

Ruth: Resident Alien with a Face

BY MICHAEL S. MOORE

The biblical story of Ruth challenges our easy assumptions about immigrants today, especially when we put to it two simple questions: “What challenges does Ruth the immigrant face as she accompanies her mother-in-law Naomi to Judah?” and “How does God help her meet these challenges?”

Telephoning him at home to find out why he had not sent in his term paper, the response he offered was a little unnerving. He said he had been staying up late every night the past two weeks watching the World Cup on *ESPN*. Why? Because he *needed* to know how Honduras (his native country) was doing in the first rounds of play. Because of this he just “couldn’t find the time” to write his paper. When I informed him that failure to produce a paper would mean failure of the course, he said, “I understand,” thanked me for the call, and hung up.

It was just so...puzzling. Eduardo was one of my brightest students, the young pastor of one of the fastest-growing Hispanic churches in the Southwest. Earlier that year he had invited me to preach at his church and the excitement generated by that experience had left a deep impression on me. His energetic participation in my Pentateuch class had been so positive and affirming, I could not understand why he had decided to prioritize the World Cup over a seminary term paper.

Only slowly did I begin to realize how wide the canyon had grown between our worldviews: a first-generation immigrant, he found the English reading and writing assignments very difficult; a seasoned seminary professor, I felt it my responsibility to help him learn the Word of God in its original historical and literary contexts.

When two cultures clash like this it is tempting for the dominant culture to conclude that immigrants like Eduardo are ignorant and lazy. The biblical story of Ruth challenges this conclusion, however, especially when we put to it two simple questions: *What challenges does Ruth the immigrant face as she accompanies her mother-in-law Naomi to Judah?* and *How does God help her meet these challenges?*

CHALLENGES FACING RUTH

John Keats tries to express Ruth's pain in a few lines of one of his shorter poems, *Ode to a Nightingale*:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
 No hungry generations tread thee down;
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home,
 She stood in tears among the alien corn.

It is one thing to help one's mother-in-law grieve the death of her husband and sons. It is another to accompany her to a strange new land filled with strange new people—and to have to beg for help from alien men in charge of the "alien corn." Appreciation for this challenge increases significantly when we realize that Ruth, like Naomi, is herself a childless widow. Like Naomi, Ruth has no husband to help her scratch out a living in this new land, and the chances of finding a Hebrew to help her make it through future famines stand somewhere between unlikely and impossible.

Arriving in Bethlehem, the first problem she has to face is the most basic—finding food to eat. Fortunately she has come to a place where the law is clear: "You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:10). "When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow" (Deuteronomy 24:21). Unfortunately she arrives at a time when there is "no king in Israel" and "everybody does what is right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6; cf. 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25).

GOD'S RESPONSE

While God does not speak overtly to anyone in this short story, we may glimpse God's providential response to Ruth's dilemma through four crucial meetings.

The first occurs between Ruth and Mahlon, Elimelech's firstborn son. The text does not give us the details of this meeting or their relationship, but by marrying this foreigner Ruth chooses to become part of a family so overwhelmed by "famine" they have to leave their ancestral homeland. In other words, she takes a huge risk, and it backfires horribly. Mahlon gets sick and dies before the two of them can produce a single child. Still, we cannot help

but wonder how much of this experience prepares her for the time when the tables turn and she becomes the “resident alien.”

A second meeting occurs between Ruth and Naomi. Unlike her sister-in-law Orpah, Ruth refuses to abandon the widowed mother of her dead husband. Learning that Naomi plans to go back to Judah after the famine lifts, she vows loyalty to her via some of the most beautiful words in the Bible:

Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!

Ruth 1:16-17

We do not hear words like these spoken very often today, not in a culture where the number of divorces is roughly half the number of marriages each year. Still, one of the reasons why these words appear in so many wedding ceremonies is because of their very rarity. It is hard to find anything comparable to this vow of unconditional covenant love.

Ruth meets the foreman of Boaz, one of Elimelech’s kinsmen, in a third meeting. Apparently she makes such an impression on this man that he cannot wait to tell the boss about her. Thus, when Boaz asks about her, he says, “She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, ‘Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.’ So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment” (2:6b-7). In other words, this man concludes that this immigrant is not like every other immigrant to Israel. She respects the laws and customs of her adopted country. She seeks to do what is right and proper. Her reputation precedes her—a fact Boaz makes clear when he later tells her that “all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman” (3:11). By calling her a “worthy woman” he uses the same expression describing the woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. Like his foreman, Boaz recognizes that Ruth is a different kind of immigrant than, say, the Danites who destroy the innocent village of Laish or the Gibeonites who gang-rape the concubine of the foolish Levite (see Judges 18:27-19:30).

The fourth meeting between Ruth and Boaz takes place in two stages. The first occurs when he sees her waiting patiently on the edge of his barley field,

feeds her, and offers to protect her from anyone who would do her harm. The second occurs when she stealthily comes to him on the threshing floor at night (something prostitutes commonly do, according to Hosea 9:1). Startling him from a sound sleep, she asks him to spread over her his “wing” of protection. Behind her request doubtless stands several conversations with her adopted family – Naomi, Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion – where Ruth first learns about Yahweh’s covenant love (or, *chesed* in Hebrew), particularly as incarnated in the socioeconomic institution of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Impressed by both her courage and her character, Boaz responds affirmatively to her request, the book ending with him negotiating with another kinsman for the honor of participating in this *chesed*.

RECOGNIZING “RUTHS” IN OUR MIDST

Meditation on this beloved story leads me to submit three proposals for further reflection. First, socioeconomic distress (“famine”) is most often responsible for the immigrants in our midst. No one wants to leave home, but when famine strikes, hungry people will do whatever it takes to feed their families. Today, as then, there are many kinds of famine. Whether these famines occur in ancient Judah or modern Mexico, ancient Bethlehem or modern El Paso, the “Ruths” in our midst often find themselves in miserably desperate situations. Whether the river they have to cross is the Jordan, or the Mississippi, or the Rio Grande, they have to do whatever it takes to insure the safety and welfare of their families. When food and shelter become scarce the only option they have left is to pack up and move.

Not every immigrant deserves or even wants to be “redeemed.”

Should Ruth have looked like one of the Danites, for example, Boaz would probably not have been interested in helping her. He might have excused himself for a closer kinsman (notice the fine details of the negotiation strategy in Ruth 4) or even ignored her altogether. Some immigrants are “worthy,” others are not, and Boaz is not

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going to waste his time on someone who does not want to be “redeemed.”

Finally, the genuine “Ruths” among us are nevertheless crucial to our well-being as God’s people – because the God of Boaz has a habit of redeeming *anyone* who wants to channel his “covenant love,” regardless of status or bloodline or standard of living. This God takes great delight in bringing “Ruths” among us. They channel his grace in ways no one else can. They

help the “Naomis” among us like no one else can. They help the “Boazes” among us like no one else can. They help produce the “Davids” among us when others do not, will not, or cannot.

CONCLUSION

The end of the nineteenth century saw the United States facing a wave of immigrants it did not know how to assimilate into its predominantly

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Anglo-American culture. Most Americans at that time spoke English, went to Protestant churches, believed in the separation of church and state, knew how to read and write, and displayed the buoyant optimism of a people ever-ready to indoctrinate foreigners into their “American” value system.¹

Prior to the Civil War most of these immigrants had experience with self-government, the same social mores, and a relatively high standard of living. After the Civil War, however, many of the newer immigrants did not share these characteristics, and as war with Germany (World War I) drew closer, the “immigration problem” jumped into a whole new key. Social historians call what happened next the “Americanization Movement” because nativistic hysteria simply took over the hearts and minds of many Americans at this time and it became very, very difficult to recognize the “Ruths” from the “Danites.”

It is tempting to conclude that many of us are doing the very same thing today, woefully displaying our ignorance of the Bible as well as our own recent history. Thus the question: What can we do to make it easier to recognize the “Ruths” in our midst? Here are two practical suggestions.

Only the most prejudiced unbeliever would argue that God has no more “Ruths” to send our way. One of the most unique attributes of the biblical God is the obvious delight he takes in using “foreigners” to redeem, teach, save, and sanctify his chosen people. He calls Israel to be his “suffering servant” to “redeem the nations” (Isaiah 49:1-7). He sends his only-begotten Son in the form of a “suffering servant” (Philippians 2:5-8). He empowers the Church to “suffer outside the camp” with Christ (Hebrews 13:13).²

Only the most naïve universalist would argue that every immigrant deserves the same treatment. On the contrary, many immigrants do not *ask* “Boaz” for help, they *demand* it. Imagine Ruth coming to Boaz that night on the threshing floor and accusing him of neglect instead of asking him to obey his own law. People on both sides of the immigration question can learn a lot from the attitudes and behavior of these biblical characters.

Applying these principles to the “immigration problem” cited at the beginning of this essay, I called Eduardo back and asked him if he would prefer to sit for an oral final exam in his native language, and then got a translator to mediate for us. Not only did he pass the course, the two of us experienced a taste of how good it feels when God’s *chesed* “becomes flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth.”

NOTES

1 I document this history in “America’s Monocultural Heritage,” *Fides et Historia* 15:1 (Fall-Winter, 1982), 39-53.

2 For more on this, see my article “Ruth the Moabite and the Blessing of Foreigners,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 60:2 (April 1998), 203-217.



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