

A Woman with Multiple Identities: Reading the Ruth Character in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Our varied identities as Old Testament scholars located on the African continent need to shape our reading processes as well as our scholarship. The Ruth character in the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible carries multiple identities. If the character is engaged within the intersection of foreignness, migration, gender, and economic survival, which reading may emerge? How would such a reading impact the theory and praxis of South African Old Testament scholarship in present-day South Africa?

Keywords: Ruth, character, multiple identities, gender

A INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the century, a few white South African Old Testament scholars and I were asked to write short reflections on the following question: Is white South African Old Testament scholarship African?¹ As an introduction to the text of my reflections, I made a disclaimer that I would not to respond to the question in a heavily footnoted academic paper as I was trained to, but that I would instead, narrate the story of my journey as a budding Old Testament scholar:

I have defined my experiences in the early years of my introduction to Old Testament studies as follows:

It is in this set-up, that I found myself totally lost. In my own "little" understanding, I thought I was "spiritually deprived" because of the critical approaches to Bible and Theology I consumed; "contextually empty" as the theology we were doing had basically nothing to do with my African context! It is in this context that we grappled with the biblical text – the emphasis was on the need for the knowledge of the original languages in order for one to be able to do "proper" exegesis. We were expected to know the *Sitz im Leben* of a particular text in order to be able to understand it within its historical context. However, we did not attempt to move our

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¹ Madipoane Masenyanya (ngwana' Mphahlele), "Is White South African Old Testament Scholarship African?" *Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa* 12 (2002):3–8.

fingers an inch regarding the text's relevance for the modern reader's context. If the latter was considered, it would be spiritualised and many injustices on the ground would thus be left intact. We seldom, or rather, never addressed theological questions on African-South African issues such as the land question, unjust political systems, patriarchy et cetera. Instead, we would be referred to the works of European theological giants such as Rudolph Bultmann, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and so forth, works which had nothing to do with the African context."²

In short, in my attempt to answer the then "politically correct" question, I deliberately avoided searching for Hebrew words and/or contexts of the production of biblical texts as I was trained to. Such an approach would have kept me stuck in the past of biblical texts and in the process, let me miss the harsh reality of my experiences as a budding African biblical scholar who was taught by men of Caucasian descent all the way through my educational journey.³ Since the publication of the text on my reflections to the question, I have stirred the murky waters on the concepts of racism and/or issues of Africanisation within South African Old Testament scholarship.

B RECLAIMING OUR IDENTITIES?

In my view, my response to that critical question did not only raise questions about the need to acknowledge our identities and ideological stances in our scholarship as individual Old Testament scholars; but, even more importantly, about the need to read ancient texts, shaped as it were by their contexts of production, informed by the present harsh realities of our contexts as scholars located on the African continent. Such a deliberate consciousness about our social location in the reading and interpretive processes, irrespective of whether the scholars are of Indian, Coloured, Caucasian or African descent, is pertinent, especially given the American and Eurocentric training and scholarship that have nurtured and continue to shape biblical scholarship globally. Walter Bruggemann is thus on target that:

² Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele), "Teaching Western-Oriented Old Testament Studies to African Students: An Exercise in Wisdom or in Folly?" *Old Testament Essays* 17(2004):455–469.

³ For example, Hulisani Ramantswana, "Past the Glorious Age: Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa: Are We Moving Anywhere Close to Blackening Old Testament Scholarship?" *Scriptura* 119/3 (2020):3, reminds us that, "The so-called "golden era" in Old Testament scholarship was an era of white dominance that thrived under the colonial-apartheid regime. For example, in 1983 at UNISA, the Department of Old Testament had fourteen lecturers, who were all white... The number of lecturers in the Department continued to grow over time. Except for the respective size of the departments, the situation at other Afrikaans universities was no different—the Old Testament scholars were all white."

The problem is that in the great career of western objectivity very few people were let into the room, which was largely peopled by white males of a certain class and perspective. Indeed it has been precisely the admission of others into the room that has made our treasured objectivity (and consequent hegemony) fragile and exposed.⁴

Moreover, history has revealed that especially in contexts like South Africa, and dare one say, the African continent South of the Sahara, where there is evidence that Christianity has grown in recent years,⁵ the sacred texts of Christianity, including the Hebrew Bible (cf. in particular in the African Initiated Churches: the Zion Christian Church as a case in point), whether biblical scholars care to acknowledge this or not, continue to wield authority in the lives of many a marginalised Bible reader. Like the colonialists (in collaboration with like-minded missionaries) and the apartheid masters/architects, African Bible readers at the grassroots level have continued to embrace these texts, informed by their varied experiences and/or rather mostly, by the experiences of the male interpreters of these texts.

One colleague who took the contents of my article seriously and challenged what he deemed as taking scholarship back to the dualisms of African versus non-African or Black versus white, among others, was the honouree, that is, Professor Gerrie Snyman. I was heartened that what started as a debate that could have eventually proved hostile, divisive, and perhaps futile, in my view, not only strengthened our ties as scholars but also led to Snyman's re-definition of his identity, that is, as a Euro-African South African Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible scholar! In that way, Snyman sought to do justice to his dual heritage, that is, his European ancestral heritage as well as his heritage as an African born on the continent.

Since then, I have been fascinated and perhaps comforted by Snyman's boldness in facing his Euro-African context head-on in his interaction with the biblical text, which led him to propose a hermeneutic of vulnerability.⁶ Taking his cue from Perkinson about an encounter with black eyes in the context of coming into consciousness with whiteness, Snyman insists that there is a need to "look into black eyes and not deny the reflection."⁷ Such an approach that

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Post-Modern Imagination: Texts under Negotiation* (London: SCM, 1993), 8.

⁵ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); N. Wariboko, "Pentecostalism in Africa," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia: African History* (ed. Thomas Spear; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–24.

⁶ Gerrie Snyman, "A Hermeneutic of Vulnerability: Redeeming Cain?" *STJ* 1 (2015): 633–665.

⁷ Gerrie Snyman, "African Hermeneutics: Outing Whiteness," *Neotestamentica* 42/1 (2008):95–118.

deliberately uses present day Afrikaner/Euro-African contexts as an optic to engage biblical texts basically remains a mirage and/or a distaste to many a biblical scholar of Caucasian descent, both locally and internationally. The reason is that biblical studies that take seriously the contexts of present day Bible readers (be this gender-conscious, ecologically conscious, Black-conscious, etc.) is basically associated with the scholarship and/or contexts of the marginalised Other.⁸ As it is also anti-mainstream, it is not regarded as hard-core Old Testament scholarship; hence, South African Old Testament scholar, Jurie le Roux easily describes such scholarship as the lowering of standards:

South Africa, is however, now standing on the verge of radical and far-reaching social and political change. These events will certainly cause dramatic changes to the university system and the nature of its staff. *The possible lowering of standards and the adaptation of courses in order to address the grave social and economic needs of Africa may endanger the good work of the past thirty years.* Radical changes may lead to the lack of a second and a third generation to continue the progress of the past three decades⁹ (italics, author's).

Nonetheless, I agree with New Testament scholar Teresa Okure that:

Our contemporary life experiences are not only a valid standpoint for understanding the biblical text. They are the only standpoint we have. Experience is the primary context for doing theology and reading the Bible. Experience here is not feeling, but total emersion in life, being seasoned by life.¹⁰

I am therefore delighted to contribute to this volume that celebrates the scholarship of Professor Snyman, who was not just a colleague but also a friend and supporter, one who has made notable contributions to Hebrew Bible scholarship in and beyond South Africa. I will do this by casting a gaze at the Ruth character with her multiple identities informed by some of the realities of present-day post-apartheid South Africa.

It is argued that Ruth's identity as a woman, foreigner, migrant (labourer) and widow (poor person/ low socio-economic status) is pivotal not only in the unfolding of her narrative in the book that bears her name in the Hebrew Bible but also in how Ruth interacts (or is constructed by the narrator to interact) with

⁸ Sarojini Nadar. "Beyond the 'Ordinary Reader' and the 'Invisible Intellectual': Pushing Beyond the Boundaries of Contextual Biblical Studies Discourses" in "Beyond the Future of the Biblical Past: Envisioning Biblical Studies on a Global Key" (eds. Roland Boer and Fernando Segovia; Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 13–28.

⁹ Jurie H. Le Roux, *A Story of Two Ways: Thirty Years of Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa* (Pretoria: Verba Vitae, 1993), 350–351.

¹⁰ Teresa Okure, "First Was the Life, not the Book," in *To Cast Fire upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today's Multicultural Global Context* (ed. Teresa Okure; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2000).

other characters in the story. The following key question will thus form the pivot around which the subject matter investigated in this article will rotate: Which reading may emerge at the intersection of gender, foreignness, migration, and economic survival, if the character of Ruth in the book of Ruth, is read through an African lens, especially in the post-apartheid South African context?

I have read the book of Ruth from multiple perspectives previously.¹¹ However, the subject of Ruth's multiple identities was never used deliberately as an optic through which to engage the book's contents. In this essay, I will foreground the element of identity informed by the nature of the present article in order to honour a scholar who pushed us to reckon with the question of who we are as scholars and, more importantly, to bring our identities to bear on our scholarship.

C FOREIGNNESS

In a literal sense, a foreigner is *not* a child of the soil (*ngwana wa mobu*). S/he would have for one reason or another left her or his native country to settle in another, whether permanently or partially.

The notion of foreignness basically carries with it some negative sentiments. It entails alienation from one's native context, real self, and familiar things, among others. In hospitable cultures like some traditional African cultures, foreignness (e.g. as it relates to visitors), undergirded by notions of *botho/ubuntu* (*hesed* in the book of Ruth), also entailed positive sentiments. The proverb, *Moeng tla ka gešo re je ka wena*, says it all. Its tenor reveals that delicacies get to be enjoyed with the arrival of visitors in a family. It thus occasions no wonder that during the period of *apartheid* in South Africa, African countries such as Tanzania, Zambia, Angola and Malawi, among others, opened their doors for fellow Africans as "refugees," who then became foreigners in the host countries. Such African countries who pretty much like Moab, hosted foreigners (read: Black exiled South Africans), reminds one of the hospitality of Moab to Elimelech's family (Ruth 1:1), a hospitality displayed to historical enemies—indeed, *hesed* or *botho/Ubuntu* at its best!

At the same time, many an African South African who was born and bred during the period of *apartheid* in South Africa, knows what it means to be foreign in their own home. The systems of colonialism and *apartheid* succeeded in turning us to foreigners in the land of our foremothers and forefathers. For example, in patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal African cultures, girl children

¹¹ The book of Ruth was read from the perspective of single Christian African women (2013); in the context of poverty (2004b), in the context of identity crises in Africa-South Africa (2004a) and in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic (2007). It was also brought into conversation with Rebecca Alpert's *Lesbian Reading of the Book of Ruth* within the Metsoalle Context of Lesotho Reading as well as a reading that was informed by the religio-cultural African context (2012).

may be designated foreigners on own home space; hence, the Jamaican proverb, "Marry your daughter as soon as you can and your boy as you wish."¹² It could thus be argued that Ruth's identity as a foreigner relates very well with the identity, especially of African-South African, girl-children and women. As a girl child, Ruth began life as a foreigner in her father's house. However, as one whose humanity had to be validated through heterosexual marriage in a patriarchal context, Ruth ended up as a bride (yet another foreign status) in the house of Elimelech (Ruth 1:4). In that sense, Ruth, now a bride in a foreign space, having left the house of her mother (Ruth 1:8), becomes a foreigner as a daughter-in-law in the house of Elimelech. In the African tradition, she would also be foreign to the ancestors of Elimelech and his sons in that patriarchal context. (Ruth 2:20). However, like many Africans in apartheid South Africa, Ruth would then be a Moabite foreigner in her own home territory due to her gender in a context that did not legitimate female power.

The trait of foreignness is linked to migration. To the latter feature, we will return momentarily. For now, suffice it to mention that Ruth's commitment to Naomi, her mother-in-law, and her commitment to a woman's proverbial grave, one that could only be found at her husband's home space,¹³ would plunge her into further foreignness as she would, against the wishes of Naomi, head with Naomi to Bethlehem (Ruth 1:15). The Hebrew text is consistent in foregrounding Ruth's foreign status as a Moabite woman—*Rûṯ hammô'ābiyyāh* (Ruth 2: 2; 2:6); and *na'ārāh mō'ābiyyāh* (a young woman who is a Moabite, Ruth 4:5). Could this have been an overt critique by the narrator that Naomi brought a real foreigner into Judahite territory? Elsewhere, Ruth also acknowledges her status as a foreigner (*gēr*): "Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner (*nokrîyâ*)?" (Ruth 2:10)

Ruth was a foreigner in terms of her Moabite identity, her gender and her socio-economic status as a widow. Therefore, Gale Yee rightly argues: "Refracting the story of Ruth through the prism of Asian American experience, I argue that, in its own way, the ideology of the text constructs Ruth the Moabite as a model minority and perpetual foreigner."¹⁴ Perhaps Ruth's foreignness was the main reason that Naomi not only exposed her to the risks of possible sexual molestation by the male labourers in the field of Boaz (Ruth 2:15) but also behind Naomi's calculated move to expose Ruth to the risks at the threshing floor in the

¹² Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Orbis: Maryknoll, 2004).

¹³ *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* (the grave of a (married) woman is at her in-laws' home), J. R. D. Rakoma, *Marema-ka-Dika tša Sesotho sa Leboa* (Pretoria: van Schaik, 1971) 146.

¹⁴ Gale A. Yee, "She Stood in Tears amid the Alien Corn": Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority" in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong B Liew, and Fernando F Segovia; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 119.

thick of the night (Ruth 3:1–4)? Or could it be that the Hebrew Bible narrators find comfort in the sexualisation of foreign women and thus, Randall Bailey would have rightly cautioned:

...we must both decry the ways in which biblical narrators only allow women to function as seducers as a means to achieve national liberation and be cautious in our readings as to what is possibly going on in the text... We need to be aware of the androcentric and misogynistic ideologies embedded in such a paradigm of national struggle.¹⁵

Although Bailey's argument was made in the context of the Esther text, if we argue for the pre-exilic dating of the book of Ruth and thus the legitimization of the Davidic monarchy, Bailey's arguments may hold water even here, especially given the narrative of the origins of the Moabites in Gen 19:30–38.

D WHAT NOW OF MIGRATION IN THE EQUATION?

It was migration that landed the family of Elimelech in the country of Moab and facilitated the total assimilation of Ruth into Elimelech's family. Due to her marriage to Mahlon, Ruth would later migrate to Judah, not in search of greener pastures, but as already noted, due to Ruth's sense of commitment to Naomi herself, her people, her God (Ruth 1:16–17). It is such an unusual commitment (cf. the Hebrew word *davaq* in Ruth 1:14) of a woman to another woman that has prompted lesbian feminist scholars to read this text as an affirmation of same-sex love and thus of the affirmation of the sexualities of gender-non confirming persons.¹⁶

As already noted, migration and foreignness are bedfellows. To the former feature of Ruth's identity, we now turn. The African proverb, *Tlala e ntšhitše noga moleteng*,¹⁷ comes to mind here. The migration of Elimelech, the family head, in the opening chapter of the book (Ruth 1:1–2), is not linked to military invasion as in present day Ukraine/ Russia, Palestine/Israel and other parts of the African continent such as Cameroon, the Sudan and Ethiopia, among others. It is linked to Elimelech's commitment to putting bread on the table as the family head because *Lebitla la monna le kgaufsi ga tsela*.¹⁸ What comes to

¹⁵ Randall C. Bailey, "That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hassadah!" The Intersec(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther," in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong B. Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 242.

¹⁶ Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Rebecca Alpert's Lesbian Reading of the Book of Ruth within the Metsoalle Context of Lesotho," *JGRA* 18 (2012):43-62.

¹⁷ Literally, hunger has caused/forced a snake to get out of a hole.

¹⁸ A man's grave is to be found next to the road. Traditionally, a trend that has either changed radically and/or even been reversed in present-day South Africa, a man as a

mind regarding the theme of migration as it relates to the South African *apartheid* history was its gendered nature. Only African men were allowed to be migrant labourers. To the detriment of the African family, our forefathers had to migrate from rural areas to urban areas in order to provide cheap labour for their white masters. African men, even from other parts of the continent, including Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia, had to migrate to South Africa in search of greener pastures. Such a gendered migration pattern continues to happen, especially from the Northern parts of the African continent to Europe, many a time at the cost of the lives of these African men who die to live. Today, in many Two-Thirds majority contexts, it is not uncommon to find migrations, especially of younger females who are being sex-trafficked into more affluent Northern contexts.

The irony of the flight of Elimelech's family from hunger in the house of bread (Bethlehem) is that the family goes into a hostile territory, that is, Moab. Economic survival revealed the family's craving for dying to live. However, it never rains, but it pours (*Mepipi ka moka e a na*). On arrival as foreigners in Moab, the traditional breadwinners, and the carriers of the patrilineage all die, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law as widows (Ruth 1:3–5). The latter category of people, together with the stranger/foreigner and the orphan, is listed among the powerless in the various corpora of the Hebrew Bible (cf. the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings). As Musa Dube has observed, Moab, a country of problematic origins and hostile interactions with the chosen race, cannot be good enough for the chosen people. She thus reasons: "In Moab, divine powers are scarce or even absent... In Orpah's untold story, Moab remains the land of famine as attested by death, childless marriages, and lack of godly powers."¹⁹

The painful narrative of the death of three males in a patriarchal world could be a pointer to the harsh reality of the uncertainty, vulnerability and hopelessness connected with one's foreign status, one's perpetual struggle to fit in and/or be assimilated by the mainstream host culture. The preceding fact will be buttressed by Ruth, the Moabite's relocation to Bethlehem with Naomi, her mother-in-law.

E GENDER AND ECONOMIC SURVIVAL²⁰

Naomi, who was familiar with the harsh reality of heterosexual married women's economic survival being tied to that of their husbands, exhorts her daughters-in-

family head, was/is expected to provide for the family, food, shelter and protection, among other necessities, Rakoma, *Marema-ka-Dika*, 146.

¹⁹ Musa W. Dube, "Divining Ruth for International Relations" in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 179–195 (189).

²⁰ *Mmago ngwana o swara thipa ka bogaleng* (A mother holds a knife by its cutting edge).

law to return, not to their fathers' but to their mothers' houses to seek husbands for themselves. She is too old to bear sons who would then become their husbands and support them economically (Ruth 1:8–13). The first chapter reveals the basic role of a woman as a wife (*iššah/mosadi*) in a patriarchal culture as well as her role as a mother of sons; the latter would later also be expected to be husbands who would perpetuate the patrilineage. In such a context, like in many a patriarchal African context, it would have been unheard of for Chilion and Mahlon to remain wife-less. Thus, ideal notions of womanhood (*bosadi*) and manhood (*bonna*), though both linked, were distinct. The obsession of Naomi with the deceased males also points to the normativity of the male who, in that cultural context, continued to call the shots even from his grave. Ruth, a younger widow, seems to hold a different view though. Unlike a man who should leave his father and mother to cleave (*davāq*: Ruth 1:14) to his wife, she chooses to cleave to an old 'husband-less' woman:

But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from following you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and worse, if anything but death separates you and me!" (Ruth 1:16–17 MEV)

Naomi's reluctance to return with her daughter-in-law would not have made sense in our communal, family-oriented African cultures. Is it not that *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*²¹? One's status as *mosadisadi* (a woman of worth) is determined not only by her attachment to a man in a heterosexual marriage but also by her capacity as a widow, irrespective of her age, not to divorce her husband's grave.

The earlier migration of Elimelech with his family into Moab would now be replaced by the migration of two 'husband-less' women, still in pursuit of economic survival. Ruth would carry three strikes against her—gender (widow), foreignness and ethnicity, while Naomi would carry the strikes of gender and old age. With the latter strike, though—and Naomi's insider racial/ethnic status—was embedded the wealth of her experience. Unlike our forebears, in this textual context, a migrant labourer would not be a heterosexually married man. No! It would be a young (?) foreign woman who is constructed by the narrator as being committed to her mother-in-law, one whose love to Naomi had also been confirmed by the women of Bethlehem: "... For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him" (Ruth 4:15: MEV).

Ruth's marriage proposal to an elderly man at the threshing floor (Ruth 3; cf. the sexualised undertones of a foreign woman—pretty much like the

²¹ *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, Rakoma. *Marema-ka-Dika*, 146.

nokrîyâ/Woman Stranger of Prov 1–9)—a proposal that had originated from Naomi, her mother-in-law, would stand in stark contrast to the marriage proposal of many an African foreign male national (who have migrated and continue to migrate into South Africa) to younger South African women. Some of these are committed more to the country (and its resources: greener pastures?) and thus the desire to acquire citizenship than to the women they propose marriage to. In such cases, South African women become objectified and end up, irrespective of their socio-economic status, being used as a means to an end.

For hungry and poor women, whose bodies often become the only means to combat hunger, Ruth's problematic visit to the threshing floor, buttressed by violent fundamentalist readings of the Hebrew Bible, may be used to endorse sex work and sex trafficking. Hebrew Bible feminist scholar, K. Doob Sakenfeld relates the following painful narrative, one reminiscent of a discourse that made some rounds during the HIV and AIDS pandemic on the continent. "AIDS will kill you in ten years while hunger will kill you tomorrow." Sakenfeld relates the story of a 14-year old girl from a destitute family in the Philippines. Having accepted an offer by a "recruiter" to be a dancer in a foreign wealthier country, she responded to a female pastor who questioned her decision: "Ruth put herself forward to a rich man in hopes that he would marry her and take care of her family. God made things turn out right for Ruth and God will take care of me too" (2003:35).²²

Although a perpetual foreigner, one whose labour was exploited, according to other scholars, Ruth eventually became assimilated as legitimated by patriarchy. The exploitation of the labour of many an African foreign national in South Africa and their confrontation with the wrath of the Operation Dudula²³ protesters come to mind here. At the end of the book, Boaz, a man, shows kindness (*botho/ubuntu*) to Ruth, a migrant labourer, a foreigner and the widow of Mahlon. Ruth's agency in choosing to stay faithful to her assimilation into the Israelite community persisted even when she encountered initial pushbacks—first, when Ruth chose to cling to Naomi, her mother-in-law by returning with her to Bethlehem (Ruth 1) and second, when after proposing marriage to Boaz at the threshing floor (Ruth 3), he informed her that there was a fitting *go'el* to act as *levir* for Mahlon, her deceased husband. It was only when the closest *go'el* refused to take up the role that Boaz showed kindness (*botho/ubuntu*) to Ruth.

²² Katharine D. Sakenfeld, *Just Wives: Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 35.

²³ According to Thabi Myeni, Operation Dudula is an unregistered community organisation formed as a campaign against illegal immigrants". In" Aljazeera, 8 April 2022. He continues, "Operation Dudula is a splinter group from a faction in the Put South African First movement, an organisation that first popularised and renewed anti-immigrant campaigns on social media before finding expression on the ground." Thabi Myeni, What is Operation Dudula, South Africa's anti-migration vigilante? *Aljazeera*, 8 April 2022.

Ruth eventually bore a son, Obed, who became the great-grandfather of David, who became not only the most powerful king in Israelite history but from whom the New Testament's promised Messiah would be born (Ruth 4:22).

F CONCLUSION

In our commitment to staying true to our identities as biblical scholars and thus using our various South African contexts to engage sacred texts including proverbs/folklorist texts and Hebrew Bible texts, among others, perhaps we may benefit from revisiting the following questions that were rightfully asked by the Kairos Theologians:

Why does this[Church] theology not demand that the oppressed stand up for their rights and wage a struggle against their oppressors? Why does it not tell them that it is "their" duty to work for justice and to change the unjust structures?

Correspondingly, how may the character of Ruth in the intersection of foreignness, migration, gender (widowhood) and economic survival be brought to bear on our theory and praxis of Old Testament scholarship in post-apartheid South Africa? The calls for the decoloniality and Africanisation of our teaching and research offerings are a reminder that ours is an educational system steeped in foreignness, one that thrived historically and even until today boasts in American and Eurocentric knowledges, perspectives and philosophies. Although African knowledge systems and philosophical frameworks, like women in patriarchal contexts, have been marginalised, it is the responsibility of scholars who are located on the African continent to reclaim our heritage and rise. In terms of migration, especially in the global village, while there is a need to be comfortable in our own skins (and remain in Bethlehem-Judah), it should not be a challenge to take our cue from Ruth and undertake an easy migration from one country to another. We could do that to exchange ideas with scholars from other global contexts while remaining true to our real selves and the continent that has given birth to us. In our commitment to socio-economic survival, especially in a context where the STEM fields are getting more attention in terms of government funding than those in the Humanities, perhaps we stand to benefit more from the Multi, Inter and Transdisciplinary approaches to the subject matter of Religion and Theology in our teaching offerings and research.

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