

# John Chrysostom's Interpretation of the Book of Ruth in His *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*

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## Abstract

This article examines John Chrysostom's interpretation of Ruth, highlighting how he frames her as a marginal yet important figure within the late antique Christian discourse on gender, power, and ethnicity. While Chrysostom is often labelled a literalist interpreter, his reading of Ruth demonstrates a complex figurative and typological approach that aligns her with the church while associating figures like Tamar and Rahab with the synagogue. This figurative reading serves both a polemical and pedagogical function, reinforcing his broader anti-Jewish rhetoric while using Ruth's foreignness and poverty to model Christian identity. Ironically, Chrysostom presents Ruth as an emblem of the church, despite her historical choice to embrace Judaism, showing the adaptability of biblical figures in Christian exegesis. By exploring how Chrysostom employs gendered and ethnic tropes, this article sheds light on the exegetical strategies that shaped Christian identity formation and biblical interpretation in the fourth century.

**Keywords:** ancient ethnicity; ancient gender; anti-Judaism; asceticism; early Christian biblical interpretation; John Chrysostom; Ruth



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## Introduction

The book of Ruth stands out as one of the most captivating narratives in the Hebrew Bible, largely because of its rich character development and subtle yet compelling themes of intimacy, power, and social identity. Its reception across various interpretive traditions, including its Greek translation in the Septuagint (LXX), demonstrates its enduring significance. However, Ruth's place in early Christianity presents an interesting paradox. While the book is consistently included in early Christian canonical lists, there is a notable scarcity of early Christian commentaries or theological engagement with its themes. This limited exegetical attention suggests that, despite its canonical status, Ruth occupied a somewhat peripheral position in the interpretative frameworks of early Christian authors.

This relative neglect is part of a broader pattern in the study of early Christian exegesis, where figures who exist on the margins—whether women, enslaved persons, or socially liminal individuals—often receive less scholarly attention than dominant theological figures or canonical narratives. Yet, these so-called “minor” characters provide crucial insights into the socio-theological landscape of early Christianity. Their stories have the potential to illuminate the lived realities of marginalised groups, challenge dominant ideological constructs, and reveal alternative theological voices that may not always align with the dominant orthodoxy of their time. A study of these characters may also showcase the diversity of early Christian exegesis and could illuminate competing exegetical narratives in early Christian biblical interpretation.

More importantly, perhaps, a more focused study on the exegetical histories of such figures becomes vital because it expands our understanding of how early Christian communities interpreted and reinterpreted biblical texts to navigate issues of gender, power, and social hierarchy. In particular, Ruth's story—centred on themes of migration, economic precarity, ethnic identity, and covenantal inclusion—offers a lens through which we can examine broader questions about identity, belonging, and divine agency in the biblical tradition. Acknowledging and analysing the exegetical history of marginalised characters not only enriches biblical scholarship but also ensures that contemporary interpretations remain sensitive to the complexities and nuances of the ancient texts.

This article aimed to analyse John Chrysostom's (ca. 349–407 CE) interpretation of Ruth, with a particular focus on how he engages with her as a figure shaped by intersecting categories of gender, power, and ethnicity. Ruth is an interesting paradoxical character—she is both non-Jewish and yet very Jewish, being in the genealogy of David himself. Ruth stands as a compelling example of a marginalised biblical character—an impoverished, foreign woman whose presence in Chrysostom's homilies is, in many ways, incidental rather than central. By studying Chrysostom's treatment of Ruth, this article aimed to explore not only *what* he says about her, but also *how* he reconstructs the character of Ruth and, crucially, *why* he does so. Through this lens, the study interrogates how Chrysostom navigates Ruth's complex and paradoxical

identity as a Moabite, a widow, and a beneficiary of divine providence, as well as how she is positioned in relation to other figures in Jesus's genealogy. In doing so, this article contributes to broader discussions on the exegetical history of marginalised biblical characters in early Christianity, shedding light on how figures like Ruth were framed within theological and social discourses of the time. In other words, I ask: How and to what ends would someone like Chrysostom, who is infamous for his views on Judaism, present a marginal and paradoxical figure like Ruth to his late antique Christian audience?

Chrysostom was one of the most influential early Christian biblical commentators and preachers, renowned for his eloquent homilies and deep engagement with biblical texts. As bishop of Constantinople, he played a crucial role in shaping early Christian exegetical and ethical teachings and practices, particularly through his extensive exegesis of both the Old and New Testaments. His interpretations, preserved in his homilies and commentaries, provide valuable insight into how biblical texts were read and applied within the socio-political and theological frameworks of Late Antiquity.

Despite his vast exegetical output, Chrysostom only briefly refers to Ruth in his *Homiliae in Matthaëum* (*Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*; henceforth *Hom. Matt.*), and even then, perhaps only incidentally—because she appears in the genealogy of Jesus: "... and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse ..." (Matt 1:5).<sup>1</sup> Unlike other biblical women who receive more sustained treatment in his corpus, like Sarah or Hannah, Ruth is not the subject of a dedicated homily or much moral-theological reflection. This near-absence makes her an especially interesting case study: she is present, but marginal; acknowledged, yet not deeply explored.

Ruth's story is one of intersectional vulnerability—she is a foreigner, a widow, and economically precarious, yet she is also an ancestor of David and Jesus. Her inclusion in Matthew's genealogy places her alongside other women, such as Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba, all of whom challenge conventional social and moral categories, as we will also see in Chrysostom's interpretation. The study will thus also explore how Chrysostom positions Ruth in relation to these other figures and whether he acknowledges the social, gendered, and ethnic complexities of her identity.

Before turning to Chrysostom's interpretation, the article first provides a brief overview of how Ruth was received and interpreted in early Christianity. This contextual foundation illuminates the broader interpretive landscape in which Chrysostom's comments are situated, highlighting both the continuities and gaps in early Christian exegetical engagement with this fascinating biblical figure.

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1 Quotations from the Bible are taken from the NRSVUE.

## Ruth in Early Christian Canonicity and Biblical Interpretation

The canonical positioning of Ruth reflects some ambivalence in both Jewish and early Christian traditions, revealing diverse perspectives on its theological and literary significance.<sup>2</sup> Edmon Gallagher and John Meade’s work on the biblical canon lists of early Christianity illuminates Ruth’s canonicity in early Christianity.<sup>3</sup> One of the reasons for Ruth’s interpretive marginality among early Christian authors may be its more general historical reception in the Jewish canon. For many Jewish authors of the first century CE onwards, Ruth was also not a prominent text. With regards to Josephus, for example, Gallagher and Meade remark:

Other books [besides the Torah and Prophets] did not attract much notice (Ruth, Chronicles, etc.), but they did feature later in the Jewish biblical canon, even though they remained relatively obscure. It seems likely that, for such books, the later reception continued a tradition rather than being an innovation, simply because we have little reason to suppose that at the end of the first century these books of little popularity enjoyed a sharp increase in their authority.<sup>4</sup>

The marginal status of Ruth in the early Christian tradition is most likely the result of its similar status in Jewish canon history and biblical interpretation. Still, Ruth was in the Christian Old Testament, the LXX, and did merit attention. Some early Christian canon lists treat Ruth as an independent work, and the book’s position in a canon, in itself, may be a theological suggestion on how to approach and read the book—that is, its canonical “ecosystem,” so to speak. In the Greek tradition, the Bryennios List (ca. 100–150 CE) includes Ruth as a separate book but places it in an unusual order—Ruth, Job, Judges.<sup>5</sup> Job might be inserted between Ruth and Judges to indicate that Ruth should *not* be considered as part of the theological history of Judges, yet its proximity suggests some theological continuity. A similar grouping appears in Epiphanius of Salamis’s *Panarion* 76.22.5, further affirming an alternative canonical structure that distinguished Ruth from Judges. Other significant early Christian lists—including those of Melito of Sardis, Athanasius of Alexandria (*Epistula festalis* 39.15–21), the Apostolic Canons, Gregory of Nazianzus (*Carmina Theologica* 1.1.12), and Amphilochius of Iconium (*Iambi ad Seleucum* 251–320)—generally maintain Ruth as a separate book, though its placement within these lists often follows Judges, reinforcing

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2 I have already explored some of the points in this section in a previous study on Theodoret of Cyrus’s reading of Ruth; Chris L. de Wet, “Canon, Sex and Gender in Theodoret of Cyrus’s Exposition of LXX Ruth,” *HTS Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2022): 1–7. I repeat and expand the discussion here in this section for the sake of contextualising the Chrysostomic passage for readers. For a fuller discussion and comparison of readings of Ruth by Jewish and Christian authors of late antiquity, see Eleanor J. Foo, “‘Do Not Go to Another Field’: Late Antique Rabbinic-Patristic Exegetical Encounter over the Book of Ruth,” in *Interactions in Interpretation: The Pilgrimage of Meaning through Biblical Texts and Contexts*, ed. Jan Roskovek and Vit Hušek (Brill, 2021), 139–167.

3 Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

4 Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 20; see also 60 n. 11.

5 Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 76.

its historical and narrative continuity with the preceding text.<sup>6</sup> This is also the case with the Pseudo-Chrysostomic *Synopsis scripturae sacrae*, a summary of the contents of the books of the Old Testament, which places Ruth after Judges, describing the book thus: “Next is Ruth, a short book, containing an account [ἱστορίαν] of a foreign woman who married a certain Jewish man.”<sup>7</sup>

Jerome notes that in late antiquity, Jewish scholars included Ruth as part of the book of Judges.<sup>8</sup> This association suggests that Ruth was often viewed as an appendix or continuation of Judges rather than a distinct work. However, this ambiguity extended into early Christian canonisation, where Ruth’s placement varied across different textual traditions and ecclesiastical authorities. Some early Christian authorities, therefore, preferred to align with the Jewish tradition that combined Ruth with Judges into a single book. Origen (*Selecta in Psalmos* 1.2) explicitly states that Ruth and Judges were understood as one work, referred to as *Sōphtheim*.<sup>9</sup> This tradition is echoed by Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechesis* 4.35), who also lists Ruth as an extension of Judges.<sup>10</sup> Among Latin authors, Hilary of Poitiers (*Instructio Psalmorum* 15) and Jerome (*Prologus Galeatus*) followed the same pattern, maintaining the association between the two books.<sup>11</sup> Jerome’s perspective, in particular, became highly influential in the Western church, as his Latin Vulgate played a significant role in shaping the canonical order of Scripture for medieval and later Christian traditions.

A further distinct canonical arrangement appears in the Syriac Christian tradition. The *Peshitta*, the Syriac Old Testament, places Ruth within a unique grouping known as the “Book of Women,” which includes Ruth–Susanna–Esther–Judith. This collection is positioned near the end of the canon, following Daniel–Bel and the Dragon.<sup>12</sup> The grouping of these texts suggests a thematic emphasis on female biblical figures and their theological or moral significance, reflecting a different interpretative lens than either the Greek or Latin traditions.

These varying canonical placements of Ruth are more than just editorial decisions; they reveal underlying theological and hermeneutical presuppositions about the book’s meaning and function within the broader scriptural narrative. Whether Ruth was considered an integral part of the Deuteronomistic history (as in the Jewish tradition),

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6 For these lists and texts, see Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, ad loc; De Wet, “Canon, Sex and Gender,” 2.

7 Pseudo-Chrysostom, *Synopsis scripturae sacrae* (PG 56.314.29–30); for more on this important text, which contains a synopsis of Ruth, see Francesca P. Barone, “Pour une édition critique de la *Synopsis scripturae sacrae* du Pseudo-Jean Chrysostome,” *Revue de philologie, de littérature et d’histoire anciennes* 83, no. 1 (2009): 7–19. Translations of Chrysostom’s (and Pseudo-Chrysostom’s) works are my own.

8 Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 60.

9 Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 86–94; De Wet, “Canon, Sex and Gender,” 2.

10 Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 114; De Wet, “Canon, Sex and Gender,” 2.

11 Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 195–196, 200; De Wet, “Canon, Sex and Gender,” 2.

12 Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 254; De Wet, “Canon, Sex and Gender,” 2–3.

an independent theological narrative (as in some early Christian lists), or a component of a broader thematic collection (as in the Syriac tradition), these different arrangements influenced how Ruth was read, interpreted, and utilised in teaching and preaching within the early church. By examining these canonical trends, we gain insight into how early Christian communities engaged with Ruth's narrative, particularly in relation to questions of identity, divine providence, and inclusion within the covenant community.<sup>13</sup> We can now explore in more detail Chrysostom's approach to Ruth.

## John Chrysostom's Interpretation of the Book of Ruth

Chrysostom's engagement with Ruth is remarkably sparse, appearing only in three of his *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*—namely, homilies 1, 3, and 70. Even in these instances, his references to Ruth are almost incidental, as they emerge solely in his discussion of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5). Chrysostom does not quote or refer to texts from the book of Ruth itself, which is in its own way telling of the status of the book, to Chrysostom, at least. Rather than engaging directly with the book of Ruth or its theological and narrative themes, Chrysostom merely acknowledges Ruth's place in the genealogy, using her as part of his broader argument about God's providence and the inclusion of Gentiles in the lineage of Christ. This limited engagement agrees with the varied and sometimes ambiguous ways Ruth was received in early Christianity. Chrysostom's use of the figure remains confined to his interest in Matthew's presentation of Jesus's ancestry. Let us now examine these three homiletic references in greater detail. Because they are so few, I will quote the entire sections in which Ruth is referenced.

### *Hom. Matt. 1.5*

The reference to Ruth occurs in *Hom. Matt. 1.5* in which Chrysostom introduces the genealogy in Matthew and its peculiar characteristics:

And along with these things, this is also worth investigating: for what reason can it be, that, when tracing the genealogy through the men, he has also mentioned women. And why, since he decided to do this, in fact, he did not mention them all, but passing over the more eminent women, such as Sarah, Rebecca, and many who are like them, he has introduced only those women who are known for something bad, as, for example, if any one of them was a prostitute, or an adulteress, or a mother by an unlawful marriage, or if anyone was a foreigner or barbarian [ἀλλόφυλος καὶ βάρβαρος]. For he has recalled the wife of Uriah, and [he also mentioned] Tamar, and Rahab, and Ruth, of whom one was of a foreign race [ἀλλογενής], another a prostitute, another was disgraced by her close kinsman, and with him not in the context of marriage, but by a surreptitious intercourse, when she had disguised herself with the mask of a prostitute; and mentioning the wife of Uriah, no one does not know [this story], because of the infamy of the crime. And, yet, the evangelist has passed by all the rest, and inserted only these women in the genealogy. Whereas, if women were to be mentioned, all of them should

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13 De Wet, "Canon, Sex and Gender," 2–3.

be mentioned. If not all but some, then surely those known for their virtue, and not those known for their faults [τῶν ἐν ἀρετῇ, οὐ τῶν ἐν ἀμαρτήμασι]. Do you see how much attention [προσοχῆς] is required of us immediately at the very beginning [of the Gospel]? And yet the beginning seems to be simpler than the rest—to many perhaps even unnecessary, since it appears only as a list of names.<sup>14</sup>

Here Chrysostom gives some important information that frames his understanding of the genealogy and its nature, as well as the care and attention (προσοχή) that is required when reading it. For a genealogy, to Chrysostom, is not simply a list of names. This initial discussion is, in fact, quite important in understanding the other texts that follow. What are the initial observations we can make in this regard?

First, Chrysostom identifies an exegetical and moral problem in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus: Why does the evangelist include certain women—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah)—while omitting the more eminent and virtuous ones such as Sarah and Rebecca? As Chrysostom notes, these selected women are known not for their virtue but for their associations with moral transgression or foreignness. This disrupts the common patristic emphasis on biblical exemplarity, where figures in Scripture are often read as models of moral emulation.<sup>15</sup> If the purpose of genealogy was to highlight worthy ancestors, then the presence of women with morally nefarious backgrounds seems problematic. Chrysostom’s response signals the need for a deeper exegetical reflection—perhaps there is another reason beyond mere moral exemplarity that justifies their inclusion.

In this case, Chrysostom departs from other eastern writers like Ephrem and Theodoret. Phil Botha’s analysis of Ephrem’s hymn *De nativitate* 9 shows how the hymn highlights the connection between these Old Testament female figures and Christ, portraying Tamar and Ruth as prophetic believers who prefigured the Messiah. As Old Testament types of Mary, they served to counter Jewish criticism of the virgin birth, showing how their bold devotion—though ridiculed—was ultimately vindicated by God. Their unwavering love for the Messiah inspired the congregation to indeed emulate their faith and dedication.<sup>16</sup> “It thus seems that Ephrem is arguing here that Christ’s birth as a

14 *Hom. Matt.* 1.5 (PG 57.21.19–44).

15 On Chrysostom’s use of exemplars, see esp. Pak-Wah Lai, “The Monk as Christian Saint and Exemplar in St John Chrysostom’s Writings,” *Studies in Church History* 47 (2011): 19–28; “Exemplar Portraits and the Interpretation of John Chrysostom’s Doctrine of Recapitulation,” in *Revisioning John Chrysostom: New Approaches, New Perspectives*, ed. Chris L. de Wet and Wendy Mayer (Brill, 2019), 587–612. Chrysostom did not shy away from using women as exemplars in homilies, for instance in the case of Hannah or the mother of the Maccabean martyrs; on Hannah, see Chrysostom’s homilies *De Anna*, and on the mother of the Maccabean martyrs, see his homilies *On the Holy Maccabees and Their Mother*; see also Chris L. de Wet, “Prayer and Gender in John Chrysostom’s Homilies *On Hannah*,” *Acta Theologica* 42, no. 2 (2022): 139–156; “Claiming Corporeal Capital: John Chrysostom’s Homilies on the Maccabean Martyrs,” *Journal of Early Christian History* 2, no. 1 (2012): 3–21.

16 Phil J. Botha, “Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary—The Bold Women in Ephrem the Syrian’s Hymn *De nativitate* 9,” *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 17, no. 1 (2006): 1–21.

human was made possible by the visionary and bold love a number of women had for him,” Botha explains, “[h]e shows that the sexual aberrations of Tamar and Ruth are in fact vindicated by their pure motive of love for the Messiah, and that they were rewarded by Christ for this.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, Ephrem writes that Ruth and Tamar endured sexual shame on account of Christ, which is why they are praiseworthy. Syriac Christianity was very mindful of the virtue of sexual abstinence and virginity—Syriac is one of the few ancient Christian languages that had words for both male and female virgins.<sup>18</sup> In his usual eloquent and euphonious tone, Ephrem writes:

On your account \* women have hurried – after men: \* Tamar desired – a man who was widowed \* and Ruth loved – a man who was old. \* Even Rahab, – who caught men, \* was caught by you”;<sup>19</sup> then he continues, “Ruth: with a man \* on the threshing floor she lay down, – for your sake. \* Her love was bold – for your sake, \* you who teach boldness – to all the repentant. \* Her ears despised – all the voices \* because of your voice.”<sup>20</sup>

We thus see a very different approach to the moral problem of these women in Ephrem compared with Chrysostom’s view.

Theodoret’s reading of Ruth in his *Quaestiones in Octateuchum (de Ruth)*<sup>21</sup> is also distinctive because it directly engages with themes of sexuality, marriage, and procreation rather than avoiding them. I have explored this point in detail in a different study.<sup>22</sup> Unlike Chrysostom, Theodoret engages directly with the story of Ruth as a whole, and not only as an annotation in the genealogy of Matthew. While he acknowledges Ruth’s christological significance (from Matt 1:5) and pedagogical value, he reinterprets the narrative by reshaping its characters, presenting Boaz as the true saviour of the passive and submissive female figure, Ruth. This revision diminishes Ruth’s agency, shifting the focus to Boaz as the central virtuous figure worthy of emulation. In this sense, Theodoret is closer to Chrysostom in that the figure of emulation is still not Ruth, but Boaz. Ultimately, Theodoret adapts the story into an androcentric version that resonates with his contemporary audience. Notably, he does not dismiss the sexual undertones of the text but reconfigures them by reframing the characters and placing sexuality securely within marital boundaries. Even this initial and cursory comparison between eastern authors like Chrysostom, Ephrem, and Theodoret highlight the diversity of approaches to and interpretations of the figure and story of Ruth.

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17 Botha, “Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary,” 3.

18 Still useful is the discussion in Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, Vol. 1 of *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 184 (Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1958), 106–145.

19 *De nativitate* 9.7; Botha, “Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary,” 4–5.

20 *De nativitate* 9.14; Botha, “Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary,” 6.

21 See John F. Petruccione and Robert C. Hill, eds., *The Questions on the Octateuch, Volume 2* (Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

22 De Wet, “Canon, Sex and Gender.”

A second issue Chrysostom raises is the problem of association. Among the women listed, some have clear associations with sexual impropriety—Rahab as a prostitute,<sup>23</sup> Tamar disguising herself as one, and Bathsheba as an adulteress (albeit a victim of circumstances). Ruth, however, is different; she is simply a foreigner, yet she is grouped alongside these morally compromised figures. In the original narrative, Ruth’s story has elements that could be read as seductive (such as her night-time encounter with Boaz on the threshing floor), yet Chrysostom does not dwell on this aspect (does he perhaps assume it?). Nevertheless, her defining characteristic in this context is her foreignness (as seen in the use of multiple terms signifying this status, e.g., ἀλλόφυλος, ἀλλογενής, and even βάρβαρος). This categorisation suggests that, for Chrysostom, Ruth’s inclusion in the genealogy is significant not because of any moral failing but because she, like the others, represents an outsider—someone incorporated into the divine plan despite an initially marginal status. As an alien woman, a Moabite, she still appears to be an unlikely figure for the bloodline of Christ himself.<sup>24</sup> It gives us a glimpse into Chrysostom’s strategy of what to do when a text presents complex and even problematic women (and their bodies).

The genealogy, then, is a problem-text, demanding special προσοχή from the reader. Chrysostom points out the paradox: the very beginning of the Gospel, which many might view as a mere list or “numbering” of names (διὰ τὸ ὀνομάτων ἀριθμὸν εἶναι μόνον), actually contains a profound theological message. Already in this first homily, Chrysostom hints at the possibility, which he will expound in the third homily, that the inclusion of these women suggests that divine grace operates beyond conventional moral expectations, and that marginal and even unscrupulous characters can have a very profound purpose in the narrative of salvation history.

Beyond these points, Chrysostom’s analysis also raises the question of divine providence in human history. The irregularities and moral complexities in Jesus’s lineage do not compromise his legitimacy; rather, they highlight how God’s purposes unfold in unexpected ways. Ultimately, Chrysostom’s initial reading of the genealogy challenges simplistic interpretations of biblical history as a straightforward moral narrative. The presence of these women in Jesus’s lineage is not incidental; it invites a

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- 23 Interestingly enough, Chrysostom and many other early Christian authors have a great deal to say about Rahab; see, for example, A. T. Hanson, “Rahab the Harlot in Early Christian Tradition,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 1, no. 1 (1978): 53–60; Hendrik F. Stander, “The Greek Church Fathers and Rahab,” *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 17, no. 1 (2006): 37–49; Johannes P. K. Kritzinger, “Rahab, illa meretrix,” *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 17, no. 1 (2006): 22–36; Botha, “Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary”; William L. Lyons, “Rahab through the Ages: A Study of Christian Interpretation of Rahab,” *SBL Forum* (2008), <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=786>; Chris L. de Wet, “Rahab the Harlot in Severian of Gabala’s *De paenitentia et compunctione (de Rahab historia)*: Paradox, Anti-Judaism and the Early Christian Invention of the Penitent Prostitute,” *HTS Theological Studies* 76, no. 3 (2020): 1–7.
- 24 Peter S. Hawkins, “Ruth amid the Gentiles,” in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (Fordham University Press, 2006), 78.

deeper reflection on divine grace, the role of the marginalised in salvation history, and the radical nature of Christ's mission. These are the key themes in *Hom. Matt. 3*.

### ***Hom. Matt. 3.4***

The most detailed discussion of Ruth in Chrysostom is found in *Hom. Matt. 3.4*. The section in full requires citation:

Do you see that it was not for few nor insignificant reasons that he reminded us of the whole history of Judah? For this reason, he has recalled both Ruth and Rahab, the one a foreigner [ἀλλοφύλου], the other a prostitute, that you may learn that he came to deliver us from all our ills. For he has come as a physician, not as a judge. Therefore, just as those of the old days took prostitutes for wives, in the same way God also adjoined to himself the nature of that which was like a prostitute: and this, from the beginning, the prophets predict to have taken place regarding the synagogue. But that [wife] was ungrateful towards him who had been a husband to her, whereas the church, when delivered from the evils received from our fathers, continued to cling to the bridegroom. See, for example, what happened to Ruth, how similar it is to the things which befell us. For she was both of a foreign race, and reduced to extreme poverty; yet Boaz, when he saw her, neither looked down on her poverty nor loathed her low birth [δυσγένειαν], as Christ having accepted the church, being both a foreigner and in much poverty [ἀλλόφυλον καὶ ἐν πενίᾳ πολλῇ], took her to be a companion [κοινωνόν] of the great benefits. But as Ruth, if she had not left her father earlier, and renounced household and race, country and her kin, would not have found this relationship; so too the Church, having forsaken the customs which her people had received from their fathers, at that moment, and not earlier, became lovely to the bridegroom. Of this, therefore, the prophet discourses regarding her, and says, "Forget your people, and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty" [Ps. 45:10–11 LXX]. This Ruth also did, and because of this she became a mother of kings, the same as in the case of the church. For from her [offspring] David himself came. So, then, to shame them by all these things, and to compel them not to be proud, he has composed the genealogy, and introduced these women. Yes, for this last, through those who intervened, was an ancestor to the great king, and David is not ashamed of these women. For it cannot, no, it cannot be that a person should be virtuous or wicked, low-born or glorious, either by the virtue or by the vice of their forefathers. But, if one must state it paradoxically, they are even more distinguished when, though not being of worthy ancestors, have still become excellent.

In this section Ruth certainly merits more attention than the other figures like Rahab or Tamar. Chrysostom's exegesis of Matthew's genealogy in this section provides a fascinating interplay between typology, rhetoric, and theological polemics. In the passage under examination, Chrysostom focuses on the inclusion of Ruth in Christ's lineage, emphasising their foreign status and perceived moral blemish to demonstrate the universality of salvation and the pedagogical value of scripture. In this section, Ruth receives the most attention of the women in the genealogy and we see that Chrysostom was aware of the details of the story in the book of Ruth.

Chrysostom's use of medical imagery is noticeable in his interpretation, although it is not as extensive as in some other homilies.<sup>25</sup> He describes Christ as a physician (ιατρός) rather than a judge, a rhetorical strategy that he frequently employs in his homilies. This metaphor serves to underscore the pedagogical function of scripture and the necessity of the health of the soul. The pedagogy of the genealogy is thus also curative, healing the pathology that some might have regarding their social, economic, and ethnic status. By integrating figures such as Rahab and Ruth into Christ's genealogy, Matthew (according to Chrysostom) demonstrates that salvation extends even to the most unlikely candidates. Chrysostom explicitly contrasts this approach with a more legalistic or judgmental perspective, which would exclude such figures. The genealogy, therefore, serves as a pedagogical tool in the interest of psychic health. And what is the lesson to be learnt?

A key element in Chrysostom's argument is the repeated emphasis on Ruth's foreign identity. The genealogy of Christ in Matthew, structured to include several women of dubious backgrounds, serves a pedagogical purpose: to shame Jewish identity and to honour the identity of the church. By identifying Ruth explicitly as a foreigner (ἀλλόφυλος) and as impoverished (ἐν πενίᾳ πολλῇ), Chrysostom draws an implicit parallel between Ruth and the gentile church. This is ironic given that Ruth, in the biblical narrative, chooses to join the Jewish people, thereby becoming an ancestor of David.<sup>26</sup> Despite this, Chrysostom reconfigures her story to function as a type of the church, while Boaz, implicitly, serves as a type of Christ. This reading aligns with Ambrose, Isidore of Seville, and other Western exegetes, who also interpreted Ruth within a christological framework.<sup>27</sup> What are the customs that Ruth forsook according to Chrysostom? Hawkins remarks:

In an astonishing revision, Chrysostom turns the law of Israel ("the customs which men had received from their fathers") into the darkness meant to be left behind, along with idols, in Moab. Like Ruth, "we" must abandon Jewish "household and race" if we are to become "lovely to the Bridegroom" and be partakers "of much blessing."<sup>28</sup>

In this reading, Hawkins opines that Ruth, according to Chrysostom, actually leaves her Jewish ancestry and practices behind. But there is no explicit reference to her doing so, and this seems to go against the grain of the narrative. In the narrative, it appears to be her Moabite heritage she forsakes. While we might surmise that Chrysostom, generally,

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25 On Chrysostom's medical rhetoric, see esp. Wendy Mayer, "The Persistence in Late Antiquity of Medico-Philosophical Psychic Therapy," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8, no. 2 (2015): 337–351; "Medicine in Transition: Christian Adaptation in the Later Fourth-Century East," in *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity*, ed. Geoffrey Greatrex and Hugh Elton (Ashgate, 2015), 11–26; Chris L. de Wet, "The Preacher's Diet: Gluttony, Regimen, and Psycho-Somatic Health in the Thought of John Chrysostom," in *Revisioning John Chrysostom: New Approaches, New Perspectives*, ed. Chris L. de Wet and Wendy Mayer (Brill, 2019), 410–463.

26 Foo, "Do Not Go to Another Field," 155.

27 Foo, "Do Not Go to Another Field," 155–156.

28 Hawkins, "Ruth amid the Gentiles," 80.

wanted her to also forsake her Jewish ancestral past, he seems to rely more on the *principle* of leaving all former non-Christian customs and practices for the sake of Christ. As the message of the genealogy in Matthew implies, it is not the distinction of one's ancestral past that adds worth to one's person.

Despite this ambiguity about what Ruth actually forsakes, Chrysostom's rhetoric does take a more polemical turn when addressing the synagogue, which serves as a representation of Jews.<sup>29</sup> While other patristic writers, such as Ephrem, offer relatively sympathetic, even admirable, readings of Tamar and Rahab, Chrysostom employs their sexual shame to reinforce his broader argument against the Jewish people—using sexual slander against Jews was a common feature of early Christian polemics.<sup>30</sup> He claims that God, just as men of old took prostitutes as wives, “adjoined to himself the nature of that which was like a prostitute [i.e., the synagogue].” Using matrimonial rhetoric, here, Chrysostom typologises Israel's unfaithfulness, contrasting it with the fidelity of the church.<sup>31</sup> The synagogue, represented by figures like Tamar and Rahab, is depicted as ungrateful and unfaithful, while the church, prefigured by Ruth, clings steadfastly to the bridegroom Christ. This polemic underscores Chrysostom's broader anti-Judaic tendencies, which pervade much of his homiletic corpus.

One of the most striking aspects of this passage is Chrysostom's deviation from his usual exegetical method. Generally known for his preference for a literal or moral reading of scripture, Chrysostom here embraces a figurative and typological approach. The infamous women of the genealogy are not merely historical figures but serve as symbols within a grand theological narrative. Rahab and Tamar, tainted by scandal, become representatives of the synagogue, while Ruth, a foreigner who renounces her people, becomes a type of the gentile church. This exegetical move situates Chrysostom within a broader tradition of typological readings but also highlights an inherent tension in his approach. While he often emphasises the clarity and moral utility of scripture, this passage demonstrates his willingness to engage in more complex figurative interpretations when it serves his theological aims.

Another significant undercurrent in Chrysostom's interpretation is his ascetic and monastic rhetoric. Ruth's abandonment of her people, her father's house, and her former way of life mirrors the ideals of monastic renunciation. Chrysostom promoted a form of

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29 On Chrysostom's rhetoric against the Jews, see Courtney Wilson Van Veller, “Paul's Therapy of the Soul: A New Approach to John Chrysostom and Anti-Judaism” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2015); “John Chrysostom and the Troubling Jewishness of Paul,” in *Revisioning John Chrysostom: New Approaches, New Perspectives*, ed. Chris L. de Wet and Wendy Mayer (Brill, 2019), 32–57; Wendy Mayer, “Preaching Hatred? John Chrysostom, Neuroscience, and the Jews,” in *Revisioning John Chrysostom: New Approaches, New Perspectives*, ed. Chris L. de Wet and Wendy Mayer (Brill, 2019), 58–136; Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century* (University of California Press, 1983).

30 See esp. Susanna Drake, *Slandering the Jew: Sexuality and Difference in Early Christian Texts* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

31 Foo, “Do Not Go to Another Field,” 154–155.

popular monasticism in which lay Christians, even those living in urban settings, could embody monastic virtues.<sup>32</sup> Ruth, by leaving behind her lineage and embracing a new identity, serves as a model for this ideal. Her poverty, explicitly highlighted by Chrysostom, reinforces the virtue of detachment from material wealth. In this reading, Ruth exemplifies the renunciation necessary for true discipleship. The fact that the church clings to Christ as Ruth clung to Boaz also has undertones of monasticism and virginity. Whether Chrysostom assumes a sense of emulation in this regard is possible but it is not explicitly stated.

This ascetic dimension also aligns with Chrysostom's broader theological vision, in which ethnicity and social status must be transcended. He insists that neither virtue nor vice is inherited; rather, individual moral excellence determines one's standing before God. By "forgetting her lineage," Ruth attains a privileged place in salvation history. This reflects Chrysostom's broader critique of (his perceived) Jewish ethnocentrism and his promotion of a Christian identity that supersedes national or ancestral ties. The church, like Ruth, consists primarily of those who were once outsiders but have now been grafted into the divine family through her marriage to Christ.

### ***Hom. Matt. 70.2***

The final reference to Ruth in Chrysostom's homilies is a fleeting reference in *Hom. Matt. 70.2*. It occurs in a discussion about Matthew 22:23–33, in which the Sadducees test Jesus about his views on the resurrection by positing the case of a woman who married seven brothers after each one died. Chrysostom believes the story to be fictitious and he refers to the occurrence of the levirate marriage we find in Ruth, who was forced to marry Boaz. Ruth was often used as a text to discuss the levirate marriage. Yifat Monnickendam explains this reference in Chrysostom:

Indeed, according to his writings, at this stage the Jews no longer performed levirate marriage, possibly reflecting the rabbinic attempt to minimize the practice, preferring *ḥaliza*. To conclude this point, when discussing levirate marriage directly, the early Christian writers who commented on the dispute between Jesus and the sadducees [*sic*] described such marriage following its biblical description, and focused on its role in ensuring continuity. They did not oppose the practice itself, but rather addressed its significance to the theological discussion on the resurrection of the dead.<sup>33</sup>

Chrysostom's comments about Ruth and the levirate marriage, in this case, are so scant that it is difficult to deduce much more about this. However, in a context where Christian

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32 See, more generally, Martin Illert, *Johannes Chrysostomus und das antiochenisch-syrische Mönchtum. Studien zu Theologie, Rhetorik und Kirchenpolitik im antiochenischen Schrifttum des Johannes Chrysostomus* (Pano, 2000); Peter R. L. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 1988), 305–322.

33 Yifat Monnickendam, "Biblical Law in Greco-Roman Attire: The Case of Levirate Marriage in Late Antique Christian Legal Traditions," *Journal of Law and Religion* 34, no. 2 (2019): 150, see also 154.

ethics was geared against remarriage, it is not surprising to see the levirate receiving much criticism from someone like Chrysostom. He seems to sketch Ruth as a victim of this practice, who was “plunged headlong” (ἐξεκυλίσθη) into it. The occurrence of the levirate marriage in Ruth does not in any way, however, influence the status and legitimacy of the Ruth/church and Boaz/Christ typology.

## Conclusion

Chrysostom’s interpretation of Ruth reveals a complex interplay of gender, power, and ethnicity within his broader theological and rhetorical agenda. While he is often characterised as a staunchly literal interpreter of Scripture, his treatment of Ruth demonstrates his willingness to employ a figurative and typological reading, particularly when it serves his polemical purposes. Far from simply recounting the historical or moral aspects of Ruth’s story, Chrysostom presents her as a typological figure whose significance extends beyond her own narrative.

At the heart of his reading lies a contrast between Ruth and the other women in Matthew’s genealogy, particularly Tamar and Rahab. Whereas figures like Tamar and Rahab, despite their complex roles, are associated with the synagogue and framed through a lens of sexual shame, Ruth is uniquely positioned as a positive, transformative figure. She is a foreigner, a Moabite, yet she becomes an ancestor of David and ultimately of Christ. In this way, Chrysostom aligns Ruth with the church—a new people gathered from the gentiles—while Boaz assumes the role of Christ, the bridegroom. This interpretation draws on a well-established Western Christian tradition, yet Chrysostom gives it a distinctively ascetic and monastic dimension.

Chrysostom’s rhetoric emphasises Ruth’s voluntary renunciation of her ethnic identity, her family, and her homeland—elements that resonate strongly with the late antique monastic ideal. In his vision of Christian virtue, it is not noble birth, wealth, or social power that determine one’s worth, but the willingness to forsake worldly attachments. Ruth, in her poverty and foreignness, embodies the spiritual ideal of the Christian who leaves behind their old ways in order to become part of the new people of God. This emphasis on renunciation is not merely about personal piety but also functions within Chrysostom’s broader polemical strategy. By framing Ruth as the church and Tamar and Rahab as representations of the synagogue, he reinforces a stark contrast between the rejected past and the redeemed present.

At the same time, gender plays a crucial role in his interpretation. The women in Matthew’s genealogy are not incidental figures; their presence requires explanation, and Chrysostom’s reading turns this explanation into a theological lesson. The sexual shame associated with Tamar and Rahab allows him to craft a vision of the synagogue as unfaithful and ungrateful, while Ruth’s humble submission and transformation make her the perfect emblem of the church. This framing not only reflects Chrysostom’s anti-Jewish polemics but also serves his broader moral and ascetic teachings, particularly his

idealisation of renunciation and obedience, virtues frequently ascribed to women in his homilies. Of course, he does not account for the vulnerabilities all these women may have experienced. That is not the point of this interpretation. Ironically, Chrysostom presents Ruth as an emblem of the church, despite her historical choice to embrace Judaism, showing the adaptability of biblical figures in Christian exegesis.

In light of these elements, Chrysostom's interpretation of Ruth serves multiple functions. It offers a theological defence of the church's gentile identity, reinforces his polemical stance against Judaism, and advances his ascetic ideals by presenting Ruth as a model of poverty and self-denial. Most strikingly, his use of typology in this context challenges any simplistic classification of him as a strictly literalist exegete. Instead, his reading of Ruth illustrates how exegesis in late antiquity was deeply shaped by contemporary social, theological, and rhetorical concerns. Chrysostom's Ruth is not merely a marginal Old Testament figure; she is a carefully crafted symbol deployed to instruct, to polemicise, and to shape the moral imagination of his Christian audience. In this way, his interpretation sheds light not only on biblical exegesis but also on the broader dynamics of gender, power, and ethnicity in early Christian thought.

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