

# **The Book of Ruth and the Theology of Home: A Quest for New Communities of Care and Human Dignity in Africa**

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## **Abstract**

One of the amazing turns that have been witnessed around the world is that of human migration from one part of the world to another. There have been heavy influxes of people from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East into Europe in recent years (and even in continual basis). Many people have died on the road and in the sea in the process of such migrations while others have been sold into slavery into territories beyond their familiar control and comfort. This indicates that human beings from various communities are still experiencing the effects of enslaving policies that make their so-called “original home” safeless and their identity jeopardized and their lives constantly at risk or even tragically destroyed. The question of human dignity especially to the foreigner, stranger or newcomer has been both a local and international burden. The need for humanity to move in search of survival and acceptance has been a very necessary case in point. But one of the big bones of contention is on the idea of their acceptance and/or rejection from those they approach. This among other serious questions that confront and expose the injustices of unequal communities in the world especially within African contexts informs the writing of this essay. Thus this essay will present a methodological paradigm in re-reading the book of Ruth in conversation with the notion of

“the theology of home” in search of useful theological-ethical paradigms that help us to deconstruct and reconstruct our communities and lives in light of inclusive, economic and social justice that intentionally provides a home to the refugee and welcomes them with dignity and human sense of love [*agape*] as homely care (*diakonia*).

Keywords: *The Book of Ruth, Migration, Theology of Home, Homely Care (diakonia), inequality, poverty, human dignity and social justice.*

### **Introduction;** The Problem of Migration in the Contemporary World

Homelessness has been one of the critical problems of human migration in the contemporary world. One of the leading practical theologians in South Africa, Professor Daniël J. Louw once presented a discussion that drew my attention to this problem.<sup>161</sup> In the same way, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm also in his Nuremberg Lectures of 2016 on public theology and the challenges of religious pluralism also presented the problem of migration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>162</sup> This has been one of the leading challenges of life across contexts. There has been mass migration of people from Syria to be specific into Europe. Germany has been one of the mother countries that have been compassionate towards the plight of emigrants in recent years. Angela Merkel’s courage to risk the reception of tens of thousands of people has been very challenging both internally and externally.<sup>163</sup> If one would take a look within African

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<sup>161</sup> Daniël J. Louw, “Between Xenophobia and Xenodochia in an Operative Ecclesiology of Home: The Plight of Refugees and Migrants as Challenge to a Diagnostic Approach in a Pastoral Hermeneutics of Caregiving,” pp. 1-25 (A Lecture Presented at Stellenbosch University: Unpublished to the best of my knowledge at the time of writing this essay, but I have a personal copy of the essay, nd).

<sup>162</sup> It is on You tube see Prof. Dr. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, “Opening Lecture,” Nuremberg Forum 2016.

<sup>163</sup> Louw, “Between Xenophobia and Xenodochia in an Operative Ecclesiology of Home: 5. Cf. G. Faulconbridge & S. Young, “World Unites on Paris, Beirut.” *Cape Times*, (November 16, 2015).

continent, the issue of human mass movement or migration is one of the popular problems across the borders. The media has been capturing the images of many African people trying to move away from African into European countries possibly in search for a better life. Many of such mass movers have been destroyed in the sea in the process of crossing over. This reminds me of the story of a young Syrian boy named Alan Kurdi whose body was washed to the shore, lying dead and alone. It was a terrible sight which continually challenges us today that such a young boy was rendered homeless, and his life snuffed out by the disastrous waves of the sea that engulfed him.<sup>164</sup> He died as an emigrant, possibly with his parents on the run from one place to another. This in a way is an indication that the environments or communities from which they are moving have become toxic for them and now by moving into other (new) and (better) communities they hope that they may have better opportunities for living.

One may be concerned to know the reason(s) behind such migrations in recent history, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which many people may see as the zenith of human technological advancement, which may be interesting to make life easier and better and comfortable for people. This in truth is not true for everyone in all places. There are many reasons why people move from one place to another. Like the movement of people from Syria into Europe has been the resultant effect of the incessant war in Syria. In the same way there have been wars and sociopolitical instability in many African countries. For example, countries like Somalia, Mali, Libya, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Nigeria, etc. have been suffering from serious sociopolitical and socioreligious instabilities. These

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<sup>164</sup> “After the alarming online pictures in the global media of the death of the 3-year-old boy, Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi in the Mediterranean Sea, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan put the blame on European countries for turning the Mediterranean Sea into a ‘migrant cemetery.’” Louw, “Between Xenophobia and Xenochia in an Operative Ecclesiology of Home: 8 cf. S. Shuster, “Smuggler’s Cove.” In *Time Special Report. Exodus. The Epic Migration to Europe & What Lies Ahead* (October 19, 2015), 38-43.

have destroyed the economic promise and the enjoyment of life in those places which has pushed the people out in search for a better place to live.

Sampie Terreblanche is one of the respected economic historians in South Africa. One of the salient problems he has discovered in (South) Africa is the problem of “inequality.”<sup>165</sup> South Africa among other African countries has suffered the history of injustice because of the coming of apartheid regime between 1948 to 1994. These years have been seen as the dark years of South African political history. It was very unfortunate that humanity could mistreat one another in the same country because of the differences of color and privilege. These racial problems have manifested themselves in many ways in the country including the religious contexts. Spaces have been occupied by those who have been privileged to the extent that those at the margin had almost no space to share. It was the burden of Terreblanche among others to stand up to the truth of human life and human flourishing that is why he insists that justice as equality must be done. He called the attention of the White Privileged others to make some good sacrifices in order to ameliorate the abject poverty which he sees as “chronic” within his South African context. Christianity has been abused among other religions in order to promote apartheid ideologies which may still be traceable in one way or another even in the contemporary democratic contexts. This problem of human (economic) inequality has been the pervasive problem in the African contexts especially from a political interactive point of view. Many politicians around African countries has neglected their duties of making the context conducive for the general public to live comfortably with the sense of (e)quality in which their lives receive some improvement and quality that make the flourishing of life possible.

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<sup>165</sup> Sampie J. Terreblanche, *The History of Inequality in South Africa: 1652-2002* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002); *Lost in Transformation* (Johannesburgh: KMM Review Publishing Company, 2012).

Another South African scholar, Gerald West, presents us with another challenging example on the role of empathy in our hermeneutical endeavors.<sup>166</sup> His theological (hermeneutical) interest has been focused on contextual hermeneutics from which he seeks to see, read, and interpret the Bible with people in particular contexts. His effort has been useful to bring to the public an increasing awareness on the fact that many poor people in (South) Africa are yearning for the quality of life and human dignity. His practical theological interest to study the Bible with those from below and in the margin has often than not mobilized many people (scholars) like him to have more interest and give closer attention to the plight of the context in which he lives and the contexts into which he and those who suffer could imagine together and seek to move into. There is need for developing much better communities that would take good notice and responsibility for the quality of life in Africa and around the world today.

The Nigerian theologians and church leaders namely, S. W. Kunhiyop,<sup>167</sup> Sunday B. Agang<sup>168</sup> and David Kajom<sup>169</sup> have

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<sup>166</sup> Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in South African Contexts* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1991); "The Legacy of Liberation Theologies in South Africa, with an Emphasis on Biblical Hermeneutics." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 63 (July, 2010) 157-83; "Liberation Hermeneutics after Liberation in South Africa." In *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, edited by Alejandro F. Botta and P. R. Andiñach, 13-38 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009); "The Son of Man in South Africa?" in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, edited by Richard Walsh, Jeffrey L. Staley, and Adele Reinhartz, 2-22 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013); "Tracing the 'Kairos' Trajectory from South Africa (1985) to Palestine (2009): Discerning Continuities and Differences." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 143 (2012), 4-22; "Contending for Dignity in the Bible and the Post-Apartheid South African Public Realm," 76-98 in *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics and Human Dignity*. Edited by L. Juliana Claassens and Bruce C. Birch (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

<sup>167</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Nairobi: Hippo Books, 2008); "Witchcraft and Human Rights," *Kagoro Journal of Theology* Vol. 2 No. 1 (2017) 21-38.

recently discovered and discussed the ongoing mass problems of Africa taking Nigeria as their point of departure. The problems that they have respectively outlined are the continual struggle for survival against the deadening effects of witchcraft, corruption and violence in African (Nigerian) contexts. Witchcraft has been one of the lingering social and spiritual problems that often than not terrorizes people in particular contexts. Sometimes it sets them against each other, for example, few weeks ago, in one of my class lectures,<sup>170</sup> a serving pastor presented a prayer request that we should pray for his church because he has lost one of his members and a certain 'old woman' in the church has been accused of killing the man and now she is being attacked by the youth in context that they want to kill her (i.e. burn her alive) too. This is one of the horrible reports we get from churches and communities in which we live in modern Africa. Certainly this is not the Africa we desire, nor is it what God desires that we should give to one another.

Furthermore, in Agang's public theological journey, he has noticed the increasing growth of corruption in Nigeria up to the extent that religion has been politicized and monetized. This idea of political and religious corruption has made life different and difficult to many people in contexts to the extent that terrorism has been manufactured in divers ways.<sup>171</sup> Right now violence has become common news in Nigeria among

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<sup>168</sup> Sunday B. Agang, "Divine Sovereignty: The Challenge of Christians Coping with Suffering in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *KaJoT* Vol. 1, no.1 (2016): 17-33.

<sup>169</sup> David Haji Kajom, *Violence and Peace Initiative in Nigeria; A Theological Assessment of the WCC's decade to overcome violence and volatile Nigerian Polity* (Kaduna: Pyla-mak, 2015); Martin Allaby, *Inequality, Corruption and the Church: Challenges and Opportunities in the Global Church* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2013); Ayuba Mavalla, *Conflict Transformation: Church in the Face of Structural Violence in Northern Nigeria* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2014).

<sup>170</sup> This happened during the third module of our 2018 Summer School at ECWA Theological Seminary Kagoro.

<sup>171</sup> Sunday B. Agang, "Globalisation and Terrorism: Corruption as a Case to Ponder." *KaJoT* vol. 2 no. (2017)1-20.

other African countries. The insurgence of Boko Haram has left a terrible legacy and mass destruction of people and communities. Right now there are numerous displaced people in almost every State in Nigeria. Many communities have been ravaged by inhumane human activities. Recently we received news from Barkin Ladi Local Government Area in Plateau State that many hundreds of people have been slaughtered (i.e. killed). These included babies of one year and six months old. These contextual injustices and dehumanizing issues have made our contexts toxic, and rendered many people homeless because of how their homes have been razed to dust and ashes which bury the remains of some of their loved ones. This is a horrible sight to behold and a haunting context to visit. Many people are homeless today, some are living as IDPs (Internally Displaced People) within their own country! This can ironically be described as 'homelessness at home.' Where then can we find an alternative world in which we would live and mobilize others to live beyond the contexts of violence, dehumanization, religious abuse, poverty and homelessness?

In order to answer the above question, I would like to think alongside scholars like Daniël Louw, Dirk J. Smit and Elna Mouton in search for a new way of seeing the other who is in need in order to find better ways to help them out of their situation. Mouton has done well to closely read and appreciate the work of Dirk Smit over the years (although he is still going on with some interesting works) in order to celebrate his contributions with emphasis to his interest and ethos of interpretation.<sup>172</sup> One of the hermeneutical keys that she has identified from his work is the art of seeing the other with

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<sup>172</sup> Elna Mouton, "Seeing' with Reverence: Dirk Smit on the Ethos of Interpretation." NGTT 48/1&2 (2007), 383-96; CF. Dirk J. Smit, "Responsible Hermeneutics: A Systematic Theologian's Response to the Reading and Readers of Luke 12:35-48." *Neotestamentica* 22 (1988) 441-484; "The Bible and Ethos in New South Africa." *Scriptura* 37 (1991), 51-67; "Reading the Bible and the '(un)official Interpretation of Culture." *Neotestamentica* 28/2 (1994), 309-321; "On Learning to Speak: A South African Reformed Perspective on Dialogue." *Scriptura* 88 (2005), 183-204.

reverence by “seeing people through the narratives of God’s grace.”<sup>173</sup> Although this has been a proposed hermeneutical key within systematic theology and ethical theological engagement, we can still use it in new ways of seeing our communities in Africa (Nigeria and South Africa among others) today in search for new and better communities against the communities of homelessness and poverty to alternative communities of home and inclusive justice. In my attempt to provide a biblical perspective for the challenge for an alternative community among our existing communities I would like us to explore the book of Ruth on human migration, in the next section of this essay.

### **The Book of Ruth and Human Migration**

Many scholars over the years have given attention to the book of Ruth especially in search for its theological significance in the history of Israel. There has not been much interest on reading Ruth with new eyes until very recently. Thus this section shall provide some examples of critical scholars who have been active in discussing the book of Ruth from a more contextually engaging perspective.<sup>174</sup> Even with that I am not

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<sup>173</sup> Mouton, “Seeing’ with Reverence: 389.

<sup>174</sup> Ellen van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi* (London: SCM Press, 1997a); “Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar,” in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997b) 426-51; Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1999); Laura E. Donaldson, “The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes,” in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)* [ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999] 130-44; S. Nadar, “Subverting Gender and Ethnic Assumptions in Biblical Narrative: Exploring the Narrative Voice of Ruth.” *Journal of Constructive Theology* 6/2 (2000); Eunny P. Lee, “Ruth the Moabite: Identity, Kinship, and Otherness,” in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld* (ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 89-101; Bonnie Honig, “Ruth the Model Emigree: Mourning and the Symbolic Politics of Immigration,” in *Ruth and Esther*. Athalya Brenner (ed) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 50-74; L.



sure they have given much attention to the idea of migration in the book of Ruth and the dialectic of the “theology of home.” That is what I seek to closely propose from it as an alternative vision for a new community that we need to see and also help others to see for better life in Africa and beyond.

International scholars like Katherine Doob Sakenfeld,<sup>175</sup> Carolyn Sharp<sup>176</sup> and Juliana Claassens<sup>177</sup> have read the book of Ruth severally with specific interest even though not from a community development perspective. Yet, their thoughts can be harnessed as point of departure into a more community development orientated discussion. Sakenfeld’s interest is basically theological in order to help her readers to see the ethos and ethics of togetherness between Ruth and Naomi. In her critical discussion the mother-in-law Naomi takes the lead of providing an example of a good mother while Ruth remains a faithful friend and companion to Naomi. But by some kind of contrast, Carolyn Sharp presents a critical response to Sakenfeld’s discussion in which she takes the study further. She somewhat problematizes the characters Naomi and Ruth in that she appears ambiguous within her reading.<sup>178</sup> It could be agreeable that there is no one without

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Juliana M. Claassens, “Resisting Dehumanization; Ruth, Tamar and the Quest for Human Dignity.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74 (2012), 659-674.

<sup>175</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1999).

<sup>176</sup> Carolyn Sharp, “The Formation of Godly Community: Old Testament Hermeneutics in the Presence of the Other.” *Anglican Theological Review* 86. No.4 (2004) 623-636.

<sup>177</sup> L. Juliana M. Claassens, “Resisting Dehumanization; Ruth, Tamar and the Quest for Human Dignity.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74 (2012), 659-674.

<sup>178</sup> At Juliana Claassens Professorial Inaugural Conference from 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2015, Carolyn Sharp presented her lecture the following thoughts; “Is this Naomi? A Feminist Reading of the Ambiguity of Naomi in the Book of Ruth”. In her lecture, Sharp dared to stand alone in viewing Naomi with some ambiguous elements in the book of Ruth. This is a direct contrast to the positive perspective of Katherine Sakenfeld who sees Ruth as a trustworthy, hopeful and promising young woman who owned her identity and was active in decent struggle

some kind of ambiguity in life and context. Nevertheless, the readings we get from Sharp are more of dialectical engagement with the characters as human beings within an identity negotiation polemic than to see them as people who call our attention to an alternative community. Claassens has also given her voice and interest in reading the book of Ruth with theological-ethical interest especially in search for alternative way of being in the world.<sup>179</sup> Thus Claassens has made a name for herself in doing critical theology in context in which she gives voice to the voiceless, attention to the neglected, and dignity to the dehumanized and healing to the traumatized. Drawing from her insight especially in terms of her art of reading the biblical text is very interesting, timely, and inspiring. In this study we shall take her interest of resistance further by calling for the resistance of toxic communities that push us away into the deserts of life in order to search for, and hopefully to find an alternative way of living in a homely context that provide us dignity and inclusive justice. Within this rhetoric of resistance against dehumanization and injustice we shall also resist poverty as one of the common factors in Africa that has rendered our contexts toxic and contested.

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for survival. Sharp on the other hand dared to try to deconstruct such positivistic points of view by prying a little further into the agency of Naomi in telling Ruth where to go, and what to do as an ambiguous character who dominated Ruth's life. Sharp no doubt recognized feminist effort in trying to honor and liberate all subjects and bring community reformation by interrogating powers that be towards a point of reconsidering what has been done at the expense of what is important, just and right. She uses "dissensus" as a point of departure towards seeing differently, seeing responsibly and acting the same. Sharp values ambiguity as a tool of subversion to structural ideologies that hampers what is true, right and just." See Hassan Musa, "Is There Any Man Here?" (Who Would Ask This Question Afterall?): Some Reflections On Feminist Frameworks in Reading the Old Testament at the Intersections," pp. 1-10 (Stellenbosch University: Unpublished, 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2015), 4.

<sup>179</sup> L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization; Ruth, Tamar and the Quest for Human Dignity." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74 (2012), 659-674.

I agree with Jacqueline Lapsley among others to give attention to our creatureliness and call for human dignity “for all.”<sup>180</sup> This takes our attention to the dialectic of Jacques Derrida, who is known as one of the founding scholars of postmodern thinking and hermeneutics. Although Derrida is notoriously complex, ambiguous, and contested, I shall (hopefully) capture him for the time being (even for the sake of this essay) to help our dialogue in search of an alternative community from his critical dialectic which he titles *Of Hospitality*.<sup>181</sup> I will argue alongside Derrida that our (South) African (Nigerian) contexts can be communities of home against the communities of displacement, even the unfortunate, “internal displacement” that many people experience within their countries,<sup>182</sup> to becoming the communities of home where life of dignity and inclusive justice is possible and viable.

But before we move to the next section it will be helpful for us to take a cursory view of the book of Ruth within the question of migration. In Ruth (1:1) we are introduced to a man and his family. In verse 2 we know that the man’s name was Elimelech and that he was the husband of Naomi. They have two sons namely, Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephramites from Bethlehem Judah. But they migrated (moved) to stay in Moab. They were received in Moab and lived there for many years. Their two boys grew and got married to Moabite women namely, Orpah and Ruth. In chapter 1 we learned that their father Elimelech died and left Naomi with her two sons who

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<sup>180</sup> Jacqueline Lapsley, “Dignity for All: Humanity in the Context of Creation.” in *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics and Human Dignity*. Edited by L. Juliana Claassens and Bruce C. Birch (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 141-44.

<sup>181</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>182</sup> “In 2004, some three and a half million Africans were refugees outside their own countries, and some ten million others were refugees within their own countries. Most were not fleeing natural disasters but internal political violence and power struggles that feed on religious, tribal and ethnic differences.” Celestin Musekura, “Refugees” in Tokunboh Adeyemo (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: World Alive, [2006], 2010), 321.

also died after some years. Naomi was left with her two daughters-in-law. She later heard that the Lord has visited his people in Bethlehem Judah and has provided them food (bread), so she decided to go back home. She now considered Moab to be another place (a strange and uncondusive place) for her to stay, thus she moved back home. She asked her daughters-in-law not to come with her but that they should go back to their mothers' homes and wait for other husbands in whose house she prayed that they may have rest (peace) from the troubles of life (1:8-9). She thought that as widows they are all vulnerable and homeless but when they get married they would have "rest" and/or fulfillment in a homely context. But Ruth became a classical companion to Naomi by her commitment to go back with Naomi to Bethlehem Judah (1:16-19a). Ruth determined to abandon her home, and home country to move into a "strange" place where she might find another home. She chose to emigrate with Naomi under a solemn oath of confident and religious revolution (conversion?) which has some endlessly engaging (problematic?) textures to so many critical as well as dogmatic interpreters today.

At the end of chapter 1 Naomi returned home with Ruth as her companion but she was still "Ruth the Moabiteess." In chapter 2 we see Ruth's exploration of a certain farm in which she gleaned and found food and favour. We shall return to comment more on chapter two later on. Furthermore, in chapter 3 Naomi sent Ruth to carefully and (wisely?) present herself to Boaz 'the farmer'<sup>183</sup> with the intention of being redeemed. With all due respect to all those who read from a feminist and postcolonial perspective, there is no need to dogmatize the idea of Ruth being redeemed by Boaz as something normative to the church and society. Women's identity must not be incessantly tied to almost being sold to a male master. But in chapter 4, after some crucial cultural

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<sup>183</sup> This may present some ironic humour or ambiguity to South African readers, but it has no ulterior motive rather than to think about the identity of Boaz from a practical perspective.

considerations Boaz did what should be done as a responsible kinsman redeemer. Ruth found a home with Boaz in Judah and she found her place in the history of Israel's royalty and even the history of the life of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5b).

### **The Theology of Home and Human Dignity**

The book of Ruth presents us with some helpful categories for a theology of home and human dignity. Following the rhetoric of faith care and the healing of life from Daniël J. Louw, Ruth's identity was accepted and healed.<sup>184</sup> This is because Boaz has seen Ruth from the narrative of grace.<sup>185</sup> In chapter 2 of Ruth her good deeds to the living and the dead were recalled and celebrated. She treated her mother-in-law with kindness by being such a loyal companion to her. This ethical solidarity between Ruth and Naomi has demonstrated the elemental blessedness of relationality in the context of vulnerability and sorrow.<sup>186</sup> As a paradigm from Louw's *Cura Vitae*, Ruth's companionship has healed Naomi of her sorrowful loneliness. Ruth has given worth and dignity to Naomi thereby resisting the dehumanizing problem of death and dying. She shows Naomi that her life is worth being with. As she dwelt with Naomi in chapter 2 she went out to glean some grain. She was not directed to anywhere at her first outing, but she went at random to gleaned wherever she found favour and acceptance.<sup>187</sup> She knew her homelessness in

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<sup>184</sup> Daniel J. Louw, *Cura Vitae; Illness and the Healing of life* (Wellington: Lux Verbi, 2008).

<sup>185</sup> Mouton, "Seeing' with Reverence: 389.

<sup>186</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, "Becoming Fully Human: An Ethic of Relationship in Difference and Otherness." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 102 (November, 1998) 13-27.

<sup>187</sup> "She initiated the move because *wanwa Mmimba ndiye atsekula chitseko* [Chewa, Malawi-'the one with diarrhea opens the door,' meaning that the one with a problem goes to seek help]. Ruth had a problem. She needed to find food for herself and Naomi if they were to survive. Ruth is typical of many rural African women who spend most of their time looking for food to feed their families." Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Ruth" in Tokunboh Adeyemo (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: World Alive, [2006], 2010), 322.

Bethlehem Judah thus she placed herself at the mercy of anyone at whose farm she might find grace. This is indeed the tragic effect of homelessness, people wander to anywhere looking for help and survival even to places that young girls and women are being exploited and abused. Ruth was willing to take the risk in order to find some food that could be useful to taking care of Naomi her mother-in-law as well as her own self. The quest for food to survive hunger has displaced many people in large and small scales. There are many people who legitimately and others illegitimately cross borders today in search for a better place to live, get some food and survive. There are also unfortunate stories of young men and women who engage themselves in criminal and dehumanizing activities in order to get some food or money to survive on. Ruth resisted the ravaging effect of hunger and the dehumanizing effects of foreignness, she dared to survive,<sup>188</sup> she moved out of her comfort zone by faith and action<sup>189</sup> in search of a new and better way to live.

It is interesting and important to note with Juliana Claassens and Bruce C. Birch, Klaas Spronk and Fritz De Lange that the reality of human dignity is actually God-given, and it is the inalienable rights of all human beings everywhere.<sup>190</sup> Thus

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<sup>188</sup> Claassens, “Resisting Dehumanization; (2012).

<sup>189</sup> ‘Faith and Action’ are the key words in the motto of the EMS (Evangelical Missionary Society) of ECWA (Evangelical Church Winning All)

<sup>190</sup> L. Juliana Claassens and Bruce C. Birch (eds) *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics and Human Dignity* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2015); cf. Beverly Eileen Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009). Juliana L. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God’s Liberating Presence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012); L. Juliana Claassens and Klaas Spronk (eds), *Fragile Dignity: Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family and Violence* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013); Piet Naudé, “Human Dignity in Africa: Sketching the Historical Context.” *Scriptura* 104 (2010), 221-230; Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Unique in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Fritz De Lange, 2013. “The Hermeneutics of Dignity,” pp 9-27. In L. Juliana Claassens and Klaas Spronk (eds), *Fragile Dignity*:

Ruth, though a foreigner, needs a space to be, to live and thrive as a true human being. On reaching the field of Boaz, she stumbled on his servants working on the farm and she was allowed to glean without any harassment by Boaz's men (vs. 3). She did not know that Boaz was a kinsman to Elimelech and none of his men knew who she was but that does not matter, they only noticed a human being looking for what to eat and they allowed her space. This is crucial for our ethics of care and responsibility. In many developing African contexts like Nigeria there is hardly anything a person may look for and get easily without knowing someone that can stand as a godfather or godmother or a friend that knows you and agrees to speak for you or work in your interest. The way things work in most cases, even in Church contexts, is when you know somebody and when somebody knows you. In other more prominent instances is if you can afford to pay for the services. These categories of knowing somebody and having enough to pay clearly exclude and dehumanize the poor and the vulnerable. The problem of Xenophobia is not only a South African problem but it has its guises in other instances and ways that show the new comer that s/he is a stranger and is not welcomed on crossing the borders. Derrida in his *Of Hospitality* has helped us to see beyond the stranger and strangeness of humanity but rather as we cross borders and as our borders are crossed we need to be like Boaz and his servants who were open to accepting (allowing) the new comer (not the stranger) to be among them and to glean some food from their field.

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*Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013); Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Becoming Human Together: The Pastoral Anthropology of St. Paul*, Good news Series 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982); Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996).

When Boaz returned from wherever he was he asked his men who that young woman was, as in ‘to whom does she belong’ (vs. 4-7 NeT Bible; so patriarchal).<sup>191</sup> When he heard about her, he was so delighted to really accept and allow her to continue to glean and even have the grace of taking part in their meal. She was accepted and allowed not because of what he heard about her but rather what he heard about her, the story further strengthened the clarity of who she was to him. In a sense I will argue that Boaz humanized Ruth by asking for her identity. He was not ready to address her as a nameless and contextless other.

In verses 8-9 Ruth was courteously addressed by Boaz. He faced her as a new comer not as a stranger, this implies that he faced her not with suspicion which is ready to reject or take cover from the strangeness of the stranger but rather he approached her as a new comer, as someone who has come to belong to them. This I will argue is Boaz’s courtesy and his move to provide a home and dignity to Ruth not because he has any ulterior motive (we must not read against the grain of the text). In his address to Ruth, Boaz used an endearing form of speech that shows love as care. Although there is some amount of seniority (not superiority) in how he addressed her as *בִּיתִי* (*bīthī* “my daughter”) this implies that she belong to him as a precious one. In Africa as well as the Semitic cultures, calling someone my daughter, father, mother, brother, sister, does not necessarily indicate some biological attachment or origination but rather it shows the use of a rhetoric for solid community or homeliness. In this regard Ruth found a space within Boaz’s field (if not life) in that he gave her freedom and direction of what to do and whom to follow. This brings us to the homeliness of Boaz which should be challenging to all of us today.

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<sup>191</sup> “Such a question assumes that every woman must belong to a man, either a father or a husband. This is also true in the African construction of the identity of African women.” Phiri, “Ruth,” 322.



In verse 10 Ruth “knelt” before Boaz in appreciation and she got a voice with which to express herself. She acknowledged that Boaz has showed her more than usual care, even more than enough kindness which led her to ask “why” perhaps “why me Boaz?” even though “I am a foreigner.” Yes, she was foreigner to the context but not to him. He has heard about her interesting and important story in which she provided home and dignity to her mother-in-law in respect to the dignity of her husband. In this Boaz moved on to a priestly rhetoric in which he blessed her (vs. 11-13) and she also acknowledged his kindness and generosity (vs. 13). Later on during the meal time Boaz called Ruth to the table (vs. 14). There is no indication that her ‘foreignness’ become a reason to ostracize her but rather she should be invited and be treated as a guest (vs. 14-17). Ruth was given food to eat and some more grain to pack, not only to glean the left over but rather she was to be given until she has enough. This move is what I have learned from Mouton’s reading of Smit’s “ethos of interpretation” that we need to learn to see others from the “narratives of God’s grace” as mentioned above. Ruth received grace from God through Boaz. She found acceptance and great blessing that made her mother-in-law to wonder. Naomi wondered why Ruth returned so early/quickly and with much grain with her ( vss. 18-23). Ruth faithfully took the grains she was given back home indeed with the story of joy because of the kindness and hospitality of Boaz. Ruth was no longer seen as stranger or even a foreigner but rather she found a home, a real home and a child who continue to define the family of Elimelech and the history of Israel (chaps. 3&4).

From the story of Ruth we can see the theology of home and human dignity. Yes, she and her mother-in-law and sister-in-law have experienced loss and deep sorrow, yet, their joy came to them in another place which became home to Ruth and Naomi. The world that we see in chapter 2 of Ruth is an interesting and a begging world, it is the world to live in, it is the world we need in Nigeria, (South) Africa, and the world.

This is a world in which the stranger becomes a friend, the world in which foreignness does not hinder acceptance, and giving gifts. The world we see in chapter 2 is a world without hatred or violence, or marginalization, or any form of discrimination, but rather it is a homely world, where greetings happen, freedom is given and accepted, respect is given and accepted, food is given and accepted. This is where life takes a real and satisfactory shape that we need to promote. In the next section of this essay we shall reflect on some practical ways of application in our daily lives as communities of faith in order to develop communities of home (not strangeness, hatred, and violence) in Africa.

### **Developing New Communities in Africa**

Allan Boesak, one of the leading South Africa's public theologians has demonstrated in his discourse and theological contribution to the 75<sup>th</sup> birth celebration of John De Gruchy as one who presents "Hope unprepared to accept things as they are." This is a contested, and contesting hope, a living hope that looks ahead into the future being aware of the past but not ready to be trapped and incarcerated in the past. He calls for a move into new a world in order to rest from the present state of things which he describes as "A restless presence."<sup>192</sup> The question is despite all the crimes and injustices in our contexts, be it Nigerian, South African, American contexts etc, how do we create communities of home? Communities that are defined by love (*agape*) and godly service (*diakonia*) and fellowship (*koinonia*) as ethos for responsible living and actions? In my attempt to answer these related questions, I believe we need to move from our past of

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<sup>192</sup> Allan A. Boesak, "A Hope Unprepared to Accept Things as they Are: Engaging John De Gruchy's Challenges for 'Theology at the Edge.'" In Robert Vosloo, Hendrik Bosman, JH Cilliers, Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel, JA Van den Berg and D P Veldsman (eds), NED GEREKTE TEOLOGIESE TYDSKRIFT, DEEL 55, SUPPLEMENTUM 1, (December, 2014), 1061.

hurt and hatred into the future of hope and joy (Moltmann).<sup>193</sup> We need to learn to forgive those who hurt us and as in the words of Boesak, “we must not abandon the correctness of our decision to forsake revenge, retribution and punishment and to pursue reconciliation.”<sup>194</sup> This kind of move will be constructive to our communities.

We need to learn the ethics of responsibility. In our attempt to create communities of home we need to learn to be responsible to one another. Denise Arkermann discusses on how we can have a sense of economic responsibility in the way we use our wealth. We need to know the blessedness of knowing when enough is enough. We have enough when we have enough to share with others.<sup>195</sup> Many politicians in Nigeria take huge sum of money home at the end of every month. They use the same roads we use which are full of pot-holds that cause numerous accidents and loss of lives. They see the same markets as the poor, they always look at very dilapidated houses, shacks and shanties in which the poor people live. Yet, they often than not close their eyes and ears to the realities of those who suffer. Jürgen Moltmann was once asked a question after his lecture on the future of ecumenical/public theology on the idea of poverty and the poor. He declared that poverty is the crime of the rich against the poor. This assertion may generally be contested but if closely discussed it will yield a lot of truth that we need to critically face. We need our privileged/wealthy/influential people to be responsible in sharing their wealth with those in need. There should not be a needy person in the community of home because everyone will be responsible and comfortable.

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<sup>193</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Experiment of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1975); *A Broad Place: An Autobiography* (London: SCM Press, 2007); Moltmann, Jürgen. *Ethics of Hope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>194</sup> Boesak, “A Hope Unprepared to Accept Things as they Are:” 1072.

<sup>195</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey: Ordinary Blessings* (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2014), 241-64.

We need to have some socio-political policies that guide and regulate the way we deal with new comers (not strangers). We need to be loving and caring as faith communities, especially the Church which is called to follow Jesus Christ who has been active in caring for all those in need around him. We need the church to be active in its *agape*, *diakonia* and *koinonia* calling and theology. To truly be a space for fellowship and the creation of godly ethos that will provide us better communities than the ones we have inherited.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, the reality of poverty and suffering in African contexts can be closely addressed when we learn the theology of home. This theological paradigm is founded within our hermeneutical lenses. Dirk Smit and Mouton have called our attention to read other people around us from the narratives of God's grace. If we do this we shall be internally developed towards an ethos of love and care for others. These others may be anyone who is not me. These others could be the Ruths among us. Those men and women on the move from another country, church context, or socio-political contexts, to another in search for a new (better) place in which life will be possible and joyful. We see the ravaging effects of poverty in the numerous ways it destroys our contexts and world. This essay argues for a move into the theology of home. The encounter of Ruth and Boaz which has been used as the case in point for our illustration of the new kind of world that we can receive from the Bible is endlessly challenging and enriching. It is my hope that we shall grow with Boesak within a hope that is not prepared to accept things as they are but will seek to catch the vision of the new world we have been given as in the story of Ruth, that we may be encouraged, and empowered to resist the dehumanization of poverty and estrangement that we may create a community of faith that is ready to exercise its fellowship (*koinonia*) in ways that are true, inclusive, just and joyful.