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. I appeal to recent assimilation theory and apply its insights to a close reading of the canonical book. This reading explores how it might resonate with the way contemporary immigrants navigate the challenges of living in a new context.

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. Assimilation theory, however, has experienced a revival in recent years, and scholars are exploring diverse dimensions of these cultural dynamics. Specifically, I employ what is called New Assimilation Theory, which is associated with Richard Alba and Victor Nee. 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.” 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:

- **Purposeful 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 distinctions 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”).

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.
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 rabbinc commenters). This is possible, but might not these be 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. 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 נקריתעיה, the not-so-nice label for a foreigner (2:10). Is this an acknowledgment of the long-standing enmity between Moab and Judah? 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 גיר, a “resident alien.” 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 Moabiteess”; 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 “Moabitess,” 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 Moabitess as a member of her household and her participation in the homecoming? This immigrant respects the expectations of her future. Is it a combination of both impulses?
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 “Moabitess” (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 Moabitess” (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.12 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 Moabitess” is used throughout by the townsfolk, even 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.

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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. 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. 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?

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.


4. Some prefer terms such as integration, accommodation, acculturation, or adaptation.


8. Ibid., 131.

9. The gleaning laws are found in Lev. 19:10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19–22.


