



The Outsider Becomes an Insider; The New Center is on the Margin

BY DIANE BERGANT, CSA

Insider/Outsider: Everyone needs to belong to some group. In fact, it is impossible not to belong. We are born into a family, a cultural group, a nation.

No one is really a true island.

Rather, our entire identity is determined by our natural ties with others and the social ties that we fashion throughout our lives. The bonds that indicate who we are and to whom we belong also identify those

who belong to us; they determine who is inside our group and who is outside it.

While such identification is quite natural, it too frequently contributes to various forms of discrimination and exclusion. Preference for our own group is often joined by disdain for other groups. The conviction that we are special or even superior can imperceptibly develop into xenophobia, which is an unreasonable fear or hatred of foreigners or strangers. In such situations, insiders often do whatever they can to reinforce their status, protect their privileges, and keep outsiders where they belong – outside.

The ancient Near Eastern world was perilous. Strangers were usually considered dangerous. In order to counter that danger, people devised a very intricate policy of hospitality.

Strangers who approached a settlement were considered a potential threat. The reverse was also true: since strangers were outside the confines of their home and the safety that it provided, they too were vulnerable.

In order to neutralize any threat, one went out to strangers and offered hospitality. If hospitality was not offered, it was clear that the stranger was in danger. If the

hospitality was not accepted, it was clear that the settlement was in danger. There was an understanding in the ancient Near Eastern world that the practice of hospitality guaranteed safety to all involved.

Both the Old and the New Testaments contain traditions that situate the outsider squarely at the heart of the community. I have chosen to look at one such group, a group which we today have often relegated to the margins of our society. I am speaking about migrants.

The Outsider is Brought In: The opening phrase of the Book of Ruth states the political situation of the period as: “At the time of the judges.” This phrase not only identifies the period before the monarchy, but it is a kind of shorthand used to refer to a time of great political

and social disintegration, a time of violence and vengeance: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what [they] thought best” (Judg 17:6; 21:25). This political and social disintegration was emphasized in order to demonstrate the need for some form of strong central controlling power. In the ancient Near Eastern world, that meant a monarchy.

The land of Moab, the birthplace of Ruth, always lurks in the background in this biblical book. It was located directly east of the Dead Sea, in what is today modern Jordan. In the eyes of the Israelites, it was not merely a foreign land. At certain periods in Israel’s history it was actually despised as hostile to the Israelites. Amos (2:1), Isaiah (16:6) and Jeremiah (48:20) hurled pronouncements of doom against Moab:

I will send fire upon Moab... Moab shall meet death amid uproar and shouts and trumpet blasts (Amos 2:2).

Therefore, the famine suffered in Israel, as described in the Book of Ruth, must have been severe for Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons to have migrated to this land that had a history of hostility toward Israel. Furthermore, the marriages of the sons to women of Moab suggest that the family intended to remain in that foreign land. However, as we see in the story, God had other plans.

All three men die, leaving the women bereft of the legal protection that women in patriarchal societies are granted through the men of their families. Naomi resolved to send her Moabite daughters-in-law back to their families of origin, for



Anice Schervish Chenault of CTA's Anti-Racism Team shares a moment with Diane Bergant following her keynote address at the Call To Action National Conference in November.

it was impossible for her, a widow with no sons, to provide these women with new husbands who could continue the name and lineage of her own dead husband Elimelech.

The story of Ruth hinges on two of the major kinship practices of the ancient world, namely, the law of levirate and the law of redemption of land. These laws were meant to safeguard both the integrity of the clan and its property. The law of levirate required that a brother of a man who died without an heir should take the widow as his own wife. The first-born of that union would be considered the legal heir of the deceased man. This practice accomplished three goals: it guaranteed the survival of the deceased man's name; it assured that his property would remain within his clan; and it made provision for the care of his widow.

According to the law of redemption, members of a clan had an obligation to protect each other's person and financial interests. If, because of a temporary financial setback, an Israelite had to be sold into slavery in order to pay debts, a close relative was duty-bound to redeem that person. In those situations where the inheritance had to be sold in order to pay a debt, the relative who had acted as redeemer had the first right to purchase the property. In this way the family property would be kept within the family. It is important to understand these two cultural practices if one is to grasp the dynamic that moves the story of Ruth forward.

Various reversals exist that carry the dynamic of the narrative. The story opens with famine but it closes in Bethlehem, which means 'House of bread'; it begins with the death of Elimelech and his sons, thus marking the end of his lineage, and it closes with the birth of the child (the ancestor of David) who will restore that lineage; the Israelites first migrate to a foreign land, but then return home; the Moabite Ruth leaves her home and is finally incorporated into the Israelite family. In each of these reversals, God's plans for the family, and ultimately for the monarchy, are moved forward through the agency of a foreign woman.

Although the book is named for Ruth, one wonders if Naomi might not be the real principal character of the story. After

all, it is her family that migrates to Moab; she is the one who is left widowed and childless with no possibility of remarriage or future children, thereby regaining some form of male protection; it is Naomi who directs Ruth to capture the interest and the commitment of Boaz in order to ensure his redemption of the property and protection of the family of Elimelech; finally, it is Naomi who is said to have gained an heir in the child Obed (Ruth 4:17). Not only is the lineage of Elimelech restored, but his widow is no longer without support.

In the Old Testament, individual characters, besides having importance in themselves, often stand for groups of people. In a very real sense, Naomi represents the threatened remnant of Israel who has suffered severe loss and is threatened with extinction. She is a childless widow, she has no future. Ruth, on the other hand, is the heroine, for it is through her that this threatened remnant is restored. It now has a future. This migrant woman becomes the agent of God's blessing for Israel.

In this story, the marginal Ruth acts as savior of the people. This story shows that those whom society often considers marginal and unimportant are anything but marginal and unimportant. Rather, it is the powerless woman who restores the lineage of Elimelech; it is the vulnerable widow who becomes the ancestress of King David; it is the defenseless migrant who determines the future of the nation.

The Migrant: The True Insider: Ruth's migrant status is important for at least two reasons. First, the vulnerability that migrant status engenders is a fundamental element of ancient Israelite identity. When Israel proclaimed, "My father was a wandering Aramean" (Deut 26:5), it was acknowledging that rootlessness is at the heart of its identity. Though the people believed that they were promised a land on which they would thrive, they never really considered it theirs by conquest. The land belonged to God. They only possessed it through inheritance and they were expected to hand it down within the family as heritage for the next generation. Even when the people were well established in the land, their migrant origins served to remind them of their true identity. Thus, the migrant became a metaphor of the true

Israelite. Though not an Israelite by birth, metaphorically Ruth was a true Israelite.

Ruth's migrant status is important in a second way. She is a linchpin between Israel's past and its future. It is through her that the lineage of Elimelech is restored, and it is from her that the Davidic line will eventually be established. As stated earlier, if Naomi represents the threatened remnant of Israel, then Ruth, the migrant, represents the agent of Israel's restoration or salvation.

This migrant woman becomes a genuine insider, but not by the usual means of acculturation. She retains her original identity and at the end of the book is still referred to as "Ruth the Moabite" (Ruth 4:5, 10). What is remarkable is that she does not simply move from the margins of Israelite society to its center. Instead, where she is on the margin actually becomes a new center. In fact, it becomes the most important center for Israel's future. Ruth's marginality is not somehow resolved or corrected; it is transformed into the setting for restoration or salvation.

This story reinforces the notion that vulnerability is at the core of ancient Israel's identity. The true Israelite – and we might say, the true believer – is genuinely vulnerable. The migrant Ruth's vulnerability does not simply challenge us to remedy the vulnerability of others. As already stated – resolving and correcting Ruth's vulnerability is not the issue of the story. Rather, it challenges us to acknowledge our own vulnerability lest the privilege that most of us enjoy mislead us into thinking that we are independently competent and self-sufficient, and that we serve others from our self-sufficiency. When we act with such an attitude, our service can be very demeaning, and it can remind those whom we serve that they benefit through us. Remember, in the

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story of Ruth, those who were privileged and self-sufficient did not realize that they were really a remnant that faced probable extinction. Self-sufficiency is a characteristic of the American ethos, not of biblical spirituality.

The second and probably the overriding message of the Book of Ruth may be even more difficult for us to embrace. It certainly was startling for ancient Israel. The story contends that the migrant, the outsider, is the agent of restoration, or salvation, or grace. And she accomplished this, not by being transformed into an insider, but precisely as an outsider. For a people like the ancient Israelites who maintained that they were the ones who would be a source of blessing for the other nations, the idea that God would choose a non-believer as an agent of divine favor was unthinkable. This was a total reversal of perspective for them. However, this story focuses on the fact of the outsider being the source of blessing for Israel, not Israel being the source of blessing for the outsider, as we read in the promise to Abram: "All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you" (Gen 12:3).

Though the people of Bethlehem certainly did accept this outsider, their acceptance was not the reason they were blessed. Their acceptance of Ruth simply set the stage for the genuine unfolding of her life. For her part, Ruth accommodated herself to the customs of the people and stepped into a role that only she could play. God acted through her, a migrant or sojourner, for the restoration of Elimelech's lineage and the promise of the Davidic monarchy.

The New Center is on the Margin: Most societies today do not observe the requirements of levirate marriage, nor is the law of redemption of land enforced. Another way of reading the story must be employed if we are to bring its meaning into our lives to transform us and the world of which we are a part. In the field of biblical interpretation, this step is called recontextualization. It prompts us to bring to life the meaning or meanings of the story out of the original literary and/or historical context and situate it (or them) in our context. In this way, the contemporary context reinterprets the meaning.

In this approach, we do not place ourselves in the story and wonder what we might do if we

were in such a situation. Nor do we simply draw connections between elements of the story and our own lives. Rather, we bring the meaning of the story, not merely some of its details, into our social, political, religious contexts.

Looking at the meaning of the story of Ruth in this way, we will find that our understanding of ourselves or our identity, not merely our practices of social justice, must be radically revised. While we are certainly called to open our minds and hearts and lives to migrants and to commit ourselves to their well being, we should consider the possibility that the migrants themselves, and not our commitment to them, might be the source of God's blessing for us. The needs of the migrants might simply constitute the context within which God will bless us through them. In other words, the story of Ruth reminds us that blessing does not merely flow through us to migrants, but through migrants to us. In fact, in this story, mention of the first movement (from Israel to the migrant) is negligible; while the second movement (from the migrant to Israel) is the major theme of the story. There is no blueprint that outlines how this will happen in our case. It is for each of us to discover how God works through others for our good.

As we appropriate the religious meaning of this story, we who are relatively secure in the dominant culture might discover that like Naomi, who was genuinely concerned with the well being of her migrant daughter-in-law, we are really a threatened remnant. If we are granted this insight, we might come to see that it is precisely through the migrant and not through our authentic and unselfish concern for the migrant that we will have a future. The story of Ruth will also show us that this restoration is not dependent on our acceptance and inclusion of those who are marginal, but in their willingness to accept us and to allow God to work through them for our good. In this story, salvation did not come to Ruth because the Israelites accepted her; it came to the Israelites because Ruth accepted them.

So, as we wonder what the story might mean to us, we might ask: Who is the insider and who is the outsider? Where is the center and where is the margin? Who are you? And where do you find yourself?

This edited text was originally presented as the Saturday Plenary at the 2009 Conference.

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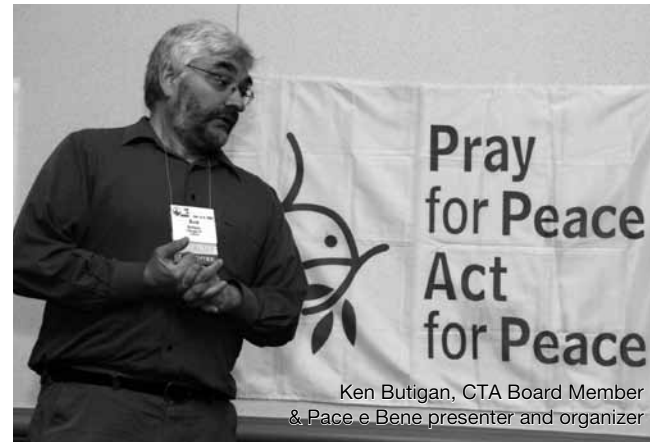
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