

3. THEOLOGY OF CONVERSION IN RUTH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONS TO YOUTH IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Joe Grom

Author's Profile

Pr. Joe (M.Div, Asbury Theological Seminary) is a Ph.D student at Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, where he also serves as a lecturer helping direct the youth ministry degree programs. Joe is a member of the global YFC Academics Team, playing a small part in helping young people experience the love of Jesus and grow in their faith through training pastors and youth workers. In his free time, he enjoys coding web development projects, walking, and enjoying time with his wife and young son.

Abstract

"Theology of Conversion in Ruth and Implications for Missions to Youth in Southeast Asia" demonstrates how the famous confessional oath in Ruth 1:16-17 provides a rare Old Testament model of conversion from which we can draw implications for missions to youth in Southeast Asia today. The article explores the concept of conversion in the OT and delves into the cultural context of Ruth's conversion, highlighting the interconnectedness of land, deity, and people in the Ancient Near East. Ruth's decision to leave her land, people, and gods represents a transformation that can inspire missions today. Drawing from this conversion narrative, the author suggests that conversion in Southeast Asian contexts may not always align with a binary paradigm but can be viewed as a progressive aspect of spiritual growth.

The paper then proposes creating or adopting "liminal spaces"—transitional or in-between stages—as effective mission methods for fostering conversion among youth. These spaces, such as youth camps, international student ministries, or community-centered youth programs, can provide a context for young people to encounter Christian communities and grow in conversion. By understanding conversion as a process rather than a single event, the Church can adapt its mission strategies to engage youth who are challenging to reach with greater optimism.

*“Do not urge me to leave you or return from you.
Where you go, I will go; and where you stay, I will stay.
Your people, my people; and your God, my God.
Where you die, I will die; and there I will be buried.
May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely,
if even death separates you and me.”*

Ruth 1:16-17¹

¹ Author's own translation based on the Hebrew text and NIV.

Introduction

The Church has the unique call to join God's mission by making disciples who place their faith in Christ. This call includes the millions of young people across Southeast Asia who do not yet know Jesus. Conversion becomes paramount in this discussion as missions occur on the frontier between faiths in this highly diverse context. Conversion involves transitioning from one state of being to another, transferring allegiances from the entities in the fallen world toward the Creator God. While most of the Church's conversion doctrine finds its biblical basis in the New Testament (NT), there is much we can glean from the Old Testament (OT) as well, particularly from the narrative of Ruth. This article will demonstrate how the famous confessional oath in Ruth 1:16-17 provides a rare OT model of conversion from which we can draw implications for missions to youth in Southeast Asia today.

The Conversion of Ruth

The Book of Ruth opens with a story of an Israelite family fleeing Judah during a famine to find refuge in the land of Moab. During their sojourn, the sons of Elimelech and Naomi took Moabite wives named Orpah and Ruth. However, readers are quickly informed of a tragedy that struck this family as they lived in a foreign land. The father and three sons all die in quick succession. This tragedy left the three women of the household to fend for themselves in a patriarchal ancient world, widowed and alone. But just in time, Naomi receives news that Yahweh of Israel has restored her ancestral land. Naomi begins the journey back to her people, with her Moabite daughters-in-law following behind. In this liminal space, Orpah and Ruth face a choice of loyalty between their former way of life and a new life following the footsteps of Naomi. Orpah chooses to turn back while Ruth presses on. This decision Ruth makes can be viewed through the

lens of conversion. To understand this clearly, attention must be given to the concept of conversion in Scripture and the cultural context of the Ancient Near East (ANE).

Conversion and Scripture

In Christian parlance and literature, conversion is usually conceived in NT vocabulary, such as “being born again,” “responding to the gospel,” and “believing in Jesus.” In *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem defines conversion as “our willing response to the gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation.”² Similarly, Thomas Oden’s *Classic Christianity* also emphasizes repentance as a “reversal of disposition” toward Christ.³ Grudem also highlights that mere mental ascent to the truths of God is not sufficient for conversion;⁴ what ultimately matters is a personal decision to trust Jesus for salvation that can be actualized in a single moment.⁵ While Oden takes a slightly longer view noting, “Faith is the only condition of conversion, yet true faith is preceded by repentance and evidenced by acts of love;” citing Hebrews 11:6, Oden goes on to nuance, “Some anticipatory faith in God’s mercy is presupposed in taking the first steps in repentance.”⁶ Here, we see a slight difference in describing the conversion process. But, setting aside the intra-Protestant squabble over *ordo salutis*, we can observe in both Oden and Grudem an understanding of conversion as an internal and individual act turning from sin and toward Christ based on their exclusive NT sourcing.

² Wayne Grudem, “Chapter 35: Conversion,” in *Systematic Theology*, Second Edition (Zondervan Academics, 2020), 1.

³ Thomas Oden, “The Way of Repentance” in *Classic Christianity* (Harper Collins, 2009), 608.

⁴ Grudem, “Chapter 35: Conversion,” 3.

⁵ According to Grudem, “although it is true that initial saving faith and initial repentance only occur once in our lives, and when they occur they constitute true conversion, nonetheless, the heart attitudes of repentance and faith only begin at conversion.” Grudem, “Chapter 35: Conversion,” 25.

⁶ Oden, “The Way of Repentance,” 609.

While a distinctly Christian theology of conversion rightfully draws most of its systematic insight from the NT, we can also glean from OT accounts and round out our NT understanding. In a 2004 *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, Christopher Wright briefly surveyed a biblical theology of conversion.⁷ Following a familiar *Missio Dei* trajectory, Wright begins with Abraham's call to bless the nations. According to Wright, while there is no direct connection to the mechanism of conversion being the pathway to this blessing in Gen. 12, the pattern of Abraham's faith may be understood as a model for the propagation of this blessing.

The path to blessing for Abraham meant leaving his home country (in that sense also turning from his ancestral gods), trusting in the promise of God, walking in obedience, and teaching his household to 'keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice' (Gen. 18:19). Though not described as conversion, some of the key elements are already signaled here: forsaking, trusting, observing, following.⁸

As we see throughout salvation history, this Abrahamic blessing has indeed gone forth to the nations by grafting them into the family of God.

Jumping from the seeds of conversion in the blessing, Wright moves forward through the narrative of Scripture to the Prophets, highlighting their call for the conversion of the nations in Jeremiah, Jonah, Isaiah, and Micah. In Jeremiah, the prophet pronounces a compassionate judgment upon the nations with the assurance that if they 1) learn the ways of the people of God, 2) identify themselves with the Lord's name, and 3) forsake Baal, then they will be established

⁷ Christopher J.H. Wright, "Implications of Conversion in the Old Testament and the New," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 28, no. 1 (2004): 14, doi: 10.1177/239693930402800103.

⁸ Wright, "Implications of Conversion," 14.

among God's people (Jer. 12:16). These conditions are similar in kind to those Wright deduced in the Gen. 12 example: observance, identification, and forsaking. All three of these conditions easily fall within the semantic range of *conversion* today. Here, we have a foretaste of *panta ta ethne* and an OT pathway for the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God.

In addition to whole nations or people groups being provided a pathway for conversion, we also have instructions for individuals and families gaining access. Again, Wright says it best:

The Passover regulations make it clear that a *resident alien* could be included in the worshiping community, celebrating the foundational event in Israel's redemptive history, provided he accepted circumcision (Exod. 12:48-49). On that basis, he and his family were to be treated as fully equal to the native-born.⁹

Therefore, circumcision was to function as the primary marker of inclusion for outsiders entering into the covenant people.¹⁰ Presumably, the hope was that the holiness and priestly function of Israel would be a strong enough centripetal force to convince the foreign males of the household to go through with it. (Talk about an attractional church model!) The point is separation and then inclusion; if you want to be part of the people of God, you must be all in.

Despite these pathways for inclusion through conversion and the appropriate symbolic acts, there are few specific OT examples of non-Israelites walking the path of conversion. In Exodus 18, we have the example of Jethro, who sees the mighty acts of Yahweh bringing Israelites out of Egypt, confesses (v11), makes a sacrifice in the presence of God (v12), and then joins the team as an advisor to Moses.

⁹ Wright, "Implications of Conversion," 17.

¹⁰ However, it is notable that conversion was only for male converts in a patriarchal society. Yet, the two clearest individual non-Israelites for whom we have a conversion story in the OT, namely Rahab and Ruth, are marginalized women. It is also interesting that Ruth's conversion is initiated by another woman, Naomi.

Later, during the conquest narrative, the Gibeonites in Joshua 9 express a fear of Yahweh and employ deception to *oath* their way into a fringe position alongside Israel.¹¹ It is unclear whether any or all the Gibeonites became worshipers of Yahweh or, if so, how long it took them to do it. Yet even the Gibeonite's unorthodox approach and expression of faith warranted Joshua showing loyalty to the oath by coming to their aid. Subsequently, Yahweh went as far as stopping the Sun and the Moon to ensure their victory.¹² Even small, fumbling steps toward inclusion in the people of God elicit cosmic blessings for those who choose to do so.

Earlier in the conquest narrative, Rahab showed loyal-love (רַחֲמִים *checed*) to the spies in Joshua 2. After the battle of Jericho, her actions warranted safe passage and a place for her family alongside the people of Israel. Rahab's lineage was subsequently integrated into the covenant community, and she would later find a new home in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. It is also noteworthy that the author of Hebrews attributes Rahab's demonstration of loyal-love as an act of faith (πίστις *pistis*), which the NT considers a foundational aspect of conversion.¹³ James also includes Rahab as an example in his argument about faith (πίστις) without works is dead. Rahab's action of showing loyal-love (רַחֲמִים) demonstrated and actualized her faith (πίστις), therefore qualifying her as an example of an OT non-Israelite convert, even by NT standards.

The three examples listed above - Jethro, The Gibeonites, and Rahab - proceeded in their conversion journeys during a unique time. The shared context that unites them is a wartime footing. For Jethro, his son-in-law was now the leader of an emerging nation fleeing from

¹¹ The Gibeonites resurface in the biblical narrative in 2 Samuel 21, where the narrator reminds readers that this people group was not part of Israel, perhaps to boost the image of David's subsequent actions.

¹² See the narrative in Joshua 9-10. Based upon the following discussion of Rahab and the link between a demonstration of loyalty and the New Testament's labeling of such acts as "faith," it is not out of bounds to deduce some level of faith in Yahweh on behalf of the Gibeonites here.

¹³ See Hebrews 11:31.

the subdued army of the current world empire. On the other side of the sword, Rahab and the Gibeonites chose to take conversion steps motivated by fear and survival in the face of impending divine judgment. These unique circumstances do not make good fodder for systematic theologies today. However, these OT stories of missional inclusion allow us to see reminders of the Abrahamic blessing and glimmers of *panta ta ethne*, even in the bloodbaths of Exodus and Joshua. Even if we exclude the three above OT stories due to their unique wartime settings, we are still left with our primary canonical example: the conversion of Ruth.

Ancient Near Eastern Background for Ruth's Conversion

As we have seen, a core component of conversion is turning away from something in repentance. To better understand Ruth's conversion, we must first examine what she turned away from. Ruth was a Moabite from the region east of the Jordan River, where her father-in-law had fled due to a famine in the land of Judah.¹⁴ In the OT, the Moabites find their origin story in Genesis 19. They are identified as the incestuous descendants of Lot and his eldest daughter after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Not a great introduction!). The Moabites receive their share of judgments and conflicts alongside Israel's other ANE neighbors through the Pentateuch and the Prophets. However, due to their connection to Abraham's family, they were to be given safe residence adjacent to Israel's territory and, therefore, would become a common feature in the OT.¹⁵ In the book of Judges,

¹⁴ Richard Hess, Daniel Block, Dale Manor, and John Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Zondervan Academic, 2016), 248. The authors note that Moab often escaped a famine due to its geography and weather patterns differing from the larger region. Elimelech's move would have taken several days and the distance involved in the move suggests it was a serious undertaking.

¹⁵ See Deuteronomy 2:9. In the Pentateuch, the frequency of Biblical references to "Moab" or "Moabite" peaks in Numbers with 31 references, followed by Deuteronomy with 13. References reach their summit in the book of Jeremiah with a count of 33. In fact, at least one reference to the terms can be located in 23/39 OT books. Other than Ruth, the other famous OT Moabite is the archetypal fat King, Eglon, in Judges 3 who is assassinated by Ehud.

which is the stated historical context for the narrative of Ruth, we see the Israelites tempted to turn away from Yahweh to follow after the gods of Moab and subsequently repent during the time of Jephthah.¹⁶

Citing an inscription on a nineteenth-century BC Moabite stone, Marion Ann Taylor and Temper Longman argue that it was commonplace in the ANE to tie together the concepts of deity, people, and land.¹⁷ This gives insight into Ruth's choice to formally leave her gods behind at the same time that she was given the choice to leave her land and people. The national god of Moab was Chemosh, "an ancient god in the Levant for whom we have evidence as early as the late third millennium B.C."¹⁸ The ANE's binding of god, people, and land is Biblically illustrated in Judges 11 as Jephthah argues with the contemporary Ammonite king, saying: "Will you not take what [land] your god Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever the LORD our God has given us, we will possess."¹⁹ When Orpah decided to leave Naomi, she would return to her own land, people, and gods, the chief of whom would be Chemosh.

On the other side of the family, according to Taylor and Longman, this ANE holistic view of deity, land, and people may also illuminate Elimelek's decision to leave the promised land for refuge in Moab. Elimelek's decision "suggests desperation and perhaps even a lack of faith."²⁰ While it does not play a major role in the narrative, the name Elimelek (אֱלִימֶלֶךְ) originates from the words El (אֱל) and Melek (מֶלֶךְ) and together can mean "God is King."²¹ If his character was true to his name, as is often the case with names in the Hebrew Bible, we may have a license to assume the best of him. Furthermore, the fact

¹⁶ See Judges 10:6-10 for the introduction of Jephthah.

¹⁷ Marion Ann Taylor and Temper Longman III. *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Ruth, Esther* (Zondervan Academic, 2020), Ch. 1: Ruth 1:1-22, "Moab and the Moabites."

¹⁸ Hess, Block, Manor, and Walton, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 249.

¹⁹ See Judges 11:23.

²⁰ Taylor and Longman, *Ruth, Esther*, Ch1. Ruth 1:1-22, "Moab and the Moabites."

²¹ Brown-Drivers-Briggs. *Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Unabridged, Electronic Database.

that his Moabite daughters-in-law knew the divine name, Yahweh, and seemed to have a positive impression would indicate that this family did not wholly assimilate to their new land and its gods. Regardless of the family's faithfulness and calculus in their initial move, we can sympathize with Elimelek regarding how the decision to move would have holistic ramifications as he tried to provide for his family.

Ruth's Oath as a Conversion

The opening chapter of Ruth contains a prologue (1:1-5), giving readers a synopsis of the tragic events in the life of Naomi's family. This synopsis provides the backdrop and rationale for the events that follow. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the first of a series of dialogues between the main characters; this series provides the framework for the book. In this first dialogue, Naomi attempts to persuade her two widowed daughters-in-law to return to their Moabite families and start a new life with their people. At the same time, Naomi intends to return to her people in Judah. Naomi's first attempt persuades neither of the sisters-in-law, and they politely decline, employing culturally appropriate, indirect vocabulary.²² In her second attempt at persuasion, Naomi employs an argument demonstrating the unlikelihood of the younger women leading culturally honorable lives if they decide to stick with her. Since Naomi is already past her childbearing years, she will not be able to provide replacements for the husbands they have lost in their highly patriarchal cultures. This argument is persuasive for Orpah, who returns to her people, but Ruth clings²³ to Naomi.

²² Peter H.W. Lau translates their response in v.10 as "surely with you we will return" and contrasts this to Ruth's bolder and more direct final response. Lau notes the elder-younger relationship between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. From Lau's comments, we may speculate that Ruth and Orpah's initial collective decline to leave was more culturally polite than sincere, at least on Orpah's part. Peter H.W. Lau. *The Book of Ruth*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans, 2023), 141.

²³ The Hebrew word translated for clings (קָלַף) is the same word used in Genesis 2:24 describing the union of husband and wife indicating the level of familial dedication Ruth wishes to have for Naomi.

The theme of returning is apparent in the opening chapter of Ruth's story. In the sixteen verses (1:6-22) after the prologue, the verb return (שׁוּב *shub*) appears twelve times.²⁴ While return (שׁוּב) is a prevalent word in the Hebrew Bible,²⁵ the frequency it reoccurs in this opening dialogue suggests a developing theme.²⁶ According to Taylor and Longman, "In addition to denoting physical actions of turning and returning, the Hebrew verb *return* frequently describes spiritual transformation or conversion."²⁷ Considering the ANE conceptional grouping of people, land, and deity, we can read a double meaning even in the geographical uses of the word in this opening narrative. This double meaning and interconnectedness is made clear in Naomi's summary of Orpah's decision to "return (שׁוּב) to her people *and* to her gods" (1:15).²⁸ The concept of returning carried in this verb is utilized in two directions: both in the sense of Naomi returning to her people and her pleading with Orpah and Ruth to turn away from her and back toward their own people, land, and gods. The prevalence of *return* in this dialogue is strong evidence for a conversional interpretation of Ruth's subsequent decision. When Ruth chooses not to return to her land, people, and gods but instead turns and joins Naomi's own *return*, the theme of the text prepares readers to understand her decision through a conversional lens.

The first time we hear Ruth's singular voice in the story is in verses 16-17. In response to Naomi's third attempt at persuading Ruth to return to her own people, Ruth launches into an oath pledging loyal-love to Naomi and confessing Yahweh as her God. In this short speech, Ruth commands her mother-in-law, issues a three-part oath, and concludes by invoking a curse on herself were she to break the oath.²⁹

²⁴ Taylor and Longman, *Ruth, Esther*, Ruth 1:6-18 "The Return Home."

²⁵ Englishman's Concordance.

²⁶ In 11 of the 12 occurrences, the verb form is Qal strengthening the thematic force of repetition.

²⁷ Taylor and Longman, *Ruth, Esther*, Ruth 1:6-18 "The Return Home."

²⁸ Hess and others note, "While people and gods may refer to Orpah's personal allegiances, they also may extend to her tribe's social and religious associations. Ancient societies often had a hierarchical slate of deities who resided in their area..." Hess, Block, Manor, and Walton, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 249

²⁹ In ANE settings, this could be categorized as an imprecatory oath.

Ruth's appeal to Naomi is no longer indirect but bold. Even though Naomi has previously retired from the mutual obligations of the in-law relationship by giving Orpah and Ruth her blessing to return and remarry, Ruth strongly rejects this separation and decides to cling to Naomi instead.³⁰

Havilah Dharamraj and other commentators see the chiasmic structure of Ruth's speech in the following five couplets.³¹

A [Appeal to Namoi]: Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.

B [Ruth and Naomi]: Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay.

C [Ruth, Naomi, and YHWH]: Your people will be my people, and your God my God.

B' [Ruth and Naomi]: Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.

A' [Appeal to YHWH]: May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.

The tri-part oath found in B, C, and B' illustrates the interconnectedness of land, people, and deity. First, beyond mere geography, Ruth pledges to abide in the very same household as Naomi. Secondly, in the center of the chiasmic structure, Ruth vows to put herself under Naomi's people and deity, which we will discuss further below. Her tri-part oath concludes with a burial commitment. In the ANE context, her commitment to even be buried with Naomi highlights the high level of loyalty she is pledging.³² In this oath, Ruth is committing the whole of her life.

³⁰ Havilah Dharamraj, *Ruth*, Asia Bible Commentary (Langham Global Library, 2019), 25.

³¹ Dharamraj, *Ruth*, 35.

³² According to Hess, Block, and Walton, "To most Westerners, there is usually little emotional trauma in being buried away from the family plot. Such a casual approach to death was unknown to the people of ancient Canaan. Ruth's declaration is emphatic—'there I will be buried'—that is, with you, Naomi. [... Additionally,] the Bible often refers to death as being gathered to one's people (cf. e.g., Gen. 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:33; Num. 20:24, 26; Deut. 32:50), and Jacob and Joseph gave

One of the difficulties of interpreting this oath as a conversion is that it was made from Ruth to Namoi and not to God. Including personal pronouns may suggest that Ruth is committing a personal attachment to Naomi, not a religious attachment to Yahweh.³³ According to Havilah Dharamraj, this argument is strengthened when,

compared to other confessions of faith in Yahweh by non-Israelites (e.g. Jethro, Exod 18:10-11; Rahab, Josh 2:9-11; Nebuchadnezzar, Dan 4:34-37; Darius, Dan 6:26-27), Ruth's two-liner has a different ring to it. The others focus their confessions on Yahweh; Ruth's declaration keeps the attention on a human being. At least at this point in the story, she chooses Yahweh because she first chooses Naomi.³⁴

Alongside our current systematic understanding of conversion, i.e., as a momentary individual act of volition by repenting and placing trusting allegiance in God, Naomi, being the addressee of Ruth's oath and not God, calls conversionist interpretations of this passage into question.

While this oath irrefutably expresses Ruth's strong commitment to her mother-in-law,³⁵ it also expresses her conversion to

specific instructions that their remains be conveyed to the family homeland (Gen. 49:29–32; 50:24–26). These requests are apparently not unique to the Israelites. Archaeology has uncovered a number of cemeteries, many of which yield evidence that the deceased passed away elsewhere, and their bones were interred in the cemetery sometime after death and deterioration had occurred." Hess, Block, Manor, and Walton, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 249.

³³ Havilah Dharamraj highlights arguments for both a conversionist interpretation and a reading with Naomi as the central recipient. Dharamraj, *Ruth*, 37-40.

³⁴ Dharamraj, *Ruth*, 39.

³⁵ While this commitment to a mother-in-law, in human terms, is simply astounding, nothing short of miraculous to begin with, and worthy of re-telling through the generations, the Bible is primarily a book about God's redemption of humanity and not merely a script for the next Oprah episode. It's likely there is a bigger picture here.

Yahweh. The four Hebrew words at the center³⁶ of Ruth's speech, transliterated, are: *your people, my people, and your God, my God*. Most English translations³⁷ include a future continuous form of the verb *be*, e.g. *your people will be my people, and your God shall be my God*; however, this is absent from the Hebrew. Commentator Peter Lau suggests that the statement could also be translated as: *your people are my people, your God is my God*.³⁸ If Ruth was not already a worshiper of Yahweh before this statement, she certainly is afterward. Either way, the weight of this oath represents an important milestone in her journey toward God, indicative of growing in conversion.

As a daughter-in-law who married into a sojourning Israelite family, Ruth gained prior knowledge of Yahweh and likely already adopted some of their religious practices. However, an earlier, definitive pledge to convert is unlikely. Peter Lau states, "It is unlikely Ruth would have made this commitment while in her homeland, despite living in Mahlon's and Naomi's household."³⁹ The connection between land, people, and deity was too strong to break; however, the liminal space initiated by Naomi's return provided the opportunity for Ruth to externally express an internal commitment that had been swelling in her heart for some time. Therefore, "while Ruth's pledge centers on her loyalty to Naomi, it is inseparable from her pledge of allegiance to Naomi's people and God."⁴⁰

Havilah Dharamraj, who sees both interpretative angles on this issue, notes how Ruth's "commitment involves a change of direction, one that is opposite to Orpah's,"⁴¹ is support for an

³⁶ The four words together form the unified center of Ruth's speech with exactly 16 words before and 16 words after.

³⁷ Some translations include consistently with both people and God (HCSB, NLT), while others only include with people (ESV, KJV, NASB, NIV) leaving room for a reading in which it extends poetically to God as well. However, notably, the Message translates it in the present tense: "Your people are my people, and your God is my God."

³⁸ While the Hebrew word here for God is the more generic word *Elohim* (אלהים) and the same word used earlier in v15 in reference to the Moabite gods, Ruth's use of the divine name Yahweh in v17 provides clarification for the referent.

³⁹ Lau, *The Book of Ruth*, 144-146.

⁴⁰ Lau, *The Book of Ruth*, 158.

⁴¹ Dharamraj, *Ruth*, 37.

understanding of this pledge to Naomi doubling as a confession of faith. When the choice before her involves leaving the land, people, and gods of Moab and joining herself to Yahweh and his people, Ruth chooses the latter; what else can we label this other than a conversion story? And a dramatic one at that! According to commentator Frederick Bush,

Ruth stands alone; she possesses nothing. No God has called her; no deity has promised her blessing; no human being has come to her aid. She lives and chooses without a support group, and she knows that the fruit of her decision may well be the emptiness of rejection, indeed of death. Consequently, not even Abraham's leap of faith surpasses this decision of Ruth's.⁴²

Early Jewish interpreters also saw a model convert in Ruth, so much so that they shaped their conversion liturgy from Ruth's oath.⁴³ Despite life's potent sufferings, God's complete silence, and zero promise of a brighter future, Ruth still chooses to bind herself to Naomi and her God.

Through this narrative, we can glean that conversion may be motivated by interpersonal relationships, involve a holistic shift in loyalties, and consist of a gradual movement toward God. The confessional oath spoken by Ruth did not emerge from a vacuum; it surfaced from a close relational history with a sojourning Israelite family who themselves were called to *return*. For Christopher Wright,

The classic Old Testament convert is Ruth. Indeed, one might say that the book affords us one of the most beautiful descriptions of conversion when

⁴² Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth-Esther*. World Biblical Commentary Vol. 9. (Zondervan Academic, 2018), 85.

⁴³ Godoy de Danielson, Kelly J. "Women on the Outside Looking In." Godoy references Targum Ruth for the conversion liturgy.

Boaz sums up what Ruth has done: ‘May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!’ (Ruth 2:12).⁴⁴

The Fruit of Ruth’s Conversion

After Ruth shows her determination to follow Naomi to the people and land of Yahweh, she maintains the same level of resolve to make this new life work throughout the remainder of the narrative. Summarizing his Biblical theology of conversion, Wright observes that conversion 1) demands the rejection of other gods, 2) inclusion in the worshipping community, and 3) apparent ethical transformation.⁴⁵ As we have seen, Ruth has already rejected the gods of Moab in favor of following Yahweh and has even made an imprecatory oath to that end. Through marriage, she was initially incorporated into a worshipping community in the form of Naomi’s family and continued the desire to be included once in her new land. While we do not have contrasting information about her ethics or spiritual maturity before meeting the sojourning Israelites, we do see a transformation through an increase in her boldness and commitment to show loyalty to Naomi through the four short chapters we do have.⁴⁶ Against steep odds and a backdrop of suffering, Ruth’s conversion produces blessings for Ruth and her family.

One such blessing is the reversal in status from an outsider to an insider. Ruth was an immigrant in the land, a foreigner to the people of Israel. The narrator highlights this status by labeling her “Ruth the Moabite” five times, beginning the moment when she entered Israel’s territory. She was an outsider from a neighboring nation with false

⁴⁴ Wright, “Implications of Conversion,” 5.

⁴⁵ Wright, “Implications of Conversion,” 5.

⁴⁶ After making her oath to Naomi and Yahweh, Ruth becomes increasingly bold through her willingness to leave her ancestral land, glean in the fields as a widowed foreign woman, and break gender roles by approaching Boaz and proposing a marriage on the threshing floor.

gods and an incestuous reputation. She was a young, impoverished, childless widow with culturally questionable boldness. Her only family connection was a mother-in-law who took on the nickname *Bitter* with no rebuttal from anyone in town. It is safe to say Ruth's life in Bethlehem came with a very low status. Yet this status began to be reversed through her integration into the worshiping community and demonstration of character. As the story progresses, her marriage status is reversed through a kinsman redeemer and ideal Israelite, Boaz. With a firm family tie, reclaimed land rights for Naomi's prodigy, and a son on the way, her status is indeed reversed by the end of the story. Yet, the text still maintains her ethnic identity even after she was integrated into the worshiping community. Maybe this is a preview of what is to come.⁴⁷

A notable feature of this biblical book is the absence of God's direct action or words. The only action attributed to God is the event that instigated Naomi's return, namely, the end of the famine in 1:6. Yet, the main characters in this story all genuinely attempt to navigate the world in righteousness under the law of Yahweh with no direct intervention. These are ordinary people facing the trials and hardships of life, yet in their faith, they demonstrate and inhabit God's loyal-love in their own context. Yet, as the reader, we can see God's hand behind the scenes of their everyday lives. After the failure of Judges and the need for a King, this cast of characters playing the faithful remnant provides the solution. The last line in the narrative brings the idea to focus, " 'A son has been born to Naomi!' And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David . . ." This last line, in the ears of a first-century young Jew, must have been a memorable moment, so much so that he made sure to include this foreign convert

⁴⁷ Wright sees this and other examples as a preview of grafting in the nations. He writes, "There is something profound here about the nature of conversion: in conversion, people receive the names, the identity, the mission, and the privilege of Israel; yet they preserve the ethnic and cultural identity that is theirs by creation. This combination is not surprising when we remember that the purpose of God's election of Israel was for the restoration of creation" (Wright, "Implications of Conversion," 2).

in his genealogy of the messianic king, Jesus.⁴⁸ In this short OT narrative, the treads of *Missio Dei* and *panta ta ethne* run from beginning to end.

The Conversion of Youth in Southeast Asia

As we see Ruth the Moabite courageously walk the road of conversion, it can inspire us and give biblical vocabulary to the barriers to conversion faced in our context today. While developing a specific missions strategy to reach Southeast Asian youth is beyond the scope of this article, some principles gleaned from Ruth may inform or inspire creativity in the future. This final section will propose conversion as an aspect of spiritual maturity that can be grown through relational ministry and liminal spaces. While the suggestions below may apply broadly across Southeast Asia, the purpose here is to spark conversation and creativity around reaching youth who face unique legal, family, and religious barriers to conversion in the region.

Conversion as an Aspect of Spiritual Maturity

In Ruth's ANE context, we see the interconnectedness of land, deity, and people. There is also a tendency to link these three across societies today. To be a good citizen in India is to be Hindu; to be a proper Thai is to be Buddhist; and so forth . . . When one thread is pulled, the others are affected, and unraveling this web takes time. In *Grassroots Asian Theology*, Simon Chan argues:

The complexity and variations of conversion in Asia show that the traditional Protestant concept of conversion, which identifies 'being saved' by means of a standard *ordo salutis*, cannot be readily applied. Rather, conversion is a gradual process that may begin with a hazy awareness and understanding of

⁴⁸ See Matthew 1. Notably, Matthew's genealogy also lists Rahab as David's great-grandmother; yet, many commentators note the literary conventions of genealogies allow for artistic gaps.

the person of Christ and progress to where certain essential Christian truths are more formed over time.⁴⁹

Viewing conversion in less binary terms may be more realistic and more faithful to the OT witness in such contexts.

As much as the dramatic 180-degree conversion stories inspire, anecdotally, they do not resonate with many Christians' experiences today. When listening to uncoached conversion testimonies, there is usually a significant passing of time between the individual or group first identifying God's work in their lives and, if it is present at all, a finalized "salvation moment." Things become even fuzzier when we try to retroactively apply a binary lost/saved conversion paradigm to the OT saints. For example, at what moment was Abraham "saved?" When he left Ur? When he believed in God's promise? It's complicated.⁵⁰ Lest we think this conversion complexity is resolved through progressive revelation, the same question can be asked of Peter in the Gospels,⁵¹ the former disciples of John the Baptist in Acts,⁵² and third-generation Christians such as Timothy in the Epistles. The point here is not to argue soteriology but to briefly demonstrate the complexity and timing of conversion in Scripture and experience.

Considering this complexity, it may be more fruitful to understand conversion as one aspect of spiritual maturity that blooms according to its time and the Spirit's lead. In Ruth's story, we observe

⁴⁹ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology* (IVP Academic, 2014), 122.

⁵⁰ Hebrews 11:8 says by faith (πίστις), Abraham left Ur. James 2:21 says Abraham was justified (δικαιώω) for his faith (πίστις) when he offered Isaac on the altar. Paul, in Romans 4, sees Abraham justified (δικαιώω) when he believed (πίστευω) God's promise of a son and descendants in his old age (Gen. 15:6).

⁵¹ Through the gospel narratives, Peter progresses through a series of questions Jesus ask him from, *Will you follow me?*, *Who do you say that I am?*, to *Do you love me?* Upon which answer was Peter saved according to a binary conversion paradigm? (If the correct answer is: 'When he confessed Jesus as Messiah,' recall that Jesus calls him Satan in the very next story.)

⁵² See Acts 19:1-7.

that she was married into an Israelite family and likely had at least a few years of exposure to the truths of Yahweh before building up to her famous confessional oath. Given what we know of her steadfast character throughout the narrative, it is unlikely that her oath represented the starting point for her demonstration of loyal-love toward Naomi and her family. Viewing conversion as a budding aspect of her spiritual maturity allows us to observe God's work in her life in other aspects. Missionally, when a youth is not ready for, or even resists, traditional marks of conversion such as baptism, we can still rightfully celebrate God's work in their lives in other areas. Seeing conversion as just one aspect of spiritual growth also pushes back against the tidal pressures of churches and mission agencies, which may be overly focused on counting the number of converts. Acknowledging conversion as a process seems to be a healthier starting point for Christian missions to Southeast Asian youth today.

Relational Ministry and Conversion for Youth

In *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, Jayson Georges and Mark Baker note that "Group-oriented people view conversion as transferring loyalty and identity to a new group, so they must experience the group before choosing to join it."⁵³ Georges and Baker's "community encounter" method may be effective over a long period if the web of nation, people, and deity is unwoven enough to prevent conversion growth from being stifled. The authors suggest that the traditional Western ministry model moves from *Evangelism* → *Discipleship* → *Community*; however, they identify the reality in Asian contexts as *Community* → *Discipleship* → *Evangelism*.⁵⁴ Understanding conversion as a process of spiritual maturity frees us to expect evidence of conversion later and build community sooner. This freedom also alleviates the pressure to lead with evangelistic methods unlikely to untangle the web of barriers.

⁵³ Jason Georges and Mark D. Baker. *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (IVP Academic, 2018), 185.

⁵⁴ Jason Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, 185.

Youth Ministry has a long history of relational-oriented ministry and places a premium on creating a sense of community and belonging. Empowering and releasing youth workers to practice these same ministry skills in a missional context may create the proper environment for spiritual growth in conversion over the long haul. Ruth's conversion did not occur in a vacuum but in the context of a family environment. Creating a 'second-family' atmosphere for non-Christian youth among people of faith may provide the environment necessary for growth in conversion.⁵⁵ We can imagine and see applications of this through well-managed youth centers, sports ministries, tuition centers, school clubs, home-based cell groups, and even youth camps. In such contexts, we can build community first and pray for growth in conversion as liminal space is created in the *people/belonging* aspect of the interconnected web.

Holistic Conversion Through Liminal Spaces

Ruth's conversion story surfaces the idea of utilizing liminal spaces as a missions method. Earlier, we noted how Ruth did not give her confessional oath until she and Naomi had already departed Moab for Judah. This departure created a gap in the interconnected web for her to make a life-altering decision. For possibly the first time in her life, separation and distance were created from her original land, people, and deity. This released her to finally express a high level of spiritual maturity in her conversion. Even though she was already married into an Israelite family, her commitment to Yahweh did not fully bloom until this distance was created.

In addition to Ruth's narrative, the Bible is full of people having powerful spiritual transformations while they are "on the way" and in a liminal space.⁵⁶ We also see cases of transformative

⁵⁵ However, to the young people's dismay, maybe we can leave out the wedding rings for now . . .

⁵⁶ Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Paul, and others all had powerful experiences while they were on the road or on a journey, which led to growth in their conversion or commitment to God.

experiences during the human developmental stage of youth.⁵⁷ It seems a dynamic in these journeys and developmental stages opens us to God's work in a way we previously were not. The life phases of adolescence and emerging adulthood are liminal times between childhood and adulthood. During these phases, we are biologically wired to form our sense of long-term identities; this is why many conversion testimonies contain at least one vignette from this crucial developmental stage. Ministering to youth in this biological liminal phase is a valuable missional window of opportunity.

The most significant opportunity for liminal space among youth today may be in college or International Student Ministry (ISM). Today, we observe high mobility rates among young people leaving their hometowns to study at colleges and universities in larger cities. We also see numerous youths traveling internationally from, to, and within Southeast Asia for their tertiary or even secondary education. For example, it is reported that the government of Malaysia has a long-term goal to increase international student enrollment to a quarter million by 2025.⁵⁸ Motivated by God's care for youth, love for neighbor, and welcoming the sojourner, these sectors represent an unparalleled missional opportunity to reach youth during this liminal season of their lives.⁵⁹

We may also apply this concept of liminal space to special programs in adolescent ministry. Youth Ministries often utilize special

⁵⁷ We see examples of this in David's youthful experience of God's provision against the lion and bear as a shepherd, preparing him for later battles. Joseph's journey as a young captive to Egypt humbled him and set him on a course to save his people. We also see this when Daniel and his friends are taken from their homes and own their faith in a foreign land.

⁵⁸ ICEF Monitor, "Malaysia exceeds target for new international student applications in 2022," 1 February 2023, <https://monitor.icef.com/2023/02/malaysia-exceeds-target-for-new-international-student-applications-in-2022/>.

⁵⁹ When young people leave home for school, there is a need to develop a new network of community the Church can help with. Additionally, students may experience greater religious freedom as they migrate from their homelands, giving an unparalleled opportunity for gospel access. While a desire for indigenization and even promoting whole-family conversion is laudable and ideal, the separation resulting in this liminal space experienced by international students is not the church's fault or intention; in this case, we are simply seeing the opportunity in a preexisting cultural dynamic in our time.

programming such as youth camps, retreats, and mission trips as effective ministry methods. These methods can also aid conversion growth, partly because they take advantage of liminal space and temporary separation from the youth's current background. It should also be noted that these special programs often risk employing elements of emotional manipulation, which can lead to premature conversion decisions. We know from the content of Ruth's speech that she was making her oath with eyes wide open to the risks and what she would be giving up.⁶⁰ However, if done thoughtfully and creatively, youth camps may create a healthy environment for growth in conversion among even the hardest-to-reach Southeast Asian youth.

Conclusion

As Ruth the Moabite practiced family life with her sojourning in-laws, she saw something appealing (other than her husband, of course) that led her to forsake her future and everything she knew to join the people of God. The family of Elimelech must have shown Ruth a consistent and appealing witness to a way of life with Yahweh as King. Michael, W. Goheen notes that *Missio Dei* in the OT focuses less on the *centrifugal* mission of God's people to 'go and tell' and more on the *centripetal* mission where the nations are invited to 'come and see.'"⁶¹ In Elimelech's family, we see a fine example of both. While the evidence shows a missional outcome was not the motivation for this family, this only adds to the theme that God is working to knit together his mission through the lives of ordinary people in their humble attempts to navigate the tragedies of life in faith.

As this article has demonstrated, we can draw insights for our theology of conversion from the OT example of Ruth and suggest

⁶⁰ Ruth's oath expresses a break with land, people, and deity alongside the understanding that death maybe an implication of her decision.

⁶¹ Jerry Hwang *Exploring The Old Testament in Asia: Evangelical Perspectives* (Langham Global Library, 2022), 60). Here Hwang cites, Michael, W. Goheen *A light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 49-73.

implications for missions to youth in Southeast Asia today. However, we should not neglect that it is Naomi's own *return* that sparks Ruth's conversion. This article would be incomplete without a call to the Church to remember the theme of conversion is a double-edged sword. Simon Chan wrote, "Failure of the church to live out its faith as a redeemed community constitutes the most serious stumbling block to conversion and the retention of new converts."⁶² Christopher Wright highlights the Hebrew word for *return* (שׁוּב shub) we examined earlier, commonly used in the context of repentance and conversion, "is much more often addressed to Israel than used in connection with the other non-covenant nations."⁶³ Wright continues and makes the point potent,

So any missiological reflection on conversion must wrestle with this issue of the continuous need of God's people for radical conversion themselves, rather than being seen only as the agent of the conversion of others.⁶⁴

So let us be the sort of people the Ruths and youths of this world are drawn to as we dream to make disciples from the youth of all nations for the glory of God, Amen.

⁶² Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 124.

⁶³ Wright, "Implications of Conversion," 1.

⁶⁴ Wright, "Implications of Conversion," 1.

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