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The Ambiguous Migrant: From the Book of Ruth Toward a Theology of Migration

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Abstract

The book of Ruth has long been interpreted as a story of loyalty, divine providence, and the inclusion of the foreigner into Israel. Yet beneath its pastoral surface lies a profound and productive ambiguity that has often been neglected in the history of its interpretation. This paper argues that Ruth the Moabitess embodies an irreducible ambiguity that challenges both nativist and liberal pieties about migration. Drawing on literary analysis, performance criticism, postcolonial theory (particularly Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, third space, mimicry, ambivalence, and unhomeliness), and a review of classic, feminist, and theological commentaries, we demonstrate that closure readings—whether theological, proselytizing, royal-apologetic, or feminist—domesticate the text's subversive potential. By recovering Ruth's ambiguity, this paper constructs a theology of migration that refuses easy answers, embraces liminality as revelation, and locates divine presence precisely in the spaces between certainty and resolution. The result is a situated, dialogical, performative, and hybrid theology that reimagines the migrant not as a problem to be solved but as a gift to be received.

Keywords: hibridity; liminality; postcolonial; subversive; third space

INTRODUCTION

The book of Ruth is a masterpiece of biblical narrative. Its four chapters have inspired countless sermons, works of art, and theological reflections. Yet for all its apparent clarity, the book harbors a persistent and unsettling ambiguity that has troubled readers from the rabbis to contemporary feminist critics. Who is Ruth, really? Is she the paragon of loyal love (*ḥesed*) that tradition has made her, or is she a subversive foreigner who uses her sexuality to manipulate a wealthy landowner? Is Naomi a bitter victim of divine injustice or a cunning strategist who secures her future through her daughter-in-law? Is God providentially guiding events or strangely absent, leaving the characters to fend for themselves?

This paper argues that the book of Ruth offers a sophisticated theological reflection on migration that embraces ambiguity rather than resolving it, challenging simplistic narratives about both migrants and the God who accompanies them on their journeys. To make this case, we draw on multiple disciplinary perspectives: literary analysis (Kristin Moen Saxegaard), performance criticism (Terry Giles and William J. Doan), postcolonial theory (Homi K. Bhabha), and theological reflection (Daniel G. Groody, Gemma Tulud Cruz, and others). We also engage with a range of commentary traditions (classic theological, proselytism, royal-apologetic, and feminist) to show how they have sought to close off ambiguity in service of various agendas.

Ilana Pardes, in her recent literary biography of Ruth, captures this productive instability when she writes that the book of Ruth "is astonishingly spare. The book of Ruth is not really a book. It is only four chapters long—more of a short story, or a very short story, than a book. To write a biography of Ruth thus means to become a gleaner, to gather bits and pieces from sparse scenes that are replete with lacunae." [1] Pardes's formulation is more than a methodological observation: it recognizes that the gaps in the narrative are not defects but invitations. The same lacunae that have allowed generations of readers to project their own closures onto Ruth also preserve her irreducible ambiguity. As Pardes notes, "The book of Ruth treats her as [a historical figure]" yet "there are no archaeological findings or extrabiblical texts that corroborate her existence."[2] This double condition, treated as real yet unverifiable, detailed yet laconic, is precisely what enables Ruth to function as a migratory figure par excellence: she is al-

[1] Ilana Pardes, *Ruth: A Migrant's Tale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 1.

[2] Pardes, 3.

ways in need of being gathered, interpreted, and retold, never fully possessed by any single telling.

Our central thesis is that the figure of Ruth embodies a productive ambiguity that has been systematically domesticated by closure readings. Recovering this ambiguity, particularly through Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, third space, mimicry, ambivalence, and unhomeliness, generates a theology of migration that refuses easy answers, embraces liminality as revelation, and locates divine presence precisely in the spaces between certainty and resolution. Such a theology is urgently needed in an age of hardened borders, xenophobic rhetoric, and the desperate journeys of millions of displaced persons.

RESEARCH METHOD

To recover the productive ambiguity of Ruth and construct a theology of migration from it, this paper employs an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates literary criticism, performance criticism, postcolonial theory, and theological reflection. Our approach is fundamentally hermeneutical: we read the book of Ruth as a narrative that generates meaning not through fixed authorial intention but through the interplay of text, reader, and context.

For that, we draw on literary narrative criticism which allows us to attend to the text's rhetorical devices and their effects on readerly interpretation. Then, we utilize performance criticism that shifts our attention from the written page to the embodied, communal event of storytelling, revealing how ambiguity functioned in live performance before audiences familiar with the tale. Next, we employ postcolonial theory, specifically the concepts of Homi K. Bhabha: hybridity, third space, mimicry, ambivalence, and unhomeliness. Bhabha's framework helps us see Ruth's ambiguity not as a failure of the text but as a strategy of cultural resistance and creativity. Furthermore, we engage theological reflection from contemporary scholars of migration that offer resources for constructing a theology that is both faithful to scripture and responsive to present realities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Closure Readings

Loyalty and Providence

Brevard Childs famously concluded that "the major purpose of the canonical shape of Ruth is to show the ways of God in the life of one family," focusing on Naomi's discourse in 1:21 as the theological thread

of the plot.[3] For Childs, the narrative's movement from emptiness to fullness, from famine to harvest, from death to birth, demonstrates that God is at work even when hidden. The bitter complaint of Naomi is not a genuine theological problem but a narrative device that sets up the resolution. Childs' reading is canonical and theological, subordinating the details of the story to the overarching theme of divine sovereignty.

Robert L. Hubbard Jr. similarly finds that the book "portrays God as involved in life's ordinary affairs; indeed, they are exactly the arena in which he chooses to operate."[4] Hubbard emphasizes that God works "through, not despite, the everyday faithfulness of his people." The human characters, i.e., Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, are models of *ḥesed*, and their actions, though sometimes unconventional (Ruth's nighttime visit to the threshing floor), are ultimately expressions of loyalty to family and covenant. Hubbard's commentary, while historically informed, tends to resolve the narrative's tensions into moral and theological coherence.

Katharine Doob Sakenfeld's influential commentary identifies three key themes: "the peaceable community, examples of loyal living, and the place of God in the story."[5] She presents Ruth's acts of *ḥesed* as exemplary: the "former" act as loyalty to Naomi, the "latter" as approaching Boaz "so that the interests of Naomi and the deceased father-in-law and husband are held central."[6] Sakenfeld is attentive to the social context of widows and foreigners, but she ultimately reads the story as affirming the value of loyal relationships within a patriarchal framework. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky similarly present Ruth as "the moving story of Ruth, with it's themes of loyalty, loving kindness, and redemption."[7]

What these readings share is a drive toward resolution. The ambiguities of the text: the narrator's subtle correction of Naomi's complaint (1:22), the persistent labeling of Ruth as "the Moabite" even after her supposed conversion, the sexual tension of the threshing floor scene, are either explained away or subordinated to the larger edifying message.

[3] Terrance R Wardlaw, "Shaddai, Providence, And The Narrative Structure Of Ruth," *JETS* 58, no. 1 (2015): 31–41, citing Brevard Childs.
[4] Wardlaw, citing Robert L. Hubbard Jr.
[5] Joan E. Cook, "Review of Ruth by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld," *Interpretation* 55, no. 2 (2001): 205–6.
[6] Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Loyalty and Love: The Language of Human Interconnections in the Hebrew Bible," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 22, no. 3 (1983): 203–44.
[7] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth* (Philadelphia: The JPS, 2011).

Proselytism and Inclusion / Exclusion Readings

Another closure tradition reads Ruth as a model for proselytism, a reading with deep roots in Jewish exegesis. The Targum, Midrash, and Talmud all interpret Ruth as a convert who fully embraces the God and people of Israel. This tradition has been revived in modern scholarship by Hans-Georg Wünch and others.

Hans-Georg Wünch argues that the book can be "understood as a model for proselytism" with Ruth as "a proselyte par excellence," noting that Jewish exegesis consistently presents her in this light.[8] Christian M. M. Brady's study of Targum Ruth shows how the biblical characters are transformed into "exemplars of rabbinic piety," with Ruth becoming "the ideal proselyte" and Boaz a "judge, a scholar of the Law, and a prophet."[9] In this reading, Ruth's declaration to Naomi—"Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (1:16)—is understood as a formal conversion, and her subsequent actions demonstrate her complete integration into Israelite life. This proselytism reading resolves Ruth's foreignness by presenting her conversion as total and her identity as fully assimilated.

A related closure reading situates Ruth as a response to the ethnic exclusivism of Ezra and Nehemiah. Gerda de Villiers and Jurie le Roux argue that "the Book of Ruth proposes an alternative interpretation of the Torah, also from the plains of Moab and the exegesis comes in the person of Ruth, the Moabitess."[10] According to this view, the book was written to counter the harsh policies of Ezra and Nehemiah, who required Jewish men to divorce their foreign wives. Ruth serves as a counterexample: a foreign woman who becomes an ancestress of David and, by extension, of the Messiah. This reading, while acknowledging the polemical context, nevertheless resolves Ruth into a stable position: the inclusive alternative to exclusivism.

Royal Apologetic and Genealogy as Closural Frame

Perhaps the most powerful closural device in the book is its genealogy (4:18-22), which has been read as providing a royal apologetic for Davidic kingship. This reading has a long history, from the Babylo-

[8] Hans-Georg Wünch, "Ruth, a Proselyte Par Excellence - Exegetical and Structural Observations," *Journal for Semitics* 26, no. 2 (2017): 36–64, https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC174596.

[9] Christian M. M. Brady, *The Proselyte and the Prophet: Character Development in Targum Ruth* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

[10] Gerda De Villiers and Jurie Le Roux, "The Book of Ruth in the Time of the Judges and Ruth, the Moabitess," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 1 (July 27, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4102/VE.V37I1.1587.

nian Talmud to modern critical scholarship. Gerda de Villiers notes that the genealogy starts with Perez and ends with David, thereby covering Israel's history since the time of the sojourn in Egypt to the Davidic monarchy. In this reading, the entire narrative is framed by the genealogy: the story of Ruth is told to explain how a Moabite woman came to be in the lineage of Israel's greatest king.

The genealogical frame subordinates the women's narrative to male dynastic concerns. As one critic observes, "the closure of the full narrative recoils the story back in the patriarchal realm, as it provides the lineage for the house of David, with no women mentioned in it (Ruth 4:18–22)."[11] Ruth's story is no longer about a migrant woman's struggle for security but about the providential preparation for David's throne. This royal-apologetic reading is not without merit, the genealogy is clearly intentional and serves an important function. But it also represents a particular kind of closure: the subordination of the female, foreign, and ambiguous to the male, native, and settled.

Feminist Readings: Ambivalent Closure

Feminist readings have offered the most sustained challenge to traditional closure interpretations. Scholars such as Phyllis Trible, Athalya Brenner, and Ilana Pardes have highlighted the female-centered nature of the narrative, the agency of Naomi and Ruth, and the subversive potential of the threshing floor scene. Yet even feminist commentators, in their desire to recover female voices and agency, can exhibit forms of closure, albeit in the service of different ends.

Rhiannon Graybill and Philippe Guillaume argue that "feminist readings denounce the way patriarchalism used the figures of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz to bolster its social hegemony," while insisting that "there is more to gender asymmetries and patriarchy than the devaluation of women. Women always have power. Neither Naomi nor Ruth are powerless victims."[12] This approach recognizes female agency but often resolves the narrative into a "comic triumph" that celebrates the attributes of Ruth and Naomi, as it also undercuts the patriarchal context into which it is subsumed.

Yet even here, closure is deferred rather than escaped. Ruth's movement "from woman to matriarch remains problematic" precisely because the narrative's resolution re-establishes the patriarchal structures it

[11] Gili Kugler and Ohad Magori, "Hesed in Ruth: A Frail Moral Tool in an Inflexible Social Structure," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 604, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050604.

[12] Rhiannon Graybill and Philippe Guillaume, *Ruth* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2025).

temporarily subverts. One critic notes that "the closure of the full narrative recoils the story back in the patriarchal realm," with Ruth "succumb[ing] to the representations offered to her in the hope to find a place back into patriarchy."[13]

Feminist readings have been invaluable in recovering the female voices in Ruth, but they are not immune to the drive for closure. The desire to find a positive female role model, a story of resistance, or a celebration of sisterhood can lead to a flattening of the text's ambiguities. Ruth is not simply a feminist heroine, she is also a collaborator, a seductress, and a foreigner who never fully belongs.

The Surplus of Meaning

These various closure readings share a common operation: they stabilize the migrant's identity, domesticate ambiguity, and subordinate the narrative to extratextual frameworks (theological, political, or ideological). Yet as we shall see, the book resists such stabilization. The persistent recurrence of "Ruth the Moabite" after her "conversion," the narrator's subtle correction of Naomi's complaint in 1:22, the ambiguity of the threshing floor scene (3:6-15), and the silence of God throughout the narrative all testify to a surplus of meaning that exceeds closure.

What these readings miss is precisely what a postcolonial framework illuminates: that the migrant's ambiguity is not a problem to be resolved but a resource to be inhabited. The migrant is a figure of productive instability, a reminder that identities are never fixed, that cultures are always hybrid, and that belonging is always negotiated.

The Ambiguous Migrant

The Problem of Naming and the Third Space

One of the most striking features of the book of Ruth is the instability of its characters' identities, revealed particularly through names and naming. As Kristin Moen Saxegaard observes in her meticulous literary analysis, Ruth's name is *undurchsichtig* (opaque, difficult to interpret) in striking contrast to virtually every other name in the narrative.[14] While Naomi means "pleasant," Mara "bitter," Orpah suggests "neck" or "turning away," Mahlon "sterility," Chilion "destruction," and Boaz "strength," Ruth's name remains stubbornly unclear. Proposed etymologies range from "friend" to "to see" to "to satiate" to "refreshment," but none is definitive. Saxegaard concludes that this

[13] Achieved or Deceived: A Postfeminist Critique," *European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics Studies* (2021).

[14] Kristin Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 106.

uncertainty may be intentional, a literary device that keeps the character's identity open.

This onomastic ambiguity functions as the first clue that Ruth cannot be fixed in meaning. This resistance deepens when we observe the relentless labeling of Ruth as "the Moabite" throughout the narrative (seven times in total), often where the designation seems superfluous to the plot. As Terry Giles and William Doan note in their performance-critical analysis, "The repeating identification of Ruth 'the Moabitess' serves a function in the book of Ruth that is superfluous and out of context in the Naomi Story."[15] The repetition itself becomes significant: the narrative cannot let us forget Ruth's foreignness, even as it refuses to tell us what her name means. She is marked, over and over, as other, yet this marking never fully defines her.

This ambiguity is not merely literary, it is political. Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space offers a way to understand how Ruth's indeterminate identity becomes a site of resistance. The third space is a liminal, interstitial realm where multiple cultures intersect, generating new cultural identities that transcend the binary of colonizer and colonized, insider and outsider.[16] Ruth occupies precisely such a space. She is neither fully Moabite nor fully Israelite, neither wholly outside the community of Israel nor securely inside it. Her encounter with Boaz and Naomi is not a simple assimilation into Israelite culture but the creation of a new hybrid identity that will ultimately produce David, the famous king of Israel. The third space, as Bhabha argues, is where the negotiation of cultural difference takes place, not through the negation of difference but through its productive ambivalence.[17]

In the third space, identities are not fixed but performed, not inherited but negotiated. Ruth's famous declaration to Naomi —"Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (1:16)—is often read as a statement of conversion and assimilation. But reading through the lens of the third space, it is something more complex: a performative utterance that creates a new identity even as it claims allegiance to an old one. Ruth does not say, "I am becoming an Israelite." She says, "Your people shall be my people"—a future-oriented, aspirational statement that acknowledges difference even as it seeks to overcome it. The "shall be" marks the space of becoming, the third space where identity is in process, never fully achieved.

[15] Terry Giles and William J. Doan, *The Naomi Story—The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 110.

[16] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge Classic Edition, 2004), 36-39.

[17] Bhabha, 53-56.

Between Identities

Gemma Tulud Cruz's characterization of migrants as inhabiting an "in-between" and "in-both" space finds vivid embodiment in Ruth.[18] She clings to Naomi (1: 14) but also dresses and goes to the threshing floor at night (3:3-4). She works tirelessly in the fields (2:7, 17) yet proposes marriage to a drunken older man (3:9). She is repeatedly called "Ruth the Moabite" (1: 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10) yet becomes the great-grandmother of David and, in Matthew's genealogy, an ancestor of Jesus (Matt 1:5). She is praised for her loyalty (*ḥesed*) yet acts in ways that push the boundaries of social propriety.

For Bhabha, hybridity is always most productive where it is most ambivalent and transgressive.[19] It is the "third space" that enables other positions to emerge, disrupting the binary logic of colonial discourse. Ruth's hybrid identity is precisely what enables her to challenge the ethnic purity laws of Deuteronomy (23:3-4) that would exclude Moabites from the assembly of the Lord. By becoming a member of David's lineage, that is, by being inscribed into the genealogy of Israel's greatest king, she reveals that the boundaries of Israel are more porous than the law would suggest.

This hybridity is intimately connected to Bhabha's concept of mimicry. Mimicry, in Bhabha's formulation, is an ambivalent strategy whereby subaltern peoples simultaneously express their subservience to the more powerful and subvert that power by making mimicry seem like mockery.[20] The colonized person mimics the colonizer's language, dress, and behavior, but the mimicry is never perfect, never complete. This "almost the same but not quite" produces a disturbing effect, revealing the constructedness of the colonizer's identity and the instability of colonial power.

Ruth's speech and behavior can be read through this lens. When she tells Boaz, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin" (3:9), she is performing the role of a subservient woman—using the language of servitude, addressing Boaz as "my lord," presenting herself as a handmaid. Yet simultaneously, she is initiating a sexual encounter that will bind Boaz to her and to Naomi. She mimics the language of submission in order to gain power. The mimicry is effecttive precisely because it is ambivalent: Boaz cannot be sure if she is a supplicant or a seductress, a dependent or an equal. He responds by calling her "my daughter" (3:10-

[18] Gemma Tulud Cruz, *An Intercultural Theology of Migration: Pilgrims in the Wilderness* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 211-13.

[19] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 112-14.

[20] Bhabha, 85-92.

11), a term that maintains hierarchy, but he also promises to do "all that you ask" (3: 11), acknowledging her agency.

Her famous declaration to Naomi—"Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (1:16)—mimics the language of covenant loyalty, yet Ruth remains pointedly identified as a Moabite throughhout the narrative. The mimicry is never complete, never total, never assimilated. It is this incompleteness that makes it subvertsive. Ruth is "almost the same" as an Israelite, but not quite. She is "almost" a convert, "almost" a wife, "almost" a mother. This "almost" is the space of hybridity, where new identities are forged and old certainties are unsettled.

Ambivalence lies at the heart of Bhabha's framework, and it is the central characteristic of Ruth's identity. Ambivalence, for Bhabha, is not a failure to decide but a structural feature of colonial (and postcolonial) relations. The colonizer is both attracted to and repelled by the colonized; the colonized both desires and resists the colonizer's culture. This ambivalence is productive because it opens up spaces for negotiation and transformation. Ruth's relationship to Israelite culture is deeply ambivalent: she embraces Naomi's God yet remains marked as a foreigner. She becomes the mother of Israelite kings yet retains her Moabite identity. She is praised for her *ḥesed* yet acts in ways that challenge the very structures that define *ḥesed*.

Even at the end, when Ruth has given birth to Obed and been incorporated into the genealogy, the narrative does not erase her foreignness. The women of Bethlehem praise Ruth as "your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons" (4:15), but they do not call her an Israelite. The ambiguity lingers. And it is precisely this unresolved tension that allows the story to challenge the ethnic exclusivism of the postexilic community.

Performance and Embodiment

The ambiguity of Ruth's identity is further complicated when we consider the performance context of the story. Giles and Doan's performance-critical reconstruction argues that the book of Ruth is based on an earlier oral "Naomi Story" that was performed by female storytellers for female audiences.[21] In this performance tradition, the storyteller likely embodied multiple characters, including the male roles, in a kind of "drag" or "camp" performance that highlighted the constructedness of gender and power.

[21] Giles and Doan, *The Naomi Story—The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*, 44-47.

If this reconstruction is correct, then Ruth's ambiguity is not only literary but performative. The female storyteller playing Ruth would have embodied the character's hybridity: female playing female, but also possibly playing male characters in other scenes. The audience, composed primarily of women, would have been acutely aware of the performance's constructed nature, and this awareness would have heightened the subversive potential of the story. When Ruth mimics submission, the female audience sees a woman playing a woman playing a role. The layers of performance multiply, and the ambiguity deepens. Oral performance is inherently unstable, each telling is a new event, shaped by the audience's response and the performer's choices. The written version we have is a freeze-frame of a living tradition, but the traces of that living tradition remain in the text's ambiguities.

Migrant Experience as Liminal Revelation

The Wilderness as Third Space

The metaphor of the wilderness provides a powerful lens for understanding migrant ambiguity. Alex Nava reflects on the desert as a biblical symbol that carries both positive and negative valences: it is where Israel is tested and punished (Exodus 14-17), but also where God speaks tenderly to the people (Hos 2:14). It is a place of death and a place of divine encounter. It is barren and yet blooming with flowers of Christ (in the Egyptian monastic tradition).[22] For migrants crossing the Sonoran Desert or the Mediterranean Sea, the wilderness is equally ambiguous, a place of mortal danger and desperate hope, of death and new life, of abandonment and divine presence.

The wilderness, in Nava's analysis, does not resolve ambiguity but intensifies it. "The desert has neither time nor place," as the medieval text Granum sinapis puts it, "Its mode of being is unique… It is here, it is there, It is far, it is near, It is deep, it is high."[23] Nava draws on Meister Eckhart's identification of God with the desert, not because the desert is hospitable but because it resists human categories. To name God as Desert, Nava acknowledges, is to name a God who is "indifferent, merciless, devoid of forgiveness" as well as the God who meets the soul in solitude. The desert is the place where the certainties of settled life (property, family, ritual, identity) are stripped away, and the migrant is forced to confront the bare facts of existence: hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and the need for grace.

[22] Alex Nava, "God in the Desert: Searching for the Divine in the Midst of Death," in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey*, ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 62-75.
[23] Nava, 68.

The Ambiguity of Religious Practice

For migrant people, religion itself becomes an ambiguous resource. On one hand, faith provides comfort, continuity, and community. On the other, it can reinforce submission and justify suffering. Jacqueline Hagan documents how Catholic and Protestant migrants alike turn to religious rituals: blessings, prayers, pilgrimages to shrines, as they prepare for dangerous journeys.[24] They seek blessings from priests, purchase religious medals and prayer books, and pray to the Virgin of Guadalupe or other saints. Religion gives them courage and hope. Yet as Cruz shows, the same Filipino Catholicism that gives domestic workers strength also "makes suffering a reasonable part of life and Christian witness."[25] The valorization of suffering, the emphasis on the cross, and the idealization of self-sacrifice can all be used to keep migrants in their place, to make them accept exploitation as their divinely ordained lot.

The ambiguity of migrant religion challenges both "secular" readings that dismiss religion as false consciousness and theological readings that romanticize migrant piety. As Robert Schreiter notes, the ministry of reconciliation among migrants must take seriously both the healing power of religious practice and its potential to deepen suffering through valorization of the cross.[26] The task is not to choose one reading over the other but to hold both in tension, to recognize that the same ritual that gives comfort can also reinforce oppression, and that the same prayer that expresses hope can also express resignation.

This tension can be understood through Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness. Unhomeliness, for Bhabha, is "an estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world," where the boundaries between self and other, public and private, become blurred.[27] The migrant's relationship to religious tradition is unhomely: the familiar rituals are performed in unfamiliar settings, the language of prayer is spoken in a foreign tongue, the God of the homeland is called upon in a land of other gods. This unhomeliness produces a hybrid religious identity that is neither fully the religion of the homeland nor fully assimilated to the religion of the new land.

[24] Jacqueline Hagan, "Faith for the Journey: Religion as a Resource for Migrants," in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey*, ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 3-19.
[25] Cruz, *An Intercultural Theology of Migration: Pilgrims in the Wilderness*, 78.
[26] Robert Schreiter, "Migrants and the Ministry of Reconciliation," in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey*, ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 107-22.
[27] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 9-10.

Ruth's declaration that "your God shall be my God" (1:16) is not a simple conversion but an act of translation: a bringing of the Moabite self into relationship with the God of Israel in a way that transforms both. Ruth does not say, "I now worship Yahweh and reject Chemosh." She says, "Your God shall be my God"—a future-oriented statement that acknowledges that she is not yet fully at home with this God, that the relationship is in process. This is unhomely faith: faith that is not at home in any single tradition, faith that is always in translation, always in negotiation, always becoming.

The Bodies of Migrants

The ambiguity of migrant experience is nowhere more evident than in the body of the migrant. Cruz's analysis of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong reveals how migrant women's bodies are simultaneously sites of exploitation and resistance.[28] They are controlled by employers who regulate their appearance, their sexuality, their movements, and their labor. They are subjected to pregnancy tests, dress codes, and restrictions on socializing. Yet they also use their bodies to resist: they gather in public spaces on Sundays, they create informal networks, they use humor and song to cope with their situation, and they sometimes engage in relationships—including same-sex relationships—that challenge traditional norms.

Ruth's body is similarly ambiguous. On the threshing floor, she uncovers herself at Boaz's feet (3:7-8). This action has been interpreted in countless ways: as a sexual invitation, as a request for marriage, as a legal claim, as a desperate act of survival. The text refuses to clarify. What is clear is that Ruth uses her body to achieve her goals. She is not a passive victim, she is an agent. But her agency is exercised within a system that objectifies women's bodies. She uses the system's logic to subvert it.

This embodied ambiguity is central to a theology of migration. The migrant's body is not simply a site of suffering, it is also a site of resistance, creativity, and grace. The same body that is exploited in the fields or the factory is the body that prays, that embraces children, that builds community, that crosses borders in hope. A theology of migration must attend to the body, not as an abstraction but as the concrete, physical, vulnerable, and powerful reality of migrant life.

[28] Cruz, *An Intercultural Theology of Migration: Pilgrims in the Wilderness*, 32-46.

Divine Presence and Absence in Migration

The Silence of God as Postcolonial Critique

Perhaps the most theologically challenging dimension of the book of Ruth is the silence of God. As Kristin Moen Saxegaard documents, God is referred to frequently in the narrative. Yahweh appears eighteen times, Shaddai twice. Yet, God never speaks, never acts directly (except in the ambiguous statement that "Yahweh let her conceive" in 4:13), and never responds to Naomi's bitter complaints. Saxegaard concludes that "God is not absent, but he is silent."[29]

This divine silence is not absence but a particular mode of presence that refuses to clarify meaning. Naomi interprets her losses as divine punishment: "the hand of the LORD has turned against me" (1:13); "Shaddai has brought calamity upon me" (1:21). Yet the narrator's perspective subtly corrects Naomi: she is not empty—she has Ruth. The women of Bethlehem will later praise God for what God has done (4:14). The ambiguity is never resolved: is God punishing Naomi or blessing her? Is the silence abandonment or the precondition for human agency?

Bhabha's concept of ambivalence offers a way to read this divine silence. The colonizer's discourse, Bhabha argues, is structurally ambivalent: it both desires and fears the colonized, both seeks to control and is fascinated by the other.[30] The God of Israel in the postexilic period is similarly ambivalent: this God has both chosen Israel and allowed it to be conquered, both promised the land and permitted exile, both established the temple and watched it be destroyed. The divine silence in Ruth is the literary trace of this theological crisis.

This silence also functions as a critique of theodicies that would explain suffering as divine punishment. Naomi's friends in Bethlehem do not challenge her interpretation, they are simply "stirred" (1:19) by her return. The narrator does not explicitly correct her, but the narrative structure does. By placing Naomi's complaint alongside the facts that she has Ruth and that it is the beginning of the barley harvest (1:22), the narrator invites the reader to question Naomi's perspective. The silence of God is matched by the silence of the narrator, who refuses to pronounce judgment on Naomi's theological claims. The reader is left to wrestle with the ambiguity.

The Third Space of Incarnation

Several theologians develop the striking image of God as migrant. Peter C. Phan traces this theme through the patristic era,

[29] Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth*, 190-95.

[30] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 66-67.

where Christians understood themselves as paroikoi—sojourners, resident aliens—and God as the one who accompanies them.[31] The early Christians, scattered by persecution, saw their identity as fundamentally migratory. They were "aliens and exiles" in this world (1 Pet. 2:11), and their God was the God who had led Israel through the wilderness, who had accompanied Abraham on his journey, who had become flesh in Jesus the itinerant preacher.

Daniel G. Groody takes this further: "the God who first migrated to our world in the Incarnation and the God who calls us through Christ to migrate back with him to our spiritual homeland."[32] Jesus becomes the paradigmatic migrant: born away from home (in Bethlehem, not Nazareth), fleeing to Egypt as a refugee (Matt. 2:13-15), itinerant in ministry ("the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," Matt. 8:20), crucified outside the city gate (Heb. 13:12-13). The Gospel narratives are, in a sense, migration narratives: they tell the story of God's journey into human flesh, into human history, into the depths of human suffering and death.

The migrant's condition is not merely a human tragedy but a reflection of the divine nature. God, like the migrant, is "*ni de aquí, ni de allá*" (neither from here nor there), belonging fully to neither heaven nor earth, yet present in both. The migrant does not simply imitate God, the migrant participates in the divine mode of being. This is a radical theological claim: the migrant's ambiguity is not a deviation from the norm but a revelation of the norm. To be human is to be a migrant, to be God is to be a migrant as well.

Toward a Theology of Migration

What emerges from this analysis is a theology of migration that does not seek to resolve ambiguity but to inhabit it faithfully. First, it is **situated and contextual**. This theology arises not from abstract principles but from the lived experience of migrants themselves. As Cruz insists, following Delores Williams and Jung Young Lee, theology must begin with the "survival quality of life" of those on the margins. Bhabha's emphasis on the specificity of colonial and postcolonial contexts reinforces this commitment. There is no universal migrant experience, there are only particular migrants negotiating particular power relations in particular places. A theology of migration must attend to these specificities: the Filipina

[31] Peter C. Phan, "Migration in the Patristic Era: History and Theology," in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey*, ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 35-61.

[32] Daniel G. Groody, *A Theology of Migration the Bodies of Refugees and the Body of Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 16.

domestic worker in Hong Kong is not the same as the Mexican agricultural worker in California, who is not the same as the Syrian refugee in Germany. Each context shapes the ambiguity of migration differently.

Second, it is **dialogical and polyvocal**. This theology refuses to harmonize the different voices within the biblical text or within contemporary migrant communities. The book of Ruth gives us Naomi's bitter complaint and Boaz's cheerful blessing, Ruth's subversive action and the women's conventional praise. A theology of migration must hold these in tension rather than resolving them into a single meaning. The goal is not to find the "right" interpretation but to keep the conversation going, to allow multiple perspectives to coexist, to resist the closure that would silence any voice.

Third, it is **performative and embodied**. This theology recognizes that theology is not only something written but something enacted. Giles and Doan's performance-critical approach reminds us that the Naomi Story was originally embodied by female performers before female audiences, and that this embodied context shaped its meaning in ways that are lost when we read the text silently. A theology of migration must attend to the bodies of migrants—their labor, their sexuality, their suffering, their joy—not as illustrations of abstract truths but as the very locus of theological reflection.

Fourth, it is **hybrid**. This theology recognizes that the encounter between cultures produces not purity but mixture, not closure but openness. Hybridity is not a dilution of identity but a multiplication of possibilities. The migrant does not choose between Moab and Israel but becomes something new that includes both. A theology of migration must embrace this hybridity as a gift, not a threat. This means rejecting both assimilationist models (the migrant must become like us) and separatist models (the migrant must remain separate). Instead, it affirms the creative, transformative power of cultural encounter.

Fifth, it is **eschatologically oriented**. This theology recognizes that the ambiguity of migration will not be resolved in history. The promised land is never fully possessed, the exile recurs, the walls are rebuilt only to be torn down again. A theology of migration must therefore be a theology of hope, not hope for a resolution of ambiguity but hope that God is present in the ambiguity, that the journey is meaningful even when the destination is unclear, that the migrant's struggle is not in vain. This is the hope of the resurrection: not the end of suffering but the transformation of suffering into new life.

CONCLUSION

Ruth the Moabite remains a migrant whose identity is never fully resolved. She

is foreign and ancestress, submissive and subversive, faithful and sexually provocative. The God of the story is present and absent, silent and active, punishing and blessing. The narrative itself sits astride oral and written traditions, female and male voices, comedy and covenant. This is not a flaw to be corrected but a gift to be received. In an age of hardened borders and hardened hearts, the ambiguity of Ruth offers an alternative: a world where the migrant is not simply problem or victim but complex human being, where the receiving community is not simply host but also stranger; where God is not simply in control or absent but present in the silent spaces between. The migrant teaches us that all identity is hybrid, all belonging is negotiated, all home is unhomely. To welcome the migrant is not to perform an act of charity but to recognize a truth about ourselves: that we are all, in the end, ambiguous people, journeying through a third space toward a God whose silence is the condition of our speech and whose absence is the possibility of our freedom.

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