***The Broken Doll - a story behind the Book of Ruth***

*The Book of Ruth is a novella written long after the events took place, probably after the Jews returned from exile, when they were very inward-looking. The author is unknown, but it may have been written in circumstances like these:*

‘They say I should divorce you.’ Hilkiah couldn’t meet his wife’s eyes.

‘They say WHAT?’ Ketura was sure she had heard wrong. ‘But why? What have I done? I look after the house, I cook the meals, I’ve given you two children… what grounds in all that for divorce?’

‘You’re not Jewish.’

‘You knew that when you married me. It didn’t worry you then – you even said how good it was that when there weren’t many girls around, you found one as nice as me’.

‘It’s still true.’ Hilkiah reached out to hug Ketura, but she whirled out of his reach, pacing up and down in agitation.

‘Who are *they*, anyway? How can anyone have the right to interfere between us?’

Hilkiah sat down heavily. ‘It’s not just us. It’s happening to your friends too. Adah and Rizpah and Abital and Merab…’

‘But not Miriam or Deborah?’

‘No, they’re from Jewish families – you know that.’

Ketura stopped her pacing and sat down facing Hilkiah. This was something big, and she had to get to the bottom of it. Slowly Hilkiah put the story together. ‘You know we had a village meeting tonight. Well, two men came from Jerusalem to talk to us. They’re going round all the villages, bringing messages from Nehemiah and Ezra in Jerusalem.’

‘How can that be bad?’ Ketura interrupted. ‘It was marvellous when the Persian king allowed them to come back and rebuild everything. The walls and the gates and the homes and the Temple. You said how good it was that the Jews would be a proper nation again, with a place to worship. You said you’d take us all to see the Temple, after the barley harvest.’

‘There’s another side to that’ Hilkiah shifted awkwardly on the bench. ‘If we’re going to be a nation again, God’s chosen people, we have to stick with Him. Meshullam and Kadmiel were definite about that. We shouldn’t mix with foreigners or marry them. If we have married foreigners, we should show our good faith by divorcing them. You can go back to your father’s house. He will understand.’

‘Good faith?’ Ketura was almost screeching with indignation. ‘And what about your faith to me, and the promises we made when we were married?’ With an effort she quietened her voice, as she turned to point to the children asleep under the blanket in the corner. ‘What about them?’

‘My mother will look after them.’

Ketura could not believe her ears. In a hard, grim voice she said, ‘You mean you’re taking my children from me? What kind of a God expects you to do that?’

He did not answer, and they sat slumped in silence for a long time.

Eventually they moved to the bed in the corner and settled down for the night. Ketura turned away from Hilkiah and quietly, so as not to disturb the children, let her tears flow unchecked. But she slowly realised that Hilkiah’s usual even breathing had become ragged, and turned to find that his cheeks, too, were wet with tears. She saw on his face an anguish like her own, and for an hour they wept silently in each other’s arms.

\*\*\*\*

The morning did not bring joy or relief, but it did bring strength and determination. Hilkiah set off resolutely for his fields, and Ketura gathered the children and picked up her water pot.

‘Come on Beth, Zak. Your friends will be waiting at the well.’

Ketura’s friends were all there, too, longing to share their feelings in the daily gossip session. Many had had the same experience as Ketura, though not all husbands had been as understanding as Hilkiah. But Rebecca and Miriam were noticeably quiet, almost shrinking away from their friends. Miriam jumped in alarm when Ketura turned to her suddenly.

‘Miriam, why is this happening now? A lot of your people have been prisoners in Babylon, and now they have been allowed to return. But our people were brought here as prisoners from other defeated countries, and most of us can hardly remember where our grandparents came from. Why should it matter what family we were born into?’

Miriam looked at Rebecca, then hesitantly put words together. ‘I don’t know a lot, but I know God called our people to be especially his, and we stayed strong when we were close to the Lord. Jotham says that Nehemiah is calling everyone to turn back to the Lord and leave everything that might tempt them away. In the past, it was when people like King Ahab married foreign wives that we forgot our faith.’

A clamour of voices broke out, and Ketura’s was the loudest. ‘But that can’t mean breaking up existing families. Surely your God doesn’t want a village of motherless children! Even if he doesn’t approve of us, he must care about our children.’ The others nodded energetically.

Rebecca broke in. ‘What’s all this about ‘our God’? You’ve called him the Lord as long as I’ve known you, like Hilkiah does.’

Keturah hunched her shoulders. ‘It’s no good thinking he might be my God if he doesn’t want to know me. If he’s finished with me, I’ve finished with him. My old household gods on the shelf don’t do a lot, but at least they don’t throw me out of my home.’

Miriam looked distressed. ‘But other gods aren’t real. The only true, powerful God is the Lord. He watches over everyone…’ her voice tailed off as she registered what she was saying.

‘Everyone who suits him, that is,’ said Ketura bitterly. Then she remembered that Jotham, Miriam’s husband, was the man responsible for holding and treasuring all the stories and laws about the Jews. They heard him recount these on high days and holidays.

‘Look, Miriam’ she said urgently. ‘Will you ask Jotham if he knows of any woman, just one, anywhere in your history, who was a foreigner and married a Jew.’

‘Of course.’ Miriam nodded immediately, and Ketura guessed that she was relieved to have something she could actually do to show sympathy. There was nothing more to say, and the women called their children, shouldered their water pots and went home.

\*\*\*\*

The next morning brought little improvement. The women were quiet and listless, all shadowed by the disintegration hanging over their community. Miriam, however, had something to tell Ketura.

‘I asked Jotham’ she said, ‘and he said that King David’s great-grandmother was a foreigner, from Moab. Her name was Ruth, and she married a Jewish refugee boy who fled to Moab with his family during a famine. When the menfolk died, Ruth went back to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law and eventually married a local landowner. But that was centuries ago, and we don’t know a lot about her. And I can’t see how she could make any difference to us, now.’

Neither did Ketura, but she needed to clutch at any straw. She was thinking hard when they were suddenly interrupted by a scream from the children’s group, and the sound of distraught sobbing. When they ran over, they found most of the girls in tears. In the centre was Zak, firmly clutching the body of a rag doll, and Beth sobbing her heart out over the doll’s severed arm in her hand. Sternly Ketura demanded an explanation.

Zak was unrepentant. ‘We were playing at weddings and divorces’ he said, ‘and I said that if we were getting divorced the doll should be mine, but Beth wouldn’t let go and it came to pieces.’

Ketura stooped to cuddle Beth and assure her that the doll would be mended that very night. But as she looked round the group she saw many of her friends holding back tears, and felt the same horror in them that she was experiencing herself. If the Jews’ God said they were his children, surely He could not want their own children to be ripped apart like this?

That evening, after stitching the doll securely together and tucking her in to Beth’s protective embrace, Ketura accosted her husband. ‘Hilkiah, will you go with me to speak to Jotham? Now?’

She had expected a long discussion, even a refusal. When he agreed immediately it brought home to her how much he too wanted their relationship to be preserved.

The thought gave her courage, and she found herself able to explain her thoughts to Jotham and Miriam.

‘When I married Hilkiah, his home became my home. His people are my people, and the worship he offers is on my behalf too. I observe the Sabbath and the Passover, and I encourage my children to grow up in these beliefs. Now someone is telling me that this is not enough – that because of who my parents were, I am not good enough for your God. At first this made me angry, but now I am asking – are we sure this is what the Lord wants? Surely love matters to him, whoever we are?’

Jotham nodded. ‘This is true. The first commandment is to love the Lord, and the later commandments enjoin love in the community. Throughout God’s Law, the Torah, we are commanded to show kindness to aliens as well as to our own people. Everyone matters to the Lord.’

Miriam slipped her hand into Jotham’s and said quietly ‘I remember how you have often told me that the right for poor people and strangers to glean at the harvest is part of the Lord’s provision.’

Ketura took a deep breath. ‘If that is so, then maybe we can resist the edict from Jerusalem? I have heard men say that if something is in the Torah, that is a good guide. If Ruth was welcomed by King David’s ancestors, can’t we use her as a guide as well? When are the messengers returning? How long do we have?’

‘They are coming to hear our response the week after Shavuot, that is Pentecost’, replied Jotham. Then he smiled slowly. ‘And Shavuot is a good festival to talk about this. It commemorates the giving of God’s Law, and also celebrates the end of the barley harvest, which was the point at which Ruth came to Bethlehem. It would be a good time to share her story and think what it means to each one.’

Ketura breathed in deeply. ‘So there is hope for us?’

Jotham nodded. ‘There is hope for us all. We can’t go far wrong if we look at the Lord’s word and his dealings with his people. He will build us up.’

\*\*\*\*

Ketura accompanied Hilkiah home with a lighter heart. As she passed the box on the door frame that held a fragment of God’s word, for the first time she reached out and touched it. There was a silent prayer in her heart. ‘Lord God, if we come to see that you really want us to live in loving families, I will turn to you as my own God, not just Hilkiah’s.’

The next fortnight passed slowly. Ketura did not speak to Jotham again, but Miriam assured her that he was working on the story of Ruth. ‘He is including the gleaning’ she said, and then she giggled. ‘And I have reminded him what fun it used to be meeting up on the threshing floor. It is very private in among all those heaps of grain.’

The evening before Pentecost, a meeting of the men of the village was called. Hilkiah hugged Ketura tightly before he set off, and she watched him with anxious eyes. What would the men decide?

It was late when Hilkiah returned, but he threw open the door with a broad smile on his face.

‘All is well,’ he said. ‘Jotham brought us his story, and it was agreed that there is a precedent for marriages like ours, provided that the Lord is honoured in the home. He will tell the story again at the feast, for all the village to hear, but the decision has been made.’

He put his hands on her shoulders and smiled with deep affection. ‘Henceforth,’ he said, ‘my people shall be your people.’

‘Yes,’ she answered. ‘And your God shall be my God.’

*Sylvia Bunting, May 2005*