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

Leneman, H.F.

Citation for published version (APA):

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INTRODUCTION

The term **midrash** can be loosely applied to any re-telling of a biblical story. The gaps found in biblical narrative are filled in, one way or another, by each reader (ch.1, p. 13). An interpreter that fills the gaps by re-telling parts of the story creates a midrash. Midrash is the paradigm of interaction between the text author and the reader. Midrash derives from readers of the Bible who were stimulated by the text to indulge imaginative comments, that sometimes went against its natural meaning (Weiss-Halivni, 159). This is as true for the librettists who wrote versions of the Scroll to be set to music in the 19th and 20th centuries as it is for rabbinic interpreters writing 1400 years earlier. In fact, the common rabbinic device of placing other biblical texts alongside the Scroll to support or highlight certain points was also used by the librettists (Preface to ch.6, p.101). When the librettos are sung, this adds an entirely new dimension. Both the libretto and music are forms of midrash, as will be discussed in chapter 6. Long before oratorios and operas based on the Scroll were written and sung, the Scroll was chanted as part of the Jewish liturgy on the holiday of Shavuot. Aspects of this tradition of cantillation will be discussed at the conclusion of this chapter.

The gaps in the text that the rabbis perceived, or chose to fill, are culturally determined. In some cases, they grappled with the same gaps and ambiguities as modern readers; in many other cases, issues or inconsistencies that troubled them would seem irrelevant today. The midrashists' moral and philosophical approach to the text can only be understood in the context of their contemporary mindsets, since all exegesis is time-bound and historically conditioned (Weiss-Halivni, vii).

The context for midrash is always the entire Bible. Rabbinic exegetes typically would connect and re-connect texts from throughout the Hebrew Bible, harmonizing the contradictory into sometimes new and surprising concordances (Fishbane as quoted in Darr, 37). In their method, any biblical verse could be used to clarify the original, base verse (Neusner, 3, 16). Their interest was in interpreting verses, not entire stories; they were concerned with the smallest details, such as a troubling or suggestive word or phrase within a specific verse (Kugel 1997, 28).

All ancient interpreters started from four basic assumptions, which must be kept in mind when discussing rabbinic midrash.

- **First**: the Bible is fundamentally a cryptic document, which may seem to be saying one thing while really meaning another;
- **Second**: the Bible is a book of instruction and relevant;
- **Third**: the Bible is perfect and harmonious and contains no mistakes;
- **Fourth**: the Bible is divinely sanctioned.

Partly due to these assumptions, there is really no distinction in rabbinic midrash between "exegesis" (reading from) and "esegesis" (reading into) (Kugel 1994, 18-20).

These points are intricately connected. Because the rabbis viewed the Bible as perfect and divine, they felt it their duty to explain those parts that might trouble readers. They recognized the existence of troubling passages as part of the cryptic nature of the Bible. But in the course of their explanations, they felt it their duty to teach a lesson, since they viewed the Bible as a book of instruction. Therefore the aim of the rabbis writing midrash was a polemical one. Even when a midrash seems to obscure the original text it is explaining, its purpose is ultimately to illuminate what is in that text (Kugel, 248). The rabbis wrote midrash not only to fill in the gaps in the...
story, but to make a moral point, to disclose what they perceived as a deeper meaning in the text, and to stimulate the religious imagination (Darr, 53). The primary concern of the midrashists was to let the Bible be the intellectual and religious milieu in which the Jew was living (Stemberger, 237).

In their re-telling of biblical texts, the midrashists exhibited an unusual combination of literary criticism and literary creativity. They interpreted the texts not only as moralists, but also as literary critics, sensitive to hidden signals buried in it. In addition to the motive of instructing their readers, the midrashists were also responding to the changing cultural and aesthetic tastes of their own times (Hirsch and Aschkenasy, Introduction, 1).

**Midrash on Ruth**

The primary midrash on the Scroll is *Ruth Rabbah*, which is part of the larger collection known as *Midrash Rabbah*. This collection is the oldest Amoraic midrash (c. 400 C.E.) on the Pentateuch (Five Books of the Bible) and the five Megillot (scrolls). *Ruth Rabbah* falls between the oldest midrashim—*Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, and *Ezra Rabbah* (from which much of its material is taken)—and the later midrashim such as *Exodus Rabbah* and *Deuteronomy Rabbah* (L. Rabinowitz, 'Introduction,' *Ruth Rabbah*, vii). The compilation draws on all of these, as well as on the *Jerusalem Talmud* and *Posiqta de Rab Kahana*. It covers the biblical text of the Scroll verse by verse (omitting only 4.16-17).

*Ruth Rabbah* opens with a long introduction, called a *Petihta*, composed of several unconnected proems. The commentary is divided into eight chapters of differing lengths. The exposition is largely homiletical, or instructional, with a few passages of literal exegetical value.

The male voice and prerogatives dominate in *Ruth Rabbah*, even though the major characters are women. Aggadic midrash reveals much more about men's assumptions and anxieties than about women's concerns. "To study women in rabbinic literature is actually to study men" (Baskin 2002, 11). According to Neusner, it is not only a male perspective that governs, but also the rabbinic mind-set in which all things are possible when biblical laws are observed. The outsider—a woman—can become an insider; the Moabite can become an Israelite, and her offspring, a king or even the Messiah, as long as biblical laws are followed (Neusner, 13).

In addition to *Ruth Rabbah*, other sources to be included in this discussion are passages from various tracts of the *Babylonian Talmud* (B.T.): *Ruth Zuta*, compiled by Buber from the MS Parma De Rossi dated to c.1400; *Pesikta Rabbati*: *Zohar Balak*: Yalkut Shimon from the 12th or 13th century; and *Sekhel Torah*, a midrashic anthology on the Torah drawn from various earlier sources by Menahem b. Solomon in 1139 (Stemberger, 321, 351, 357). When no page reference is given, translations from these sources are my own. Many midrashic interpretations appear in almost identical form in several sources. I will also refer to commentaries by several post-Enlightenment modern Orthodox commentators, such as Malbim, for purposes of comparison.

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2. All Hebrew texts are from the Bar Ilan Responsa CD Rom, version 10, 2002.
GAP FILLING IN MIDRASH ON RUTH

In this chapter I will develop the motifs discussed in chapters 2 and 6: this includes gaps in action time: cause motive; and character appearance. I will discuss these as they relate to the Scroll.

ACTION TIME:

Chapter 1 Naomi decided to leave Moab when she heard that God "had remembered his people" (1.6). How did she hear? According to Ruth Rabbah:

She heard from peddlers [sic] making their rounds from city to city (Ruth Rabbah 2.11: 33).

This is a logical conclusion for the midrashists, who probably received news in this same way in their own day. (I commented on the same gap in ch. 2, p. 46).1

Why did Naomi tell her daughters-in-law to return home after allowing them to accompany her (1.8)? Malbim explains that Naomi had assumed they were accompanying her merely out of respect and courtesy, not with the intention of leaving permanently (Zlotowitz, 71).

Chapter 2 Why was the entire city present as Naomi and Ruth entered (1.19)? (chap. 2, p. 46). R. Samuel b. Simon suggests:

That day was the day of the reaping of the *omer* [the measure of barley offered on the second day of Passover], as we have learnt elsewhere: all the towns nearby assembled together that it might be reaped with great ceremony (Ruth Rabbah 3.6: 47).

This immediately establishes that the Bethlehemites are observant Jews, and creates a context for the subsequent events.

R. Tanhumah in the name of R. Azariah and R. Menahema in the name of R. Joshua b. Abin explained:

The wife of Boaz died on that day, and all Israel assembled to do charity, and all the people came for the charity-giving. Ruth entered with Naomi. Thus one went out and the other entered (Ruth Rabbah 3.6).4

The fact that a wealthy landowner like Boaz was not married was perceived as a gap by these rabbis. Their solution was imagining the death of his wife, fortuitously the same day Ruth and Naomi came on the scene.

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1 A much later commentator, Malbim, in the 19th century, presumes that Naomi must have heard it from Israelite peddlers, since a Moabite would not have invoked God's name as the cause of both the famine and its end (Zlotowitz, 68). This is an example of a change in perception between the early and much later midrash. The centuries of persecution and oppression seem to have fostered a deeper distrust of the foreigner than was found in earlier midrash collections. The country and culture in which a particular midrash was written would also have had strong influence.

4 This is also found in *B. B. Battr. 91a*, where R. Isaac says it; in the *Y. K. Keibbot 1.25* column 1; and in the words of R. Isaac again in *Yalkot Shimoni Ruth 601*. 
Chapter 4  Boaz sits at the gate and the near kinsman he needed to see appears (4.1). This seems too coincidental to be arbitrary, to the rabbis.

Was he [Boaz] then standing behind the gate? R. Samuel b. Nahman said: Had he been at the uttermost ends of the earth, the Holy One, blessed be He, would have flown him and would have brought him there in order that the righteous man should not grieve while sitting there. Rabbi Berekiah said: thus did these great men, R. Eliezer and R. Joshua say. Rabbi Eliezer said: Boaz played his part, and Ruth played hers, and Naomi played hers, whereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘I too must play Mine.’ (Ruth Rabbah 7.7).

The rabbis see God’s hand in the convenient appearance of the relative Boaz needs to find. At the start of the story, they interpret the famine as God’s punishment. God is not depicted as an active agent in either of these cases in the Scroll. The Scroll assigns an active role to God only in two spots: in 1.6, where God is said to be providing food to his people; and causing Ruth’s conception (4.13). The midrashists assign God a larger role.

Ruth gleaned till the end of the barley and wheat harvests (2.23). According to R. Samuel b. Nahman, that period is three months (Ruth Rabbah 5.11; 69). An editorial footnote suggests that Boaz had to wait this period of time before marrying Ruth to ensure she was not pregnant by her former husband, assuming she had left Moab immediately after his death (Ruth Rabbah 5.11, note 4, 69).

CAUSE MOTIVE

The major gaps in cause noted by the midrashists that I will discuss are:

1. The reason for the famine that forced Elimelech to move to Moab:
   - Punishment because the people had sinned;
   - Idleness;
   - Lack of Torah;
   - Testing strong people.

2. Reasons for Elimelech’s punishment:
   - He betrayed people who depended on him;
   - He left Judea for a foreign country;
   - His sons took Moabite wives without converting them.

3. God’s involvement in Ruth’s conception:
   - A structural explanation relating to Ruth’s womb;
   - The pregnancy was due to blessings.

1. Reasons for the famine
   - Punishment

The rabbis believed no punishment, such as a famine, was undeserved. Rabba said: (Ruth Rabbah 1.3, 18).

Blessings bless those who deserve them, and curses curse those who deserve them (Ruth Rabbah 1.3, 18).
They wondered if this particular famine was connected in some way to the strange construction "in the days when the judges ruled" (1.1).

Woe unto that generation which judges its judges, and woe unto the generation whose judges are in need of being judged! (Ruth Rabbah 1.1.16).

**Idleness**

The rabbis believed that a famine was always a mark of punishment; and the phrase "the judges judging Israel" was understood to be an indication that the people had sinned. The verse used to prove this is Proverbs 19.15-16. "An idle person will suffer hunger."

Ten famines have come upon the world. One in the days of Adam, one in the days of Lamech [these first two are not explicit in the biblical texts suggested. Gen. 3.17 and Gen. 5.29], one in the days of Abraham [Gen. 12.10], one in the days of Isaac [Gen. 26.1], one in the days of Jacob [Gen. 41.54, 43.1, 45.6], one in the days of Elijah [1 Kings 17.1 refers to drought, not specifically famine], one in the days of Elisha [2 Kings 6.25], one in the days of David [2 Sam. 21.1], one in the days when the judges judged [Ruth 1.1], and one which is destined still to come upon the world (Ruth Rabbah 1.4).

**Lack of Torah**

In Ruth Zuta, the famine is connected to a hunger for Torah:

The word מְלָכָה (there was) is repeated twice: once is the hunger for Torah, the other is hunger for bread; to teach you that in every generation where Torah is not available, famine comes (Ruth Zuta 1.1.7).

The conclusion for the rabbis in the first instance is that any famine was due to idleness (Neusner, 23), and in the second, to lack of Torah. In both cases they are teaching an important lesson based on a single passage of the Scroll.

- **Testing the strong**

  In another interpretation, R. Huna said in the name of Samuel:

  All these [famines] did not come upon feeble people, but upon strong ones, who could withstand them. (Ruth Rabbah 1.4; 19-20).

  The midrashists are trying to provide moral justification for a famine. The notion of random suffering was apparently difficult in the worldview of some rabbis.

2. **Reasons for Elimelech’s punishment**

- **Betrayal**

  The rabbis wondered why Elimelech, in particular, suffered this famine. One reason they considered was that Elimelech was punished for an act of betrayal:
Elimelech was one of the notables of his city and one of the leaders of his generation. And when the famine years came he said, 'Now all Israel will come knocking at my door, this one with his basket and that one with his basket.' So he arose and fled from them (Ruth Rabbah 1.4).

Elimelech was afraid the famine would bring people begging to his door, so he left, and was subsequently punished.

- Leaving Judea
  Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel said:

  In time of pestilence and in time of war, gather in [thy] feet (ed.note: stay home), and in time of famine, spread out [thy] feet (ed.note: go abroad). Why then was Elimelech punished? Because he struck despair into the hearts of Israel (Ruth Rabbah 1.4: 20).

R. Simeon b. Yohai said:

Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion were great men of their generation, and they were also leaders of their generation. Why, then, were they punished? Because they left the land for a foreign country (B.T. Baba Batra 91a: cf. Midrash Tanhuma Behar 8, which adds that God was angry).

R. Hanan b. Raba said in the name of Rab:

Elimelech and Salmon and Peloni Almoni and the father of Naomi all were the sons of Nahshon, son of Amminadab (Exod. 6.23, Num. 10.14). What does he come to teach us [by this statement]?—That even the merit of one's ancestors is of no avail when one leaves the land for a foreign country (B.T. Baba Batra 91a).

The rabbis' agenda here, obviously, is to stress the extreme importance of the land of Israel. In addition, they use a circular argument that the severity of Elimelech's punishment is proof of his importance, and his importance is proof of the severity of his punishment.

- Moabite wives
  Elimelech's sons didn't learn from their father to return to the land of Israel, but what did they do, even they? They took Moabite wives, whom they did not immerse (in the mikva) and did not help to become proselytes. (Midrash Tanhuma Behar 9.8, Leviticus 25.25, 354).

This interpretation is also found in Rashi (11th century) and the Zohar Chadash (13th century).
According to the Targum (Targum Ruth 1.5), the sons died because they disobeyed God’s word and married foreigners. This is also why they died in the unclean land. In Ruth Rabbah,

It was taught in the name of R. Meir: They neither proselytized them [the wives], nor gave them ritual immersion (Ruth Rabbah 2.9; 30).

Zohar Balak states: Ruth was not made a Jewess by Elimelech, but she learnt all the ways of his house and rules about food and when she went with Naomi, then she was converted (Zohar Balak 190a, 265).

3. God’s involvement in Ruth’s pregnancy

The midrashists were puzzled (as modern commentators have been) by the wording of 4.13, “YHWH let her conceive,” or “YHWH gave her conception” (יְהֹאכָל אֱלֹהִים). In the midrash, two explanations are offered for this phrase, an unusual expression for the fairly common biblical idea of God’s involvement in pregnancy (Gen. 21.1, 25.21, 30.22, 1 Sam. 1.19, 2.21; interestingly, every libretto I studied eliminates this verse; ch. 6, p. 103).

- **Structural explanation**
  R. Simeon b. Lakish explains:

  "Ruth lacked the main portion of the womb, but the Holy One, blessed be He, shaped a womb for her (Ruth Rabbah 7.14; 91)."

  This novel interpretation serves to heighten the miraculous nature of her pregnancy (and is certainly a vivid illustration of the degree of anatomical understanding that existed among the rabbis). It also recalls Sarah, who is described in Bereshit Rabbah 45.1 as having no womb.

- **Blessings cause conception**
  Another way God is involved in Ruth’s conception is through blessings, which help both Boaz and Ruth.

  R. Johanan said:

  In later commentaries, the 16th-century Igeres Shmuel and the 20th-century Pri Chaim (based on 19th-century commentator Malbim), the rabbis justify the deaths of the sons by stating that they might have been spared for leaving Israel, but they sinned further by marrying Moabite women and therefore had to be punished (Zlotowitz, 66). This interpretation is not found in the earlier period. The intervening centuries of persecution probably colored the rabbis’ view of intermarriage.

  When the sons die, the text calls them only by their names, no longer identifying them as Ephrathites or as the husbands of Ruth and Orpah. Two 16th-century commentaries, Alshich and Igeres Shmuel, see significance in this omission. Their names are repeated to stress that they not only died physically, but because they were childless, their very names died with them (Zlotowitz, 68).

  R. Nahman in the name of Rabbah b. Abahu said that “Sarah was barren and had no child” means she “had not even a womb” (B. Yebamot 64a-b).
Boaz was 80 years of age, and had not been vouchsafed [children]. But when that righteous woman [Naomi] prayed for him [2.20], he was immediately vouchsafed. Resh Lakish said: Ruth was 40 years of age and had not yet been vouchsafed children as long as [because] she was married to Mahlon. But as soon as that righteous man [Boaz] prayed for her (3.10), she was vouchsafed. And our Rabbis say: Both of them were vouchsafed children only as a result of the blessings of righteous people [4.2] (Ruth Rabbah 6.2: 75; cf. Ruth Zuta 4.13).

There are three opinions here: in one, Boaz was helped by Naomi’s blessing; in the second, Ruth was helped by Boaz’s blessing; and in the third, both were helped by the blessings of the righteous people of Bethlehem. Implicit in these opinions is the belief that God acts through those who offer blessings.

CHARACTERS

Naomi

I will comment on several midrashim dealing with Naomi. These will include:

- The meaning of her name;
- The idea of “being left” (1.3);
- The impact of her departure (1.7), and why she sent Ruth and Orpah back;
- Why the women ask “Is this Naomi?” (1.19);
- Naomi’s responses to this question (1.20-21);
- Her attitude to Boaz (2.1) and Ruth (3.1).  

- *Her name*

  Many rabbinic midrashim begin with an interpretation of proper names, used as a device to reinforce particular aspects of the character. R. Meir and R. Joshua b. Karha interpreted Naomi’s name as meaning שׁוֹרָה מַלְשֵׁי נָאָשׁ דְמָיוֹת, “her actions were pleasant and sweet” (Ruth Rabbah 2.5: 29), from the Hebrew מַלְשֵׁה meaning “pleasant.” It is more than usually apt to glean this meaning in Naomi’s case, since she herself shows an awareness of her name’s meaning when she says “Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara” (bitter): אלא תקוהנה לא נטעי קראא ל מרעא (1.20).

  - *She was left* (1.5)

    Naomi is sometimes depicted in a pathetic light. For example, with her husband and sons dead, Naomi—here “the woman”—was left נְגָשֵׁה לַאֲנָשָׁה (1.5). R. Hanina said she was נְגָשֵׁה שְׂרִי שְׁרִי, “left as the remnants of the remnants [of the meal offering]” (Ruth Rabbah 2.10: 33), meaning of no value whatever.

  - *Naomi’s departure* (1.7)

    Naomi seemingly departed with her daughters-in-law but without servants: נְגָשֵׁה מְלַמְּדֵי אֲשֶׁר תִּדְמֱעָה שְׁפָה, “she left the place where she had been living.”
How many camel-drivers and how many ass-drivers also went forth? And yet it says "and she went forth"? R. Azariah in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon [explained]: The great man of a city is its shining light, its distinction, its glory, and its praise. When he departs, its brilliance, its distinction, its glory, and its praise depart with him. And so you find with our father Jacob when he departed from Beersheba. Was he then the only one who departed from there? How many camel-drivers and how many ass-drivers went forth from there? And yet it says, "and he went forth" (Gen. 28.10). But when a righteous man is in a city, he is its shining light, its distinction, its glory. When he departs, its shining light, its distinction, its glory and its praise depart with him (Ruth Rabbah 2.12).

R. Azariah compares Naomi’s departure with that of Jacob from Beersheba, based on the same verb נתן found in both places. The conclusion he draws about Naomi from this is that “there was no other righteous person but her,” echoing the biblical description of Noah, “the only righteous man in his generation” (Gen. 6.9). To describe a biblical woman in this way is a deviation from the rabbinic norm. Though ultimately this is not a nod to feminism, only part of the larger agenda of glorifying everyone connected to David’s birth, it nonetheless shows high regard for Naomi.

Other rabbinic portraits show more sympathy than admiration. Bar Kappara explains Naomi’s situation:

Her case was like that of an ordinary cow which its owner puts up for sale in the marketplace, saying, “it is excellent for ploughing, and drives straight furrows.” ‘But,’ say [the bystanders], “if it is good for ploughing, what is the meaning of all those weals on its back?” (Ruth Rabbah 3.6; cf. Yalkut Shimoni Ruth 601)."

Equating Naomi with an abused or scarred animal paints a rather pathetic picture. There is also a subtext that Naomi, like the cow, must have deserved her punishment. Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said, more sympathetically:

All suffering is difficult but the suffering of poverty is the most difficult. All suffering comes and goes in its time and the body returns to how it was before. But the suffering of poverty darkens a man’s eyes, as it is said, “my eyes hurt from affliction” (Psalm 88.10) (Ruth Zuta 1.20; cf. Yalkut Shimoni Ruth 601).

* Bronner says “this high praise is said of no other woman in midrashic literature” (Bronner 1993, 157) yet she mistakenly attributes the words of praise to Ruth rather than to Naomi. R. Azariah is definitely discussing Naomi’s departure and not Ruth’s. The same inaccurate attribution is found in Bronner 1994, 71, where she again states (incorrectly) that “Ruth’s departure is said by the rabbis to have depleted Moab of a great and saintly person.”

* Freedman explains in a footnote that this means “it is a sorry animal,” equating the cow with Naomi (Ruth Rabbah, footnote 1.48).
This shows sympathy for Naomi, but the stress here is on her poverty, not on her greatness as in other midrashim. In Ruth Zuta, Naomi’s troubles are blamed on “jealousy”:

“I went out full” (1.21): from here we know that she was rich and full; and who caused her to lose her property, husband and sons, was the jealousy of others (Ruth Zuta 1.20).

Another reason is proposed for Naomi sending her daughters-in-law back:

Why did Naomi send her daughters-in-law back? Because she did not want to be embarrassed by them, as we learned: There were ten markets in Jerusalem, and they did not mix with each other. There was the market of the kings, the market of the prophets, the market of the priests, the market of the Levites, the market of Israel, and all were known in the markets by their garments: what those [one group] wore, those [the other group] did not wear (Ruth Zuta 1.8; cf. Yalkut Shimoni Ruth 601).

In other words, Ruth and Orpah could not fit in, and Naomi would be embarrassed by their different appearance. In this rather negative portrayal of Naomi, she is insensitive to others’ needs and preoccupied with her own image.

* “Is this Naomi?” (1.19)
The townspeople ask “Is this Naomi?” (1.19), and the rabbis try to explain the motivation for this question. R. Tanhum a in the name of R. Azariah and R. Menahema in the name of R. Joshua b. Abin both assume that Naomi’s appearance is so altered that the women cannot believe it is Naomi:

In the past she used to go in her litter, and now she walks barefoot, and you said “Is this Naomi?” (1.19) In the past she wore a cloak of fine wool, and now she is clothed in rags, and you said “Is this Naomi?” (1.19). In the past, her countenance was ruddy from abundance of food and drink, and now it is sickly from hunger. And you said “Is this Naomi?” (Ruth Rabbah 3.6).

*Ruth Zuta* presents a slightly different version:

The handmaids went out on camels and with embroidered garments, and on their return they were dressed in worn out garments, she and Ruth her daughter-in-law, therefore all the Bethlehemite women were startled by her and said “Is this Naomi?” because the
Bethlehemit women used her jewels. 'Is this Naomi who used to put gold to shame with the beauty of her face?' (Ruth Zuta 1.19; cf. Yalkut Shimon Ruth 601).

In this re-telling, the Bethlehemit women were wearing jewelry, and recalled how Naomi had once shamed gold with her beauty. This 13th century midrash is completely at odds with the biblical story, but it is also indicative of the lengths rabbis will go to depict beauty as a positive trait. It is the only midrash in which Naomi is described as beautiful.

- Naomi responds (1.20-21)

Naomi complains that God has afflicted her. The midrashists find several possible meanings for the word she uses, הָיְלָה:

God has afflicted me with His attribute of Justice, as in the verse (Exod. 22.22) ‘If thou afflict him.’ Anothert interpretation is ‘testified’ against me, as in the verse (Deut.19.18) ‘he hath testified falsely against his brother.’ Another interpretation: ‘All His concern was with me,’ for in this world ‘The Lord hath afflicted me, but of the Messianic future it is written, ‘Yea. I will rejoice over them to do them good’ (Jer. 32.41) (Ruth Rabbah 3.7; 48).

The first interpretation implies that Naomi deserved her affliction, though the rabbis do not explain why. The second implies she did not deserve affliction, and the third, interpreting the verb הָיְלָה as הָיְלָה יָלִין “concern,” indicates a certain reluctance in the midrash to accept a biblical character appearing to actually criticize God, or being punished without reason. This may be particularly true for a female character.

- Naomi and Boaz

The midrashists wonder why Naomi did not contact Boaz when she first arrived in Bethlehem (The first verse of chapter 2 informs us that “Naomi had a kinsman...whose name was Boaz”). Two rabbis (Alshich and Alkabetz) answer this indirectly. In one interpretation, Naomi is avoiding her relative because she is ashamed about deserting her people during the famine, when Boaz had not left. Another interpretation praises the strength of the two women. Naomi did not throw herself on her rich relative; and Ruth, who according to the Midrash was the daughter of the King of Moab (בְּנֵיתוֹ של גְּזַלֵן נֵר), was not too proud to take on the burden of supporting herself and Naomi (Zlotowitz, 86).

- Naomi and Ruth

Naomi said to Ruth, “I must seek a resting place for you” (3.1). The midrashists state:

There is no rest for a woman but in the house of her husband, and there is no rest for a man except in his wife (Ruth Rabbah [Lerner] V).

*Alshich, also spelled Alshikh, wrote Eyni Mushe on Ruth in 1615 (Zlotowitz, 139).*
In the Tanhuma, the phrase is taken to mean that a woman does not have rest in the house of her father but only in the house of her husband (Midrash Tanhuma Bo. 3:16, Exodus 12:29, 6”). In both instances Naomi is seen as a woman dependent on men for comfort, who feels she must find a man for Ruth even though she cannot find one for herself.

Ruth

I will comment on the following issues as treated in the midrash:

- **Ruth's name:**
- **Ruth's appearance:**
- **Her modesty, righteousness, and proper conversion:**
- **The notion of “once a Moabitite always a Moabitite.”**
- **Ruth’s name**

One interpretation of the significance of Ruth’s name is that “she considered well (Hebrew נ grátis for ‘she saw,’ connecting it to מְדֹר) the words of her mother-in-law” (Ruth Rabbah 2.9:31). This highlights one of the qualities she is most praised for: obedience. In another interpretation, the name Ruth derives from מָרָה, agitated, stating "Ruth was agitated from crossing over to do the will of her Father in Heaven" (Ruth Zuta 1:2:13 and 1:4:16).

Another rabbi derives Ruth from רוח, "the one who fills to overflowing." R. Yohanan said: “Why was she called Ruth? Because such was her merit that from her was to issue David, who filled to overflowing [saturated] (רוח) the Holy One with songs and hymns” (B.1. Berachot 7b; and Yalkut Proverbs 964).

In Ruth Zuta:

The Holy One Blessed be He said: “Let Ruth come, for she is a convert and did not disown her mother-in-law, and will admonish Israel who rebelled against me” (Ruth Zuta 1:7).

- **Her appearance**

Naomi addresses Ruth as “my daughter,” בּת, in 2:2. In Ruth Rabbah, R. Jannai, who believed Ruth was 40 years old, wonders why she was called “daughter,” and says it is because she looked like a girl of 14 (ואז קראתי בת את להב עמק שלח) (Ruth Rabbah 4.4:52).

This is probably intended to be highly complimentary, for a woman of 40 to look like a girl of 14.

- **Her modesty**

Ruth in midrashic re-tellings is a model of modesty and virtue, through an enlargement and embellishment of her portrayal in the biblical text.

When Boaz asks his servant about Ruth: “Whose girl is that?” (למי הערמה הותאת) (2.5), the head reaper begins by praising Ruth and her modesty:

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1. In a footnote, Freedman comments that this is an emended text: the literal translation is “one is called daughter only when one is forty years of age...so...It must be assumed that they had a tradition as to her age” (Ruth Rabbah, footnote 2, p. 52). It is a puzzling tradition, since rabbinic literature generally assumes Jewish women were married at age twelve, according to Ross Kraemer (Kraemer 1991, 86). The notion that Ruth could look like a girl of 14 after possibly 10 years of marriage is particularly imaginative.
Indeed, she has been with us for several days, and not even a single finger or toe was seen: and as written above, we don’t know whether she is mute or can speak (Ruth Zuta 2.7).

R. Eleazar wonders if Boaz was in the habit of inquiring about young girls:

A thing of wisdom he saw in her. Two ears [of grain]—she gleaned: three ears—she didn’t glean [according to the law in Mishnah Peah 6:5]. In our Mishna it is taught: he saw something of modesty in her: the standing ears she gleaned standing, and the fallen ears she gleaned sitting (B.T. Shabbat 113b; cf. Ruth Zuta 2.3).

Ruth Rabbah amplifies the theme of Ruth’s modesty. R. Eliezer ben Miriam notes:

All the women hitch up their garments, and she keeps her garment down: all the women jest with the reapers, while she is reserved: all the women gather from between the sheaves, while she gathers from that which is abandoned (Ruth Rabbah 4.6).

Similar descriptions are found in Ruth Zuta:

When Ruth sat to reap with the reapers, she turned her face away, and not even one of her fingers was visible. When she would see an ear of corn, she would stand and pick it, and when she saw a discarded ear she would sit to glean it: since Boaz saw in her these three attributes, he immediately asked his servant, “Whose is this girl?” (2.5) (Ruth Zuta 2.3).

In the midrash, modesty is detected in Ruth in the smallest gestures. For example, Ruth sits down beside the reapers, מתנה מצה הקצרים (2.14). R. Jonathan note that this means לעצם הסירה כוכרים, “actually at their side,” rather than among them, another indication of her modesty (Ruth Rabbah 5.6; 66). R. Eleazar stresses this point even more: מца הקצרים ולא מצה כוכרים, “At the side of the reapers, but not in the midst of the reapers” (B.T. Shabbat 113b).

When Ruth returns home after her day of gleaning, she says to Naomi, “the name of the man with whom I worked [dealt] today is Boaz” (2.19). Rab Joshua points out that it doesn’t say “who dealt with me,” rather “with whom I dealt,” אישה עשתה עמי, suggesting that she offered many services and favors to him in exchange for the morsel he gave her (Yalkut Shimoni Ruth, 604; cf. Leviticus Rabbah 34.8). Rab Joshua said:
This is to teach you that more than the master of the house does for the poor man, the poor man does for the master of the house (Ruth Zata 2:19; cf. Leviticus Rabbah 34:8, Yalkut Shimoni Behar, 665).

The rabbis seem to be praising Ruth for offering Boaz the opportunity to do a good deed.

In yet another incident proving her modesty, Ruth first tells Naomi she will do everything she has been told to do (3:5) and then is described as going down to the threshing floor before doing everything she was told. The rabbis understand this to mean that Ruth only bathed and dressed in her finery after reaching the threshing floor (B. T. Shabbat 113b: Ruth Zata 3:2). She was afraid of attracting too much attention if she went out perfumed and dressed up, making it impossible to perform her mission discreetly (Rashi and Malbim, in Zlotowitz, 111). This interpretation, too, stresses Ruth’s extreme modesty.

- **Her righteousness**

  The fact that Ruth ate and was so satisfied that she even had food left over (2:14) is interpreted several ways. Perhaps it proves Boaz’s generosity: he provided so much food, Ruth could not even finish it all. R. Isaac believed the implication was that:

  "One of the two: either a blessing reposed in the fingers of that righteous man [Boaz] or a blessing reposed in the stomach of that righteous woman [Ruth], since it says ‘she ate her fill and had some left over’ (2:14) (Ruth Rabbah 5:6: 66; cf. Tavikra Rabbah 34:8. B. T. Shabbat 113b).

  In a broader interpretation, it is stated that “righteous persons like Eliezer, Ruth, and Hezekiah required very little to satisfy their wants. Only the wicked like Esau...stuffed food into their mouths...All the wicked who are insatiable receive their just desserts in the end” (PK 6, 59a-b; PR 16, 82a).

- **Her proper conversion**

  Why does Naomi instruct Ruth to bathe herself (3:3)? This verse is interpreted as a reference to a spiritual bathing:

  "Wash thyself clean of the filth of thine idolatry.” And “Anoint thee”: these are good deeds and righteous conduct (Ruth Rabbah 5:12).

  The reference to cleansing herself from her idolatry presumably means a spiritual bathing, as in a mikvah. This may have been perceived as a gap in the text because the word “bathe” is used in a general sense, and Ruth would hardly need instruction to do such a basic thing. But the rabbis seized this chance to point out that Ruth had purified herself ritually as a proper Jewish woman before meeting Boaz. It is possible that the rabbis were also stressing that

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7 This would have been Ruth’s first filling meal in a long time, and this could account for her feeling of being full (Zlotowitz, 99, quoting Ralbag (14th cent.), Malbim (19th cent.), Rav Alkalaitz, and Alshich (16th cent.), all of whom interpret this verse in its peshat, or simplest and most straightforward meaning.
Rut had been properly converted, since she was observing Jewish law by ritual immersion; in addition, she was also proving herself compliant.

- *Once a Moabitess...*

One of the rare negative comments about Ruth refers to her repetition to Naomi of Boaz’s warning to her, to stay close to his maidens. When she repeats this to Naomi, she says Boaz told her to stay close to his young men. (2.21). R. Hanin b. Levi infers from this lapse that: אשה מקדידה דם אשה. “In truth Ruth was a Moabitess” (Ruth Rabbah 5.11; 69). The implication is that she could not overcome her origins, so though it has negative connotations, it does not precisely place the blame on Ruth.

In one interpretation of Ruth’s response to Naomi’s request, Ruth supposedly responds twice: "All you say I will do" (3.5) is written. From this we know that Naomi commanded Ruth twice. The first time Ruth says “All you say I will do” (3.5. For the second command, she says “all you tell me, I will do.” [Ruth’s second response] hangs outside, showing that Ruth answered Naomi twice, the first time she does not say אלי and the second time she does say אלי, because it hangs on the outside.

The midrashic collection *Ozar Hamidrashim* (Treasury of Midrash) notes that the discrepancy literally “hangs on the outside” (Ozar Hamidrashim 502). The word אלי (to me) in 3.5 is to be read out when the scroll is chanted, but only its vowels appear in the Masoretic text. The context of this midrash is a number of instances of מכתש קרבנא אלי כניב. The word, if written at all, is to be “hung outside” the rest of the text, in the margin or between the lines. Examples of such interpolated words abound in the Dead Sea Scrolls and other manuscripts, though in such cases the situation is normally the opposite: the word was supposed to be there, only someone noticed it was missing (Robert Goldenberg, personal communication).

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11 The discrepancy noted here is between the הבין לך אלי (read” and “written”); only the former includes the word אלי, “to me,” but only the vowels appear, without the consonants.

12 מכתש קרבנא אלי כניב means that the word, if written at all, is to be “hung outside” the rest of the text, in the margin or between the lines. Examples of such interpolated words abound in the Dead Sea Scrolls and other manuscripts, though in such cases the situation is normally the opposite: the word was supposed to be there, only someone noticed it was missing (Robert Goldenberg, personal communication).
Inferred that Ruth was not paying attention, or that Naomi thought she needed to stress her command by repeating it. Either way, it seems to depict a slightly distracted or disobedient Ruth.

These are the only two mildly negative images of Ruth. Though “once a Moabitess, always a Moabitess” might have held true, the midrashic Ruth largely overcame her origins to be a model of modesty and propriety. There is only a subtle hint that she might be less than totally obedient. The rabbinic agenda was to make Ruth an exemplary progenetrix of David, as well as a role model for the perfect woman in rabbinic eyes.

**Orpah**

All midrashic comments on Orpah begin with her name. Orpah (along with Ruth) is called a daughter of Eglon, King of Moab. R. Bibi said in the name of R. Reuben that they were daughters of Eglon, based on the story in Jud. 3.19, when Eglon rises from the toilet only to be stabbed.

“And Ehud came to him…and said ‘I have a message from God unto thee.’ And he arose out of his seat” (Jud. 3.20). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: ‘Thou didst arise from thy throne in honour of Me. By thy life, I shall raise up from thee a descendant sitting upon the throne of the Lord.’ (Ruth Rabbah 2.9; 31).

In this midrash, God decided to raise up a descendant (David) to sit on the throne of God because Eglon rose from his “throne” in honor of God. In far-fetched interpretations like these, the rabbis’ tongues seem to be lodged quite firmly in their cheeks.

Because Orpah did not choose to follow Naomi, she is not portrayed favorably in rabbinic midrash. The rabbis go to extreme lengths to make an example of Orpah, in order to highlight the more positive example of Ruth, who made the better choice in following Naomi. Orpah’s name is taken to mean: שמה עופר חניתה, “she turned her back on her mother-in-law” (Ruth Rabbah 2.9; 31), because Hebrew עופר, from which her name is believed to originate, means nape of the neck. Elsewhere her name is related to the עופר עופה, the “beheaded heifer” which atones for an anonymous murder: שמהله ערפה ועופה ערפה (Ruth Zutta. 1.4). Nothing is known about Orpah besides the fact that she turned back, but the midrashists weave fantastic tales about her adventures after leaving Naomi.

R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Isaac:

Forty paces did Orpah go with her mother-in-law, and [for this reason retribution] was suspended for her descendant [Goliath] for forty days, as it is said (1 Sam. 17.16): “And the Philistine drew near morning and evening, and presented himself forty days.” R. Judan said in the name of R. Isaac said: Four miles did Orpah proceed with her mother-in-law, and as a reward four mighty men descended from her, as it is said (2 Sam 21.22): “These four were born to the giant” [ערפה ערפה, now read as ערפה] (Ruth Rabbah 2.20, 38).

This interpretation derives from a play on the Hebrew for Orpah עופר, read as ערפה, the giant.
Rabba said:

As a reward for the four tears which Orpah shed upon her mother-in-law, she merited that four mighty warriors would issue from her. [She shed four tears because she and Ruth wept twice, and a tear from each eye would have been shed each time] (B.T. Sotah 42b).

In the Babylonian Talmud, there are several examples of this kind of word play. Rab and Samuel differed:

[One said her name was טרפה but she was called טרפה] because all had intercourse with her from the rear (רעפת). [Samuel said it was] because all ground her like bruised corn (חרפה) (B.T. Sotah 42b).

R. Isaac said:

“Ranks of Philistines” (מְמַמִּכְרוֹת פָּלִיסִיִּים) but מִמְמַכְּרוֹת פָּלִיסִיִּים is written, the whole of that night when Orpah separated from her mother, a hundred heathens raped her (Ruth Rabbah 2.20; 39).

This is based on a verse from 1 Samuel. “The champion, whose name was Goliath, the Philistine of Gath, stepped forward from the ranks”: (I Sam. 17.23). The interpretation is based on a difference between the written text and tradition of reading aloud (כְּהַנָּה הָאָלָה כְּהַנָּה). The or written text, is מְמַמִּכְרוֹת, a word suggesting sexual relations, though the customary reading, is מְמַמִּכְרָה, meaning “ranks.”

In the Babylonian Talmud. R. Johanan says that Goliath was the “son of a hundred fathers and one mother,” and R. Joseph continues that “all men pressed his mother like a wine-press (מלְשָׂך) and all had intercourse with his mother (B.T. Sotah 42b).

R. Isaac differentiated Orpah’s actions from Ruth’s, saying:

The Holy One blessed be He ordained the sons of the one who kissed to come and fall by the hand of the sons of the one who clave (B.T. Sotah 42b).

Pseudo-Philo also contrasted the two. In his description of the David-Goliath encounter, he imagines David addressing Goliath beforehand and telling him that the two women from whom the two of them were born were sisters. He tells Goliath his mother (ancestor) was Orpah, who chose the gods of the Philistines and went after them, while Ruth chose God’s ways. David tells Goliath “Because you have risen up today and have come to destroy Israel, behold I who am born from your own blood have come to avenge my people” (Pseudo Philo 61.6-7). Orpah as the imagined mother of Goliath is a sharp contrast with Ruth as grandmother of David; perhaps this was one of Pseudo-Philo’s purposes.
Boaz

The midrashists weave their discussions around Elimelech and then Boaz, who eventually becomes the primary figure of interest. Like Elimelech, Boaz is seen as the great man of his generation. He is depicted possessing great piety and purity, conforming to the rabbinic idea of a devout and righteous individual. The story becomes decidedly male, and Boaz usurps the place of main character and protagonist, becoming a hero for all generations. The midrash deals primarily with Boaz’s character.

An issue dealt with only obliquely by the rabbis is why Boaz is depicted in a positive way in the narrative for allowing Ruth the “privilege” of gleaning in his field, when he apparently knows she is his relation and would be expected to offer her far more. One interpretation (15th century Rav Arama) suggests that Boaz was testing Ruth, knowing she was a foreigner and wanting to be sure of her integrity (Zlotowitz, 92). This theme of distrust of foreigners has been found, not surprisingly, in other midrashim of the Middle Ages. This interpretation also makes Boaz clever and even slightly duplicitous.

When Naomi discovers it was Boaz who let Ruth glean in his field, she tells Ruth he is a kinsman. Rav Arama (15th century) believes Naomi had wondered for some time how this man, who was noted for his kindness and generosity, could have ignored them since their arrival. Now she understands he has not failed in his kindness to them (Zlotowitz, 104). This is a sort of apologia for Boaz, expressing the idea that Boaz intended to do his duty all along, but was just being cautious, rather than thoughtless.

The midrashists go to some lengths to prove Boaz’s good character. They interpret “He was in a cheerful mood.” רַעַשׁ לְצָה (3:7), in several ways:

1. Because he recited the grace after meals.
2. Another interpretation: he was in a cheerful mood because he ate different kinds of sweet things after his meal as they accustom the tongue to the Torah. Another interpretation: he was in a cheerful mood because he occupied himself with the words of the Torah, as it is said (Ps. 119, 72) “The Torah of your mouth is good to me.” Another interpretation: he was in a cheerful mood because he sought a wife, as it is said (Prov. 18, 22), “He who finds a wife has found happiness” פָּנַי אָשֶּׁר מָצָא נְזָה (Ruth Rabbah 5, 15; cf. B.T. Sanhedrin 19b).

In Midrash Tanhuma, the study of Torah is brought back into the discussion a few lines later. Ruth tells Boaz that she has come to fulfill the Torah. Lev. 25, 25, וְהִנֵּה מַגִּדְתָּ לִי מִדְרָשָׁה. “when your relative becomes poor...a redeemer shall come” (Midrash Tanhuma Behar 3).

R. Judah II ha-Nasi was troubled by the fact that Boaz was lying at the end of the heap of grain even though he was a leading figure in his generation. R. Phinehas b. Hama explained:

۷ Ruth Rabbah treats many of these verses in a metaphorical or symbolic way. For example, in 2:10 Ruth falls on her face in gratitude for Boaz’s kindness, and asks him why he has “taken notice” of her. The verb used here can also be used to know someone casually; hence, the rabbis state that this phrase is a prophecy that Boaz would make Ruth his wife (Ruth Rabbah 5, 2, 59).
Boaz was a great man in his generation, yet you say [he was lying] by the heap of grain. He answered him: since that generation was steeped in immorality, and they used to pay harlots from the threshing-floors, as it is said [Hos. 9.1]: “Rejoice not, O Israel, unto exultation, like the peoples...Thou hast loved a harlot’s hire upon every threshing-floor.” And righteous men do not act so (Ruth Rabbah 5.15).

In other words, Boaz had to lie there to prevent the threshing floor from being used for immoral purposes. These explanations serve not only to shed a positive light on Boaz, but they also reflect the rabbis’ thinking. In their minds, any laudable biblical character had to live in accordance with the Torah, the way they did. Since they said grace after meals, and studied Torah, they could not imagine Boaz, or any other male protagonist in Bible, not doing the same (Neusner, 97). They are also establishing Boaz as a role model.

Chapter 3 of the Scroll posed the greatest difficulty to rabbis who wanted to depict Boaz as well as Ruth as examples of purity, goodness, and obedience to God. They had to explain actions than run counter to this image. They do not believe the text insinuates there may have been sexual relations, but they do wonder how Boaz found the strength to resist. R. Judah and R. Hunya said:

All that night his Evil Inclination contended with him, saying, ‘You are unmarried and seek a wife, and she is unmarried and seeks a husband. Arise and have intercourse with her, and she will be your wife.’ And he took an oath to his Evil Inclination, saying, ‘As the Lord liveth, I will not touch her.’ And to the woman he said, ‘Lie down until morning...If he will act as a redeemer, good, let him redeem’ (3.13). R. Hunya said, it is written (Prov. 24.5), “a wise man is strong, יְּשַׁלְמוּנְךָ -יְדַבֵּר, [but reading] Boaz, יְדַבֵּר, [with different vowels, in place of יְּשַׁלְמוּנְךָ, ‘strong’] ‘A wise man is Boaz, and a man of knowledge increases strength,’ for he overcame his desire with an oath (Ruth Rabbah 6.4; cf. Vayikra Rabbah 23.11 as found in Sifre Zuta).”

Only for this chapter does Zlotowitz, co-editor of Megillat Ruth, offer prefatory remarks. He points out that the reader of this chapter must understand “the purity and innocence with which the Sages understood the episode as being fully for the sake of Heaven” (Zlotowitz, 107). He then offers an interpretation of his own, in which Naomi has been dreaming and hoping throughout the harvest that Boaz would make a move to “redeem” Ruth. When the harvest ends, Naomi realizes there is little chance of another opportunity presenting itself. She realizes desperate measures are needed (Zlotowitz, 107). In this scenario, an element of desperation is added to the text in order to justify both Naomi’s and Ruth’s actions. It was, in the end, all in the service of God. Naomi also realized that Boaz was too passive to ever make a move without encouragement. Though this is a typical rabbinic apologia, it remains logically consistent with the plot.

A passage in B.T. Sanhedrin praises men’s resistance to women’s temptation, using as a prooftext Proverbs 31. Baskin sees irony in the invocation of one of the most positive statements of female qualities found in the Hebrew Bible as a prooftext for the praise of men who resisted women’s seductiveness, for male triumph over sexual desire (Baskin 2002, 111).
According to Ruth Zuta, Boaz died on his wedding night, after Obed was conceived. (Ruth Zuta 4:13), further supporting the rabbis' notion that the only truly important figure in the story of Ruth is David.

SPECIAL CONCERNS: CONVERSION, GENEALOGY, MESSIAH

CONVERSION

It seems apparent from these texts that the rabbis who wrote and compiled Ruth Rabbah were attempting to deal primarily with a particular issue: Ruth, a woman of exemplary character but a foreigner, became the ancestor of the Davidic line. The midrashists' primary concern was patrilineage, which meant that Ruth's "conversion" had to be halachically proper (based on B.T. Yevamot 76b-77a). With this motive in mind, the midrashists embellish the dialogue between Naomi and Ruth in 1.15-17. R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Judah b. Hanina:

Three times it is written here 'Turn back,' corresponding to the three times that a would-be proselyte is repulsed: but if he persists after that, he is accepted (Ruth Rabbah 2.16; 36).

In Ruth Rabbah, statements by Naomi to which Ruth is purported to be responding are interpolated, during Ruth's famous utterance in 1.16-17. The opening phrase, לָֽעַרְשַׁתַּמְכֶּֽרְמֵרְךָ, usually translated "Do not entreat urge me to leave you" is here translated as "Do not sin against me" (from the root עָשִּׂיָה, which can also mean "trouble").

And Ruth said 'Do not entreat urge me to leave you' (1.16). What is 'Do not entreat'? She said to her 'Do not sin against me'—by turning your misfortunes away from me. (Ruth Rabbah 2.22).

Naomi must explain to Ruth that what she wants to do is difficult. By replacing Ruth's monologic oath with a dialogue, the rabbis show that Ruth's personal loyalty to Naomi is not her primary motivation, and that she has been told all the duties of the Israelite, including the cultic ones. In this way rabbinic theology is expressed through their exegesis (Neusner, 82-3). In the talmudic version, according to R. Eleazar:

[Naomi] tells [Ruth]: "We are forbidden to travel beyond the Sabbath boundaries (��הוּ)." Ruth says: "Wherever you go I will go." [Naomi says] "Private meetings between men and women (ונתת) are forbidden to you." Ruth says: "Wherever you lodge, I will lodge." [Naomi says] "We are commanded to observe 613 commandments".

According to Caspi and Havelock, the origin of this notion is found in Lekh'at For Josephus, supplement 48-9 (Caspi Havelock, 86).
plus the seven Noahide Laws incumbent on all humanity. Ruth says: “Your people will be my people.” [Naomi says]: “Idol worship is forbidden to us” (B.T. Yebamot 47b).”

In *Ruth Zuta* there are some unique interpretations of the scene between Ruth and Naomi. The writer notes that Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to return twice—once she says “Return,” then “Go.”

From this you learn that you refuse the proselyte twice. Rab Hiyya said: Do not believe the proselyte for 24 generations because he holds on to his evil inclination: but the moment he takes on himself the yoke of [HaMakom] God out of love and fear, and converts for the sake of Heaven, the Holy One blessed be He does not turn him back, for it is said, ‘God loves the sojourner and gives him food and clothing’ (Deut. 10.18. ראובן בר הלל טוב ו良性 טוב שה). Further, God gave 18 warnings [משה: also the name for hymns read on Shavuot] about the sojourner, and opposite those, he warned against idol worship (*Ruth Zuta* 1.12: 30-31).

The word רע in the Bible usually means “sojourner” (BDB, 158), while in rabbinic Hebrew, it more commonly means “proselyte” (Jastrow, 263). In this way the rabbis read the meaning they want to find into various biblical passages.

Two women attached themselves to the tribe of Judah—Tamar and Ruth. Tamar shouted that she would not leave empty from that house; Ruth wept each time Naomi told her to go back. So in the end, Ruth clung to her mother-in-law.

And Ruth said: “I cannot return to my family and to the idol worship of my father’s house (*Ruth Zuta* 1.12).

When Ruth concludes her plea, Naomi does not reply. The fact that Naomi stopped speaking to Ruth after she saw how determined she was (1.18) is cited in the Babylonian Talmud as a paradigm of how to treat a proselyte, whom one should not excessively push away (B.T. Yebamot 47b).

The scene between Ruth and Naomi ends with the two women walking together: “The two went on until they reached Bethlehem” (התלכדה ששתים שנה בניBLEM ד). The rabbis saw this as a sign of the preciousness of proselytes to God. R. Judah b. Simon commented:

Come and see how precious in the eyes of the Omnipresent are converts. Once she decided to become converted. Scripture ranks her equally with Naomi (*Ruth Rabbah* 3.5: 47; cf. *Yalkut Shimoni Ruth* 601).

7 According to the *comitaria*, the name Ruth adds up to 60th, proving to the rabbis that even Ruth’s name indicates her acceptance of all 613 commandments (Leivel Metzer. “Ruth” in *The Five Scrolls*, as quoted by Bromer, 1994).
This view is based on the fact that the text says the two women went together ( Manson), interpreted here as “equals.” The acceptance of Ruth the proselyte is the key issue in the genealogy discussion.

GENEALOGY

The genealogy at the conclusion of the Scroll is discussed at some length, with the goal of making David’s descent from a Moabite woman acceptable. The meaning of the phrase “A son is born to Naomi” (4.17) is discussed at length in the Talmud and midrash. R. Hanina explains that it means “Ruth bore him but Naomi brought him up, so he was called after Naomi’s name” (B.T. Sanhedrin 19b). Other rabbis offer biblical examples that are similar to this verse. R. Johanan quotes “these are the sons of Bilhah the daughter of Pharaoh.” (1 Chronicles 4.18), explaining that Jochebed bore and Bithia reared him; therefore he was called after her, which he sees as a parallel to Naomi raising Ruth’s son (Yalkut Shimoni to 1 Samuel, 129). R. Eleazar quotes from Psalm 77.16. “By your arm you redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph.” He notes that it was Jacob, not Joseph, who fathered them. But since Joseph sustained them, they are called by his name. Other examples are offered by R. Samuel b. Nahmani and Rab Judah (B.T. Sanhedrin 19b).

There is a similar discussion in Sekhel Tov:

As we find in Rachel, who says “I will be built up through her.” (Gen. 30.3), and she named the sons of Bilhah (Gen. 30.6, 8), as Leah named the sons of Zilpah (Gen. 30.11, 13), and so Naomi and her neighbors named Obed son of her daughter-in-law (4.17) and this phrase is repeated [in 4.16 Naomi became the child’s nurse, in 4.17 the women name him], to show that through Naomi’s mouth they named him Obed (Sekhel Tov Genesis 16.15).

In Gen. 30.3, Bilhah gives birth and Rachel raises the child and nurses him at her breast, similarly to the son on Joseph’s knees (50.23). So with Naomi, she took the boy and nursed him at her breast (4.16):

The sons will be called by my name, in remarkable language [אֶת שָׁמְעִי נַקֵּד], that is to say, by what I do for her. I will attain merit and be remembered [לֶאָה וּמִּני], as Sarah was remembered through Hagar (Sekhel Tov Gen. 30.3).

More commentary on this section is found in Yalkut Shimoni:

Rabbi Hanina said: From where [why] “the neighbor women named him, saying ‘A son is born to Naomi.’” (4.17) Did Naomi give birth? No, Ruth gave birth. Rather, Ruth gave birth but Naomi raised him, so he was called by her name (Yalkut Shimoni 1 Sam., 129).
The formula ‘תלט הינון’ ‘these are the generations,’ appears at least seven times in Genesis (2.4, 6.9, 10.1, 11.10, 11.27, 36.1, 37.7) and once in Numbers (3.1), in addition to here in Ruth. No woman is named in the list at the end of Ruth, even though the story focuses primarily on women. In the end, Neusner believes.

God chooses, and genealogy stands aside... Abraham and David compare to one another, one standing at the commencement of Israel’s history, the other at the end... there is a match at the start and finish (Neusner, 108-9).

The male perspective of the ancient rabbis is reflected in Neusner’s views.

These interpretations serve to support the rabbis’ claim, consistently from the fourth century up to this day: that the Scroll was created to legitimize David’s ancestry. One reason this was such an important goal was David’s link to the idea of the future Messiah.

MESSIAH

Understanding the centrality of the Messiah theme in Ruth Rabbah is crucial to understanding the work’s context (Neusner, 115). It is central because the genealogy in 4.18-20 points to David, and in the talmudic period it became a fixed conception that the Messiah must be a “son of David” – מושל רבי.

Many legends are connected with the view that David himself is the promised Messiah. There are several examples in the Talmud. The link of David to the Messiah is found as early as Bereshit Rabbah:

The Moabitess Ruth is the great-grandmother of David, and the Ammoniteess Naamah [Solomon’s wife] is the mother of Rehoboam, and the Messiah is of the line of these two kings (Bereshit Rabbah 51.8-11).

Elsewhere in the same Midrash collection, Tamar is described as endowed with the gift of prophecy, which enables her to know that “she was appointed to be the ancestress of David and of the Messiah.” The paradox of the Messiah coming from an excluded people (the Moabites) had to be resolved by the rabbis in their midrashic retelling (Neusner, 6).

The rabbinic belief that Ruth was destined to become the mother of the Davidic dynasty is found in earlier midrashic sources. In Deuteronomy, Moses is commanded to fight both the Midianites and Moabites, but war is not waged against Moab until David’s time. God told the Israelites to wait before waging war against Moab, because God had lost something valuable among them, and did not want Israel to avenge itself until God found what he lost (meaning Ruth). The Deuteronomist prohibition against intermarriage with Moab (Deut. 23.4) is explained by the fact that Ruth was destined to become the foremother of David (Ginzberg, vol. III, 406 and vol. VI, 142, n. 845, quoting Yelamdena in Yalkut 1.875).

In another, later Midrash, Abraham’s kindness towards Lot supposedly was due to Abraham’s prophetic understanding that Lot was destined to become the ancestor of David, through Ruth the Moabitess (Zohar I. 84a and 79a, as quoted in Ginzberg, vol. V, 240, n. 171).

In an extensive passage in B. B. Sanhedrin, several rabbis expound on the idea “The Son of David will not come until…” R. Hammur said “until a fish is sought for an invalid and cannot be procured;” R. Hama b. Hammu, “until even the poorest kingdom ceases to have power over Israel;” Zerim in R. Hamma’s name “until there are no concealed men in Israel” (B. B. Sanhedrin 98a). Each rabbi offers a textual proof, and the discussion continues at length.

Beliefs in the world to come and the Jewish Messianic ideal may have both begun in the period of the Second Commonwealth, marked by its yearning for the restoration of the nation and the Temple. David became the quintessential romantic figure of the Messianic idea, his reign being considered the ideal era (Casp and Cohen, 87). The leader was supposed to stand for and embody the people.
In Christian belief, their own Messiah, Jesus, descended from David:

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham...So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations (Matt. 1.1.1.1).

Therefore when Christians read the Messiah idea into Ruth, they are referring to Jesus. Jerome obtained from his Hebrew teachers the most current interpretation of the Bible in his day, thus admitting rabbinic exegesis into his Latin “Vulgate” translation and exposition. In turn, his translation and commentaries became a repository of Hebrew traditions (Spiegel, “Introduction” in Ginzberg, xx).

JOSEPHUS

Flavius Josephus (37-c.100 C.E.) was a Jewish general, historian, and biblical exegete. He approached Jewish texts from a different angle and with a different agenda than the rabbis. He wrote his 20-book *Jewish Antiquities* under the patronage of the Flavians, after defecting to Rome. The first ten volumes of this work parallel biblical history. Josephus wanted to retell biblical narratives by making the texts more relevant to his time, much as the rabbis did. *Jewish Antiquities* drew heavily from the Septuagint, extra-biblical traditions, and the writings of Greek and Roman historians (Whiston, Introduction, xi), as well as rabbinic literature.

Josephus represents one of the earliest extant stages in midrashic tradition, and for that reason his writings cannot be ignored in a discussion of midrash. Josephus was “well versed not only in the Bible but also in the body of oral law, as later codified in the Talmud...he is well read in a variety of authors and has direct access to the commentaries of Vespasian and of Titus” (Feldman 1987, Introduction, 65). In his paraphrase of biblical narratives, Josephus is an important early witness to the biblical text. His version of the text can be compared to the various versions of the Hebrew and Septuagint as well as to Dead Sea fragments. (Feldman 1987, Preface, 13).

Josephus became very well known and influential well beyond his own time and place, class and ethnicity. His influence on early Christianity is important. His text was read and reread by the church fathers (Brenner 2003, 105-6), whose reading of Josephus’ midrashic retellings became a source of Christian knowledge of Jewish traditions (Feldman 1987, Introduction, 62). Later on, with the reformation, his text became authoritative again, “equivalent to the Bible itself as a source of inspiration” (Brenner 2003, 105). His approach and attitudes, therefore, offer a window into the thinking of his era and cultural milieu. They must also be considered when trying to understand later Christian interpretations of the Scroll, as reflected for example in the librettos I will be discussing.

Typical of that era were condescending attitudes towards women, found both in Jewish circles and the larger Greco-Roman world. Passages in Josephus’s work clearly indicate that he considered women to be in a category apart from men, even if they are not always inferior. Since his stated goal was to demonstrate the superiority of Judaism, Josephus needed to make his portrayal of biblical women attractive, even exemplary, for Greco-Roman readers. His portrayals of the matriarchs, for example, show Hellenistic idealization (Bailey, 155).

Josephus betrayed a Hellenistic prejudice about women’s proper social roles and personality traits, yet he also attached too much importance to their existence even when this was justified by the biblical narrative. Ultimately the picture is mixed and inconsistent, and in many
ways. Josephus' *Antiquities* is no better and no worse than other sources of his time and place (Brenner 2003, 104). Josephus' enhancement of some biblical women's portraits did not apparently change his own misogynistic attitudes towards most women. This would not have been a contradiction for Josephus, since he considered the matriarchs to be aristocrats, not commoners, as understood in his contemporary society. And he held very different views towards these two different classes of women (Bailey, 168, 176).

Josephus frequently did expand the role of women from that of the original biblical story, but the motive was just as likely to have been the writing of a better tale than appreciation of women (Brenner 2003, 95). In an expansion, the female figure may be enhanced or, on the contrary, may be further weakened in some way. As Brenner points out, "theoretically and hypothetically, an expansion might serve the same purpose, or result in the same belittling, as a minimization" (Brenner 2003, 94). Josephus also tended to exaggerate women's beauty or youth, accepting wisdom from women only when they were old (Brenner 2003, 100).

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

Translation of Josephus's works becomes a complex problem because of Josephus's "use of a Greek version of Scripture, and the corrections made by Christian copyists in the interest of conformity to the biblical text known to them. and partly because of the apparent revisions made by Josephus's Greek assistants" (Ralph Marcus in Thackeray, Preface, ix). The most respected 20th century English translation of Josephus is considered to be that of Henry St. John Thackeray in 1934. There is also a more recent translation of books 1-4 by Feldman (Brill Academic Publishers, 1999). The most popular English translation prior to Thackeray's was that of William Whiston (1736), which was the most widely known and used before Thackeray. There is also a Hebrew translation by Shalit. The translators themselves—much like Josephus—are informed by their own perceptions, and the small differences they introduce reveal their own approaches to the story in general, and to the issue of women in particular (Brenner 2003, 97).

Comparisons between Thackeray and Whiston highlight the power of a translation to subtly alter the original meaning of a text. I will be pointing out differences when relevant, throughout this analysis. I am working solely with English translations, not the original Greek.

GAP FILLING

ACTION TIME

Chapter 1 From the start, male bias is evident in Josephus's re-telling:

Elimelech was not able to support his family, so he took with him Naomi his wife, the children born to him by her, and removed his habitation into Moab; there he took for his sons wives of the Moabites (italics all mine) (*Antiquities*, 5.9.318, Whiston).

This account differs from the biblical story in several details:

A man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab (1.1). Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women (1.3-4).

Elimelech’s death in the Scroll precedes the death of his sons, so he could not take sons for his wives. Josephus' version elevates Elimelech’s role and status, in addition to validating the marriage of his sons to Moabite women, which is not so clearly validated in the Scroll.

In spite of my efforts, this book was not available to me so I could not check Feldman’s Introduction and Notes. In any case, *Ruth* is found in Book V, and Feldman’s translation to date is only of Books I-IV.
Chapter 2  When Boaz first meets Ruth. Josephus adds a phrase: “Boaz hospitably received them” (5.9.323, Whiston). Josephus apparently could not conceive a man in Boaz’s position not immediately greeting his female relation. When Ruth appears in the field, Boaz asks who she is, and the overseer answers. The original text does not explain how the overseer came by the information about Ruth that he imparts to Boaz. Josephus fills in the gap with:

The servant had a little before inquired about all her circumstances (5.9.320, Whiston).

In Thackeray’s translation.

The steward learnt all her story from herself (5.9.320, Thackeray).

The second version imagines a dialogue between Ruth and the steward, which humanizes Ruth. This is not the sort of gap that troubled the rabbis, but it might have been noticeable and possibly unacceptable to the Roman reader.

At the end of chapter 2, Ruth returns home to Naomi with extra food she has gleaned (2.18). Josephus adds:

Naomi on her side had reserved for her portions of some food with which attentive neighbors had provided her (5.9.326, Thackeray).

Thackeray points out in a footnote that this phrase is an “amplification” from the original biblical story. Josephus’s addition explains how the two women could have survived only on the meager rations Ruth might glean in the fields. This version also takes away from Boaz’s generosity.

Chapter 3  The action in chapter 3 opens at the end of the harvest season, which the rabbis believed lasted three months. Josephus, however, describes it as “not many days” (5.9.328, Whiston). Either he was not knowledgeable about agriculture, or he felt the story would be more dramatic in a more compact time frame. His time frame would have been more in keeping with Greek Hellenized dramatic conventions.

In the Scroll, Naomi knows that Boaz was sleeping on the threshing floor. The original text does not explain how she knew, because the assumption was that the reader would know the custom. Josephus adds that she “was informed” of this. Either Josephus himself did not understand, or he knew his intended readers would not understand, and therefore would not grasp how Naomi could have known without being told. But whatever his motivation, the addition of this phrase opens new gaps: who told Naomi, and why? It is implied that Naomi had formed friendships with neighbors who would have kept her informed.

In the Scroll, Ruth rises at dawn because Boaz thought “Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor” (3.14), which is ambivalent about whose decision it was for Ruth to rise and depart, and whether a conversation took place (ch. 2, pp. 29-30). Josephus amends this ambivalence by unequivocally stating:

...in the morning, before the servants began to set about their work, he awaked her, and bid her...go to her mother-in-law before anybody there should see that she had lain down by him, because it was prudent to avoid any reproach that might arise, especially when there had been nothing done that was ill (5.9.330; Whiston).

Thackeray’s translation spells it out even more clearly:

It was wise to guard against scandal of that kind, and the more so when nothing had passed (5.9.330; Thackeray).
Obviously Josephus wanted to ensure that his readers not draw any wrong conclusions about the night on the threshing room floor.

Chapter 4  At the beginning of chapter 4 in the Scroll, Boaz sits at the gate and then “gathers ten elders of the town” (4.2). In Josephus, Boaz is described as “gathering the senate together” (5.9.332, Thackeray). Thackeray points out that the word means “senate or council of elders,” which has a parallel in the Targum, where Boaz came before the “court of Sanhedrin” (Targum Ruth 4.1). Josephus also has Boaz summoning both the kinsman and Ruth. These are changes from the original story, where the kinsman just happened to come along, and where Ruth is absent from the scene. Josephus is thereby amplifying Ruth’s role, and downplaying the role of “Providence” in the supposedly random appearance of the kinsman in the biblical version. This is in contrast to the rabbis, who saw the hand of God in the kinsman’s appearance (this chapter, p. 56).

Ruth and Boaz are described by Josephus as having a son within a year’s time. Naomi herself, according to Josephus, names the child “by the advice of the women” (5.9.336, Whiston), an alteration from the original text in which the women name the child. In the Scroll, the women first tell Naomi “He will be a restorer of your life to you, and he will sustain your old age,” (4.15) after which Naomi takes and nurses the child; and only then do the women name the child Obed (4.16-17). The reversal of order in these different versions of events indicates a difference in focus:

This infant was nursed by Naomi, who on the council of the women called him Obed, which means servant in Hebrew, because he was to be brought up to be the stay of her old age (5.9.336, Thackeray).

Either Josephus wanted to elevate Naomi’s role, or he did not understand the significance of a group of women naming a child. But the remark reflects his general attitude that the purpose of marriage is to produce children who will tend their parents in their old age (Antiquities IV. 261).

CAUSE: MOTIVE

The numerous “why” questions that preoccupied the midrashists—why a famine, why go to Moab, why not contact Boaz on arrival in Bethlehem—are not dealt with by Josephus. An interesting attribution of motive is found in Josephus’ treatment of the kinsman in chapter 4. In the Scroll, the kinsman refuses his right of redemption because he is afraid of impairing his own estate (4.6). According to Josephus, the kinsman’s reason for refusing Boaz’s offer is that he already has a wife and children (5.9.334), which is Josephus’s understanding of the biblical expression.

CHARACTER APPEARANCE

Josephus expends very little energy amplifying the biblical characters’ personalities or appearance. After the death of Elimelech and the sons, the biblical story, as well as Josephus’s retelling, shifts to Naomi, whom Josephus describes with some feeling as “not able to bear her lonesome condition” (5.9.320, Whiston). This is an early example of Exum’s “romantic gap-filling” (ch. 2, p. 46). Naomi’s sad condition is also greatly amplified in most librettos (e.g., Franck, p. 136; Schumann, p. 153; Rumshinsky, p. 170).
Neither Ruth’s nor Orpah’s names are mentioned in Josephus' description of their interaction with Naomi. Only when Orpah departs are both women named. The conclusion of the chapter, in Whiston’s translation, reads as follows:

...she took Ruth along with her, as not to be persuaded to stay behind her, but would take her fortune with her, whatsoever it should prove (5.9.322, Whiston).

The same passage translated by Thackeray reads:

Naomi took her with her, to be her partner in all that should befall.

The simple addition of the word ‘partner’ alters the sense of the entire phrase, by focusing on the relationship between the two women. Josephus' retelling adds a dimension of mutual feeling between the two women that is not found in the Scroll.

Naomi orders Ruth (3.3-4) to follow her plan: no motive is given in the Scroll. Josephus writes:

Naomi schemed to bring Ruth to his side, deeming that he would be gracious to them after consorting with the child (5.9.328, Thackeray).

This conjures up an image of a crafty and slightly self-serving Naomi. Ruth obeys Naomi’s commands, because, Josephus writes, she thought it her duty not to contradict any command of her mother-in-law. Obedience to a mother-in-law was probably perceived as an important quality in Josephus’s social milieu, so in this way he enhanced the figure of Ruth.

Josephus offers only a brief genealogy—Obed, Jesse, David, “who was king, and left his dominions to his sons for one-and-twenty generations” (5.9.336). Josephus explains his purpose in relating the story of Ruth:

To demonstrate the power of God who, without difficulty, can raise those that are of ordinary parentage to dignity and splendor, to which he advanced David, though he were born of such mean parents (5.9.337, Whiston).

Thackeray’s translation of the last phrase is more felicitous:

...how easy it is for Him to promote even ordinary folk to rank so illustrious as that to which He raised David, sprung from such ancestors (Thackeray, 311).

Josephus clearly views the point of the Scroll to be the birth of David and its almost miraculous nature. He seems to be suggesting a comparison with Jesus, without saying so overtly.

Josephus’s account differs in some important ways from the biblical narrative and later rabbinic versions. First, Moab and Moabite are each mentioned only once. Ruth’s being a Moabite is apparently not an issue for Josephus or his intended readers; or he wanted to intentionally downplay it, in order not to depict an intolerant side of Judaism. Josephus’ stated

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7 The use of the word “child” is striking. Whiston translates the word as “girl” here, and instead of “consort with” he uses “discourse with.” The biblical text refers to Ruth as a מַעֲשֶׂה, “young girl” or social inferior, but not really “child.” Possibly Josephus used a Greek equivalent to the Hebrew that was not accurately translated. Brenner asks: “Is a daughter automatically a child?” This is imperceptible downgrading, especially since it might be argued that ‘child’ is a term of endearment. But is treating an adult female, even a young adult, as a minor necessarily complimentary? For Josephus, even Ruth is a child (5.324), which is worse even than the put-down “daughter” which Boaz uses to address her (Ruth 3.10, 11), and makes the complex game of power, gender and class differentials between them extremely clear” (Brenner 2003, 99,100).
goal, after all, was to present the Jewish people and religion in a positive light to the Greco-Roman world. In addition, he was trying to refute the virulent anti-Jewish feelings of his day, found in such writers as Quintilian, Tacitus, and Juvenal (Feldman 1987, Introduction, 21). At issue is more Ruth’s *class* than her ethnic origin, reflecting the Greco-Roman world Josephus inhabited. In addition, the ancient animosity between Israel and Moab would probably have been unfamiliar or irrelevant to his readers.

CONCLUSION

The rabbis in their midrashic re-tellings, and to some degree Josephus, embellish the characters and their motivations in order to make them more noble, more modest, more totally instruments of God’s will. Autonomy, friendship, and devotion—human qualities all found in the original book—are almost air-brushed out of the picture. Confirming their belief in the Bible as a cryptic document, the midrashists find hidden meaning in characters’ names and in the smallest gestures or utterances. They implicitly teach lessons about proper behavior through examples of Ruth’s modesty and Orpah’s betrayal, and the results of these, thereby using the Scroll as a relevant document for instruction. The rabbis’ midrashic re-tellings serve the agenda of glorifying God, who sanctioned the Scroll and chose Ruth as the foremother of David, from whom the messiah would come: הַמַּשָּׁה בְּנֵ דָּוִד.
EXCURSUS: READING THE TROPE SIGNS (תְּרוּפָה) IN RUTH AS INTERPRETATIVE KEYS

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In my Jewish tradition, public recitation of biblical texts is generally done as a chant. The Scroll is chanted annually in synagogue on the holiday of Shavuot. The notion of chanting, or cantillating, a text, probably originated when people of antiquity realized how this intensified the emotional and dramatic impact of words. Composers have always used music to heighten the theatricality of a powerful text (Jacobson, 9), and cantillation of biblical texts is a very early example of this use of music.

The music of Jewish cantillation is unphrased and consists not so much of melodies, as of modes in which an octave runs through a diatonic scale (Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. 3, 15). Based on Talmudic references (B.T. Megillah 32a), it is believed that sacred texts were chanted in ancient Israel. Scripture is cantillated in systems resembling the Jewish one in every Asiatic tradition, from Vedic recitation in India to Buddhist recitation in Japan (Avenary, 1978, quoted in Jacobson, 368). Chanting rather than reading sacred texts highlights the important distinction between secular and sacred (Jacobson, 11).

The Hebrew word for biblical trope (cantillation) is וּדְנָה (plural וּדְנָה), which can mean both “taste” and “meaning.” This points to the stress on oral over written meaning. Medieval commentator Abraham Ibn-Ezra claimed that “any comment that is not on a comment of the accents you will not want it and you will not listen to it” (as quoted by Meschonnic in Hirsch and Aschenasy, 228).

Jacobson gives four primary functions of cantillation:
- It is an aesthetic enhancement of the text;
- It serves as a mnemonic device, helping the reader memorize the text;
- As a stage device, it aids the reader in projecting the voice so all the worshippers can hear the text;
- It is a stylization of the natural inflections of expressive speech, in that it emphasizes some syllables and some words more than others by means of heightened volume, raised pitch, or longer duration of certain notes.

Numerous books and articles have dealt in great detail with text interpretation based on trope. An in-depth analysis would include the use of trope to indicate how each verse should be phrased, and would point to particular functions of specific trope signs. I am treating this subject only briefly here because, although I believe it is an essential part of any reading of the Hebrew Bible, it is not really a form of musical midrash, only of expression. But as a type of musical interpretation, it connects the original text to the chapters that follow, on musical

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The passage reads as follows: Rabbi Shefatiah further said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: If one reads the Scripture without a melody or learns the Mishnah without a tune, of him the Scripture says (Ezekiel 20:25), “Moreover, I gave them laws that were not good” (Jacobson, 368).

interpretations of *Ruth*. In addition, the 1986 opera by Aloni utilizes trope modes extensively throughout (ch. 6, p. 198).

The trope signs were added to the biblical text by the Masoretes in the 10th century C.E., and were that group’s own interpretation of how the un-punctuated Hebrew text should be phrased and understood. Yet this one group’s interpretation has continued to have influence beyond that of any other’s because of the dispersion of these trope marks in all Hebrew Bibles printed since the Middle Ages.

CHANTING *RUTH*

The particular melodic system for chanting *Ruth* is the same as the one used for *Song of Songs* and *Ecclesiastes*. These three scrolls are chanted on the three Pilgrimage Festivals - Shavuot, Passover, and Sukkoth. Using the same melodies for all three makes a liturgical connection between them. The earliest reference to chanting these three scrolls in public is in the post-talmudic tract *Soferim* (14.3.4) (Jacobson, 732).

I will point out only a few instances of the less common signs as they appear in the Scroll. These are the signs I will discuss:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew Sign</th>
<th>English Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pazer</strong></td>
<td>long, ornate; from Hebrew “disperse”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>T’lisha g’dola</strong></td>
<td>ornate; from Hebrew “major pull”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gershayin</strong></td>
<td>a “double gersh”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zakef gadol</strong></td>
<td>high pitch; from Hebrew “major raising”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aza gersh</strong></td>
<td>high pitch: Hebrew “going on”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kadma v’azla</strong></td>
<td>same high pitch: <em>kadma</em> is “precedes”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zarka segol</strong></td>
<td>different mode, lower pitch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pazer:** In 1.2, the name Elimelech appears for the first time (and the only time in the entire Hebrew Bible) with the mark of *pazer* (ṷא), the only place in the Scroll this mark is found. It is a relatively uncommon and elaborately chanted trope, signifying the importance the Masoretes wanted the listener to ascribe to Elimelech.

**T’lisha g’dola:** This sign (תלישא ג’דולה) is found in very few places in the Scroll. Its first appearance is in 1.16, over the word יִל “for wherever you go.” This is like a signal to the reader to pay attention to what follows.

**Gershayin:** The first appearance of this sign (גֶּרשק) is in 1.18, over the word יָנוּה, when Naomi “now that she was determined.” This highlights Naomi’s act of passive seeing rather than the more unusual verb יָכוֹס מְלֻא which ascribes determination to Ruth in a verb form found uniquely here in the feminine. Possibly the Masoretes thought the verb was unusual enough not to need further accentuation, while they wanted to keep the spotlight on Naomi at this point in the story.

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1 Elsewhere in the Bible, it is found only in 1 Kings 12.18 and 2 Chronicles 10.18, in both places it means “made speed.” The only place it is translated similarly to the Scroll is in 2 Chronicles 13.7 where it means “they strengthened themselves.”
Zakei gedol: This sign (יְדֵי) is first found in 2.2 over the word יְדֵי, where Ruth hopes to find favor behind someone in the field. The word can also mean “after.” Having the voice rise in a melisma on this particular word can be interpreted as an indication of Ruth’s hope.

Azla geresh: Boaz’s speech to Ruth in 2.8-9 contains more ornate trope combinations than other parts of the narrative. The Masoretes seem to have been trying to attribute a certain formality to his speech in this way. In 2.9 there is a (יְדֵי) over יֵדְעָה, “your eyes on the field.” There is no verb attached to this noun; it is understood to mean “keep your eyes on the field.” The insertion of a complex trope symbol compensates for the missing verb and also stresses the importance of Ruth’s watching the field carefully. Both her livelihood and her safety depend on this watchfulness.

Kadma vaatzla: Ruth’s and Boaz’s speeches are distinguished in 2.10-14 by different trope signs. The melodies of Ruth’s speech are far simpler, even in her longer phrases, while Boaz’s continue to be more ornate. There are frequent uses of (קָנָא קָנָא) which has a more ornate tune associated with it.

Zarka segol: There is a striking change in the trope patterns in chapter 4. The signs (קָנָא קָנָא) are found here for the first time in the Scroll, in 4.1 and 4.4, both of which refer to legal proceedings. The Masoretes tried to create a “musical language” here that differed from the rest of the book.

SUMMARY

Jewish exegetes read biblical texts with the diacritical marks: they are a part of the punctuation but are also interpretation. Though trope was initially an oral tradition, notation systems were developed some time between the 6th and 8th century C.E. (Jacobson, 373). Aharon Ben-Asher is believed to have written the first complete codex of the Masoretic Bible in 930 C.E., and the Leningrad Codex of 1009 is purportedly based on Ben Asher (Jacobson, 378). Once editions with these marks were available, no Jewish exegete could ignore them in interpretation. Hidden meanings or stresses reveal themselves to the reader who is also reading the trope signs. Though I have not engaged in a detailed study of trope in the Scroll, I felt this area of inquiry could not be altogether ignored in the study of a biblical book.