



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Ruth: Resident Alien with a Face
(*Immigration*, pp. 20-25)

Suggested Article:

📖 Beyond Risk and Uncertainty
(*Immigration*, pp. 68-71)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Ruth: Resident Alien with a Face

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

Prayer

O God of creation, your redeeming work in this world is not dictated by borders, by lines on a map. We praise you for the unreserved nature of your mercy and the expansive reach of your love. You have created all the people of the earth in your image and care for each one.

Remind us this day of your call for us to be a blessing to all families of the earth, and illuminate the fears that make us unwilling to be the vessels of your blessing to those who live as strangers among us. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Ruth 1:22-2:23

Reflection

The people of Israel carefully distinguished among the other persons who lived among them. They used *zar* and *nokri* (“foreigner”) to describe those like the Canaanites, Ammonites, and Moabites who had no part in Israel, but used *ger* (“alien” or “sojourner”) for one “who comes from outside the community but who settles within the community,” Dana Wilbanks has noted. “The *ger* is very much like what we today call ‘resident alien.’ He or she may be a refugee or an immigrant, settling into the community but still as an outsider who brings a different communal identity. Within the covenant community, however, this difference does not justify a double standard of justice.”[†]

In the story of Ruth, which is set in the time when there is “no king in Israel” and “everybody does what is right in his own eyes” (cf. Judges 17:6), the main character moves from being a Moabite foreigner to a valued member of the community. Ruth’s amazing transformation of status is due to the discerning eye and generous heart of Boaz, to whom she marvels: “Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner [*nokriya*]?” (2:10). Boaz feeds and protects Ruth as she gleanes grain from his fields. When she boldly seeks Boaz’s protection through the institution of levirate marriage (3:6-9, cf. Deuteronomy 25:5-10), he is so impressed by her courage and character that he negotiates with a kinsman for the honor of “redeeming” her (4:1-12).

Reflecting on this beloved story, Michael Moore makes three observations about caring for the “Ruths” among us today:

- ▶ *Socioeconomic distress (“famine”)* is most often responsible for immigration. Many “find themselves in miserably desperate situations,” he writes. “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.”



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- ▶ *Not every immigrant deserves or even wants to be “redeemed.”* Behind Ruth’s story are other abusive immigrants of the time (e.g., the Danites described in Judges 18). “Only the most naïve universalist would argue that every immigrant deserves the same treatment,” Moore says of immigrants today, as then. “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.”
- ▶ *Genuine “Ruths” among us are crucial to our well-being as God’s people.* God “has a habit of redeeming *anyone* who wants to channel his ‘covenant love,’ regardless of status or bloodline or standard of living,” writes Moore. “God takes great delight in bringing ‘Ruths’ among us. They channel his grace in ways no one else can.”

Study Questions

1. How does God bless Ruth through the lives of others in the story? How does God bless the people of Israel through her?
2. Should we be wary of some foreigners? What character traits must we develop to distinguish which immigrants are “Ruths”?
3. In the early 20th century Americans worried that immigrants did not share their standard of living, social mores, and form of government. Due to this “nativistic hysteria,” Moore says, “it became difficult to recognize the ‘Ruths’ from the ‘Danites.’” Are there signs that we’re doing the same thing today?
4. God still cares for immigrants through those who welcome them. According to Dan Royer, how did members of his congregation in Selkirk, Ontario, bless him? Do you have a similar experience of welcoming or being welcomed by others?

Departing Hymn: “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” (vv. 1, 5, and 8)

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,
like the wideness of the sea;
there’s a kindness in his justice,
which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of one’s mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

If our love were but more simple,
we could take him at his word;
and our lives would be more loving
in the likeness of our Lord.

Frederick W. Faber (1854), alt.
Tune: WELLESLEY

† Dana W. Wilbanks, *Re-creating America: The Ethics of U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy in a Christian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: AbingdonPress, 1996), 99.

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Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand distinctions among type of immigrants in ancient Israel.
2. To imaginatively apply lessons from the story of Ruth to welcoming immigrants today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Immigration (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" locate the familiar tune WELLESLEY in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Michael Moore recalls telephoning Eduardo, who was one of his brightest students, 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." Moore found it difficult to understand his student's priorities. He writes, "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."

This story reminds us that as immigrants of diverse cultures come to live among us, we need discerning hearts to appreciate their needs and honor their contributions. There is a happy ending to the story. Imaginatively drawing on the perspective on immigrants he finds in the book of Ruth, Moore "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.'" (*Immigration*, 20, 25)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide in unison.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ruth 1:22-2:23 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The book of Ruth has three richly nuanced characters: Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. Michael Moore focuses on Boaz because he discerns the intentions and character of Ruth, the Moabite immigrant, and graciously welcomes her into the community of Israel. You might read the entire book of Ruth (it contains only 84 verses), or have members summarize the parts of the story before and after the scripture reading from 1:22-2:23. Summarize the

actions of the Danites in destroying the innocent village of Laish (Judges 18), because Moore contrasts these foreigners to Ruth. Ruth's own ethnic group, the Moabites, were shunned as foreigners (Ruth 2:10; cf. Deuteronomy 23:3 and Nehemiah 13:1-3) because of their past mistreatment of the people of Israel.

Study Questions

1. God blesses Ruth through discerning individuals like Naomi and Boaz, but notice that these characters do not act in isolation, but come to know and care for Ruth through intricate social networks and institutions. Naomi trusts the judgment of her son-in-law Mahlon in marrying the foreign-born Ruth, and she urges Ruth to trust Boaz because he is a kinsman on her husband's side. Boaz trusts the judgment of his foreman concerning Ruth, and he negotiates her security through the social institution of levirate marriage.

God blesses Naomi and Boaz through Ruth's love, all the people of Israel through her great-grandson, King David, who brings security to the community, and all the people of God through her descendent Joseph, who nurtures the Messiah (Ruth 4:17; Matthew 1:5).

2. Some immigrants who are driven by greed and selfishness will not seek the common good, and others who are motivated by an ideology may try to harm our country. So, yes, we have reason to be wary of *some* foreigners, as Israel was wary of the "Danites." Yet, most immigrants are not like this. Instead, they are "Ruths" whose reasons for immigrating are understandable and honorable, and potential contributions to our society are good.

In the story, Boaz is willing to bracket the fact that Ruth is a Moabite. He accepts the report of his foreman who admires Ruth's work and respect for the laws of Israel. "All the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman," Boaz tells Ruth when they finally meet (Ruth 3:11). Then Boaz gets to know Ruth and judges her for himself.

Ask members to list the traits of character that a "Boaz" must have: courage to meet those who are different, willingness to listen to friends who know the strangers' stories, ability to evaluate character, compassionate, open to friendship with others, able to see God's blessing in their work, etc. How can your congregation encourage such traits in its members? Do trusted missionaries or travelers share their experiences in worship? Do members welcome immigrant friends into positions of leadership?

3. Due to our increasing vigilance against terrorism after 9/11, we may judge immigrants from Middle Eastern countries harshly. In neighborhoods where many immigrants with a common heritage gather and create their own institutions, we may fear they will not loyally support their new country. These are two ways that by fearing the "Danites," we fail to recognize the "Ruths" living among us. Encourage members to reflect on the immigrants who live in their local community. Which individuals (or groups) have they easily known and accepted? Is this because the immigrants share our heritage, language, and customs, or have a common educational and professional background? How can members of your congregation come to know the immigrants who are more different from them and isolated within the local community?
4. Dan Royer's family emigrated from the United States to Canada where he served as pastor of a church in the village of Selkirk, Ontario, for several years. He recalls church members helping him learn seemingly incidental aspects of the culture – a new vocabulary and customs – and pitching in many other ways to make his ministry successful. I found it interesting that he mentions how many people let him into their lives to help them. To turn this point around, the Canadian congregants allowed the immigrant, as naïve as he was about his new country, to minister to them.

Encourage members to share their stories of welcoming immigrants (by caring for them, but also allowing them to be care-givers) or being welcomed themselves as immigrants.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.