

Research Article

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Migration, Exile, and Homecoming in the Book of Ruth

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Abstract: My article examines various artworks from Europe and Israel that portray and are inspired by the Book of Ruth. While in Jewish sources such as the Talmud (Yevamot 47b) Ruth is seen as an immigrant and a convert to Judaism, European artists since the seventeenth century highlighted different episodes and aspects of the biblical story that suited their social, political, and religious worldviews. Notably, the expansion of colonialism during the nineteenth century transformed the depictions of Ruth. While in the canvases of painters such as Pieter Lastman and Jan Victors Ruth is depicted as a model of religious identification, in the paintings of Joseph Anton Koch and Francesco Hayez she epitomises “oriental” otherness. Furthermore, while early European painters underscore the immigration of Ruth, Hayez represents Ruth as a dweller of the “East.” Zionist artists were influenced by European traditions of depicting the Book of Ruth but developed a unique fusion between strategies of identification and differentiation. Artists such as Ze’ev Raban (1890–1970) portrayed the story of Ruth as both ancient and contemporary, while imitating and appropriating Palestinian tropes in order to imagine the Zionist narrative of homecoming. The contemporary Israeli artist Leor Grady (b. 1966), on the other hand, addresses questions of immigration and homecoming while exploring the Book of Ruth in his solo exhibition *Bethlehem* (2019, Tel Aviv). While Raban’s illustrations ignore the Jewish experience of exile, Grady’s oeuvre epitomises what the Israeli historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin sees as “exile within sovereignty.” Instead of recounting a linear historical narrative that begins with exile and culminates with the return to the Promised Land, Grady underscores that every return is also a departure and every departure a return. In this manner, Grady foregrounds the voices silenced by Zionist historiography and challenges the exclusion of the Palestinian narrative.

Keywords: The Book of Ruth, Ze’ev Raban, Leor Grady, negation of exile, Zionism, immigration

1 Introduction

Jewish tradition provides several explanations for the custom of reading the Book of Ruth during the Feast of Weeks. Each exegesis accentuates different aspects of the Jewish holiday, celebrated both as a harvest festival and as the day in which the Torah was given. The fourteenth century author Rabbi David Abudraham ascribes the custom to the setting of the biblical plot during the barley harvest.¹ In addition, he compares Ruth’s conversion to Judaism to the giving of the Torah, following the Babylonian Talmud that treats both the ancient Israelites and converts to Judaism as “entering into treaty [with God]” (Keritot 9a). The author of the aggadic compilation Yalkut Shimoni takes this analogy a step forward: “what is the

¹ Abudirham, *Sefer Abudraham*, 88b.

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relation between [the Book of] Ruth and Shavuot that it is read at the time of the giving of the Torah[?] to teach you that the Torah was given only through suffering and poverty.”² While in the Babylonian Talmud the giving of the Torah is the model through which the laws of conversation are constituted, in Yalkut Shimoni the poor immigrant becomes the exemplar of religious conduct. In this manner, the Yalkut Shimoni pushes forward the transformation in the significance of Shavuot in the Jewish tradition. If in the bible Shavuot is an agricultural festival marking the conclusion of the grain harvest, Chazan commemorate it as the day in which the Torah was given. What started as an agrarian celebration that underscores the relation of the community to its land was gradually transformed into a holiday whose protagonist is the displaced immigrant.

The interpretations of Shavuot and the significance of the Book of Ruth reflect the changing circumstances of Jewish societies. When the community’s social organisation was altered, other interpretations of the festival and different readings of the Book of Ruth were introduced.³ Since biblical Shavuot did not commemorate any historical event (unlike Passover and Sukkot),⁴ the giving of the Torah became the event with which Jews in exile could identify themselves. Similarly, when secular Zionists revived Shavuot in Israel, they celebrated it as a harvest festival rather than the day of giving of the Torah and renewed the offering of the first fruits ceremony (*bikkurim*). In a similar vein, Zionist artists, who illustrated the Book of Ruth, highlighted the agrarian and pastoral settings of the plot, while ignoring its migratory features.

In this article, I will explore artworks from different cultural and historical contexts that illustrate or are inspired by the Book of Ruth. While analysing their visual commentaries, I will examine their use of hermeneutic strategies of identification and differentiation and their treatments of the themes of migration and exile. I begin with an analysis of European paintings from the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, which leads to a discussion of the representations of Ruth in Israeli art. I examine the illustrations of the painter Ze’ev Raban and the solo exhibition *Bethlehem*, by the contemporary artist Leor Grady. While Raban narrates the Book of Ruth as a Zionist story of homecoming, and thus suppresses the Jewish experience of exile, Grady underscores the plot’s duality of departure and homecoming and thus recovers the notion of migration and care for the Other.

2 Hermeneutics of identification

Biblical paintings unfold the hermeneutic gap between the text and its readers. Since the text is never a closed system of signs but presupposes the worlds in which it is written and read, the event of interpretation is determined by readers’ changing horizons. Even the most trivial episode assumes a background and figuration as their conditions of possibility in the plot and, while an unreflective reading might be oblivious of these proceedings, the transition from the text to the image forces the painter to imagine the characters and their background in their most minute details. It is here that the gulf between the horizons of the text and the painting comes forward most clearly. Even if the painter attempts to be faithful to the original setting of the plot, she is forced to visualise it through her own world, i.e. to project her own horizon onto the world of the text. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer dubs this hermeneutic procedure, which undermines the possibility of acquiring an objective historical knowledge, “the fusion of horizons.”⁵ The absence of scientific objectivism, however, is not seen by Gadamer as a drawback. While probing the historical emergence of the “scientific” approach of the Enlightenment to history, he argues that the quest for historical objectivity also means that the reader gives up the possibility of finding in the text something meaningful for his own world. Historicism is therefore not only an impossible theoretical position but also

² *Yalkut Shimoni on Ruth*, par. 596. 1039.

³ Ganzel, “When and Why Did Shavuot Become the Giving of the Torah Holiday?”

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.



Figure 1: Jan Victors, *Ruth swearing her allegiance to Naomi*, 1653.

undesirable, as it distances the reader from the text. Moreover, while stressing the hermeneutic gap between the text and the reader, Gadamer does not think that the text becomes opaque, or that the reader's interpretation is merely a projection. Rather, the intelligibility of texts from different worlds affirms that the reader's horizon is not entirely alien to them.⁶

Ruth swearing her allegiance to Naomi by the Dutch painter Jan Victors is a case in point (1653, Figure 1). After Naomi implored Ruth to return with Orpah to Moab, the latter replied to her mother-in-law, "Because to wherever you will go, I will go, and wherever you will sleep, I will sleep, your people are my people, and your God is my God" (Ruth 1:16). The Bible relates this dialogue with economy. Only a few verses are dedicated to the departure of Orpah and Ruth's profession of faith. Accordingly, the transformation from textual to visual representations necessitates a consideration of elements that are absent yet presupposed in the plot – not only gestures and countenances but also the women's surroundings and attire. If Victors' landscape does not resemble that of the mountainous east shore of the Dead Sea, it is not because he could not imagine a "drier" setting (as his paintings *Laban and Jacob* and *Laban reconciled with Jacob* indicate). Like Pieter Lastman's *Ruth Declares her Loyalty to Naomi* (1614, Figure 2) Victors renders a landscape akin to his own environment. Similarly, despite Ruth's peculiar headgear, which "lends a fanciful, orientaling accent to the scene,"⁷ both she and Naomi do not strike the viewer as "oriental" but perhaps as Flemish peasants. It is thus not surprising that the canvas was initially identified as depicting the story of the Roman

⁶ Ibid., 154–5.

⁷ Miller, "Ruth and Naomi of 1653."



Figure 2: Pieter Lastman, *Ruth Declares her Loyalty to Naomi*, 1614.

god of seasons Vertumnus and the wood-nymph Pomona, and only later as a painting of Ruth and Naomi.⁸ The rendering of the biblical story through the European imagery of the seventeenth century led viewers to see it as a Roman myth.

As Hermann Goetz suggests, “oriental” was a rather fluid category in the Rembrandt School with which Victors was associated – encompassing “Jews, Poles, Indian Mohammedans, Kalmuks, Persians, etc.,”⁹ who appear in his paintings as “superficially dressed-up models.”¹⁰ Moreover, the depiction of “oriental” figures in Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century betrays a gender difference, insofar as “only oriental men and hardly any oriental women appear.”¹¹ Goetz explains this phenomenon by the fact that Dutch artists were more likely to see “oriental” men, particularly Poles and Persian men, rather than women.¹² This practical explanation, however, obscures the logic of Victors’ canvases.¹³ Victors’ biblical paintings reflect “strict devotion to the Calvinist doctrine of his era” and were meant to deliver religious morals.¹⁴ As such, rather than providing an accurate representation of a historical moment and thus distancing it from the present – as Gadamer argues regarding the hermeneutics of the Enlightenment – Victors’ goal is to portray the devotion of Ruth to Naomi as relevant for his contemporaries. This does not mean that he intentionally portrays his figures as European, but that he was less concerned about the historical gap between his world and that of the Bible. For him both worlds were part of the same religious continuity, and hence he highlights what seems relevant for his didactic mission. The painting is not meant to render the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Goetz, “Persians and Persian Costumes in Dutch Painting of the Seventeenth Century,” 281.

¹⁰ Ibid., 289. This haphazard approach towards the representation of the “East” characterised also the nineteenth century. Schaefer, “From the Smallest Fragment’;” Holloway, “Assur is King of Persia.”

¹¹ Goetz, “Oriental Types and Scenes in Renaissance and Baroque Painting-II,” 112.

¹² Ibid., “Oriental Types,” 112; “Persian,” 282.

¹³ Goetz argues that Dutch painters encountered Persian visitors during the 1,627 embassy of Musa Beg to the Netherlands. Goetz, “Persians and Persian Costumes in Dutch Painting of the Seventeenth Century,” 282.

¹⁴ Miller, “The Word of Calvin in the Art of Jan Victors,” 104.

biblical scene accurately, but to communicate its moral to his contemporaries. The distant city, the hazy figure of Orpah returning to Moab, and the earthly colour of the figures' drapery accentuate Ruth's sacrifice and her choice to become an immigrant.

Gadamer conceives his hermeneutics *vis-à-vis* historical positivism and the adoption of the natural sciences' methods in the human sciences. Instead of gauging interpretations of texts as true or false, accurate or inaccurate, he is concerned with their meaningfulness for readers.¹⁵ Accordingly, he is critical of Paul Ricœur's attempt to integrate the theories of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx into hermeneutics and to characterise their methods as "hermeneutics of suspicion."¹⁶ For Gadamer the school of suspicion preserves the scientific approach to the study of the humanities and reiterates its foundationalism.¹⁷ Nonetheless, while Freud's psychoanalysis and Marx's critique of ideology presuppose an objective scientific perspective, critical theory does not have to be reductionist.¹⁸ The German philosopher Hans-Herbert Kögler, for example, conceptualises his "critical hermeneutics" as a critical *dialogue* between readers and the tradition, which allows them to reflect on their beliefs and convictions.¹⁹

Gadamer himself points indirectly towards the operation of power when he compares the alienation of the human sciences from "the world of history" to the estrangement of modern society from nature in the "age of mechanics."²⁰ Just as separation from nature facilitates control over it, distance from tradition enables the reader to escape its authority and become its master. In order to adopt Gadamer's insights to the critique of power, I will distinguish between *hermeneutics of identification* and *hermeneutics of differentiation*. This terminology has two major implications. First, it dispels the notion that meaning is located in the text which is to be believed or suspected, and stresses the inseparability of the text's significance from its readers. The text is not an independent being and without its readers' interpretations has no meaning of its own. Furthermore, if the school of suspicion claims to expose the text's emanation from interest and desire, in the following I will show how power operates *through* identification and differentiation but without necessarily assuming that power is their sole origin.

3 Ruth in the orient: Hermeneutics of differentiation

The representation of Ruth in nineteenth century European art was influenced by the expansion of colonialism. The accumulation of "oriental" artefacts in European museums, the circulation of illustrations of "eastern" architecture, and the visits of artists to the Levant led to the integration of "oriental" motifs in biblical paintings.²¹ Paradoxically, however, despite this growing familiarity of Europe with the "East," representations of the "Orient" became more fantastic and mystified.²²

Goetz – who divides the representation of the "Orient" in Western art into two periods: from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, then the nineteenth century onwards – characterises this transformation in the representation of the "East" differently: "While during the period of the Renaissance and of absolute royal power, the princes and potentates of the East had occupied men's minds, in the democratic nineteenth century, it was the people."²³ Goetz's analysis is rooted in a Eurocentric narrative that perceives

¹⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxi.

¹⁶ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 32.

¹⁷ Gadamer, "Hermeneutics of Suspicion," 73.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁹ Kögler, *The Power of Dialogue*, 262.

²⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 56.

²¹ Schaefer, "'From the Smallest Fragment';" Holloway, "Assur is King of Persia."

²² Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision*, 41.

²³ Goetz, "Oriental Types and Scenes in Renaissance and Baroque Painting-II," 115. This argument requires modification. European artists continued to depict royal figures in the nineteenth century, but expanded the scope of their canvases to include common people.



Figure 3: Joseph Anton Koch, *Landscape with Ruth and Boaz*, 1823/25.

modernity as a process of enlightenment and democratisation. While this perception persists in Western art history even today, as in the archaeology of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière,²⁴ it camouflages what Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo see as the complicity between modernity and coloniality.²⁵ If Orientalist painters were interested in the depiction of “oriental” people, it was not only an expression of egalitarianism but also of power, constituting the colonial subject through a Western gaze.²⁶ As the distance between “East” and “West” withered, Orientalist paintings could present themselves “simply [as] “reflections,” scientific in their exactitude, of a preexisting Oriental reality,”²⁷ and thus conceal their political discourse and participation in the colonial matrix of power.²⁸

The painting *Landscape with Ruth and Boaz* (1823/25, Figure 3) of the Romantic Austrian painter Joseph Anton Koch demonstrates the growing acquaintance of European artists with the “orient” – and at the same time their tendency to exoticise it. The meeting between Ruth and Boaz lent Koch the opportunity to depict an idyllic rural community in an imaginary landscape that fuses “eastern” (camels, palm trees) and “western” (citadel) elements. The organisation and atmosphere of the painting recall Koch’s *Heroic Landscape with Rainbow* (1805). Both paintings represent an arcadian existence and in both the figures are

²⁴ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 29.

²⁵ Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 171–2; Mignolo, “Delinking,” 451.

²⁶ Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision*, 37.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Goetz’s discourse itself reveals Orientalist tendencies. While discussing Victors’ depictions of the “orient” he writes, “you never get from Victors a plausible impression of an exotic milieu but are always conscious of an obtrusive group of superficially dressed-up models.” Goetz, “Persians and Persian Costumes in Dutch Painting of the Seventeenth Century,” 289.



Figure 4: Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, *Ruth in Boaz's Field*, 1828.

marginal in relation to the landscape. Thus, instead of projecting Ruth's emigration, as Lastman and Victors do, Koch focuses on the pastoral setting of the plot. Whereas Lastman's citadel accentuates Ruth's departure to exile, Koch's fortress adds pathos to the canvas, and the "oriental" elements increase the otherness of the scene. The biblical subject-matter, i.e. Boaz's generosity, does not disappear from Koch's canvas but is marginalised in relation to the theme of ruralism and its romantic implications.

Historicism was not received in nineteenth century biblical paintings without controversy. Painters such as James Jacques Joseph Tissot, who visited the Holy Land in 1886–1887 and 1889 and depicted biblical scenes in "Eastern" settings, were not unaware of the historical gap between the Bible and the "oriental" present, but were hoping – naively, perhaps – "to trace back from their modern representatives through successive generations the original types of the races of Palestine."²⁹ But artists such as the German Nazarenes and the English Pre-Raphaelites preferred the medieval and early Renaissance conventions of Christian art over the new imagery coming from the "East."³⁰ This more conservative camp viewed this alleged historical precision as coming at the expense of viewers' identification with the traditional subject matter, as transmitted through the Christian tradition. Thus, Eugène Fromentin, celebrated for his orientalist depictions of Arab life, was opposed to visualising the ahistorical truth of the Bible through history.³¹

Nonetheless, these conservative artists were not entirely indifferent to the artistic "discovery" of the "East." For example, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld's *Ruth in Boaz's Field* (Figure 4, 1828) exhibits the solemnity and piousness characteristic of the Nazarene Movement, while at the same time being influenced by the nineteenth century historicism. Even though his figures maintain an "ideally Aryan" look,³² their dresses are more orientalist and the landscape is somehow more faithful to the setting of the biblical story. The introduction of the oriental milieu, however, does not distance the viewer from the biblical lesson. Carolsfeld continues the didactic tradition of Lastman and Victors, portraying Ruth as a model for humility, and devotion.

Francesco Hayez's portrait of Ruth, by contrast, epitomises the style of nineteenth century orientalist paintings that eroticise and thus render docile the body of the "East." Instead of representing Ruth as a model of piety, he portrays her as sensuous and seductive (*Ruth*, 1835, Figure 5).³³ The themes of devotion,

²⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, 100.

³⁰ Schaefer, "From the Smallest Fragment," 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

³² Bullen, "Book Review," 253.

³³ The French realist painter Jean-François Millet, on the other hand, did not look eastwards while rendering the story of Ruth and Boaz but focused on his own social reality (*Harvesters Resting*, 1850–3). Instead of representing Ruth's loyalty or Boaz's mercy, he foregrounds Ruth's poverty as an allegory for the living conditions of French farmers in nineteenth century. He depicts Ruth as a poor gleaner and Boaz as "a sharecropper hired to work a rich man's land." Here again, and even more



Figure 5: Francesco Hayez, *Ruth*, 1835.



Figure 6: Khalil Raad, *Ruth the Gleaner*, 1900.

sacrifice, and suffering give way to eroticism and sensuality, and the biblical protagonist becomes a symbol of otherness that one may desire and conquer. Notably, Hayez does not depict Ruth as an immigrant with whom one can identify, as in the biblical story, but as a native whom one desires and fears.

The black and white photograph *Ruth the Gleaner* (1900, Figure 6) by the Palestinian photographer Khalil Raad marks the culmination of Ruth's nativisation. Based on the image of Ruth holding a barley sheaf – an iconic image in European art by the nineteenth century³⁴ – Raad depicts a young Palestinian girl standing in a harvested grainfield. Raad's photographic practice was set in a period in which geographical "authenticity" and historical "exactitude" were demanded by European pilgrims and tourists.³⁵ Thus,

profoundly than in the painting of Victors, the representation of the Book of Ruth is not meant as an accurate depiction of ancient Israel, but to encourage identification. Tellingly, when the work was first exhibited in 1853, Millet changed the name of the painting from *Ruth and Boaz* to *Harvesters Resting* "to underscore its contemporary significance."

³⁴ This motif already appeared in the illustration of Ruth in *The Crusader Bible* from 1240s <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/crusader-bible/34>.

³⁵ Sela, "Chalil Raad (Khalil Ra'd), Photographs 1891–1948, Gutman Art Museum, 2010."



Figure 7: Ze'ev Raban, "Ruth," 1930.

instead of representing Ruth in a manner that might provoke identification, Raad's photograph underlines otherness and difference. By depicting contemporary Palestine as a biblical land, Raad portrays it as a remnant of a frozen past.³⁶ This tendency is also apparent in his other photographs, which link his scenery with biblical events and accentuates the antiqueness of his milieu, e.g. *Follow Me I Will Make Thee Fisher of Men* and *Ancient Hebrew Steps about 2000 Years Old*.³⁷

4 Settler mimicry: Identification through differentiation

The Book of Ruth also inspired Zionist artists to reflect on notions of migration, exile, and homecoming. Revisiting the story of Naomi and Ruth allowed them not only to restage the biblical plot in a modern setting but also to bridge the Jewish past with their present and to create continuity between Naomi's return and the Zionist project. As such, these visual interpretations manifest an amalgamation between the apparatuses of identification and differentiation, rendering the biblical story as both ancient and modern. Ze'ev Raban's illuminations of The Book of Ruth epitomise this dichotomy. Like Raad, he depicts the scenes in the contemporary landscape of Palestine and the characters as its present-time dwellers: the fields in the print "Ruth" are cultivated with stone terraces (Figure 7), the city in the prints "Boaz and Ruth" (Figure 8) recalls Auguste Salzmänn's photograph of Bethlehem (1854, Figure 9), Boaz is dressed as an Arab with Jellabiya and Keffiyeh, and throughout the series Raban depicts the native flora of Palestine: palm trees, cypress, and Sabra cactus. By representing ancient Israel through Palestinian tropes, the artist projects Palestine as shrouded in a mythical past, untouched by change and processes of modernity.³⁸ Nonetheless, the

³⁶ The Israeli curator Rona Sela underlines this orientalist tendency in Raad's work, while also noting his inverse ability to depict the rich cultural life of Palestine. *Ibid.*

³⁷ al-Hajji, on the other hand, characterises Raad's photography as anti-colonial and as "dispelling the myth perpetrated by colonialists in Palestine that it was an empty land peopled only by a few savages." al-Hajji, "Khalil Raad – Jerusalem Photographer," 39.

³⁸ Nochlin, "The Politics of Vision," 35.



Figure 8: Ze'ev Raban, "Boaz and Ruth," 1930.



Figure 9: Auguste Salzmann, *Bethlehem*, 1854.

illuminations also relate a story that is relevant for the present. While exoticising the Palestinian landscape, Raban also links it to the life of the Jewish settlers. This fusion between the apparatuses of difference and identity is peculiar to the project of the Zionist settler colonialism and its employment of what I call *settler mimicry*. If Raad adopts colonial tropes and depicts the Palestinian Self as the Other (or as seen by the Other), Raban portrays the Palestinian Other as the Zionist Self.

Settler colonialism nurtures an ambiguity at the centre of its project, though this is somehow overlooked in the writing of the Australian anthropologist and historian Patrick Wolfe. Wolfe, who rejuvenated the academic interest in settler colonialism in the 1990s, explicitly distinguishes settler colonialism from exploitation colonialism. While exploitation colonialism is oriented towards the resources of the colony, settler colonialism's concern is the seizure of the land itself, and thus is geared towards a "logic of elimination" – whether physical or symbolic, militant or cultural.³⁹ If in exploitation colonialism the othering of the colonial subject justifies the coloniser's control, in settler colonialism the native can become a figure of identity and imitation. In Australia, for instance, "in order to produce a narrative that can bind it [the settler-colonial state] transcendentally to its territorial base – to make it, as it were, spring organically from the local soil – the settler state is obliged to appropriate the symbolism of the very Aboriginality that it has historically effaced."⁴⁰

A tension between the strategies of elimination and mimicry is apparent in Israeli culture. Paradoxically, while Palestine was projected as an empty land in Zionist discourse, Zionist artists, such as Ephraim Moses Lilien, Raban, Yisrael Paldi, Nachum Gutmann, and Yitzhak Danziger, among others, were using Palestinian figures and landscapes to develop a unique visual Zionist identity and to reimagine a Zionist past. The Israeli curator and art historian Dalia Manor writes: "For some artists the Arab was a role model for the New Jew – an idealised image of belonging – similar to numerous works of Hebrew fiction where the Arab represented in his rootedness and strong physique a kind of antithesis to the image of the feeble Jew of the diaspora."⁴¹ Furthermore, she argues, the depiction of the Palestinian milieu was far more popular in early Israeli art of the 1920s than the portrayal of the Zionist project.⁴²

Raban's famous poster *Come to Palestine* (1912, Figure 10) purposefully utilises the ambiguity of its visuals to address both Christian and Jewish viewers. The exotic and pastoral rendering of Tiberius, the sea of Galilee, and their surroundings had the potential to trigger different reactions among different audiences. For the Western tourist or the Christian pilgrim, Raban's print provoked a mechanism of differentiation. By portraying Palestine as an exotic destination, the artist others its geography. Jewish viewers were obviously not blind to the charms of the Levant, but they also knew that Raban is not merely persuading them to visit Palestine but to immigrate to the Promised Land. If for the Christian pilgrim the portrayal of Palestine as a biblical territory underscored its otherness, for Zionists and prospective Jewish immigrants it also meant identification. Paradoxically, then, contemporary Palestinian culture was used to bridge the Jewish past to its Zionist present. Despite its competing claim to the territory, Palestinian scenery was used by early Israeli artists to visualise and imagine their national identity.

5 The Zionist Ruth and the negation of exile

Raban's illustrations rehearse the prevailing Zionist historical narrative through the story of Ruth, framing episodes that serve as allegories for national exile, immigration, and above all homecoming. The graphic plot begins with the exile of Elimelech and his family and culminates with the birth of Obed, the grandfather of King David. While the Bible describes the departure of Elimelech and his family from Bethlehem

³⁹ Wolfe, "Nation and MiscegeNation," 97.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴¹ Manor, *Art in Zion*, 129.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 128.



Figure 10: Ze'ev Raban, *Come to Palestine*, 1912.

laconically, Raban intensifies and dramatises it: Elimelech and Naomi's faces bear painful expressions, the tree near the city gate is dry, and a camel is lying on the ground next to it. At the bottom of the decorative frame that surrounds the illustration, death is represented as a skeleton wearing a white gown and holding two giant snakes in his hands. By contrast, the meeting of Boaz and Ruth is imagined in a pastoral setting in a field outside Bethlehem. Instead of depicting Ruth as a poor gleaner, Raban underscores the agricultural richness of the land, both in the picture proper and in the frame that surround it.

Raban's illustrations represent a widespread narrative of Zionist historiography in the 19th and 20th centuries, resonating with the efforts of Zionist historians "to represent the continuity and unity of 'the Jewish history' as a unique entity that appears in all its expressions and the continuous link of Jews to the Land of Israel and their alleged constant ambition to migrate to it."⁴³ The use of the Book of Ruth as an allegory for the Zionist homecoming creates a sense of connection and continuity with the Land of Israel, compressing diverse Jewish experiences into one coherent historical narrative. Through this linear and messianic narrative, the Israeli historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin argues, Zionist historiography negates the Jewish experience of exile: "the work of these historians can be defined in this context as 'extrication' of Jewish history from the different cultural contexts in which the phenomena that were explored were created to adjust them to the framework of the unified narrative [...]"⁴⁴ The lives of Jews in exile are portrayed as an interval between the departure from the Land of Israel to the Zionist return: "The consciousness of 'Medieval' Jews was positioned as a 'proto-Zionist' position, as if the consciousness of the previous generations – in Baghdad, Ashkenaz or Spain – already contained the present worldview that writes them and about them."⁴⁵

Raz-Krakotzkin suggests that the negation of exile and the adoption of modernity by Zionism engendered a binary opposition between religion and secularism. Paradoxically, however, while Zionism claims

⁴³ Raz-Krakotzkin, "Exile Within Sovereignty," 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

to be a secular movement, it predicates itself on a theological rather than secular framework.⁴⁶ Raban's last illustration of the Book of Ruth manifests this suppressed religious borrowing. The depiction of the birth of Obed (literally "worker" in Hebrew) recalls the Christian Nativity of Jesus. In this image Raban weaves a Zionist narrative that culminates in the birth of a secular messiah: the Zionist worker whose mission is to toil the land. Opposed to this secular messianic vision, Raz-Krakotzkin argues for "Exile within Sovereignty" or "Exile out of Sovereignty,"⁴⁷ understood in a Benjaminian vein as a retrieval of the suppressed histories silenced by Zionist historiography.⁴⁸

6 Departure-return

Raban's narration of the Book of Ruth highlights certain elements and keeps others at bay. While presenting the biblical story as an allegory of national repatriation, the artist overlooks motifs of migration and glosses over the fact that Naomi's return to Bethlehem renders Ruth a "*nokhriya*": a foreigner, gentile, or the Other (Ruth 2:10). Grady's exhibition *Bethlehem*, on the other hand, is particularly attuned to this duality. Unlike the Zionist narrative of exile and homecoming, Grady problematises a simplistic reading of the Book of Ruth by splitting it into two narratives: one of Naomi who returns to her native place and the other of Ruth who becomes an immigrant. Shira Friedman, the exhibition curator, writes regarding this defining moment:

The first chapter of the Book of Ruth ends with the story of Naomi's return from Moab to Bethlehem with her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth: "So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, returned with her out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of the barley harvest" (Ruth 1, 22). This verse describes a moment of contrast in the lives of the two women: Naomi is returning to her home after living as a foreigner in Moab, whereas Ruth is leaving her home in Moab and entering the land of Israel as a foreigner. This point in time, the departure-return of Naomi and Ruth, is a turning point in the biblical narrative. This transformational moment is similarly captured in Leor Grady's body of works, as made evident in the exhibition "Bethlehem."⁴⁹

Grady's visual commentary on the Book of Ruth was inspired by his emigration from Israel to New York at the end of the 1990s and his recent return to Tel Aviv, but the exhibition also reflects an alternative genealogy of Jewish exile and a different migratory narrative. If the Zionist project marks for Raban the return of a primordial national being, Grady stresses that homecoming is also a departure. The ambiguity of "departure-return" is indicated by the two *mezuzot* that Grady installed on the two opposing doorposts of the gallery (*Untitled (Mezuzot)*, 2019, mixed media). According to the Jewish halakha, the *mezuzah* is placed on the right doorpost from the side through which a person enters the house; Grady's positioning of the *mezuzot*, however, makes the entrance an exit and the exit an entrance. For him, national homecoming is also a departure – an exile from one's homeland, a return.

Bethlehem was hosted by Neve Schechter during Shavuot and conceptualised in response to the Jewish festival. Whereas Raban's illustrations resonate with the secular Zionist renewal of Shavuot as an agrarian festival, Grady retrieves meanings given by Jewish and Christian traditions to the Book of Ruth and to the holiday. The exhibition is composed of repeated gestures of folding, packing, and reorganising, as if viewers have entered a house that is in the middle of – perhaps in a constant state of – shifting and moving. The two dressers in the entrance hall were shipped to Tel Aviv from Grady's flat in New York, books piled up on top of them as if were just unpacked or are about to be packed; the inner room is empty, with only a carpet spread on the floor. The only work that seems to be in the "right" place, i.e. on the gallery wall, is the three khaki linen frames on which the artist embroidered in gold thread the Hebrew verse "To wherever you will go I will go"

⁴⁶ Ibid., "There is no God, but He Promised Us the Land (Hebrew)," 72.

⁴⁷ Ibid., "Who am I without Exile? (Hebrew)," 62.

⁴⁸ Ibid., "Exile Within Sovereignty," 39.

⁴⁹ Friedman, *Bethlehem*, 48.



Figure 11: Leor Grady, *Untitled (For Where You Go, I will Go)*, 2019.



Figure 12: Leor Grady, *Untitled (Passage II)*, 2019.

(*Untitled (For Where You Go, I will Go)*, 2019, Figure 11).⁵⁰ Each of the Hebrew letters is stitched in one corner of the canvas, in a manner that recalls a Jewish amulet. Unlike Lastman and Victors, who sought to visualise Ruth’s declaration of loyalty, Grady renounces pictorial representation and thus renders migration enigmatic. The decision to depart is seen as a leap of faith, and Ruth’s declaration as an incantation or a spell.

Grady’s oeuvre epitomises Raz-Krakotzkin’s vision of “exile out of sovereignty.” In particular, his engagement with the cultural heritage of the Yemeni Jewish community – of which he is a second-generation member – is an attempt to salvage traditions suppressed by the Zionist historical narrative. The book collection displayed on top of the dresser manifests the diverse epistemologies from which he takes his inspiration and resonates with Raz-Krakotzkin’s exilic consciousness: neither religious nor secular, neither

⁵⁰ Grady chose to embroider the popular version of Ruth’s reply which is slightly different from the original verse. Instead of “El asher telkhi elekh” (Ruth 1:16), Grady wrote “beasher telkhi elekh.”



Figure 13: Leor Grady, *Untitled (Carpet)*, 2019.

national nor universal, but preceding these distinctions (*Untitled (Passage II)* 2019, Figure 12).⁵¹ Grady reads the Israeli author David Grossman and the Palestinian author Sayed Kashua, the African-American activist Malcom X and the Yemeni Haggadah of Rabbi Yosef Qafih, the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa and Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer.

The exilic consciousness, according to Raz-Krakotzkin, has also potential for recovering Palestinian voices whose suppression coincides with the negation of exile: “The definition of the Zionist settlement as an expression of ‘the negation of exile’ and of the ‘return of the people’ to its land prevented reference to the collective ambitions of the local Arab population and its perspective, and doubtless blocked the possibility of making the existence of this collective a positive element in the process of establishing a new Jewish identity.”⁵² The Palestinians, however, played (and play) an important, albeit passive role in the Zionist construction of “a new Jewish identity.” Zionism not only employed ideological elimination but also imitated Palestinian natives, as discussed above. Accordingly, for a politically conscious artist the integration of Palestinian motifs presents a dilemma. Their inclusion may lead to appropriation – but to ignore them, especially in the context of the Book of Ruth, is to repeat their exclusion. If the Book of Ruth relates a story of migration and homecoming, in the current Israeli scenario the *nokhri* is the native Palestinian.

In face of this dilemma, Grady develops a subtle strategy that surfaces the presence of the Other without appropriating her milieu. Unlike Raban, who projects otherness in order to identify with it, Grady preserves Palestinian difference and distance. The carpet in the inner room was stitched from several pieces, each replicating the shape of one of the room’s walls (*Untitled (Carpet)*, 2019, Figure 13). In this manner, Grady symbolically folds the building (a nineteenth century German Templer residence), as if condensing the room into the carpet’s flat surface. This subtle intervention underlines the genealogy of the space and renders it temporary, unstable, and prone to change. By projecting the room’s arches onto segments cut from “local” carpets, Grady reveals the layered history of the space and challenges the Zionist myth of *terra nullius*. Notably, instead of re-presenting the “Eastern” architecture or the carpets’ “oriental” designs, and thus taking possession of them, Grady lends them a shadowy and partial presence. The carpet is a patchwork of traces, which do not form a harmonious whole but overlap, suppress, and conceal one

⁵¹ Raz-Krakotzkin write: “Exile is the substrate in which aspects that were later separated (in the modern Western cultural language) into “religion” and “nationality” are integrated.” Raz-Krakotzkin, “Exile Within Sovereignty,” 39.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 44.



Figure 14: Leor Grady, *Untitled (Bethlehem)*, 2019.

another like the Ottoman, Christian, and Israeli strata of the Neve Schechter building and gallery. Similarly, a photograph of Bethlehem, taken by Grady during a road trip from Tel Aviv to the outskirts of that Palestinian city, makes the Palestinian presence felt without appropriating it. Instead of printing the photograph, Grady projected it on the uneven eolianite wall of the gallery, in a manner that softens its contours and makes it more distant and unapproachable (*Untitled (Bethlehem)*, 2019, Figure 14). While Raban imitates the city with its terraces and houses but ignores its inhabitants, who merely serve as extras in the Zionist narrative of homecoming, Grady gives Bethlehem a ghostly presence that haunts the Zionist myth of empty land.

7 Conclusion

Paintings and artworks inspired by the Bible are meeting points between the horizon of the text and that of the artists. As such, they are neither transparent reflections of the biblical story, nor simply projections of the artists' worldview. The text is not a thing-in-itself that cannot be fully unfolded, but rather an open-ended network of signs activated by readers. In the absence of a signified whole and despite the hermeneutic gap, "something" of the "original" meaning is transmitted to readers as long as the text is intelligible. In this article, I explored these hermeneutic mechanisms of mutations and endurance through representations of the Book of Ruth. Artists' changing circumstances and diverse interests shaped their visual exegeses, and the biblical identification with the immigrant (Ruth) persisted either through exposition or repression. The artists who did not express compassion and care towards the immigrant employed hermeneutics of differentiation (exoticising, orientalisising, eroticising, romanticising) and subdued Ruth's migration. The biblical lesson could be ignored, but not misinterpreted.

Analysis of interpretive devices of identification and differentiation reveals not only the level of commitment of artists to their tradition but also the operation of power. Victors and Lastman's identification with the subject matter of the biblical text led them to depict Ruth as an immigrant, and to be less concerned with historical and geographical "accuracy." Koch's romanisation of the biblical story and Hayez's eroticisation of its protagonist, on the other hand, are differentiating devices that facilitate colonial domination. If the biblical story may lead readers to identify with its displaced protagonist, in Koch's and Hayez's paintings Ruth is no longer an immigrant but a native who may arouse desire or pose a threat.

While imperial colonialism endeavours to project the colonised as frozen in time – as in Raad’s photograph – settler colonialism employs a strategy of both differentiation and identification. Raban’s illustrations of the Book of Ruth replicate the exoticising tropes of Orientalist paintings, but through them bridge the gap between the biblical past and the Zionist present. Reviving the story of Ruth through a form of settler mimicry, he suppresses Ruth’s immigration and relates a story of homecoming. Grady, by contrast, undermines the Zionist negation of exile and highlights the Book of Ruth’s duality of departure and return. Grady is attuned to the biblical empathy towards the *nokhri*, and instead of identifying and thus appropriating the Other he seeks to unveil traces of the suppressed stories that disrupt the Zionist narrative of the Return to Zion.

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