

EXPLORING BEREAVEMENT AND TRAUMA, AND COPING MECHANISMS IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

OBEDBEN MMESOMACHUKWU LUMANZE
West African Advanced School of Theology, Owerri
AND

STELLA-MARIS OKECHUKWU
International Christian College of Nursing Sciences, Owerri

ABSTRACT

The Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible is a compelling narrative that tells the story of Ruth, a Moabite woman who later becomes the great-grandmother of King David. The story deals with themes of trauma, loss, and resilience, and provides insight into how individuals cope with adversity. This paper gives a qualitative exploration of trauma and coping methods in Ruth. The study used a thematic approach to examine the text of the Book of Ruth. The analysis revealed that the characters in the story experienced various forms of trauma, including bereavement, economic hardship, and displacement. The coping methods used by the characters included seeking refuge in the community, showing kindness to others, and taking action to improve their situation. The study also uncovered the importance of faith and spirituality as coping mechanisms in times of hardship. The characters in the book of Ruth frequently turn to God for guidance and support, and their faith helps them to find meaning and purpose in their suffering. Overall, the findings suggest that Ruth provides a valuable perspective on trauma and coping methods. The story offers insights into how people can find resilience and hope in the face of adversity, and highlights the importance of community, kindness, and faith in helping individuals cope with trauma.

KEYWORDS: Ruth, Naomi, trauma, coping mechanisms, and resilience.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Ruth is a narrative that provides an insightful and fascinating account of the experiences of Naomi and Ruth, who experienced significant loss and trauma. While scholars such as Hubbard (1988), Piper (2009), Kassian (2010), and

Peeler (2018) have often understood the book as a story of love and redemption, few have read it in the light of the themes of trauma and coping, especially in the African context. Though the book lacks emotional details, it allows readers to find resonance with their own situations using their imaginations (cf. Linafelt, 2010).

The book of Ruth offers an excellent opportunity on how individuals can cope with trauma and the various coping mechanisms they can employ to overcome their struggles. Dickie (2023) acknowledges that the narrative is an excellent case study for exploring the lived experiences of those who have suffered trauma and how they can manage their emotions, relationships, and faith. Thus, this paper explores the themes of trauma and coping mechanisms in the lives of Naomi and Ruth and the lessons that can be learned from their experiences.

The study is significant because it offers hope that healing and recovery are possible even in the face of significant loss and adversity. Again, Dickie (2023) rightly observes that biblical literature can be useful in helping victims of trauma cope with their traumatic experiences. Understanding how Bible characters coped with adversity can help the modern victim of such experiences recover from trauma and build resilience.

The study employed the qualitative method, particularly the narrative analysis method. This method was employed because it helped in carefully studying the plot, language, and structure of the story. It also gives room for interpreting how Ruth's experiences relate to wider human themes like grief, hope, faith, and resilience.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF RUTH

Ruth is a narrative account of the life of Ruth, a Moabite woman who became the ancestress of King David and, eventually, Jesus Christ. The book is divided into four chapters and is set against the backdrop of the period of the judges in Israel (1:1). It begins with the story of a man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi, who migrated from Bethlehem to the country of Moab with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, due to a famine in their land (1:1-2). According to Hamilton (2006), Ruth is a charming and beautifully crafted work of literature that highlights the themes of loyalty, faithfulness, and redemption. Hubbard Jr. (1988) avers that the story is one of the steadfast love of two women and the kindness of a man who became the means of their redemption. Piper (2009) also describes it as a story of love and loyalty, of grace and providence, of redemption and hope.

Though Ruth is only four chapters long, it is full of rich and complex themes that have captured the imaginations of readers for centuries. The story moves between two nations: Bethlehem in Judah and Moab, a nation allegedly cursed by Yahweh beyond ten generations. The narrative unfolds with the death of Elimelech and his two sons, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, as widows. Naomi then decides to return to Bethlehem, and Ruth chooses to accompany her, demonstrating her loyalty and faithfulness not only to her mother-in-law but also to the God of Israel (1:16-17).

In Bethlehem, Ruth goes to glean in the fields of Boaz, a wealthy relative of Naomi, to provide for herself and Naomi (2:2). Through a series of events and by divine providence, Boaz becomes Ruth's kinsman-redeemer, and the two eventually marry, providing a happy ending to the story. The book of Ruth is significant not only because it tells the story of Ruth's redemption but also because it demonstrates God's faithfulness to His people even in times of hardship and suffering. Block (2015) underscores that the book affirms that Yahweh is the God of Israel and that His covenant promises are not nullified by the disobedience of His people.

Over the years, the dating of Ruth has been debated among scholars. While the story itself is set during the period of the judges (1:1), many believe that it was composed much later than the events it describes. For lack of space, only three major views about the dating of the book will be discussed here: Many scholars, such as Harrison (1969), Campbell (1975), Hubbard (1988), and Morris (1988), among others, believe Ruth was composed during the time of King David (circa 1000 BC). Such scholars argue that since the book ends with the genealogy of David (4:17-22), it was likely written to support, celebrate, and legitimise David's royal family line. Hence, the essence of composing the book was to show David's humble and faithful roots.

Many other scholars, such as Nielsen (1997), Sakenfeld (1999), Matthews (2004), and Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky (2011), all argue that Ruth was written during the Post-exilic period, after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon. This argument is based on the language of the book, which includes some Aramaic words and Persian influences. During this post-exilic period, based on the materials found in Ezra (9-10), there was strong opposition to marrying foreigners; however, Ruth, a Moabite woman, was praised and accepted. In consequence, many are of the opinion that the book was written to challenge strict views on foreign marriages and promote inclusion (Younger, 2002).

A few scholars, such as Provan and Longman (2003), Block (2015), and Webb (2015), all suggest that the book could have been written during the time of the monarchy or shortly before or during the early exile (between 800-600 BC). According to this view, the language is older than post-exilic Hebrew but not as old as that from the time of the judges. This view tries to balance the internal setting of the story with its literary style (LaSor, Hubbard, & Bush, 1996). Though the debate on the dating of the book continues, the message remains powerful and relevant across all periods and cultures.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS OF TRAUMA IN LIGHT OF MODERN THEORIES

Trauma refers to a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that can have a significant impact on an individual's mental, emotional, and physical well-being. According to the American Psychological Association (2020), trauma is “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster” (p. 1). The APA further explains that trauma can cause long-term reactions such as flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches. Emotional and psychological trauma happens when someone goes through a deeply upsetting or frightening event that they find hard to cope with. It could be caused by the death of a loved one, war, natural disasters, physical abuse/violence, natural disasters, serious accidents, or prolonged exposure to extreme stressors. These experiences can leave a person feeling helpless, afraid, or deeply hurt on the inside.

The impact of trauma extends beyond the immediate experience, often leading to persistent emotional and psychological distress (Lawrence et al., n.d). Individuals who have undergone trauma may exhibit symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, heightened arousal, and avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event. Emotionally, a person may feel sad, angry, anxious, or numb. They might find it hard to trust others or feel safe as well. Also, they may have feelings of guilt or shame and a sense of detachment from reality. These symptoms can significantly impair daily functioning, disrupt relationships, and contribute to the development of mental health disorders like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (APA, 2023).

Understanding emotional and psychological trauma necessitates recognizing its complex nature. Though according to the National Institute of Mental Health (2022), everyone responds to trauma in the same way, Figley (1995) and Bryant

(2013) argue that trauma responses vary among individuals, influenced by factors such as resilience, social support, and the nature of the traumatic event. They believe that cultural, societal, and contextual factors play a crucial role in shaping the experience and expression of trauma.

The story of Ruth starts with sad events. In the Book of Ruth, bereavement and grief are central to the story. Bereavement means the state of losing someone close through death, while grief is the deep emotional pain and sorrow that follows such a loss. The Centre for Bereavement Services (2020) explains this concept better: “the experience of losing someone important through death, which often brings a period of mourning” (p. 2). Grief, also, as explained by the National Health Service (NHS), is “a natural reaction to loss, involving a range of emotions like sadness, anger, guilt, and confusion” (NHS, 2022, p. 1).

According to the narrative, Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, lost her husband and two sons. Ruth also lost her husband. This situation left them as widows- they were thus left without male protection, family support, or financial security in such a patriarchal society. Hence, their bereavement and grief were not only emotional but also social and economic because they all had depended on their husbands, who provided them all the security they needed. The narrator intentionally or unintentionally created gaps in the story so as to draw the emotions of the audience and/or reader and create room to extend their thinking and thereby making the story interesting. For example, the questions of how and why the husbands died were left for the reader to contemplate.

As the story unfolds, Naomi is seen expressing her grief by asking the people to call her “Mara”. She lamented, “*’al tigre’nah lî nā’omî, q^ere’na lî mārā, kî hēmar šadday lî m^e’ōd* / Do not call me Naomi; call me *Mara*, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me”. The above statement shows how deeply the bereavement and grief affected her mental health and entire identity. Usually, experience has shown that in most cases, when people are bereaved and/or traumatised, they look for religious or spiritual frameworks and beliefs to interpret their experience and cope with it. Naomi asking her people to call her, *mārā* shows how heavily discontented and grieved she was.

Naomi’s attitude aligns with Kubler-Ross and Kessler’s (2005: p.7) theory on bereavement. According to this theory, people go through five stages when dealing with loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages do not always come in that order, and not everyone experiences all of them at the same time.

Initially, Naomi felt abandoned by their national deity, Yahweh, and was overwhelmed by grief. However, as the narrative progresses and as Ruth remained by her side, she, Naomi, slowly moves from denial, anger, and depression towards acceptance and healing, especially as Boaz entered the scene as their family “redeemer”. In the case of Ruth, she expressed her grief through loyal action. Hence, instead of returning to her family, she chose to remain with Naomi and start life afresh in her husband’s place, Bethlehem. Her journey shows how grief can move someone toward courage, love, and hope, even after great loss.

Another modern theory that aligns with the story of Ruth is Worden’s (2009) tasks of mourning. This theory outlines four major tasks of mourning: first, accepting the reality of the loss; second, experiencing the pain of grief; third, adjusting to life without the deceased; and fourth, finding an enduring connection while moving on with life. Naomi and Ruth both demonstrated these tasks. As already stated, Naomi accepts her loss but expresses it openly (1:13, 20); while Ruth grieves silently, yet adjusts to a new life in her husband’s hometown, Bethlehem. Together, they rebuilt their lives, showing strength and faith. At the end of the story, Naomi held Ruth’s son, Obed (4:16), showing how both women moved forward while still honouring their past.

Furthermore, Bowlby’s (1980) attachment theory is relevant to this study. According to this theory, people often develop strong emotional bonds with loved ones, and when such bonds are broken through death, the result is grief and trauma. Hence, the depth of grief often depends on how close the relationship was. Though Ruth’s grief over the loss of her husband is not recorded in words, her actions speak volumes. Instead of returning to her parents and people, she clings to the mother-in-law, Naomi (1:16). One of the Hebrew words used in v.16, *telekhi* comes from the root verb *hlkh*, which means “to go” or “to walk.” Here, Ruth uses word to express her decision to go wherever Naomi goes. This word shows determination, action, and direction. Ruth was not just speaking emotionally; she was deciding to physically and spiritually follow Naomi’s path. This shows loyalty and determination (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1906).

Again, the Hebrew word, *’ammeikh*, meaning “Your people,” is important in the narrative. This word is made up of two parts: *’am*, meaning “people” or “nation”, and the possessive suffix *-eikh*, which means “your” (feminine). When Ruth says *’ammeikh ’ammi*, she is saying, “Your people shall be my people”. According to Strong (1890), this is more than a cultural change: it is a full identification with

Naomi's nation and way of life. Ruth is willing to give up her Moabite identity to join the Israelite community.

Finally, the word *'Elohayikh* (Your God) is one of the most powerful words in the whole story. It comes from *Elohim*, meaning "God". The suffix *-ayikh* again shows possession: "your God." Ruth is not just pledging loyalty to Naomi's family but also to Naomi's God. In the ancient world, gods were tied to nations. Ruth's declaration shows a deep spiritual transformation- she is choosing the God of Israel as her own (Harris, Archer, & Waltke, 1980).

The above incident shows the depth of Ruth's emotional bond with her late husband and the trauma of separation. Her loyalty and love are ways of coping with that loss, in line with Bowlby's idea that grief is about re-forming attachment in new ways.

WIDOWHOOD IN ANCIENT ISRAELITE SOCIETY

As earlier noted, the Book of Ruth depicts a story of trauma that the main characters Naomi and Ruth experienced throughout their life. Trauma is evident in the story when their husbands all died, leaving them in a vulnerable position. In addition, Ruth, as a foreigner in Israel, is forced to rely on the kindness of strangers to survive. She experiences trauma because of her poverty and lack of resources. She must work in the fields to provide for herself and her mother-in-law, and she is subjected to the harsh conditions of manual labour, which can be physically and emotionally taxing. Ruth experiences trauma due to her social status as a widow and a foreigner.

In the ancient Near East, including Israel, widows and foreigners were among the most vulnerable and marginalized members of the society. In fact, it is interesting to note that the word for "widow" in Hebrew comes from a root word which means "unable to speak" (Thurston, 1989, p. 9). Ancient Israel was a patriarchal society where women's socio-economic status was linked to the men (fathers, brothers, and husbands). Thus, when a woman loses her husband, she becomes vulnerable and is "unable to speak". She loses her voice and status, and this becomes worse if she has no son to take care of her or speak for her. According to Siquans (2009: p.446), in such a case, such a woman is relegated as a "poor" person. An average woman in that society, thus, feared the death of a husband.

One of the most significant challenges faced by widows in ancient Israel was economic insecurity. Widows were often left without any means of support after the

death of their husbands and were forced to rely on the kindness of relatives or strangers to survive. Ruth's status as both a widow and a foreigner would have made her extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse from those who hold power over her. However, through her resilience and determination, she overcomes the trauma and finds a sense of belonging and security in a new community.

Another challenge faced by widows in ancient Israel was social isolation. According to Boling (1995), without a husband, a widow had no male protector and was often excluded from social gatherings and religious festivals. This social isolation could also lead to emotional distress and depression. Moreover, widows were often subjected to exploitation and abuse. In a patriarchal society like ancient Israel, women had little power or agency, and widows were particularly vulnerable to the whims of those who held power over them.

Also, in ancient society, losing one's sons was considered a traumatic and devastating event, especially for a woman like Naomi who had lost both her sons. In that society, the primary role of women was to bear children and continue the family line, so the loss of sons meant the end of the family's legacy. Moreover, without a husband or sons to provide for her, Naomi was left in a vulnerable position with no means of support.

The trauma of losing sons was reflected in the mourning practices of ancient Israel. In the book of Genesis, when Jacob thought that his son Joseph had been killed, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son for many days (Gen. 37:34-35). Similarly, in the book of Job, when Job's children died, he tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell to the ground in mourning (Job 1:20). These mourning practices demonstrate the deep emotional pain and sorrow that losing a child caused in ancient times. This loss of family and social support leads to Naomi's displacement from her home and community in Bethlehem.

RUTH'S EXPERIENCES AS A FOREIGNER AND WIDOW

The book of Ruth covertly portrays how foreign women were treated in ancient Near Eastern society. The narrator notes that the people of Bethlehem were surprised to see Naomi return with a foreign woman referred to as a "Moabite". This term was probably used to denote foreigners. According to Boling (1995), this may suggest that the people of Bethlehem were not used to seeing foreign women in their community, and they were somewhat taken aback by Ruth's arrival. Probably, foreigners were regarded with suspicion and possibly even hostility in ancient Israel.

However, there were exceptions to this treatment, as we see when Boaz, the landowner, takes notice of Ruth and treats her with kindness and respect.

In ancient Israel, gleaning was a common practice whereby the poor would gather leftover crops from the fields after the harvest. This practice was an important aspect of that society. According to the book of Leviticus, landowners were required to leave the corners of their fields unharvested and not to gather any fallen grain, so that the poor and the foreigners could come and collect the leftovers (19:9-10). This was not only a way of providing for the disadvantaged members of the community, but also a means of preventing waste and promoting fairness and social justice.

Ruth, being a foreigner, would have been especially vulnerable in this situation. However, Boaz's attitude towards her shows that there were both negative and positive attitudes towards foreign women in that society. While some may have been suspicious or hostile towards them, others, like Boaz, were willing to extend kindness and help to those in need.

As a widow, Ruth would have faced numerous other challenges, including financial hardship and social exclusion. She would have had to rely on the kindness of others to survive. The narrator informs the reader, "And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favour'" (2:2, ESV). Relying on the generosity of others to survive in the ancient world was not easy. Those who gleaned in the fields were often exposed to rape and sexual molestation, sometimes verbal and physical abuse, scorching sun, the rain, and the wind. They had to wake up early and work long hours to collect enough grain to sustain themselves and their families. Moreover, they had to compete with other gleaners for the leftover grain, which could be scarce at times. In those days, the poor and widows who gleaned in the fields could be intimidated or even robbed of their gleanings by those who wanted to keep the grain for themselves. Of course, they had no legal protection or recourse, and as noted already, their survival often depended on the mercy and generosity of the landowners.

While gleaning, people could share their experiences, stories, and prayers with each other and find comfort and hope in their common struggle. The researcher believes that Ruth must have also shared her story with others while gleaning and would have been encouraged by other women. Despite the challenges she faced, Ruth's faithfulness and loyalty to Naomi eventually earned her acceptance and respect in the community. Chapter 4:14 shows that Ruth's perseverance and

dedication were rewarded, and she was eventually accepted and integrated into the community.

IMPACT OF BEREAVEMENT AND TRAUMA ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF NAOMI AND RUTH

Having explained the traumatic experiences of the main characters in the book of Ruth, it is important then to briefly discuss the impact of such experiences on their mental states. The loss of their husbands must have deeply affected both of them in various ways, leading to significant emotional and mental trauma.

For Naomi, losing her husband and sons must have caused immense grief and sorrow. Losing these loved ones must have made her feel hopeless and depressed. This loss not only must have impacted her emotionally, but it may have also altered her sense of identity. In the narrative, Naomi expresses her pain by renaming herself “Mārā,” meaning bitter, highlighting the depth of her anguish (1:20). Ruth also faces the trauma of losing her husband and the uncertainty of her future. Such experience can result in significant trauma. Trauma from the loss of loved ones can have enduring effects on mental health, leading to feelings of grief, depression, anxiety, and a sense of displacement.

For both Naomi and Ruth, facing this type of trauma, known as complicated grief or bereavement, would have made them have intense emotions such as sadness, yearning, anger, guilt, and a sense of emptiness. In fact, if it were to be in most African societies, the women would have been blamed for the deaths of their husbands. Many would have said that Naomi was under a curse. She may even have been accused of being a witch. Losing a husband and two sons without any heir could have been interpreted as a bad omen in the African context (Odiaka, 2013).

In most African societies, just like in ancient Israel, following the death of a husband, widows often face significant challenges, including social stigmatization, loss of inheritance rights, and economic hardships. In many Igbo communities, for example, when women lose their husbands, they often face a lot of abuse, especially from their husbands’ family members and kinsmen. In some places, a widow is forced to prove her innocence by drinking the water used in bathing the husband’s corpse (Ifemeje & Umejiaku, 2014). Thus, just like in ancient Israel, the social stigma surrounding widowhood in Igboland is particularly pronounced. Widows are sometimes seen as bad luck or bearers of misfortune, which can lead to ostracisation

from their communities. This stigma can manifest in various ways, including exclusion from social gatherings or being subjected to derogatory remarks.

In the case of Naomi and Ruth, their experiences were also difficult. Individuals experiencing this type of grief or trauma might find it challenging to accept the reality of the loss, leading to persistent feelings of disbelief and emotional pain. Though the traumatic grief should have significantly disrupted various aspects of the lives of Naomi and Ruth: social relationships, work, and daily functioning, from all indications, Ruth was more resilient and hopeful than Naomi. She was ready to socialize and continue her normal life, even though all hope seemed to have been lost. Hence, when Boaz proposed to her, she did not hesitate. She was ready to go into another marriage. The researcher would want to believe that, but for Ruth, Naomi might have died earlier than her time, as she returned to her homeland, Bethlehem.

COPING METHODS EMPLOYED BY THE CHARACTERS

From the narrative, both Naomi and Ruth employed the following post-traumatic coping techniques to cope with the loss of their loved ones:

Supportive and caring relationship: Both Naomi and Ruth relied on each other for emotional support. This way, they were able to form a strong bond, providing companionship and strength during their shared hardships. Ruth's steadfast love and commitment to Naomi, as well as Naomi's guidance, offered both of them mutual comfort. This is a big lesson for anyone experiencing trauma today.

Adaptation to Change: Naomi and Ruth had to adapt to drastic life changes. Despite the loss of their husbands and relocation to a foreign land, they embraced the challenges and worked toward building a new life together.

Active decision-making: Ruth took initiative and showed agency by choosing to remain loyal to Naomi and embrace her mother-in-law's culture and faith. Her proactive decision-making demonstrates resilience and determination in the face of uncertainty. She did not mind what people would say. Actually, her people, the Moabites, would have seen her as a silly person for deciding to follow a foreigner back home instead of remarrying and staying back to support her own family. However, she followed her heart and did what would give her peace of mind.

Seeking social support: Naomi and Ruth sought help and support from people around them. They were not ashamed of asking for help. Ruth's willingness to work in the fields for their sustenance and Naomi's guidance regarding social customs display their efforts to integrate into the community for support. Many people have

committed suicide because they were unable to seek support and help from others in times of trial.

Maintaining hope and faith: Naomi and Ruth held onto hope and faith, despite their challenging circumstances. Their perseverance and trust in a better future guided their actions and decisions.

RELEVANCE OF RUTH'S NARRATIVES IN MODERN TRAUMA STUDIES

Ruth's story of loss, grief, displacement, and resilience is still relevant today. Her experience is significant as it still resonates with many individuals who have experienced bereavement, trauma, and adversity, especially those who have been forced to flee their homes due to conflict, the death of a husband, or persecution. The narrative can contribute to discussions on post-traumatic growth and the capacity of individuals to construct meaning after bereavement and/or trauma.

One of the key themes in Ruth's story is the importance of community and social support in the process of healing and recovery. When Ruth's father-in-law, brother-in-law, and husband died, leaving her with Naomi, the mother-in-law, she chose to stay with Naomi and accompany her to her homeland, not minding the consequences of her decision. This act of loyalty and solidarity is noteworthy as it is an important source of strength and comfort for both women, and in the end, it led to Ruth's remarriage and the restoration of the husband's family line. Ruth's commitment to Naomi, therefore, serves as a model for the importance and role of interpersonal relationships in mitigating the effects of trauma. This thus aligns with modern trauma studies as it emphasizes the role of social networks in healing (cf. Cohen 2004; Uchino 2006; Holt-Lunstad et al 2010).

Again, in the narrative, the role of faith and spirituality in coping with bereavement, grief, and trauma is underscored. Ruth's decision to convert to the religion of her husband's people, Yahwism, is a significant part of her journey of healing and transformation. It is still relevant today. Experience has shown that many trauma survivors have found peace, solace, and meaning in their religious and/or spiritual beliefs. Thus, Ruth's story serves as a powerful example of how faith and certain theological frameworks can help individuals to find peace, hope, and resilience in the face of grief and hardship. Ruth's story, therefore, offers valuable insights into the experience of trauma and recovery, and this is relevant in the fields of psychology of religion.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the themes of bereavement, grief, trauma, and recovery in Ruth and how the narrative might offer insights into ancient understandings of coping mechanisms, healing, and resilience. The study shows that the two main characters in the book of Ruth, Naomi and Ruth, employed several coping skills to overcome their trauma, including faith, loyalty, kindness, and practical problem-solving, etc. These coping skills helped them to manage their situation and eventually find a way out of their difficult circumstances.

The study has shown that Ruth's story offers valuable insights into the experience of trauma and the importance of community and spirituality in the process of recovery. By studying and learning from Ruth's example, one can gain a deeper understanding of the human capacity for resilience and the role of social support and faith in promoting healing and growth.

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