The scroll of Ruth re-told through librettos and music: biblical interpretation in a new key
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Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 8    BEYOND RUTH: FUTURE PATHWAYS

Each librettist represented in this thesis reflected his own preconceptions and agenda by omitting, expanding, or altering scenes found in the Scroll. Some librettos foreground the Ruth-Boaz relationship, others, the Ruth-Naomi friendship. The composers reinforced these choices with a range of musical techniques.

Ruth would have been expected to predominate in all the works, yet she appears in a smaller percentage of scenes than in the Scroll in half the 19th century works. There seems to be a trend to diminish Naomi’s presence, though not dramatically, rather than to expand it, in over half of all the works. Very few works greatly increase Boaz’s presence, but virtually none reduces it.

The greatest change from the Scroll is the decreased role of the Narrator. In general, the more “dramatic” a work aspires to be, the less evident the narrator. This is true for Schumann, Fino, Berkeley, and Rumshinsky; the last three are operas, which would not be expected to utilize a narrator, and Schumann’s style is operatic. Cowen’s is the only 19th century oratorio without a narrator. Based on some of his writings (Appendix I, pp. 260-1), Cowen may have been trying to tweak the conventions of his day deliberately. Conversely, the presence of a narrator lends a tone of “authenticity” to a musical setting because the part of the narrator is closely linked to the Scroll itself, the Bible in general, and oratorio tradition (ch. 4, p. 85). This probably explains why the narrator predominates in Gaul and Damrosch, whose works were very conventional. Use of a narrator also adheres closely to the narrative style of the Scroll, which is why it is found in Mellers, Beecham and Aloni.

Ruth’s predominance varies between these works, yet her words of 1.16-17, “Entreat me not,” are found in each one, set to vastly contrasted music. Some settings are very fast and dramatic (e.g., Damrosch, Franck, and Schumann) while others are slower and softer (e.g., Goldschmidt and Gaul). Ruth’s attachment to Naomi is re-imagined in multiple ways by the kind of music chosen for her declaration of allegiance. My analysis in chapter 6 of how those exact same words were set to music by each composer provides a good example of musical midrash applied to a single aria; this concept can be traced throughout all the analyses in chapter 6.

Finding more Ruth-Boaz duets in the 20th-century than the 19th-century works (Table D, Ensembles) was a surprise. I had a preconception that in the earlier period, the “romance” would be of greater interest than in a later period, while in fact, the interest in the Ruth-Naomi relationship is virtually equal to the Ruth-Boaz one in the 19th century. In the 20th-century works, there is a love duet in all but in Beecham and Aloni, while in the 19th century, such a duet is only found in two works, Cowen and Fino. In spite of the label “Romantic” for the late 19th-century, the reluctance in that era to create a love story might stem from a traditionalist view of, and respect for, biblical writings. This is only speculation; understanding the social settings of these different composers is important, but such sociological aspects are beyond the scope of this thesis.

As a feminist scholar, I have been aware of increased interest in Ruth in the past few decades because of the Scroll’s story of a relationship between women. Brenner states in her Introduction to A Feminist Companion to Ruth that “The fact that the Ruth scroll is a ‘woman’s story’ makes it particularly attractive for feminist interpreters” (Brenner 1993, 10). A manifestation of greater interest even outside the academic community is the book Reading Ruth, where in the Introduction the editors describe the Scroll as “a story of woman caring and women plotting, women mourning and women rejoicing” in which “Daughter-in-law and mother-in-law,
two women who care for each other, displace the more common Western love story of older man marrying younger woman” (Kates and Renner, pp. six-xxii). Ruth’s relationships with both Naomi and Orpah were of interest to librettists and composers in both the 19th and 20th centuries, as verified by the presence of at least one ensemble (and often more) between two or three of the women in every work containing ensembles (ch. 7, p. 219).

The absence of a proactive God in the Scroll was dealt with in a variety of ways by the librettists and composers. Many choral praises of God were inserted, possibly indicating perceived audience expectations or the librettists’ and composer’s agenda, or both. Whether the librettists and composers thought that was the point of the Scroll, or wanted to satisfy people who came with that preconception, is a question that warrants future study.

As seen in Table F1, there was interest in making the characters more pious. The librettists and composers had a particular vision of the Scroll and of its characters, and placed references to God in their mouths for purposes that can only be guessed until further research is done.

Gaps in the original narrative left room for librettists and composers to create works which offer new keys for hearing and understanding the Scroll. Librettists and composers who set the Scroll all engaged in a creative gap-filling exercise of “what if...” and their answers to this question became a musical midrash.

What if... Ruth and Naomi pledged love or at least friendship to each other prior to Ruth’s marriage to Mahlon? That would explain the powerful bond between the women; Schumann suggests this possibility in a single line (ch. 6, pp. 159-160). That bond could also explain why Ruth never had children; she could have married Mahlon merely to stay close to Naomi. Ruth and Naomi could have also pledged faithfulness to one another at any point during their sojourn in Moab. Orpah never formed this alliance with Naomi, so it made no sense for her to follow the two women to their new life.

What if... Ruth and Orpah had only been married a matter of months or a year or two, out of the ten years that Elimelech’s family was in Moab? Then Ruth’s infertility would not really be an issue. The only hint in the text that it was an issue for the writer is in God’s involvement in Ruth’s pregnancy, recalling similar involvement in pregnancies of other biblical women (i.e., Sarah in Gen. 12.1, Rachel in Gen. 30.22).

What if... Orpah was a child bride, married off to an Israelite for some perceived economic or social benefit? If so, she was too young to follow Naomi to a strange land. That is what Berkeley suggests (p. 190).

What if... Orpah was so attached to Naomi and Ruth that she followed them all the way to Bethlehem, unable to face returning to a possibly hostile family reception in Moab? She would then have had to find her own way back there, which is suggested in Franck’s work (p. 137).

What if... Naomi and Boaz had known each other, even had a relationship, before Naomi married Elimelech and left Bethlehem? This intriguing possibility is raised by Fino (p. 145). It would explain Naomi’s reluctance to turn to Boaz when she returned. It might even explain why Naomi decided to play matchmaker; it would bring her close to Boaz again, in a non-threatening way.

What if... Ruth and Boaz felt a powerful attraction to each other? Or what if only one of the two felt this attraction? Could their meeting on the threshing floor have been chaste? Would Naomi have known of this attraction and suggested the encounter either because of, or in spite of, this factor? The deliberate ambiguity of the Scroll’s author becomes a gap filled with passionate declarations of love between Ruth and Boaz, or scenes in which Ruth tells Naomi
about her feelings for Boaz (Schumann, Rumshinsky). Several works feature a lengthy love duet (Fino, Schumann, Rumshinsky, Berkeley) between Ruth and Boaz, but half the works feature no such duet. Two works end with a wedding scene (Gaul, Rumshinsky), clearly indicating what the librettist or composer considered to be the point of the story.

What if...Ruth and Naomi were part of the crowd in the final scenes? In the Scroll, when a character does not speak in a scene and is not mentioned by the narrator, it is assumed she is not there. Yet Ruth and Naomi participate in ensembles in Act IV in several works, suggesting that they were present during Boaz’s legal proceedings. Visualizing their presence alters the feeling of the scene, which in the Scroll could be imagined to be populated entirely by men. There is no reason not to assume that Naomi might have even encountered Boaz in a public setting, either on her arrival in Bethlehem or later. This possibility is reflected in various ensembles featuring both Naomi and Boaz (Table D). No meeting between Naomi and Boaz is depicted in the Scroll, and this is perceived as a gap in need of filling; dramatically the whole story seems to make less sense without such a meeting.

What if...the Bethlehemites were furious at Naomi for leaving in bad times and returning when the famine was over? Their accusations give an opening to Naomi and Ruth to reveal their character by the way they respond. It also presents an opportunity for Naomi and Ruth to publicly show their loyalty to one another. This idea is found in Schumann (p. 158) and Berkeley (p. 193).

These possibilities are raised in the librettos, offering unexpected and diverse perspectives on the story. Such perspectives are facilitated by the numerous gaps in the original narrative (ch. 2, pp. 45ff). The addition of music offers the listener a different level of understanding. Music externalizes emotion according to set conventions, which can be understood and experienced on a purely emotional level.

In the final analysis, the impression left by characters in a literary, dramatic, or musical work may not precisely match the percentage of time that character is “on stage.” Many readers of the Scroll, when asked to talk about its plot, might focus on the story of Ruth and Naomi; yet my analysis (ch. 2, p. 23) showed that Boaz speaks more than double the words of the two women. Readers are aware of Boaz’s role, but do not necessarily see him as the focus of the work. The musical works either reflect or magnify the impression of Boaz’s insignificance.

Biblical scholars can now recognize music that is a new kind of “focalizer,” one which not only shifts the spotlight but also alters its color. The focalizer in these musical works is the combination of the librettist and composer (in a few instances these are the same person), working together to create a re-imagined Scroll. This thesis has articulated this double perspective in depth for the Scroll. Many other musical settings of biblical texts, scholars will discover, would benefit from discussion in this double perspective.

Illustrating the Paradigm

The analysis of the Scroll in this thesis is intended to be a paradigmatic model for analysis of musical settings of biblical narratives. The ideas and techniques found here can be applied to the large repertoire of musical works based on biblical texts that have not yet been examined from this double perspective. I am going to offer two examples which would benefit from this kind of analysis. The advantage of using examples such as these is their accessibility, which facilitates attaining stages three and four of research (Thesis Introduction, p. 3).
All the works discussed below are performed relatively frequently, and their scores and/or librettos can be found in libraries or purchased. The first example is a comparison between two settings of the biblical story of Samson, the second between two settings of Salome. Following the model of this thesis, the discussion moves from text analysis to midrash and from there to librettos and music.

Samson

Delilah is the only woman named in Samson’s story, and is arguably the most famous woman in the Book of Judges (Jud. 16.4-31); her name a synonym for the mature seductive woman. Though not identified as a prostitute, she was obviously a woman available outside marriage, overtly using sexual attraction to entice Samson. Delilah was often assumed to have...

Handel’s Samson was performed at De Nederlandse Opera in Dec 2003, with John-Mark Ainsley, Charlotte Hellekant, and Judith Howarth, with the orchestra Concentus Köln under Christopher Moulds.

Saint-Saëns’ Samson et Dalila was performed in 1999 in Madrid and Los Angeles featuring Plácido Domingo. Also in the cast in Madrid was Carolyn Sebron, with the orchestra Sinfónica de Madrid under Garcia Navarro; in Los Angeles the Dalila was Denyce Graves. Graves sang the role with Jose Cura at the Royal Opera House of Covent Garden in London in March-April 2004.

Massenet’s Herodiade was performed with Plácido Domingo in the tenor role at the Vienna State Opera in 1995 and the San Francisco Opera in 1994. The conductor in Vienna was Antonio Vivaldi, in San Francisco the Salome was Rene Fleming and the conductor Valery Gergiev. The opera was more recently performed at the Westford Festival in Dublin in 2000, with Bernadette Greevy, Gisselle Allen, and Idaes de Jong, conducted by Franz-Paul Decker.

Strauss’s Salome was most recently performed at the Metropolitan Opera in 2004 with Karita Mattila in the lead role, Valery Gergiev conducting. It was broadcast live on the Metropolitan Opera International Broadcast on 25 March 2004.

For Handel’s Samson the Core label release of 2003 features Thomas Randle, Mark Padmore, and Lynda Russell, the Sixteen Ensemble and L’Armonia e L’Inventione conducted by Harry Christophers. The 1994 Euldee das Aite Werk features Anthony Rolfe-Johnson, Robert Alexander, and Jochen Kowalski, the Artold Schoenberg Choir, Vienna Concertus Musicus, conducted by Nicolas Harnoncourt. The Eto Libretto 1993 release features Janet Baker, Helen Watts, and Robert Tear, the London Voices and English Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Raymond Leppard.

For Saint-Saëns’ Samson et Dalila, the 1998 Eto release features Jose Cura, Olga Borodina, Jean Philippe Lafont, the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Colin Davis. The 1992 Deutsche Gramophon release features Plácido Domingo, Elena Obraztsova, Renato Bruson, the Orchestra of Paris conducted by Daniel Barenboim. A 2001 historical re-release on EMI Classics features Jon Vickers, Rita Gorr, Ernest Blanc, the Paris Opera Orchestra conducted by Georges Prêtre.

For Massenet’s Herodiade, the 1995 Sony release features Plácido Domingo and Renée Fleming, the San Francisco Orchestra and Chorus, under Valery Gergiev. The 2001 EMI Classics release features Cheryl Studer, Ben Hepphner, Thomas Hampson, the Toulouse Capitole Orchestre under Michel Prunson. The 2002 Opera D’Orsay release features Nadine Denize, Ernest Blanc, Jean Baptiste, the ORTF Lyric Orchestra under David Lloyd-Jones.

For Strauss’s Salome, the 1999 EMI release features Hildegard Behrens and José van Dam, the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Herbert von Karajan. The 1991 Deutsche Gramophon release features Cheryl Studer and Bryan Hertel, conducted by Giuseppe Sinopoli. The 1991 Sony Classical release features Eva Marton and Bernd Weikl, the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Zubin Mehta. The 2002 RCA Victor re-release features Monierat Caballé and Sherrill Milnes, the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sirch Leonhard. The 2003 Opera d’Orsay re-release features Leonie Rysanek and Herberd Wächter, the Vienna State Opera Orchestra under Karl Bohm.

Handel’s Samson was published in Paris: Henry Lemarie & Co., 1911; and New York: G. Schirmer, 1900.


Salome was published in Berlin: Adolph Färner, 1906; in New York, F. Pullman, 1908, and Dover, 1981. A libretto with German and English was published in New York: G. Schirmer, 1964; Boosey & Hawkes, 1968. All of these can be found at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
been a Philistine in order to make the lesson of the story one of a warning against foreign women. Part of the androcentric agenda of biblical writers was to portray women as powerful and dangerous, yet still subject to control by men. The narrator of this story seems to attach the blame for Samson's downfall to women, who are themselves victims of exploitation, since the Philistine men act through Delilah, rather than the usual reverse (Leneman, 141).

Whoever was the guiltier party in the story of Samson and Delilah, both paid a price in the end. Samson dies as a hero, destroying himself along with the Temple of Dagon (Jud. 16:30). Delilah dies a textual death, vanishing from the story with her fate unknown to the reader (Leneman, 143).

Delilah's motives are never stated. Her primary motive could have been patriotism. The fact is, she betrays Samson for a price. If she loved him, this would show a lack of ethics and morality; yet nowhere in the text does she ever claim to love him. So Delilah is not in dire need of money: she simply engages in a business transaction, either out of patriotism or simple practicality. To call it greed would be an unwarranted value judgment. Once she has agreed to do the job, Delilah is not devious: she says exactly what she wants. She never says she loves Samson; she uses his emotions without compromising her own. Delilah's point of view is never given (Leneman, 144-5).

A close reading of the story of Samson and Delilah still leaves obvious gaps. Micke Bal highlights three unanswered questions: Why doesn't Samson reproach Delilah for her betrayal? Why does he accept her reproaches without giving his own view? And most vital of all, why does he finally give her the crucial information? (Bal 1987, 40)

Two opposing viewpoints have been offered to explain most of these gaps. Samson was either incredibly stupid, in which case the story could be read as an indictment against the institution of both Judges and Nazirites (since he was considered a Judge and a Nazirite); or he was too smart for his own good, and thought he could play games with Delilah and still come out ahead (Leneman, 148).

Later interpreters generally chose to keep Samson as a hero by in some way denigrating Delilah. Pseudo-Philo (1st century C.E.) was one of the first to retell the Samson and Delilah story. He combined the first four verses of chapter 16 with the subsequent verses:

Then Samson went down to Gerar, a city of the Philistines, and he saw there a harlot whose name was Delilah, and he was led astray after her and took her to himself for a wife. And God said, 'Behold now Samson has been led astray through his eyes...Samson's lust will be a stumbling block for him, and his mingling a snare. And his wife was pressuring him and kept saying to him, 'Show me your power and in what your strength lies, and so I will know that you love me.' ...the fourth time he revealed to her his heart. And she got him drunk, and while he slept, she called a barber and he cut the seven locks of his head (Pseudo-Philo 43, 5-7, in Charlesworth, 357).

The notion of making Delilah a respectable woman by marrying her off to Samson actually probably was motivated more by a need to make Samson, not Delilah, more respectable and settled. This idea, plus that of getting Samson drunk, was picked up by later writers who might have been familiar with this text.

In a much later period and different place, Baroque Europe, Milton wrote an epic poem in 1671, Samson Agonistes (Samson the Fighter), in which Delilah claims to have acted out of patriotism when she tries to be reconciled with Samson. In this work Delilah is depicted as "a full-blown enchantress, seductive, using all her charm for ignoble ends" (Phillips, 32).
Samson Agonistes opens in the prison, that is, near the end of the biblical story. Samson refers to Delilah as “that specious monster, my accomplished snare” (line 230, p. 53). Delilah appears only at line 710 (p. 67):

But who is this, what thing of sea or land?
Female of sex it seems...

Some rich Philistian matron she may seem;
And now, at nearer view, no other certain
Than Dalila thy wife (lines 722-724).

The two most famous musical renditions of the story of Samson and Delilah are by Handel (1685-1759) and Saint-Saëns (1835-1921). Handel had the idea of setting Samson’s story to music when he heard a reading of Milton’s Samson Agonistes in 1739. During the pauses, Handel improvised movements on the harpsichord (Hicks in New Grove vol. 10, 758). Newburgh Hamilton converted the poem into an oratorio libretto, using verses from Milton’s minor poems for some of the arias and choruses (Hicks, 758). The dramatic oratorio (reh. 4, p. 86) was completed in 1742 and first performed in London in 1743.

Most of the action takes place in the prison, and Delilah, “Samson’s wife,” appears only briefly in Act II to sing two successive arias (one is traditionally cut) in which she pretends to be penitent and submissive. Handel used two contrasting styles of choral writing, “exuberant and homophonic for the Philistines, solemn and polyphonic for the Israelites” (Hicks, 759). The solo arias convey different moods, from Samson’s bleak despair in “Total eclipse” to Delilah’s seductive “With plaintive notes.” This oratorio has occasionally been staged; it was staged in Falmouth, England, at which performance cuts were made, but the staging showed the work to be dramatic rather than devotional (Hicks, 777). It was also staged in a church performance at Guildford Holy Trinity Church, England (which I attended, 25.1.2002).

The libretto for the Saint-Saëns opera of 1877 is by Ferdinand Lemaire: the composer originally intended to write an oratorio but Lemaire persuaded him to turn it into an opera (James Harding, CD liner notes, Samson et Dalila, Erato 1998, 17). It was nevertheless performed as an oratorio in 1893 at Covent Garden because the English censor vetoed biblical topics in operas (Ratner in New Grove vol. 22, 125). Delilah is a cold, calculating seductress in this re-telling, a portrayal that has probably molded modern views of Delilah’s character far more than the biblical account ever did.

The story has been altered somewhat. In her first appearance, Delilah, in the company of other Philistine women, greets Samson in a public place. In the first of her three arias, “Printemps Qui Commence” (Act I, scene 6), she reminds Samson of their earlier liaison as her compatriots dance sinuously. Praising spring, she sings to Samson of how eagerly she awaits the renewal of their relationship. The listener is hard pressed not to feel some sympathy for her. The music paints a softer portrait of Delilah than the librettist probably intended! However, in her second aria, “Amour, Viens Aider Ma Faiblesse” (Act II, scene 1), the only one not sung for Samson’s benefit, Delilah shows her true colors. In this aria she invokes love to further her revenge. The music is a mixture of steely determination mingled with the voluptuous quality of her earlier aria (Earl of Harewood, in New Kobbe’s, 697). Such is the power of music to move the listener that even in Delilah’s famous seduction aria, “Mon Coeur S’Ouvre à Ta Voix” (Act II, scene 3), the music is so lush and seductive that the listener simply has to empathize with poor Samson. Who could resist such music? The fact that the biblical Delilah nags and cajoles rather
than seducing is immaterial to composers: seduction music is far more appealing than nagging music, so Delilah became imprinted in all opera lovers’ minds—and thereby in popular culture—as the temptress par excellence.

Saint-Saëns used varied styles in this opera, from the great religious chorus of Act I, to the Italianate love duet filled with chromaticisms in Act II, and the pseudo-orientalism (ch. 5, p. 97) of the ballet music in Act III (Benoit Dateurte, CD liner notes, Samson et Dalila. Frato, 1998, 20). Samson, a dramatic tenor, is portrayed through his music as an appealing hero and victim. The embellished story includes a scene depicting the blinded Samson grinding grain while he sings movingly of his agony at God’s abandonment. His aria “Vois ma misère” (Act III, scene 1) mingles with the plaintive voices of the captive Hebrews, who blame him for their plight. Delilah appears with the crowd in the final scene, mocking Samson just before he pulls the temple down. So her fate is clearly depicted, another alteration from the biblical narrative.

Samson is a dramatic tenor in both works, which was more unusual in a Handel work than one of the French Romantic period. Delilah is a soprano in the Handel and a mezzo in Saint-Saëns. Neither work is based on the biblical text. The most striking difference between the two works is in their focus. Delilah plays a major role in the Saint-Saëns, appearing in all three acts, whereas she only appears in the middle of the second act of the Handel. The main interest in the earlier work is on Samson, while in the later work it is on the relationship. This is also indicated in the titles of the two works.

An analysis of these Samson settings could be expanded upon, from this starting point, utilizing the tools and methodologies employed in this thesis. The final step in this analysis would be a comparison between particular elements in both librettos and scores, and the original biblical text, along with more detailed analyses of text and music.

Salome Hérodiade

The story about the death of John the Baptist is found in two gospels: Mark 6:14-29, and Matthew 14:1-12. The main difference between the two is that in Matthew, it is Herod, not Herodias, who wants to kill John. In both gospels Herod has John killed in response to Herodias’ (unnamed) daughter’s request for John’s head, which comes after Herod has promised to give her whatever she wishes.

The end of the story leaves an ambiguous impression of Herod because, notwithstanding his initial appreciation for John, he has him put to death. Herodias, on the other hand, appears as a more consistent albeit flat character, whose sole purpose seems to be John’s death. Her daughter’s actions, though not explicitly motivated, are judged by the reader in that light as she helps realize her mother’s interests. Although mentioned only in passing, the daughter’s dance plays a pivotal role in the story as the necessary condition and dramatic event that moves the plot to its fatal conclusion (Vander Stichele, 4).

The two most well-known operatic settings of this story are Hérodiade by Jules Massenet (1842-1912) and Salome by Richard Strauss (1864-1949). In an analysis similar in structure to what I am proposing here, Caroline Vander Stichele (lectio difficilior, 2001) discusses both of these works. The first impression one gets from these operas, she points out, is how different they are from the biblical narratives. To explain those differences, she first analyzes the gospel stories in question, then takes a closer look at Flaubert’s story Herodias, which served as source text for the opera of Massenet. Lastly, Vander Stichele analyzes Massenet’s opera Hérodiade and Salome by Strauss. In these analyses, she summarizes the story, discusses the representation of
the main female characters, Herodias and her daughter; and, finally, their presumed involvement in John's death.

Some of these topics are also covered in Bach's article "Directing Salome's dance of death" (Bach, 210-262), in which she asks the general question, "How did the fin de siècle Salomania begin?" (Bach, 217) Bach also points out the differences in later interpretations of the story, calling them "cultural appropriations" found in later literary, musical, and visual interpretations of the figure of Salome (Bach, 224).

Massenet was the most prolific and successful French composer of opera at the turn of the 20th century (Hugh MacDonald in New Grove, vol.16, 89). He based his opera Herodiade on a Flaubert story. An agent for Ricordi publishers called in a librettist, Paul Milhet, to help Massenet with his adaptation of the story. The vocal score was completed in 1879 but the director of the Paris Opéra refused to consider staging it because of the "biblical-amorous subject" (Macdonald, 90), similar to Saint-Saëns' experience with Samson et Dalila (p. 253). It was premiered two years later in Brussels.

After her discussion of the biblical story, Vander Stichele outlines both the Flaubert story and Massenet's libretto based on it. She notes the changes in focus both in plot and character, between Flaubert and Massenet's adaptations and the changes from the gospel version found in both. The plot is changed more dramatically in the Massenet, where Salome does not dance for Herod nor ask for John's head. These actions form the climactic moments of the Strauss opera.

The addition of musical elements would move this discussion to another level. For instance, the fact that John the Baptist is a tenor in the Massenet opera, and in love with Salome, immediately establishes him as a romantic and virile figure and creates a love interest. Vander Stichele focuses her attention on the female characters, yet it would be worth noting that the most well-known aria in the Massenet opera, "Vision Fugitif," is sung by Herod, a baritone. This aria, in which Herod sings of his obsessive love for Salome, is considered by some to be "one of the great baritone solos of French opera" (Harewood, 434).

Massenet depicts a "contrast between sensuality and asceticism" in the opera, along with much "exotic local color" (MacDonald, 94). The instrumentation is "heavily perfumed, with pseudo-orientalisms delicately sketched in" (Rodney Milnes, in New Grove Dictionary of Opera, vol. 2, 703). Massenet's word-setting was his most important contribution to French opera. He described in his autobiography how he would memorize his librettos and mull over them for weeks before setting them (Milnes, CD liner notes. Massenet, Thais. Decca 1998, 14).

Richard Strauss's Salome is based on an Oscar Wilde "stage poem" written in French and first performed, in 1896, by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris (Ross, vol. II, 2). It was a failure there, and was subsequently banned in England by Lord Chamberlain because of its inflammatory content. The German version was well received in Breslau in 1901 (David Murray, in New Grove Dictionary of Opera vol. 4, 146).

This work took many liberties with the original New Testament narrative. Yet Wilde's retelling is probably much more well known than the original story, and the opera lover cannot hear the name Salome without visualizing and hearing the sensuous, "orientalizing" music of the Dance of the Seven Veils. The narrative has been transformed and almost appropriated by its operatic adaptation.

Strauss first became interested in the Wilde play in 1902. After seeing a production in Berlin in 1903, he decided to set it to music. Not satisfied with the German versified version, he set the play directly, in Hedwig Lachmann's translation, making his own cuts and alterations (Bryan Gillham in New Grove vol. 24, 511). Wilde was apparently irritated by the "docility" of
the biblical Salome, who demands John's head in obedience to her mother. He found this characterization inadequate, lacking in imagination and passion, which drove him to create an excessive heroine (Bach, 239). The biblical figure of an unnamed dancing daughter of Herodias plays a minor role in the biblical text, and is dramatically transformed into the protagonist of a "visually horrific and exotic tale" which "challenges the drear biblical telling" (Bach, 219).

Utilizing the methodologies and paradigm expounded in this thesis would entail adding music to this analysis. The similarities Vander Stichele suggests between the operas of Massenet and Strauss would soon vanish, since Massenet's melodic style belongs to the period of French Romanticism, while Strauss's is Late Romantic German, usually considered early modern in style. Though fundamentally tonal, it has numerous bi-tonal passages (Murray, 149). Strauss found "a new, modernist voice for the stage" with Salome, which "resonated throughout a Europe preoccupied with the image of the sensual femme fatale" (Gilliam, 500). Within a year of the 1905 Dresden premiere, this succès de scandale was being performed throughout Europe and the U.S.A. (Gilliam, 500).

An interesting similarity between the two operas is that both end in Salome's death, not found in the gospel account, where the focus was the death of John the Baptist. The mother-daughter relationship is emphasized in both operas much more than in the gospel, with the result that blame for John's death is shifted to one or both female characters (Vander Stichele, 20). The interest in the two women, and the shift of blame, is apparent from the librettos, but approaching the operas from a musical perspective might yield different results.

Vander Stichele finds that both women are to some extent demonized. It would be very interesting to point out musical elements that accentuate this demonization. The part of Salome is taken by a soprano in both operas, but in Strauss it is a far more dramatic voice. John is a bass-baritone in the Strauss opera, but a tenor in Massenet's. His completely unromantic demeanor and music in the Strauss highlight the irrationality of Salome's attraction to him.

It is hardly surprising that librettists and composers from different eras and cultures chose to emphasize different aspects of these stories and their characters (Thesis Introduction, p. 5). Samson the questionable biblical hero becomes a hero of tragic proportions in oratorio and opera; and an unnamed daughter in a gospel account of the death of John the Baptist becomes romantically involved with John, or an obsessive necrophiliac kissing his severed head.

Transformations in the Scroll of Ruth retold are less vivid and dramatic, because the story itself is a simpler one. Yet each musical depiction of Ruth presents us with a different character: pious and sweet, passionate and determined, or anything between these extremes. Naomi is presented through her music as despairing and bleak, or trusting and steady. Boaz is anything from a pompous older man to a fervent younger lover. The librettists and composers worked together to create convincing and consistent portraits of these characters, however they may differ from the listener's preconception. Acknowledging the variety in these representations prevents the listener from harmonizing or universalizing characterization. The process of characterization is continual, not linear (Bach, 249, 262). The listener is free to reject any particular musical Ruth, but an encounter with this character in any of these works will forever alter that listener's reading of the Scroll. The music offers a new way to read the words. For example, the music suggests how Ruth feels as she swears her loyalty to Naomi, which the text alone never does. This is more than reading between the lines or in the margins: the spaces are filled with music, wordlessly but effectively filling the gaps.
RETURNING TO CASTELNUOVO-TEDESCO

We saw a glimmer of these possibilities at the beginning of this thesis, in the discussion of Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s short cantata *Naomi and Ruth* based on the first chapter of the Scroll (p. xii). The story is taken out of context because the remaining three chapters are not included. It differs in many respects from the works discussed in this thesis, primarily in its brevity and inclusion of only a partial text. There is a principle behind inclusion or exclusion: the choice of a partial libretto is also a choice. In Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s version, Ruth and Naomi are together forever; they never meet Boaz, and this different story is told through the music.

The composer’s choice of a soprano voice for Naomi and a female chorus for Ruth also differentiates this work from most other settings. This device in a sense de-personalizes the character of Ruth, or in the composer’s words, universalizes it. That unusual and fascinating choice suggests the vast range of possibilities available to the composer who sets biblical narratives.

To return to an earlier metaphor, that of the literary archaeologist (Introduction, p. 6; ch. 2, p. 52), Castelnuovo-Tedesco has built and decorated an unusual and beautiful room, but my interest in this thesis has been to explain how generations of readers have built an interpretive “home” for *Ruth* in which to comfortably dwell. Castelnuovo-Tedesco has given us only the entrance room. But that room served as an invitation to imagine, explore, and eventually inhabit the other “rooms,” or chapters, of the Scroll of Ruth.

CONCLUSION

The final result--the transformation of a biblical narrative into a different medium--will challenge many of our conscious and unconscious presumptions about the story. My hope is that this challenge will spark a new interest in both biblical scholars and musicians, spurring specialists in both fields to utilize this new key to biblical interpretation. This is a rich mine only waiting to be tapped by the curious biblical scholar with an interest in music, or by musicians drawn to the study of biblical texts. Musical works, both well-known and obscure, will benefit equally from this new approach. Collaborations should be encouraged, and this exciting research will hopefully lead not only to a new and different appreciation of works already in the repertoire, but also to the discovery and performances of unjustly neglected musical works based on the Bible. Such joint efforts will surely lead to greater public understanding of both the Bible and music.