

Inclusivism and the Integration of Foreigners: A Socio-Theological Narrative Reading of the Book of Ruth in the Dialectic of Community Identity

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Received: 13/05/2026

Revised: 17/07/2026

Received: 23/08/2026

Abstract

Tensions regarding identity boundaries and the marginalization of foreigners frequently dominate both ancient and modern socio-religious discourses. Within the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Ruth offers a compelling counter-narrative to rigid exclusivity by embedding the Moabite outsider at the center of communal restoration and redemptive history. This article explores the dynamics of inclusivism and the integration of foreigners through a socio-theological narrative reading of the Book of Ruth within the dialectic of community identity. Utilizing qualitative narrative analysis integrated with socio-scientific insights, the study examines how characterization, plot trajectories, and socio-cultural institutions—specifically *chesed* (covenantal loyalty) and *go'el* (kinsman-redeemer)—redefine boundary-making mechanisms between Israelite insiders and Moabite outsiders. The findings demonstrate that Ruth's narrative deconstructs xenophobic paradigms by portraying social integration not as passive assimilation, but as a dynamic, reciprocal process driven by radical ethical solidarity and divine providence. Ultimately, the Book of Ruth provides a transformative socio-theological framework for contemporary debates on migration, social inclusion, and the reconstruction of inclusive communal identities.

Keywords

Book of Ruth; Inclusivism; Integration of Foreigners; Narrative Hermeneutics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tensions regarding identity boundaries and the marginalization of foreigners have repeatedly dominated socio-religious discourse, both in ancient Israelite communities and in contemporary societies. In many religious traditions, communal identity is often constructed through rigid distinctions between “insiders” and “outsiders,” which in turn generates exclusive attitudes, suspicion, and even xenophobia toward migrants and other ethnic groups. The Hebrew Bible itself contains texts that appear to reinforce ethnic and cultic boundaries, such as the prohibition against Moabites entering the assembly of the Lord (Deut. 23:3–4), alongside other texts that celebrate the acceptance of foreigners. This very tension makes the study of community identity and the integration of foreigners persistently relevant,



especially as modern religious communities struggle with issues of migration, multiculturalism, and social cohesion (Crouch, 2014).

The Book of Ruth occupies a unique position within the Hebrew canon because it presents a Moabite woman—a member of a people explicitly rejected in Deuteronomistic tradition—as a central figure in the restoration of a community and in the lineage of David. The narrative sharply questions exclusivist assumptions about Israelite identity and offers what may be called a counter-narrative to religious xenophobia. Although numerous studies have examined the Book of Ruth from literary, theological, gender, and social-scientific perspectives, a socio-theological reading that specifically employs the dialectic of community identity as its primary analytical framework remains underdeveloped (Schipper, 2016). In other words, how the Ruth narrative reconstructs the relationship between Israelites and Moabites not merely as a matter of tolerance, but as a dynamic and reciprocal process of identity formation, has not received adequate attention in academic discourse.

This article employs qualitative narrative analysis integrated with socio-scientific insights to read the Book of Ruth within the dialectic of community identity. The analysis focuses on characterization, plot trajectories, and the socio-cultural institutions that operate in the narrative, particularly *chesed* (covenantal loyalty) and *go'el* (kinsman-redeemer). These institutions function not only as elements of ancient Israelite legal and social background but also as symbolic mechanisms that redefine the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Through this approach, the reading of Ruth avoids reducing the text to a binary opposition between inclusivism and exclusivism. Instead, it demonstrates how communal identity is negotiated through ethical action, social relations, and the recognition of the agency of the foreigner (Lau, 2010).

The central thesis of this article is that the Book of Ruth deconstructs xenophobic paradigms by portraying the integration of foreigners not as passive assimilation but as a reciprocal process driven by radical ethical solidarity and divine providence. Ruth does not merely abandon her Moabite identity in order to become Israelite; rather, she exhibits a loyalty that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries, while Boaz and the Bethlehem community respond with legal and social recognition through the institution of *go'el*. In this way, the narrative rejects a logic of integration that demands the total erasure of one's original identity. Instead, it presents a model of integration that honors the contribution, dignity, and moral capacity of the foreigner. Within this framework, *chesed* serves as a theological bridge connecting divine commitment with inclusive social practice (Mtshiselwa, 2018).

This study is expected to make a twofold contribution. Academically, it offers a more comprehensive socio-theological framework for reading the relationship between community identity and the integration of foreigners in the Old Testament. Practically, it provides hermeneutical resources for religious communities grappling with migration, social inclusion, and the reconstruction of shared

identity in pluralistic societies. The subsequent sections of this article outline the theoretical framework of identity and social boundaries, examine the socio-historical context of the Book of Ruth, present a narrative analysis of its key characters and institutions, and discuss the theological and ethical implications for contemporary discourse on foreigners and inclusive communities (Claassens, 2020).

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates narrative analysis with socio-scientific criticism to examine how the Book of Ruth constructs community identity and negotiates the inclusion of a foreigner. The primary data consists of the Masoretic Text of the Book of Ruth, read with close attention to plot development, characterization, point of view, repetition, and narrative gaps (Gunn & Fewell, 1993). Socio-scientific insights, particularly social identity theory and boundary-making mechanisms, are utilized to interpret how the categories of “Israelite” and “Moabite” are formed, challenged, and redefined within the narrative (Esler, 2003). This interdisciplinary approach enables the study to move beyond purely literary or historical observations toward a deeper understanding of the social and theological dynamics embedded in the text.

The analytical procedure involves a sequential process: first, a close reading of the Hebrew text with reference to the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* and standard English translations; second, the identification and thematic analysis of key socio-theological concepts, especially *chesed* and *go’el*, within their ancient Israelite kinship and legal settings; and third, a theological hermeneutic that reads the narrative as a witness to divine providence and human ethical responsibility. Methodological rigor is maintained through triangulation, whereby narrative, social-scientific, and theological perspectives are brought into critical conversation, and through sustained engagement with recent scholarship on Ruth, migration, and identity (Claassens, 2020; Mtshiselwa, 2018). This procedure ensures that the interpretation remains textually grounded while also being contextually relevant to contemporary debates on social inclusion and communal identity.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Deconstructing Ethnic Boundaries: Ruth, Chesed, and the Redefinition of Insiders and Outsiders

The narrative of Ruth opens with a series of boundary-crossing movements that immediately destabilize fixed categories of identity. Elimelech’s family migrates from Bethlehem to Moab due to famine, and his sons marry Moabite women, thereby blurring the ethnic and cultic lines that later Deuteronomistic texts would harden (Deut. 23:3–4). Ruth, as a Moabite widow, occupies a double marginality: she is both a foreigner and a childless woman without male protection. Yet the narrative refuses to portray her as a passive victim or a threat to Israelite purity. Instead, Ruth’s voice emerges as

one of the most theologically profound expressions of covenant loyalty in the Hebrew Bible, demonstrating that ethnic origin does not determine moral capacity or divine favor (Schipper, 2016). This narrative strategy begins the deconstruction of xenophobic paradigms by placing the outsider at the ethical center of the story.

Ruth's famous declaration to Naomi in 1:16–17 functions as the hermeneutical key for redefining insider and outsider status. Her words—"your people shall be my people, and your God my God"—employ covenant language typically reserved for the relationship between YHWH and Israel. By invoking the divine name and binding herself to Naomi with an oath, Ruth does not merely express personal affection; she enacts a radical transfer of social and religious allegiance (Lau, 2010). From the perspective of social identity theory, Ruth engages in what may be called self-categorization, but the narrative presents this not as an abandonment of her Moabite identity for the sake of assimilation. Rather, her commitment is grounded in *chesed*, a covenantal loyalty that transcends ethnic boundaries and redefines kinship on the basis of ethical solidarity rather than blood or national origin.

Naomi's transformation further illustrates the reciprocal nature of boundary redefinition. At the beginning of the narrative, Naomi perceives herself as empty and bitter, even urging her daughters-in-law to return to their maternal homes because she believes she has nothing to offer them (1:11–13). Her initial worldview assumes that security and identity are tied to ethnic and familial continuity. However, Ruth's stubborn loyalty challenges this assumption, and as the narrative progresses, Naomi moves from bitterness to proactive agency, instructing Ruth in the customs of the *go'el* and ultimately receiving the child Obed as her own (4:16–17). This transformation indicates that the integration of the foreigner is not a one-way street; it also transforms the host community's self-understanding and restores its capacity for hope (Claassens, 2020).

Boaz's first encounter with Ruth in the field similarly subverts ethnic stereotyping. Although Boaz initially refers to Ruth as "the Moabite woman" (2:6), his subsequent speech and actions extend to her the protections and blessings belonging to an Israelite member of the covenant community. He calls her "my daughter" (2:8) and blesses her under the wings of YHWH, the God of Israel, under whose wings she has sought refuge (2:12). Boaz recognizes Ruth's *chesed* toward Naomi as a defining feature of her character, declaring in 3:11 that all the people know she is a "woman of noble character" (*'eshet chayil*), the same phrase used of the idealized woman in Proverbs 31. By ascribing this honorific to a Moabite, the narrative dismantles the ethnic logic that would automatically exclude her from the community's moral exemplars (Crouch, 2014).

Thus, *chesed* emerges in the narrative as a boundary-crossing ethical principle that redefines who belongs to the covenant community. Ruth is never required to deny her Moabite origin; in fact, the narrator repeatedly reminds the reader of her ethnicity, even after her marriage to Boaz (4:5, 10). The

narrative therefore does not erase difference but reinterprets it within a framework of covenantal loyalty and mutual responsibility. The insider/outsider binary is destabilized because Ruth, the quintessential outsider, becomes the model of covenantal faithfulness, while some Israelite characters, such as the unnamed kinsman, fail to embody that ideal. In this way, the Book of Ruth replaces an ethnic criterion of belonging with an ethical and relational one.

The Go'el Institution and Reciprocal Integration: Legal, Social, and Theological Dimensions

The institution of *go'el*, or kinsman-redeemer, provides the legal and social framework through which the narrative explores the cost and complexity of integration. In ancient Israel, the *go'el* was responsible for redeeming land that a poor relative had sold and, in certain circumstances, for levirate marriage to preserve the name of the deceased (Lev. 25:25; Deut. 25:5–10). The Book of Ruth creatively combines these duties, presenting Boaz as both redeemer of Elimelech's land and husband of Ruth, the Moabite widow. This legal framework is not incidental to the narrative's theology; it serves as the concrete social mechanism by which the foreigner is incorporated into the covenant community, demonstrating that divine restoration operates through ordinary human institutions (Esler, 2003).

The unnamed kinsman's refusal to redeem Ruth provides a sharp contrast to Boaz's inclusive action. The closer redeemer is willing to purchase the land, which would increase his estate, but he refuses to marry Ruth because it would "ruin his inheritance" (4:6). The text does not specify precisely how his inheritance would be damaged, but the likely concern is that children born to Ruth would inherit the redeemed land, thereby diminishing the kinsman's patrimony. His decision reveals a logic of self-preservation that prioritizes economic interest over covenantal responsibility. In social-scientific terms, he represents a boundary-maintaining posture that views the foreigner as a potential threat to the stability and continuity of the community's resources (Lau, 2010). His refusal is not merely a legal choice but a moral failure to embody *chesed*.

Boaz, by contrast, embraces the full obligations of the *go'el*, including marriage to Ruth. His action is publicly ratified at the city gate, where the legal transaction is witnessed by the elders and the people (4:9–11). The community's blessing invokes the names of Rachel, Leah, and Tamar, thereby linking Ruth to Israel's matriarchs and to a lineage of women whose stories involve complex, sometimes transgressive, acts of courage and loyalty. The reference to Tamar, in particular, is significant because Tamar was also a foreign woman who acted decisively to secure her place in the family line of Judah (Gen. 38). By placing Ruth in this genealogical tradition, the narrative legitimizes her inclusion and presents her as a mother in Israel whose Moabite origin does not disqualify her from the covenant promises (Schipper, 2016).

The integration of Ruth is portrayed as a reciprocal process in which she actively participates rather than passively receives. In chapter 3, Ruth follows Naomi's instructions and approaches Boaz at the threshing floor, requesting that he spread his cloak over her as a gesture of redemption (3:9). Her action is bold and potentially scandalous, yet the narrator presents it as an act of *chesed* (3:10) that seeks the security and well-being of both Naomi and herself. Boaz responds not with exploitation but with honor, promising to do all that she asks and commending her for choosing him over younger men. The narrative thus constructs a model of integration in which the foreigner exercises agency, dignity, and moral initiative, while the host community responds with legal recognition and covenantal commitment (Claassens, 2020).

The birth of Obed and the community's naming of the child further demonstrate the reciprocal transformation of identity. The women of Bethlehem bless YHWH and declare to Naomi, "A son has been born to you" (4:17), thereby making the Moabite's child Naomi's own. The foreigner does not merely join the community; she becomes the vehicle through which the community's future is secured. The genealogy that concludes the book traces the line from Perez to David, placing Ruth at the center of redemptive history. In this way, the *go'el* institution transcends its legal function and becomes a symbol of divine restoration that incorporates the outsider into the very heart of Israel's identity and messianic hope.

Divine Providence and Human Agency: Toward a Transformative Socio-Theological Framework for Inclusive Community

The theology of the Book of Ruth is characterized by a subtle yet powerful presentation of divine providence. Unlike many other biblical narratives, God does not act through dramatic miracles or direct speech; the divine name appears primarily in blessings, oaths, and the concluding genealogy. The narrator's comment that Ruth "happened to come" to the field of Boaz (2:3) uses the Hebrew *miqreh*, which can mean "chance" or "happening," but the unfolding events make clear that what seems coincidental is under divine guidance. This narrative technique refuses both a fatalistic determinism and a secular humanism, instead presenting providence as operating through ordinary human decisions, social customs, and ethical commitments (Gunn & Fewell, 1993). The hiddenness of God in the narrative places greater emphasis on human agency as the arena where divine purposes are realized.

The relationship between divine providence and human *chesed* is central to the book's theological vision. Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, Boaz's willingness to act as redeemer, and the community's acceptance of the Moabite are all human actions, yet they are repeatedly blessed and interpreted as signs of YHWH's faithfulness. Boaz's blessing over Ruth—that she may be rewarded by YHWH, the God of Israel, under whose wings she has sought refuge (2:12)—indicates that human acts of kindness are both

responses to and channels of divine care. The narrative thus constructs a theology in which God's redemptive work is not separate from but is realized through the ethical solidarity between insiders and outsiders (Mtshiselwa, 2018). This has profound implications for communities of faith that claim to trust in providence while ignoring the ethical demands of inclusion.

The Book of Ruth's deconstruction of xenophobic paradigms offers a transformative framework for contemporary debates on migration, social inclusion, and communal identity. Ruth is never portrayed as a burden or a threat to the community's resources; rather, she is the agent of restoration who brings life out of emptiness. Her integration is not based on her ability to assimilate entirely into Israelite culture but on her embodiment of *chesed* and her willingness to commit herself to the well-being of Naomi and her God. This narrative challenges host societies to move beyond tolerance, which merely permits the presence of the other, to a posture of radical hospitality that recognizes the foreigner as a potential bearer of divine blessing and as a co-participant in the community's future (Claassens, 2020).

At the same time, the narrative resists romanticizing integration by acknowledging its costs and complexities. Ruth's decision to leave Moab entails leaving her homeland, her gods, and her kin, and she initially faces vulnerability as a poor widow in a foreign land. Boaz's act of redemption involves legal risk and the potential disruption of his own inheritance. The community's inclusion of Ruth requires the reinterpretation of its own traditions and the expansion of its genealogical memory. The Book of Ruth therefore presents integration not as a painless or automatic process but as a deliberate, reciprocal, and often costly practice of covenant faithfulness. This realism is essential for contemporary theological reflection on migration, as it avoids both exclusionary fear and superficial hospitality (Mtshiselwa, 2018).

In summary, the Book of Ruth provides a transformative socio-theological framework for reconstructing inclusive communal identities in a world marked by migration and cultural pluralism. The dialectic of community identity is not resolved by eliminating boundaries altogether, for the narrative continues to acknowledge Ruth's Moabite origin even as it incorporates her into Israel. Instead, the narrative redefines those boundaries through the practice of *chesed* and the institution of *go'el*, demonstrating that belonging is grounded not in ethnic purity but in ethical solidarity and mutual recognition. Divine providence works precisely through this human responsiveness, so that the foreigner becomes the mother of kings and the bearer of redemptive hope. For contemporary religious communities, the call of Ruth is clear: to move from exclusion to embrace, from suspicion to solidarity, and from fear of the other to the recognition that God's future is always larger than our inherited boundaries.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the Book of Ruth offers a transformative socio-theological framework for understanding the integration of foreigners within the dialectic of community identity. Through a narrative analysis integrated with socio-scientific insights, the study found that Ruth's story deconstructs rigid insider–outsider boundaries by redefining belonging not through ethnicity but through covenantal loyalty (*chesed*) and the legal-social mechanism of the kinsman-redeemer (*go'el*). Ruth, as a Moabite outsider, becomes the ethical and theological center of the narrative, exhibiting a loyalty that transcends national and religious boundaries, while Boaz and the Bethlehem community respond with recognition and inclusion. The result is a reciprocal process of integration in which the foreigner is neither passively assimilated nor merely tolerated but is honored as an agent of divine restoration and a bearer of the community's future. The narrative thus rejects xenophobic paradigms and presents a model of communal identity that is dynamic, relational, and grounded in ethical solidarity.

The implications of this reading extend beyond the ancient text to contemporary religious and social contexts marked by migration, cultural pluralism, and identity-based conflict. The Book of Ruth challenges faith communities to move from exclusionary boundary maintenance toward a practice of radical hospitality that recognizes the dignity, agency, and moral capacity of the foreigner. At the same time, the narrative's realism about the costs and complexities of integration cautions against superficial or romanticized approaches. Integration, as portrayed in Ruth, requires legal recognition, social responsibility, and the reinterpretation of communal traditions, all under the providence of a God who works through human acts of *chesed*. For theologians, pastors, and communities of faith, the story of Ruth remains a compelling call to reconstruct inclusive identities that reflect divine faithfulness and anticipate a future in which outsiders become insiders within the redemptive purposes of God.

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