Pete Wilcox

Come for Refuge

The book of Ruth and hope for migrants

AN ESSENTIAL STUDY GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUALS AND CHURCHES

‘*Come for Refuge* is a story of our time and a story of all times. Resonating with profound relevance, it weaves first-hand accounts of refugees today with those of biblical characters, reminding us that themes of migration, refuge, and asylum are nothing new. There is a potency in the dialogue between contemporary voices and ancient text, each illuminating and enhancing the other, and together revealing that amid pain and tragedy there is also light and hope.’
The Rt Revd Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani, bishop of Chelmsford

‘This brilliant book provides a rich comparison of the experiences of migrants now to the challenges of Naomi and Ruth. In a world where hostility to migrants is on the rise, Bishop Pete shows us the striking themes and similarities in journeys between Ruth and Naomi and modern migrants. The case studies highlight the desperate challenges but also the route to belonging that many migrants follow. It paints a vivid picture of the necessity of movement of people, from famine, loss, and persecution to returning home and the equal necessity for us to welcome and show understanding to our migrant communities.’
Olivia Blake, MP for Sheffield, Hallam

‘Living in cities with significant migrant communities in London, and now in Melbourne, I have seen both the deep gifts migrants bring and the profound vulnerabilities they carry. Pete Wilcox names these realities in this beautiful book with honesty and grace, challenging church and society alike to respond not with fear, but with love, compassion, and faithful welcome. *Come for Refuge* deserves to be widely read, studied, and shared!’
The Most Revd Ric Thorpe, archbishop of Melbourne

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Introduction

The book of Ruth and contemporary migration stories

The book of Ruth is the story not just of one woman, but of two: Ruth and Naomi. The whole narrative is only four chapters long: Naomi is most prominent in chapters 1 and 4 (though Ruth is present), and Ruth is most prominent in chapters 2 and 3 (though Naomi is present). Both women had experience of migration: Naomi was an Israelite who went to live as a migrant in the land of Moab; Ruth was a Moabite who went to live as a migrant in the land of Israel. For Naomi, migration was essentially a bitter experience; for Ruth, a much more fulfilling one – she sought and found refuge (the word is used of her in 2:12) in Bethlehem and almost certainly never returned to her country of origin.

This exposition of the book of Ruth seeks to pay particular attention to those experiences of migration. I would argue that the text invites this focus, not least by the way in which it repeatedly places stress on Ruth's migrant status: again and again, sometimes gratuitously, she is 'Ruth the Moabite' (1:4, 22; 2:2, 21; 4:5, 10) and once she is 'the Moabite… from the country of Moab' (2:6). Once she describes herself as 'a foreigner' (2:10) – in Hebrew, *nākerîyāh*, an alien.

However, my sensitivity to this emphasis in the book of Ruth has been heightened by my recent interactions with migrants and refugees in the two cities in the UK in which I have lived in the last twelve years: specifically with refugees and asylum seekers from Iran (and Kurdistan) in Liverpool and with refugees from Ukraine in Sheffield. Their stories of leaving a beloved homeland, of risk-laden journeys, of uncertain

and uneven welcomes in a new and deeply unfamiliar country have enriched (among other things) my reading of this biblical text.

That enrichment is what has prompted me to experiment with the format in this book. I have tried to create a conversation between the experience of Ruth and Naomi, on the one hand, and that of some contemporary migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, on the other. I am deeply grateful to those individuals who have confided their stories in me and who have trusted me to place their testimonies alongside the Bible story. How far this experiment is a success will be for others to judge, but I am immensely grateful to those whose risky frankness with me made the experiment possible. I am especially thankful to those who provided me with testimonies which, on account of various inevitable editorial considerations, I have not ultimately been able to include in this book. Their generosity, patience, grace, and understanding have been exemplary.

These testimonies are drawn from two contexts: Sheffield, in England, where I serve as bishop of the Anglican diocese; and Melbourne, Australia, where I drafted much of this book during a sabbatical.

As the bishop of Sheffield, it is my privilege to be one of the patrons of a magnificent charity called ASSIST, which seeks to support some of the most vulnerable people in our City of Sanctuary. So it was an obvious step, not least as a way of drawing attention to the extraordinary work of the staff and volunteers of ASSIST, to seek to secure some of these testimonies from among those the charity has supported – though not all the 'Sheffield' stories are 'ASSIST' stories.

Part of the point of this book is to underline the fact that migration is a global challenge requiring a global response. Our experience of increased migration to the UK in recent decades is by no means unique – quite the opposite. On sabbatical, I had barely been in Melbourne for 48 hours before I became aware of the extent of migration to that city at present and of the work of the Anglican Church in seeking to support asylum seekers, refugees, and other migrants there. The opportunity

to include testimonies from migrants to Melbourne seemed, in the providence of God, too good to miss, and I am delighted that it has proved possible.

The challenge of rising global migration and government policy

Migration has been growing globally for decades. The *World Migration Report* for 2024, published by the United Nations' International Organization for Migration (IOM), estimates that 'there are about 281 million international migrants in the world, which equates to 3.6 per cent of the global population'. It goes on to state that this number is '128 million more than 30 years earlier, in 1990 (153 million), and over three times the estimated number in 1970 (84 million)'.[1]

Some definitions will be useful at this point, and I have been working with those offered by the IOM. It uses the word 'migrant' as an umbrella term with the broadest possible scope, to refer to any person who for any reason now lives in a country other than the country of their birth. In this sense students studying overseas, for example, are migrants. According to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, cited by the IOM, the term 'refugee' has a much narrower meaning. It refers to 'persons who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, are outside the country of their nationality and are unable or, owing to such fear, are unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country'.[2] Thirdly, again using the IOM definition, an asylum seeker is 'someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every recognized refugee is initially an asylum seeker'.[3]

Every refugee and asylum seeker is therefore a migrant, but by no means is every migrant a refugee or asylum seeker. Migrants may be relatively prosperous and may exercise substantial freedom of choice and agency in making a migration. Obviously, however, there are also many migrants who are not prosperous and who have little freedom of choice or agency when they migrate; they might best be described as 'forced migrants'. These include increasing numbers of trafficked persons and increasing numbers of climate migrants (seeking to escape famine and drought, for example), as well as migrants who are fleeing conflict or war. The testimonies of contemporary migrants in this book are exclusively those of refugees and asylum seekers – of migrants who have found themselves in vulnerable situations. Although 'forced migrants' is not a happy phrase, and not a universally accepted one, I use it to emphasise the vulnerability, not least, of Ruth in the Bible story.

It is interesting to note that the IOM has an essentially positive disposition towards the phenomenon of migration, even towards globally increasing migration, seeing it as part of the solution to the world's great problems, rather than as a contributor to them. In its 'Institutional Strategy on Migration and Sustainable Development', the IOM argues that 'migration, when well managed, can be both a development strategy and a development outcome', contributing to, rather than hindering, the achievement of the UN's sustainable development goals. It notes, for example, that many migrants are economically productive and benefit not only their country of residence but their country of origin, too.[4] The IOM estimates that 'remittances' (financial or in-kind transfers made by migrants directly to families or communities in their countries of origin) increased from US$128 billion in 2000 to US$831 billion in 2022.[5] Of course, what migrants contribute to both their country of residence and their country of origin should not be measured purely financially.

This rather positive stance towards global migration is noticeably at odds with recent government policy in the UK. For well over a decade, until July 2024, the Conservative government sought to respond to (indeed, to combat) increasing migration by the creation of a so-called

'hostile environment' – 'a range of measures aimed at identifying and reducing the number of immigrants in the UK with no right to remain', which by 2018 had shockingly led to the wrongful deportation of at least 63 members of the Windrush generation.[6] Although the terminology was generally abandoned latterly (in favour of 'a compliant environment'), the policy has not. Thus during 2023, the government introduced the Illegal Migration Act (designed not least to 'stop the boats' crossing the English Channel) and procured the Bibby Stockholm accommodation barge as a holding centre for asylum seekers awaiting the outcome of their claims. A treaty with Rwanda was also signed in December that year, with the associated legislation placed before Parliament in 2024, to enable asylum seekers to be removed there. Only the general election in July 2024 and the consequential change of government prevented the passage of the Rwanda legislation and the implementation of the treaty. Those measures were all highly controversial: indeed, the earliest attempt to arrange the deportation of asylum seekers in the UK to Rwanda was ruled unlawful by the UK's own Supreme Court in December 2022. However, if it had been expected that the election of a Labour government would mean a clear policy shift in a more humane direction, those hopes have not been realised – on the contrary, the 2025 'Border Security, Asylum, and Immigration Act' actually represents 'more of the same'.

Of course, hard cases make bad law, and the book of Ruth is not a policy document. It goes without saying that it is neither possible nor appropriate to extrapolate from the experience of two individuals in a setting over 2,000 miles from Britain and over 3,000 years ago to contemporary national government policy. However, national government policy becomes inhumane precisely when it loses sight of its impact on individual migrants. So the book of Ruth may nevertheless helpfully encourage us to reflect on what good government policy can look like and what kind of outcomes it might enable.

To assist in such reflection, this book includes study materials, primarily designed for group use but also capable of being used by individuals. There are study materials to accompany each of the six main chapters

of the book, each set including questions both about the biblical text and about the experience of contemporary migrants, as well as suggestions for worship and for further activity.

The structure of the book of Ruth and migration

While holy scripture is, of course, always more than carefully crafted literature, it is seldom less than that, and the artfully composed book of Ruth is a case in point. It has a clear and deliberate structure: it is a 'chiasm'.

A chiasm is a literary device, common in Hebrew biblical literature, in which a text has a symmetrical shape: ABC in the first half of a text is followed by its reflection, C'B'A', in the second. In the case of the book of Ruth, in the first half of the chiasm, a report of the demise of a family line (A) is followed by an account of Naomi's emptiness (B), which is in turn followed by a story about Ruth and Boaz in a harvest field (C). Then in the mirror image of the chiasm, a story about Boaz and Ruth on a threshing-floor (C') is followed by an account of Naomi's fullness (B'), which is in turn followed by a genealogy charting the renewal of a family line (A'). It can be depicted as follows:

A Prologue (1:1–5): the demise of a family line
B Act I (1:6–22): Naomi's emptiness
C Act II (2:1–23): Ruth and Boaz, part 1
C' Act III (3:1–18): Ruth and Boaz, part 2
B' Act IV (4:1–17): Naomi's fullness
A' Epilogue (4:18–22): the renewal of a family line

In the ensuing pages, the six chapters expound each of the six parts of the chiasm in turn. The intention has been to stay close to the biblical text, respecting its contours, its shape, and its structure. What is offered is a literary and theological reading, which takes the text at face value and pays attention to word plays and semantic patterns. Like any

short story, the text of the book of Ruth has to be taken at face value, in order to appropriate its meaning. It has to be read realistically – or indeed heard realistically. (Over the centuries it is likely that the book of Ruth has had as many hearers as readers. I tend therefore to refer to the audience of the book rather than its readers.) Elements of the interpretation are inevitably speculative, a reading between the lines, but the aim on such occasions has always been to enable the biblical text to have its full dramatic impact.

The six parts of the chiasm together relate the happy reversal of fortune experienced by Naomi and Ruth. As such, the six parts describe a journey which contemporary migrants are often hoping to follow: from an initial crisis and calamity to a migration which often calls kinship into question, through a period of subsistence and heightened vulnerability, to a more settled situation of security and wellbeing, to eventual integration and inheritance, and finally to contribution and legacy. This scheme maps onto the chiasm as follows:

Prologue: Crisis and calamity – the demise of a family line
    Act I: Migration and kinship – Naomi's emptiness
        Act II: Subsistence and vulnerability – Ruth and Boaz in the field
        Act III: Security and wellbeing – Ruth and Boaz on the threshing-floor
    Act IV: Integration and inheritance – Naomi's fullness
Epilogue: Contribution and legacy – the renewal of a family line

Readers of this book may also discern that this scheme has informed the way in which the testimonies of contemporary migrants have been interwoven with the biblical exposition.

To assist the reader to engage directly with the biblical text, it has been printed together with the commentary, scene by scene. The translation is the Anglicised NRSVue – chosen for the balance it achieves between a closeness to the Hebrew text, on the one hand, and a fluency of contemporary English, on the other.

Victor's story

to Sheffield from Zimbabwe

Victor's story has been included first as something of a paradigm. It illustrates the whole migrant journey, from crisis and calamity, to migration and kinship, to subsistence and vulnerability, to security and wellbeing, to integration and inheritance, and finally to contribution and legacy.

My name is Victor Mujakachi. I was born in Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) 64 years ago. Southern Rhodesia was a British colony, which became a self-governing colony in 1923. Rhodesia declared independence in 1965, triggering civil disorder between the white minority government and the large black majority, which escalated into a 15-year civil war. This ended in 1980 with a political settlement brokered by the British government and the establishment of modern Zimbabwe, governed by its indigenous black majority.

For the first 20 years of my life, I lived under a form of apartheid. Even at primary school, I was aware of the injustice. Society was divided into three spheres: white, Asian, and black. We lived in separate residential areas, used separate shops, restaurants and public transport systems, and were educated in separate schools. We even worshipped in separate churches.

In my teens, I became more politically aware. During the 1960s and 70s unrest grew, orchestrated by black activists and guerilla fighters coming over from countries such as Zambia, Tanzania, and Malawi, from which they had moved to join the armed struggle against the Rhodesian government.

As a young person, I was strongly pro-nationalist and planned to join those fighting for the cause of black people in Rhodesia. However, a cousin who planned to help me join the insurgency in Zambia was arrested and executed, so for a time my involvement was subdued.

Yet momentum for change was irresistible. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher initiated discussions with Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith, leading to free elections in 1980 and our country's first democratic government under Robert Mugabe. For me, this meant I could begin a career in our new nation. I was invited to join the police, but moved instead into banking, where I remained for 23 years.

Initially, there was a climate of euphoria and expectation among the black majority, disenfranchised by almost a hundred years of colonisation. Sadly, this period was short-lived. Mugabe began to exert one-party control, suppressing critics and opponents. In 1981, my brother and I, with two other family members, were forcibly taken, interrogated, and beaten by former guerilla fighters for daring to question government policies. This was not the freedom we had sought.

For many years, though, I remained conflicted. I was unhappy with Mugabe's increasingly autocratic rule, constitutional changes, corruption, and repression. But my career was progressing well, and I had high hopes for the 1999 elections. Opposition parties were gaining traction, including the new and popular Movement for Democratic Change. However, after Mugabe instigated a well-documented violent crackdown ahead of the elections, I knew it was time to leave Zimbabwe.

In 2003, I left for the UK with my wife Memory and our three children, on a three-year student visa. By then, the opposition had regained momentum and was expected to defeat Mugabe at the next election. My intention was to return after completing my studies. The UK had been an obvious choice. English was the official language of Zimbabwe and, at the time, Zimbabwe's 'most favoured nation' status meant no visa was required upon entry for visitors. I enrolled in a bachelor's degree, aiming to proceed to postgraduate studies. For a few years family life

was settled. We remained hopeful Mugabe would be ousted, after which I'd return to my banking career and contribute to the development of my beloved Zimbabwe. We were so optimistic that Memory continued her job in Zimbabwe at the South African Embassy, visiting me twice a year, while I did the same from here.

The 2008 elections took place soon after Memory had visited me with our youngest child. We were, however, once again disappointed, as Mugabe's ZANU–PF party rigged the election. I wrote to a friend back home, highly critical of the government. Somehow my letter became known to the government and my friend was arrested. Memory lost her job, we believe because of political interference, but she was unable to join me because I claimed asylum while she was still in Zimbabwe.

For the next 14 years, I was forcibly separated from my wife and youngest child. Even when Memory was able to join me in 2022, our younger son could not secure a visa for himself, and so he now lives in China. I saw him again in the summer of 2024, for the first time in nearly 20 years!

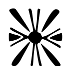
When my asylum application was submitted in 2008, I was relocated from my home in London to Sheffield. Here, I made contact with ASSIST, a charity supporting refugees and asylum seekers. My involvement with ASSIST opened up a network of friends who supported me in many different ways, for which I'll be forever grateful.

That support reached its peak when the British government sought to deport me to Zimbabwe in 2019. The Sheffield community stood up for me, and in four days garnered nearly 80,000 signatures petitioning against my deportation. After this massive outcry, the government relented. The support I received is without doubt the most positive experience of my life in the UK. The Sheffield community offered me advice, encouragement, moral support, financial assistance, and a place to live with a host family for twelve of my 14 years as an asylum seeker.

I spent 14 years in the asylum system. I had no right to employment or accommodation, no means of sustenance and limited access to

healthcare. Those years were far from easy, with periods of distress, soul-searching, depression, fear, insecurity, anguish, emotional turmoil, and at worst listless resignation. I found life in the UK challenging because of the culture, customs, language – and food! Although Zimbabwe is an English-speaking country, I struggled badly with the different regional accents and colloquialisms. The British weather, which changes very quickly and dramatically, unlike where I come from, often caught me off guard.

Despite all the trials and tribulations of my long asylum journey, I lived within a community who supported me in a massive way. These people empathised with my situation. They gave me strength, encouragement, and assurance in the face of adversity. They gave me hope.



PROLOGUE

CRISIS AND CALAMITY

The demise of a family line (Ruth 1:1–5)

The opening (1:1–5) and closing (4:18–22) paragraphs of the book of Ruth, the first and last sections of its symmetrical structure, have much in common with one another. They are the least 'narrative' parts of the book. The many named characters in these two sections are the least fully developed: they don't speak (dialogue is a prominent feature of all the other sections of the book), they barely act, and it is hard to get much sense of their personalities, except in so far as their names provide hints. These are also the only two sections of the book of Ruth in which there is no reference to the Lord. (It will become clear that the distribution of these references through the book as a whole is suggestive.)

Although in themselves these opening and closing sections of Ruth have little narrative content, they do have a definite narrative purpose – to capture the transformation in the circumstances of the family of Elimelech. In the prologue, the family is forced by famine into migration from Israel to Moab. The future is bleak and precarious. The family line appears like it is about to expire. In the epilogue, the family line is secure once again and a most glorious future indicated, culminating in the birth of King David no less. Yet readers who are at least a little familiar with the Hebrew scriptures will recall that even King David will himself become an asylum seeker and refugee, multiple times.

> [1]In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. [2]The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were

> Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. [3]But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. [4]These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, [5]both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.
>
> RUTH 1:1–5

In this short first scene of the drama, before the first character is ushered on to the stage, two preliminary facts are stated by way of context: the first is historical and the second is socio-economic.

Historically, the story is set 'in the days when the judges ruled'. If nothing else, this accounts for the place the book of Ruth has been given within the Christian Bible: it is sandwiched between Judges itself and 1 Samuel, in which the story of Israel's kingdom is begun. Historians date the period of the judges to about 1100BC, but precision is frankly unnecessary as well as impossible – a precise date would make little difference to a reading of the story.

The book of Judges passes a negative judgement on the life of the people of God at that time: it was a period when 'there was no king in Israel' and 'all the people did what was right in their own eyes' (Judges 21:25). It was a time of extreme social chaos and moral corruption. Some of the most gruesome stories in the Hebrew scriptures are to be found in its pages, many of them stories of macho-violence and what might today be called 'toxic masculinity' – think of Samson, to name only the best known. Many of the narratives in Judges, especially towards the end of the book, include episodes of terrible violence against women. Certainly 'the days when the judges ruled' were days of great vulnerability for women and when kindness towards women (which will prove to be a characteristic feature of the book of Ruth) was in short supply.

Socio-economically, the story is set in a time of famine. The dearth of food in Israel is fundamental to the plot of the book of Ruth because it triggers the migration of an Israelite family. Famine was, of course, a recurring feature of life in ancient Israel – and the economic migration with which the story of Ruth begins recalls the earlier journeyings (mostly to Egypt) of Abraham (Genesis 12:10), Isaac (Genesis 26:1), and Jacob (Genesis 42:5; 43:1; 47:4).

In this instance, it is a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah who is driven from his home in search of food. The name Bethlehem means 'house of bread': if famine has reached even here, then the situation is dire indeed. This man 'went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons': the text perhaps implies that it was the man's decision, the man's initiative to migrate. We are offered no insight into what his wife or children thought, whether they were willing participants in this adventure or reluctant ones. Naomi is not the first woman, nor the last, to be made to migrate against her will and against her better judgement.

This Bethlehemite, then, goes with his wife and two sons to live in Moab. Depending on the actual destination, it may have been a journey of as little as 30 miles, but it would have required the family to cross the River Jordan and navigate the Rift Valley. And in any case, Moab is a hostile location. From its very first appearance in the biblical story, Moab is a bad place. Its eponymous ancestor is born in disreputable circumstances (Genesis 19:30–37). It is a kingdom bent at the time of the Exodus on the cursing and destruction of Israel (Numbers 22—24) and on fighting against it (Joshua 24:9). It is viewed by Israel as a place and a people of sexual and spiritual promiscuity and temptation (Numbers 25:1–2; Judges 10:6). Later in history, it is a kingdom which oppressed Israel and from which Israel required deliverance (Judges 3:12–30), an enemy against whom Israel regularly fought (e.g. 1 Samuel 12:9; 14:47; 2 Samuel 8:12; 2 Kings 3:5).

There is, then, something ill-omened about this migration: an Israelite would not lightly choose to journey from Israel to Moab. 'Moab?', the audience is invited to ask, 'Can anything good come out of Moab?' At

the very least, the fact that Moab represents an attractive option is an indication of how desperate conditions in Israel must have been.

There is a particular irony in the fact that, at the time of the exodus, when the people of Israel, en route to the promised land, passed through Moabite territory and requested aid (bread and water), they were denied it (Deuteronomy 23:3); now inhospitable Moab commends itself as a place of sanctuary for Elimelech. It cannot have been an easy decision to make this journey, and it probably wasn't an easy journey. Generally, contemporary 'forced' migrants will recognise the difficulty of both.

There is some dramatic emphasis in the fact that the characters who make this journey are not immediately named. In verse 1, we are just told that the story involved 'a certain man… his wife and two sons'. It is only in verse 2 that their names are supplied: the man is Elimelech, his wife is Naomi, and their sons are Mahlon and Chilion. In all four cases, repetitively, the introduction includes the actual word 'name', as it will do again (twice more) in verse 4, when we are given the names of the sons' wives. Names, and also anonymity, are significant throughout this book and not least at its conclusion (see 2:1, 19; 4:5, 10 [x2], 11, 14, 17).

In the man's case and in his wife's, the derivations of their names are straightforward and probably meaningful. Elimelech means 'My God is king' or 'God is my king'. The name may well be a further reminder that in the period of the judges 'there was no king in Israel' (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), while also anticipating the focus on David's royal line with which the book will close. The likelihood of this is increased by the reference to Ephratha and Bethlehem (compare 1 Samuel 17:12). Naomi's name means 'pleasant' or 'sweet' and introduces her as a happy woman. The tragedies that are about to strike befall a woman who has, until this point, known mostly sweetness in her life.

The etymologies of their sons' names are less certain, but both seem ominous. A likely derivation of Mahlon is from the Hebrew word *hala*, meaning 'to be sick', and Chilion is almost certainly derived from the word *kala*, meaning 'to end'.

These four Ephrathites 'went into the country of Moab' and 'sojourned' there (exactly the same word is used with reference to Elimelech here as is used with reference to Abraham in Genesis 12:10). It implies migrant status: a sojourner is not a citizen. It may also imply that the family only envisaged a short-term stay in Moab and hoped to return promptly to Bethlehem. When the text goes on to state that 'they went to Moab and remained there', it may mean their initial expectations were confounded. This too is an experience to which many contemporary refugees can relate: what was at first envisaged as a temporary measure becomes an unimaginably lengthy stay.

The prologue focuses on one family from Bethlehem, but when the opening line tells us that there is a famine in the land, we can infer that the famine affected the whole land of Israel. Indeed, if the famine were not general in the whole land of Israel, no Israelite would choose to migrate to Moab. On the other hand, if the famine did affect the whole land of Israel, it is unlikely that Elimelech was the only one to make this hard decision and to migrate. There must have been others, perhaps even from Bethlehem, left with no choice but to make this challenging journey. Possibly the road from Bethlehem to Moab was well trodden.

The text is silent about the particular challenges Elimelech, Naomi, and their sons encountered as migrants in Moab, especially at first – with respect to language and customs, finding housing and work, making friends and belonging; but those challenges will surely have been there.

A significant shift follows in verse 3. In the first two verses, the story is told, as one might expect, as if Elimelech were the principal character. He is the first character introduced in verse 1 and the first to be named in verse 2. The end of verse 1 further emphasises his priority: the story is about *him* and *his* wife and *his* two sons. Yet although he

is also first named in verse 3, the expectations of the audience are then confounded by his description as 'the husband of Naomi'. She is no longer defined by her relationship to him, but vice versa. So the reader is instantly prepared for the shocking news of the early death of the apparent hero of the story.

The terse account gives no details about the death of Elimelech. But it leaves Naomi alone, with her two sons. For a decade, these three make their home in this foreign land, and in the course of that time, the two sons find wives – Moabite wives. It is worth recalling that such a practice is generally not encouraged in the early books of the Bible: sexual relations with Moabite women leads directly to a spiritual infidelity on the part of Israelite men in Numbers 25:1–3, and close community with Moabites is expressly forbidden to Israel in Deuteronomy 23:3–6. One wonders if there were no Israelite women, fellow sojourners in Moab, among whom Mahlon and Chilion might have sought wives.

The two Moabite women are Orpah and Ruth. We are given no insight into how they, or their families, felt about their marriages across the boundaries of race and culture. The etymology of their names seems less clear and so is presumably also less freighted. Ruth, it transpires later in the story (4:10), was the wife of Mahlon (and Orpah, therefore, was married to Chilion).

About a decade after the death of Elimelech, Naomi's two sons also died. Perhaps they died in the same incident; or perhaps their deaths were coincidental. Either way, the curtain comes down on this brief first scene in the drama, as Naomi is left alone with her daughters-in-law, 'without her two sons or her husband'. Naomi not only survived her husband (a tragic situation, especially in a patriarchal culture), but survived her children also – a personal disaster in any culture. She began the scene as a wife and a mother, but ends it as a childless widow. A story which began in crisis has, over the course of a decade, deteriorated into calamity. A migration which was intended to remedy poverty has brought destitution. There will surely have been many times during that period of at least a decade when Naomi questioned the

wisdom of her decision-making: should she and Elimelech ever have left Bethlehem? Might she have returned to Bethlehem on the death of Elimelech? Should she have allowed her sons to marry Moabite women? What if…?

There is a reminder here that experiences of migration and displacement are often also experiences of bereavement – sometimes of multiple bereavements. It is worth dwelling on this introduction for a moment for the insight it offers into migrant lives. There are many Naomis in the world, stranded in a strange land, destitute, and desperate. Many treacherous journeys undertaken by contemporary migrants in search of a better life end in disaster. This story tells us nothing about Naomi's former life in Israel or her standing in Bethlehem, nor about the achievements of Elimelech at an earlier point in his life. This too is a common testimony among those who become migrants and asylum seekers: their former lives all too often count for nothing in their new country of residence and the stories of earlier chapters of their lives mostly go untold.

Nasir's Story

to Sheffield from Pakistan

Nasir's story is raw. His departure from his country of origin was relatively recent. As such, his testimony illustrates most vividly the migrant journey, from crisis and calamity, to migration and kinship, to subsistence and vulnerability. (Note also that names have been changed in this story to protect the identity of the people concerned.)

I grew up in Lahore, Pakistan. My family has been Christian as far back as I know. I am the youngest of my siblings, and all of us (in school and out of school) have experienced discrimination in small but persistent ways on account of our faith. The discrimination is more severe in employment, from colleagues and bosses: Christians are generally seen as fit only for menial jobs – when a Christian succeeds in securing an office job, for example, people will say, 'The cleaners are behind the desk now.'

After leaving school in 2009, I came to the UK to study for a degree in mechanical engineering at Doncaster College. I stayed until 2013 and returned home after that.

Our life circumstances changed in 2010 when my oldest brother, who had a successful business, was asked for help by a colleague and friend who wanted to convert to Christianity. Though my brother warned him of the trouble he would face, the man was determined, so he helped him. The result was that, first, that man himself had to flee (because his in-laws started to come after him), and then my brother had to flee. The man's family (together with some extremist people) blamed my brother for the man's conversion. The threats and attacks against him became increasingly violent, so he fled to the USA.

After my brother had gone, we assumed life would settle down again, but, in fact, occasional threats and harassment against my family continued, even after I returned to Pakistan in 2013. People would come to our house or confront us in the street to humiliate us or beat us or whatever.

I got married to Aman in 2020. My wife used to work for a Catholic charity that supported people facing harassment or persecution – such as having bogus blasphemy cases brought against them. Their work focused on villages and small towns because these attacks were frequent. My wife supported girls and young women who were especially vulnerable. After one particular case, she, too, became the focus of personal attacks. Even their efforts to make the school curriculum unified and less religiously biased were met with extreme opposition in the form of verbal and targeted threats on many occasions. For some months, we tried to escape the threats: moving house, even moving to a new city for a few months, hoping things would calm down. But repeatedly, people managed to track us down. Occasionally, someone would come to our house to 'talk' with my wife.

So, in mid-2023, we decided to leave. That was a hard decision. Our family is important to us, and we didn't want to leave them. We tried our best to survive, but eventually, our situation became untenable. We fled to the UK and as soon as we got to Heathrow, claimed asylum.

We were detained at the airport for four or five hours and interrogated. After processing, the Home Office transferred us to a hotel in Chelmsford. We arrived at the hotel around 2.00 am and were told that we would stay in the hotel until a decision was made on our asylum application. However, the next morning the hotel staff informed us about a letter from the Home Office requiring us to leave the hotel because we had about £1,500 with us, which we had declared at the airport. Because of this money we were not entitled to accommodation.

I offered to pay for us to stay there, but the hotel manager said his contract was exclusively with the Home Office, and so he could not accept

paying guests – his hands were tied. When we tried to find alternatives, we couldn't – our passports had been held at the airport, so we had no identification papers, no bank cards, nothing.

Desperate, I contacted my oldest brother, a pastor in Virginia, USA. He is also a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge, at Wesley House. He contacted some people he knew here in the Methodist Church and explained our predicament, that we were a family with a small daughter, about to be made homeless, with nowhere to go.

Amazingly, the people at Cliff College, which is a Methodist college, offered us accommodation. A church in Chelmsford helped us with the transportation to Cliff College. We were stunned by the hospitality and welcome offered by the college staff and community. We have a one-bedroom flat, which is more than enough for us. We couldn't have asked for anything better.

Cliff College is in a small Derbyshire village, so the nearest big supermarket is a distance away; however, other college residents and church members generously drive us there when we need groceries. They make us feel like part of the community, invite us to events, etc. It's the same at All Saints' Church: the congregation has been fantastic. Being part of such a strong Christian community has been a great blessing.

We feel safe here and have become a part of the community. We have joined a local church where my wife and I serve actively. This community has become a second home to us. Our two-year-old daughter has made friends here. We stay in contact with our families in Pakistan via phone and social media. I did see my oldest brother when he came over from the USA in January: that was the first time I had seen him for 14 years!

As we wait for our asylum application to be processed, we are left in a state of uncertainty. The only communication we have received from the Home Office so far is our application registration (identity) cards.

With the backlog at the Home Office, it could take a long time for our asylum claims to be processed. The unknown future is a constant source of worry and stress for us.

Despite the challenges we have faced, we remain hopeful for a better future in the UK. We hope that our asylum application will be granted, allowing us to live without the constant threat of persecution. We are eager to contribute to the economy and wellbeing of this country, using our education, skills, and experience.

Study session one

To begin, read through the 'Guide to study materials' located at the end of the book (p. 135) to familiarise yourself with the format and intent of this material.

Participants are invited to prepare by reading pages 7–30.

For this session, you will need a candle and something with which to light it for the closing worship.

Welcome (15 minutes)

If group members do not already know one another well, it will be important to arrange a brief introduction, perhaps including name, home context, and church involvement.

Each group member is invited to say, in a sentence, what they hope they might get out of these six sessions.

Each group member is invited to respond to these questions:

- What's your favourite book or story?
- Do you have a favourite bit of the Bible?
- Do you have a migration/refugee story in your family? For how many generations has your family been settled in the country where you live?

The facilitator may like to lead an opening prayer, committing to God the discussion and reflection which follows.

Word (40 minutes)

Before reading the short Bible text, allow 20 minutes to reflect together on the following:

- Has your experience of family been mostly positive or difficult?
- How do family and nation contribute to your sense of identity?
- On page 9 you will find some United Nations definitions:
  - a migrant is a person ‘who lives in a country other than their place of birth’.
  - a refugee is a person who ‘owing to well-founded fear is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of the country of their nationality’.
  - an asylum seeker is a person ‘whose claim for refuge has not been finally decided’.
- Do any of these definitions surprise you?
- Do these terms help or hinder you in seeing migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers as individuals, with histories and hopes, fears and dreams?

Read the short Bible text together: Ruth 1:1–5 (20 minutes).

- Which of the named characters in this passage do you relate to most easily and why?
- Do any of the named characters in this passage remind you of individuals you know or have met in your community and why?
- Was there material in the exposition which sparked a new thought?

Work (20 minutes)

Look again at Victor’s story, which begins on page 14. In the opening description, a paradigm of the whole migrant journey is described, which moves from crisis and calamity, to migration and kinship, to subsistence and vulnerability, to security and wellbeing, to integration and

inheritance, and finally to contribution and legacy. Look also at Nasir's testimony, on page 27.

- At what point in his story do you think Victor was most vulnerable?
- What support do you imagine would have been most valuable to him then?
- Victor refers to the support he received from ASSIST. What strikes you about the way he describes that support?
- Victor spent 14 years in the asylum system. Who or what do you think is responsible for that?
- What challenged you most about Nasir's testimony?
- Nasir was evicted from Home Office accommodation without any means to secure shelter. What duty of care should there be towards people in the asylum system?

Worship (5 minutes)

Light a candle and spend a few minutes in silent reflection together, thinking especially of those around the world who are beginning on their migrant journeys right now and who have been plunged against their wills into 'crisis and calamity'. After a few minutes, close the session with this prayer:

Almighty and merciful God,
whose Son became a refugee and had no place to call his own;
look with mercy on those who today are fleeing from danger,
homeless and hungry.
Bless those who work to bring them relief;
inspire generosity and compassion in all our hearts;
and guide the nations of the world towards that day when all will
rejoice in your kingdom of justice and of peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

If you have capacity

Investigate online the presence of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in your own community. Does your research throw up any surprises?

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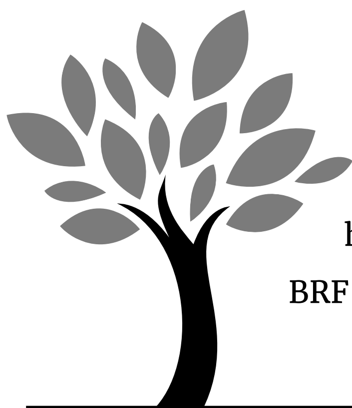

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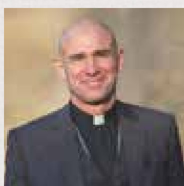

Pete Wilcox has been Bishop of Sheffield since 2017. He has been ordained for over 30 years and has spent most of that time in the north and in urban settings. He is the author of three books: *Living the Dream* (2007), *Walking the Walk* (2009) and *Talking the Talk* (2011).

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