

NAOMI AND RUTH'S RELATIONSHIP AS EXEMPLAR OF SINGLE PARENTING

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Abstract

The relationship that existed between Naomi and Ruth had gone beyond mother-in-law to daughter-in-law relationship. Although, previous studies on Naomi and Ruth have tilted towards mother-in-law to daughter-in-law relationship, widowhood and levirate marriage with insignificant attention paid to their exemplar characteristics which served as model for single parenting. This study, therefore, examines the relationship that exists between Naomi and Ruth with a view of underscoring the exemplary qualities inherent in them as model for single parenting. The study reveals that war/sickness which can lead to death of spouses, divorce, teenage pregnancy, premarital sex, polygamy, infidelity/immorality, abandonment by one's spouse, poverty, recession and social mobility are contributing factors to single parenting. In fact, it is observed that single parenting is a means of freedom from necessary problems of marriage. The behavioural problems like smoking, drinking, disobedient to authorities, truancy, corruption and immorality which in most cases may lead to thuggery, prostitution, mental illness, school dropout and other forms of misbehaviours, are found in both the parents and children of one single family. From all ramifications, single mother faces problem of loneliness which makes it difficult for her to handle children matters because the presence of both parents plays vital roles in child's upbringing. It is disheartening that single parenting has not been given proper attention in the society and in Church. The work, therefore recommends that the Church should put in place programme of activities such as single parents' seminars, single parents' Sunday, single parents' workshop, and Bible classes for single parents that will give them sense of belonging. Therefore, the hallmark of Naomi and Ruth's relationship is rooted in terms of אָהָבָה, (ahab i.e. to love) אָבָד (dabaq i.e. to cleave) and אָהָבָה, (hesed i.e. to devote). These virtues made Naomi and Ruth's relationship an exemplar of single parenting.

Keywords: Naomi and Ruth, Widowhood, Levirate marriage, Single parenting, Book of Ruth

Introduction

Biblical Perspective of Single Parenting

Having single parents was never God's original plan. Looking at the book of Genesis, we see that God intended for two groups of people to be on this earth-married people with families and unmarried people. In Genesis, He created the first single man followed by the first single woman and after a season of successful singleness by the man and the woman, He united them in marriage and they started a family. In God's original plan, He never intended to have single parents. Does that mean God does not care about single parents or does not have a plan for single parents? Absolutely not! God's response to the single parent keeps in line with His immutable character. Therefore, He does not bring condemnation, but mercy and grace in plenteous quantities to meet the needs of single parents and their children.

The first time the single parent was introduced was after the fall of man and it was a direct result of man's sin and disobedience. In Genesis 12, Abraham had been chosen to father God's special people. According to the promises, Abraham was to be the father of a great nation. There was a problem, however, Abraham was eighty-six years old and his wife Sarah was seventy-six years and they did not have any child. How would all of God's marvelous promises be fulfilled without a child?

A custom of the day seemed to offer a way out. It was acceptable, in that age, for a childless woman to offer her maid to her husband. If the maid bore a child, the child would be accepted in the same status as a son born of the wife. So Sarah sent Hagar, her handmaid, to sleep with Abraham. The plan worked, Hagar conceived. Hagar was involuntarily pulled into the relationship with Abraham and Sarah. The same way many became single parents not by their own choice,

but because of situations and circumstances beyond their control such as abandonment by a spouse or death of a spouse.

The Bible pictures Hagar in the desert having been cast off and rejected. Hagar did what many single moms who have been rejected by men and in particular by the father of their children. In Genesis 21:16 we see Hagar opened her voice and wept. This signified the emotional pain she felt after Abraham's rejection which was traumatizing and unbearable.

When Hagar was about to become a mother she fled from the cruelty of her mistress Sarah to a place called Beer-lahai-roi (the well of the visible God), where the angel of the Lord appeared to her. This name has special significance for every single parent. It is the place where single parents see God's provision. In obedience to the angel of the Lord, she returned to the tent of Abraham where her son Ishmael was born. After Isaac was born to Sarah, she began to vent her dissatisfaction with Hagar and her child. Ishmael's conduct was insulting to Sarah, and she insisted that he and his mother should be dismissed. Hagar and Ishmael wandered in the wilderness, where Ishmael exhausted with his journey and fainted from thirst, seemed about to die. Hagar "lifted up her voice and wept," and the angel of the Lord, as before, appeared unto her and she was comforted and delivered out of her distresses. God opened her eyes to see the resources that were available to her. In Genesis 21:19, she had a well of water from which to give her son a drink of water. In Genesis 21:18, God also gave Hagar a plan for her son's future. "Arise lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation." In other words, God was telling her that his plans included a significant future for her son and her responsibility was to prepare him for that future. God responded to this single parent's cry and met the practical needs of her son, and gave purpose and direction for both of their lives (Genesis 21:14-20).

Naomi was an exemplar of single parenting being a widow and a good mother-in-law who exhibited fortitude in her tragedies; hence she deserved to be mentioned. She migrated from Bethlehem in Judah with her husband, Elimelech and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion to the land of Moab in the time of famine. Unfortunately for her, she lost her husband and two sons in that strange land. Despite the pains in her heart, Adeoso (2005) opines that she was not a nagging mother-in-

law. If she was, her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth could not have decided to follow her when she wanted to return home. She must have been a strong, bold, accommodating, loving and caring woman, in spite of her losses. She was a pillar of strength to her daughters-in-law. She was also selfless, because she desired and informed them that they should remarry. When she insisted that Ruth and Orpah should return to their mothers' places and remarry, she prayed for them in these verses:

"...The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead, and with me. The Lord grants you that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. So she kissed them; and they lifted up their voices and wept" (Ruth 1:8b, 9).

Despite this urge, they refused to leave her. This was as a result of the exemplary life she exhibited. Three more times she persuaded them before Orpah returned to her mother but Ruth could not be persuaded. She was married to her mother-in-law. Hence, Ruth became adopted daughter to Naomi. Naomi's consideration for Ruth when they got to Bethlehem was also worthy of mentioning. She was still mindful of her youth and wanted her to remarry. It was the fruit of her concern for and kindness to Ruth that Naomi reaped when she lived comfortably afterwards and saw her grandson. "Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him" (Ruth 4:16).

In another vein, Ruth refused to leave her mother-in-law alone even though she knew that Naomi could not have another son. Naomi entreated her to go back but Ruth vowed not to leave her mother-in-law:

But Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, And there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me" (Ruth 1:16-17).

Consequently, Ruth's resolution, loyalty and commitments were obvious to her mother-in-law, and she knew that, she could not be persuaded from following her. In fact, she simply resolved not to part with her mother-in-law, only death could part them as she vowed. The relationship between them could not have started after Ruth's widowhood. Adeoso (2005) notes that; there

must have been a rapport between Ruth and her mother-in-law when her husband was alive. Concomitantly, Adeyemo (2006) insists that Ruth's response to Naomi's instructions was an oath that epitomizes the good relationship between the two women (Adeyemo, 2006). Ruth's steadfastness and loyalty to Naomi earned her, a Moabitess, four chapters of the Bible. Her love and care for her mother-in-law is very rare.

Concept of Single Parenting

Parenting is a mandate given by God. The Biblical definition of parenting says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). This indicates that raising a balanced child depends on how committed parents are in training their children. The word "train" involves motivating a child toward a desired goal. Children occupied an important place in God's mind, "Children are a heritage from the Lord..." (Psalms 127:3). Because of this reason, parents must explore the Bible for rearing, caring and nurturing their children in the way of God. In view of this, Hester (1990) in his Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling says, parenting can, thus, be viewed as "voluntary procreation responsibility, a consciousness raising on behalf of the future".

Collins (2001) in his Learner's Dictionary describes parenting as the activities of bringing up and looking after a child or children. This suggests that both the father and the mother must devote their time to bear, care, and nurture the child from conception to maturity. In like manner, Adeniran (1996) in his dissertation claims that, "parenting is the crucial skill of the family. It is the ability or inability of the natural parents or parental surrogates to fulfill their parenting."

Parenting in the cultural context will also need clarification, to fully define parenting in this work. Culturally, parenting can be seen as:

... System (of) socialization of a child (which) is not only the function of the parents alone but those kinsmen living with the child's parents also participate as the socializing agents. The parents, in conjunction with other socializing agents, have the task of directing the behavioral development of a child (Odetola, 1983).

This idea implies that in African traditional societies, no man lives unto himself. What one man does affects others either directly or indirectly because the traditional African society is blessed with a very rich co-existence called the extended families and friends (Olupona, 1991). Parenting, by its nature, is the birthright that every child deserves from his/her parents, because it is more than knowledge as opined by Ogunkunle (1988).

Amolo (2011) notes that among the Jews, the mother had the responsibility to teach the child in his or her early life, while the father had sacred duty of teaching religious truth to his son and of giving him general education. Amolo (2001) further affirms that education is an important part of child's life. However, due to economic concerns, most children in the Roman world were required to begin working for the support of the family as at early age. This is a situation where Mahlon and Chilion, Naomi's sons in the land of Moab found themselves.

According to Blenkinsopp (1997), children in ancient times were an extremely valued commodity, while children in the contemporary society have little or no economic value. In support of Blenkinsopp's view on the value placed on children in ancient times, Scott (1995) observes that besides being a valuable economic commodity, children were also considered to be a divine blessing from God. Psalms 127: 3 gives meaning to this view when the writer of this Psalm states that "Children are heritage from the Lord". This shows that the Jews considered it to be a great divine favour to be blessed with large number of children.

An Overview of Parenting Discourse in the book of Ruth: Exegetical Analysis of Ruth Chapter 1: 16-17

The book of Ruth begins and ends with stories about women's relationships. The emphasis has always been on the principal character of Ruth, and rightly so. However, Naomi's attitude towards the Moabites calls for recognition. She and her daughters-in-law from Moab are obviously good friends despite their different religious backgrounds. The story of Ruth's persistent loyalty to Naomi becomes a paradigm and exemplar of single parenthood. In turn, Naomi's attitude of tolerance and acceptance towards Ruth should be an exemplar for a contemporary single parent (Sewakpo, 2013). This section therefore, deals with exegetical imports of

selected verses in the book of Ruth as they relate to the relationship between Naomi and Ruth.

Exegesis of Ruth Chapter 1: 16- 17

The lyrical nature of Ruth 1: 16-17 dramatically underscores the depth of devotion Ruth expresses towards Naomi. It is the **Verse 1:14**

‘hP’r>[’ qV;ÛTiw: dA[+ hn"yK,bb.Tiw: !l’êAqhn"F<âTiw:
 `HB’(hq’b.D"itWrßw>Ht’êAmx];

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, **but Ruth clung to her (Ruth 1:14 RSV).**

HB’(hq’b.D"itWrßw ((but Ruth clung to her). The verb *dabaq* {daw-bak’} denotes “to cling, cleave and keep close”. When used in Modern Hebrew in the sense of “to stick to and to adhere to”, *qb;D* yields the noun form for “glue” and also the more abstract ideas of “loyalty and devotion”. The figurative use of *qb;D* in the sense of “loyalty” and “affection” is based on the physical closeness of the persons involved which explains Ruth’s decision or commitment to stay with Naomi. The term *qb;D* is employed in Ruth 8: 2 and 2: 21 when Boaz tells Ruth to stick closely to the young men who are harvesting, and in Ruth 2: 23 when Ruth sticks closely to the young women—hardly an invitation to form a covenant union with either the men or the women.

The word *qb;D* employs in this context indicates that Ruth clung to Naomi in **Verse 1: 16-17**

bWvâl’ %bEßz>[l. ybiê-yjiG>p.Ti-la; ‘tWrrm,aToÜw: **Ruth 1: 16-17**
 !yliêa’ ‘ynlyli’T’ rv<Üa]b;W %le^aaeykiøl.Terv,’a]-la, yKiû %yIr"+x]a;me
 `yh’(l{a/ %yIh:ßl{awEyMiê[; %MEâ[;
 hf,’[jy: •hKorbE+Q’a, ~v’Pw>tWmêa’ ytiWm’T’ rv<Üa]B;
 `%nE)ybeWynliÿBedyrlßp.y: tw<M’êh; yKiä @ysiêyOhkoâw> ‘ylihw"thy>

But Ruth said, "Entreat me not 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; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you" (**Ruth 1: 16-17 RSV**).

In this passage, Ruth attempts to recast the linguistic terms of distance generated by Naomi’s speech acts in order to obtain a space in language that is fundamentally different from the mnemonic device that characterizes Orpah as feminine within the signifying economy of patriarchy. Ruth uses the imperative form of [g;P,, “urge,” combined with the infinitive construct of both *bEßz>*],

verbqb;D’ (Cling) in verse 14 that constitutes the primary point of departure for proposals of an ideal daughter-in-law’s relationship with mother-in-law behind Ruth’s actions (Sewakpo, 2013). Since Ruth 1:14 is an integral part of 1:16-17; it is, therefore, expedient to attempt its exegesis.

maintenance of the mother and daughter relationship that was established when she married her son. At that point, she became a part of Naomi’s (and Elimelech’s) family and took on their identity. Ruth is saying at this point, “Though my husband has died, I remain your daughter”. And this makes sense of her covenant in verses 16 and 17 “...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; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried...” It is probable that what Ruth is essentially saying is – I am your daughter and I remain your daughter. I am now part of your people, your God is my God, I will live in your home as your daughter. I will be buried where you are buried, because we are family. Naomi relents and accepts that Ruth will stay with her, she looks to fulfill her obligations as mother (Ruth 2: 11) to her daughter (Ruth 2: 1; 2: 2) and they returned to Judah.

“abandon,” and *bWv*, “return.” Using the performative force of the imperative, she mirrors Naomi’s previous performative repetitions of the imperative and of *bWv* while adding *bEßz>* to her own construction. The addition of *bEßz>* [, in a way, is its own repetition in that it is juxtaposed with *bWv* and reinterprets its very meaning. Ruth performative renegotiates the (re) signification of the sign *bWv* and generates a space that affirms Ruth’s clinging, *qb;D*, to Naomi. Ruth is attempting to recast the terms and conditions of the category of sex that are set within the limit of a rigid patriarchy. The climax of Ruth’s performance erupts in a series of statements, utilizing various verbs, in a poetic repetition of the non-perfective verbal

conjugation framed by the pattern of the second to first person. The repetition of second to first person speech patterns suddenly changes in the last line of Ruth's speech acts. It is as if Ruth is subtly implying, by means of her speech act, that she will cling to Naomi so much that only death will part them and this death is no longer imminent (Sewakpo, 2013).

This passage, on the other hand, focuses on Ruth's loyalty to Naomi. It goes much further in that it constitutes a declaration of Ruth's allegiance to the Jewish community, since she identifies herself with the people and the God of Naomi. Furthermore, Ruth concludes this statement of identification with an oath in which she calls upon the LORD to punish her if she, in any way, violates her pledge of loyalty. It now became clear that Ruth no longer wished to serve Chemosh, the national god of Moab, but was determined to give her allegiance to the God of Israel, whom she had come to know through the life and witness of her husband and Naomi. The words recorded in verses 16 and 17 are the epitome of utter loyalty and selfless devotion. No ulterior motive influenced Ruth's decision. She identified herself with Naomi, and even bound herself by an oath to stand by her to death. In another dimension to verse 16 Adeyemo (2006) asserts that Ruth's response to Naomi's instructions was an oath that epitomizes the good relationship between the two women: "Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God..." (1:16). Ruth was declaring that her commitment to Naomi was final. She had decided to change even her religious and cultural identity in order to stay with Naomi. Spence and Excell (2011) observes that Ruth's mind was made up. Therefore, she was resolved that nothing on earth would separate them. This was a powerful decision by a young woman, even without taking into account the fact that she might be choosing a life of singlehood in a society that valued marriage and children.

The study of Ruth 1: 16-17 reveals two Hebrew words that explicate some essential virtues of Ruth and Naomi. These words are אָהַב (ahab) and חָסַד (hesed). While the former refers to the family love experienced by a daughter-in-law towards her mother-in-law, the latter alludes to closer relationship between friends or relatives.

The Hebrew verb אָהַב (ahab) denotes "to love, like". This verb occurs in Moabite

and Ugaritic. It appears in all period of Hebrew and around 250 times in the Bible. Basically, אָהַב is equivalent to the English words, "to love" in the sense of having a strong emotional attachment to and desire either to possess or to be in the presence of the object. It is used to refer to the sexual as in the very poetic Song of Songs. It connotes the love of a husband for a wife. It also refers to passion in illicit relationships. It is employed to describe the love of Jonathan and David, and Ruth and Naomi, and it is used in the great commandment to love one's neighbor as one self (Rabbi, 2010).

Literally, אָהַב which means "I will give" from a Jewish perspective, is a kind of love that is evident in the relationship of Naomi and Ruth. The term אָהַב is understood in the context of Ruth's submission: "...wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God." Here, Ruth was giving up her culture, her home, her opportunity for safety, her gods, everything for the sake of being with Naomi.

In order for any relationship to survive, to thrive in the day-to-day difficulties, regardless of societal acceptance or not, חָסַד (hesed) is another quality that is essential for single parenting. Both Ruth and Naomi have this quality between them. This quality has been translated as loving-kindness, steadfast love, grace, mercy, faithfulness, goodness and devotion. Indeed, the term חָסַד (devotion) is one of the most important words in the vocabulary of Old Testament theology. No wonder then Rabbi (2010) states that; The... Orthodox Jews... believe that the model of a perfect spouse is God. They have this wild belief that human beings were created in the image of God, and because they were created in the image of God they have God-like potential. Therefore, at least in terms of character, they could become like God. Now if you add to this word that they believe that God is pure חָסַד, He is pure giving.

With Naomi and Ruth, Boaz uses the word חָסַד (devotion) in recognition of Ruth's devotion to Naomi and her seeking to abide by Jewish customs. Naomi and Ruth had a love that was not dependent on some material cause, on some circumstances but theirs was a love that was based on something elemental to the human condition that transcended but material causes or circumstances.

General Conclusion

It is an established fact that we have single parents among us and the number is increasing because of death, which is inevitable and there is nothing one can do to stop it when it comes. Hence, it has been the major cause of single parenting and the other minor ones are divorce, teenage pregnancy, abandonment by spouse, pregnancy before marriage, personal ego, among others. Whatever way it takes, every generation, regardless of age, status and tribe is normally visited by at least one of these traumas which are unpleasant experience.

Whenever death, divorce, or teenage pregnancy occurs, women are usually at the receiving end. It marks the beginning of suffering and change of identity. They are reduced and humbled to the barest minimum. Some single parents are passing through “hell on earth” because they are not adequately catered for by their relatives and friends.

In the ongoing study, Naomi exhibited an exemplar of a good single mother and godly mother-in-law by showing love and care to Ruth. Ruth was a young single mother as well as her daughter-in-law, who incidentally became Naomi’s adopted daughter by giving her a useful counsel that resulted in settling down with a befitting husband. On the other hand, Ruth is a dynamite model of a single mother as well as a daughter-in-law to salivate for. She demonstrated that her marriage to Chilion, her late husband was not dependent on mundane things but was based, purely, on genuine love. She intensified her love even after the death of her husband and extended it to Naomi, her aged mother-in-law, and now adopted parent/mother to the extent that she took good care of her and God blessed her in return. In a nutshell, the relationship between Naomi and Ruth is rooted in terms of אהב (ahab- to love), דבק (dabaq- to cleave) and השקט (hesed- to devote). These virtues made Naomi and Ruth’s relationship an exemplar to single parents, be it widow/widower or divorcee to all ages.

Conclusively, parents, especially single mothers, who are passing through the state of single parenthood should trust God and have faith in Him and His word which says, “Come unto me all who are wearied and heavily burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

God is able to wipe away their tears and to replace their sorrows with joy. They are however, required to have unshakable faith in Him and it shall be well.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be the steps that will help and bring relief to their hearts or bring solutions to the problems confronting single parents in our Churches. The Church and the community are expected to rise up to their responsibilities in ministering to single parents vis-à-vis the recommendations below:

1. The teaching of basic Biblical principles of marriage and sex education should be emphasized. It needs to be taught clearly at home and in Church. The teaching can be on God’s plan for marriage and consequences of broken homes.
2. The single parents should be counseled on social needs of their children so that their academic work will not suffer at school.
3. The parents should be more diligent, loving and alert in the rearing and upbringing of their children, so as to produce Godly children in such a way to prevent teenage pregnancy and help unmarried adults to avoid premarital sex. It is usual said that, “family that prays together stays together” (Prov. 22:6; 1 Sam. 3:13).
4. The Church should organize counseling and prayer sessions for single parents. Those who have burden for one parent family and called to serve should be placed in these areas. Healing for single parents is a gradual process that needs series of counseling and prayer by the Church. Moreso, premarital and post marital counseling should be organized both for the unmarried and married as well. When this suggestion is followed, the rate of single parenting would be greatly reduced.
5. Seminars and workshops could be organized for single parents by the Church to avail them the opportunity to freely discuss their problems and share their feelings; knowing what the Bible says concerning the situation they are passing through.

6. The Church must give economic empowerment to single parents as they may not be able to cope with their financial upkeep. The Church should help them to acquire skills which will give them business opportunities like agriculture (poultry, piggery and farming) or investment in stock.
7. Leaders of the Church should organize visitation team for single parents. Since loneliness is one of the greatest weapons used by Satan to attack single parents, the pastors can delegate men and women fellowship and assign them to visit single parents to serve as encouragement to them. If the Church fails in visiting the single parents, the world will visit them and influence them negatively.
8. General public should change their perspectives towards single parents no matter the cause of single parenthood. People should know that single parents are already down; thus they need someone to motivate them to rise up. They should not be ignored, stigmatized and maltreated in their predicament.
9. The Church should put in place ministry to the single parents with those who have suffered the trauma of divorce, desertion or death of spouse. Programme of activities such as single parents' seminars, single parents' Sunday, solo parents' workshop, Bible classes for single parents, e.t.c. This will give them sense of belonging.
10. All young single parents should be advised to remarry as a solution to their singleness and find someone to make life meaningful for them. They should borrow a leaf from Ruth. This will help curtail the number of women in this problem. Caution here is that this move must be prayerfully and carefully carried out, with counsel from spiritual leaders so as not to add salt to the existing wounds.
11. All hands should be on deck in ensuring that single parents are adequately catered for. To this end, there should be sharing of gifts, food items, clothing materials, for them on special days like Easter, Christmas and New Year days. The Church as well as philanthropists should borrow a leaf from Boaz who asked his reapers to leave sheaves (grains) to be gleaned by Ruth. They should enroll the single parents on welfare packages, to help their children cope with academic work so that they will not drop out of school, due to financial constraints. Scholarship can also be given to their children.
12. Finally, the single parents on their own part should not see the condition they found themselves as the end of their life. They must do something to improve their own situation, by making necessary adjustments that will help them go on with life. For the downfall of a man, they say, is not the end of his life.

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