

# Once a Stranger, Always a Stranger? Immigration, Assimilation, and the Book of Ruth

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This article explores a particular dimension of immigration, the adaptation of first-generation immigrants into the host culture, in dialogue with a biblical narrative about an immigrant woman, Ruth.<sup>1</sup> I appeal to recent assimilation theory and apply its insights to a close reading of the canonical book.<sup>2</sup> This reading explores how it might resonate with the way contemporary immigrants navigate the challenges of living in a new context.<sup>3</sup>

Several caveats are in order. First, my concerns lie largely with Latino/a immigration into the United States. This is due to my personal background (I am half-Guatemalan) and experience living in Guatemala and working with Latino/a immigrants. Second, much research on immigrant integration into the host country explores the experiences of second- and third-generation descendants of immigrants. My primary contacts, though, are with recently arrived Spanish-speaking immigrants and their children. This limitation fits nicely with the Ruth narrative.

## Assimilation Theory

For this immigration reading of this narrative I employ assimilation theory. This theory came under suspicion for a time because of pejorative connotations of the term “assimilation,” which to some communicated attitudes of superiority, an ideal of conformity to the majority culture, and the loss of identity.<sup>4</sup> Assimilation theory, however, has experienced a revival in recent years, and scholars are exploring diverse dimensions of these cultural dynamics.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I employ what is called New Assimilation Theory, which is associated with Richard Alba and Victor Nee.<sup>6</sup> They are aware of weaknesses of earlier iterations of the theory, such as suggestions of ethnocentrism and the inevitability of assimilation.

Alba and Nee define assimilation as “the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences. ‘Decline’ means in this context that a difference attenuates in salience.”<sup>7</sup> In their construct, assimilation is not inescapable; it is incremental, cumulative, and variable in terms of its time frame, circumstances, and history. It is also a mutual process, where the host culture is modified in the interaction with newcomers. Other important topics related to assimilation theory, which I will not explore, include transnationalism, the changing conceptions of citizenship, the relevance of social class, residential patterns, and the impact of economic globalization both here and abroad.

## Mechanisms of the Assimilation Process

Several mechanisms serve as causal factors in the assimilation process. These work in combination and at differing tempos. Alba and Nee classify these as either “proximate” (those within

personal and larger relational fields) or “distal” (at the macro level). Immigrants are not passive observers or victims in relationship to these mechanisms. The authors mention three clusters of mechanisms:

*Purposive action.* Immigrants make choices and devise strategies to assimilate to the degree they desire or are able, weighing potential risks and benefits. Success necessitates that immigrants acquire appropriate sociocultural competencies that decrease the distance between themselves and the host culture and that facilitate the implementation of their efforts.

*Networks and forms of human capital.* Networks, such as extended family, friends, and others of similar ethnicity, make the accommodation process easier. These are sources of orientation and basic information; they serve as safety nets for immediate needs, provide contacts for jobs, and help with initial housing.

*Institutional mechanisms.* These are the more formal institutions and regulations of a society. They may play a large role in whether immigrants assimilate or remain segregated (and to what extent), with all of the sociocultural and legal implications associated with this status. The relationship between the proximate and distal mechanisms can be reciprocal. As immigrants are incorporated into their new context, rules change, and negative attitudes shift; institutional realities are modified, and opportunities for immigrants may increase.

## Boundaries and Ethnicity

Assimilation impacts formal and informal ethnic distinctives for both the outsider and the host culture. Alba and Nee, for example, espouse a constructionist view of ethnicity. They distinguish between boundary *crossing* (“someone moves from one group to another without any change to the boundary itself”), boundary *blurring* (“the clarity of the social distinction involved has become clouded”), and boundary *shifting* (“involves the relocation of a boundary so that populations once situated on one side are now included on the other”).<sup>8</sup>

## Ruth: A Tale of Assimilation and Acceptance?

This section offers a reading of Ruth from the perspective of assimilation theory. I do not presume that assimilation processes in the ancient world were exactly as they are today, but I do assume commonalities based on a shared humanity. These echoes may generate a fresh appreciation of this biblical narrative and its relevance for immigrants and their communities.

## Mechanisms of the Assimilation Process

*Purposive action.* One thing that becomes readily apparent from an assimilationist reading of the Book of Ruth is the ambiguities in character, plot, and dialogue. These are expected in cultural negotiations across borders. Life in a new land is complicated, and the obstacles that one must overcome require nuancing



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words and balancing personal motives in the effort to survive and succeed. One must be proactive, and Ruth certainly is, as her strategies to integrate into Bethlehem make clear. Years before she had married an immigrant from Judah (1:4–5); now she herself is the immigrant.

1. The decision to follow Naomi (1:14–18). Many have taken Ruth's declaration in 1:15–18 as a determination to forsake her ethnic background and to convert to the God of Israel (her possible conversion was an important topic of discussion among rabbinic commentators). This is possible, but might not these be

## Was Naomi embarrassed to have a Moabite daughter-in-law in light of the negative portrayals of the Moabites in Israel's traditions?

the words of a woman reluctant to return to her kin? Burdened with the stigma of having married an immigrant from Judah and with questions about not having borne any children (was she sterile?), could she find a new husband among her own people? Could not her rejection of Naomi's advice to return home be instead a decision to say and do whatever was necessary to make a new life for herself in Judah? Is hers a show of loyalty to her mother-in-law, or is it a determined overstatement for the sake of her future? Is it a combination of both impulses?

On Naomi's side, why does she tell her daughters-in-law three times to "return" (1:8, 11, 12) and repeat that verb one more time to Ruth, once Orpah leaves them (1:15)? Why does Naomi not respond to Ruth's audacious statement? Does she welcome Ruth's company? Is she suspicious of Ruth's motives? Does her bitterness include anything and anyone Moabite (she had lost her husband and sons in Moab)?

2. The decision to work in the fields (2:2–3). After the return to Bethlehem, Ruth asks for permission to work in the fields. The wording implies that she knows the gleaning laws.<sup>9</sup> She is doing what it takes to survive. It was the time of the barley harvest (1:22), and to do nothing was to go hungry. Her initiative quickly pays off. She finds a place to glean, and the field in which she is working belongs to a kinsman.

3. The self-deprecating language in the exchange with Boaz (2:8–13). As in the case of many immigrants, her hard work is noticed by others (2:7; the meaning of the verse is contested). Boaz inquires of her and engages her in dialogue. What is puzzling is her self-ascription as a *nokriyyâ*, the not-so-nice label for a foreigner (2:10). Is this an acknowledgment of the long-standing enmity between Moab and Judah?<sup>10</sup> Her status as a member of Naomi's household and her participation in the gleaning would lead to the expectation that she classify herself as a *gêr*, a "resident alien."<sup>11</sup> Does she use the other label out of a sense of vulnerability? As perhaps the only foreigner in a field of Bethlehemites, did she feel very much like the outsider (the foreman calls her "the Moabite"; 2:6)? Was it her accent, skin color, dress, demeanor? Had she been shunned? Had the young men been acting inappropriately?

Her choice of label also might be calculated: it could be self-effacing, designed to win greater sympathy. She couples

this word with falling prostrate before Boaz. This exaggerated respect wins her the appreciation of the onlookers and plays to the self-worth of this important landowner. Note her subsequent humble response to him as "lord"; she is but his "servant" (2:13).

This immigrant is learning the cultural cues of her new context to attain her desired end: food, rest, and, with a little luck, continued support for herself and Naomi. Some suggest that there is a bit of flirtation on her part as well. If this is correct, it is further evidence of using whatever means are at hand to gain favor in a foreign land.

4. The exchange with Naomi after the return from the fields (2:17–22). There are subtle differences between what was communicated in the exchange with Boaz and what Ruth reports to Naomi. Ruth says she had been working among the men (2:21). What is she doing with her words? Is this an innocent slip of the tongue, or is she manipulating Naomi? Ruth "accepts" Naomi's advice to work among the women, something Boaz had told her and she already was doing (2:8–9). By bringing Naomi food and sharing the news, Ruth wins her mother-in-law's commendation and gives her hope. At home the impression is that she is the submissive daughter-in-law to the woman who, when they first arrived, may have not been so kindly disposed to her. Ruth's immigrant strategy has to prosper both with Naomi and in the fields.

5. The actions at the threshing floor (chapter 3). Much is made of the ambiguities of this scene. The first issue is that Ruth does not follow all of Naomi's advice at the threshing floor, even though she states that she will and the text reports that she did (3:1–6). Instead of waiting for what Boaz will instruct her to do, she tells him of his obligations as a kinsman-redeemer (3:9). Again, Ruth takes things into her own hands.

What is the meaning of the phrases "uncover his feet and lie down" (3:4, 7) and "spread your cloak over your servant" (3:9)? Are these symbolic gestures of modesty without sexual intent, or euphemistic descriptions of a sexual advance? Either way, Ruth once more takes a risk. If things go wrong, there will be embarrassment and shame, with any prospect of acceptance in Bethlehem irredeemably lost (and what would this mean for Naomi?).

She calls herself simply "Ruth," without the label "Moabite," and twice repeats "your maidservant" (3:9). Is it that she wants to be seen as a person with a name without the ethnic label, even though she recognizes her social place? As in the harvest fields and her first experience with Boaz, this immigrant is largely in control of events. As before, her report to Naomi differs from what happened. She puts words into Boaz's mouth and includes Naomi in the benefits of his largesse (3:16–18).

*Networks and forms of human capital.* Ruth must plot a course within the networks she encounters to facilitate assimilation. She needs these networks to accept her and help her, if her new life is to be a success.

1. The family of Naomi. By marrying one of Naomi's sons, Ruth entered that family's network. In chapter 1 she decides to remain in this network. Now, she moves to the new setting of Naomi's hometown. The start of that experience is not encouraging. Naomi does not answer her declaration, and when they arrive and are greeted by the women of the town, she does not introduce Ruth (1:19–22). Was Ruth noticed by the other women? Was she ignored because of her Moabite ethnicity? Was Naomi embarrassed to have a Moabite daughter-in-law in light of the negative portrayals of the Moabites in Israel's traditions? That homecoming must have been an awkward moment for Ruth.

In time, the tone of Naomi's words changes, and her faith is renewed. Based on what she is told, Naomi believes that Ruth is acting on her behalf and following her directions. Yet, the reality is another! In chapter 4 again Naomi is silent, when the women tell her how she *should* feel toward this Moabite immigrant because of the love that Ruth has for her and the fact that, through her daughter-in-law, she has another "redeemer," a grandson. This little one will take care of Naomi in her old age, they say (4:14–17). Maybe Naomi's taking the child onto her lap is an acknowledgment of the truth of what these women have told her.

2. The women of Bethlehem. This is a world that Ruth will need to enter if she is to become part of the rhythms of life of the town. At her first encounter this group overlooks her. Though she is the widow of one of Naomi's sons, she is still one of "them," not one of "us." Ruth, however, gains a reputation through her hard work and actions. By the end, Ruth has won over this network.

3. Two other networks are the workers in Boaz's fields and the elders. In both cases, what they say reflects respect for Ruth. The workers are witnesses to her untiring work (2:6–7); the elders at the gate call for God's blessings upon this new family and link Ruth to Rachel and Leah, other notable women who came from outside Israel (4:11–12).

It is noteworthy that these three groups never refer to Ruth by name. She is the "Moabite" (2:6), "the woman" (4:11), "this young woman" (4:12), and "your daughter-in-law" (4:15). In other words, Ruth is *among* them and appreciated *by* them, but still not *of* them. Even so, she has come a long way since the "whole town" had greeted Naomi upon their return (1:19). Naomi demonstrates tenderness to her at times, calling her "my daughter" (2:2, 22; 3:1, 16, 18). To Boaz she will move from being a poor woman of interest, whom he values, to being his wife, but she remains—at least in public—"Ruth the Moabite" (4:5, 10; though in private conversation, "my daughter," 3:10).

**Institutional mechanisms.** The third and final set of mechanisms is institutional. In the Book of Ruth, these are of both an informal and a formal nature. By informal is meant that the characters participate within a cultural-legal framework without any ceremonial accruals. This is the case of the gleaning laws. Ruth apparently is aware of this law and goes out to the fields to harvest. This institutional mechanism assists her integration, even as it meets the physical needs of the two widows.

Two other legal issues that surface in the book—the redemption of the property of a relative and (possibly) levirate marriage to provide an heir for a deceased kinsman—are more formal in nature.<sup>12</sup> These are handled publicly at the gate of the town, and the pronouncement of a blessing is given in traditional language (4:1–12). These two rulings are testimony before the community that Ruth has legal standing: she is now within the line of a Bethlehemite family, with rights to a specific parcel of land, and she stands within their genealogical history.

## Boundaries and Ethnicity

Is there evidence that the boundary lines between the Bethlehemites of Judah and this Moabite immigrant are in any way impacted? Several items imply a positive answer.

1. Note the way in which the narrative and its characters refer to Ruth. The label "Ruth the Moabite" is used throughout by the townsfolk, even Boaz (1:22; 2:2; 4:5, 10), but Naomi and Boaz also call her "my daughter." Even though boundary markers are still in place *within* the story, the *spirit* of the ethnic labeling has shifted. The narrator on two occasions refers to her simply as

"Ruth" (2:8; 4:13; yet 1:22; 2:2, 21). In the narrator's view, Ruth has lost her ethnic label as a "foreigner."

2. The characters in the narrative affect the boundary as well. Boaz, a significant person in the community, praises Ruth (2:11–12; cf. 3:10–14) and offers her aid and protection in the hearing of the workers (2:8–9, 15; cf. 3:15). He demonstrates commitment to Naomi and Ruth at the gate in the exchange regarding the family land (4:1–10). All of this would have had an impact on attitudes. The people connect Ruth to the traditions of several women of *Israel*, and not to the stories of Israel's past encounters with Moabite women (4:11).

3. The experience of Obed, the son of this mixed marriage, will be different from Ruth's (4:13–17). He is embraced (literally) by his grandmother and is named by the townswomen. Ruth's assimilation strategies have paved the way for a different life for her son.

4. The book also places this narrative within the much larger context of the genealogy of David (4:18–22). This connection, unknown to the characters, is directed at the reader and further underscores that Ruth "belongs." She is the ancestress of Israel's greatest king. Perhaps because David had not forgotten his ancestral roots in Moab, he takes his parents there to protect them when he flees from Saul (1 Sam. 22:3–4).

5. Whatever this narrative's relationship to other passages dealing with Moabites, at least *in the world of this book*, ethnic boundaries have changed. Ruth has done more than simply *cross* boundaries that remain unaffected. The progressive acceptance of this outsider suggests that ethnic boundaries were *blurred* and eventually *shifted*, at least in this small town.

## Additional Issues for Future Reflection

At least two other items affecting assimilation that are dealt with in the literature deserve more study but are beyond our purview. One is the role of religion. It is interesting to note that, even though Ruth makes a profoundly religious confession in chapter 1, nowhere does she mention the God of Israel by name.

## Ruth is *among* them and appreciated *by* them, but still not *of* them.

Naomi does (1:20–21), as do Boaz (2:12; 3:10–13) and the people of Bethlehem (4:11–12, 14). One might ask, How deeply was Ruth invested in her new cultural setting? Were her actions focused on survival and acceptance, without the impulse of faith? How much of her Moabite background and memory did she retain?

Another topic is the role of intermarriage in ethnic assimilation. In the narrative the intermarriage of the Israelite Boaz and the Moabite Ruth is not an issue. Perhaps this is due to the importance that it will have later for someone from that town: David.

## Conclusion

This essay offers a brief reading of the Book of Ruth through the lens of assimilation theory. The theory's notion of three sets of mechanisms and their effects on ethnic boundaries find parallels in this account of the assimilation of a Moabite immigrant into Bethlehem. And this biblical story opens a window into the processes of immigrant assimilation today.

I have found that this approach has the pastoral value of allowing present-day Latino/a immigrants to find their own story in the text.<sup>13</sup> The challenges they face in terms of their identity and status are well documented in anthropological and sociological research and are laid bare in the wrenching stories of Latino/a fiction. The obstacles to overcome are similar: physical and economic survival, ethnic acceptance, cultural competence, and legal awareness.<sup>14</sup>

The mores of Ruth also are familiar: hard work and loyalty, coupled with creative (even risky) action. It is a tale of a process,

perhaps never completed for Ruth but with a brighter promise for her son. Who knows whether today's immigrants are part of a larger, significant trajectory of which they are totally unaware? For people who are the product of ethnic intermarriage—in my case, the son of an immigrant mother and a native-born father—we have heard the stories of that parent who worked so hard for us to feel at home here while not losing our other cultural identity (for me, my *guatemalidad*). We are Obed. Said another way: Ruth still lives among us.

## Notes

- It is a pleasure to offer this article in honor of Jonathan Bonk, a missionary statesman and scholar with a heart for refugees and immigrants. I count it a privilege to call him a friend.
1. For immigrant readings, see, e.g., Dianne Bergant, "Ruth: The Migrant Who Saved the People," in *Migration, Religious Experience, and Globalization*, ed. Gioacchino Campese, and Pietro Ciallella (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 2003), 49–61; John M. Prior, "'Failed' Migrants Return: A Transforming Word from the Book of Ruth," in *God's People on the Move: Biblical and Global Perspectives on Migration and Mission*, ed. VanThanh Nguyen and John M. Prior (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 132–43; Fleur S. Houston, *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself: The Bible, Refugees, and Asylum* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 83–92; the reflections of Athalya Brenner and Yani Yoo in *Global Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. Mark Roncace and Joseph Weaver (Boston: Pearson, 2014), 186–89.
2. Cf. M. Daniel Carroll R., "Reading the Bible through Other Lenses: New Vistas from a Hispanic Diaspora Perspective," in *Global Voices: Reading the Bible in the Majority World*, ed. Craig S. Keener and M. Daniel Carroll R. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2012), 20–22; also my *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2013), 55–58.
3. For the choice of the canonical text, see my "Ethics and Old Testament Interpretation," in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God's Address*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 204–27. For a survey of views on the book's provenance, see Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xvi–xix.
4. Some prefer terms such as integration, accommodation, acculturation, or adaptation.
5. Rubén G. Rumbaut, "Assimilation and Its Discontents: Ironies and Paradoxes," in *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, ed. Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, and Josh DeWind (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 172–95; Peter Kivisto, "What Is the Canonical Theory of Assimilation? Robert E. Park and His Predecessors," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 40, no. 2 (2004): 149–63; Chris Lee, "Sociological Theories of Immigration: Pathways to Integration for U.S. Immigrants," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 19 (2009): 730–44. In biblical research, Katherine E. Southwood has utilized assimilation theory in *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10: An Anthropological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012).
6. Richard Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003); idem, "Assimilation," in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*, ed. Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda, with Helen B. Marrow (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 124–36.
7. Alba and Nee, "Assimilation," 130.
8. Ibid., 131.
9. The gleanings laws are found in Lev. 19:10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19–22.
10. Gen. 19:30–37; Num. 22–25; Deut. 23:3–6 (MT 23:4–7). For the term's negative connotations, see, e.g., Ezra 10:2, 10, 14, 17–18, 44; Neh. 13:27; cf. Gen. 31:15; Prov. 5:20; 23:27.
11. English versions translate *gēr* differently: "alien" (NRSV), "sojourner" (ESV), "foreigner" (NIV 2011), "immigrant" (CEB).
12. Lev. 25:23–34, 47–55; Deut. 25:5–10.
13. Within Hispanic biblical and theological studies, diaspora perspectives are coming to the fore. See Luis R. Rivera-Rodríguez, "Toward a Diaspora Hermeneutics (Hispanic North America)," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 169–89; cf. Carroll R., "Reading the Bible through Other Lenses."
14. See Carroll R., *Christians at the Border*, 17–26, 153–56.



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