

Using Performance (with Audience Participation) to Help Translators Discern Ambiguity in Texts: An Empirical Study Based on the Book of Ruth

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June F. Dickie 

Wycliffe Bible Translators, South Africa

Abstract

Written text often has ambiguities or “gaps,” requiring readers to bring their own experience into making sense of the story (in line with reception theory). Translators need to be able to identify such gaps, determine if they are intentional or not, and then decide how best to deal with them in translation. In this study, oral performance of a text is used, with audience participation, to discern ambiguities and gaps. Two groups in South Africa present a performance of the book of Ruth to three audiences. A jester questions the audience, at particular points in the story, as to their perceptions of characters’ moods or motivations. The book of Ruth, being largely dialogue, lends itself to dramatic performance, but the methodology could be applied to any text, with enlightening results. The approach shows that by imagining texts as performances, translators can become more aware of ambiguities and decide how they should be treated.

Keywords

ambiguity, performance, translation, Ruth, reception theory, audience

Corresponding author:

June F. Dickie, 15 Waterford Circle, Kirstenhof, Cape Town 7945, South Africa.

Email: junedickie@gmail.com

I. Introduction

Bible translators need to be sensitive to “gaps in understanding” or ambiguities in the source text, and to consider whether such gaps are intentional or not. One way to highlight these gaps is through oral performance of the text, and then enquiring of the audience as to how they understand the story. For this study, the book of Ruth was chosen. The focus of the study is not so much on discovering new insights about the book, but rather on helping translators to recognise the gaps that arise and to consider how they should be treated, i.e., clarified or maintained.

The book of Ruth is largely dialogue¹ and thus lends itself to dramatic performance. As Block notes, “Hearing the story of Boaz and Ruth and Naomi as a drama helps us grasp its message” (2015, 12–13).² Nielsen claims that it is “a lively literary piece intended to be read orally and heard at one sitting” (1997, 4). Hongisto also asserts that the book of Ruth has the character of a drama, owing to “its large amount of discourse, its introduction of each episode with a clear definition of the setting, and the use of early episodes to build tension which is resolved in later episodes” (1985, 20).

Oral performance of the text was chosen as a methodology for two reasons. First, enacting the story draws attention to details that are often not considered when the text is simply read. In performance, such details, even if not specified in the text, must be portrayed in some way. For example, decisions must be made as to how a character will respond emotionally to another character.

The second advantage of dramatic performance is that it adds an amphitheatre quality to the text, making the rhetorical power of the story much stronger. For example, in Ruth 1, the “calamity motif” (Prinsloo 1980, 331) can be easily portrayed through gestures of pain such as weeping and lamenting to God. Similarly, the “abundance motif” (when Ruth comes home with food, or when the baby is born) can be vividly displayed through songs of joy and praise. As a result, the story engages the audience, and their participation in making sense of the text is consequently more likely.

In the empirical study, members of two communities in Cape Town were invited to participate in a “performance translation” of the book of Ruth. One group comprised Grade 7 scholars from Westlake township, and the other included adults from two Christian fellowship groups in Capricorn township. Over a period of several months, in weekly sessions of an hour, the participants studied the biblical account, considering particularly the emotions behind the text. A dramatic reading was then prepared, with

¹ In the book of Ruth, 56 of 86 verses include dialogue (Morris and Cundall 1968, 253).

² Block views the book as a drama with four acts.

six actors: Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, a narrator, a jester³ (who interjected with questions to the audience at periodic intervals in the story's development), and the audience. For the adult version, a minstrel also performed, with songs at various key moments in the story, inviting audience participation. Performances were made before three different audiences: Both the adults and the school-learners performed before their peers, and then a combined cast presented the drama at a suburban church.

The theoretical foundation for the study is that of reception theory (within the wider field of performance criticism). This is briefly delineated next.

2. Reception theory

Reception theory was elaborated for written texts, and highlights the dynamic contribution of the reader as she or he interacts with the text (see Dickie 2017, 46–47). Although there are clearly differences in the way a live audience connects with, and impacts, an oral performance, there are some characteristics of reception theory that are useful to this study.

2.1 *The reader has a creative role*

In most texts, there are gaps or ambiguities, some intentional and others not,⁴ which the reader fills, consciously or otherwise (Darr 1998, 29; Iser 1974, 279). In the book of Ruth, the characters are not described beyond their actions (and some of their words)⁵ and from these, the hearer/reader must deduce their motives and moods, and fill in the “indeterminacies” in the plot. Some of the meaning of the text is not self-evident,⁶ and thus the reader must share in making sense of the story. Foley (1991, 41) advises that ideally, the reader/hearer should fill gaps in ways that are in harmony with the bigger context of the text (historical, sociological, and literary). This suggests that only certain interpretations are possible, and some are more true to authorial intent than others (Suleiman 1980, 23–24).⁷ However, the reader's imagination often leads him or her to fill the gaps in line with his or

³ The notion of a jester comes from the work of the Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal, who elaborated his “theatre of the oppressed” in the 1970s. See Boal 1993.

⁴ Lee argues that the gaps and ambiguities in the narrative of Ruth are intentional, to engage the reader to pay close attention (2015, 1).

⁵ However, being able to hear some of the characters' dialogues assists us with deducing some of what is missing (Llaguno 2014, 251).

⁶ Fretheim refers to gaps in the text arising from translation ambiguities and the use of metaphors (2007, 51), but there are other gaps besides those caused by semantic ambiguities.

⁷ See also Hirsch 1976.

her needs and experience.⁸ Thus meaning arises from “a fusion of horizons” of the reader and the text, being negotiated within the range of possible meanings (Soukup 1997, 103–7; Gadamer 1991).⁹ As a result, there may be various valid readings for a text (Booth 1977).

Fish proposes that meaning is determined by the interpretive community,¹⁰ not the individual and not the text (1980, 13–14). Darr objects, insisting that the historical and sociological setting of the text must be considered. He asserts that without the constraints of textual objectivity and intentionality, “interpretation becomes unqualified free play” (1998, 34, 39–41). Mailloux (1982) agrees, noting that original hearers would have brought a “context of expectation” to the ancient text. In the empirical situation, the actors and audience will have their own “context of expectation,” interpreting the biblical text largely within their own sociological context.

2.2 The audience impacts the way the performance develops

In Africa, audience members expect to participate (Dorson 1972, 262),¹¹ and are often “waiting for their cue to enter the performance” (Dhlomo 1993, 191–97). Their role is largely to provide affirmation, without which the performance might come to a sudden end (Cope 1968, 30). Ukala describes the African audience as “a polaroid audience,” giving immediate feedback (2000, 92). Lack of participation indicates that the performance is not acceptable (Dhlomo 1993, 197). Thus the audience plays an important role in determining the viability or otherwise of interpretations given in performance (Rhoads 2006, 179).¹² They may also interject additions or questions. Indeed, their contribution is vital if the work is to be fully realized.¹³

2.3 Each performance of a text is unique

In oral performance there is no correct (or original) version.¹⁴ Each performance is “a new formulation of the text,” suited to the needs of the setting

⁸ Fretheim notes, “What we bring to the text will inevitably affect what we see in the text” (2007, 52).

⁹ This is in line with relevance theory: People try to make the best sense of messages at minimal cost.

¹⁰ “The community” includes those present and those through the ages, that is, tradition (Maxey 2010, 11).

¹¹ The performer seeks to use the oral arts in the best way to get the greatest response from “an evaluative but involved audience” (Kunene 1981, xxxi).

¹² Bailey gives examples from the Middle East of the strength of “informal controlled oral tradition,” exercised by the community itself (1995, 9).

¹³ Oral literature is not composed *for* performance, but *in* performance (Lord 1960).

¹⁴ See Finnegan 1988, 51. As Derrida (1988) argues in his essay, “Signature Event Context,” citation is never exact, as it is always being adapted to new contexts.

and participants (Dewey 1994, 157–58).¹⁵ Indeed, variation (albeit controlled) is considered important for the sake of artistic expression (Klem 1982, 121).¹⁶ Finnegan agrees, arguing that it is a Western notion that a story must be the same every time it is told. She claims that this arises from the fact that Western literature is “frozen” in print form (2012, 334).

However, (oral) religious stories or songs (Klem 1982, 119–20; Chafe 1982) as well as poetry (Block 2015, 32) are more likely to follow a relatively standard form. For example, in the performances for this study, the commitment of Ruth to Naomi (1.16–17) is poetic and the actors found this easy to memorize. However, as Finnegan (2012) points out, in oral performance rote memorization is not sought nor produced. Even in the ancient world, where memorization was a critical element of the transmission of high-value texts, “recall was not without some small variation” (Carr 2005, 6, 11, 13, 71). Nevertheless, cultural memory ensures that there is a “core of structural stability in the oral tradition” (Crossan 1998, 87).¹⁷ The acceptable boundaries of the “original form” are recognised by the community (Wendland 2008, 29, 45) and put into practice by the community (Bailey 1995). Bailey notes that in the context where he was working (in Egypt), three different levels of flexibility are permitted, according to the genre being transmitted. The material is passed on *in public* in a formal setting, and this ensures that cultural stories are transmitted accurately (with some minor variation) from one generation to the next.

In the Ruth drama, although the actors read from a script, there was variation from one performance to another. Sometimes, in trying to act rather than just read, the actors omitted some of the details and jumped over lines. Also, the actors (none of whom were English mother-tongue speakers) changed words in the script that they had not understood and assumed their peers would not understand (e.g., “offspring” was changed to “children”) or emended terms that they battled to pronounce (e.g., “persuade”). The changes varied according to the actors and audience, making each performance unique.

3. Empirical examples in the light of reception theory

Ambiguities and gaps in the text may result from the reader/hearer lacking information (as a result of the narrator not providing such) or they may arise from a lack of biblical knowledge and cultural background.

¹⁵ Canonici gives an example of two recorded performances of the same poem (*Izibongo zika Senzangakhona*): one has 128 lines and the other 93 lines (1996, 229).

¹⁶ However, for high-value texts (e.g., Scriptures), the limits of acceptability are more constrained, as determined by the receptor community.

¹⁷ See also Petrov 1989, 78–79.

3.1 Lack of information provided by the narrator

Ambiguities may arise from the reader's lack of information about the world at that time. For example, when Elimelech and his sons all die in a foreign land, is this a punishment for their disobedience, the result of natural causes, or part of God's overarching plan? In biblical stories, comments from the narrator can help explain the actions of the characters (Spitz 2017, 1). But in the book of Ruth, there is very little narrator comment.

At times the larger biblical context can shed light on the author's intent. For example, in interpreting Elimelech's act of moving his family to Moab, the context provided by the author might be helpful. For example, by way of the phrase "In the days when the judges ruled" in 1.1, the original hearers were reminded that at this time Israel was subject to the Mosaic covenant. This should have brought to mind for them that one of the curses resulting from disobedience to that law was famine (e.g., Deut 8.2-6).¹⁸ Thus Spitz claims that Elimelech, rather than running away from Israel, should have repented (2017, 3). However, Hubbard notes that biblical famines often have natural causes, and in this case the author chose not to indicate the cause (1988, 84-85). Wardlaw concludes that Elimelech's action is ironic. He acknowledges, like Spitz, that in the law famine was a punishment intended to lead to repentance, but instead it caused Elimelech to go elsewhere seeking food (2015, 38-39). However, he also notes that famine took Joseph's family to Egypt and this proved providential and served to safeguard the elect line and the land. Thus, one cannot dogmatically deduce whether Elimelech did right or wrong.¹⁹

In our study, when audience members were asked if Elimelech did the right thing, the majority responded "yes" or "he had no choice, given the famine." Very few responded "no." Clearly they were responding from their contexts (where practical solutions dominate) rather than in terms of the covenant relationship. In some cases, this could be problematic, and highlights the need for background teaching or footnotes (in a written translation) to help provide the biblical context.

Another example where the narrator withholds information is in 1.3. He gives no account of the time, place, circumstances, or cause of death of the three men, but leaves the audience pondering such questions. However, Hubbard considers that this is a rhetorical device intended to involve the audience emotionally with the story (1988, 92).

¹⁸ References to the patriarchal narratives (e.g., Ruth 4.12) assume the original audience possessed knowledge of the Mosaic commands. See Baylis 2004.

¹⁹ Lawson asks, "Why should we pronounce a sentence against any man, when we are neither called to be his judges, nor furnished with means for judging?" He continues by observing that whether Elimelech did right or wrong, "the providence of God was accomplishing its own gracious purposes" (1805, 25).

3.2 Lack of expert knowledge or cultural background

As many scholars have noted, the authors of Hebrew biblical narrative often omit any description of characters' inner lives. Access to motivations and feelings must often be achieved through careful literary analysis or subtle hints within the story (Linafelt 2008; Auerbach 1968). For example, the reader could well wonder at Naomi's apparent lack of response in 1.18 to Ruth's expression of loyalty (the text only indicating that Naomi "said no more"). Naomi seems to show ambivalence towards Ruth (despite Ruth's impassioned commitment to her),²⁰ but some scholars excuse her lack of response in various ways.²¹ Performance of the scene highlights the stark contrast between the two women's emotional display. With Ruth's poetic language and heightened emotion, the author communicates the "central place" of her confession in the story (Gow 1984, 312). Naomi's apparent "ignoring" of Ruth continues when they meet the village women on their arrival back in Bethlehem, for which Fewell and Gunn criticize Naomi (1990, 75–76). However, Esler argues that such criticism is anachronistic, condemning Naomi with respect to a view on the position of women not current in her social context (2018, 658).

When audience members in the performances were asked to suggest Naomi's inner response to Ruth's commitment, various interpretations came to the fore. Some thought that Naomi was pleased that she would have a companion, someone younger to help her physically and who might marry again and provide security for her too. Others thought she was irritated at having to be responsible for a foreigner in her home country, or ashamed to have a family member who was from Moab, Israel's enemy.²²

However, study of the text does sometimes give clues to those able to analyse the text. For example, Davis (2013, 502–3) notes that Naomi uses discordant (masculine) suffixes when addressing Ruth and Orpah (ch. 1). He suggests that this shows that she is preoccupied with "the sons she has lost,"

²⁰ Xie (2009, 20) suggests that Naomi saw Ruth as "invisible" or of no import, given her perception that Shaddai had testified against her. Hubbard suggests that Naomi's silence is the author's rhetorical device to help the audience sense slight alienation between the two women, or Naomi's preoccupation with her painful, uncertain future (1988, 121). Murray Gow suggests that Ruth's emotional pledge was a "conversation stopper" (personal communication). Fewell and Gunn suggest that Naomi's silence betrays her resentment and frustration (1988, 100–107).

²¹ Alter points to a desire by the narrator to "avoid excessive repetition" (1981, 78). Coxon maintains that Naomi's silence is "not the silence of stony resistance but the silence of consent" (1989, 27).

²² Rees (n.d.) maintains that, as the sons' wives are outsiders to the Bethlehem community, they are a problem for Naomi. Linafelt suggests that possibly Naomi does not want to "be burdened with two Moabite women in Judah" (2010, 121–22). Block argues that Naomi knew that the women would not be accepted in Israel (thus suggesting Naomi was considering their future as well as her own possible embarrassment; 2015, 632).

rather than the daughters-in-law before her,²³ implying that her response to Ruth's commitment speech was indifference rather than gratitude. Linafelt (2010) agrees, arguing that the tension generated by the contrasting attitudes of Ruth and Naomi to one another is a driving force in the narrative. However, most readers of the text do not have access to such knowledge, and so must fill the gaps according to their own experience.

Another example of clues provided by the author but missed by most readers or hearers is seen in 1.4. The reference to "ten years of [childless] marriage" would signal to the original readers a link to Sarah, who after ten years of childless marriage gave her maid Hagar to her husband, to provide him an heir (Gen 16.3). For the original audience, there would be heightened tension at this point. This is probably missed by today's hearers.

In ch. 2 (vv. 8-17), there is a further example of cultural information implicit in the story but missed by contemporary audiences. Alter (cited by Hubbard 1988, 187) observes that the entire dialogue (the first conversation between Ruth and Boaz) conforms to a common Hebrew literary convention, the "betrothal type-scene." In this episode, the author employs certain literary conventions well known to his original audience, but not recognized by people today.

Similarly, metonymy often evokes an entire set of knowledge, emotions, and attitudes that are associated with the mention of a particular character (Wardlaw 2015, 33). For example, the repeated use in ch. 2 of terms indicating Ruth's foreignness (e.g., "the Moabite") would probably provoke feelings of strong prejudice in the original audience (Xie 2009, 29), with Moab being Israel's long-standing enemy (e.g., see Deut 23.3). However, modern listeners to the drama are both culturally and historically distant from the original context and thus not likely to respond as the Israelite audience would have.²⁴ Nevertheless, some explanation (e.g., in a footnote for a written text or as part of an introduction to an oral performance) could help "outsiders" to find their own resonance with the idea being presented.

Key terms are also not well understood by those outside the culture or those who are not biblical scholars. For example, the term "Shaddai" (as used by Naomi in 1.21) is used in a very specific way throughout the Old Testament. Wardlaw notes that typically the term is used in the face

²³ Hubbard notices "gender confusion" at several places in the book (1988, 4). When there is similar discordancy at 2.9, he suggests that the suffix is inclusive of male and female workers (158). Thus perhaps the discordancy in Naomi's speech (2.13) is not significant.

²⁴ Modern audiences, with the huge refugee population in the world today, might consider that one of the main themes of the book is the need to integrate foreigners into one's community. However, Goswell notes that none of the canonical positions assigned to the book of Ruth (in either the Hebrew or Greek canons) suggests that ancient readers viewed it as written to promote a more generous view of foreigners (2014, 129).

of threats to divine promises (2015, 35). “Shaddai” then acts in order to protect the patriarchal family and their descendants, to fulfil the promises of offspring and land (as in Gen 17.1). Thus when Naomi uses the term, the audience would have an expectation of YHWH intervening to save the patriarchal family (by providing offspring). Current audiences are unaware of the loaded meaning of such significant terms.

3.3 *Intentional gaps*

Apart from gaps and misunderstandings resulting from a lack of knowledge, there are many places in biblical texts where authors seem to deliberately introduce gaps and ambiguities.

3.3.1 Gaps concerning inner feelings and motivations. Lee argues that gaps in the book of Ruth are intentional, designed to draw in the reader (2015, 3). As a result, there may be many different interpretations, particularly with regard to the emotional state of characters at various points. For example, when audience members in this study were asked, “How did Ruth feel about having to go down to the threshing floor at night and meet an important, older man, the boss where she was working?” two of the Grade 7 boys (and an adult man in another audience) responded, “She was excited.” However, two of the girls countered, “She was afraid.” Gender played a part in the assumptions each was bringing to the interpretation.

The fact that the reader must fill the gaps makes the story “a reflection of each reader’s unique approach to the text” (Walsh 2009, 76). As Hayes notes, “Ambiguities enable us to adopt quite different readings of a narrative that are grounded in one and the same text.” He argues that a person “should be free to adopt whichever reading an ambiguous text allows, that resolves the most interpretive dilemmas in the narrative” (2016, 169). This means that the reading adopted may be very different from that intended by the author. For example, some of the Grade 7 boys seemed to think that Ruth’s beauty was the main reason that Boaz was so kind to her.²⁵ The boys’ age and gender, as well as the township context, might have led them to interpret the text differently to authorial intention. But their ideas could well be part of the picture; certainly her inner beauty was shown in her loyalty to Naomi. As Sakenfeld observes, the text encourages both participation in the story and the exercise of one’s own visual imagination (2002, 168).

At two places in the story, the author shifts from narrative to poetic mode, “to give the reader access to the inner lives of Ruth and of Naomi”

²⁵ Linafelt (2010, 121) asks if Boaz’s interest in Ruth is altruistic (as implied in 2.11-12) or motivated by sexual/romantic interest (as suggested in 2.5). He considers the latter a possibility, interpreting the servant’s use of הנערה (the young woman) as implying “Ruth’s sexual availability” (119).

(Linafelt 2010, 127). These poetic texts are Ruth's commitment in 1.16-17, followed soon after by Naomi's complaint in 1.20-21. The story then reverts to narrative, and is thereafter opaque of their feelings. Consequently, at the end of the story we are still not sure how Naomi views either Ruth or God (Linafelt 2010, 128).²⁶

3.3.2 Gaps arising from questions in the text. Gaps may result from questions in the text not being clarified (Lee 2015, 4, 8–9). For example, the text does not tell us how and why the men died, or where God might be in Elimelech's life, given that his name means "my God is king." Such gaps serve to make the audience think, and be drawn into the story.²⁷ They are invited to see crises from the points of view of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz.²⁸

Linafelt asserts that the text of the book of Ruth is "terse, complex and, therefore, fascinating." He continues,

By not revealing the qualities of character of the actors in the narrative, the narrator puts the onus of interpretation on the readers, who must work out on their own – albeit with hints given – what they think of these characters. This is not the absence of characterization, but is a certain mode of characterization and, in fact, a fairly complex mode at that, [particularly] when it comes to the inner lives of the characters. (Linafelt 2010, 120)

As a result, the question of character motivation is left open, "in a literarily fruitful way" (Linafelt 2010, 121). The audience must hold in tension sometimes conflicting behaviours, and come to some resolution. For example, is Naomi a "loving mother-in-law" (as 2.22 seems to suggest)? If so, Hubbard asks (1988, 139), why did she send Ruth into a risky situation with no warning, as in 2.1 (cf. 2.9, 15)?

In ch. 3, the hearer has a big role to play in interpreting and making sense of the story. As Campbell (1975) notes, this part of the story is "teeming with carefully contrived ambiguity" through the use of double entendres. For example, Naomi's words in 3.4 are "tantalizingly ambiguous" (Hubbard 1988, 204), as are Ruth's in 3.9. When she says, "spread your cloak over your servant," is she making an offer of betrothal (Campbell 1975, 123), or is she making an offer of her sexual favours (Fewell and Gunn 1990, 102)? The narrator refuses to tell us, and thus the onus lies with the audience to come to some conclusion. Hubbard believes that such ambiguity

²⁶ It would be interesting, in a workshop following a performance of Ruth, to ask audience members to compose a poem in the voice of Naomi at the end of the story.

²⁷ The book of Ruth invites participation because it can evoke memories, create expectations, and form conclusions that are personal for a reader (Honsbury 1986, 4).

²⁸ This is in contrast to the readers of the Gospel narratives, who are not invited to identify with Jesus' perspective on events, but rather with those of his followers (Bauckham 1997, 42).

and suggestive language is an authorial ploy “to retain audience attention” (1988, 196).

One audience member in the study (a church leader), when asked a question by the jester, responded, “I don’t know. I have never thought about it before.” As various audience members offered their ideas, it became clear that many of them had never before considered there was more than one way of interpreting the text. An adult audience member commented, “I’ve always read the story one way. . . . But now I see” The interaction that resulted was lively and stimulating, and showed that one reason gaps occur in the text is “for the sake of interest” (Sternberg 1985, 236).

3.3.3 Gaps arising from conceptual ambiguity. Lee refers to gaps arising from conceptual ambiguity (2015, 6). There is a nice example of this when Boaz talks to the redeemer in Ruth 4.5. As Block (2015) notes, the Hebrew literally says, “On the day you claim the field from the hand of Naomi and from Ruth, the Moabite woman, I will claim the wife of the deceased.”²⁹ When he says, “wife of the deceased,” is he referring to Naomi or to Ruth? Some scholars (e.g., Daube 1981, 40) argue that the ambiguity is deliberate and should be retained, asserting that to emend the text “destroys the artful web woven.” Daube’s view is that Boaz “formulates” his reply to suggest to the near redeemer that the referent is Naomi. Holmstedt agrees that the ambiguity is intentional, and maintains that “while it could (and later does) describe Ruth, it could also (and is likely taken as such by the nearer redeemer) describe Naomi” (2010, 40).

Hayes (2016) agrees with Holmstedt (2010) that the ambiguity is intentional, and seeks to reinforce his argument with a theory of ambiguity derived from studies of human cognition. He asserts that a more precise definition of “ambiguity” is required; thus he distinguishes between various kinds: lexical ambiguity, structural/syntactical ambiguity, intentional ambiguity, ambiguity that is later disambiguated, perceived ambiguity, etc. (2016, 165). He notes further that a key step in identifying intentional ambiguity is to see how and when the author disambiguates it (thereby showing the purpose of the ambiguity). If the author does not disambiguate, it is harder to tell if it is intentional (166).

Hayes also raises the question as to whether the author intends that the characters and/or the audience perceive the ambiguity (2016, 167). As the ambiguity in 4.5 is disambiguated in 4.9–10, we can deduce that it was intentional,³⁰ and that the author intended the characters not to perceive the ambiguity in 4.5 (170).

²⁹ Block (2015) follows the *ketiv* reading “I will buy” (as opposed to the *qere* “you will buy”), which he claims is neither impossible nor difficult. It is defended by, among others, Beattie 1971; Sasson 1979, 119–36; Wilch 2006; and Linafelt 2010.

³⁰ Bernstein (1991) also considers that the ambiguity in 4.5 is intentional and a highly effective ploy by the writer.

When ambiguity arises from the presence of two possible referents, the hearer must search for additional clues to help him or her determine the relevant one. For example, according to Block's reading of 4.5 there are two competing antecedents for "the dead man," either Elimelech or the husband of Ruth. As a result, episodic discourse memory is searched (Nieuwland and Berkum 2008, 607). Hayes notes that the audience can go back in memory to the incident on the threshing floor (when Ruth became betrothed to Boaz), but the nearer kinsman can only go back to the last-named person, Elimelech (2016, 172). This process of resolving an ambiguity operates unconsciously. Moreover, it lies at the heart of the humour of the situation, the audience being "in on the joke," and knowing more than the characters on stage.

Hayes asserts that what is critical is to determine if Boaz was intentionally ambiguous or not (2016, 174). This impacts the way his character is perceived: as a trickster or a fool (Hayes 2016, 176), or as a comic (Aschkenasy 2007, 445). The interpretation will influence the whole message of the book. It is clear that ambiguities in the text allow for broader interpretation, requiring stereotypic views of characters' actions in other scenes to be re-evaluated (Hayes 2016, 182). Thus Hayes claims that ambiguity can be a useful tool in biblical interpretation.

Other scholars attempt to make sense of the textual difficulties in 4.5 by emending the text (from *וַיָּמָאָה* to *אֵת גַּם אֵת*) along the lines of the Vulgate (e.g., Campbell 1975, 146), thus asserting that it refers to Ruth. Gow (1990, 310) does not accept the emendation or the *ketiv*, but supports a variant of the *qere* reading (also indicating reference to Ruth). Most translations (e.g., NIV, ESV, RSV, NJB) give the referent as Ruth. In Block's (2015) view, they "adjust the text to say what they think it should say, rather than letting it stand as is." Indeed, the form of Boaz's presentation is shrewd (or foolish), and the fact that it is intended to be ambiguous is highlighted by the use of what may be a paralinguistic pause before Ruth's name in 4.5. Some commentators suggest that this (*וַיָּמָאָה*) is a throat-clearing "ahem," by a man nervous about what he is about to say and how it will be received.

When the church audience was asked who they thought the redeemer understood by "wife of the deceased," most responded "Ruth" but a few thought the reference was to Naomi. When the question was put to the Grade 7 scholars, two of the boys responded, "Ruth . . . because she is more beautiful."³¹ Their responses reflected their priorities, rather than that

³¹ Some scholars consider that Boaz's interest in Ruth may have been prompted by his sexual attraction to her (Fewell and Gunn 1990, 40–41). However, the fact that the text says nothing about her physical appearance suggests that it was irrelevant to how Boaz regarded her (Esler 2018, 660). Nevertheless, Boaz's comment in 3.10 suggests that she was not unattractive (Gow, personal communication). Linafelt (2010, 117–18) observes that this practice of giving few physical details of characters in stories is consistent across the biblical canon.

of the near kinsman. Indeed, the kinsman would have been more likely to accept the older widow, with her being past child-bearing age and thus less of a risk to his children's inheritance (Rowley 1947, 77). The fact that the redeemer later reneged on his offer might suggest that he first understood that he would be getting the older widow, and only later, when Boaz disambiguated the situation, did he realise that it was Ruth, thus a threat to his family situation (Hubbard 1988, 61).

3.3.4 Gaps serve to underline themes in the book. Lee argues that gaps also serve an important role in underlining primary themes in the book, such as the absence or presence of God in the story (2015, 12–13). The absence of YHWH's name being expressly linked as an agent in the story's development (except for 1.6 and 4.13b) is a glaring gap.³² This prods the reader to consider how then the message of YHWH's "facilitating activity" comes through. Lee suggests that it is the repeated use of רַחֲמֵי ("loving-kindness") which demonstrates the presence of the spirit of YHWH.

Also, as the story develops and there appear to be "amazing coincidences" (for example, Ruth "happening" to come to the field belonging to Boaz, 2.3), one discerns the hand of YHWH guiding the plot. Hubbard (1988, 69–70) notes that "the indirectness [of God's action] heightens the reader's awareness of it. As a powerful stylistic device, extreme understatement serves to stress forcefully that Yahweh is indeed very much at work." Moreover, as this key theme is not explicitly spelt out in the text, the reader/hearer must make an effort to make sense of the plot, and thus his or her investment in the story is greater (Lee 2015, 9–10). Consequently, gaps not only draw in the hearers, requiring them to interpret, and offering them reward for their efforts, but also underline the key theme in the book, "human and divine agency" working together (Linafelt 2010, 129).³³

4. Conclusion

As Keita and Dyk (2006, 17) note, the story of Ruth leaves room for the receptor's imagination to do its work. Reception theory has helped explain how this happens. This study shows, too, the need for the translator to be sensitive to ambiguities in the text, and to discern the purpose of the ambiguity and if it should be maintained in translation. Gaps that arise for the receptor from a lack of knowledge of the historical or linguistic situation should possibly be filled in by footnotes, explaining how the original receptors would have understood the situations. This is particularly important

³² Apart from these two verses, there are thirteen other occasions when YHWH is mentioned, but always in formulaic ways (greetings or blessings, not actions).

³³ Prinsloo (1980, 338–41) agrees, claiming that "the book of Ruth pictures human initiative as the means through which Yahweh acts." See also Campbell 1975, 29.

when the biblical text has little narration, and consists largely of dialogue. However, the translator needs to be able to identify intentional gaps (part of the literary art of the author), and to maintain the ambiguity in translation. Imagining, or even witnessing, how the text is “playing out” in performance, he or she can provide a translation that is vivid, provoking questions and stimulating the receptor to deeper thought.

ORCID ID

June F. Dickie  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5226-5874>

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Abbreviations

ESV	English Standard Version (2001)
NIV	New International Version (2011)
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible (1985)
RSV	Revised Standard Version (1952)