CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND PROJECTIONS

At the end of this long itinerary, we come back to the problem we posed at the beginning of this study: How can First Testament narratives be appropriated ethically without being reduced to an ethical model approach? Ricoeur’s narrative theory suggests a way forward. Ricoeur contends that narratives do not provide ethical models for life; rather, their ethical power rests in their capacity to open up possibilities for living and for forming one’s identity. Playing with these possibilities through an act of imagination leads to growth in practical wisdom (phronesis) and an enlarged self, as one takes on a narrative identity which, when acted upon, is translated into an ethical identity.

Ricoeur shows how this process takes place through the operation of emplotment—the movement from prefiguration to configuration to refiguration. The strength of this threefold movement is that it is able to draw out the potentials of a text and actualize its power to reshape the reader’s identity. This can happen because Ricoeur does not see the text as a closed system but as one that transcends the boundaries of the textual world to encompass both the lived experience that gave birth to the text and the lived experience of the reader of the text. However, the text does not merely reproduce the practical reality that lies behind the text but configures it through an inventive process that has the capacity to transform the world in front of the text.

Ricoeur’s approach to symbol and metaphor is fruitful in unpacking the surplus of meaning in the rites and symbols found in the First Testament. I have used Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor as a gateway for accessing the multivalent meanings of the symbolic rite of circumcision in the First Testament. These meanings are then used to understand the symbolic significance of the performance of the rite in Exod 4:25.

Ricoeur’s method allows for the use of various approaches in an integrated way. Thus, in interpreting Exod 4:18–26, I have employed narrative criticism, speech act theory, ritual studies, and reader-response approaches. I have not used diachronic approaches as much, yet Ricoeur’s theory allows for their use, especially in the role he gives to symbols, which he understands as rooted in specific cultural systems,
and to explanations, which function to help readers understand the story better when this is blocked by a lack of knowledge of the cultural and linguistic context. Other biblical passages than Exod 4:18–26 may require other approaches. Ricoeur’s method does not preclude the use of differing approaches but encourages their deployment to enable readers to follow the story better.

Ricoeur gives an indispensable place to the real reader. For Ricoeur, the ethical significance of the narrative would not be realized without an actual flesh-and-blood reader who would operationalize the movement of emplotment in the act of reading. Indeed, the identity-forming function of narrative would only be possible through the engagement of a real reader. Thus, I have acted as the real reader of the text and, reading from a specific social location, I have sought to show how the Exodus passage can be significant for Filipino migrants. In order to do this it was necessary to show what prefigured actions in the world of the reader and the world of the text are common, including the symbolic and ethical significances of these actions in each world. Thus, I have identified farewell and leave-taking, migration, attack on the traveler, and circumcision as the actions that are ethically salient. Of these, the action of migration and the symbolic significance of circumcision would be the most pertinent for Filipino migrants.

These disjointed actions, however, do not make a story. They need to be configured through the mediating action of the plot. Using Ricoeur’s notion of discordant concordance, I have shown how the different actions identified in the text thwart the expectations of readers but, at the same time, the plot’s synthesis of the heterogeneous makes it possible for readers to work out some form of coherence. I have argued that when read in the context of the immediate narrative unit (Exod 2:23–4:31), Exod 4:18–26 should be taken as narrating a liminal experience. Thus, the ambiguity in the pronouns, the threat of death from the deity, the lack of clear-cut moral boundaries, and the act of circumcision all speak of a transitional period in a rite of passage that leads to a change of identity. This transition involves the transformation of Moses from a marginal person in Midian with a confused identity to a new status and vocation as God’s spokesperson in Egypt with an unambiguous Israelite identity. It also involves the initiation of Moses’ family into their new identity as part of the Israelite community. This transformation is expressed and encapsulated in the rite of circumcision, which speaks of death and rebirth, of separation and incorporation.