


# Canon, sex and gender in Theodoret of Cyrus's exposition of LXX Ruth

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The purpose of this article is to examine Theodoret of Cyrus's (ca. 393–ca. 457 CE) exposition of LXX Ruth, as found in his Questions on the Octateuch. At the centre of this analysis lies the question of what an early Christian author like Theodoret, who lives in a context where asceticism and sexual renunciation were quite popular (i.e. Christian Syria), does with a complicated text like Ruth, which contains so many explicit nuances about sex, procreation and marriage, as well as various gendered complexities. The article starts by examining briefly the canonisation history of Ruth in early Christianity and some of the main interpretative trends in readings of Ruth by other Christian authors. Then, Theodoret's interpretation of Ruth is examined, focusing specifically on his Questions on Ruth. The purpose of Ruth as scripture, according to Theodoret, is first delineated, after which Theodoret's approach to sex and gender in LXX Ruth is examined.

**Contribution:** This article argues that Theodoret transforms the story of Ruth into one that aligns with the moral-philosophical discourse related to sex, marriage and gender of his own time. Theodoret restructures Ruth androcentrically by placing Boaz, the masculine and virtuous male father-figure, at the centre of the story, while at the same time stripping Ruth of any possible agency she might have as a would-be temptress.

**Keywords:** Christian Syria; Theodoret of Cyrus; LXX Ruth; early Christian biblical interpretation; patristics; Ambrose.

Now in the drops of this most balmy time, with its unfulfillable promise and its eternal reality going hand in hand down the road, two barefoot women walk. They too are holding hands, an old widow and a young one. (Ostriker 1996:89)

## The Book of Ruth in early Christianity

With its intriguing characters and implicit sexual nuances, the Book of Ruth is undoubtedly one of the most interesting texts to feature in the Hebrew Bible and its subsequent receptions and translations, including that of the Septuagint (LXX). Ruth did have what we might call a mixed reception in early Christianity. On the one hand, Ruth is included in all the early Christian canon lists, yet on the other hand, we have very few early Christian commentaries on the book. One of the aspects of Ruth ambivalence is seen in its canonical positioning. Jerome, for instance, tells us that in late antiquity, Jewish scholars included Ruth as a part of Judges (Gallagher & Meade 2017:3,60). This ambivalence remained in the early Christian canonisation of Ruth. Some early Christian lists include Ruth as a book on its own. In the Greek canonical tradition, the Bryennios list (ca. 100–150 CE) has Ruth on its own, but with the curious order of Ruth–Job–Judges, again showing association between Ruth (and Job, interestingly) and Judges (Gallagher & Meade 2017:76); a similar grouping is found with Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 376 CE, from *Panarion* 76.22.5). Melito's list (170 CE), the canon list of Athanasius (367 CE, from the *Epistula festalis* 39.15–21), the Apostolic Canons (375 CE), Gregory of Nazianzus (381–390 CE, from the *Carmina Theologica* 1.1.12), Amphilochius (ca. 380 CE, from the *Iambi ad Seleucum* 251–320), among some others, have Ruth on its own mostly after Judges.<sup>1</sup> Others prefer to follow the Jewish canonisation trend and include Ruth with Judges. Origen (in his *Selecta in Psalmos* 1.2, from ca. 220 CE; see Gallagher & Meade 2017:86,94) states that Ruth is included with Judges in one book, known as *Sōphtheim*. Cyril of Jerusalem (in *Catechesis* 4.35, from ca. 350 CE; see Gallagher & Meade 2017:114) follows suit, combining Ruth and Judges. Some Latin authors like Hilary of Poitiers (in *Instructio Psalmorum* 15, from 364 CE to 367 CE; see Gallagher & Meade 2017:195–196) and, of course, Jerome (in *Prologus Galeatus*, from ca. 390 CE; see Gallagher & Meade 2017:200) also include Ruth with Judges. The Syriac Christian tradition has yet another

1. See the details of the various lists in Gallagher and Meade (2017:ad loc).

**Note:** Special Collection: Septuagint and Textual Studies, sub-edited by Johann Cook (Stellenbosch University).

different canonical grouping for Ruth. The Syriac Old Testament, the Peshitta, includes Ruth in a so-called 'Book of Women', which has Ruth–Susanna–Esther–Judith as its order, located near the end of canon, after Daniel–Bel–the Dragon (Gallagher & Meade 2017:254). It is important to understand that each of these different canonical trends for Ruth may suggest varying presuppositions and conceptions about the meaning of Ruth and its implications for reading and teaching in the early church.<sup>2</sup>

The Book of Ruth was subject to numerous interpretations in the early church.<sup>3</sup> The majority of interpretations provide figurative and moral readings of the Ruth narrative. Ambrose of Milan (339–397 CE) provides a great deal of interpretative material on Ruth, even though he did not write an individual commentary on the book. Like many authors, Ambrose begins by explaining and defending the presence of Ruth in the genealogy of Jesus. Not only does Ruth's presence in the genealogy signify Christ's legitimate descent from David, but Ruth also prefigures the church:

Hence, how did she enter the church unless because she was made holy and immaculate by deeds [*moribus*] that go beyond the law? For if the law was given for the irreverent and sinners, then surely Ruth, who exceeded the limits of the law and entered the church and was made an Israelite and deserved to be counted among the honored figures in the Lord's genealogy, chosen for kinship of mind, not of body, is a great example for us, because she prefigures all of us who were gathered from the nations for the purpose of joining the church of the Lord. We should emulate her ... (Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 3.30; in ed. Franke 2005:182; Latin text in ed. Tissot 1956:136–138)

We see here in Ambrose's reading several aspects that are shared among most early Christian commentators. In the first instance, Ruth functions as a useful *exemplum* for the contrast between Jewish and gentile identity and for the prominence of gentiles in the early church. In this commentary on Luke, Ambrose associates Jewish identity, overall, with heterodox Christian identity, and gentiles like Ruth are examples of orthodox Christian identity.<sup>4</sup> The 7th-century Christian author Isidore of Seville, who wrote a commentary on Ruth, gives a similar reading of the theological significance of Ruth's ethnic identity. Quoting the most famous verse from Ruth 1:16–17, Isidore (*De Ruth* 7; in ed. Franke 2005) writes:

[F]or the church was called to God from the Gentiles in just this way: leaving her native land (which is idolatry) and giving up all earthly associations, she confessed that he in whom the saints believed is the Lord God. (p. 184)

Isidore's general reading of Ruth is figurative: for instance, the two possible suitors for Ruth, Boaz and the other descendant, are read as figures of Christ and John the Baptist, respectively, and the institution of the Levirate marriage,

2. For more on the canonical trends for Ruth, and their possible implications, see Wolfenson (1924:151–178).

3. For a useful collection of primary sources of some early Christian interpretations of Ruth, see Franke (ed. 2005:181–192), on which the synthesis of this section is mainly based.

4. On Ambrose's construction of Jews and Jewishness in his commentary on Luke, see especially Doerfler (2011:749–772).

according to Ambrose, also prefigures Christ and the church (see ed. Franke 2005:190). Even Eastern interpreters like John Chrysostom (*In Matthaeum* 3.1; in ed. Franke 2005:191), who tended less toward figurative readings, understands Ruth in the figurative sense as referring to the dynamics between Christ and the church.

The second characteristic we see is a shift away from the physical or sexual aspects nuanced in the Book of Ruth. In the quotation above from Ambrose's commentary on Luke, we see that it was not so much her actions related to the body (*non corporis*) but her 'kinship of mind' (*cognationem mentis*) (ed. Tissot 1956:137) that links her to Christ. This point is further accentuated in Ambrose's explanation of the figurative significance of the Levirate marriage. In explaining the significance of the custom, Ambrose (*De fide* 3.69) says:

[W]e should almost find the words [*relating to the custom*] an occasion of certain shame and horror, that we should regard them as intending and conveying the thought of common bodily intercourse. (ed. Franke 2005:190)

Readers should therefore disregard the physical significance of the custom of the Levirate marriage. Now Ambrose (*De Fide* 70) provides the true significance of the custom:

Rather it [*the Levirate marriage*] was the foreshadowing of one who was to arise from the Jewish people – whence Christ was, after the flesh – who should, with the seed of heavenly teaching, revive the seed of his dead kinsman, that is to say, the people, and to whom the precepts of the law, in their spiritual significance, assigned the sandal of marriage, for the espousals of the church. (ed. Franke 2005:190)

We see here a complete spiritualisation of the custom of the Levirate marriage. Furthermore, Naomi and Ruth are, for Ambrose, also sterling examples of the merits of widowhood and caring for one's parents (see Ambrose, *De viduis* 6.33; ed. Franke 2005:185). Isidore (*De Ruth* 7–8; ed. Franke 2005:190–191) also reads the Levirate marriage in a spiritual and figurative sense, downplaying the physical and sexual dimensions of the custom. Jerome (*Epistula* 39.5; in ed. Franke 2005:182) also sees Ruth as an ancestor of Christ, not primarily based on physical kinship but because of her trials and suffering.

Finally, as with most early Christian scriptural interpretations, there is a common emphasis on the moral aspects of the narrative in Ruth, in which the characters are recast as examples of virtue who should be emulated in one's behaviour and habits. Ancient Christian narrative scriptural interpretation was always very dynamic in this sense. Stories of scripture are always retold to affirm the moral values of the early church, with a great deal of practical advice on how to follow the examples of characters in the stories of the Bible. Ruth and Naomi and Boaz, of course, were no exceptions in this regard. We already note that Ambrose called his audience to imitate Ruth and Naomi as exemplars of chaste widowhood and daughterhood. Paulinus of Nola (354–431 CE, in *Carmina* 27.511; see ed. Franke 2005:183) contrasts the actions of Ruth and Orpah, where Ruth symbolises those who elect to follow

God and their faith, and Orpah signifies those who choose to turn their backs on God and the faith – a type of recasting of the two-way motif so common in early Christian discourse.

The Book of Ruth therefore displays a varied and interesting reception in early Christianity. Having outlined the broader canonical and literary-interpretive context of Ruth in the early church, this article will now focus more closely on one of the earliest and most complete Greek Christian commentaries on Ruth, namely that of the Syrian Christian author Theodoret of Cyrus in his *Quaestiones in Octateuchum (de Ruth)* (henceforth *Quaestiones* and *Quaest. Ruth*).<sup>5</sup> Theodoret was probably born in Antioch around 393 CE. His parents consecrated him at an early age to the monastic life, and he grew accustomed to the monastic life and teachings of the period. Theodoret was a prolific author of the period and region, composing numerous moral and theological treatises, a compendium of *vitae* of the monks of Syria (the *Historia religiosa*), an ecclesiastical history and numerous commentaries on the various books of scripture. In 423 he became bishop of the city of Cyrus. He died sometime between 457 CE and 460 CE.<sup>6</sup> There is some uncertainty about the year in which the work of the *Quaestiones* was written, but scholars agree that it was composed later in Theodoret's life, probably sometime after 450 (Bardy 1933:14–30; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007a:xxi). The *Quaestiones* were written to a Christian audience. In the preface of the *Quaestiones*, Theodoret explains:

Now, to begin with, you should know that not all inquirers share the same purpose. Some inquire irreverently, believing they find holy Scripture wanting: in some cases, not teaching right doctrine, in others, giving conflicting instructions. In contrast, others, longing to find an answer for their question, search because they love learning. Accordingly, it is my intention to stop the blasphemous mouths of the former, please God, by demonstrating the consistency of holy Scripture and the excellence of its teaching, and also, to the extent possible, provide the latter with solutions to their difficulties. (*Quaest.* preface, 16–24; in ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007a:5)

Theodoret therefore gives us a good idea of his understanding of the genre that is *quaestiones*. It is not so much to find discrepancies in the text but rather to demonstrate its consistency and the relevance of all scripture. The question of who the irreverent inquirers might be is open to speculation. Petruccione and Hill (eds. 2007a:xxii) state that Theodoret might be thinking of heterodox Christians, especially those like the Marcionites who did not accept the Old Testament. 'But it is possible that he is also referring even to his fellow Antiochene commentators Diodore and Theodore', Petruccione and Hill (eds. 2007a:xxii) speculate, 'who may have had reservations about the canonicity of Ruth, a book for which there is no extant patristic commentary beyond these *Questions*'. It is therefore interesting that the question of

5.The Octateuch represents the first eight books of the Christian Old Testament, from Genesis to Ruth. The volumes of Petruccione and Hill (eds. 2007a,2007b) provide us with the Greek text of the *Quaestiones* (compiled by Petruccione), along with a translation and some brief commentary (provided by Hill). There is also an earlier version of the Greek critical text, upon which Petruccione's is based, by Fernández Marcos and Sáenz-Badillos (eds. 1979; with a Spanish translation). I will rely on the text and translation of Petruccione and Hill (eds. 2007a,2007b) for this article.

6.For more focused work on the life and context of Theodoret, see, for example, Leppin (1996), Pásztori-Kupán (2006) and Schor (2011).

Ruth's canonicity might lie at the heart of who Theodoret's real or imagined opponents might be.

The latter is a difficult point to argue. Just because there are no extant patristic commentaries on Ruth does not necessarily imply that the early Christians had issues about its canonicity. Besides groups like the Marcionites, there is not much evidence in the early Christian canon lists, as seen in Gallagher and Meade (2017), that Ruth was ever excluded from the canon. The question never seemed to have been whether Ruth should be included or not, but rather whether Ruth should be incorporated into Judges or whether it should stand as a book on its own. The absence of patristic commentary on Ruth does not necessarily signify problems about its canonisation, but it might suggest something about the popularity of the book in early Christian discourse and its pedagogical utility. Ruth is a short and, possibly for some, an obscure text from the Old Testament, which only gleams some significance from the mention of Ruth in the genealogy of Jesus. One also wonders whether some readers would have found the sexual contents of the book unsettling. Ruth contains numerous implicit and explicit sexual connotations, along with emphasising the importance of marriage and procreation, all of which were complex matters in early Christian moral discourse.

When Theodoret (and others later like Isidore) wrote a commentary on Ruth, it might not have been to argue for its inclusion in the canon, but for its utility and relevance in Christian pedagogy. This, as we will see, also lies at the heart of Theodoret's exposition of Ruth. The text used by Theodoret for Ruth is the Lucianic (or Antiochene) recension of the Septuagint (LXX).<sup>7</sup> This article will now continue to analyse Theodoret's *Quaestiones* on Ruth, asking what the specific problems are that Theodoret identifies from Ruth and why, as well as how he accounts for these problems and what the significance of his exposition might be for understanding early Christian culture in Theodoret's context. The study represents an excursus into the reception history of a short yet important book of the LXX in early Christianity. Because of the scarcity of ancient commentaries on Ruth, this study is even more relevant to understand what we might call the early Christian scriptural *imaginaire*, especially in Christian Syria. Theodoret identifies only two problems in the Book of Ruth that he needs to address. Albeit only two, these are two highly complex and significant questions which, as we have seen, were most likely problems for other authors as well. He firstly asks why the Book of Ruth was composed and added to scripture, and secondly, he accounts for the problem of sex in Ruth. It is this second problem that lies at the very heart of Theodoret's commentary on Ruth, and it serves as an excellent case study in how an early Christian author like Theodoret, operating in a context where asceticism and sexual renunciation are core values, might deal with problematic texts that address sexual matters and contain sexual nuances.

7.See especially Petruccione and Hill (eds. 2007a:xxii–xxvi) for a detailed discussion about Theodoret's text, which I will not repeat here in this article.



## The purpose of the composition of Ruth

'Why was the story of Ruth composed?', Theodoret asks at the very start of the *Quaestiones de Ruth* (*Quaest. Ruth* 1.1.1; eds. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:362–363). This is undoubtedly the logical point at which to begin his enquiry. The first reason for the story (ἱστορία) of Ruth's composition, according to Theodoret, is indeed because of 'the Lord Christ, who drew his bodily descent [κατὰ σάρκα] from Ruth' (*Quaest. Ruth* 1.1.2–3; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:362). Ruth therefore has 'Christological significance' or exhibits a dominical record (δεσπότην ἀνάγραπτον; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:364–365). Unlike some of the other early Christian authors like Ambrose, Theodoret indeed emphasises the physical nature of the relationship between Ruth and Christ (via David). While he reads the Book of Ruth from the vantage point of the gospel genealogies, he acknowledges the physical kinship between Ruth and Christ and not the type of 'virtue' or 'behavioural' kinship (like Ambrose's 'kinship of mind') we find with some other authors. This already gives the reader a clue that Theodoret will not side-step issues of physical kinship and sex that are so prevalent in Ruth. In fact, Theodoret reminds his readers that Matthew's gospel:

[P]assed over women such as Sarah, Rebekah, and the others, who were celebrated for their virtue, but mentioned Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and even the wife of Uriah, to teach us that God's only-begotten became man for the sake of all human beings: both Jews and gentiles, sinners and saints. (*Quaest. Ruth* 1.1.5–9; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:363)

Once again, we see a radical departure from the interpretations of Ambrose and Isidore in this regard. Theodoret actually removes the issue of virtue from the argument of Ruth's relation to Jesus, stating that it was not because of virtue that Ruth was added to the genealogy, despite the fact that she was indeed virtuous; for Theodoret, Ruth's choice to support Naomi is a sign of Ruth's piety or 'right religion' (εὐσέβεια) (*Quaest. Ruth* 1.1.18; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:362–363). She was included exactly because she was a sinner and a Moabite, demonstrating the inclusiveness and universality of God's plan for salvation. Theodoret therefore again departs from readings like those of Ambrose, who links Ruth the gentile with the gentile church, preferring to posit a more universal motif from Ruth's presence in the gospel genealogy. Ruth is not considered to be an exclusive type for the gentile church but rather a symbol of inclusiveness, like Bathsheba, Rahab and Tamar.

Along with its significance for Christ's genealogy, Theodoret also posits, as a second reason, the pedagogical utility of the story of Ruth. Ruth is not simply written because of its genealogical links to David and Jesus:

[T]his narrative is sufficient of itself to offer great benefit to those who know how to profit by it. Indeed, it teaches us Naomi's severe misfortunes and commendable patience, the continence [σωφοσύνην] of the young wives, and their affection for their mother-in-law, especially Ruth's, who, moved by a pious heart and the remembrance of her partner, honored even more than

her parents an elderly woman, and a pauper at that. It also teaches us about the virtue of Boaz ... (*Quaest. Ruth* 1.2.42–50; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:365–367)

The fact that Theodoret highlights the pedagogical value of Ruth is significant. Ruth may have been seen by many commentators as a complicated, albeit eventually useful, text because of its sexual nuances. Commentators and teachers would need to engage in some exegetical 'acrobatics' in order to restructure sex and sexuality in the story of Ruth. As we will see in the next section, Theodoret himself had to do some moral-theological manoeuvring when dealing with Ruth's encounter in Boaz's chamber. The benefits listed by Theodoret are all those values that lie at the centre of early Christian moral philosophy, including patience amid suffering (see Perkins 1995), the importance of continence or self-discipline (σωφοσύνην) (see De Wet 2015) and the care of the poor and elderly (see Brown 2002), as well as the significance of widowhood (see Walter 2018). Theodoret is therefore already recasting the story of Ruth as one that reflects the interests and concerns of early Syrian Christianity. Ruth thus fits in, according to Theodoret, quite well in the early Christian moral-philosophical programme.

Theodoret only resorts to a quasi-figurative reading at the very end of his commentary, as a conclusion to the *Quaestiones* as a whole, when discussing the birth of Obed, the father of Jesse and grandfather of David, after citing Ruth 4:15 LXX: 'He will be the one to restore your life'. Theodoret explains:

[N]ow, in its superficial meaning, this refers to the consolation of that ancient woman, but in its deeper and true meaning, to the conversion of the world, since the salvation of the world was to blossom from that stock. (*Quaest. Ruth* 2.2.91–95; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:373)

Even in this sense, Theodoret is not so much relying on allegory, like Ambrose and Isidore, but more on what is known as *theōria*, the deeper sense of a scriptural passage (Nassif 1993:437–470).

## Restructuring sex in the Book of Ruth

In the first of his *quaestiones*, Theodoret affirmed that Ruth not only has Christological significance, but it also has great pedagogical utility. The challenge now is to address the obvious concerns some readers may have had with the sexual nature of the material in Ruth. We should remember that Theodoret's world, early Christian Syria, was fundamentally shaped by a rigid and unique manifestation of asceticism, in which some viewed sex and procreation as distractions and even considered marriage a far second to the practice of abstinence and virginity. Theodoret himself, as a child, was dedicated to the monks and had to remain a virgin (Brown 1988:323–337). No doubt a story like that of Ruth would have titillated all the undesired emotions in readers who practised or simply admired sexual abstinence. 'There are those who find fault with Naomi and Ruth', Theodoret admits, 'with the former, for suggesting that Ruth sleep at the feet of Boaz and with the latter, for heeding and doing what Naomi suggested'

(*Quaest. Ruth* 2.1.1–3; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:369). He recognises that the main problem of the book is its sexual nature. As noted above, Hill surmises that the detractors here might be the Marcionites or even closer contemporaries of Theodoret like Diodore and Theodore. However, the statement is so general in this respect that one cannot comment on possible specific references. What does Theodoret do with Ruth in the context of Christian Syria, then?

Other authors like Ambrose and Isidore read Ruth in a figurative or allegorical sense, which removed the focus from the physical and sexual dimensions of the book. Even Chrysostom, another close contemporary of Theodoret, who shared a similar approach to the interpretation of scripture, resorted to the figurative aspects of Ruth. Theodoret, however, will not take this approach. He recognises the physical and sexual nature of the book and addresses the problem directly.

Theodoret deals with the problem of sex in Ruth by strategically reconstructing and redistributing the characters in the story. This is found specifically in *Quaest. Ruth* 2.1–2 (eds. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:368–373), from which the following analysis is derived. Theodoret first writes:

Naomi suggested that she sleep at the feet of Boaz, but not to sell her beauty, since the words in which she couched her proposal indicate the opposite. As she said, ‘You will go and uncover the place at his feet and lie down, and for his part he will tell you what you are to do’ [*Ruth* 3:4 LXX]. This is how confident she was in the man’s continence and righteousness. (*Quaest. Ruth* 2.1.12–17; Petruccione & Hill 2007b:369)

Theodoret thus begins by removing most of Ruth’s agency (and, to a lesser extent, Naomi’s) as a woman when she approaches Boaz. In early Christian literature we often see the erasure of women’s agency by men (see e.g. Clark 1999:233–329). By stripping Ruth of her agency, rendering her a passive female body, Theodoret also removes any possible suspicion that Ruth might have been a sexual temptress. Theodoret’s reading, of course, goes against the grain of the original story, as Brenner-Idan (2015:106–23) has demonstrated, who refers to Ruth as a ‘positive’ temptress. But Theodoret needs to reconstruct Ruth as a passive woman to make her character acceptable to his conservative (and, possibly, male-dominated) audience.

The story is, to an extent, rewritten, and what was a tale about courageous women now becomes a story about a virtuous man, Boaz. He ignores the sexual euphemisms so apparent in *Ruth* 3:4 and reconstructs Ruth’s action not as one of temptation but submission. Boaz’s main characteristics are his continence (σωφοσύνη) and righteousness (δικαιοσύνη). The concept of σωφοσύνη was central to early Christian sexual pedagogy, and it was considered the prime virtue that all men and women had to embody. The original sense of the term, related to moderation, had given way to a sense more akin to self-control and discipline, and it was considered a prime virtue of masculinity. So not only is Boaz moved to

the centre of the story, but the story becomes one that serves the pedagogy of masculine formation. Like Boaz, young men are not supposed to falter in the face of possible temptation, and women need to submit to their male counterparts. Boaz always had his σωφοσύνη in mind when engaging with Ruth:

[W]hen he asked her who she was, and she reminded him of his relationship to the deceased, he commended her actions, but, without forgetting his continence, in observance of the Law, deferred the marital union. (γαμικὴν... ὀμιλίαν) (*Quaest. Ruth* 2.1.20–23; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:369)

In Theodoret’s interpretation, there is no distinction between sexual intercourse and marriage (because Boaz is a man of σωφοσύνη, extramarital sex was by no means an option), and when Boaz defers the marriage to Ruth, he also resists any possibility of extramarital sexual intercourse. Theodoret then also strategically paraphrases the text in *Ruth* 3:10 LXX:

‘May you be blessed by the Lord God, daughter’, he declared, ‘for this act of kindness surpasses your first, as you have not pursued young men, whether poor or rich’ [*Ruth* 3:10 LXX]. He means to say, ‘Through your actions you have shown that you did not take this step in thrall to lust; otherwise you would have sought out young men, with no thought for their wealth or poverty, but only for the enjoyment of pleasure. Instead, you have come to a man who plays the part of your father’. Indeed, this is the implication of the word ‘daughter’ ... (*Quaest. Ruth* 2.1.23–31; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:369–371)

The literary strategy of paraphrasing is quite curious in this regard and in early Christian moral-philosophical discourse more generally. We see here that Theodoret quotes the text from the LXX, but through paraphrasing, he essentially creates a new text that is more aligned to his interests and concerns. By focusing on the occurrence of the word ‘daughter’ (θυγάτηρ), Theodoret transforms the relationship between Ruth and Boaz from a sexual relationship to a parental (and patriarchal) relationship. While the term θυγάτηρ (or ἡθ) does not necessarily imply a parental relationship (Fischer 2001:212–214), it serves in Theodoret to restructure the very nature and dynamics of the relationship between Boaz and Ruth. As a father-figure, Boaz also affirms the character and virtue of Ruth, not as a temptress, but as a woman who is not a slave to desire (οὐκ ἐπιθυμία δουλεύσασα). Later, Theodoret also states that when Boaz eventually marries Ruth, it was also not because he was enslaved to pleasure (οὐκ ἡδονῇ δουλεύων) (*Quaest. Ruth* 2.2.57; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:370).

As was common in early Christian moral philosophy, Theodoret reads the story through the lens of the passions or the emotions, carefully analysing and elucidating the possible emotional struggles and decisions of the characters.<sup>8</sup> The emotion of lust (ἐπιθυμία) and the pursuit of pleasure (ἡδονή) are explicitly denounced by the main masculine character of the story, thereby sanitising it of any sexual-emotional misconduct. Rather than it being a story about sex, Theodoret transforms the story of Ruth into one that is about the correct

8. In early Christian studies, there is now a major focus in research on ancient emotions and passions – see, for example, Nussbaum (2013); Reyßer-Aichele (2014); Papadogiannakis (2019); Leyerle (2020).

conduct in pursuit of marriage – sex is restructured in the narrative by placing it within the marital relationship between Ruth and Boaz. Even though virginity was considered to be superior to marriage, any rejection of marriage was considered heretical (Hunter 2007:87–129); Theodoret's reading is therefore on solid footing and would perhaps even appeal to a younger and broader audience who did not want to pursue rigorous ascetic practice:

Such was the man's virtue that though a lovely young lady visited him at night, he maintained his continence and conducted the matter according to the Law. He did not even rush into marriage in defiance of the Law, but addressed the closer relative on the topic of the marriage. When the latter declined the marriage, then, and only then, did he unite himself to that excellent woman. (*Quest. Ruth* 2.2.41–46; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:371)

Boaz is therefore the ideal masculine character, who holds his *σωφοσύνη* in high esteem, not being subdued by the passions and rushing into a marriage with a young woman for the sake of sexual gratification. Rather than Ruth, Boaz functions as the main *exemplum* that should be imitated. Boaz is never seen as a type of Christ, as is the case in some Western expositions. Theodoret further demonstrates Boaz's disregard for sex and marriage by arguing that, when Boaz attempts to conform to the requirements of the Levirate marriage, it is a question of property to him, not sex and marriage per se: 'How admirable his negotiations with that man! He did not begin by raising the question of marriage but first discussed the ownership of property' (*Quaest. Ruth* 2.2.47–49; ed. Petruccione & Hill 2007b:371). Nowhere does Theodoret reinterpret the Levirate marriage in a figurative sense – he rather renders the custom as an issue of property distribution, an interpretation that holds much merit.

## Conclusion

The scarcity of patristic commentaries on Ruth is possibly related not only to its stature as scripture but also to the complexity of the sexual nuances that are so explicit and inherent in the text. Contrary to what Hill has suggested about possible canonical issues related to Ruth, it seems more as if Ruth was a text that was considered difficult for pedagogical purposes. There is no evidence in the canon lists that Ruth's canonicity was ever questioned. Rather, in many early Christian readings of Ruth, there is a common tendency to provide figurative readings of the narrative. Theodoret's interpretation of Ruth in the *Quaestiones* is therefore unique in that it does not aim to side-step matters of sex, marriage and procreation. After affirming Ruth's purpose and value as a Christological record and a useful pedagogical text, Theodoret sanitises the story of Ruth by strategically reconstructing the characters and transforming Ruth into an androcentric narrative that has Boaz as the true saviour of the (weak and submissive) woman (or women). Ruth's agency is stripped, and the masculine and virtuous male figure that is Boaz becomes the centre of the story and the main object for imitation. In conclusion, Theodoret's commentary on LXX Ruth transforms the narrative into an androcentric account

that appears relevant for his own time and audience. The fact that Theodoret does not shy away from the sexual nuances is telling. Rather than avoiding sex, he restructures it through the reconstruction of the characters of the narrative, and he places it safely within the confines of marriage. From canonisation practices in the Syriac tradition, we know that this was probably not the only way a text like Ruth, with its gendered complexities, was handled. Syriac canonical traditions listed Ruth along with other heroic (albeit, in some cases, also passive) female characters like Susanna, Esther and Judith, with interpretations that may have kept Ruth's agency intact.

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C.L.d.W. is the sole author of this research article.

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