

NAOMI  
AND HER  
DAUGHTERS

A NOVEL

*by* WALTER  
WANGERIN JR

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

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*Naomi and Her Daughters*

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*For Saul Danger,  
My Faithful Aaron*

Part One

# MILCAH



# 1

## A Present Rage

*A CRY IS HEARD IN JUDAH, lamentation and bitter weeping. The Women of Bethlehem are weeping for their daughter and refusing to be consoled because she is no more.*

Four hundred women in black robes stand on rooftops. They tear their hair. They stretch their arms wide under heaven. They throw back their heads and whirl, robes billowing.

“Milcah!” they howl, wolves keening on the air. “Milcah!”

Milcah of the white hands, sixteen years old, the young wife whose cheeks they kissed not three days ago and unto whom they waved farewell as she departed with her husband for his home in Ephraim—Milcah is no more.

She will never come home again.

UNTIL THE EVENING MEAL this had been an unremarkable day. By midafternoon the women were preparing for supper by grinding grain in their handmills—producing the genial sound of a village at work. Children small enough

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still to be playing in the lanes began to smell barley cakes baking. Time to twaddle home. As the sun descended and shadows grew too long for labor, the farmers came back through the gate. They paused in the public square to discuss the date harvest—difficult because the palms grew far down great escarpments near the shores of the Salt Sea.

Just before they separated, while each farmer turned to his house, a man came sprinting into town. He fell to his knees and gasped for air.

He wore a loincloth only. He had the long, ropy muscles of a distance runner. He carried the leather envelope of a messenger. It went spinning across the ground with the force of his fall. His hair was stuck to his forehead with sweat.

The farmers formed a ring around the man.

One of them shouted toward a near house: “Miriam! Bring water!”

The urgency of his voice and the hubbub in the square drew wives and mothers out of doors. The small children jumped up on bench-backs in order to see. It isn’t often that events break the easy routines of Bethlehem.

“A full skin of water!” The farmer squatted beside the messenger. “Take your time,” he said. He helped the breathless fellow to a stone bench, then sat down beside him.

Miriam arrived. “Salmon,” she said and handed a goat’s bladder to her husband. Peering around the woman’s skirts was a wide-eyed little girl, winding long hair around a forefinger. “Papa?”

Salmon tipped the messenger’s head back and squirted

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a stream of water into his mouth. The poor fellow's eyes were red with September dust and salt sweat. Salmon poured water over the messenger's head, moistened the edge of his own tunic and washed the runner's eyes.

"Can you speak?"

The runner nodded, then croaked, "Yes." He paused a moment, then said, "A Levite ..."

"Take your time."

"A Levite ..."

At the same time a tall man bent down, picked up the messenger's leather envelope and began to open its flap.

The messenger yelled, "No! Don't do that!"

Salmon looked up. "Boaz," he snapped. "*Stop!*"

Boaz showed no intention of stopping. He opened the envelope altogether. Everyone was watching him now. He glanced in. He shuddered and tipped the bag over and out fell a human hand.

Immediately Miriam grabbed her child and hurried away.

Men grew solemn; some of the women covered their mouths. Some stepped closer, disbelieving.

Yes. (*Oh, Lord God!*) It was a human hand chopped clean off above the wrist, its skin as white and as dry as ivory. The hand was loosely fisted. Two bones showed in the chop, the marrows shrunk into pits.

"Put it down," Salmon commanded. "Put it down!"

Boaz had regained his insouciance. "Shouldn't we burn it?" he grinned. "As an offering?"

The messenger raised his voice. "A Levite from Ephraim sent me to Judah and especially—" He stopped

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and swallowed. “Especially to Bethlehem,” he said, and more softly, “to you. One of your daughters has perished.”

A perfect silence fell on the village. Even the children who could not understand his words began to suffer their parents’ distress.

He stood up, then took a stand on the bench. “I’m one of twelve who have been commanded to inform every tribe in Israel. This Levite, his wife—” the messenger grew stiff and emotionless. “The Levite’s wife, whom you know as Milcah, was raped by the men of Gibeah. She is dead.”

If dogs were skulking about the village square or goats running loose; if birds were fluttering in the dust, no one was aware of it. The sun sat down on its western ridge and reddened with regret.

So the Women of Bethlehem turned away and left the men behind them in the village square. They pulled the scarves from their heads and let the cloth fall in heaps. Older women bared their breasts and began to beat them in a slow rhythm. Others donned black, climbed the stairs to the roofs of their houses, and lifted their voices in lamentation. *Rachel, weeping for her children.*

WHILE THEY WAIL ABOVE, one woman remains below. She has set her jaw, her chin thrust forward, her countenance hard-eyed and rigid. When she begins to move, the men make way for her. She kneels down. Tenderly she wraps Milcah’s hand in her scarf. She rises and walks to the gate, to stone steps that take her to the watchman’s room above.

Iron-eyed, she looks through the northern window. The

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wind begins to whirl her hair. She holds Milcah's hand, now respectfully clothed for burial, in both of hers and stretches it forth toward Gibeah. "Be not silent," she begins to sing in a level, deliberate rage:

*Be not silent, God of my praise;  
for the wicked and the deceitful  
have assaulted her without cause.  
They reward her goodness with evil  
and her love with hatred.*

The rest of the Women of Bethlehem hear a canticle of anger.

*Naomi*, they think, and they mute their miseries. For this is she. This is Bethlehem's Hakamah, whose song gives language to their bitterness.

*Let their days be few—  
Let others seize their goods—  
Let their daughters be fatherless,  
their wives made widows!  
Let their sons be driven  
from a city destroyed  
into the countryside to tap with sticks  
the rims of beggars' bowls!*

Naomi has lived thirty-five years on these upland hills. Sun and the unrelenting summers have scored her face with a thousand wrinkles. In repose her face is wreathed with the vines of kindness. But at this moment it is as severe and cracked as dry clay. Northward, even to Gibeah nine miles hence, the watchwoman of Bethlehem cries her curses:



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*Let no one—no one!—be kind to the  
wives of the wicked  
or pity their fatherless children.  
Cut them off from the earth, O Lord!  
Blot out their names by the second generation—  
For they did not remember mercy.  
They took the gentle Milcah  
and broke her soul to death.*

The sun has concealed itself behind the farther ridge, spreading a fire of shame across the pillars of heaven. The hilltops grow ashen.

Naomi is a Mother in Israel, a Hakamah, the teller of the tales of Israel's past. She sings songs that name her people's bewilderment, songs to give order to the wild complexities of their existence, songs to collect their mute emotions into a spear of cursings or the milk of blessing.

*Mine is an outcry against Gibeah. Come, O Lord, and judge the truth of my outcry. Send your angels. Send angels to destroy the wicked city.*

Long into the darkness Naomi keeps watch over Bethlehem. Finally, at midnight, she descends the stone steps and departs through the village gate and walks by memory the road to Rachel's tomb a mile northward. There she scoops out a dusty hole. Into its bed she places Milcah's hand, and prays.

But this is only one piece of her daughter. There are eleven more scattered throughout Israel, and who will love her well enough to bury those? What man could sever the





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corpse of his wife, even if for signs to alert the tribes of Israel?

*Has such a thing ever happened in this land, since the days we came out of Egypt?*

By his messengers the Levite cries out: *Behold, people of Israel, all of you, give your advice and counsel here.*

Which is to say: “To your tents, O Israel!”

# 2

FOURTEEN YEARS EARLIER:

## A Motherless Child

IN TIMES OF CONTENTMENT, THE WOMEN OF BETHLEHEM gather at daybreak, each with a large jar on her head, then troop out of the village to the cistern. There is neither a spring nor a well upon these Judean hills—hence the great cistern dug and well-plastered in the mouth of a cave. Morning gossip is as nourishing as bread for untroubled maids and mothers, those who sustain and stabilize their households.

When she was twenty-two—having lived six years the wife of Elimelech—Naomi joined in that laughing camaraderie as cheerfully as anyone else. But there were differences. When she trained as a healer in Judah, the differences became apparent. As friendly as her sisters were, they felt a kind of awe. Medicines were becoming Naomi's province. She grew wise in the ways of herbs and poultices, the binding of broken bones, midwifery, philters. Healing required knowledge of incantations, formulas by which to call upon the Lord who declares: *I, even I, am he, and there*

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*is no god beside me. I kill and I make alive. I wound and I heal.*

Something like a priestess was Naomi. One who stands between the chosen people and the deity who chose them, comforting the one and calling upon the other.

Women of Bethlehem, the old and the young, honored their Hakamah. They took her for a woman like themselves, of course: wife and mother and a singer when they danced. At the same time they granted her a central place in their lives: the keeper of their histories, the fire of their imaginations. And they granted her solitude.

So Naomi drew her water last and alone.

These days she would sit in the semi-darkness on interior stones, abolishing thought, resting her hands on her belly. This took the place of thinking: that now and again her baby moved, filling all the hollows inside of her.

“Mama—”

*What was that? Naomi, what did you hear?*

“Mamaaaa.” A small sadness farther back in the cave. A child.

Naomi stood. She dipped a ladle into the jar she had already filled, and began to feel her way away from daylight into gloom.

She said, “Nevermind me. Sometimes I carry cool drinks in case somebody somewhere gets thirsty.”

Immediately Naomi could hear a mighty effort at silence. She blinked, adjusting her eyes to the dimness. Why, there. In a small crevice a child crouched, her pale kneecaps giving her away. Naomi, barefoot, made scarcely a sound. So she talked.

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“Well, look at this. A little girl.” She paused and hummed a little tune. See? All things are right in the world. Naomi said, “Little girl, are you sad?”

The eyes were shadows till the girl lifted her face. She looked at Naomi and a fresh sob flared the child’s nose.

“Yes, yes. The child is sad,” said Naomi. “Can I sit down beside her? Do you think she would allow me?”

The child did not say *No*.

As she sat, the woman said, “I wonder what’s my daughter’s name. Would she like a drink? Crying always makes me thirsty.” The child was filthy. Her flesh gave forth a foul odor.

Naomi lifted the ladle to the girl who slurped and swallowed.

“Taste good?”

The child nodded.

“What’s your name?”

Like the peeping of a sparrow: “Milcah.”

“Good morning, Milcah. I’m glad to meet you.” Naomi sat and gazed forward, offering companionship and asking nothing in return. Then she noticed a large water jar behind the little Milcah. “Your mother couldn’t come to the cistern this morning?”

The child shook her head, then covered her face and the great rain of sorrow poured down. Naomi put her arm around thin shoulders, bones as crackable as twigs.

When the tears subsided, Naomi tested a delicate matter: “Please, Milcah. I’m right here beside you. Who is your mother?”



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It was as if Naomi had said, *What* is your mother. The child answered, “Dead.”


“Oh, daughter, I am so sorry! Does anyone know this? Who is your father?”

The girl pressed into the woman. She whispered, “Ezra.”


Ah, then here was the reason why the girl smelled as if she wore something rotten around her neck. Ezra was the tanner for the village. Tanning creates a putrid odor.

“Ezra the tanner?” Naomi said.

Uttering his name may have released the detail for which Naomi had not asked: “Mama died yesterday. Papa buried her under the floor.”



THE TANNER’S HOUSE WAS NO MORE than a two-room hovel, the roof-clay cracked, straw and brambles hanging loose through the cross-branches.



*Of course a woman would die in here.*

Through the doorway Naomi saw walls unplastered, damp, mold blacking the corners, rats scratching the roof beams.

Though water was precious in the hill country, Naomi had washed the girl before bringing her to her Ezra—and was moved to find beneath the filth a skin almost luminous. She had anointed Milcah top to toe with scented olive oil, but the odor of animal rot and boiled oak-galls remained.

Ezra was sitting on a stool in front of his doorway. He didn’t turn when the woman and the child had approached. He kept scraping flesh from a hide stretched taut over a

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wooden frame. He slung fat from the edge of his scraper onto a fly-blown pile between his feet.

“So,” he growled. “You washed her. Does the mighty Hakamah expect thanks from a tanner’s wretched mouth?”

“No, sir. I don’t expect civility.” The rancid atmosphere disgusted Naomi. She set down Milcah’s large jar of water.

All her life the woman had been and would be direct. She said, “If you’re willing, Tanner, I will take care of your daughter. I’ll keep her as my own child.”

Scraping, scraping. The knuckles on both his forefingers were knobbed. A touch of arthritis. He froze a moment, neither dropping his arms nor looking up.

Milcah stole to her father’s side. She laid her cheek on his back and began to pat his bare ribs. The man didn’t speak.

Naomi said, “I’m sorry we didn’t know your wife was so ill. I promise, I would have come to sit by her pallet, Ezra. I would have prepared her body for burial—if we had known.”

“Pity, pity, coming around with a hang-dog face. Suddenly the Tanner’s worth the notice.” He threw himself back into his work. “Brings him water who never brought him nothing before. Wants to take his child away from him.”

“No. Not *away*. I’ll watch her during the day—” Milcah began to mew, rubbing her cheek against her father’s spine. “I’ll bring you both bread as long as you both are in mourning. I’ll wash her, I’ll oil—”

“Get outa here,” he growled.

Milcah, in her fluted voice, repeated it: “Get outa here.”



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*Milcah, what's happened to you?* Naomi's stomach knotted.

She said, "Be reasonable. Who's to care for your daughter, now that her mother's gone?"

Now Ezra turned and pointed his curved scraping knife at Naomi. Favoring the grossly knuckled fingers. Arthritis. "Who's to watch out for *me*," he growled, "now my wife's gone? You tell me that! Who takes care of the widower? My daughter, is who. All I got's my little girl." A whining crept into his voice. "My child to grind our handful of barley grain. Stick a thumb-sized spot of dough to the side of the fire pot. Clip my toenails. Bereave me! Bereave me of all what's mine! Blot out my family?"

Little Milcah had started to cry again. "Papa, don't be sad. I don't want you sad."



NAOMI WOULD HAVE SENT ELIMELECH to the Tanner. Ezra cowered in the presence of her husband.

But other matters intervened.

In two weeks Naomi went into labor. She survived the danger, as did her son. Naomi brought to her husband a second son whom she named Chilion, a baby to his brother Mahlon, who was already four years old.