The scroll of Ruth re-told through librettos and music: biblical interpretation in a new key

Leneman, H.F.

Citation for published version (APA):
THREE SCROLL OF RUTH RE-TOLD THROUGH LIBRETTOS AND MUSIC: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN A NEW KEY

Helen Leneman
University of Amsterdam

INTRODUCTION

The biblical book of Ruth (henceforth to be referred to as either Ruth or the Scroll) has three major characters—Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. Boaz is not as developed or interesting a character as the two female figures, either in the original or in the later, musical versions. The uniqueness of Ruth is its development of two central female characters and its portrayal of a bond between two women. Biblical stories generally show very limited interest in women, which may reflect the inferior status of women in biblical societies or a lack of interest on the writers’ part, or both.

In this thesis I treat both the music and librettos as midrash (creative re-telling) of the biblical narrative. The analysis of music and librettos in twelve works—oratorios, cantatas, and operas—will illustrate how musical settings can alter our attitudes towards a biblical book and its characters, as well as how a biblical book such as Ruth can be made relevant for changing eras. Each work offers an alternative reading, featuring voices known and unknown, from the text and the margins of the Scroll.

The musician will find it interesting to discover how commonly utilized musical techniques were used to re-imagine a biblical story. Entering the world of biblical interpretation through the familiar doorway of music will open the musician unfamiliar with this field to new discoveries. How the music is used to breathe life into the text will be understood on a more technical level by the musician than the biblical scholar, but both groups will learn to read between the lines and find new and interesting possibilities there. Biblical texts will be of greater interest to musicians when approached through their musical settings than as written narratives. This interest may in turn inspire musicians to find and explore other biblical texts that were set to music.

The Scroll is our most comprehensive biblical source for information about women’s in-gender and trans-gender social relationships and behavior patterns (the other is Song of Songs). It is often problematic to understand social relationships in the period when the biblical narratives were written, because the only viewpoint presented is that of the high status males who generally wrote them. It is wrong to assume women belonged to a separate domestic sphere in ancient societies. This assumption has colored modern views of Israelite gender roles. In fact, the public and private were not two distinct social spheres; women’s roles in the domestic, so-called “private” life could have consequences in the “public” sphere, the wider community, as well (Meyers 2000, 111-115).

The plot of Ruth takes place in an agrarian community. Women’s alliances in such communities were not casual or irrelevant to their society, any more than they are irrelevant in such societies today. Women performed functions that were essential to the economic and social stability of their small communities (Meyers 2000, 126). But the reader would not guess these facts based only on a reading of Ruth: for example, women are totally absent from the legal proceedings at the city gate in chapter 4. On the other hand, narratives can both reinforce and implicitly question the dominant culture. The centrality of women in the
Scroll's plot can and should be read as an example of a writer challenging the cultural norms of his or her day. We can never know the identity or intent of any biblical writer, but considering different possibilities opens us to alternative ways of reading and interpreting the text.

The thesis will consist of four parts, as described below.

**Part I  The Scroll**

Chapter 1 will introduce the concepts, methodology, and terms I use in my subsequent literary analysis of the Scroll. The literary analysis itself, chapter 2, will include discussion of the most important commentaries and articles on *Ruth*. The English translation of the Scroll that I use is from the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Jewish Publication Society, 1999) except where otherwise indicated. An analysis of gaps and ambiguities in the biblical text will highlight the places that allow for variable responses and multiple interpretations. As Meir Sternberg notes, literary works all establish a system of gaps that must be filled in.

He defines a gap as:

...a lack of information about the world—an event, motive, causal link, character trait, plot structure, law of probability—contrived by a temporal displacement (Sternberg 1987, 186).

Aihalya Brenner points out that narrative gaps are a distinctive feature of biblical writing, resulting from narratival economy (Brenner 1993, 11). The end result of the discontinuity caused by gaps is ambiguity, which later librettists take advantage of in their re-telling of the story. How gaps are filled in rabbinic midrash and Josephus is the subject of chapter 3.

**Part II  The Music and Librettos**

Chapter 4 is a brief historical survey of oratorio and opera, with particular emphasis on the place and time of the works discussed. Chapter 5 sets out general concepts and terms used for musical analysis. For example, musical characterization depends on certain technical devices, including harmony, rhythm, and orchestral texture. I will explain the importance of these elements in the context of treating music as a kind of midrash. Chapter 6 contains detailed analyses of librettos and music from the 12 works. More detailed information on the composers and works can be found in Appendix I.

The 12 works to be considered in this thesis are oratorios, cantatas, and operas. The musical forms of the three are very similar, but oratorios and cantatas (a shorter form of the oratorio) are not staged, that is, acted out with sets and costumes, while operas are. An oratorio is defined as

An extended musical setting of a sacred text made up of dramatic, narrative and contemplative elements (Smith in *New Grove* v. 18, 503).

I have chosen a widely diverse group of oratorios and operas. These scores (piano-vocal) were available at the U.S. Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., enabling me to delve into the music as well as the texts. I studied many other scores (see Appendix II), but in some cases I found the music unappealing or unimaginative, while in other cases, there was no biographical or other information on the composers.

For example, I studied two 19th-century American works, by Eben Andrews (1882) and James Butterfield (1877). The music was uninteresting, and the composers' names did not appear in any edition of the *Grove's Dictionaries of Music*. With no bibliographical
information, it would have been hard to find out more about these composers. I confronted
the same problem with American composers Gill (1948), Hughes (1935), Noss (1904), Bliss
(1925), and Boatner (1968). Some of these works are hand-written manuscripts donated to
the Library of Congress. There is no way of knowing if they were ever performed.

Two categories of Ruth works not included in this thesis are: solo settings of specific
verses; and very short choral settings (mostly cantatas) of only one chapter of the Scroll.
Most solo settings are of Ruth’s words “Entreat me not...Whither thou goest” (1.16-17)
which are often used for weddings. The most well-known solo setting of this text is that of
Charles Gounod (1872). The most well-known short choral work is Naomi and Ruth by
Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1947), a setting of 1.1-17 of the Scroll for soprano and
women’s voices. These works are listed in Appendix III, p. 276.

I was able to obtain an orchestral score of only one work, Georg Schumann’s. I also
obtained performance tapes of two works, Berkeley and Aloni, which enabled me to write
longer and more thorough analyses of those three works. In addition, I attended a

There are several stages in this kind of analysis:

- Stage one: the libretto. This is a midrashic retelling of the Scroll, and when it is available
in printed form separate from the musical score, can be read by anyone. Otherwise it can
be read only between the lines of music.

- Stage two: the score. This can be either the original full orchestral score or a “piano
reduction,” adapted from the original. It can be read only by persons with musical
training. Musicians can play and or sing through the score, or “hear” it as they read.

- Stage three: the performance. This is the ultimate goal for each score, that it be performed
and heard. In the case of operas, the visual element is also essential. Hearing and
enjoying the music is not limited to musicians, but most of the works treated in this thesis
have not been performed for many years.

- Stage four: the recording. Since the early part of the last century, much music has been
made more widely available to the general public through recordings. In this way, even
non-musicians could hear works when performances were not easily accessible. Most
music discussed here has never been recorded.

My interpretation of any work is partly influenced by which of the above stages I was
able to reach. In most cases I was working only with a piano score. Reading the libretto
literally “between the lines” of music. I was able to extract important information about
musical styles and techniques and how they were used to set specific parts of the text.
Playing and singing through the music gave me a general impression of the sound. Reading
the libretto literally between the lines of music is a perfect metaphor for reading “between
the lines.”

When I obtained tapes of two works (Aloni and Berkeley), I instantly realized what a
large gap existed between what I was reading off the page and what was reaching me through
sound. The level of performance includes interpretation in sound, missing from a silent
reading. The sound of a particular voice portraying Ruth, Naomi, or Boaz in any work will
instantly create a character for the listener. When I later attended a performance of
Schumann’s Ruth in Berlin, the effect was even more powerful. Though it is an oratorio, and

---

This is the KJV translation used in almost all musical settings of these verses.
was not staged, seeing singers portray Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz added an important dimension. Interpretation is a large step beyond what exists on the printed page of music.

Yet score analysis is valid on its own, for many features may be obliterated in performance. Silent reading of music represents an inner hearing, translating signs into sound. Musical meaning, in contrast to linguistic meaning, Dahlhaus contends, is only slightly detachable from the sounding phenomena. It is true that a composition in one sense only becomes musically "real" when interpreted in sound; musical meaning exists only insofar as a listener grasps it. Yet music does not divulge all its meanings in performance. Elaborate thematic or motivic relationships may disclose themselves more easily through a reading of the music and imagining the sound. The difference between written speech and notated music is a difference of degree, not of principle (Dahlhaus 1982, 12-13).

My background and training have enabled me to do a thorough analysis of each work. But my awareness of the power of hearing the music on these pages brought to life highlighted the limitations under which I have done my analysis. In addition, I have been inspired to seek out possibilities to bring other Ruth scores to life and let the public hear and enjoy the Scroll re-imagined through music.

In Chapter 6 I discuss how the musical characterization of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz might affect our understanding of these characters. I point out how the librettos and musical interpretation fill in narrative gaps, possibly altering our perception of the biblical text. I examine how the librettos and music either parallel, enhance or contradict the biblical narrative.

I have divided the works according to periods, since similar musical conventions allow a proper context for comparison between the works. The group includes five British composers, one German, one German-British, one German-American composer, two American (one born in Poland, the other in Israel), one French and one Italian. Two of the composers are Jewish (Rumshinskys and Aloni), three are converts from Judaism to Christianity (Goldschmidt, Damrosch, and Cowen), and the rest are Christian-born. I have not located any personal documents to indicate the level of religious commitment of any composer which might have motivated him to set a biblical book. In only two of these works is the text exclusively from the Scroll (Beecham and Aloni). Others use librettos that are either stitched together from various biblical texts, including only parts of the Scroll, or are original librettos based on the Scroll (Preface to ch. 6, p. 101).

The works to be analyzed and discussed are:

1. 19th Century
   Ruth, A Sacred Pastoral (English), 1868
   Words from the Bible
   Otto Goldschmidt (1829-1907, German-British)

   Ruth and Naomi: A Scriptural Idyll (English), 1875
   Words from the Bible
   Leopold Damrosch (1832-1885, German-American)

   Ruth, A Sacred Cantata (English), 1880
   Words by Edward O xenford
   Alfred Gaul (1837-1913, British)
Ruth, A Dramatic Oratorio (English). 1887
Words selected from the Bible by Joseph Bennett
Frederic Cowen (1852-1935, British)

Ruth, Eclogue Biblique (French). 1844 & 1872
Text by A. Guillen
Cesar Franck (1822-1890, Belgian French)

Vocei e Ruth, Poema Biblico (Italian). 1908
Libretto by Saverio Fino
Giocondo Fino (1867-1950, Italian)

11. 20th Century
Ruth, Oratorio (German, English). 1909
Text by the composer, based on the Bible
Georg Schumann (1866-1952, German)

Ruth, Biblical Opera in Two Acts and Seven Scenes (Hebrew). 1949
Libretto by I.L. Wohlman
Joseph Rumshinsky (1881-1956, American)

The Song of Ruth, cantata (English). 1950
Words written and arranged from Ruth by R. J. White
Willfrid Mellers (1914-.., British)

Ruth - Cantata (English). 1957
Text from the Scroll
Adrian Beecham (1904-1982, British)

Libretto by Eric Crozier
Lennox Berkeley (1903-1989, British)

Ruth (Hebrew and English). 1986
Text from the Scroll
Aminadav Aloni (1928-1999, American)

Part III The Scroll and the Music
Chapter 7 includes a quantitative analysis (including tables and graphs) of such elements as what percentage of scenes is allotted to each character in both the Scroll and subsequent librettos. This, in turn, can form the basis for indicating which roles are expanded or reduced in librettos by comparison to the biblical text.

The “new key” of this thesis’s title refers to how the musical works reflect a certain traditional strand of interpreting the biblical story as a pastoral, idyllic love story. Questions to be addressed will include: Is the “traditional” characterization of roles reflected, or transformed, in each musical work? What additional plot lines, scenes, and characters appear
in the different musical works? How do these additions alter the original text? What elements of the biblical story usually remain unchanged, and which are most frequently altered? And ultimately, can we understand these changes as culturally motivated, or as individual choices made by each composer and librettist?

Part IV: Ruth and Beyond: Illustrating the Paradigm

In Chapter 8, I discuss some of the “what ifs...” of the Scroll and how these were addressed by the librettists and composers. I then offer suggestions on using this thesis as a paradigmatic model for future studies of musical settings of biblical narratives.

Librettists and composers from different eras and cultures chose to emphasize different aspects of the story and its characters. Audiences in different eras and places read and heard Ruth with their own cultural biases. As “literary archaeologists,” we can uncover the frame and even the foundations of an ancient house—or narrative—but we can never actually inhabit it. This thesis will be an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of how different generations “lived” Ruth. In Part I, I analyze the bricks and mortar that made up the ancient dwelling, and attempt to re-assemble it. In Parts II and III, I show that the composers and librettists who put this story to music were not so much interested in finding or preserving the biblical frame as they were in decorating and embellishing what they found for their own purposes. In the first case, my working metaphor is the architect; in the second, it is the interior decorator. And when the decorator’s job is done, we may have an altered and even distorted version of the original, with only its frame intact. But music has the power to illuminate texts in an entirely new way. It can inspire us to go back and hear the voices of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz between the lines, and to hear other, newer voices found only in the margins of the ancient scroll.