

Ruth as a Foreign Worker and the Politics of Exogamy

Athalya Brenner-Idan *

Abstract: The book of Ruth can and has been read as an optimistic, idyllic story of integration, of polemic against exogamy and xenophobia (see Ezra and Nehemiah), as a story of love, as a story of duty and *hesed*, of traditional Jewish conversion. Such readings and others are possible, certainly. What marks such interpretations is the common denominator of viewing the story as a comedy, the birth of a son being interpreted as a happy ending. But a happy ending for whom? Ultimately, so it appears, foreigners may be accepted into the target community; less so if they are of the underprivileged classes and women; and full integration, even in the case of Ruth, is in fact impossible. The variables of class, occupation and femaleness usually override those of foreignness and personal excellence — then and now.

Key Words: The Book of Ruth, Exogamy, Foreign Worker, Gender

Temporary, hopeful migration of workers from underprivileged locations to more developed locations sometimes results in the workers' settling in the host location and a permanent or semi-permanent abandonment of the source community. A cluster of cultural issues — economic, religious, linguistic, and more — either contributes to the integration of the foreign worker in the host culture / location or hinders it. In this essay I shall examine some of such foreign workers' issues in modern Israel in light of the Ruth narrative while, simultaneously, rereading the Ruth narrative in light of those foreign workers' situation.

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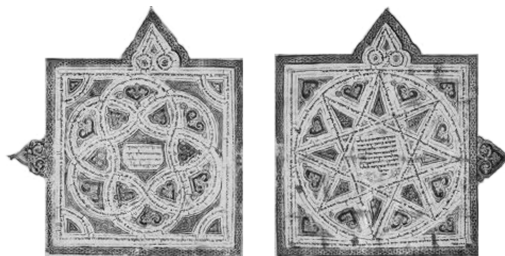
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Modern Israel imports workers, chiefly from Eastern Europe and the far east (for the purpose of the present paper, I shall not look at Israel's employment of Arab workers from the occupied territories). The importation of foreign workers is dictated by the country's fluctuating needs and human resource shortages and is subject to relatively stringent rules and quotas. Foreign workers sign a contract of employment. They generally do menial jobs, are often underpaid and badly treated by their employers. Presumably, however, they would fare even less well in their source communities economically; this is their prime motivation for coming and for staying for a while. Fifty-six foreign workers died in Israel in 1996, according to a report in the newspaper Ha'aretz from the end of August 1997, in spite of their legally enforced access to health and social care.

Foreign work in modern Israel is decidedly gendered. In sociological analyses, any line of employment whose practitioners are over fifty percent females is feminized, and vice versa. To follow this broad definition, the gendering of foreign workers is as follows. The majority of male workers will do construction and agriculture, a minority basic health care for the physically handicapped and other services. The majority of female workers do care work for the young, elderly or disabled, a minority agricultural work and other services. Female foreign workers are much in demand. Their stereotyped image is: young, positive, modest, trustworthy, industrious. Male workers have a stereotyped image of troublemakers and drunks.

There is no question of widespread integration of migrant foreign workers into Israeli society: the work permit is valid for a fixed and short period; cultural and religious differences are too great; there are language barriers; Israeli society is, by and large, snobbish and insular, suspicious of strangers and xenophobic; personal isolation and workers' group dynamics, not to mention specific living arrangements, contribute to their isolation. And yet, for financial gain and perhaps for other motives, foreign workers keep on coming back to Israel. And yet again, against all odds, some integration occurs in the form of cross-cultural marriages (although not all workers are single upon arrival). In Israel of the 1990s and beyond, such unions will be less problematic if the local spouse is a woman, ostensibly because any offspring of this union will still be considered Jewish according to orthodox halakhah;



however, both combinations are known to have happened. And, remarkably, more unions of local man-foreign woman worker are registered.

It is possible, perhaps illuminating, to read Ruth's story against this background. Some similarities between her situation and that of single, female foreign workers in modern Israel are apparent — although dissimilarities obtain as well they will not be discussed here. In the following discussion, I'm heavily indebted to Jack Sasson's commentary, whose results I view from this specific angle.^①

Ruth comes from another culture, another language, another place. She is a *zārāh* (Heb. foreign, "other", not belonging to the community or family) woman (see Prov. 1-9). It is customary to idealize Ruth's decision of following Naomi to the strange land into a decision primarily motivated by her love for her mother-in-law, thus filling an obvious gap in the text; this is how I have read it, too. Point One of the present cross-cultural, cross-everything reading: Ruth might have had less of a free choice than we fondly imagine, as is the case with many a foreign worker nowadays.

Sasson points out in his commentary that Ruth binds herself to Naomi by verbal contract (1: 16-17). The concept of "love" (Heb. *ḥesed*) that is applicable here, as in the slave's love for his master in Exod. 21:2-6 [5], is a legal rather than an emotional concept; it indicates intent as well as consent. Point Two: Ruth initiates a contract implying that she has to work for Naomi, she has to take care of the older woman — see ch. 2 — as is true of many contracted female foreign workers. Questions concerning Naomi's inability or ability to fend for herself are thus made redundant; she has somebody contracted to do it for her.

The only one to notice Ruth at the end of ch. 1, the homecoming scene, is the narrator. Neither Naomi nor the Bethlehem women acknowledge her existence. Point Three: foreign workers are largely invisible to the dominant culture, in spite of the important work they perform.

Ruth decides to glean in Boaz's field. It can be argued that she thus

^① J.M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); The Biblical Seminar, 10; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2nd edn.

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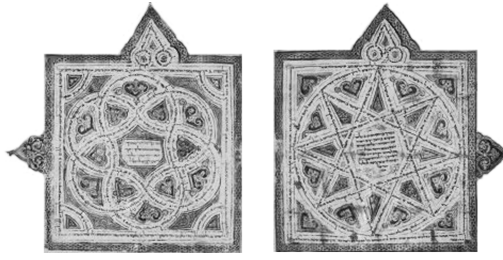
becomes a lowly agricultural worker. The laws, or customs, or utopian demand to make gleaning of agricultural produce accessible to the poor are codified in Lev. 19:9-10 and 23:22, Deut. 24:19 (see also Talmud Bavli, Pe'ah and Gittin). One could argue that Ruth is not an agricultural worker, since she is not employed by Boaz and does not receive wages for her activities. However, from her implied viewpoint, she is self-employed; does work in the field for her livelihood; does support Naomi by it. In that Hebrew Bible world, wages were probably in kind anyway. And, as will be seen, she does aspire to become a contractually recognized worker of Boaz's economic family (next point). Point Four: most foreign workers work as menial laborers; their livelihood depends to a large extent on seasonal changes and market demands.

Ruth is noticeably industrious. Point Five: a foreigner's — a foreign worker's — way to becoming visible is to try harder.

Boaz notices Ruth in his field, awards her some privileges but refuses to grant her a more solid footing among his local workers (ch. 2). Point Six: hard work is noticed; so is devotion. However, these are not enough for a female foreign worker if she seeks integration into the host society.

Naomi recommends that Ruth create a situation of seduction (3:1-4). Ruth apparently knows that seduction alone will not mean integration and asks Boaz directly to marry her (3:9). Irrespective of what precisely happens on the *goren* (Heb. "threshing floor") — did they? did they not? — Ruth is well aware of Point Seven: integration into the host community, if at all possible, can be achieved primarily and perhaps only by marriage. Having a "mentor" is not sufficient. And of Point Eight, of which Boaz is also aware (3:14): a foreign (working) woman should be especially mindful of her reputation; she has an image to protect as well as an image (the *zārāh*) to shun. And if she wants to be accepted by the host community, a foreigner — particularly such a female worker — ought to maintain a stereotype of apparent modesty and reticence. Hence, Ruth is silent and invisible through the negotiations in ch. 4 (vv. 1-10).

When Boaz declares his intention to marry Ruth she is compared to Rachel, Leah and Tamar (4:11-12); these verses are usually read as a special blessing conferred on a foreigner, thus concluding her integration into Judahite society. This can undoubtedly be so read. The mention of those female



forerunners has a sting, however — and perhaps also a veiled sub-textual threat or warning. Those female figures constructed “the house of Israel”, true; all three entered exogamous marriages or sexual relations with “our” men Jacob and Judah; all three produced children, future leaders and heirs. However, none is portrayed as an exemplary figure. The Leah and Rachel of the obvious intertext, Genesis 29-30, bicker and compete and their sons imitate their behavioral patterns. Tamar (Gen. 38) stretches sexual norms beyond the utmost limits. If the world of the Hebrew Bible, if the world-vision of the Ruth Scroll is of a world inhabited by just desserts and earned rewards, then Rachel’s early death, Leah’s death before Jacob, and Tamar’s non-marriage to Judah are relevant asides on their behavior. It is futile to ask why no other ancestress is mentioned in this string of “foreign women”. Nevertheless, a suspicion of ambivalence can and should be retained. Point Nine: can foreignness (Moabite in this case) and class (menial worker) be overcome, even when the foreigner conforms to a positive stereotype and embraces the local culture?

Much has been written about Ruth’s disappearance from the last narrative scene of “her” story, the child’s name-giving scene (4:14-17), in the text that bears her name. It seems unwarranted that, immediately upon fulfilling her duty as set out in the ‘blessing’ by bearing a male child, immediately upon following in Rachel and Leah and Tamar’s footsteps, Ruth is rewarded by becoming as invisible as she is at the end of ch. 1. Several explanations for her disappearance from the final stage of the narrative have been offered. One solution is the traditional viewing of Naomi as the baby’s caretaker or adoptive mother. Another is the understanding of the word *bēn* (Heb. “son”; v. 17: “a *bēn* is born unto Naomi”) as ‘child, offspring’ rather than the straight forward “son”, as if Naomi is not the male child’s mother, but “simply” ancestress, a figure in his blended family tree. Yet another explanation is to view the story’s ending as a final fusion into one finale of the pretextually separate Naomi and Ruth stories.^① Yet, another possibility is to draw one more analogy to the plight of female foreign workers in Israel and beyond today. Point

^① A. Brenner, “Naomi and Ruth,” in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 70-84.

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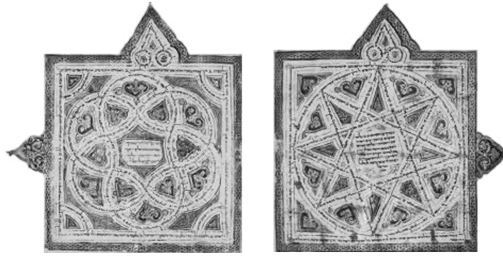
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Ten: a female foreigner can perhaps be integrated into Judahite, or Israelite, or Israeli, or another, society through marriage and motherhood — if and when the additional issue of class does not occur. Cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic and similar variables can be overridden: this is the basis for royal political marriages and even nowadays for achieving citizenship status, for instance. Therefore, it seems that stereotypes of foreign femaleness can be either negative or positive or in between. But ultimately the factor of class, of social background and wealth or its lack and the resultant personal status involved, is the decisive determinant. Hence, finally, Ruth might be a prime example of this reality: a low-class foreign woman, a worker without property, will become invisible in the host community. She will be absorbed rather than integrated. Her prospects, however virtuous she is, are less than promising.

The book of Ruth can be read and has been read as an optimistic, idyllic story of integration, of polemic against exogamy and xenophobia (see Ezra and Nehemiah), as a story of love, as a story of duty and *hesed*. It has also been read as a story of traditional Jewish conversion. These readings and others are possible, certainly. What marks them is the common denominator of viewing the story as a comedy, the birth of a son being interpreted as a happy ending. But a happy ending for whom? Is it a happy ending for the foreigner, for the menial working woman Ruth? Read against the reality of foreign female work today, the story may seem much less celebratory. The realpolitik of economics, law, and labour supply and demand, supports the necessity to treat the foreigner reasonably well. However, custom mitigates the possibility of the foreigner crossing cultural boundaries into integration in the host culture. Foreigners may be accepted; less so if they are of the underprivileged classes and women; and full integration, even in the case of Ruth, an exemplary female character in many ways, is in fact impossible. The variables of class, occupation and femaleness usually override those of foreignness and personal excellence — then and now.

Postscript: Some further thoughts

This analysis of the Ruth story as the story of a labor worker was first



published about twenty years ago,^① and I've returned to it as a possible interpretation of the Scroll's heroine motivation for her linking herself with Naomi several times.

Ruth's motivation is neither fully disclosed by the story's "real" narrator (outside the story, the one who composed it) nor by the implied narrator (inside the story, the implied narrator who tells us the story in the text itself). And while the woman neighbors assure Naomi that Ruth's motivation is "love" for her (4:15), this is one possible interpretation of her behaviour: it comes to us, as text consumers, from a third source, not put into the mouth of Ruth herself. Therefore, as often in reading biblical narratives or in listening to or visualizing them, even when the narrators (external and / or internal) seem to align themselves with a certain figure, a space may remain for more than one interpretation.

As stated above (p. 26), most commentators tend to valorize Ruth and her motives, in keeping with ideologies of social inclusion or the literary genre of comedy, or a successful origin story. Indeed, Ruth's behavior in chapters 1-3 — her declared fealty to Naomi, her industrious work in the field, her obedience to Naomi's plan concerning Boaz — is presented as completely voluntary. Hence, it is easy to understand as motivated by her feelings for Naomi. And yet, since Ruth is so active throughout chs. 1-3, it is difficult to understand why she consistently chooses an inferior position to that of the other characters in the story by relying on emotional factors alone.

"Voluntary" behavior has many shades. It may be altruistic and unselfish; it may also be self-interested. Or a combination of the two — depending on the case and social circumstances.

Indeed, in terms of the story Ruth is socially inferior: a woman, a foreigner, a widow, and landless. Modesty behooves her in her new social environment if her goal is integration. Nevertheless, the question remains: why does she choose to leave her own land and go to the Unknown, then work so hard? She acts like a fugitive, or a refugee!

Here the analogy to modern-day work immigrants springs forcefully to

^① Original version in A. Brenner ed. *A Feminist Companion to Ruth and Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 158-162.

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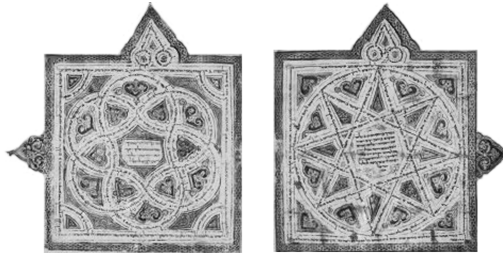
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mind. In our global world, migrants cross borders and risk their lives for many reasons: because of violence and military and political prosecution of race, color, religion and more, as well as natural catastrophes like draught, earthquakes, floods and hunger. Such a refuge seeking is hardly “voluntary”, in many senses. But people also choose to migrate in order to improve their lot in life, or to help their families back home, at least for a fixed period.

Israel is a young country that is being relentlessly developed, but is aging fast, not least because of the high life expectancy. Its work force suffers permanent shortages of construction and agricultural workers on the one hand, and domestic care workers on the other hand. These are menial jobs, at the bottom of the social and financial scale, that Israeli citizens — even Israeli Arabs — tend to refuse. As a result, Israel allows a legal quota of foreigners, females and males, divided into categories, that can receive a working visa linked to a local employer for a fixed period of time. Thereafter the worker has to leave the country, unless s/he marries an Israeli citizen and thus becomes an immigrant and gains permanent residency or even citizenship.^①

How are such foreign workers treated in Israeli society? Here we have to separate judicial regulations and social attitudes. Salaries, benefits and other employment conditions are mostly strictly controlled by the State, even enforced — but so are terms of sojourn, including expulsion from the country beyond the employment period. Socially, the picture is more complicated. Israeli society, especially Jewish society with Jews in the majority, is highly insular. Class, race, language, customs, gender and financial status are heavy markers. But a special hindrance to the integration of foreigners is that of identity. Israel, as a State, has not decided yet whether it is a democratic State operating equally for all its inhabitants; or a Jewish Homeland, in which Jews hold favored positions in many areas of Law and praxis. This is partly explained by the trauma of antisemitism which explains why every person born Jewish is immediately admitted into citizenship, unless a criminal. At the same time, it makes life for the foreign laborers in our midst, mostly Christians, unequal and unstable. The situation is of course exacerbated for laborers at the

① Like in other countries, there are many illegal refugees and work immigrants in Israel, especially in some urban areas. This article doesn't ignore their plight but also doesn't deal with that directly.



bottom of the pecking social order, and for women in particular, in spite of the essential jobs they do. And yet, as already noted, the foreign workers keep coming and are often unwilling to depart, citing the even worse conditions in their original communities.

So let's examine anew Ruth's declaration to Naomi (1:16-17).

Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus, and more may the LORD do to me if anything but death parts me from you. (JPSS)

Viewed in the light of female foreign workers, Ruth's declaration is a choice. She chooses to leave her own country. She chooses to join another community. She chooses to change her religion. She chooses for a permanent solution for herself, not a time-limited one. And she chooses to care for Naomi, the elder woman.

I personally know of several Israelis, especially elderly, whose foreign care givers remained with them, serving them with devotion and love, until their death, then left to go back to their own country, or tried to stay with another employer, in most of the cases illegally. I also know of cases of eventual marriage, especially of female foreign workers with Israeli men. The case of Ruth is so similar to that of reading both "texts" cross-textually (to borrow a term from Archie C.C. Lee) against each other — the Ruth Scroll against the foreign workers' situation — that it may enhance our understanding of both.

I've interpreted Ruth specifically against the Israeli context because this is the context which I know best. But you, every one of you, can compare this with your own context; and see how much you can gain, for the then and for now, and for biblical scholarship.