Jione Havea and Peter H.W. Lau (eds.)  

Published in the series International Voices in Biblical Studies, this monograph brings together scholars from Malaysia, Tonga, India, China, Australia, Hong Kong, and Myanmar. For all of them, some more than others, their social location has influenced how they read and interpret the book of Ruth. Collectively and individually they have much to contribute to traditional Western interpretation.

Let me begin with what I consider cumulative contributions. Coming to the book as a white, female American trained in Hebrew Bible, I was assuming, wrongly, that all of the articles would be written from a post-colonial perspective. I had not given sufficient thought to the book's title: *Reading Ruth in Asia.* Two of the chapters (One and Eight) begin by talking about the meaning of the term “Asia” – what is and is not included in that term, its fluidity, and the diversity of cultures and languages included. One of the commonalities of this diversity is that Christianity is not the dominant religion in the locations represented. While the Bible is foundational for all Christians, it is one among other sacred texts in Asian cultures – and not the most important of sacred texts for most people. While a contemporary West may weave secular, Muslim, Buddhist and other religious threads into its Judeo-Christian tradition, still, the Bible remains the most influential religious text in the West even today. Western biblical scholars have a very different experience from Asian and Asian American biblical scholars.

Second, the cultures represented in some of the articles evoke comparisons with the biblical book of Ruth that are not present (at least publicly) today in Western societies – variations on the Levirate law, joint family structures, rape in marriage, assumptions about marriage and maternity. The culture in Mississippi is different from the culture in Massachusetts. The cultures in Asia are very different from the cultures in the West. If one’s social location affects one’s reading and interpretation of texts, I, who have spent all of two weeks in Asia, have much to learn from those for whom “Asia” in its broadest sense is their social location.

Third, the articles written from a post-colonial perspective and the others that “exhibit ... postcolonial tendencies” (p. 13) widened my understanding of post-colonialism. Having always believed that the book of Ruth is post-exilic, I have been sympathetic to how Ruth, by her identity as a Moabite, under mines the exclusivity cultivated by Ezra and Nehemiah (the religious establishment) during the Persian Period. Ruth, an outsider like Rahab and Tamar, becomes the insider. She becomes the great-grandmother of David. I have
always stressed faith in YHWH, Israel’s God, rather than ethnicity as the key to belonging in the narrative. Just as I hadn’t given sufficient thought to the importance of hesed in the text, I had not fully thought through the identification of missionaries as colonial powers, traveling to Asia not under the aegis of a foreign dominating political power, but nevertheless “hell-bent” to change the religious cultures of the aboriginal peoples.

One of the recurring themes in the volume is migration and the hybridity that results. Naomi goes from Israel to Moab and then returns to Israel; Ruth goes from Moab to Israel. Naomi is changed by her experiences in Moab; Ruth is changed by her journey to Israel and life there. She cannot erase her Moabite origins but her identity is transformed. The numbers of people in our own time who have experienced this migration – some out of necessity for survival, and some in the hopes of improving their situations – are astounding and include both authors of and audience for articles within the monograph.

In addition to these cumulative contributions of the book, each article brings its own unique perspective. While I learned something I didn’t know from each of the articles, I found some contributions stronger than others. Not surprisingly, I was attracted most especially to the work of feminist authors.

Chapter One functions as an introduction to the volume. In it Jione Havea and Peter H.W. Lau encourage both the articles’ authors and their readers to develop an “inclusive imagination” that “celebrates difference and diversity” and that enables cross-scriptural reading (p. 8). While not a sacred text, per se, Yan Lin (Chapter Four) provides a cross-textual reading between the book of Ruth and A Pair of Peacocks to the Southeast Fly.

Chapter One also asserts that “in the intersection of text, interpretation, and community, the challenge is to give voice to the silenced” and that “attending to the subjectivities and interests of outcast and minority/minoritized communities is urgent” (p. 11). While this principle is not unique to this volume or to post-colonialism, interiorizing it contributes to a richer appreciation of the biblical texts. And I, as a white, middle-class American, somewhat familiar with the outcasts of my own culture, need to learn more about the outcasts within Asian cultures.

Surekha Nelavala (Chapter Seven) proposes sisterhood as the relationship that emerges between Naomi and Ruth. She contrasts that relationship with the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship that is common within the Indian joint family structure and which is competitive and hierarchical. The relationship between Naomi and Ruth is based on “mutual empathy” and on “understanding a sense of responsibility, accountability, and support” (p. 91).

I had never heard of Kachin society (in Myanmar), although there are 600,000 Kachin people, 99% of whom are Christian. Roi Nu (Chapter Five)