were travelling on sank. The autopsy report further revealed that one female suffered a wound on her liver, while two of the dead women – Marian Shaka and Osato Osaro – were pregnant. (p. 1)

Thousands of Africans take long, perilous journeys to Europe each year often traversing the Sahara desert and leaving the North African shores on small, inflatable boats fleeing hardship or seeking a better life. In 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) reported 3077 people as dead or missing, nearly double the 2020 toll (Addeh, 2022). It is on record that 26 Nigerians were 'sexually abused, murdered' at Mediterranean Sea (Asadu 2017).

## Recommendations

- Elimelech had the mind of going to stay in Moab for a temporary time. In the same vein, Nigerians who are travelling to their destination country with short term visa, should keep to the terms of their visa approval rather than changing their mind and refusing to return, running from immigration officials in the destination country.
- People should seek advice before taking the option of migrating permanently out of Nigeria. Most people fall into trouble in the destination country because they are lured into prostitution and drug peddling in the destination country.
- There is the need for mass sensitisation of Nigerians especially the youths on the need to shun irregular migration.

## Conclusion

The narrator in the study text discussed border crossings to escape famine, vulnerable widows struggling with life and faith in the face of death, a way out to poverty that transcends welfare, among others. A famine was ravaging the land, and so Elim moved his family away from Israel to the country of Moab so they would be fed (Rt 1:1–2). While this was a decision made out of a desire for survival, Moab was not the best place for Elimelech to take his family. He was leaving the Promised Land that God had given him, and the Moabites did not worship the Lord (Block 2015). The issue of migration in Nigeria has eluded the government and other stakeholders in Nigeria. It is believed that with the proper sensitisation of the youths on the right model to be embraced for migrations, the issue of irregular migration could be curbed.

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D.O.O., and F.C.U., contributed equally to the writing of this research article.

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