

IMIGRATION AND GENDER ISSUES IN THE BOOK OF RUTH¹

Dorothea Erbele-Küster

As an Old Testament scholar interested in interreligious issues I want to contribute to the discussion from the perspective of Bible studies. My hermeneutical approach is inspired by what I've learned from EATWOT, especially the female members. Being rooted myself in the First World exegetical discourse, reading the book of Ruth from the perspective of immigration and gender issues provides new insights for the sociopolitical discussions in Germany and in the Netherlands, where I live.

In the following study on the book of Ruth I concentrate on how immigration is faced by the foreign sojourner and by the natives. Three questions will be dealt with in particular: (1) What does it imply to live as an immigrant, (2) is assimilation a practical model and finally, (3) what is the impact of gender and generation differences.

1. What does the experience of living as a sojourner in a foreign country (*gur*) imply for the way we face immigrants?

In the book of Ruth it is told that Elimelech from Judah lives as an immigrant (*gur*) in Moab (1,1). Because of a dry and barren period he and his wife Naomi and their two sons Machlon and Kilion have left their hometown Beth-lehem (House of Bread) in order to find a better dwelling place for the family. Nothing is said about the family's way of living and income in their new surrounding.

Generally, the Hebrew verb *gur* is used to describe the existence as an alien sojourner in a foreign country, which often results from a harsh economic or a difficult political and social situation in one's native place.² Thus the cognate noun *ger* may be translated with "immigrant" in these contexts.³ Whereas the noun *ger* is mostly used in legal texts, the verb *gur* often occurs in narratives in a combination with other verbs such as *halk* (to go), *jšb* (to dwell) or *šûb* (to return).⁴ The stress is not always on a foreign nationality, but more generally on the fact of living in a place where one is not born or far away from the soil where one's ancestors dwell (II Sam 4,3)⁵. As *ger* one lives under restricted legal rights. As *ger* in Canaan Abraham is not allowed to own land (Gen 23,4). Due to a famine in Canaan he and his wife Sarah decide to move to Egypt, where they are called *gerîm* as well (Gen 12,10; cf. 20,1; 21,23.34). Abraham is thus the exemplary *ger* in the Old Testament

In the Deuteronomistic legislation the alien resident is often paralleled with orphans, widows or the poor in general. According to the Book of Covenant (Ex 22,20) and the Holiness Code (Lev 19,33f) to be a *ger* grants certain rights

and security. The argument of the law runs as follows: To be a foreigner is an experience which the Israelites share with the sojourners, therefore they should not oppress them or discriminate against them.⁶ The law recalls the times of oppression in Egypt⁷ to explain why Israel should not treat immigrants the way the Israelites were treated by the Egyptians!

In the contemporary public discourse people argue sometimes just the other way round; because we have suffered so much the alien should suffer too and work hard. When I gave a lesson on the story of Moses and Miriam, one of my pupils in secondary school asked: "But what if we do not share the experience of oppression and liberation? Are the laws still valid for us if we have not been in slavery and if it was not us who have been liberated?" This spontaneous question does not only express a certain unwillingness to grant citizenship to immigrants but also raises the hermeneutical problem whether we as modern and Christian readers may refer to the history of Israel as ours.

2. Does living as an immigrant necessarily imply to assimilate and to lose one's own identity?

After the death of Elimelech the two sons of him and Naomi took Moabite wives : Orpah and Ruth. This may be taken as an effort to integrate into the Moabitan society. But it seems to be in vain. Both sons, Machlon ("sick") and Kiljon ("weakling"), die. Thus Naomi who finds herself alone decides to go back to Beth-lehem. But her two daughters-in-law insist to accompany her. While Orpah finally returns to Moab, Ruth follows Naomi all the way to Beth-lehem. In order to underline her willingness to follow Naomi to her homeland, Ruth

dissociates from her ethnic and religious background. She declares: "Your people ('*am*) is my people and your God is my God ('*elohaj*)" (1.16). To affirm her vow she does even refer to the name of the Israelite God JHWH (v17) and states that she will die in the foreign country. We could understand Ruth's vow as a perfect model of integration. The language of the book itself is ambiguous. Ruth is called "the Moabite" until the end of the story (2,1.6; 4,5.10). When she talks to Boaz (2,10), she designates herself as "foreign" (*nokrijja*)⁸, meaning that she belongs to a foreign country or tribe. Hence, she preserves her ethnic identity. Her otherness is still of importance. She remains a foreigner although she is willing to adopt the religion of Naomi and to socialize with other people even by marrying a native of Beth-lehem. Not much is told about Moab, neither any detail about its culture nor its religion.⁹ The only God who is talked about is the God of the Israelite people. The text remains silent about the difficulties in the relationship between both countries (cf. Dtn 23,4f). This lack of interreligious language may be one of the reasons why the struggle for assimilation fails and why integration is not fully achieved.

So, is Ruth's strive for assimilation a practical and useful model for a multireligious society? The text indicates also other possibilities. Boaz, who wants to marry Ruth, respects her complex ethnic identity and refers to Ruth as "Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the dead [Machlon, the Ephraimite]" (4,5). Ruth is being blessed by the people (4,11) because she helps to build the house of Israel and hence she brings something new to Israel. Does Ruth become an integral part of the Davidic line or is it just her son? It is striking that the female neighbours visiting the newborn only talk and refer to

Naomi (4,17). This might be the result of an antimooabitan redaction of the book in order to play down the role of the foreign wife. The (postexilic) remark aims to create the myth of a monoethnic descendance and kinship in times of struggle for an Israelite identity.

Assimilation is not an easy solution. Thus the question remains: how does integration work? It is tricky to understand integration, alternatively, either as an active striving of the foreigner or as a task that has to be undertaken by the natives. It is rather a dialectical process in which each other's differences have to be respected.

3. How do women of different generations¹⁰ cope with the situation of immigration and culture contact?¹¹

Gender as well as age have an impact on immigration. Naomi follows her husband to the foreign country. But after the death of her husband and her two sons she decides to go back to her hometown. Already on the way Orpah, the older daughter-in-law, finally returns to Moab, her people and her gods (1,14f).¹² Orpah acts like Naomi sensing that living as an old widow without offspring is even more difficult in a foreign country than in her own. Naomi's reaction towards the women of Beth-lehem who welcome her, makes clear how she experienced the exile. She wants no longer to be called Naomi, the "lovely" but instead Mara, the "bitter", because of all the bad things she had to suffer in Moab (1,20). As she herself has lived far away from her homeland, she does not want that her two young daughters-in-law have to meet the same fate (1,13) and therefore, she urges them to return to their homeland.

Ruth, who follows Naomi all the way to Beth-lehem, is described as a powerful and witty woman who does her best in order that she and her mother-in-law are able to survive. Ruth is industrious, as Athalya Brenner states, because "a foreigner – a foreign worker's – way to becoming visible is to try harder"¹³. But nonetheless her devotion does not suffice for a full integration in the host society. In clinging to Naomi (v14 *dabaq*) Ruth, the young foreign woman, shows a typical male behaviour (cf. Gen 2,24); likewise in providing for her old mother-in-law, Ruth takes over a male role.¹⁴

The women of Beth-lehem welcome Naomi (1,9f) in order to re-integrate her. When the female neighbours give the name to the son of Ruth, saying: "A son has been born to Naomi" (4,17), they reestablish the old widow. Female solidarity is practiced between the younger and the older women of the same native place. But this circle isn't interested in integrating Ruth, the Moabite. Their female solidarity exclude the foreign woman. Ruth, nevertheless, shows fidelity to her old mother-in-law Naomi.

Ruth commits herself to the name of the Israelite God JHWH. Her loyalty to Naomi is manifested in the way she acts and lives. Even before she states "your God shall be mine" Naomi praises her steadfast love (*hæsæd*) for the dead and herself (1,8; later Boas does the same in 3,10). Naomi's wish is that JHWH may react as Ruth and Orpah¹⁵ had acted. Looking at the way the Moabite Ruth cares for her mother-in-law, God's compassion is reflected. Ruth's devotion is not just characterized in economic terms as industriousness but is praised in theological terms as *hæsæd* (grace, mercy, compassion and love)¹⁶. Thus immigration can't be treated

only as an economic problem but we must look at its ethnic and religious implications. In situations of interreligious and interethnic encounters there is the need of a thorough description of the other, their religion and culture in order to develop appropriate modes of intercultural language.

What puzzles is that Ruth as a foreign woman becomes a model for God's *hæsaed*. Ruth is the ideal performer of the virtue which is characteristic for JHWH. In fulfilling steadfast love (*hæsaed*) interreligious dialogue is realized here as interreligious practice and living dogmatics.

Notes

1. The article is an enlarged version of my paper given at the EATWOT meeting in Chateau de Bossey/Switzerland on 11 of June 2002.
2. Cf. Hebräisch-Aramäisches Lexikon I (1967) 193; R. Martin-Achard, Art. *gur*, als Fremdling weilen, in: *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament I* (1994) 409-412.
3. Cf. Frank Anthony Spina, Israelites as *gerim*, 'Sojourners' in Social and Historical Context, in: *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, ed. by Carol L. Meyers and M.O'Connor, Winona Lake / Indiana 1983, 321-335, 323ff.
4. Cf. José E. Ramirez Kidd, Alterity and Identity in Israel. The *ger* in the Old Testament (BZAW 283) 1999, 13-33.
5. Cf. Frank Crüsemann, Tora. *Theologie und Sozialgeschichte des alttestamentlichen Gesetzes*, München 1992, 214.
6. Cf. Hermann Spieckermann, Die Stimme des Fremden im Alten Testament, in: *Pastoraltheologie* 85 (1994) 52-67, 52.
7. Jan Assmann coined for this phenomenon of public, social and cultural remembrance the German term „kulturelles Gedächtnis“ (cf. id., *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München 1992).
8. Ruth designates herself with a term which was used in a pejorative sense for alien women in postexilic times (cf. for example Neh 13,23-30).
9. Cf. Musa W. Dube, Diving Ruth for International Relations, in: *Other Ways of Reading. African Women and the Bible*, ed. by id., Geneva 2001, 179-195, esp. 186-194.
10. In her report Jung Ha Kim as the coordinator of the US Minorities underlined the importance of generation conflicts, for example among Hispanics in the US.
11. Cf. Athalya Brenner, „Ruth as a Foreign Worker and the Politics of Exogamy, in: id. (ed.) *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible 2* series 1999, 158-162 and Musa Dube, *Divining Ruth for International Relations*, 179-195. In the discussion which followed Helen Engell's paper and mine it was suggested that it could be helpful to sustain women circles of interreligious dialogue because of their shared experiences.

12. It is possible to understand the Hebrew noun as a plural form just as the Septuaginta did and as it is suggested by the vocalisation, thus implying a polemical overtone.
13. Brenner, *Ruth as a Foreign Worker*, 160.
14. Saronijini Nadar, *A South African Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth*, in: *Other Ways of Reading*, 159-175 speaks of role dedifferentiation (164ff).
15. It is important to notice that Naomi in her blessing states that her both daughters-in-law have performed steadfast love (1,8).
16. Cf. for the meaning of the term *hæsæd*: Hermann Spieckermann, *God's Steadfast Love. Towards a New Conception of Old Testament Theology*, in: *Biblica* 81 (2000) 305-327.