# FROM THE MARGINS 1

The Bible in the Modern World, 18

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## WOMEN OF THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THEIR AFTERLIVES

edited by
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and
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# Abbreviations

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| BDB | Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) |
| JPSV | Jewish Publication Society Version |
| KJV | King James Version |
| NIV | New International Version |
| NJPSV | New Jewish Publication Society Version |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| OJPSV | Old Jewish Publication Society Version |
| *PMLA* | *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version |

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# Introduction

Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg

The women who occupy our attention in this volume are minor figures, women whose stories occupy little scriptural space and receive far less attention than the biblical matriarchs—not to mention the patriarchs, who overshadow the entire cast of characters. These women—often vulnerable, sometimes powerful—are glimpsed for only a moment before being written out of the script or simply disappearing. As our title suggests, they are women on the margins of Scripture. For us, however, the margin is a place one *cannot* simply overlook. Rather, the margin offers a vantage point from which to look around; one can see the center from the periphery and, by seeing it aslant, see it at an advantage. One thinks of what the butler saw, the slave girl overheard, the harlot figured out.

In the context of the Hebrew Bible, what does the margin represent? To begin with, it is whatever is 'not Israel'. The nation constructs itself over against what stands menacingly at its borders, threatening either to overwhelm by force or to dilute by intermarriage or religious syncretism. Expunge the Canaanites, renounce the foreign wives and their children! And yet if one succeeded in protecting the *central* by cleansing *the peripheral and impure*, what would be lost to Israel? What would the main line of the story be without the eccentric interventions of the Canaanite Tamar, the Moabite Ruth, or Rahab, the harlot of Jericho?

These figures stand at the edges of Israel, foreigners who come to be included (either scripturally or post-scripturally) in the lineages of the nation. Even within the people Israel, however, there is *a* margin and *a* center. The God of the Hebrew Bible is famously drawn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as to those males who follow in their genealogical line—prophets, priests, and kings. These men stand firmly at the center. Women are largely peripheral. Nonetheless, because human generation is so central to the life of Israel, women must by necessity play an essential role in the Hebrew Bible: they are its mothers. They gain their place at the center—a place not as established as their male counterparts'—once they bear children. Thus, even the women the tradition holds up as its matriarchs are often those who have been marginalized because of their barren wombs. But

even so, their marginalization is never complete. These women are given names—and, in the fullness of time, the blessing of fertility; they are afforded sufficient narrative space to grow into characters that can fully hold their own with their husbands: think of Sarah, Rebecca, both Leah and Rachel. But what about those female figures who never bear the favored son, never get the limelight, whose names are never given, whose scriptural appearance may be as brief as a line or two? Indeed, these are often known to us only as some man's mother, daughter, wife, sister—or simply as 'the woman' of a particular place.

It is these characters, about whom little is known or said in Scripture, who have fired our imaginations. They often represent male fears of female power, of the possibility that women might not merely be passive objects but agents—indeed, agents who kill, subvert political regimes, and undermine military command. Nor should we forget their specifically religious significance, the contribution they make to a more capacious, nuanced, sometimes problematic understanding of Israel and its God.

We approach these women from a range of perspectives. Many of us have accorded them sustained attention through 'close reading'; others have applied the insights of a variety of post-structuralist methodologies to make them shine. Our greatest corporate legacy is undoubtedly to feminist biblical scholarship, which is evident not only in the way we read the scriptural text in our individual essays but also through the indebtedness expressed in our footnotes and bibliographies. And yet, centuries before the feminist recuperative project, Rabbis and the Church Fathers also sought to know more about these 'little women'—what they meant, and how their fleeting moments fit into the larger story. It was Gregory the Great who said that in Scripture every fact reveals a mystery. We might add that for every woman at the margin of the Hebrew Bible there is a rich and complex afterlife, one to be found not only in midrash, commentary, or homily, but in poetry and fiction, in painting, sculpture, and music—even on the World Wide Web.

* * *

The concept that drives J. Cheryl Exum's 'Hagar *en procès*: The Abject in Search of Subjectivity' is abjection. In Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, the self develops through acts of separation and rejection. One becomes an 'I' by differentiating oneself from the Other—from the body of the mother, in human development, and from the surrounding nations in the case of ancient Israel. This process, furthermore, is unending: the self is never sufficiently established; its boundaries are always threatened by invasion. So it is that the chosen people maintain their special status by abjecting their closest neighbors, their 'relatives' in Moab and Ammon, in Edom and Egypt. To elaborate on this notion Exum examines the double

rejection of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 and 21, in which the biblical narrator can be seen maintaining boundaries, defending borders, and delineating the unique promise given to Israel. This is not done, however, with an easy conscience. The divine compassion shown to mother and child, the two theophanies that are accorded 'Hagar the Egyptian', are attempts to assuage guilt about the Other, to mitigate the rejection. But whereas Hagar is repressed—that is, 'banished to the unconscious'—the abjected Ishmael, as Abraham's seed, remains an ongoing threat. According to the divine oracle of Gen. 16.12, 'He shall dwell over against all his kin'.

In 'Bible, Midrashim, and Medieval Tales: The Artistic Journey of Potiphar's Wife', Ena Giurescu Heller traces the pictorial afterlife of Potiphar's wife. She finds that visual representations of this archetypal story—the attempted seduction of a chaste youth by a powerful older woman—are as much indebted to post-biblical expansions of the story as to the account in Genesis itself. Joseph's rebuff of Mrs Potiphar's advances comes to occupy a central place in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim literature, with all three traditions developing Joseph as a model of moral fortitude and unwavering faithfulness. As Joseph's virtue increases in later retellings, so too do the number of witnesses to it: characters such as a soldier, a child, and female attendants are added to the story as the generations pass. Christian representations not only depict these Jewish additions to Scripture; they in turn influence Jewish illustrations of the Joseph narrative. Heller's account of how the Joseph story accrues an afterlife in art underscores the ways that visual artists have not only responded to the Bible, but to earlier literary and artistic interpretations as well. Her essay leads us to view visual renderings of the story not simply as a dialogue between an artist and a text, but as a broad and multi-vocal conversation among one text, three traditions, and generations of textual and visual interpreters.

In her 'Saviors and Liars: The Midwives of Exodus 1', Esther Schor is interested in what she calls 'cascading acts of female righteousness' that open up the book of Exodus; she, however, focuses exclusively on the vocation of midwifery exercised by Shifra and Puah. Moving among the brief scriptural account, the Talmud, ancient rabbinic sources, and more recent scholarly readings, Schor explores the connection between the midwives and Moses. Both 'deliver' the children of Israel; both move between the private, domestic sphere and Pharaoh's 'inner sanctum of power'; both defy an absolute monarch and take the brunt of his wrath. Yet what is unique about the midwives pertains to their vocation: their association with Hebrew fertility, their refusal of genocide, their fear of God expressed in their defiance of the king. Schor is intrigued by the fact that the women's 'fear of the Lord' is recognized by God, as indeed was Abraham's 'God-fearing' in the Akedah. But rather than join the *midrashim* in their equation of the two—both receive blessings for Israel—she amplifies a major difference between

the patriarch and these women. The midwives' fear was not generally 'of God' but specifically of the God who commanded the Akedah: 'Their refusal to kill babies spurns a theology that would conscript the human love of parent for child as a proof of faith'. The defiance of Pharaoh also defies any call for the sacrifice of life. Schor ends her essay by turning to contemporary midwives who see Shifra and Puah as the founding mothers of their vocation. In the words of one practitioner, the ancient midwives performed the first act of civil disobedience on behalf of life; they answered 'to a higher law than the law of the land'. Or, as another said with clear delight, Shifra and Puah were renegades: 'They stuck up for mothers and babies'.

In 'Brides of Blood: Women at the Outset of Exodus', Jacqueline Osherow draws our attention to an anomaly in the Hebrew Bible: a cluster of female characters marshaled at the threshold of the text who in effect make possible the book that follows. In place of the male genealogies scattered throughout Genesis, we get women as the birth-givers, the agents of life. Coming in quick succession in the two opening chapters of Exodus, these include the midwives Shifra and Puah, Pharaoh's daughter, and Moses' mother, sister, and wife. They act on their own authority and judgment, apart from any divine command. They also appear at the head of a book deeply concerned with nation-building and yet are themselves indifferent to national identity and in some cases are of unknown origin. (The 'Hebrew midwives', for instance, may just as readily be understood as Egyptian 'midwives to the Hebrews'.) These women preside over birth, help to give life, and act to preserve it against the odds. Furthermore, they do so at a time when 'the Jews are not only excluded from earthly power but also unattended to by God'. Osherow notes that once the Exodus takes place, the feminine instinct to preserve life quite apart from nationality comes to an end: the same Miriam who entrusts to Egyptians the care for her younger brother will shake her tambourine exultingly at the slaughter of Pharaoh's chariots and his horsemen. Nonetheless, 'in the no-man's land between Pharaoh's knowing Joseph and God's knowing the Jews' situation', these women at the threshold reveal how power can be exercised through circumvention rather than through confrontation. For Osherow, this is a blueprint for how to behave in circumstances which the children of Israel will come to know all too well.

In 'God's Trophy Whore', Peter S. Hawkins looks at various permutations of Rahab the harlot of Jericho. He begins with her appearance in the ramparts of the doomed Canaanite city in Joshua 2, explores how she was taken up into the New Testament, and traces what happened to her subsequently in the interpretive hands of the Rabbis and Church Fathers. While for Jews Rahab is the first proselyte, a Gentile who joins herself to the house of Israel to become the ancestor of prophets and priests, Christians identify her as a foremother of Jesus, an exemplar of the virtues of faith and

hospitality, and a figure of *Ecclesia*, the Church. Hawkins brings these various traditions to bear on his reading of Dante's Rahab in *Paradiso* 9, where she receives her apotheosis as God's trophy whore, who, like a sunbeam on clear water, shows how 'the world below again becomes the world above'.

The move from margin to center involves asserting oneself in the (patriarchal) text. In 'How a Woman Unmans a King', Ken Stone's account of the Woman of Thebez in Judges 9, the woman at the margin literally inserts herself into the male: she penetrates Abimelech's head by dropping a stone on him, just as Jael had penetrated Sisera's temple with a tent peg earlier on in Judges. Both women assume power in stereotypical male fashion—not merely through force, but specifically through penetration from above. Both women unman their adversaries. There is considerable anxiety in the biblical accounts over this feminization of masculine warriors: Abimelech is insistent that he not be remembered as dying at the hands of a woman; Joab recalls the incident to King David as he plots the assassination of Uriah the Hittite in battle, 'because she represents an earlier moment of Israelite tradition when a ruler was unmanned in circumstances involving a woman'. The Woman of Thebez symbolizes male fear about emasculation and gender reversal. For Stone, this is no ancient history: even if the Woman of Thebez no longer has a place in our collective memory, the fear she once provoked is nonetheless all-too present today. He points to the ways that the semiotics of manhood permeates the present-day world of political affairs, such that the terror of being unmanned still plagues our contemporary politicians. Stone thus understands the Woman of Thebez to be a source of both anxiety and possibility. She is a figure whose 'undoing' of gender is, on the one hand, terrifying and, on the other, hopeful: she defeats a character who symbolizes a violent homo-gendered leadership that has its own terrifying hold on contemporary politics.

It is the rare reader of Scripture who is not troubled by the story of Jephthah's sacrifice of his only daughter in Judges 11. As Susanna Bede Caroselli notes in 'The Dissemination of Jephthah's Daughter', Jewish and Christian scholars alike seem always to have 'struggled with [this] narrative culminating in the forbidden practice of human sacrifice'. Likewise, painters have wrestled with how to cast this scene visually. Is the daughter to be seen as a type of Christ, the beloved child offered in sacrifice? Is Jephthah best understood as a model of faith and obedience in the manner of Abraham, who was also willing to kill his only child? Caroselli is not content just to consider how Jephthah and his daughter are depicted, but wants to know why they take the form they do. She finds illustrations that represent Jephthah as the resurrected Christ and the Daughter as Synagoga; that set the Daughter as a type of the Virgin Mary, who is also given over to God's service; that condemn the Daughter for being a slothful maiden who

lingered in her virginity and did not hasten to marry. That the depictions are so varied—and also so very troubling—compels us to continue to interpret and reflect on them. This ongoing attention to a story of human sacrifice is necessary, Caroselli argues, as long as humans suffer. To focus on the story and its reimagining is to recognize and acknowledge all human suffering.

Following Bakhtin, who argues that the 'theme' of a saying or proverb remains relatively stable while its 'meaning' depends on the context in which it is used, Katheryn Pfisterer Darr offers a close reading of the proverb performance of the Wise Woman of Abel in 2 Samuel 20. Although accorded only seven verses of textual space, the Woman is no bit player. She speaks courageously on behalf of her city, defending it from destruction at the hands of Joab with a short, brilliantly articulated challenge that not only keeps Abel safe but that makes her a byword within the court of David. She is also linked in Joab's mind to the Woman of Thebez: he treats her resistance with respect, not wanting to incur a similar fate at the hands of a woman who is set on protecting her own. Darr is interested in every aspect of the interaction between the pair, especially the way the indirection of a venerable proverb can defuse a volatile situation. Living proof that the tongue is mightier than the sword, the Wise Woman convinces the brutal Joab that his impending attack upon her city 'is ill-conceived, ill accords with their shared Israelite tradition, and illustrates his own folly'—all with a few brilliantly strategic words.

Cold and impotent at the end of his days, King David is given a beautiful virgin to keep him warm. Neither Scripture nor the premodern interpreters have much to say about this young woman, Abishag the Shunammite, but she is referred to by a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, for whom she connotes a wide variety of things: a very beautiful young woman, a virgin, a Shunammite. Paradoxically, she is a symbol of age, impotence, decay, loss, and death. She is object, possibly subject. An electric heating blanket, but possibly a nurse or even a treasurer to the king. David's last wife or a cast-away after the death of Adonijah. A symbol of the throne, of succession and sedition. She becomes the locus of male fantasy and fears, of female anxiety and also female power. In 'From Biblical Blanket to Post-biblical Blank Slate: The Lives and Times of Abishag the Shunammite', Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg traces the emergence of a post-biblical Abishag, noting that this elusive figure becomes whatever it is later writers want her to be: she is the locus for reflections on youth *and* aging, on beauty *and* ugliness, on chastity *and* sexuality. She is a blank slate onto which we project our anxieties, fears, and fantasies.

In 'Is Naomi a Liberal Secularist? The Politics of Loss and Redemption in Jonathan Edwards's Sermon, "Ruth's Resolution"', Jay Twomey takes the book of Ruth, often read as a domestic drama with national implications, out

of the national realm entirely and looks at it in terms of politics more broadly construed. Twomey suggests that Ruth—as one who identifies herself publicly with Naomi, as one whose identity is constructed entirely in relation to another—could be seen as a danger to liberal democracy, which demands that 'ardent attachment of any sort…must remain private and depoliticized'. Naomi, by contrast, could be read as the classical liberal subject who 'can manage her affect intelligently, actively, without being consumed by it'. Her political identity is constructed apart from any deeply held commitments to others or to God. Moreover, Twomey conjectures, Naomi might even be considered a pluralist, if we focus on her toleration of her daughters-in-law and their divergent decisions—Ruth to follow Naomi and to enter Israel, in every sense; Orpah to return to Moab. Drawing on concepts drawn from political theory, Twomey reconsiders Jonathan Edwards's sermon on Ruth 'in order either to recover or construct democratic possibilities in the person of Edwards's Naomi'. Through his (mis)reading of Edwards, Twomey casts Naomi as a liberal secularist, someone who does not create new law but rather a 'space of free choice' for her tiny community. In creating this democratic, pluralistic space, she allows Orpah and Ruth to 'come to embrace…drastically different paradigms for themselves'.

Martien Halvorson-Taylor looks carefully at the commonly held assumption that Franz Kafka's writing is not only biblically fraught but, in Robert Alter's characterization, 'an elaborate network of conflated allusions' to various scriptural texts. In her essay, 'The Strange Case of the Disappearing Woman: Biblical Resonances in Kafka's Fräulein Bürstner', she takes up a particular aspect of the intertextual relationship between the book of Job and *The Trial*. Although the lady who shares Josef K.'s rooming house is as apparently marginal to the action of the novel as is Job's wife to the events of his story, in both cases the woman appears only to disappear, and her relative absence becomes an excuse for projection and misinterpretation. Nor is Job's wife the only female figure from the Hebrew Bible to be at play in Kafka's Fräulein Bürstner. Halvorson-Taylor links her as well to Potiphar's wife and the Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9, each of whom complicates our sense of Josef K.'s character and protested innocence while remaining 'barely known' herself, an enigma who resists interpretation. In spite of their anonymity, however, the women Halvorson-Taylor examines all tell us something important about the men central to their tales.

While some readers of the book of Job understand the prose narrative that opens and closes the work as a late addition intended to domesticate the potentially radical body of the work, Erin Runions judges the frame story to be as troubling as the book's middle. It is specifically the unnamed Ms Job's presence in the frame that makes Runions reluctant simply to dismiss Job's beginning. In 'Ms Job and the Problem of God: A Feminist, Existentialist,

Materialist Reading', Runions focuses on Ms Job's urging her suffering husband to 'bless God and die'—a suggestion that has almost always been read as a euphemism for 'curse God and die'. She reclaims Ms Job from those interpreters who, like her own husband, have condemned her as a foolish woman or worse. Instead, Runions sees Ms Job's proclamation as part of the text's critique of Job and his wealth. Her rebuke is shorthand for a contestation of the 'rigid class and ethnic boundary lines' that Job, from the midst of his own private chaos, would like to see restored. More than this, in fact: he is 'thoroughly convinced of his rightful economic place within a system of cosmic moral hierarchy'. Job's material success results, in his view, entirely from his righteousness. The text, however, does not coincide with Job's vision of the world. When God eventually speaks to Job and upbraids him for failing to understand the order of the universe, Ms Job subtly receives her due. She had understood the disjunction between moral worth and material wealth. That God ultimately returns to Job all that he had—and more—is not to be taken as proof that Job was right, Runions argues. Rather, it is confirmation of the existentialist's suspicion—and possibly Ms Job's as well—that 'there is no relationship between daily circumstance and the world that transcends it; …between the daily class conflicts…and the cosmic order'. Curse or bless God, the book of Job seems to say: it makes no difference. And in this way, it aligns itself exactly with Ms Job.

# HAGAR *EN PROCÈS*: THE ABJECT IN SEARCH OF SUBJECTIVITY*

J. Cheryl Exum

> The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*.
>
> …the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame.
>
> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*

Lest my title give the impression that what follows is a Kristevan reading of the story of Hagar (if one can speak of a minor character as having a 'story'), I should warn, or perhaps, better, reassure the reader that this is not my intention. Rather, I approach Kristeva's oeuvre as a *bricoleuse*, appropriating her concept of abjection and some of her terminology, such as 'subject in process' and 'abject', for my purposes, to describe what I see taking place in a perplexing and disturbing biblical story.[1] Abjection seems to me especially relevant for analysing the story of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21 both because the book of Genesis is about identity formation—a question running throughout is who belongs properly to 'Israel' and who does not—and because of the abrupt, almost violent way that Hagar and Ishmael—that is, what is perceived as 'not-Israel'—are cast out, jettisoned or abjected in Israel's attempt to construct itself as an independent subject, an 'I'. In Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, the subject is in process, or on trial (*le sujet en procès* carries both meanings). Subjectivity is tenuous and fluid; there is no such thing as a fixed and stable 'I'. Abjection is an early stage in the development of subjectivity, a stage in which the infant begins to develop a sense of self, whose borders it seeks to establish by abjecting or rejecting

* Research for this article was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the United Kingdom.

1. I have taken this approach to the account of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in Gen. 21.8-14 in 'The Accusing Look: The Abjection of Hagar in Art', *Religion and the Arts* 11 (2007), pp. 1-29, and part of my discussion here draws on that analysis.

what seems to be a part of itself but what it also perceives as threatening the fragile boundaries of its self (initially the mother's body). But abjection is more than a stage through which one passes on the way to some other stage. 'Imaginary uncanniness and real threat', the abject is always with us. It is whatever 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'[2] Because the subject is always in process, never finished, never complete and never able to create stable boundaries between itself and the world around it, the abject remains a threat to subjectivity against which the subject must maintain vigilance.

### *Israel as a Subject in Process in the Book of Genesis*

Can we speak of *Israel* as a subject in process, an 'I' seeking to establish itself in relation to the world around it? The biblical narrator encourages us to do so by personifying Israel for us, in the persons of Abraham and his offspring. A central concern of the patriarchal stories in Genesis is the issue of Israel's identity. Israel alone receives the special promises of God, while its relatives—the Ishmaelites, the Edomites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Midianites, the Arameans—are excluded. Throughout Genesis, Israel is continually defining itself over against its neighbors, whose relation to Israel is described in terms of complex family relationships. Who constitutes the 'self' that calls itself 'Israel', the chosen people, the people of the covenant? Who is not part of this 'self'?[3]

The 'father' of Israel, Abraham, is introduced in Genesis 11 and becomes in Genesis 12 the bearer of the divine promise.[4] Like the infant, for whom, according to Kristeva, the first thing to be abjected is the mother's body, the place of origin that is both 'self' and 'other', Abraham's first step in forging his identity is to separate himself from his origins, his ancestral home in Mesopotamia: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you' (Gen. 12.1).[5] To Abraham God

2. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (trans. L.S. Roudiez; New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

3. This is a historical, as well as a psychological, question: what different peoples made up ancient 'Israel'? What were their origins and how did they come together? What interests me here is the biblical construction of 'reality', how the biblical writers explain 'Israel'.

4. In this article, I use the names Abraham and Sarah throughout. The biblical text uses Abram and Sarai until ch. 17, where God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah.

5. In speaking of 'Israel' as a 'self', I refer to the people as a whole, the characters who personify them (Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, etc.), their god, and their spokesperson, the narrator. 'People who hear "voices" listen to split-off parts of themselves', as

promises land (the land of Canaan), numerous descendants (as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore, Gen. 15.5; 22.17), and a blessing that Abraham can confer upon others ('I will bless those who bless you, and those who slight you I will curse', Gen. 12.3). This promise is passed on from father to son: to Isaac (Gen. 26.3-5), to Jacob (Gen. 28.13-14; 35.11-12), and to Jacob's sons, the eponymous ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 49).[6]

Others, both distant and close relations, are excluded: Moab and Ammon, the children of Abraham's nephew Lot by his own daughters; the Ishmaelites, the subject of our story; and Abraham's sons by Keturah, among them Midian, who at one point in the narrative seems to be confused with the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37.25-28).[7] Abraham's grandson Jacob (who receives the name 'Israel') must separate himself from his uncle Laban (Aramea/Mesopotamia), who threatens to include Jacob, his wives, and his children in his—Laban's—extended family: 'The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children', he maintains (Gen. 31.43).

Although Egypt, represented in our story by Hagar, is not related to Israel by ties of blood, it nevertheless presents a threat to Israel's self-identity. As a powerful nation, a civilization with an advanced culture, and an influential force in the ancient Near East, its attractions are obvious. Israel must protect its self against the appeal of Egypt (absorption into the desired 'other') if it is to maintain its boundaries. Indeed, at the end of Genesis, the boundaries between Israel and Egypt are nearly dissolved when Joseph/Israel is virtually assimilated into Egypt as Zaphenath-paneah, an Egyptian official with an Egyptian wife (Gen. 41.45). Only abjection on a major scale, the exodus, enables Israel to assert its ideal of itself as separate, 'a holy nation'

Francis Landy observes in a study of Gen. 22, a story closely related to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, namely, Abraham's near sacrifice of his other son, Isaac. Or, to put it differently, as Landy does: 'The voice is experienced externally, as the voice of God, and yet is an inner voice, since the narrative has hypostatized in it its creative and questioning drive, and since every outer voice, especially a disembodied one, corresponds to some inner reality. Otherwise it could not be heard.' See Francis Landy, 'Narrative Techniques and Symbolic Transactions in the Akedah', in J. Cheryl Exum (ed.), *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1989), pp. 1-40 (2); reprinted in Francis Landy, *Beauty and the Enigma and Other Essays on the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 123-58.

6. On the 'promises to the fathers', see Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (trans. Bernhard W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice–Hall, 1972), pp. 54-58; Claus Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Narratives* (trans. David E. Green; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); David J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), pp. 29-47.

7. Note that we are told that Abraham 'sent them away *from his son Isaac*', Gen. 25.6.

chosen by God (Exod. 19.6).[8] Already in Genesis 12, which prefigures the exodus story,[9] we find a flirtation with assimilation into Egypt when famine causes Abraham to settle in Egypt, where he passes Sarah off as his sister and she is taken into the harem of the pharaoh. Israel's brief sojourn in Egypt on this occasion provides, as rabbinic tradition records, an explanation for how Sarah came to have an Egyptian servant, Hagar.[10] 'Hagar the Egyptian' is how the biblical narrator introduces her in both chs. 16 and 21 to foreground her foreignness, her exclusion from the 'self' that is Israel. Hagar the Egyptian is desirable as a surrogate mother because Sarah is sterile, and she is perhaps also the object of Abraham's sexual desire, though the text is silent about this (and thus, we might conclude, psychologically suspect).[11]

The real threat to Israel's identity in Genesis 16 and 21, however, is not Hagar as representative of Egypt, the potentially desirable 'other', but Ishmael, the son she bears to Abraham, who poses a threat to Israel's proper line of descent through Sarah's son, Isaac (Gen. 17.18-21; 21.12).[12] The biblical narrator views the abjection of Hagar and Ishmael from the Abrahamic household as necessary, since the Ishmaelites are a people separate

8. See Diana Lipton, *Longing for Egypt and Other Unexpected Biblical Tales* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), pp. 13-49.

9. A famine sends Israel to Egypt and Israel settles there, the promise that they will possess the land of Canaan is thus threatened (as is the promise of many descendants when Pharaoh takes Sarah into his harem), God afflicts Pharaoh and his house with plagues, which causes Pharaoh to send Israel away.

10. For the view that Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter, see *Gen. R.* 45.1.

11. Artistic representations of the scene of Sarah bringing Hagar to Abraham frequently expose what the text represses, Abraham's desire and the fascination with the other, the forbidden foreign woman. For examples and discussion, see Christine Petra Sellin, *Fractured Families and Rebel Maidservants: The Biblical Hagar in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Literature* (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2006), pp. 69-90.

12. The 'true' Israel cannot have a 'foreign' mother. For a pure line of descent to be maintained, Israel's mother should be from the same family line as the father. Endogamous marriage, the marriage of men to women from their own patriline, is the ideal in the patriarchal stories since it ensures that Israel will not have to share its inheritance with 'foreigners'; see Naomi Steinberg, 'Alliance or Descent? The Function of Marriage in Genesis', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 51 (1991), pp. 45-55; Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 10-14; J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press; Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993), pp. 107-10. But who is 'foreign' or 'other' and who is not is not straightforward; the Bible does not give a clear rationale for including some and excluding others, a pattern established as early as the story of Cain and Abel in Gen. 4. Interestingly, whereas Hagar and her son are cast out, when Jacob has sons by his wives' servants, Bilhah and Zilpah, the women remain part of the extended family and their sons are absorbed into 'Israel'; see Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 122, 131-34.

from Israel and have no share in Israel's special covenant with God. But it is problematic as well because the Ishmaelites are also seen to be related to Israel. As one of the first in a series of abjections, or separations, the dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael is one of the most forceful. Why, we might ask, are Ishmael and Hagar so violently expelled? The answer would seem to be that the greater the challenge that the self perceives to its boundaries, the stronger its reaction ('I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*').[13] As Abraham's own flesh and blood, Ishmael radically threatens the fragile boundaries of Israel's proper 'self'.[14]

## *Powers of Repetition*

The abjection of Hagar from Abraham's house takes place twice. In Genesis 16, Hagar, who is pregnant with Ishmael, runs away because her mistress Sarah treats her harshly but is told by God to return and submit. Later, in Genesis 21, Hagar and her young son Ishmael are sent away into the desert by Abraham, who is first told by Sarah and then commanded by God to drive them out.[15] The repetition of the story in its different forms functions as a textual working out of a difficult and traumatic process, and reveals the struggle the subject-in-process Israel has in drawing boundaries.[16] There is

13. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3, italics hers.

14. Only one other separation will be as traumatic, when Jacob usurps his brother Esau's blessing and thereby excludes him (that is, Edom) from the line of descent that constitutes Israel.

15. The traditional (source-critical) view in biblical criticism saw the two accounts, each concluding with a theophany to Hagar, as variants, and attributed the material in them to different sources (e.g. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 6th edn, 1964], pp. 226-33; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2nd edn, 1930], pp. 320-21; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* [trans. John H. Marks; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961], p. 226; E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964], pp. 153-57; Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977], p. 248; and, more recently, Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993], pp. 82-110; Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], pp. 37-40). Increasingly, scholars are questioning this hypothesis (e.g. T.D. Alexander, 'The Hagar Traditions in Genesis XVI and XXI', in J.A. Emerton [ed.], *Studies in the Pentateuch* [Leiden: Brill, 1990], pp. 131-48). There are important differences in the two accounts, but the theme is the same, the abjection of Hagar.

16. In the case of stories in which the same themes are replayed and the same issues revisited, repetition appears to function as a textual working out of a particular problem or concern, repeated because the problem is not so easy to resolve. Such stories invite consideration from a psychoanalytic perspective; see, e.g., Exum, *Fragmented Women*,

confusion within the self, seen in the conflict between Sarah and Abraham, both of whom represent Israel. Abraham is ultimately responsible for the abjection, since only he, and not Sarah, has the authority to send Hagar and Ishmael away.[17] In each version, however, the narrator makes the patriarch Abraham look better by having Sarah bear the brunt of the blame.

In an effort to come to terms with the abjection, the biblical narrator tackles the issue twice. Each time he has to work hard not only to make the dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael palatable, less painful for the 'self', but also to justify it to the reader, for there is a real risk that a reader could find it difficult to comprehend, if not morally reprehensible, that a man would send his wife and young son into the desert with only a loaf of bread and a skin of water. (Even if she is not his primary wife and even if he does have another son.) Meir Sternberg describes this kind of narrative situation well. '[F]aced with a task of persuasion that bristles with difficulty', he writes, 'the biblical narrator would rather go to extra compositional trouble than simply load the dice for or against the problematic character or cause'. As an example of this narrative strategy Sternberg mentions the two accounts in Genesis 16 and 21:

> In each variation on the principle, the narrator so extends and divides his treatment as to lead up to a crucial scene that might otherwise *prove too much for the reader*: the first episode softens our response to the second by getting us used to the idea of the antagonist's deprivation or, more radically, splitting it into two gradated and differently motivated acts on the protagonist's part.[18]

In order to prevent the reader from feeling too much sympathy for Hagar and Ishmael, and thus becoming too critical of Abraham/Israel, the biblical narrator suppresses Hagar's and Ishmael's point of view until their expulsion has been accomplished. It is Israel's point of view, represented by Abraham and Sarah, that is important, not Hagar's. The only glimpse we get of Hagar's perspective before the dismissal is the narrator's comment that, after Hagar realizes she is pregnant, her mistress was 'little in her eyes'

pp. 148-69, for discussion of Gen. 12, 20, and 26, which, like Gen. 16 and 21, are versions of the 'same' story repeated at different points in the narrative. On repetition within the same story, that of Lot and his daughters in Gen. 19.30-38, see J. Cheryl Exum, 'Desire Distorted and Exhibited: Lot and His Daughters in Psychoanalysis, Painting, and Film', in Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley (eds.), *"A Wise and Discerning Mind": Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long* (Providence: Brown University), pp. 83-108.

17. Although Sarah lacks the authority to abject Hagar on her own, she does have power: she is able to influence Abraham by complaining about Hagar's attitude toward her ('I was small in her eyes'), venting her anger on Abraham ('My wrong is upon you!… Yhwh judge between you and me!', 16.5), or urging him to take a particular course of action (21.10).

18. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 494, italics mine.

(16.4). Otherwise both versions objectify Hagar and Ishmael in an attempt to distance the reader from them. Only after Hagar flees (ch. 16) or is driven out (ch. 21) does the narrator allow Hagar to emerge briefly as a subject with whom the reader is likely to empathize.

### *Hagar as a Minor Character, Acted Upon (Genesis 16.1-6 and 21.8-14)*

The two versions of the dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael illustrate just how difficult abjecting Hagar and Ishmael is for Israel. In the first version, Genesis 16, the narrator tries to abject Ishmael before he is born. He seeks to make Ishmael's expulsion easier by focusing on his mother Hagar, whom he depersonalizes by objectifying her. Hagar, the Egyptian slave, neither speaks to Abraham or Sarah nor is she spoken to by them. She is only spoken about and acted upon.[19] Sarah *takes* Hagar and *gives* her as a wife to Abraham (v. 3). Hagar's point of view, how she feels about being given to Abraham as a wife for the purpose of bearing a son for Sarah, is withheld from the reader. As a slave, she has no choice. Abraham has sexual intercourse with Hagar (v. 4) and she conceives (she is the subject of the verb, but conceiving is not something over which she has control). Pregnancy, however, confers upon Hagar a certain degree of subjectivity. She *saw* that she had conceived, and she *looked down* on her mistress (literally, 'her mistress was small *in her eyes*', v. 4).[20] Hagar's own emerging subjectivity is threatening to Israel's sense of self, and enough to enrage Israel, represented by Sarah—'when she *saw* that she had conceived, she *looked down* on me'—

19. In Gen. 21 Hagar is referred to as an אמה and once as Abraham's אמה; in Gen. 16 she is Sarah's שפחה. Both terms refer to a female servant or slave, but may indicate that Hagar has a different status *vis-à-vis* Sarah and Abraham as well as a different status after the birth of the child. Because Hagar is a servant, it is not entirely unexpected that she is treated as an object and not as a person in her own right. Perhaps what *is* unexpected is the fact that, given Hagar's status, the biblical narrator later treats her as subject in 16.7-14 and 21.15-21.

20. It would seem that pregnancy gives Hagar a higher status in Abraham's household than she had before, which leads her to look down on Sarah, who is sterile—a situation that reflects the Bible's patriarchal ideology, according to which motherhood gives women status, and a woman's reaction to pregnancy and motherhood can only be feelings of pride, satisfaction, and fulfillment; see Esther Fuchs, 'The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible', in Adela Yarbro Collins (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 117-36; and Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 44-90. But let me try another interpretation: could it also be that Hagar has little regard for Israel because of the way Israel has treated her, because Israel has used her as a surrogate mother for its own interests and because she does not want to be a part of the 'self' that is Israel?

whose harsh treatment of Hagar causes her to flee. By representing Hagar as departing of her own volition, in effect abjecting herself, the narrator endeavors to make Israel seem less culpable. But there is another way of interpreting her flight, to which I will return below.

Hagar's flight from Abraham's household poses a problem because Abraham does not have another son—yet. It is still possible that the son promised to Abraham (Gen. 15.4-5) will be Ishmael. Hagar will have to return and give birth to Ishmael, and Isaac will have to be born, before Israel can successfully abject Ishmael and his mother. Hagar returns, for the time being, instructed by the divine messenger to submit her 'self' to Israel.

The birth of two sons to Abraham, one by Hagar the Egyptian and the other the divinely promised son by Sarah, creates once again a crisis within the subject (Gen. 21.8-14). Sarah calls for expulsion. Abraham is displeased. God sides with Sarah. As in ch. 16, Hagar is objectified and denied subjectivity, and so too is Ishmael. Sarah tells Abraham to 'cast out *this slave* with *her son*, for *the son of this slave* shall not be heir with my son Isaac'. God, like Sarah, refers to the abject impersonally as 'the lad', 'your slave' and 'the son of the slave'. The narrator uses similar language, underscoring Hagar's otherness by calling her 'Hagar the Egyptian', and, rather than referring to Ishmael by name, emphasizes his status as abject by calling him 'the son of Hagar the Egyptian', as though he were not also Abraham's son.[21] Only Abraham sees things differently. What Sarah calls for is 'exceedingly evil in Abraham's eyes because of his son' (v. 11).[22] Abraham has fatherly feelings toward Ishmael. Nothing, however, is said about his feelings for Hagar.

Whereas Sarah appears to lack the quality of mercy, God compensates for his harsh judgment by promising to make a great nation of Ishmael:

> Do not let it be evil in your eyes because of the boy and because of your slave. Do all that Sarah tells you, because your offspring shall be named through Isaac. I will make a nation of the son of the slave also, because he is your offspring (vv. 12-13).[23]

The promise here, however, is not for the sake of the victims but because Ishmael is Abraham's offspring: 'your seed', as opposed to the more personal

21. The narrator probably uses this language in v. 9 because he is describing Sarah's point of view. We get Abraham's point of view in v. 11, which informs us that Abraham sees Ishmael as 'his son'.

22. Often toned down in translations as 'very displeasing in Abraham's eyes'. Apart from 16.15, where Abraham names 'his son'—at this point his only son—this is the only time in the story that Ishmael is identified as Abraham's son. In v. 13 he is referred to as Abraham's offspring (זרע).

23. Both Ishmael himself and Abraham's descendants through Isaac are designated by the same term, 'offspring' (זרע), but *Israel* will trace its descent through Isaac.

'your son'. Ishmael will be the father of a nation. But not the chosen nation.[24] Perhaps Abraham is consoled by this promise; in any event, he sends Hagar away, with Ishmael.

In both accounts of the abjection, the narrator manages the reader's sympathy with Hagar and Ishmael, keeping it at a minimum, by not giving the reader access to Hagar's and Ishmael's point of view.[25] He struggles to justify the abjection, first, by making Hagar partly responsible (she flees), and then, by focusing on the threat to Israel's identity rather than on the expulsion itself, to which he gives the barest attention possible (one verse, Gen. 21.14). He endeavors to make Abraham seem less cruel and more caring, though at Sarah's expense. And he assures us that Ishmael will have a future as a great nation, albeit separate and over against the chosen people, Israel (16.10-12; 21.13, 18). These various narrative transactions reveal the narrator's unease about the treatment of Hagar and Ishmael, if not a sense of guilt. Something more is needed to ameliorate the trauma experienced by the 'self' that is Israel and to justify the ways of Israel to the reader. Nothing less than a theophany will do, a *deus ex machina* to resolve the problem of the abject.

## *After Abjection: Hagar's Bid for Subjectivity (Genesis 16.7-16 and 21.15-21)*

Whereas Hagar is by and large objectified in both accounts of the dismissal, in her confrontation with the divine messenger she becomes a narrative subject in her own right, a speaking subject who voices her distress ('I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai', 16.8, and, more poignantly, 'let me not look upon the death of the child', 21.16) and an object of divine compassion. Furthermore, Hagar, the abject, is accorded the honour of seeing and hearing God.[26] Few people are granted this privilege in the Bible, and only one is both a woman and a foreigner.[27] Why Hagar? Could it be that God's

24. Elsewhere the victims receive greater consideration when the promise is given (16.10-12; 17.20; and the sequel to the expulsion, 21.18-21), but it remains a kind of compensation. Ishmael is an 'also ran', and the promise that he too will be the father of a great nation serves as his consolation prize; it makes the reader feel better. Cf. Vawter, *On Genesis*, p. 216: 'For the moment, at least, the exclusivism that tends to characterize biblical history is put in abeyance, and we are invited to empathize with the feelings and humanity of those who in its purview were destined not to stride its stage but only to view it from the wings or the pit'.

25. Apart from 16.4; see above.

26. It is not unusual in theophanies like Gen. 16 and 21 for there to be no clear distinction between God and messenger/angel of God.

27. Another woman who witnesses a theophany is Samson's mother (Judg. 13), and another foreigner who is the recipient of a theophany is Balaam (Num. 22.31-35).

unprecedented concern for Hagar and Ishmael in Gen. 16.7-14 and 21.15-20 is the biblical narrator's way of compensating for the ill treatment Hagar and Ishmael receive at the hands of Israel? Consider what the narrator has achieved: Sarah is blamed for the expulsion, Abraham looks better because he opposes it; now God, who took Sarah's part but reassured Abraham about Ishmael's future, looks even better.

Both Hagar's flight in ch. 16 and her departure in ch. 21 are the result of rejection by Israel, Israel's refusal to accept Hagar and Ishmael as belonging to its 'self'. Away from Abraham's household, Hagar begins to emerge as a subject. Her point of view is no longer suppressed. But this is not all. *Hagar* at this point becomes a subject-in-process, seeking to establish *her* subjectivity by abjecting Israel. I mentioned above that the first version of the expulsion, in which Hagar runs away because Sarah maltreats her, is the narrator's first attempt to rid Israel of what he regards as not properly part of Israel's 'self', Hagar and, more importantly, the yet unborn Ishmael. But because Hagar is represented as fleeing of her own volition, her flight can also be interpreted as her attempt to construct herself as an independent subject by abjecting Israel, separating herself from the threat Israel poses to her autonomy: 'I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*'.

But, as we have seen, in ch. 16 Hagar cannot yet abject Israel because she is bound to Israel by the unborn child, who is Father Abraham/Israel's child. God therefore intervenes to send her back. Before she returns, however, she is permitted a measure of subjectivity. In 16.8, for the first time, Hagar is spoken to, and, for the first time, she speaks. A divine messenger addresses her by name with a question, 'Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' Ironically her reply, 'from my mistress Sarai', answers both parts of the question: she is fleeing from Israel and she will soon be going back there, for in the next verse the angel tells her to return and submit to Sarah's harsh treatment. We are repeatedly told that the angel speaks to Hagar, which makes it all the more apparent that Hagar does not respond:

> *The angel of Yhwh said to her:*
> 'Return to your mistress and be maltreated at her hand'.
>
> *The angel of Yhwh said to her:*
> 'I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude'.
>
> *The angel of Yhwh said to her:*
> 'You are with child and will bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael because Yhwh has given heed to your affliction…'

Hagar's silence all this time is perhaps telling, a sign that she does not want to go back, that she wants to abject Israel. When she speaks again, it is both about and to this numinous being: 'She called the name of Yhwh, who spoke to her, "You are god of seeing"' (or 'You are God who sees me').[28] Hagar, the Egyptian, gives Yhwh, who is Israel's god, a name that acknowledges a connection between herself and this god, a god who will come to her aid again. But back in the Abrahamic household, after she bears Abraham a son, Hagar as subject recedes from view. Abraham—not Hagar as the angel had foretold—names 'his son, whom Hagar bore', Ishmael, thereby laying claim to Ishmael as part of Israel's 'self'.

Everything changes, of course, with the birth of Isaac, the true Israel. Although, as Abraham's son, Ishmael is the real threat to Israel's proper self—'the son of this slave shall not inherit with my son, Isaac'—the narrator manages to avoid saying either that Abraham sent Ishmael away or that Ishmael goes away. He makes Hagar alone the object of the dismissal and the subject of the verbs 'go' (הלך) and 'wander' (תעה):

> Early next morning Abraham took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He placed them on her shoulder, with the child, and sent her away. She went, and she wandered in the desert of Beersheba (21.14).

The inclusion of Ishmael here, or, as the narrator refers to him, 'the child', seems like an afterthought. He is included almost incidentally, along with the meager provisions Abraham gives Hagar when he sends her away. The bread and water are mentioned first, as if the narrator would like to 'forget' about Ishmael.

One can see why the narrator would downplay Ishmael's role in the events leading up to the expulsion, but why, after the expulsion, is Ishmael still referred to only as 'the child' (ילד) or 'the boy' (נער)?[29] Hagar never calls him 'my son' or 'my child', nor does God, in his conversation with Hagar, call him 'your son'. On the one hand, we can see the continued use of this impersonal language as the narrator's way of distancing the reader from Ishmael. But since these verses also show us Hagar's point of view, the impersonal language also reflects Hagar's distancing of herself from the child. For the second time, Hagar tries to establish her subjectivity by abjecting Israel. Having left the household of Israel, she abjects what still

28. The meaning of the name is debated. The form may be an abstract noun, 'seeing' (see BDB, p. 909a); or we could read the consonantal text as a participle with a first-person suffix, 'who sees me', which is how the Septuagint and Vulgate understand it. Speiser (*Genesis*, p. 118) suggests the form may be intentionally ambiguous.

29. There does not appear to be any difference in meaning between the terms.

connects her to Israel—the child—by casting the child away, throwing him under a bush. We might consider how Hagar's situation as a subject in process (a minor character, a foreigner, a secondary wife, and a mother) is like and unlike that of Abraham, the major character, the patriarch, the father of Israel. For Abraham, Ishmael is 'not self' because he is the child of Hagar the Egyptian. For Hagar, Ishmael is 'not self' because he is Israel's child. Like Abraham, she needs to abject Ishmael in order to become an independent 'I', to establish borders for her self. Why should Hagar not do what Abraham did, and abject the child? Because God instructs Abraham to abject Ishmael, but he instructs Hagar not to.

Most commentators have little to say about Hagar's throwing the child away under a bush. Some interpret it as an act of tenderness, a caring mother's gentle placing of her child where she will not have to watch him die.[30] But one need only look at the 127 occurrences of the verb used in this verse to recognize how untenable this position is. The verb שלך means 'to throw' or 'to throw away'.[31] When people who are still alive are the object of שלך, they are thrown out or thrown down to their deaths. Joseph's

30. JPSV, for example, translates, 'she left the child under one of the bushes'; Vawter (*On Genesis*, p. 247), 'she put the child down under a shrub'; Speiser (*Genesis*, p. 154), 'she left the child under one of the shrubs'; see also Phyllis Trible, 'Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing', in Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (eds.), *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), pp. 33-69 (48); Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 83.

31. The object of the verb שלך is always a something thrown, that is, a projectile, whether it is an object (see, *inter alia*, Exod. 4.3; 15.25; 32.19, 24; Lev. 14.30; Num. 19.6; Deut. 9.21; Judg. 9.53; 15.7; 2 Kgs 2.21; 4.41; Isa. 2.20; Ezek. 7.19; 20.7, 8; Nah. 3.6; 2 Chron. 30.14; 33.15) or a person or persons (living or dead) or body part. For example, Joram's body is thrown on the plot of ground belonging to Naboth (2 Kgs 9.25, 26); Sheba's head is thrown down from the wall at Abel (2 Sam. 20.21, 22); the worshippers of Baal are killed and their bodies thrown out of his temple (2 Kgs 10.25); the body of a man is thrown in haste into the grave of Elisha and he comes back to life (2 Kgs 13.21); the body of the king of Babylon is thrown away, and, unlike the bodies of other kings, it is denied burial (Isa. 14.19); the slain are thrown out and their corpses left to rot (Isa. 34.3); bodies are thrown into the streets with no one to bury them (Jer. 14.16); Jeremiah prophesies that Jehoiakim will be buried with the burial of a donkey, his body thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem (Jer. 22.19) and also that his dead body will be thrown out to the heat by day and the frost by night (36.30); dead bodies are thrown into a cistern (Jer. 41.9); when God punishes Israel, dead bodies will be indiscriminately thrown out (Amos 8.3). For examples of living persons as the object of שלך, see the text above and n. 33 below. The verb is also used of God expelling or banishing his people from his presence or from their land, Deut. 29.28; 2 Kgs 13.23; 17.20; 24.20; Jer. 7.15; 22.28; 52.3; Pss. 51.11; 71.9; 102.10; 2 Chron. 7.20. Throwing away is the opposite of keeping (Eccl. 3.6).

brothers throw him into a pit; they do not lovingly place him there. Pharaoh commands that every boy born to the Hebrews should be thrown into the Nile—not for a toddler's swimming lesson.[32] Jeremiah is thrown into a cistern. He is let down by ropes, but this is hardly a solicitous action since the intention is that he should die of hunger (38.6-9). Similarly, Hagar throws Ishmael under a bush for him to die there.[33]

Phyllis Trible, following Victor Hamilton, appeals to the use of שלך for lowering a dead body into a grave as evidence that Hagar's is a loving act. 'Hagar does not cast away, throw out, or abandon her son; instead, she prepares a deathbed for "the child"', she maintains.[34] Hamilton observes, 'Obviously, carcasses are not hurled into their grave. They are deposited there with dignity.'[35] This may be true for burials in general, but not when bodies are the object of the verb שלך. In these cases, bodies are not treated with dignity.[36] On the contrary, the use of שלך in reference to casting aside a dead body, like its use in reference to throwing the living to their deaths, supports my proposal about Hagar's throwing Ishmael away as abjection. A dead body is unclean, abject.[37]

Having thus sought to abject the child, Hagar goes and sits opposite him 'at a distance a bowshot away'. She does not sit near him, watching over him, as Trible, for example, would have it. Trible goes to some length to argue that Hagar's ministrations on Ishmael's behalf are all compassionate and that '[c]ontrary to translations that place Hagar at a distance from the child, the entire sentence can be rendered, "She went and sat by herself in

32. The infants should be thrown into or, perhaps better, exposed on the Nile (see M. Cogan, 'A Technical Term for Exposure', *Journal for Near Eastern Studies* 27 [1968], pp. 133-35)—in either case abjected.

33. Other examples include personified Jerusalem, who is thrown out or exposed in the open field because she was abhorred (abject) on the day she was born (Ezek. 16.5); the king of Tyre, who is thrown to the ground by God (Ezek. 28.17); the women of Samaria, who will be thrown into Harmon (Amos 4.3); Jonah, who is thrown by God into the deep (2.3); the Egyptians, thrown by God into the sea like a stone (Neh. 9.11); captives thrown down from the top of a rock and dashed to pieces (2 Chron. 25.12).

34. Trible, 'Ominous Beginnings', p. 48.

35. Hamilton, *Genesis*, p. 83.

36. For example, in Josh. 8.29 the body of the king of Ai is thrown at the entrance of the gate of the city and a heap of stones raised over it; in Josh. 10.27 the bodies of five enemy kings are thrown into a cave and stones placed at the mouth of the cave; in 2 Sam. 18.17, Absalom's body is thrown into a pit and a heap of stones raised over it; in Jer. 26.23 a prophet who offended the king is slain and his body thrown into the burial place of the common people.

37. One need think only of the biblical laws concerning contact with a corpse; see also Julia Kristeva's classic essay on 'Semiotics of Biblical Abomination', in *Powers of Horror*, pp. 90-112.

front of him, about a bowshot away"'.[38] One wonders how far Trible thinks a bowshot is. Presumably the narrator has an archer with some experience in mind;[39] perhaps even one skilled with the bow like Ishmael (v. 20), since the reference to the bowshot anticipates Ishmael's later association with the bow. The point is that Hagar does not want to watch the child die. She throws him under the bush for him to die there and goes some distance away so she will not have to watch. If Hagar is a devoted mother, one might wonder why she does not want to comfort her dying child in her arms rather than sit where she will not have to watch him die.

As we saw with Abraham, it is no easy matter to abject what seems to be a part of the self but is also perceived as threatening the tenuous boundaries of the self. For Hagar too the process is traumatic. She tries to sever her connection to Israel by abjecting Ishmael, but she does not want to see the child die. A theophany again supplies a solution. God opens Hagar's eyes so that she sees a well of water. The text does not say that God created a well of water,[40] but rather that Hagar sees a well that she had not seen before. Why has she not seen it? Does she not want to, just as she did not want to see the child die? Is this why she needs her eyes opened? Alternatively, has God hidden the well from her until now? If so, why?

The narrator has difficulty deciding who is the object of divine attention, mother or child, for after Hagar seeks to cast Ishmael off, mother and child are no longer treated as one unit. Hagar weeps, but it is the voice of the child that God hears.[41] God hears the voice of the boy 'from where he is' (21.17), abjected by his mother, just as he had been abjected by his father. For a second time a divine messenger addresses Hagar by name, with a question, 'What troubles you, Hagar?'[42] In contrast to ch. 16, however, he does not wait for an answer. He instructs her to care for the child and promises to make a nation of him.

Divine sympathy for Hagar's plight is similarly stressed in 16.11, 'Yhwh has given heed to your maltreatment', and Ishmael's name, meaning 'God has heard', will provide a lasting reminder of this. Is this divine compassion

38. Trible, 'Ominous Beginnings', p. 48, following Hamilton, *Genesis*, p. 76.

39. The distance depends on many factors, such as the type of bow, type of arrow, and skill of the archer; see R. Miller, E. McEwen, and C. Bergman, 'Experimental Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Archery', *World Archaeology* 18 (1986), pp. 178-95. Speiser (*Genesis*, p. 155) thinks the form is probably dual, 'two bowshots'.

40. As he does for *Israelites* fleeing from *Egypt* (Exod. 17.6; Num. 20.8; cf. also Judg. 15.19).

41. For this reason, some translations read 'the child lifted up his voice and wept' in v. 16 with the Greek. The divine response in v. 17 points in two directions: 'What troubles you, Hagar?' to Hagar; 'God heard the voice of the lad', to the child.

42. Here simply 'Hagar', not 'Hagar, servant of Sarai', for she is no longer Sarah's servant.

a sign of a guilty conscience? Do the two theophanies to Hagar and the promises she receives assuage Abraham/Israel's guilt, a guilt that besets the biblical narrator?[43] In addition to guilt over abjecting a part of the 'self', what about guilt resulting from Israel's attraction to the 'other' that leads Abraham to take Hagar as a wife in the first place?[44] Both versions resolve Hagar and Ishmael's desperate situation with a promise not unlike that given to Israel:

> The messenger of Yhwh also said to her, 'I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude' (16.10).[45]
>
> The messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, '… Get up, lift up the lad and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him a great nation' (21.17-18).

Whatever the motivation, sympathy or guilt or both, the theophanies and the promise concerning Ishmael serve as a gesture of recognition, a sign of concern for the 'other'. The account of the dismissal ends in what seems to be a resolution, a sort of muted 'they lived happily ever after', with God showing a greater fatherly interest in Ishmael than Abraham displayed:

> God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran. His mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt (21.21).

Readers of the story may find here some consolation, but this is not quite a storybook ending, and Ishmael, the abject, does not go away, but hovers at the edges of Israel's consciousness, a reminder of the unstable boundaries of the self that is Israel, and a threat to borders, system, and order:

> He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against all and the hand of all against him. He shall dwell over against all his kin (16.12).[46]

43. In each of the theophanies, there is some confusion in the text at a key moment, the moment when God responds to Hagar's plight. Did Hagar *see* God (Gen. 16)? Whose voice did God hear, Hagar's or Ishmael's (Gen. 21)? The confusion is noteworthy because, like the story of Hagar and Ishmael's abjection, it occurs twice. Is the narrator intentionally ambiguous? Has the text suffered corruption at the hands of scribes uneasy about the details of a theophany to a foreign woman?

44. One could argue that Abraham's desire for Hagar is displaced, projected onto Sarah as her desire for a child. The narrative presents the idea that Abraham should marry Hagar as Sarah's idea, so that Sarah can be held responsible for her own unhappy situation.

45. The promises sound very much like those made to Abraham; cf., e.g., Gen. 12.2; 13.14-16; 17.4-5.

46. Ishmael returns home to bury his father (Gen. 25.9), but he is not reintegrated into the Abrahamic family.

And what about Hagar? Unlike Ishmael and his descendants the Ishmaelites, Hagar disappears altogether from Israel's story. This is more like repression than abjection: the repressed (Hagar) is banished to the unconscious, whereas the abject (Ishmael) lingers in the conscious.[47] At the end of the second version of her 'story' (21.21), Hagar slips back into obscurity, just as she did at the end of the first version, when Abraham, instead of Hagar, named 'his son'. In the last verse of her 'story', Hagar, whom the narrator and God have referred to by name, is no longer 'Hagar' but only 'his [Ishmael's] mother'. In 21.15-21, meanwhile, Ishmael has undergone a transition: at first 'the child', he becomes the subject of the promise, the one from whom God will make a great nation—in contrast to ch. 16, where the promise was made to Hagar ('I will greatly multiply *your* descendants…'). Ultimately Ishmael's future, not Hagar's, is what most concerns the biblical narrators, because, as 21.11 makes clear, he is *Abraham's* son. Hagar is 'his mother'. Nevertheless, it is no small matter that Hagar becomes a subject in the story, even if only briefly. Indeed, as I have sought to show, she attempts to assert her subjectivity in a manner more dramatic than commentators have been willing to recognize: by abjecting Israel. Moreover, at the end of the story in Genesis 21, Hagar once again asserts her 'self' over against Israel. She does for Ishmael what Abraham does for Isaac: she procures a wife for her son from her own people, Egypt. Hagar no longer has any connection with Israel, and the last word in the story of Hagar the Egyptian is 'Egypt'.

47. Outside the Hebrew Bible Hagar has long attracted the attention of readers who want to know more about her. For an overview of Hagar in Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, see the articles in Trible and Russell (eds.), *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*.

# BIBLES, MIDRASHIM, AND MEDIEVAL TALES: THE ARTISTIC JOURNEY OF POTIPHAR'S WIFE

Ena Giurescu Heller

The encounter between a chaste youth and a powerful older woman, an attempted seduction which the youth resists, is a universal story. In the ancient Mediterranean, the Egyptian *Tale of Two Brothers* was known as early as the fourteenth century BCE; a Greek version was popular at least from the ninth century on, to name just two.[1] In the book of Genesis, it is folded within the story of Joseph: while in Potiphar's service, the handsome young Joseph catches the eye of the master's wife, who tries to seduce him on a day when they are alone in the house. Joseph refuses her advances and flees, leaving his coat behind. Rebuffed, Mrs Potiphar tells her husband that the 'Hebrew slave' tried to rape her, and uses the coat as incriminating evidence, which lands Joseph, once Potiphar's trusted advisor and overseer of the household, in prison (Gen. 39.5-20).

It can be argued that this is an essential episode within the plot line, as it puts in motion an entire series of events which helps shape Joseph's character and story: without the failed seduction he would not end up in jail, start interpreting dreams, earn the Pharaoh's attention and, ultimately, his trust.[2] On the other hand, it is only one incident among many that weave together this complex biblical narrative. Yet in post-biblical literature the episode takes on a life of its own, almost out of proportion to its modest original role within the larger narrative.[3] Due at least in part to its usefulness as a moral lesson and cautionary tale, the story captures the imagination of the literary and visual interpreters of all three Abrahamic traditions. In fact, it occupies

1. Shalom Goldman, *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Islamic Folklore* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 32-33.

2. Thus Potiphar's wife can be said to fill a positive narrative role as she initiates the story line which ultimately sets the stage for Exodus; see Carol L. Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross. S. Kraemer (eds.), *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 184.

3. James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 21-26.

a central place in both Jewish and Islamic literature, which embellish, elaborate on, and even spin other tales off the original biblical narrative.[4] Midrashic literature seeks to elucidate certain details on which the Bible remains silent or offers contradictory information.[5] Joseph emerges either stronger and more impressive in his moral steadfastness (as the attempts at seduction multiply and become harder and harder to resist), or, less often, more vulnerable to Mrs Potiphar's charms but ultimately choosing virtue over sin.[6] It is this moral strength, Joseph's unwavering devotion to his masters (both in this world and the next), that make him a symbol of faithfulness for Jews, and a precursor to both the Christian and Muslim gods. Thus in the late Meccan period, Joseph is often mentioned as a role model for Muhammad, while Christians consider him an ante-type for Christ.[7] In the Christian interpretation, which often pairs Old Testament characters and stories with New Testament ones, seeing the former as prefigurations of the latter, the story of Potiphar's wife is an allusion to the Passion of Christ and the institution of the new law. This interpretation casts Mrs Potiphar as Synagoga (the old law), unsuccessfully trying to tempt Christ; the coat that Joseph leaves in her hands signifies either the body he sacrificed on the cross or the veil that hid the Holy of Holies in the temple, which tore as Christ dies, and thus marked the end of the old law and the beginning of the new (as recounted in Mt. 27.51).[8]

It is this body of post-biblical literature—rabbinical exegesis, Christian writings and medieval popular fables—rather than the biblical text alone, that shaped the history of artistic representations of Potiphar's wife from the late antique through the Baroque periods, in both Jewish and Christian

4. See, among others: the study by Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, for Jewish legend; M.S. Stern, 'Muhammad and Joseph: A Study of Koranic Narrative', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44.3 (July 1985), pp. 193-204, for Muslim commentary, and Goldman, *Wiles of Women*, for both.

5. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, esp. pp. 28-124.

6. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*. II. *From Joseph to the Exodus* (trans. Henrietta Szold; Johns Hopkins Paperback Edition; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998; originally published 1909–38 by the Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia), pp. 53-54.

7. André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origin* (Bollingen Series; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 140; Stern, 'Muhammad and Joseph', p. 193.

8. Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (trans. Janet Seligman; Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1971), p. 110; Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*. II. *Iconographie de la Bible, l'Ancien Testament* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), p. 164. Another reading has the story prefiguring the chastity of Joseph during his marriage to the Virgin Mary; cf. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Dictionary of Women in Religious Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 298.

renderings.[9] This essay offers an introduction to the artistic journey of this biblical tale. The artworks discussed span a thousand years, different countries and cultures; what connects them is the story they sketch about how Christian and Jewish patrons and artists carefully chose specific textual sources (or a weaving of sources) for the story of Potiphar's wife in accordance with the mores of their times, the tradition to which they belonged, or a pointed contemporary message they wanted to convey.

As early as the sixth century, artistic representations of the story of Potiphar's wife reflect knowledge of extra-biblical material, including details and characters not present in the scriptural account but added in order to enrich the story. The *Vienna Genesis*, a lavish sixth-century Byzantine illuminated manuscript probably made in Eastern Byzantium, includes a two-tiered narrative on two consecutive pages. On folio XVIr (Fig. 1 [next page]), Joseph is shown fleeing from Mrs Potiphar while she clings at his purple cloak. Its color is perhaps not accidental in the context of imperial Byzantium. Mrs Potiphar is seated on a monumental, throne-like piece of furniture which some scholars interpreted as an imposing bed, linking it to the Jewish legends in which she feigns illness on that particular day so she can remain alone in the house when everybody else is out celebrating a festival of the Nile.[10] An alternate reading could have her seated on a bench, with the semi-circular colonnade crowned by a prominent triple cornice and situated immediately next to a door representing the entrance to the house. It was this vestibule where, according to the same Jewish legend, she sat waiting for Joseph after she had dressed herself in the most exquisite vestments and precious jewelry: 'She rose up and ascended to the hall of state, and arrayed herself in princely garments…and afterward sat herself down at the entrance to the hall, in the vestibule leading to the house, through which Joseph had to pass to his work'.[11] Both these readings point to knowledge of rabbinical interpretations of the biblical story, as do subsequent episodes illustrated in the manuscript. To the right of the door Joseph is depicted again, this time with no cloak over his tunic, standing outside and looking back (as if contemplating the unavoidable implications). Next to him are two women, one of whom has a baby in a crib. Underneath there are three women, one holding, and another bathing, babies.

9. While the literary history of this story, particularly within rabbinic exegesis and Jewish folklore, has received thorough scholarly attention, to my knowledge we lack a comprehensive exploration of its artistic journey.

10. Katrin Kogman-Appel, 'The Sephardic Picture Cycles and the Rabbinic Tradition: Continuity and Innovation in Jewish Iconography', *Zeitschrift fur Kunstgeschichte* 60.4 (1997), pp. 451-81 (478).

11. Ginzberg, *Legends*, p. 53.

Figure 1. *Vienna Genesis*, fol. XVIr, sixth century
(Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek).
Courtesy of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

These additional characters do not seem to have been mentioned in either scripture or later commentary, and have been interpreted by Kurt Weitzmann as 'additions beyond the requirements of the text': genre figures that are not part of the narrative but fill the simple function of taking up space reserved for the illustrator and which otherwise would have remained blank.[12] In the second edition of his book *Illustrations in Roll and Codex*, Weitzmann assumed that these additional scenes may derive from midrashic literature but did not give any specifics.[13] A later study by Michael Levin attempted to identify these characters and link them to the main story, with differing degrees of success.[14] He identified the woman standing at the right, dressed in blue and spinning, as an astrologer, and the woman next to her, holding a rattle above a baby's crib, as Potiphar's wife and her adopted daughter Osnath or Asenath. He did not find, however, an adequate iconographic interpretation for the figures in the lower register, a standing woman holding a baby, and two seated women spinning, one of them with an older child tugging at her garment. Here Weitzmann's 'filling figures'

12. Kurt Weitzmann, *Illustrations in Roll and Codex* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 165-66.

13. Weitzmann, *Roll and Codex*, addenda to p. 106.

14. Michael D. Levin, 'Some Jewish Sources for the Vienna Genesis', *The Art Bulletin* 54.3 (September 1972), pp. 241-44.

seems to have remained the only accepted interpretation. Yet I wonder whether the presence of children may not refer to a later episode in the story, present only in rabbinical literature, where Potiphar's infant child is temporarily given the gift of speech to intercede on Joseph's behalf as he was being flogged 'unmercifully' by Potiphar's men: 'God opened the mouth of Zuleika's child, a babe of but eleven months, and he spoke to the men that were beating Joseph, saying: "What is your quarrel with this man? Why do you inflict such evil upon him? Lies my mother doth speak, and deceit is what her mouth uttereth."'[15] A stunned Potiphar tells his men—who otherwise may have killed the offender—to stop, and turns Joseph over to the courts. The presence side-by-side in the miniature of an infant and a young child (who could speak in Joseph's defense) may allude to this narrative detail.

The story continues on folio XVIv (Fig. 2), which depicts Potiphar's return, the accusation by Mrs Potiphar, and the corroboration of the story by members of the household.

Figure 2. *Vienna Genesis*, fol. XVIv, sixth century
(Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek).
Courtesy of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

The presence of additional characters in these scenes, both male and female, similar to the 'extras' on the previous page, sheds further light on

15. Ginzberg, *Legends*, p. 57. This story is also picked up by the Qur'an and Muslim commentary; see John MacDonald, 'Joseph in the Qur'an and Muslim Commentary: A Comparative Study', *The Muslim World* 46 (1956), pp. 113-31 (127).

the complex tapestry woven from different literary and legendary sources, all familiar to the patrons and artists involved in the creation of this early Christian manuscript. In the biblical story, Mrs Potiphar took advantage of the fact that nobody else was in Potiphar's house on that fateful day and used it as the opportunity to approach, yet again, Joseph. When he refused her and fled the house she 'called onto the men of the house'—we are however not told when, or how, they had returned—and gave them her version of the attempted rape. Yet in the miniature, on the right of the upper register, she has one of her female companions standing behind her as she tells her husband the story; below, she and her husband are surrounded by both men and women, some of whom are corroborating her story by pointing at the incriminatory evidence (the purple cloak fragment).

The presence of female household members in this miniature bespeaks knowledge of early midrashic commentary, possibly the text known as *The Assembly of Ladies*.[16] There, Mrs Potiphar's obsession with Joseph is not a secret but rather a well-known fact, and a subject of gossip among the ladies of the Egyptian court; after being rebuffed she tells them her version of the story and co-opts them as witnesses in front of her husband. The inclusion of such extra-biblical details in the *Vienna Genesis*, and particularly the knowledge of midrashic literature, poses some interesting questions. Were midrashic stories simply used to enhance, embellish, or elucidate the biblical narrative, or were they sometimes (re)interpreted to fit Christian theology and symbolism?[17]

If Jewish legends and rabbinic commentary infiltrated Christian iconography, Christian art in turn influenced later Jewish images. The *Golden Haggadah*, a Spanish manuscript (c. 1320) which includes a biblical picture cycle from Genesis and Exodus preceding the text of the Haggadah, is a case in point.[18] This manuscript is one of a group of illuminated Passover Haggadot dating from the fourteenth century that contain both compositional and iconographic patterns pointing to Christian pictorial sources.[19] The seduction scene (Fig. 3) presents clear affinities with the *Vienna Genesis*, indicating that earlier Christian models were doubtlessly known to the

16. The text, which circulated widely, in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, as well as other languages, is hard to date with precision; it circulated widely in the seventh–eighth centuries through its inclusion in the *Midrash Tanhuma*, but would have likely been formulated earlier. See Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, p. 29.

17. Further study is needed in order to formulate even tentative answers to these questions.

18. The *Golden Haggadah* includes 14 full-page miniatures, illustrating Gen. 2.19 to Exod. 15.20, with captions that contain elements derived from contemporary midrashim. See B. Narkiss, *The Golden Haggadah: A Fourteenth-Century Illuminated Hebrew Manuscript in the British Museum* (London: Eugrammia Press, 1970).

19. Kogman-Appel, 'The Sephardic Picture Cycles', p. 454.

artists responsible for this manuscript. Since the *Vienna Genesis* itself incorporated elements of midrashic literature, we begin to grasp the complex relationship between Jewish and Christian thought, literary and artistic sources, that took place throughout the Middle Ages in the elaboration of biblical iconography.

Figure 3. *Golden Haggadah*, fol. 13v, c. 1320 (British Library).
By permission of the Trustees of the British Library. MS Add.27210

In the *Golden Haggadah*, Potiphar's wife is shown in her chamber, sitting in bed: the image is consistent with the story of the feigned illness which prevented her from joining the other (Egyptian) members of the household to the festival on the banks of the Nile. Joseph, being a foreigner, was not supposed to attend such celebrations and was thus expected to come and attend to the daily business of the household. In this scene he is depicted running away from the bed, his head turned backwards to observe Mrs Potiphar grabbing hold of his cloak. Also similar to the *Vienna Genesis* is the return of Potiphar in the left-hand-side scene, entering the house from the left. Although she is in bed, Mrs Potiphar seems rather dressed up for the occasion, reminding us that she had plotted this all along and made an effort to show herself to Joseph at her most attractive. Rabbinic interpretation mentions her precious jewels, but one detail here seems incongruous both with such sources and with the Genesis text itself: the crown on her head. This detail, inconsistent with Potiphar's rank in the biblical account,

relates to the story as told in a number of medieval Christian texts. Its presence in a Haggadah further reveals the cross-fertilization between Christian and Jewish circles with respect to illustrating biblical narratives.[20]

This later version of the story has Joseph sold *not* to Potiphar but rather to the Pharaoh; it is thus the Queen of Egypt, and not Potiphar's wife, who desires and attempts to seduce him. From the point of view of the artistic journey of Potiphar's wife, then, we move from simply adding extra-biblical details to the story to actually replacing one of the main characters, substituting a crowned figure for an officer's wife. This version was given undisputed authority by one of the Fathers of the Church, Tertullian, and so we are not surprised to find it in many medieval accounts, among them the biblical paraphrases which became popular toward the end of the twelfth century and circulated widely throughout Europe in both Latin and vernacular languages.[21] The mid-thirteenth-century English romance titled *Iacob and Iosep* (the earliest Middle English writing which includes this version of the story), as well as a number of French versified Bibles, clearly influenced artistic representations portraying the female character in the story of Joseph as Potiphar's wife crowned.[22]

This substitution may have helped make the moral message more poignant—or more contemporary—to European medieval society.[23] One of several Christian manuscripts where the crowned seductress indicates the use of the medieval tale as a textual source is the *Queen Mary Psalter* (Fig. 4)

20. Illuminating in this respect is current research by Vivian Mann on Jewish artists collaborating with Christians on miniatures as well as monumental altarpieces in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Spain. This unpublished research is the subject of an upcoming exhibition at the Museum of Biblical Art in New York City. For more information on the exhibition, titled *An Uneasy Communion: Jews, Christians, and Altarpieces of Medieval Aragon*, to be held 18 February to 30 May 2010, visit <http://www.mobia.org>.

21. See Frederic E. Faverty, 'Legends of Joseph in Old and Middle English', *PMLA* 43.1 (March 1928), pp. 79-104. On biblical paraphrases more generally, see James H. Morey, 'Peter Comestor, Biblical Paraphrase, and the Medieval Popular Bible', *Speculum* 68.1 (January, 1993), pp. 6-35.

22. See, among the best-known monumental examples, the thirteenth-century sculptured spandrels in the arcade of the Salisbury chapter house; cf. Pamela Z. Blum, 'The Middle English Romance "Iacob and Iosep" and the Joseph Cycle of the Salisbury Chapter House', *Gesta* 8.1 (1969), pp. 18-34.

23. Diane Wolfthal mentions the examples of the Viennese *Bible moraliseé* (cod. 2554, Vienna, Österreischische Nationalbibliothek) which emphasizes ideas expressed by Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 such as the positive value of joining a monastery; and various twelfth-century French romances (and illustrated manuscripts, such as the Queen Mary Psalter) in which the motif of the married queen lusting after and falsely accusing a single young man makes reference to contemporary anxieties about actual queens' influence at court. See Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The 'Heroic' Tradition and its Alternative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 172.

in the British Library, a work contemporary with the *Golden Haggadah*.[24] On the left, the female character, wearing a low-cut gown, head cloth and crown, points to the bed; she almost pushes a very young and rather confused Joseph toward it. The inscription below the scene identifies her as 'la Reyne d'Egypte'. In the case of this particular manuscript, research has shown convincingly that the choice of this version of the story reflects not only the popularity of such biblical paraphrases at the time, but also an attempt to respond to, and offer a moral lesson about, a contemporary issue: royal adultery. This hypothesis is supported by contemporary evidence that the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife served as an *exemplum* of marital fidelity in royal circles.[25]

Figure 4. *Queen Mary Psalter*, fol. 16, 1310–20 (British Library).
By permission of the Trustees of the British Library. MS Royal 2BVII.

The right half of the image depicts the queen telling an armed guard about the attempted rape; the inscription below, taken from the French version of the romance, reads: 'How the queen cries out and rends her gown and tears her hair and tells the sergeant that Joseph wished to force her'. This representation is notable as it conforms to the medieval text quite literally: the queen is first telling a soldier and not her husband, who was

24. See Anne Rudloff Stanton, *The Queen Mary Psalter: A Study of Affect and Audience* (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 18.2; Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2001).

25. Kathryn A. Smith, 'History, Typology and Homily: The Joseph Cycle in the Queen Mary Psalter', *Gesta* 32.2 (1993), pp. 147-59.

hunting at the time (the upper register, not illustrated here, depicts the king in a hunting party); additionally, she is shown with her clothes in disarray or even torn, her hair loose, her crown and head cloth gone. This dishevelled and overtly anguished depiction, clearly intended to strengthen her case and make her version of the story credible, may also give us some unexpected insights into the society at the time. A contextual study of rape by Diane Wolfthal argues that in this representation Potiphar's wife takes on the standard appearance of a rape victim, whose visual attributes had been codified in art and literature and thus were recognizable by the society at the time.[26] These attributes reflect the society's collective image of how a rape victim should look (loose, disheveled hair; unkempt and torn clothes, preferably showing flesh) and are mentioned repeatedly in medieval law treatises as required evidence for a rape.

Is this visual identification of Mrs Potiphar with a rape victim simply an enhanced representation of her cunning, or are we encouraged to look more kindly upon her? In the quite voluminous post-biblical literature on Joseph and Potiphar's wife, both Jewish and Christian, I have to date been unable to find any version of the story that sets out to exonerate the seductress. As mentioned earlier, Talmudic commentary sometimes shows a slightly different facet of Joseph—a Joseph tempted, at least at first; a Joseph more human and full of doubts that the paragon of virtue that he is in the Bible—but this in no way lessens the guilt of Potiphar's wife.[27] Only in Muslin literature does Mrs Potiphar receive a more detailed, and somewhat more sympathetic treatment. In the Qur'an (which devotes an entire *sura* to the story of Joseph, and quite a bit of attention to this particular episode) she is offered the opportunity to repent and confess publicly; in later literature she is even named (Zuleika, as we have seen) and the story, which spreads throughout the Middle East and Asia, combines biblical and midrashic elements with new narrative details.[28] Midrashic elements had already found their way into the narrative of the Qur'an, such as Joseph's near-acceptance of Mrs Potiphar's advances, with a last-minute reversal upon seeing a vision of his God (or, in a different version, of his aging father).[29] Later Muslim writings continue to cast Yusuf (Joseph) as a holy man and prophet, a precursor of Muhammed. In *mi'raj* literature (the descriptions of

26. Diane Wolfthal, '"A Hue and a Cry": Medieval Rape Imagery and its Transformation', *The Art Bulletin* 75.1 (March, 1993), pp. 39-64; the theme was further discussed in her book on the same topic (Wolfthal, *Images of Rape*).

27. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, pp. 96-97.

28. John D. Yohannan (ed.), *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in World Literature: An Anthology of the Story of the Chaste Youth and the Lustful Stepmother* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 158; Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, p. 31; Stern, 'Muhammad and Joseph', pp. 193-94.

29. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, p. 194.

Muhammed's 'Night Journey'), Muhammed encounters Yusuf in a position of honor in the third heaven.[30] These later Muslim versions of the story are also the most complex; their analysis, however, is beyond the scope of this brief paper.[31]

Torn clothes, visible flesh, and rumpled bed sheets become standard in later depictions of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, which tend to multiply starting with the late fifteenth century, especially in painting. They may also take on a different significance, reflecting post-medieval society's reading of the story, and more generally its take on seduction, rape, and gender. In this context, Orazio Gentileschi's c. 1626–30 painting in the Royal Collection at Windsor illustrates well what seems to be a common view in early seventeenth-century Europe (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Orazio Gentileschi, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, 1626–30 (The Royal Collection 2009, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II). Used with permission.

30. Goldman, *Wiles of Women*, p. 43, who also mentions artistic depictions of this episode in illustrated manuscripts of the *mi'raj*.

31. Similarly, Muslim representations include episodes not seen in Jewish or Christian imagery, such as the feast where Mrs Potiphar invites all her friends to prove that Joseph's beauty is impossible to resist, and where, upon seeing him, they get so flustered that they cut their hands instead of the fruit they were served. See J.V. Wilkinson, 'Fresh Light on the Heart Painters', *The Burlington Magazine* 58.335 (February, 1931), p. 61 and Plate I.

Mrs Potiphar is depicted in an advanced state of undress; in contrast to the disheveled and clearly torn attire in the medieval miniature, however, her appearance now seems carefully orchestrated, with her dress pulled down just low enough to reveal her full breasts, and lifted to expose the undergarment and a little more than a hint of her bare thighs. The hair is down but carefully combed and adorned with a very slender tiara. She is semi-recumbent on a sumptuous bed whose feet are carved in the shape of a gilded calf's foot, a symbol of animal potency. The bed is covered with provocatively rumpled sheets and rich fabrics; Mrs Potiphar lifts the corner of the bead spread with one hand, invitingly. She is clearly not a victim but rather in full control of the situation, which she manipulates to her advantage. Iconographically, this spelling out of her manipulative game is new, and seems to place emphasis on Mrs Potiphar the seductress, rather than on the overall narrative and its moral messages, which was the case in the earlier artistic representations discussed above. Joseph, a well-groomed Italian courtier dressed in a richly textured silky coat, is not within the seductress's reach. He graciously lifts the heavy red curtain (perfect for muffling sounds?), thus making a rather unhurried, even poised escape. He is neither appalled nor disturbed, as before, nor does he worry about repercussions. He seems wholly unaffected by the incident and gives Mrs Potiphar only an indifferent, almost flippant, look over the shoulder.

The relationship—and power struggle—between the two protagonists has clearly changed, and may indicate a transformed perception of adultery, rape, and seduction. Indeed, starting in the fifteenth century, the theme of the concubine, the mistress who lures a man into adultery, is a popular literary *topos* and parallels a new concern about sexual morality in European society, especially in its rapidly developing urban centers.[32] Women are increasingly depicted as seductresses, even where the story line does not necessarily warrant that characterization, and paragons of virtue are now pictured semi-nude, as if to imply the latent enticement women cannot help but provoke. Even heroines like Judith and Lucretia, once symbols of chastity, are now depicted this way.

One of the most popular texts around the turn of the sixteenth century was *The Power of Women*, a compilation of tales that illustrated the great sexual power that women have over men and depicted men as hapless victims of any interactions with the evil, irresistible seductresses.[33] Representations of such stories, where succumbing to the temptress results in the

32. See n. 27.

33. Ellen Muller and Jeanne Marie Noel, 'Humanist Views on Art and Morality: Theory and Image', in P. Bange (ed.), *Saints and She-Devils: Images of Women in the 15th and 16th Centuries* (trans. R.M. J. van Wilden; London: Rubicon Press, 1987), pp. 129-59 (131-32); Wolfthal, 'A Hue and a Cry', pp. 61-62.

humiliation of the hero, multiply in this period. Samson, Solomon, David—biblical heroes who met their undoing through the actions of a hard-to-resist seductress—are used to warn men against adultery and against falling for the wrong woman. Although these stories were clearly used to convey a moral message, it is also true that sensual images and portrayals of lust or sexual acts proliferated in this period to such an extent that they seem to have raised many a red flag among proponents of strict Christian humanism. The early sixteenth-century treatise on Christian marriage by Desiderius Erasmus, for instance, laments 'unchaste paintings on altars', and warns against artists who infiltrate their own desires and weakness into paintings derived from scripture and meant to teach right from wrong:

> Why is it necessary to portray every story in the church?… David looking out of the window at Bathsheba and tempting her into adultery? The same king embracing the Shunamite woman? … It is true that all these subjects are derived from the Holy Scripture, but when they depict woman, how ingeniously do not the painters incorporate dissoluteness therein?[34]

Not even the men who paint these women (let alone those who come into direct contact with them), it seems, are exempt from their wiles and sexual cunning. Guercino's 1649 painting illustrates this point well (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Guercino, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife,* 1649 (National Gallery). Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

34. Muller and Noel, 'Humanist Views', p. 129.

A very young Joseph struggles to get away from the half-naked Mrs Potiphar, who looks like a beautiful ancient goddess; she does not quite touch him and yet he is gesturing almost frantically to escape her (psychological?) grip. From this representation it seems rather hard to believe that this clearly frightened boy has any chance to resist her embrace and flee—which, of course, makes the moral message all the more poignant, and Joseph's triumphant virtue more extraordinary.

In this context, it is little wonder that the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife becomes a favorite for artists and patrons alike. For, while it offered the perfect narrative vehicle for a tale of seduction and resistance, virtue and vice—not to mention the opportunity to depict a beautiful half-naked woman in a lush bedroom interior—it also told the story of a hero resisting temptation, and following his destiny in spite of the repeated pleas of a beautiful and powerful woman (Fig. 6).

It may well be this combination of naughty and nice, as well as the timeless notions of power struggle and sexual tension, that make the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife such a favorite in art and literature, both through the centuries and across different faiths. Each period, and each work of art, weaves its own meaning—and pointed message—around this turning point in the biblical story of Joseph. From defining Joseph as a paragon of virtue to warning against adultery; from bemoaning rape to portraying women as instigating it; from ancient tales to the Bible and from Midrashim to Christian and Muslim medieval lore—artistic representations of Potiphar's wife trace a complex and fascinating journey. Since this journey is by no means limited to the story told in Genesis 37–50, but indeed can be followed in the development of many other biblical tales, this particular narrative becomes a test-case for the exploration of sources, historical constructs and contexts. Taken together, we see how scriptural imagination has defined, refined, and expanded the definition of 'biblical art'.

# SAVIORS AND LIARS: THE MIDWIVES OF EXODUS 1

Esther Schor

## *Midwives to the Nation*

It was all because of Israel's women, the Talmud tells us, that God took the children of Israel out of Egypt: 'As the reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation were the Israelites delivered from Egypt'.[1] In the book of Exodus, the story of that deliverance opens with cascading acts of female righteousness. By righteous women, the deliverer Moses is given life, floated to safety, drawn from the water, nursed. There is the righteous mother, Jochebed, who saves her male infant from Pharaoh's decree by building him an ark and later, suckling him; and the righteous sister, Miriam, who follows that ark into the gaze of a third righteous woman, the Pharaoh's daughter, who pities and rescues the floating Hebrew child. By a fourth righteous woman, his Midianite wife Zipporah, Moses is rescued from the murderous hand of God, for Zipporah brings off the hasty, salvific circumcision of their child by night (Exod. 4). As Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg shows, the midrash praises the righteous women of Israel even in the wilderness, amid the grousing, blasphemy and idolatry of their male partners in the covenant. Praising women for 'repair[ing] what men tore down', *Tanchuma Pinchas* finds them refusing to 'break off' their golden earrings to make the golden calf and later, taking no part in the Spies' slander of the land.[2]

On the righteousness of two women of that generation—Shifra and Puah, the midwives of Exodus 1—there is a rare consonance between ancient rabbinic sources and recent feminist readings. Both veins of commentary converge on the defiance of the god-fearing midwives, who prevented the second of Pharaoh's three attempts to slay the sons of Israel. 'As those who aid birth', notes the encyclopedic *Women's Bible Commentary* 'they are the first to assist in the birth of the Israelite nation';[3] or, as Cheryl Exum puts it,

1. *The Talmud* (ed. I. Epstein; London: Soncino, 1935–48), *Tractate Sotah* 11b; available online at <http://www.come-and-hear.com/sotah/index.html>.

2. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 8.

3. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 30.

exploiting a pun that exists in English though not in Hebrew, 'Moses delivers the Israelites in one way; the midwives, in another'.[4] In the first two chapters of Exodus, as James S. Ackerman has observed, the narrative focus swiftly and sharply narrows from a broad view of Israel's oppression, to 'the slaughter of the newborn males within a given region', to the single saved infant who will become Moses.[5] Ackerman's reading is normative, sketching out a narrative arc running from the birth of Hebrew infants in Exodus 1 to the miraculous rebirth of the nation through the Red Sea, even to the point of figuring Moses, he who 'draws from the waters' as a national midwife. Thus, while the midwives of Exodus 1 do not deliver that infant, such readings credit them with delivering his story—the story of the national redemption. On this reading, the national travail which the midwives attend in Exodus 1 stands in for the missing birth-scene of Moses, aligning Moses with previous biblical heroes who are conceived and birthed in turmoil.[6]

One extreme strain of exegesis, however, is not content to let the midwives' story stand in for a story of Moses' birth; to be midwives to the nation, Shifra and Puah must be present at the birth of the deliverer himself. In a bold leap, both the Talmud and *Shemot Rabbah* identify the midwives Shifra and Puah with the mother and sister of Moses. In Tractate *Sotah* 11b, authority lies with the comments of Rab, who maintains that 'they were Jochebed and Miriam…"Shiphrah" is Jochebed…"Pu'ah" is Miriam'.[7]

> And there went a man of the house of Levi. Where did he go? R. Judah b. Zebina said that he went in the counsel of his daughter. A Tanna taught: Amram was the greatest man of his generation; when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh had decreed 'Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river', he said: In vain do we labour. He arose and divorced his wife. All [the Israelites] thereupon arose and divorced their wives. His daughter said to him, 'Father, thy decree is more severe than Pharaoh's; because Pharaoh decreed only against the males whereas thou hast decreed against the males and females. Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world whereas thou hast decreed concerning this world and the World to Come. In the case of the wicked

4. J. Cheryl Exum, 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live: A Study of Exodus 1:8–2:10', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Exodus and Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 37-61 (46). James S. Ackerman points out that the pun does not exist in Hebrew; see 'The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story (Exodus 1–2)', in Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, with James S. Ackerman and Thayer S. Warshaw (eds.), *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), I, pp. 74-119 (75).

5. Ackerman, 'Literary Context', p. 85.

6. William H.C. Propp notes that 'endangerment of Israelite lineage by death and assimilation, flows directly from Genesis'; see *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation* (Anchor Bible, 2; New York: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 141-42. A detailed, if skeptical, consideration of Near Eastern analogues for the 'floating foundling' appears on pp. 155-59.

7. *The Talmud, Tractate Sotah* 11b.

> Pharaoh there is a doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not, whereas in thy case, though thou art righteous, it is certain that thy decree will be fulfilled, as it is said: Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee! ['] He arose and took his wife back; and they all arose and took their wives back.[8]

In addition to placing Shifra and Puah at the birth of Moses, this identification satisfies another exegetical demand: to explain, if circuitously, why the infant Moses is described as firstborn, while as subsequent chapters of Exodus reveal, he has an older brother and sister. This comedy of remarriage produces the 'firstborn' Moses:

> And took to wife—it should have read 'and took back'! R. Judah b. Zebina said:—He acted towards her as though it had been the first marriage; he seated her in a palanquin, Aaron and Miriam danced before her, and the Ministering Angels proclaimed, A joyful mother of children.[9]

A variant of this story in *Shemot Rabbah* confirms that Puah is a nickname for the admonishing daughter of Amram: 'Puah—because she dared to reprove [*hofi'ah*, lift up her face against] her father'. Shifra, accordingly, is a nickname for Jochebed, who 'smoothed over (*meshapereth*) her daughter's words… For she said to him: "Do you take notice of her? She is only a child and knows nothing."'[10] These etymologies, providing Hebrew sources for the midwives' names, alert us to a third agenda of this line of commentary: to install the midwives, whose ethnicity has been debated since the Roman era, firmly within the people Israel. To be midwives *to* the nation, Shifra and Puah must be midwives *of* the nation. As Exum reminds us, both the Septuagint and the Vulgate, unlike the Masoretic text, tell us not that they are Hebrew midwives, but that they are midwives *to the Hebrews*.[11] On the prestigious authority of both Ibn Ezra and Josephus, for example, Moshe Greenberg reasons that they are Egyptian women; after all, why would Pharaoh rely on Hebrew midwives to kill their own?[12] For modern readers like Greenberg, an Egyptian identity for the midwives enhances their morality by taking their act out of the realm of self-interest; if Egyptians, they were not motivated by a will to save their own people. Some have even relished the spectacle of God-fearing Egyptian midwives as embarrassment to Pharaoh, whose dread of Israel contrasts ironically with the fear of God found in two 'righteous gentiles'.

8. *The Talmud, Tractate Sotah* 12a.
9. *The Talmud, Tractate Sotah* 12a.
10. *Midrash Rabbah* (ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon; London: Soncino, 1977), II, pp. 17-18.
11. Exum, 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live', p. 72.
12. Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman House/Jewish Theological Society, 1969), p. 26.

Yet there is a dark underside to the strenuous effort of both Talmud and midrash to claim Shifra and Puah for the people Israel; these women, it turns out, are not easily assimilated into the national legacy. On the contrary, it is hard to imagine a sharper critic of national legacy than the defiant Miriam-Puah, who compares her father's decree unfavorably to that of the genocidal Pharaoh. *Shemot Rabbah* heightens the stakes of the story, both by elevating Amram's prestige and by deepening his narcissistic transgression:

> Amram was at that time the head of the Sanhedrin, and when Pharaoh decreed that *If it be a son, then ye shall kill him*, Amram said that it was useless for the Israelites to beget children. Forthwith he ceased to have intercourse with his wife Jochebed and even divorced his wife, though she was already three months pregnant. Whereupon all the Israelites arose and divorced their wives. [Here the talmudic version resumes, concluding:] Hence was she called Puah, because she dared to reprove her father.[13]

Amram, noting the 'uselessness' of bearing children under the decree of genocide, even to the absurd point of divorcing *a pregnant wife*, appears to thwart his own legacy. But as his strident daughter suggests, Amram, head of the Sanhedrin, actually redefines the national legacy in his own image, exchanging a covenantal legacy of God-given fertility for a heroic legacy of civil disobedience. Only when Miriam-Puah lashes out at him do we intuit the bad faith—in fact, the blasphemy—of his sacrificial gesture. Amram's idolatry of heroic selfhood darkly inverts—even imperils—the destiny of his son, the future deliverer of the nation. Miriam-Puah charges her father with exceeding Pharaoh's order by dooming the entire nation, female as well as male children; the implicit charge is an offense not against female children but against his female partner and pregnant wife, Jochebed-Shiphra. An obsession with how best to reproduce himself and Israel in a legacy has caused Amram to forfeit his responsibility to another legacy—that of maternity, which reproduces not itself, but human beings.

The subject of legacies divides the midwives from the men of Israel not only in these exegetical narratives, but in the biblical narrative itself. From the opening verses of Exodus, legacies are at stake when a new heir to the Egyptian throne menaces the children of Israel, described pointedly as the issue of the 'loins of Jacob' (Exod. 1.5).[14] Legacies are endangered on both sides, it turns out, for this Pharaoh will be dead by the end of ch. 2, leaving only a daughter who betrays his murderous will by saving a Hebrew infant. Like the Egyptian princess, the midwives Shifra and Puah stand to one side of the cult of national legacy. While men both of Israel and of Egypt enter

13. *Midrash Rabbah*, II, p. 18.

14. All biblical citations, unless otherwise specified, refer to Robert Alter's translation, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004).

the story bound in diachronic chains, both the midwives and the Pharaoh's daughter recognize that the links on these chains are as fragile as infants. What sets the midwives apart from the Pharaoh's daughter is that their concern is not contingent—not prompted by the accidental glimpsing of a crying baby—but vocational and utterly self-conscious.[15] Their vocation is to protect not the next generation of a particular nation, but the act of generation itself, and they protect it at risk of their lives. It is this calling that takes the midwives well beyond the domain of all private, domestic, feminized spheres, whether they belong to slave women or to the aristocratic princess. For the midwives' profession takes them well beyond the domestic sphere and into the presence of Pharaoh, an inner sanctum of power approached by none of the other righteous women of Exodus—not even the Pharaoh's regal daughter.

Having surveyed the lengths to which exegetes have gone to figure Shifra and Puah as midwives to the nation, my purpose in the remainder of this essay is to resist the temptations of metaphor. Instead of calling Shifra and Puah midwives to the nation, let us pause over their calling, midwifery. The midwives' story is brief, their tasks heavy—delivering the babies of an enslaved people, defying an absolute monarch and taking the brunt of his wrath—but heavier still, for including the burden of allegory demanded of them by millennia of exegetes. On my reading, however, the midwives' ordeal points us back from a promised, indeed an achieved, redemption to a perpetually narrow place: the cunt, the place of birth, the trial of human existence.

## *Fertility and Genocide*

The book of Exodus opens with a blessing that is also a crisis: 'And the sons of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and grew very vast, and the land was filled with them'. Verbal echoes both of the swarms at the

15. Even critics who consider the midwives Hebrews rather than Egyptians seek other ways to distinguish their salvific act from that of the Egyptian princess. Ackerman's view ('Literary Context', p. 86) that 'there is all the difference in the world between the clever Hebrew midwives and the dumb Egyptian princess' is unusually harsh; the normative view is that of Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Knopf, 2004), p. 27: 'Her motivation is not quite the same as that of the midwives: they acted on moral grounds, she acted on compassionate grounds'. Exum, by contrast, notes the princess's *knowing* disregard of the Pharaoh's decree (see 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live', pp. 77-78), while I distinguish between acts based on their narratological framing. On ideologies of race and gender in the Exodus story, see Renita J. Weems, 'The Hebrew Women are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1', *Semeia* 59 (1993), pp. 25-50.

creation (Gen. 1.28) and the repopulation of earth following the flood (Gen. 9.1, 7)[16] suggest the fulfillment and persistence of primeval blessings. Medieval Jewish commentators attribute this amazing fertility to Israelite women spawning multiple births: Ibn Ezra imagines twins or quadruplets; Rashi, sextuplets.[17] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg is not alone in finding, in these bestial images of fertility, an incipient theodicy: 'masses of insect-like conformists, whose whole effort is to assimilate to their surroundings, and whose unconscious drive is for a lemming-like suicide'.[18] Indeed, the verb *sharatz*, 'swarms', appears also in the plague of frogs (Exod. 7.28). William Propp's alternative account of this dissonance is to link it not with Israel's baseness but with the Pharaoh's explicit alarm. For the Pharaoh, the Israelites themselves are a form of vermin, a plague. As we shall see, the image of Israelite women delivering in the manner of animals (whether in litters, as in the commentaries, or spontaneously and without assistance, as in the biblical text) becomes a crux in the midwives' own rendition of their refusal to execute the Pharaoh's order.

Since the stated goal of the Pharaoh's program of forced labor is to reduce the numbers of Israelites lest war occur, medieval commentators read this episode from the vantage point of the following episode—the command to the midwives to kill baby boys—puzzling out how the regime of forced labor was to reduce fertility.[19] A provocative, if minority, view in the Talmud's Tractate *Sotah* asserts that 'they changed men's work for the women and the women's work for the men';[20] in other words, the population was to be controlled by a strange confounding of genders, presumably one designed to baffle desire. The dominant view, however, is that the Pharaoh required so much labor from the men that they were both exhausted and displaced, unable to return at night to their wives.

Into this vacuum of empty beds rushes a midrash about the resourceful, sexually aggressive Israelite women:

> When they went to draw water, the Holy One, blessed be He, arranged that small fishes should enter their pitchers, which they drew up half full of water and half full of fishes. They then set two pots on the fire, one for hot water, and the other for fish, which they carried to their husbands in the field and washed, anointed, fed, gave them to drink and had intercourse with them among the sheepfolds.[21]

16. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, p. 134.
17. *Commentators' Bible: The JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot* (ed. and trans. Michael Carasik; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), p. 4.
18. Zornberg, *Particulars*, p. 19.
19. *Bekhor Shor* cited in *Commentators' Bible*, p. 6.
20. *The Talmud*, *Tractate Sotah* 11b.
21. *The Talmud*, *Tractate Sotah* 11b.

Zornberg cites an intriguing variant in *Tanchuma Pikudei*:

> And when they had eaten and drunk [in the fields] the women would take the mirrors and look into them with their husbands, and she would say, 'I am more comely than you', and he would say, 'I am more comely than you'. And as a result, they would accustom themselves to desire, and they were fruitful and multiplied…' Such mirrorings provide yet another warrant for multiple births; whether two, six, twelve or, as some sources claim, 'six hundred thousand…and all these numbers from the mirrors'.[22]

Whatever the miraculous mechanism proposed by exegetes, the biblical text asserts an inverse relationship between the abuse of Israel and its fertility: 'as they abused them, so did they multiply and so did they spread' (Exod. 1.12). It was for Rashi to refocus the issue from witty, aroused, and arousing women to the verbal wit of God: 'The holy spirit says [to Pharaoh], "You say pen yirbeh, lest they increase (v. 10), and I say ken yirbeh, let them increase"'.[23]

The Pharaoh's demand of the midwives, then, follows directly on the failure of his initial demand to curtail or reverse the fertility of Israel:

> And the King of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah. And he said, 'When you deliver the Hebrew women and look on the birth-stool, if it is a boy, you shall put him to death, and if it is a girl, she may live' (Exod. 1.15-16).

From a series of generalized punishments for Israel, the Pharaoh moves abruptly to a gender-specific command (to kill only the boys) directed to two specific individuals. Why single out the boys? asks *Shemot Rabbah*. Because females, being easily assimilated, did not need to be singled out: 'What need had Pharaoh to allow the females to stay alive? This is what they said: "We will kill the males and keep the females for wives for ourselves", for the Egyptians were plunged in wantonness.'[24] Against this sense of Israel's women as effortlessly absorbable into Egypt, the two named midwives—named in a text that will soon elide the names of Moses' mother, sister and adoptive mother—provide a tacit rebuttal. That this naming indicates their professional eminence[25] is hinted at by Tractate *Sotah*, which derives the names Shifra and Puah from the work of midwifery: Shifra, from *meshapheret*,

22. *Tanchuma Pikudei* quoted in Zornberg, *Particulars*, pp. 57-58. An elaborate coda tells us that when the Egyptians went to hunt the women down, the earth swallowed them up; here, underground, they survived the hooves of oxen and the ruts of ploughs to sprout alive and unharmed up through the ground, like new grass.

23. *Commentators' Bible*, p. 6.

24. Quoted in James Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 290.

25. Ibn Ezra supposes that 'They were the supervisors of all the midwives, of which there must have been more than 500'; see *Commentators' Bible*, p. 6.

is 'one who cleans or arranges [or makes presentable]' the infant (as opposed to the midrashic sense of 'smoothing over' Puah's retort); Puah, from *po'ah*, 'because she cried out to the child and brought it forth'.[26] Rashi, most ingenious of etymologists, echoes the Talmud on Shifra's name, reading 'Puah' instead as an onomatopoeic 'whisper' of calm in a newborn's ear.[27]

Precisely how the Pharaoh exploits the midwives' calling is the concern of the following biblical verses. The regime of enforced labor having failed, the Pharaoh orders the midwives to murder babies on the 'birthstool', as soon as they are delivered. [28] *Shemot Rabbah* suspects that the Pharaoh seeks to divert blame for the deaths to the midwives 'so that God should not demand the penalty from him [the Pharaoh] and [instead] punish them [the midwives]'.[29] Accordingly, the danger of culpability looms large for the midwives in *Shemot Rabbah*; they pray to God so that children are not born 'lame or blind or crippled or requir[ing] amputation of a limb so that they may come out safely'.[30] Their fear, clearly, is not of being blamed by God, but by the women whom they serve. S.M. Lehrman, editor and translator of *Shemot Rabbah*, construes the Pharaoh's words as a command to murder the babies *during birth* in a devious attempt to avert the crime of homicide. On this reading, the midwives are forced into the role of abortionists, a travesty of their vocation. The midrash, in fact, bears out Lehrman's reading, for Shifra and Puah clearly register the perversity of requesting murder from midwives. In *Shemot Rabbah*, they turn to Pharaoh with a stark conundrum: How are they to tell the infant's sex before birth is complete? To determine the sex of the unborn is like asking a midwife to murder. For their tortuous question, the Pharaoh has an equally twisted answer: 'If its face be turned downward', it is male 'because he is looking through his mother at the earth from which he is created; but if its face is turned upward, then it is a female because it is looking at the source of its creation—the rib'.[31] According to the midrash,

26. *The Talmud, Tractate Sotah* 11b.

27. There are a myriad of alternative namings; see Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 17. *Shemot Rabbah* proposes 'Puah' 'because she used to make bubbles (*nofa'ath*) with wine before the babe in the presence of her mother' and 'Shifra' 'because Israel multiplied (*she-paru*) exceedingly thanks to her'; alternatively, 'Puah' 'because she used to revive (*mefi'ah*) the infant when people said it was dead'; see *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 17.

28. Kugel reviews the tradition, propounded by Josephus and others, that a prophecy of a savior's impending birth motivated the Pharaoh's edicts; see *The Bible as it Was*, p. 290.

29. Translation (as well as helpful bibliography) provided by David Starr.

30. *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 20.

31. *The Talmud* offers a less elaborate variant: here Pharaoh 'entrusted [the midwives] with an important sign, viz. if it is a son, this face is turned downward and if a daughter, her face is turned upward'; *Tractate Sotah* 11b.

the Pharaoh's response is so outrageous, such a travesty of creation, that even God explodes: 'O wicked one! He who gave you this advice is an idiot. You ought rather to slay the females, for if there be no females, how will the males be able to marry?'[32]

### *Sacrifice and Salvation: 'The Birth Stool'*

Focusing on the midwives' privileged access to the site of birth, the biblical narrative next trains our gaze on the 'birth stool' as Alter has it, following the JPSV translation (and more loosely, the KJV's 'upon the stools'). Propp aims for a more literal translation of the Hebrew *obnayim* with 'the two stones', adding a lengthy footnote that favors a reading of the term as 'pudenda in general'.[33] This may be the sense of *Shemot Rabbah*, which reads *obnayim* as 'the place in which the child is released'. In the same source, R. Judah b. Simon reads 'stones' as a figure for the mother's legs, since 'God makes the limbs of a woman as hard as stones'; still 'others say, that when she stoops to give birth, her thighs grow cold like stones'. Yet another commentator, citing a usage of *obnayim* in Jeremiah 18 to mean 'potter's wheel', reads this image as an 'impressive sign; for just as the potter sits with one leg on each side of the block…so also a woman has one leg on each side and the child between them'. If we trace out the obscure obstetrics of the rabbis, we find the 'birthstool' to be an inversion of the pubic triangle radiating downward and outward from the opening of the birth canal, along the woman's legs.

Yet in Pharaoh's demand for murder, the 'birthstool' also becomes a grim altar to the Pharaoh's fatal edict for Israel. Surely the midwives intuit the Pharaoh's will to render the 'birthstool' a site of child sacrifice. Moreover, they are not alone; even the narrator shares this intuition when he notes that 'the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them, and they let the children live' (Exod. 1.17). Most Judaic commentaries—Talmudic, midrashic, medieval—are both impressed by and silent on the phrase 'fear of God'; reprised as the reason for God's blessing in v. 21, it provides most commentators with the moral anchor of the episode, self-evident and beyond glossing. As Zornberg puts it, 'Their "fear of God", is a classic, heroic response to the edicts of Tyrants'.[34] When commentary does speak on this fear, as in Ibn Ezra's terse comment '"they feared God"—And not the king', it credits the midwives with responding to a higher power than

32. *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 19.

33. See Propp, *Exodus* 1–18, p. 139, and *Commentators' Bible*, p. 7.

34. Zornberg, *Particulars*, p. 23. Many discussions of the midwives invoke heroic responses to fascism and Nazism; see Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, p. 29.

that of Pharaoh; as Carole Meyers reads it, their act of 'civil disobedience' opens up a gap between sacred and secular powers.[35]

A notable exception to the general silence on the midwives' 'fear of God' is Abarbanel, who asks a niggling question: 'Why is it repeated that "the midwives feared God?"'[36] The repetition, as *Shemot Rabbah* suggests, is necessary to confirm that God acknowledges the midwives' fear. It also supplies the midwives with a notable moral precursor. Whereas the biblical Joseph is a self-declared god-fearer (Gen. 42.18) and Job's fear is remarked by Satan (Job 1.9), only Abraham and the midwives found their fear recognized by God. As *Shemot Rabbah* puts it, '[The midwives] modeled their conduct on that of their progenitor, viz. Abraham, of whom God testified: For now I know that thou are a God-fearing man' (Gen. 22.12).[37] As many have observed, God's only act in the opening chapter of Exodus is to confer on the midwives an extravagant blessing.[38] Whereas Abraham receives a 'great' blessing on his seed, the midwives' act earns 'households' for them specifically, and fruitfulness for all Israel (Exod. 1.20-21).[39] The midrashist's assumption is that the midwives and Abraham received parallel blessings on their progeny for the same reason: to reward and acknowledge their fear of God.

The midrashist might have read more carefully, however, for here the narrator of Exodus draws a distinction between his story and the akedah narrative. Whereas in Gen. 22.12 God explicitly cites Abraham's fear of God ('for now I know that you fear God and you have not held back your son, your only one, from Me'), in Exodus 1 it is the narrator who asserts God's motive: 'And inasmuch as the midwives feared God, He made households for them' (Exod. 1.21). With the very repetition of the phrase 'feared God', the narrator introduces a difference, a dissonance. In the spirit of Abarbanel, we might well ask why the narrator makes a difference with this repetition. What difference does this difference make?

35. As Scott Langston notes, religious authorities from Pope John Paul II to the Mennonite Central Committee have invoked the midwives as a biblical precedent for civil disobedience, whether it pertains to abortion and euthanasia laws or immigration regulations; see *Exodus: Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 19. See also Carole Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 36-38.

36. *Commentators' Bible*, p. 7.

37. *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 21; an alternative tradition links the nurturing midwives to the hospitable Abraham.

38. Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, p. 34.

39. As Langston notes, the Talmud records two traditions, first that the 'households' refer to the priestly and Levitical houses of Aaron and Moses respectively; the other, that they indicate the royal/messianic line. Later traditions amalgamate these two ideas. See *Exodus: Through the Centuries*, p. 19.

By making a repetition into a difference, the narrator sends us back to the stories of Abraham and the midwives in search of difference. And we have not far to look, for there is a striking difference between what Abraham and the midwives respectively do to show their fear of God. In Gen. 22.11, God perceives fear when a man lifts a 'cleaver to slaughter his son' (Alter): 'Do not reach out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear God and you have not held back your son, your only one, from Me' (22.12). (Bearing in mind that the narrator of the akedah never attests to Abraham's fear—nor does Abraham himself confess it—God's invocation of fear might suggest his own projected fear at the image of a knife-wielding man bent over his son. That the angels who watched along with God feared, even wept, is asserted by Rashi.[40]) In Exod. 1.17, however, the narrator detects the fear of God in the midwives' *refusal to sacrifice* the sons[41] of Israel on the triangular altar of the birthstool. This initial echo of the akedah can only be ironic, for it demands that we contrast the midwives' act of refusal with that of Abraham's acquiescence. The midwives' 'fear' in Exod. 1.17 is laced with contempt, for it discerns in the Pharaoh's grim request a shadow cast by God's own testing of Abraham. The midwives' 'fear', then, is not 'of God' generally, but specifically of the fierce God of the akedah story, a God who would test a parent's faith with a fearful demand to sacrifice a child. At a risk more clearly dire than that which faced Abraham, the midwives decide to 'let the boys live'—an act that Rashi glosses as 'they *made* them live—by providing them with food'.[42] As we return to the second iteration of 'fear' in Exod. 1.32, both repetition and difference can be unriddled as revision. For with the repetition of 'fear', the narrator audaciously wills God to approve and sanction the midwives' act. Using the only leverage possible over God—narrative itself—the narrator has God ratify his own revisionary theology.

Zornberg's reference to these midwives as 'technicians of birth' gets something right and something wrong. Clearly their technical knowledge is of moment to Pharaoh. What he does not realize is that theirs is a techne of the human. Their refusal to kill babies spurns a theology that would conscript the human love of parent for child as a proof of faith. By alluding twice to the akedah story, the narrator tells us that what is absolute for the midwives—the moral core of their story—is not their reverential 'fear' of God. It is a reverence for life that revises—by upending—the theology of the akedah.

40. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 155.

41. *B'nai* means both 'children' and 'sons'. Alter (*The Five Books of Moses*, p. 308) contends that the meaning of the word shifts to 'children' in Exod. 1.7.

42. *Commentators' Bible*, p. 7.

*Liars and Saviors*

This reverence for life is expressed, sublimely and enigmatically, in the midwives' retort to Pharaoh. When he summons them, asking 'Why did you do this thing and let the children live?', they reply, 'For not like the Egyptian women are the Hebrew women, for they are hardy. Before the midwife comes to them they give birth' (Exod. 1.19). 'Hardy', translated in KJV and OJPSV as 'lively', and in NJPSV as 'vigorous', translates the Hebrew word *hayot* which harbors the word for life. As Alter's note points out, the nominal form of *hayot* means 'animals', a term that circles back to the bestial 'swarming' of Israel in Exod. 1.7. Indeed, this is the translation preferred by *Shemot Rabbah*: 'Hence this is what they said: These people are like the beasts of the field that do not require the help of midwives'.[43] It should not surprise us, then, that those fertile women of Israel, with their litters of offspring, should now be said to labor in the manner of animals: quickly, and unassisted.

The midwives' improbable response has by and large been read as a deception. As Childs notes at length, Christian commentary broods over the moral problem of why God would reward the midwives in light of their fabulous, even boastful, lie.[44] In 'On Lying' (*De Mendacio*), Augustine rebuts apologists who read the midwives' lie as prefigurative and therefore not sinful; later, in 'Against Lying' (*Contra Mendacium*), he asserts that the midwives were rewarded not for lying but 'because they were merciful to God's people'.[45] Gregory's *Moralia* notes that because of the midwives' lie, God doomed them to an earthly rather than heavenly reward. Calvin, similarly, demotes the midwives to doers of 'good works' rather than elect souls and the *Notes on the Geneva Bible* are unambiguous: 'Their disobedience in this was lawful, but their deception is evil'.[46] Luther is a lone voice in reading the lie as a response to and remedy for persecution, a note picked up by the Reverend John Lightfoot during the English Civil War, when the 'lying' midwives are roundly vindicated as heroes of faith. Reading these comments of Luther and Lightfoot, a stark fact emerges: whatever the

43. *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 21. Rashi invokes *Tractate Sotah* 11b which explores the likeness between the Hebrew women and animals, a likeness Rashi resists. Instead, he supposes that all the Hebrew women were as skilled as midwives in delivering their babies. Acknowledging that the 'sages' generally accept the translation of 'animal-like', Rashi regards this as a metaphor; Jacob, too, he insists, figured his sons as animals in blessing them (Gen. 49); *Commentators' Bible*, p. 7.

44. See Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, pp. 22-24.

45. Augustine, *De mendacio* from *Retractations*, Book 1 [last chapter]: 5-7; *Contra mendacium* from *Retractations*, Bk 2: 60.32.

46. 'Notes on Exodus', *Notes on the Geneva Bible*, 1599.

midwives said, they said at peril of their lives. [47] As Langston shows, it is a fact widely rehearsed in contemporary vindications of the midwives as heroes of conscience.[48]

What the revisionary narrator of the midwives' story does not tell us is what exactly the midwives were thinking when, summoned and interrogated, they answered to Pharaoh's wrath. I decided to ask the midwives themselves—not Shifra and Puah, of course, but their daughters. I spoke to several contemporary midwives from a variety of backgrounds: East coast and West coast; nurse-midwives and certified practical midwives; twenty-somethings and fifty-somethings; religious and secular.[49] A few minutes' search of the internet had confirmed my hunch that the story of Shifra and Puah is known and cherished by contemporary midwives, but that these figures define the calling of midwifery for practitioners of vastly different orientations came as a surprise. Across the breasts of midwives from Brooklyn to Berkeley are t-shirts adorned with the images of Shifra and Puah; on the walls of their offices are Shifra and Puah posters. An Hasidic midwife from New York, let's call her Rochel, runs an emergency birthing squad called 'Hesed Shifra and Puah' which means 'lovingkindess of Shifra and Puah'. She has trained about fifty women to supply emergency birthing services when birth comes precipitously—which in her community of very large families, many numbering eight, nine and ten children, occurs about once per month.

For nurse-midwives like Dawn, trained during the 1980s, midwifery was a political movement, an attempt to '[take] birth back for women', and the 'midwifery lore' of Exodus 1 became a myth of origins for the movement. Dawn, who trains nurse-midwives in an Ivy-League medical setting, notes

47. The Reverend John Lightfoot, an Erastian member of the Westminster Assembly, declares that the midwives risked martyrdom by bearing witness to a miracle: 'So did the strength of the promise shew itselfe upon the women, in that they were delivered of their children with a supernaturall and extraordinary ease and quicknesse.' Lightfoot concludes, 'So farre are they from being a lye, that they are so glorious a confession of their faith in God, that we finde not many that have gone beyond it'; see *An Handfull of Gleanings out of the Book of Exodus*, p. 4. As Langston notes, Elizabeth Cady Stanton read this 'lie' as antifeminist propaganda (*Exodus: Through the Centuries*, p. 20). Frymer-Kensky reads the midwives' response as a familiar form of defiance from the disempowered. Far from being a compliment to Hebrew women, she reads it as an 'ethnic slur' designed to ingratiate the midwives with Pharaoh and to mollify him: 'Not seeing the power of these women to defy him, Pharaoh is all too willing to hear something negative about Hebrews and falls for their trick'; see *Reading*, pp. 25-26.

48. Langston, *Exodus: Through the Centuries*, pp. 18-19.

49. I acknowledge gratefully (by first names only) the midwives who gave generously of their time to benefit my research: Rochel, Karen, Dawn, Robin, Louise, Christy, and Perryn. Thanks also to Michael Greenberg.

that these days, young women training to be nurse-midwives tend to think of midwifery as a job rather than as a calling, though she suspects that this is less true of so-called 'direct-entry' midwives who practice in non-medical settings—homes and birthing centers. (Parenthetically, I am told of a midwife-activist who insists that the 'houses' God built for Shifra and Puah were birthing centers. Chances are she is unfamiliar with the tradition that it was Pharaoh, not God, who built the midwives 'houses'—court-supervised birthing centers where he might keep them under surveillance.[50]) One direct-entry midwife, Karen, was arrested as a felon during the mid-90s for practicing in one of the eleven states which prohibits (by statute) direct-entry midwives. While Karen spent one year preparing for a jury trial, her client community raised funds to pay her legal fees in full. Once the funds were raised, she told me with a note of weariness, the charges were dropped. Karen commented that the story of Shifra and Puah:

> is what I originally based my midwifery practice on… I see them and their acts as the first civil disobedience, and clearly, they were honored & protected in and by their community, which is very akin to what happens these days when a midwife is threatened by the 'state'. I think most midwives feel they answer to a higher law than the law of the land, which often doesn't really serve to protect and preserve the basic freedoms we all hold so dear.

Louise, a certified nurse-midwife practicing for thirty years in New Jersey, said, 'I think the midwives are very respected by modern midwives because we have tried to do something for which we're considered renegades. The idea is that they were badass. They stuck up for mothers and babies.' And, Louise, added, at the risk of their lives: 'You're almost expecting to hear "so Pharaoh commanded them to be beheaded and their body parts thrown into the Nile"'.

By contrast to Louise's image of 'badass' midwives, other midwives said they were most moved by the midwives' fear. Robin, a young nurse-midwife practicing in Seattle, noted emphatically, 'I imagine they did not feel any more empowered or more fearless than any other woman at that time… They were weighing the wrath of God versus Pharaoh.' And Rochel, now a childbirth educator in her Hasidic community, connects the story of the fearful midwives to the curse of Eve, or as she says, Chava.

> The snake says to Chava, 'You're going to become a god', and Chava says, 'Good, I'll be a god, I'll make up my own world'… In childbirth, a woman learns that she is a partner with the creator—she's not in charge, she gets to a point where she says, 'God help me, I can't do this', and God says, 'I'll help'. It's a turning point.

50. Langston, *Exodus: Through the Centuries*, p. 20

The pain of childbirth, Rochel told me, is designed to teach, through body and soul, the 'fear' of God; and the god-fearing midwife's role is to enable her to learn it—and support her while she does.

These midwives—Karen, Rochel, Dawn, Robin, Louise and others—taught me what to make of the midwives' strange, defiant answer to Pharaoh in Exod. 1.19. When my midwife respondents contemplated the Pharaoh's demand to kill the boy babies, several spoke of their pain in attending a birth that did not go well. The youthful Robin wrote, 'I imagine they were stunned, horrified and terrified…by the idea of causing a woman the unbearable pain of losing a child'. And the veteran Louise said, 'Those midwives would have seen a lot of horrible things, stillbirths, etc. and seen the grief that it causes'. It was Louise who helped me to see that the midwives answered Pharaoh, not with a lie, but with a fantasy of the ideal birth: 'What they really meant was, "the Hebrew women were such good birthers that they couldn't make it there in time"… Animals give birth in about twenty minutes—sheep, goats, cows. The Quick Birth: Midwives always appreciate that.' And Robin too, marveled at women who 'birthed like animals, so easily and quickly and without assistance'. These midwives taught me what those biblical midwives envisioned, standing before Pharaoh: a birth beyond terror and fear, a life so robust and irrepressible as to make useless both prayers to God and the patient, knowing hands of the midwife. What those hands knew, among both the blessings of God and the genocidal curses of Pharaoh, was that peril in the narrow place of birth would outlast the deliverance of the nation.

# Brides of Blood: Women at the Outset of Exodus

Jacqueline Osherow

Shortly after the book of Exodus opens, with its long list of men's names—a list, like those we have grown accustomed to in Genesis, which makes no mention of women whatsoever—something unprecedented and never to be repeated in the Hebrew Bible occurs. The various efforts of a cluster of female characters, acting on their own authority and judgment, and only in one case, with the express motivation of the 'fear of God', converge to produce extraordinary results. First, the midwives, Shifra and Puah, defy Pharaoh's order to kill all male babies born to Hebrew women; next, Moses' mother first hides her son and then takes an ark—a תבה—and floats him in the Nile; then, Moses' sister follows her baby brother and ultimately arranges for her mother to nurse him; Pharaoh's daughter takes pity on him, and has her nursemaids bring him out of the water.

At the very outset of the paradigmatic narrative of nation-building through head-on confrontation, we are presented with effective women who are indifferent to national identity, some of whose own national identities are never even given. Shifra and Puah are המילדת העברית (Exod 1.15), those who enable the Hebrew women to give birth. The phrase tends to be translated as 'The Hebrew Midwives' but can just as easily be understood—and indeed has been understand by translators and commentators from the time of the Septuagint and Josephus, through Abarbanel, up to present-day commentators Nahum Sarna and Adele Berlin—as 'the midwives to the Hebrews'. We do not know their nationality, only the fact that they 'fear God' (1.17). Pharaoh's daughter clearly knows Moses' national identity—'this must be one of the Hebrew babies', she says (2.6)—but saves him from the river nonetheless.

These women's methods are a model of non-confrontational circumvention of absolute power. In what may seem like the quintessential pre-feminist feminine approach, the midwives deal with Pharaoh by telling him what he wants to hear and doing what they want to do anyway. When Pharaoh asks why they have let the male babies live, they take advantage of his national prejudices, saying what they know he already believes: 'those Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women', they tell him. They're

חיות (1.19)—literally, 'They're animals'. And as for Moses' mother, technically, she obeys Pharaoh's dictum: she does, after all, put her son in the river, as Pharaoh has demanded; she simply adds a hand-made ark. And Miriam—Moses' sister—is perhaps the craftiest of all—she arranges for her mother to be paid—presumably from Pharaoh's own coffers—to do the very thing she wants to do anyway: keep her son alive.

In stark contrast to this body of women whose combined efforts preserve the life of Moses is Moses himself—whose very first recounted action (aside from crying in his little ark) is committing a murder, and a cold-blooded one at that: 'And he turned this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian to death' (2.12).

This speedy trajectory in the first chapters of Exodus from a concentrated effort to preserve life to its calculated destruction repeats the pattern of the first few chapters of Genesis: there too, we have a speedy descent from a focused effort on the creation of life, to murder and then to large-scale annihilation. In Exodus, the original life-sustaining energy comes not from God, but exclusively from women. Their parallel to God is made clear through what we're told of Moses' mother, Yocheved, after she gives birth to Moses: וירא אתו כי טוב ('and she saw that he was good', 2.2). This is a precise echo of God's response to his creations in Genesis 1 (e.g. וירא כיטב, 1.10), with the sole difference that the feminine conjugation of the verb 'to see', וירא ('and he saw') becomes ותרא ('and she saw'). Needless to say, the words are hardly necessary to propel the narrative. What mother of a normal newborn baby does not see that he is good? The phrase is there to solidify the parallel between the beginning of Exodus and the beginning of Genesis, and to demonstrate that at the beginning of Exodus the life-sustaining energy comes not from God but from women.

Furthermore, these words effectively reverse the breach between humans—and particularly women—and God, created by Eve's disobedience, and marked by the very same words. Eve judges the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil to be good, even before she has obtained the knowledge of such distinctions: the verse begins ותרא האשה כי טוב ('and she saw that it was good'). Eve's 'seeing that it was good' prompts her to act in opposition to God; Yocheved's identical vision furthers God's purposes.

This reversal is carried home in Exodus, when the very instigator of the original break between God and humans in Genesis becomes a sign of God's empowerment of Moses. God initiates Moses in his newfound power by turning Moses' staff into a snake. As the snake becomes God's tool, rather than his antagonist, Yocheved recasts the very words of women's disobedience into action on God's behalf. She does this, furthermore, on her own authority. She has no express instructions from God.

Similarly, when Yocheved provides her baby son with a תבה, an ark, to save his life, she acts on her own. Here, too, the parallel to Genesis is

obvious; the only other places in the Hebrew Bible in which the word תבה appears are in reference to Noah's ark (Gen. 6–9). Unlike Noah, Yocheved receives no commandment from God to make her ark, nor does she, like Noah, 'walk with God'. God, in fact, is nowhere around.

But even before Moses' birth, immediately following the list of male names, the close verbal echoes of the first chapter of Genesis can be heard in Exodus: ובני ישראל פרו וישרצו וירבו ויעצמו במאד מאד ותמלא הארץ אתם ('And the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly and multiplied and waxed exceedingly mighty and the land was filled with them', Exod. 1.7). The word וישרצו ('and they swarmed') is the word used for God's first act creating living creatures: ויאמר אלהים ישרצו המים שרץ נפש ('And God said: Let the waters bring forth abundantly a living soul', Gen. 1.20). The other parts of the line in Exodus echo God's blessing to the birds, and the fish and, of course, to humans: פרו ורבו ומלאו את־הארץ ('Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth', Gen. 1.20, 28). All these same words are used again when God commands Noah to leave his ark (Gen. 9.1, 7). In Exodus, however, there's the addition of the word ויעצמו—here translated 'waxed exceedingly mighty' (Exod. 1.7). It comes from the root עצם, which means 'essence, itself, bone'. In Modern Hebrew, it is the root of the word for 'independence', עצמאות. In Exodus, the swarming and multiplying, the seeing that it was good, the saving ark, apply not to all living creatures or even to all of humanity, but only to the children of Israel—only to one essence. Similarly, the murder Moses commits is expressly motivated by national solidarity: 'He saw an Egyptian man smiting a Hebrew man, one of his brethren' (Exod. 2.11). Unlike those of Genesis, the floodwaters of Exodus do not drown all the inhabitants of the earth, but are entirely focused on the Egyptians, so that 'not one of them remained' (Exod. 14.28).

Moses' life may be saved by the non-confrontational womenfolk, but it is Moses, the deliberate murderer of the Egyptian taskmaster, who will go on to liberate the Jews. Exodus is not, after all, Genesis. What is called for in Exodus is violence. The feminine moment at the book's outset occurs in a circumscribed space in which the Jews are not only excluded from earthly power but also unattended to by God. Their position is explicitly identified as feminine in yet another echo of the early chapters of Genesis: ויקם מלך־חדש על־מצרים אשר לא־ידע את־יוסף ('and there arose a new king of Egypt who did not know Joseph', Exod. 1.8). The first usage of the word ידע ('to know') in the Bible, is of course, והאדם ידע את־חוה אשתו ('Adam knew Eve his wife', Gen. 4.1). יָדַע ('he knew') is the word used to convey sexual consummation: the man is always the subject of the verb; the woman its object. The relationship of Pharaoh to Joseph—that of knowing—feminizes Joseph and reveals his essential powerlessness: what power he does

wield is entirely at Pharaoh's whim. And though, as our female heroes demonstrate, one can maneuver within this feminized, beholden position, it is certainly not a position of true power.

As the last two words of Exodus 2 make clear, the only 'knower' to whom the Children of Israel must be beholden is God. After Shifra, Puah, Yocheved, Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter have all done their good works in the salvation of life, God hears the Israelites' cry and remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exod. 2.24). The suggestion, of course, is that he had heretofore forgotten it. The text goes on: וירא אלהים את־בני ישראל וידע (Exod. 2.25). Richard Elliot Friedman renders the verse so as to stress the element of knowing: 'And God saw the children of Israel. And God knew!' (2.25). The rare biblical moment of independent female action, then, takes place in the no-man's land between Pharaoh's knowing Joseph and God's knowing the Jews' situation, a time when the Children of Israel have access neither to earthly nor to divine power. Now that God knows what's going on with his people in Egypt, the children of Israel will flourish; and they will flourish not at the whim of humans with their human power, but with the support of God. God's knowledge will render the feminine circumvention of power unnecessary.

But not quite. God's support is not without its tests. And when Moses faces trials parallel to those experienced by his forefathers in Genesis, he will require the help of one more decisive woman acting on her own authority in order to come out alive. Just as he embarks on his return to Egypt to save his people, there is an echo of the binding of Isaac. God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh, אנכי הרג את־בנך בכרך ('I will kill your son, your first born', Exod. 4.23).

In this command we hear an echo of the בנך—'your son'—that Abraham was commanded to offer up (Gen. 22). Here, of course, God is referring to the sons of the Egyptians, not to Moses' own son. Since God had instructed Moses, immediately before his vow to kill the Egyptian firstborn, to say that God's child, God's firstborn, is Israel (Exod. 4.22). God appears, when he comes to kill Moses (Exod. 4.24), to be acting out his own Akedah, with himself in the place of Abraham.

But the incident also recalls another major interaction between God and a patriarch in Genesis: the moment when Jacob wrestles with God. Unlike his forefather, Jacob, Moses does not, himself, wrestle with God. He does, however, need to be released from God. The language of that letting go וירף ממנו (Exod. 4.26)—recalls the angel's hold on Jacob's thigh: ויגע בכף־ירכו (Gen. 32.26). Here, though, it is Moses' wife Zipporah who intervenes to make God 'let him go'. And just as the angel requests that Jacob 'let him go' (שלחני), so Moses, at God's request, will repeatedly request that Pharaoh let his people go (שלח עת־עמי).

Zipporah saves Moses by honoring the covenant between God and Abraham. It is she, not God or Moses, who introduces circumcision to the Book of Exodus, in what is surely among the strangest and least understood passages in the Hebrew Bible:

> And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, 'Surely a bloody husband art thou to me'. So he let him go, then she said: 'A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision' (Exod. 4.24-25).

Commentators are beside themselves attempting to make sense of this pronouncement, often falling back on the last-resort argument that it is a holdover from some earlier regional tradition. But why *this* holdover and not another? Reading Zipporah's decisive action alongside those of the women who precede her in Exodus, we can perhaps see her bold physical intervention at the very locus of maleness, and at the very instant of Moses' embarkation on his great political enterprise, as signaling female collusion in the upcoming violent national struggle. The sacrifice required will not be of her son, but rather of her ideals, of what the text of Exodus has established as women's sense of purpose: the struggle to preserve life despite national identity. Unlike Isaac, the בנך of Exodus will actually have to die and this is not just one person, but many.

Zipporah calls Moses a חתן דמים (Exod. 4.26)—a bridegroom of blood—because, in embracing him and his cause, she—and indeed all Israelite women—must embrace deadly violence. The word 'blood' (דם) first appears in the Bible with the first instance of such violence, when God tells Cain: קול דמי אחיך צעקים אלי מן־האדמה ('the voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the earth', Gen. 4.10). Here, as in Zipporah's epithet, the blood is plural. It takes the plural verb: צעקים.

In order for the Israelites to achieve nationhood, even the women's hands will have to be bloodied. The blood Zipporah accepts in accepting her 'bridegroom of blood' is not only the first of the plagues that God will visit on the Egyptians; it also represents the Israelites' participation—perhaps collusion—in final and most brutal of the plagues: the killing of the בנך בכרך, the firstborn son. The blood the Israelites are instructed to put on their doorposts when God passes through to smite the Egyptians' firstborn sons, is a sign not for God, but for the Israelites themselves: והיה הדם לכם לאת ('And the blood shall be, for you, a sign', Exod. 12.13). Zipporah's blood can be understood as another such sign.

The other half of Zipporah's epithet חתן ('bridegroom') appears, as bridegroom, only once in the book of Genesis, at the only other biblical convergence of circumcision, clan (if not quite national) confrontation, and violence: when Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi avenge their sister's rape

(Gen. 34). They murder the rapist, Shechem had his entire clan while they are recovering from the circumcisions they have undergone in hopes for intermarrying with—and, the text makes clear, subsuming—the clan of Jacob. There, as in Exodus, maleness and violence converge. But in Genesis the catalyst of these extreme methods is the rape of woman, a woman at the extreme of powerlessness; in Exodus, it is the woman who saves the threatened life of a man. Zipporah's action implies female power, even as it harnesses that power toward a violent national—and ultimately patriarchal—struggle. Furthermore, Simeon and Levi are chastised for their brutality; in Exodus, we are told repeatedly, God himself carries out the Egyptians' deaths.

That Egyptian women will also suffer in this national struggle is explicitly made clear. God tells Moses: 'And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the handmaid that is behind the mill-stones' (Exod. 11.5). The verse is, of course, also making clear that is explicitly not class warfare, but a national struggle. Similarly, Israelite women are specifically called upon, along with the men, to despoil the Egyptians of their property: 'Let every man ask his neighbor and every woman ask her neighbor for vessels of silver and gold' (Exod. 11.2). By the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the feminine instinct to preserve life irrespective of nationality—with which the narrative begins—is nowhere to be found. The same Miriam, who kept such a close eye on her baby brother, will, at the sight of the drowned Egyptians, pick up her drum and lead the other Israelite women to join Moses' song of thanksgiving.

The female power in Exodus is short-lived. Everyone remembers the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea but forgets about Shifra and Puah, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter and Yocheved. Still, their activities at the beginning of this paradigm of confrontational national conflict in fact do offer readers—at the narrative's very start—an alternative. Perhaps it is a blueprint for how to behave in the sorts of circumstances with which the children of Israel were eventually to become very accustomed: those long and drawn-out times when the people wielding power would not know them, and God would not seem to know them either.

# God's Trophy Whore

Peter S. Hawkins

It is easy to see why the book of Joshua's Rahab is, as Tikva Frymer-Kensky describes her, 'the outsider's outsider, the most marginal of the marginal'.[1] At least at first glance. She is a single woman in a man's world; a prostitute without any apparent cultic setting to empower or ennoble her;[2] a Canaanite on the verge of extinction at the hands of the Hebrew conquerors. The placement of her 'house' within the city walls (2.15), no doubt strategically near its gate, emphasizes the degree to which she herself lives on an edge, on the threshold between Jericho and everything that lies beyond. She is both in her world and not of it.

For local men, she provides a way out: a sexual partnership, however fleeting, with someone who is neither wife nor slave, someone owed nothing but her price. Unlike wives or slaves, she does not take orders. Rather, as the story shows, she gives them: she negotiates for a living. With foreigners, by contrast, she offers not a way out but a way in. No wonder Joshua's spies make her brothel their first stop once inside the city. No wonder, too, that the king of Jericho seeks her out when he has reason to believe that the enemy has made inroads into his territory. Where else would the marauders go to get the lay of the land?[3]

1. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 'The Guardian at the Door: Rahab', in her *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), pp. 33-44 (35). Phyllis Bird, 'The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and a Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts', in Alice Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 99-118, concurs with this sense of Rahab's marginality. Speaking about the ancient prostitute more generally she writes, 'Her social status was not that of an outcast, though not an outlaw, a tolerated but dishonored member of society' (p. 100). Gail Corrington Streete, *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 48, argues that Rahab's 'outsider status' has less to do with her being a prostitute than with the fact 'that she is a woman who by Israelite definition occupies 'no man's land', dwelling in a house headed by no man, not even by her father (Josh. 6.22-23).

2. Many commentators draw the distinction between *zonah*, a common prostitute, and *qedeshah*, a cult prostitute or *hierodule*. That Rahab was the former, not the latter, is effectively argued by Bird, 'The Harlot as Heroine', pp. 105-106.

3. Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Lexington, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), pp. 36-52, suggests that 'Rahab's story is saturated by an atmosphere of

Yet it is precisely because of Rahab's marginality that she has her freedom: the 'outsider's outsider' has room to range. When the foreign spies come knocking at her door, she lets them into her house, hiding them under camouflage of bundled flax drying on her rooftop. She then handles the king's search party with a skillful lie about the Hebrews' departure that allegedly took place just a moment ago, 'when it was time to close the gate at dark' (2.5). In effect she says, 'They went that a-way!' As the city's unofficial concierge, the woman at the gate can be expected to know all about men who come and go, either when the doors open in the morning or just before they are locked shut at nightfall. Urging the guards to hurry—'Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them!', v. 5)—she sends the king's men on a wild goose chase all the 'way to the Jordan [and] down to the fords' (v. 7). They follow her directions to the letter even as the city gates shut behind them, with the Hebrew outsiders safely hidden within.[4]

Why does Rahab take these risks, aiding and abetting an enemy, betraying her people? It is no doubt because she knows there is an invasion afoot. Her position on the wall of the city, her familiarity with its comings and goings, the nature of her business: all give her access to a world outside that the ladies of Jericho know little about. She's learned from her 'contacts' that catastrophic things are about to happen and is willing to use that knowledge as leverage. Furthermore, she will exploit her advantage even if it means cutting her ties to Jericho and its gods—cutting her ties to everything, in fact, except her family.

> [9] [And she said to the men] 'I know that the Lord God has given you the land, and that the dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt with fear before you. [10] For we have heard that the Lord

sexuality. This undercurrent of ambiguous sexual innuendo begins with the spies' act of 'lying down'. Is this intercourse (Gen. 19.33, 35) or perhaps just preparing for sleep (2 Kgs 4.11)? Both the king and Rahab also use the similarly ambiguous language of 'going in to' her (e.g. Josh. 2.3, 4; Judg. 16.1). Perhaps Rahab's name itself ('wide') may harshly hint at her profession' (p. 43). Athalya Brenner, *I Am… Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 82-98 (82-83), has a good deal of fun with the 'sexual pun' of Rahab's name as 'The Broad'.

4. Nelson dwells on Rahab as a trickster figure and points out the comic reversal of expectations that enliven the narrative: '[Rahab's] story gives notice that sometimes Yahweh's will is accomplished not by the glorious institution of divine war or military superstars, but by the quick-thinking, perceptive faith and decisive action of the bit players in the drama: an alien prostitute, the midwives in Egypt, a nomadic housewife, a migrant farm worker from Moab, a pious widow named Judith' (*Joshua*, p. 47). On ironic humor, see Trent C. Butler, *Joshua* (Word Biblical Commentary, 7; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), pp. 24-25 (31-32), and Yair Zakovith, 'Humor and Theology, or the Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence: A Folkloristic Approach to Joshua', in Susan Niditch (ed.), *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 75-98.

> dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. 11 As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. 12 Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord 13 that you will in turn deal kindly with my family.[5] Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death. 14 The men said to her, 'Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly with you when the Lord gives us the land.'

Commandeering the spies as deftly as she corralled the king's guards, she lays down her cards. And what a hand she unfolds! Note how she passes from hearsay to conviction, from what 'we have heard' to what 'I know'. In control over men who realize they owe her their lives, she presents a powerful mix of history, *Realpolitik*, theology, and human feeling. She is a mistress of rhetoric, indeed, more eloquent than any of the more estimable Hebrew women encountered in the Pentateuch. She also knows her geography, looking back to Egypt 'when the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea', as well as to the Transjordan and its hatefully inhospitable kings, Sihon and Og. Describing a path of destruction headed her way—a juggernaut—she flatters both the God of the Hebrews and Joshua's military might. Who could ever stand before this combined assault without heart melting and courage taking flight? Even before the crossing of the Jordan, the Lord has given them the land: she knows this (v. 9) and so do they (v. 14).

Soon to be powerless though momentarily in charge, Rahab has one remaining card up her sleeve: *chesed*. She will win by an appeal to love, loyalty, and kindness. The 'Now then' of v. 12 takes her from the position of frightened suppliant to a confident negotiator able to build her case on the mercy she has shown the Hebrews: 'since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me that you will deal kindly with my family'. It is striking that she does not plea overtly for herself: it is for her *family* that she asks. Until this moment she has appeared a free agent, a woman alone (without husband or children), making her moves with no one else in the picture. But suddenly an entire kinship is conjured up, father and mother, brothers and sisters, 'and all who belong to them'. Perhaps this intercession on their behalf is only the most dramatic way she has taken care of them over the years.

5. I am indebted to Victoria Hoffer of Yale Divinity School for pointing out that the NRSV translation I am using makes a gender neutral decision that alters the Hebrew: where NRSV gives us 'my family', the Hebrew says 'the house of my father'. Thanks also to other readers of this text as a work in progress: Ellen Davis, Cristine Hutchison-Jones, and Rachel Jacoff.

Yet what is finally most extraordinary about Rahab's speech is how high it rises above the occasion. Rather than simply making a deal with the Hebrew spies—their lives for hers—she does nothing less than forge a covenant with them. It is a pact, moreover, made on *their* religious terms.[6] *Chesed*, loving-kindness, is the bridge she offers between herself and them. Elsewhere in Scripture *chesed* is the bond between God and Israel; so it is as well among humans who reflect the divine generosity—people like Ruth, for instance, the alien Moabite whose acts of kindness toward Naomi and Boaz model the 'foundational virtue of Israelite community and culture'.[7]

Rahab may be a cradle Canaanite with *baalim* and *asherah* as her birthright, but now only a solemn oath will do—and one that is sworn not by her city's deities but 'by the Lord' (whose name was given to Israel alone); by 'your God' (who has become hers as well); in short, by the 'God in heaven above and on earth beneath'. Behold a wonder: a covenant-making Gentile professing the faith of Israel even before Joshua and his forces have stepped dry shod through the Jordan! To find her equal among the nations one would have to look back to King Melchizedek of Salem in his blessing of Abram 'by God most high, maker of heaven and earth' (Gen. 14.19). In both cases, Canaan is at stake, that land of promise and contested possession. But what a telling difference between now and then, between a prostitute hoping to save her family from destruction and a king offering a blessing and receiving a fortune in return ('And Abram gave him one tenth of everything', v. 20).

After having entered her house built deep inside the city wall—presumably through its front door—the spies exit through a window that opens onto the outside world. Rahab has a rope handy to let them make their way down to the ground, a device that has no doubt come in handy whenever an escape route from the brothel was in order. She then continues to give them aid, with directions to the best escape route ('Go toward the hill country')

6. Frymer-Kensky ('The Guardian at the Door', pp. 37-38) demonstrates how Rahab's speech to the spies 'contains all the essential elements of the classic Deuteronomic form of covenants'. She also notes the contrast between Rahab, the oracle of Yahweh, and those other Canaanite women of Moab who, at Shittim, lead into apostasy the spies sent out by Moses. On the ramifications of a contrast between Num. 25 and Josh. 2, see Butler, *Joshua*, p. 31. Frymer-Kensky, agreeing that Rahab comes out brilliantly from this comparison, nonetheless points out ambiguities: 'Her name is emblematic of the permeable boundaries of Israel. She is the wide-open door to Canaan, or maybe (in the negative view) the wide-open door to apostasy. To…Deuteronomy, open boundaries are dangerous; others can see them as presenting an opportunity' ('The Guardian at the Door', p. 44).

7. Ellen F. Davis, '"All That You Say I will Do": A Sermon on the Book of Ruth', in Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (eds.), *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 3-9 (6).

and advice about the requisite time to lie low ('Hide yourselves there three days, until the pursuers have returned; then afterward you may go your way', v. 16). She guarantees their safety even as she has worked to secure the well-being of her family.

But what of the sign of good faith Rahab requested of the spies, the outward and visible sign of their pledge to spare her family in exchange for her sparing them? The men propose that a crimson cord be tied to the same window through which they escape. In effect, it is the daub of Passover blood on the lintels of the Hebrews in Egypt, warding off the angel of Death who, in this new scenario, is the death-dealing army of Joshua. In place of the functional rope that led them out of Jericho, the symbolic cord will transform Rahab's household into a place of refuge and, as we shall see, bring her kinfolk into the house of Israel.

The spies now take charge of the situation: if their savior would save herself and her family, she must gather her entire kin within the brothel's walls and keep them there. Should anyone stray outside, or should she in any way betray their trust—what they call 'this business [*debarenu zeh*] of ours'—'then we shall be released from this oath that you made us swear to you' (v. 20). They have their bases covered in advance, and none too graciously given everything she has done for them. Typically, the scriptural text does not editorialize, so here we get only 'they said', 'she said'. Nonetheless the reader is left to savor the disparity between her covenant and their deal, between a pagan prostitute's invocation of the Lord and a soldierly quid pro quo. Before they depart, Rahab agrees without hesitation to their conditions ('According to your words, so be it', v. 21) and suspends the crimson cord from the window.

Not long afterward, on the brink of Jericho's destruction, Joshua commands that only two things are to be saved from the imminent rubble and carnage. On the one hand, precious metals; on the other, Rahab and her family (6.23-25):

> [23] So the young men who had been spies went in and brought Rahab out, along with her father, her mother, her brothers, and all who belonged to her—they brought all her kindred out—and set them outside the camp of Israel. [24] They burned down the city, and everything in it; only the silver and gold, and the vessels of brass and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord. [25] But Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, Joshua spared. Her family has lived in Israel ever since. For she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent out to spy out Jericho.

There is an odd equivalency here between what is to be salvaged from the devastation. Juxtaposed, held as if in a balance, are Rahab's 'father, mother, brothers, and all who belonged to her' and 'silver and gold, brass and iron'. Together these amassed riches compose the treasury of Jericho, the only 'spoils of Egypt' worth preserving. Not only are they both to be delivered

from the disaster of fire and sword, but both are to be incorporated into the conquerors' future lives. The precious metals and hardware of pagans will be put to use in the house of the Lord to assist in tabernacle worship; a kinship network of Canaanites will live on in the house of Israel. The latter will turn out to be the more long-lasting prize, for long after the Lord's silver and gold are lost to another conquest—that of Jerusalem by Babylon—the House of Rahab continues on: 'Her family has lived in Israel ever since'.

It is not entirely clear what is meant by this extended living on 'in Israel'. Initially, when Rahab and her kin are rescued, they are not welcomed with open arms but rather set 'outside the camp of Israel' (6.23), perhaps in distrust of a potential fifth column, perhaps by way of a cultic quarantine. But who do the prostitute's kinfolk *become*? Commentators have thought that they represent the ongoing Canaanite presence in the land, those who continued to live among, yet not fully with, the Hebrews. Were the Rahabites, then, aliens in the Land and therefore at the margin? Foreigners of any kind, and especially foreign women, were almost always seen as a serious threat by the Deuteronomistic historians who ultimately shaped this material. Frymer-Kensky notes that although the authors of Joshua refrained from making any overt negative statements against Rahab's family living on in Israel 'ever since', their overall point of view—and the frequent deployment of the term *cherem*, meaning ban or the total destruction of enemy spoils—casts a shadow over the story. For the Deuteronomists, 'the rescue of Rahab would look like Israel's first open act of apostasy, committed immediately upon its entry into the land'.[8] Saving Rahab, in other words, might seem like the beginning of the end.

## *Rahab among the Rabbis*

Yet saving Rahab is primarily what subsequent Jewish tradition does. It is true that some refused to forget that she was a prostitute and said that she worked as such for 40 years, from the age of ten until 50. Rabbi Yehudah saddles her with four names of disrepute because she fornicated with men inside the city and bandits from without; because she was an 'evil and wicked' Canaanite; and because she was from Jericho, 'those about whom it is written they should be demolished and destroyed'.[9] Other accounts of her sexual powers abandon moral dudgeon in order to boast of her extraordinary beauty (she was among the four most beautiful women in the world along with Sarah, Abigail, and Esther) or even to brag of her high standing in her 'profession': 'There was no great man or high official in the land with whom Rahab did not have intercourse' (*Zeb.* 116b). In fact, she was so compelling

8. Frymer-Kensky, 'The Guardian at the Door', p. 43.
9. *Sifre Zuta* 10, cited by Brenner, *I Am… Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories*, p. 83.

an erotic figure that a man would ejaculate simply upon saying her name twice (*Meg.* 15a).[10]

Not everyone assumed the worst of her, however. Throughout the centuries there were those who disputed whether she was a prostitute at all. Such figures as Josephus (*Ant.* 5.1.2-15), Rashi (in his commentary on Josh. 2.1), and the fourteenth-century Christian commentator Nicholas of Lyra[11] all maintained that the Targum's rendering of *zonah* as *pundekita* meant that she was a 'food provider' or 'inn-keeper'—not the madam of a brothel but a hostess providing food and lodging. As should come as no surprise, the *Targumim* are of mixed minds: she was an inn-keeper, she was a whore, she was an inn-keeper who served sex as well as food and lodging.

Saving Rahab, however, has meant a great deal more than this argument over professional identity. Rabbinic tradition took her from the sidelines of history—where the book of Joshua clearly leaves her 'ever since'—and placed her close to the center.[12] Before Ruth made her way 'in' from Moab, Rahab was hailed as a proselyte, a despised alien who, through conversion to the Lord God, becomes a full-fledged member of Israel. She is not only a woman of valor, along with Ruth, Jael, and the mother of Samson, but also a matriarch of the chosen people.[13] As Frymer-Kensky notes, the Conquest is the mirror image of the flight from Egypt, so that Rahab at once plays the part of the 'midwife of the embryonic Israel' and of Moses' mother hiding her son in a 'papyrus basket' (Exod. 2.3) when she in turn hides the Hebrew spies under her rooftop bundles of flax.[14]

For the rabbis, Rahab's rehabilitation takes place not only because of her conversion to the God of Israel but through her marriage to Joshua, lord of the Conquest and the one who saved her from *cherem* on account of her loving-kindness toward the Hebrew spies.[15] Through this marital union she

10. Other Rabbis begged to differ. R. Nahan, for instance, said that she did not have such an effect on him while R. Titzchak argued that you had to know Rahab to have the repetition of her name do its 'work'; cf. Phyllis Silverman Kramer, 'Rahab from Peshat to Pedagogy, Or: The Many Faces of a Heroine', in George Aichele (ed.), *Culture, Entertainment and the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 156-73 (159).

11. Deeana Copeland Klepper, *The Insight of Unbelievers: Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 45-47.

12. M.A. Beck, 'Rahab in the Light of Jewish Exegesis', in W.C. Delsman (ed.), *Von Kanaan bis Kerala* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1982), pp. 37-44.

13. *Midrash Mishle* 31.21, cited by Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 150.

14. Frymer-Kensky, 'The Guardian at the Door', p. 36: 'The women of Exodus [e.g. midwives, Moses' mother] have met their successor'.

15. Was it Joshua who converted Rahab or was it the Lord's own work? 'For when Thou bringest us light, many proselytes come and join us, as for instance Jethro and

becomes the ancestor of eight prophets, including Huldah and Jeremiah (*Meg.* 14b). No doubt it seemed fitting that one who praised the God of the Hebrews as 'indeed God in heaven above and on earth below' (Josh. 2.11) should count as her descendents those who were similarly called to deliver the Word of the Lord.

### *Christian Rahab*

It is precisely Rahab as matriarch who enters into the world of the Christian Testament in the first chapter of its opening Gospel—the threshold of the New Testament canon. Matthew begins with '[an] account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham' (1.1). His use of such an 'account' is part of his larger strategy to link Christian revelation to the Hebrew Bible and its distinctive ways—in this instance, to the succession of 'begats' familiar to readers of Genesis and Chronicles. As in those books, Matthew's genealogy structures history into epochs, suggests an inheritance; it witnesses to God's providential hand at work in passing generations.[16]

A peculiar feature of the Evangelist's working of Hebrew genealogy is his inclusion of women in what is traditionally a masculine preserve. Among the three sets of fourteen generations that Matthew constructs for the time between Abraham and Jesus, he names Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and 'the wife of Uriah' (Bathsheba). Each of these women is introduced as a partner with whom a father generates sons. Thus, 'Judah [is] the father of Perez and Zerah *by Tamar*' (v. 3), 'Salmon the father of Boaz *by Rahab*' (v. 5), 'Boaz the father of Obed *by Ruth*' (v. 5), and 'David [...] the father of Solomon *by the wife of Uriah*' (v. 6b).[17]

Matthew knows nothing of any marriage between Rahab and Joshua; instead, he gives us 'Salmon'—a figure from the time of the Judges specified as the father of Boaz in the genealogies given in Ruth 4.21 and 1 Chron. 2.11. Here the Evangelist is on his own: Salmon otherwise has

Rahab. Jethro heard the news and came. Rahab came' (*Cant. R.* 1.3.3, cited by Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, p. 150).

16. For a superb study of Matthew's genealogy, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 57-84. See also Ann Belford Ulanov, *The Female Ancestors of Christ* (Boston: Shambala, 1993), pp. 34-45. I cover some of this territory in an earlier and related essay, 'Ruth amid the Gentiles', in Hawkins and Cushing Stahlberg (eds.), *Scrolls of Love*, pp. 75-88.

17. In view of Jesus' divine paternity, Matthew's genealogy does not culminate in a father and his sexual partner but rather in a *husband* and wife: 'Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah' (v. 16).

no connection to the harlot of Jericho or even to her historical period.[18] Matthew instead turns Rahab into Ruth's mother-in-law—as if there were no Naomi at all!—presumably in order to align the two great female proselytes of Israel. These women, who begin at the margin, end up not only giving birth to David the king—

> Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab;
> Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth;
> Obed was the father of Jesse;
> Jesse was the father of David the king—

but becoming the foremothers of 'Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham' (1.1).

Early Christian commentators on Matthew recognized that the four Old Testament women conspicuous in the list of the Messiah's ancestors were not the obvious matriarchal choices with their impeccable bloodline: Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel. They were also aware of slurs by those whom John Chrysostom speaks of as 'unfriendly-spirited Jews', who called into suspicion the virtue, not to mention the virginity, of Mary.[19] For these reasons it became a point of honor among commentators on Matthew to draw attention to skeletons in the family closet—to insist that the Savior's foremothers were women who could at one time have been prostitutes (like Rahab) or at least played the part when the occasion warranted (like Tamar); women who had dubious ethnic origins (like Ruth) or who had engaged in illicit sexual activity (like Bathsheba). According to Jerome, 'It should be noted, that none of the holy women [of Israel] are taken into the Savior's genealogy, but rather such as Scripture has condemned, that he who came for sinners being born of sinners might so put away the sins of all'.[20] John Chrysostom argues that Christ came not to escape our disgraces, but to bear them away: 'It is not only because he took flesh upon him, and

18. Richard Bauckman, 'Tamar's Ancestry and Rahab's Marriage: Two Problems in the Matthean Genealogy', *Novum Testamentum* 27 (1995), pp. 313-29.

19. John Chrysostom, 'Homily III', in Philip Schaff (ed.), *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* (A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series, 10; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 14-20 (15): 'It is for this reason that Joseph has his genealogy traced, and the Virgin is betrothed to him. For even if he, who was both a just and wondrous man, required many things, in order that he should receive that which had come to pass; an angel, and the vision in dreams, and the testimony of the prophets; how could the Jews, being of so unfriendly spirit towards Him, have admitted this idea into their minds? For the strangeness and novelty thereof would be sure greatly to disturb them, and the fact that they had never so much as heard of such a thing having happened in the time of the forbearers.'

20. Jerome, cited in Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea* (Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected out of the Fathers, I.1; 7 vols.; Albany, NY: Preserving Christian Publications, 1993 [1842]), p. 19.

became man, but because he vouchsafed to have also such kinsfolk, being in no respect ashamed of our evils'.[21] Likewise, no one's background should count for anything; only the disposition of the soul mattered, one's pursuit of virtue: 'For such a man, though he have an alien for his ancestor, though he have a mother who is a prostitute, or what you will, can take no hurt thereby'.[22]

'Though he have an alien for his ancestor': with this aside, Chrysostom draws attention to an identity that is shared in one way or the other by all the Hebrew women in Matthew's genealogy. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites; Ruth was a Moabite, and as such, a descendent of Lot's incestuous union with a daughter and therefore of a people singularly reviled in the Law and on several counts—indeed, inadmissible to the assembly of the Lord 'even to the tenth generation' (Deut. 23.3-6). Although Bathsheba was undoubtedly an Israelite, 'daughter of Eliam' and close to the royal court, she was also, as the genealogy names her, the 'wife of Uriah'—who was, of course, 'Uriah *the Hittite*' (2 Sam. 11.3). Matthew's tracing of a Gentile thread through the tapestry of the chosen people—his looking back on a succession of aliens who went on to become central to the history of Israel—is one of the ways the Evangelist establishes a mixed origin and identity for Jesus. Even as he stipulates (on five occasions in his first four chapters) that this or that event took place in order to fulfill the word of a Hebrew prophet, so too his genealogy makes clear that the Gentile mission of Jesus develops out of a venerable matriarchy of non-Hebrews.

The two other mentions of Rahab in the Christian Testament do not concern her place in Jesus' family tree.[23] Instead, she embodies a distinctive virtue—different in each case—which the believer is meant to emulate. For the author of Hebrews, she takes her place in the cloud of witnesses to faith, named in the same catalogue of worthies that includes Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses:

> By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient [other manuscripts have "unbelieving"], because she had received the spies in peace' (Heb. 11.29-31).

Hebrews' roll call continues with the barebones mention of 'Gideon, Barak, Sampson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets' (v. 32). The

21. Chrysostom, 'Homily III', p. 16.
22. Chrysostom, 'Homily III', p. 16.
23. A.T. Hanson looks at Matthew's genealogy, the two other New Testament references to Rahab, and 1 Clement in 'Rahab the Harlot in Early Christian Tradition', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 1 (1978), pp. 53-60.

company is venerable, and Rahab (along with a mentioned-in-passing Sarah, v. 11) a singular female presence.

In the Epistle of James, Rahab is again paired with Abraham, but this time without any reference to Sarah at all.[24] Now, moreover, the context is not faithfulness but good deeds. Abraham offered up his son as a sacrifice; he believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness; he was 'justified by works and not by faith alone' (3.24). 'Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?' (v. 25). During the Reformation debate over such matters, the harlot of Jericho might well have been invoked by Catholics and Protestants as a patron for all seasons—a heroine at once of faith *and* works.

In the early centuries of the Common Era the Church Fathers discovered their version of Rahab against this rich and varied background of scriptural text and, at least in some cases, of rabbinic tradition. As mentioned above, her identity as a *former* prostitute was embraced as a sign that, given repentance, or a turn to God, all could be forgiven. The greater the depth of the fall, the more spectacular the power of grace to lift up, redeem, and transform. As Jerome puts it in his sermon on Psalm 86(87): 'Even though anyone has been a Rahab, even though anyone has been a Babylon, nevertheless I will be mindful of him who knows me… She who was at one time on the broad road to perdition, afterward mounted upward into the memory of God.'[25] Conversion is all and Rahab becomes a way of speaking about any sinner who turns to God: he or she is not only born again but, like Mary the Mother of God, gives birth. The *meretrix* who sold herself to everyone on the crossroads, 'if she suddenly wills it, suddenly becomes a virgin'; 'she who was a prostitute conceives of God and is in labor and brings forth the Savior'.

Or perhaps Rahab was not so terrible a reprobate after all—not a mere inn-keeper, as some of the *Targumim* had argued, but rather a diamond that somehow had ended up in the rough: 'She was in a brothel', says John Chrysostom, 'like a pearl mixed up in mire, like gold thrown in mud, the rose of piety hidden in thorns, a pious soul in a place of impiety'.[26]

Many commentators link Rahab to other fallen women raised up into new life and 'restored' virginity: Gomer, the wife of Hosea; the Samaritan

24. R.W. Wall, 'The Intertextuality of Scripture: The Example of Rahab (James 2:25)', in P.W. Flint (ed.) *The Bible at Qumran: Text, Shape, and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 217-36.

25. Jerome, 'Homily XVIII', in *The Homilies of St Jerome* (trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, IMM; The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation, 48; 2 vols.; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1964), pp. 135-45 (138).

26. John Chrysostom, 'Homily VII', in *Repentance and Almsgiving* (trans. Gus George Christo; The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation, 96; Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1998), pp. 98-99.

woman at the well (Jn 4); the woman of the city who washed the Savior's feet with her tears and dried them with her hair (Lk. 7); as well as some in the dubious crowd (like Mary Magdalene according to tradition) who followed Jesus and diminished his standing among the righteous. Yet, as Jesus said to those who would cast the first stone, 'the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you' (Mt. 21.31).[27]

As a Gentile with a crucial role in winning the Promised Land, Rahab was also a sign of what was to come, an image of the Church 'to be gathered from the harlotry of the nations and from prostitution with idols'.[28] She could also foreshadow the Gentiles' integration into the 'New Israel', the 'wild olive shoot' St Paul writes about in Romans, those who are grafted into the 'rich root of the olive tree' (11.17).[29] Rahab stands at the very beginning of that grafting, at a moment when ancient promises (understood spiritually) were already being fulfilled. According to Theodoretus, Rahab the foreigner foreshadowed the universal salvation brought by Jesus, who was commonly understood by the Fathers to be the typological fulfillment of his Hebrew namesake, Jehoshua/Joshua. Salvation was once for the Jews alone; now it extends to all. This is ultimately what the Savior intended when he said in John 10.16, 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.'[30]

Unfortunately, as so often happens in this kind of discourse, the 'letting in' of Gentiles becomes an occasion for putting down Jews: celebration of the Church seems to require discrediting the Synagogue. Playing with the homonymy of Jehoshua/Jesus, Caesarius of Arles says that when God called Joshua to take charge of the people after the death of Moses, 'the old law

27. See Gregory of Elvira on Origen's *Tractates on the Books of the Holy Scripture*, quoted in *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel* (ed. John R. Franke; Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, 4; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 9.

28. Gregory of Elvira on Origen's *Tractates on the Books of the Holy Scripture*, quoted in *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel*, p. 9

29. Origen makes this connection clear: 'If you want to see more plainly how Rahab is bound to Israel, consider how "the branch of the wild olive tree is implanted in the root of a good olive tree". Then you will understand how those who have been implanted in the faith of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are rightly called attached and "joined to Israel until this very day"' (Origen, 'Homily I', in *Origen, Homilies on Joshua* [ed. Cynthia White; trans. Barbara J. Bruce; The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation, 105; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002], p. 80).

30. Theodoretus, *Questions on the Octateuch, On Joshua* 8, cited by H.F. Stander, 'The Greek Church Fathers and Rahab', *Acta byzantina et byzantina* 17 (2006), pp. 37-49 (43). Stander picks up where Hanson leaves off. For a succinct overview of Patristic readings of Rahab, see S. Leanza's entry 'Joshua' in the *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), I, p. 453.

ceased, and the true Josue or Jesus ruled'. So too, those 'murmuring' survivors of Egypt, who died in the Wilderness and were buried there, 'typified the Jews, while the younger ones [brought into the land of promise] prefigured the Gentiles'.[31]

John Chrysostom also brings Rahab into this invidious comparison: 'She accepted the spies and the One whom Israel denied in the desert; Rahab preached this One in the brothel'. The Hebrews' response to theophany after theophany was only to build a golden calf and worship it. The harlot of Jericho, on the other hand, had no special revelation to go on; nonetheless, with oracular wisdom she confessed the one true God: 'What Israel heard—he who was surrounded by so many miracles and who was tutored by so many laws—he utterly denied, while Rahab, who was shut in a brothel, teaches them'. Israel is blind and faithless; Rahab, although an outsider, sees all:

> Rahab is a prefigurement of the Church, which was at one time mixed up in the prostitution of the demons and which now accepts the spies of Christ, not the ones sent by Joshua of Nun, but the apostles who were sent by Jesus the true Savior. '*I learned*', she says, '*that your God is up in heaven and down on the earth, and that apart from Him there is no God*'. The Jews received these things and they did not safeguard them; the Church heard these things and preserved them. Therefore, Rahab, the prefigurement of the Church, is worthy of all praise.[32]

This identification of Rahab as the Church becomes commonplace in Christian exegesis, just as the scarlet-colored cord suspended from her window becomes Christ's saving blood. The earliest evidence of this typology is found in Clement of Rome, who interprets the cord as a sign 'that through the blood of the Lord will redemption come to all who believe and hope in God. You see, beloved, that not only faith but also prophecy is found in this woman [Rahab].'[33] Origen goes further: Rahab escapes destruction in Jericho, the 'city of this world', by displaying 'the scarlet-colored cord that carried the sign of blood. For she knew that there was no salvation for anyone except in the blood of Christ.'[34] Other aspects of the narrative also reveal this mystery of redemption. Rahab's window, for instance—from which is hung the blood red cord, through which the

31. Caesarius of Arles, 'Sermon 115', in *St Caesarius of Arles, Sermons* (trans. Sister Mary Magdalene Mueller, OSF; The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation, 47; 2 vols.; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1964), II, pp. 81-186 (167-68).

32. St John Chrysostom, *On Repentance and Almsgiving*, p. 98.

33. Clement of Rome, 'The Letter to the Corinthians', in *The Apostolic Fathers* (trans. Francis X. Glimm *et al.*; New York: CIMA, 1947), pp. 9-58 (19).

34. Origen, 'Homily III', in *Origen, Homilies on Joshua*, p. 49.

Hebrew spies make their way to safety—signifies that through Christ's incarnation, 'just as through the window, he makes us behold the splendor of divinity'.[35]

But who is 'us'? The upshot of Origen's preaching is to insist that anyone who would escape Jericho's destruction must take refuge in Rahab's house. There is no other way out of death, no other way into life. *This* is the Passover of the Lord:

> Therefore, if anyone wants to be saved, let him come into the house of this one who was once a prostitute. Even if anyone from that people wants to be saved, let him come in order to be able to attain salvation. Let him come to this house in which the blood of Christ is the sign of redemption… Outside this house, that is, outside the Church, no one is saved.[36]

In this reading, which is by no means unique to Origen, Rahab—in the Scripture a figure of inclusion—becomes a closed door: *Extra ecclesiam, nemo salvatur*. The marginal woman keeping watch by the gate of Jericho, welcoming foreign strangers, is now *Ecclesia*, the gatekeeper of eternal life.

## *Dante's Rahab*

From this long history of interpretation I want to turn in closing to what amounts to the apotheosis of Rahab in the ninth canto of Dante's *Paradiso*.[37] The venerable exegetical tradition stretching from the Fathers to the poet's early-fourteenth century no doubt underwrites the figure we come upon in the *Commedia*: the prostitute, the convert, the Church, the soul. But as is so often the case with Dante, his Rahab is a new account of everything old—a dazzling 'chaste whore', *casta meretrix*, with no regrets and with one spectacular memory to hold onto forever.

35. Origen, 'Homily III', p. 50. See also Gregory of Elvira, *Tractates on Origen* 12.25 (CCL 69: 96-98).

36. Origen, 'Homily III', pp. 49-50.

37. All citations of the poem are from Charles Singleton (ed., trans, and comm.), *Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy* (Bollingen Series, 80; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970–75). Each canticle is published in two volumes, 1: Italian text and Translation, 2: Commentary. I am indebted to the following for their work on *Par.* 9: Paola Allegretti, 'Canto IX', *Lectura Dantis turicensis* (eds. George Güntert and Michelangelo Picone; Florence: Franco Contini, 2002); Thomas G. Bergin, 'Paradiso IX', *A Diversity of Dante* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969); Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio (eds. and comm.) *La divina Commedia: Paradiso* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1985), Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, *La divina Commedia: Paradiso* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005); Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander, *Dante: Paradiso* (New York: Doubleday, 2007); Angelo Penna, 'Raab', *Enciclopedia dantesca* (5 vols.; Rome: Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970–78), IV, p. 817; Natalino Sapegno, *La divina Commedia: Paradiso* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1973).

Dante Pilgrim comes upon Rahab in Venus, the third of the nine spheres of the Ptolemaic universe, which bears the name of the pagan goddess once believed to 'ray down mad love' upon unwitting humans: 'la bella Ciprigna il folle amor/raggiasse' (*Par.* 8.2-3). This is the third location within Dante's afterlife to showcase carnal lovers, coming after the circle of the storm-tossed *lussoriosi* in *Inferno* 5 and the terrace of purifying fire in *Purgatory* 26. And yet it would be better to think of the successive heavens of the final canticle not so much as places but as the temporary sites of command performance. We learn early on in the *Paradiso* that none of the souls who appear to Dante throughout his ascent to the City of God actually spends eternity where the pilgrim finds them. Unlike the souls in Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, one of the poet's models for the third canticle, the blessed do not return to the stars at the end of a virtuous life. Rather, after their purgation, they reside forever in the celestial Empyrean, the tenth sphere, which is beyond space and time, and where God is beheld by the 'two courts' of heaven, the angels and the blessed.

Why, then, the sequential meetings throughout the heavens? In *Paradiso* 4, the Pilgrim learns that the blessed are con-descending to him, making accommodation to his mortal understanding by manifesting themselves gradually rather than (as later in the Empyrean) all at once. But more than this, they appear in the different spheres to show him who they are, that is, to initiate him into the beatitude they collectively share but diversely enjoy. There is a particular quality to their joy, a particularity that remains part of their enduring selves.

In the first three heavens—Moon, Mercury, and Venus—we are still touched by the shadow cast by the earth; a stain of worldliness remains. Consequently, the souls reveal how negative earthly predilections—whether instability of the will, worldly preoccupation, or erotic excess—carry over into eternity, despite the 'clean slate' achieved in Purgatory. This carry-over of vulnerability into the life of glory changes with canto 10, however. Whereas the lower spheres witness a former defect, those higher up—the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—draw attention to various gifts that distinguish some of the blessed from others: the wise appear in the Sun, the courageous in Mars, the just in Jupiter, the contemplative in Saturn. This insistence on differentiation is of a piece with the *Paradiso*'s larger celebration of more (*più*) and less (*meno*), of the one (*l'uno*) and the other (*l'altro*). Unity is the nature of life in heaven but diversity is its hallmark.

The persistence of defect or stain seems like an odd condition for ultimate beatitude: should not love in paradise mean never having to say you're sorry? Indeed it does, and the poet leaves it to the souls appearing in Venus to make this point not once but twice in canto 9. The first to speak is Cunizza da Romano, a Wife of Bath figure (as Rachel Jacoff has aptly named

her), with a succession of four husbands and many more lovers.[38] According to the chronicler Rolandino, she took up with a knight named Bonia and 'wandered about the world, leading a life of pleasure'.[39]

> Cunizza fui chiamata, e qui refulgo
> perché mi vinse il lume d'esta stella;
> ma lietamente a me medesma indulgo
> la cagion di mia sorte, e non mi noia;
> che parria forse forte al vostro vulgo (9.32-36).
>
> I was called Cunizza, and am refulgent here because the light of this star overcame me. But I gladly pardon myself the reason [for] my lot, and it does not grieve me—which might perhaps seem strange to your vulgar herd.

Given that we meet her in *Paradiso*, we can assume that Cunizza repented before her end; but what 'shines' from her self-disclosure is the fact that she regrets nothing in her past. If Venus overcame her during her life time, if she is refulgent now 'only' in the third heaven, none of it matters—neither her 'lot' (*sorte*) then nor now. Refulgence is all.

So too for the next soul to address Dante, Folco of Marseilles, a troubadour poet with a reputation for high living in the courtly world of Provence before conversion to the religious life turned him first into a Cistercian monk and then into the bishop of Toulouse; he was also a formidable leader in the crusade against the Albigensians. Like Cunizza, Folco is more than willing to confess his errant ways, almost to boast that he is imprinted on the heaven of Venus here and now because he was marked by its fire during his former life ('e questo cielo/ di me s'imprenta, com'io fei di lui', vv. 95-96). During his youth, he burned with lust more than Dido and a catalogue of other classical figures who lost their lives to immoderate love. Cause for regret? None.

> Non però qui si pente, ma si ride,
> non de la colpa, ch'a mente non torna,
> ma del valor ch'ordinò e provide.
> Qui si rimira ne l'arte ch'addorna
> cotanto affetto, e discernesi 'l bene
> per che l' mondo di sù quel di giù torna (vv. 103-108).
>
> Yet here we repent not, but we smile, not for the fault, which returns not to mind, but for the Power that ordained and foresaw. Here we contemplate the art which so much love adorns. And we discern the good by reason of which the world below again becomes the world above.

38. See Rachel Jacoff, 'The Post Palinodic Smile: *Paradiso* VIII and IX', *Dante Studies* 98 (1980), pp. 111-22; also my 'All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante', *PMLA* 121.2 (March 2006), pp. 371-87. See Singleton's expansive elaboration on Cunizza's 'career' in his *Paradiso* Commentary, p. 164.

39. Singleton, *Paradiso* Commentary, p. 164.

Without setting out to do so, Folco describes the double effect of the two rivers that the penitent soul fords in the Garden Eden, at the end of their sojourn in Purgatory. By drinking from the River Lethe, the fully reformed soul forgets both the sins of the past and their attendant guilt; by immersion in the waters of Eunoe, he or she comes to a sense of redemption's *felix culpa*—the once forgotten good is recalled, so that 'the world below again becomes the world above'. Those like Cunizza and Folco, who were once conquered by Eros, now contemplate its place in the divine plan. They rejoice in the 'arte' of the Artist who foresaw, even ordained, that erotic excess could become divine surplus, 'which so much love adorns'.

With the notion of a fortunate fall conjured up—and with the blessed given over to smiling rather than to repentance ('non…si pente, ma si ride')—Folco turns the pilgrim to the individual radiance he has been drawn to all the while, to the soul that shines brightest in the lightshow of Venus:

> Tu vuo' saper chi è in questa lumera
> che qui appresso me così scintilla
> come raggio di sole in acqua mera.
> Or sappi che là entro si tranquilla
> Raab; e a nostr' ordine congiunta,
> di lei nel sommo grado si sigilla.
> Da questo cielo, in cui l'ombra a'appunta
> che 'l vostro mondo face, pria ch'altr' alma
> del trïunfo di Cristo fu assunta.
> Ben si convene lei lasciar per palma
> in alcun cielo de l'altra vittoria
> che s'acquistò con l'una a l'altra palma,
> perch'ella favorò la prima gloria
> di Iosüè in su la Terra Santa,
> che poco tocca al papa la memoria (vv. 112-26).
>
> You wish to know who is within the light that so sparkles here beside me as a sunbeam on clear water. Now know that there within Rahab is at rest, and being joined with our order, it is sealed by her in the highest degree. By this heaven—in which the shadow that your earth casts comes to a point—she was taken up before any other soul of Christ's triumph. And it was well-fitting to leave her in some heaven as a trophy of the lofty victory which was achieved by the one and the other palm, because she favored Joshua's first glory in the Holy Land—which little touches the memory of the Pope.

Along with everything else that Folco does not regret, apparently, is his past as a love poet. For what he does here is hymn the beauty and virtue of his lady within the heaven of Venus—a woman who (true to troubadour convention) does not speak or even, as far as we can tell, acknowledge his presence. Composed within herself, Rahab sparkles, yet she is also very

much at rest and at peace. The mere mention of her name evokes Joshua 2 and her identity as prostitute of Jericho; but presumably, like her companions Cunizza and Folco, she contemplates the divine art that providentially turned her into a woman of valor; the mother of prophets, priests, and kings; the ancestress of Christ; the keeper of a brothel made a figure of the Church. Though her sins once were scarlet, like the cord hung from her window, she appears in Venus as purity itself, 'like a sunbeam on clear water'. (Perhaps, as Jerome once conjectured, her virginity has been restored?) Rahab is at once sparkling and tranquil—and like the rhyming words 'scintilla' and 'tranquilla', she resonates in perfect harmony with the music of this sphere, the 'osanna' (8.29) that is sung by all. Indeed, she seals the company she keeps 'nel sommo grado', in the highest degree.

At the core of Folco's praise for his radiant lady is one particular moment—or double moment, given the figural relationship of Jehoshua/Jesus. In the first instance, we are meant to think of the fall of Jericho and the beginning of the Conquest in two senses. When Joshua leads his people over the Jordan, when he brings about the destruction of the 'city of perdition' (as Jericho was interpreted), he also figures or foreshadows, as Erich Auerbach wrote in an important essay on medieval typology, 'Christ leading mankind out of the slavery of sin and perdition into the true Holy Land, the eternal kingdom of God'. Thus Rahab, as the Church, is the trophy ('palma') of a double or two-palmed victory, that of Joshua, 'with the help of Moses' outstretched hands [at the Red Sea]' and that of 'Christ on the cross with his hands outstretched on the *arbor vitae crucifixae*'.[40] In other words, Rahab was saved both by Joshua *and* by Jesus, not only in ancient Canaan but in the Christian dispensation's 'fullness of time' (Gal. 4.4).

But then there is a second deliverance of Rahab that goes beyond the received tradition delineated above, which Auerbach summarizes so neatly. I am referring to the Harrowing of Hell, or *anastasis*, written about not in Scripture but in the Gospel of Nicodemus, and then 'publicized' in countless iconographies of the crucified Christ descending to Hell, battering down its locked gates, and delivering all those Old Testament worthies who awaited the Messiah's coming.[41] Toward the opening of the *Commedia*, Virgil gives

40. Erich Auerbach, 'Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature', *Symbol and Symbolism*, *Yale French Studies* 9 (1952), pp. 3-10 (4). See also Auerbach's earlier working of this material in 'Figurative Texts Illustrating Certain Passages of Dante's *Commedia*', *Speculum* 21.4 (October 1946), pp. 474-89 (482-84).

41. For Christ's descent into Hell, see *The Gospel of Nicodemus* in *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in English Translation* (ed. J.K. Elliott; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For the importance of the *descensus Christi* in the *Commedia*, see my *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 99-124.

an eye-witness account of this event, when the Mighty One ('un possente', *Inf.* 4.53) liberated a familiar cast of characters: Adam, Abel, Noah, Moses, Abraham, David, Rachel, 'and many others' (v. 61). At the very end of the *Commedia*, when in *Paradiso* 32 we are given our tour of the Empyrean's White Rose, we see that among these 'many others' are Sarah, Rebecca, Judith, and Ruth, among the ancient Hebrews, along with John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, and her mother, Anne. There is no mention of Rahab in either count; instead, she is highlighted in *Paradiso* 9, among the 'order' ('ordine') of Venus, and celebrated as the very first among her ilk—those who loved too well but not too wisely—to have been taken up into heaven after Christ's descent to the dead. The first one to be saved in the Conquest of Jericho is the first among the Eros-struck to be saved in the Conquest of Hades: 'pria ch'altra alma/ del triunfo di Cristo fu assunta', Rahab was taken up before any other soul in Christ's triumph.

Here is something new under the sun, or at least a splendid augmentation of the Rahab tradition. More than a 'pearl mixed up in mire', as John Chrysostom would have it, she sparkles like a sunbeam in clear water, savoring the memory of being chosen first by the divine Joshua who upon descending into hell raised her up to heaven. These words are spoken by Folco of Marseilles, but of course they come from the pen of Dante Alighieri who, like his troubadour spokesman, appears to be more than a little in love with the harlot of Jericho. His brief homage to her sparkling light, delivered in the words of another vernacular poet, enables him in essence to bring together Mars and Venus. On the one hand, Rahab provides the opportunity for Dante to call for a renewed crusade to free the Holy Land (one of his most hopeless causes); he can also take yet another swipe at the Papacy of his day, which is here accused of forgetting not only its duty toward the Terra Santa but any memory of the redemption that was wrought there, whether in the old dispensation or in the new. On the other hand, and more importantly, Rahab 'favors' Dante's poem-long rehabilitation of Eros, his attempt to join the amorous third heaven to the love that moves the sun and the other stars. Beatrice may be the major muse of this endeavor, but Rahab plays her part—and unlike the loquacious beloved, without uttering a word. She is God's trophy whore, who, like a sunbeam on clear water, shows how 'the world below again becomes the world above'.

# How a Woman Unmans a King: Gender Reversal and the Woman of Thebez in Judges 9

Ken Stone

To ask about the woman of Thebez in Judges 9 is already to ask an unusual question. To ask about her reception history is to follow an even more obscure path. Many readers of the Bible seem hardly to notice her at all. Even professional commentators often give her only passing attention. Indeed, the most extended discussion of the woman of Thebez that I have seen in print—a series of pages in Mieke Bal's dazzling book on Judges, *Death and Dissymmetry*—was written by a feminist scholar of literary and interpretation theory, well known for her interdisciplinary attention to tiny details, rather than a biblical scholar in any traditional, disciplinary sense of that term.[1] Influential exegetical commentaries on Judges, on the other hand, often dispense with the woman of Thebez quickly, sometimes in less than a sentence.[2]

It is not hard to understand, moreover, why readers of Judges pay so little attention to the woman of Thebez. Just three verses in the Bible refer to her explicitly (Judg. 9.53-54; 2 Sam. 11.21). She does not appear in later cultural artifacts with the same frequency as other women from Judges, such as Jael or Delilah, who, like the woman of Thebez, are associated with the death of male characters. As David Gunn notes in his reception-oriented commentary on Judges, the woman of Thebez 'is rarely foregrounded' in artistic representations of the death of Abimelech, for which she is responsible. Often she is barely visible in such representations; and, in some of them, she is omitted altogether.[3] Furthermore, unlike Jael and Delilah, the woman of Thebez remains unnamed even in the Bible itself. She is not literally 'the' woman of Thebez at all, in Hebrew; but rather 'one woman',

1. M. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), esp. pp. 217-24.

2. E.g. J.A. Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (trans. John Bowden; Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 194.

3. D.M. Gunn, *Judges* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 129-32.

'a single woman', or, in some translations (such as the NRSV), 'a certain woman' (Judg. 9.53). So far as quantities of verses, words, or later representations are concerned, this 'nameless and forgotten woman of Thebez' (as Susan Ackerman refers to her[4]) would surely seem to be an example of what the editors of this volume call a 'lesser known' woman from the Hebrew Bible.

To acknowledge the 'lesser known' status of the woman of Thebez is not to suggest, however, that she has been unknown always or everywhere. Indeed, her figure may actually loom quite large in the imagination of at least some of those interpreters who encounter her story. Consider the fact that the reception history of the woman of Thebez begins already *inside* the Bible itself. For only two of the three verses that refer to her in the Bible appear in the book of Judges. More specifically, during a scene of battle and siege at Thebez, recounted at the end of ch. 9, this 'one woman' in v. 53 drops a stone from a wall onto the head of Abimelech, a son of Gideon who wants to be king and rules for a time over the city of Shechem. Abimelech himself then refers to the woman in v. 54, in a gender-related command that I shall discuss further below. However, the third reference to her comes later in the story of Israel, specifically in 2 Samuel 11, where a general named Joab recalls the woman in his message to another ruler, King David, in a story that involves another man who dies in a battle near a wall. Joab knows the woman's story, then; and he apparently assumes that David knows it as well, since he speculates that David might readily recall the woman of Thebez when speaking to Joab's messenger.

How should we account for the fact that Joab remembers this woman from Judges in 2 Samuel, even though so many readers of the Bible say so little about her? How might Joab, or the author who puts words in the mouth of Joab, be reading the significance of her actions while simultaneously reading David's situation? And how might we as readers interpret the dynamics, especially the gender dynamics, of this early, inner-biblical moment of the reception history of the woman of Thebez?

In order to explore these questions, we shall need to recall the roles that the Woman plays in the narrative of Judges, in the narrative of 2 Samuel, and in the social imagination that shapes the Hebrew Bible. As is so often the case, an exploration of reception—in this instance, the reception in 2 Samuel 11 of the story recounted in Judges 9—cannot get very far unless we venture our own interpretation of the object of reception—that is, the woman of Thebez and the story from Judges in which she appears. Thus we need to begin by returning to the narrative in Judges about Abimelech, whose career the woman of Thebez brings to an end.

4. S. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 49.

A number of scholars have noted that the verses in Judges 9 which recount the Woman's killing of Abimelech are written in such a way as to recall earlier moments in Abimelech's own story. In the form of the book of Judges that we have, Abimelech is Gideon's son. This kinship relation is communicated to us in a rather complex section of Judges, which refers to Abimelech's father not only as Gideon but also as Jerubbaal, perhaps revealing thereby that multiple traditions have been combined to produce the biblical account.[5] Nevertheless, the connection between Abimelech and Gideon in our version of the book of Judges is important for our reading of the narrative. On the one hand, Gideon's own story includes an episode in which the people ask that Gideon and his sons and grandsons rule over them, whereupon Gideon explicitly asserts that 'I will certainly not rule over you and my son will not rule over you. Yhwh will rule over you' (8.23).[6] Kingship is rejected by Gideon. On the other hand, the name of Abimelech, son of Gideon, can be translated literally as 'my father is king'. Commentators sometimes suggest that this name referred originally to the divine king as father, and this may well be true.[7] It is ironic nonetheless that a character who explicitly denies that he or his sons should rule has a son named 'my father is king'. Indeed, most of the other biblical occurrences of the name Abimelech come from chs. 20, 21 and 26 of Genesis, where they refer *to* a king. In Judges, moreover, the tale of Abimelech clearly revolves around Abimelech's own desire to rule. Thus, matters of kingship are in some sense at stake in the story of Abimelech.

However, for someone who wishes to be king, Abimelech is born under circumstances that are hardly auspicious. After noting Gideon's seventy sons and many women in Judg. 8.30, the narrator distinguishes Abimelech from Gideon's other sons by stating in 8.31 that Gideon's '*pilegesh* who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech'. The Hebrew noun *pilegesh* is most often translated into English as 'concubine'. Discussions of its meaning usually gravitate toward some variation on the position held, for example, by J. Alberto Soggin, who in his commentary on Judges glosses the word *pilegesh* as 'a legitimate wife, but of second rank'.[8] A great deal of ink has been spilled over it in recent years, however; and in spite of the attention given to the term, uncertainty about its precise

5. The name 'Jerubbaal' is given to Gideon in Judg. 6.32, and appears in Hebrew interchangeably with 'Gideon' at 7.1; 8.29, 35; 9.1, 2, 5, 16, 19, 24, 28, 57; as well as 1 Sam. 12.11. In 2 Sam. 11.21, the name 'Jerubbeshet' appears in the Masoretic text; but the Septuagint retains the better reading, 'Jerubbaal'.

6. Except where noted, translations from Hebrew to English are my own.

7. E.g. R.G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible, 6A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 162-63.

8. Soggin, *Judges*, p. 159.

meaning remains. Thus Tammi Schneider, after discussing the word in her literary commentary on Judges, decides in the end simply to leave it in transliteration.[9]

For our purposes, though, enough evidence exists about the biblical uses of the word to allow us to move forward with an interpretation of the story of Abimelech.[10] The specification that Abimelech's mother is a *pilegesh* serves in this narrative not simply as information about her. It also draws a distinction between Abimelech and the other sons of Gideon, whose mothers are referred to as *nashim*, 'women' or 'wives'. This maternal distinction between Abimelech and his brothers may be related to a distinction found in Gen. 25.6, where Abraham gives gifts to the children of his 'concubines' but sends those children away from Isaac, his heir borne by Sarah. The fact that a child's mother is a 'concubine' or *pilegesh* appears, therefore, to result in the Bible, in some cases at least, in secondary status for the child. Such secondary status is clearly assumed for Abimelech in the storyline of Judges. Here as in some other biblical passages, a man's rank and reputation—what many social scientists, and many biblical scholars influenced by the social sciences, would call his 'honor'—are in doubt because of a woman, in this case Abimelech's *pilegesh* mother. Because Abimelech's story opens in such a fashion, his rank and reputation remain at stake (I would argue) throughout the story. The distinction between Abimelech and his brothers that is made with reference to Abimelech's mother therefore prepares the reader for the conflict between Abimelech and those brothers that soon follows. In 9.18, in fact, Abimelech is referred to derisively as the 'son' of a 'maidservant' or 'slave woman' by one of those brothers, Jotham.

In addition, by specifying early on that Abimelech's mother is from Shechem, the text provides a rationale for Abimelech to use when he attempts to persuade the lords of Shechem to cast their lot with Abimelech rather than with his brothers. 'Which is better for you?' Abimelech asks the lords of Shechem. 'That seventy men rule over you… Or that there rules over you one man?' 'And remember', he adds, 'that your bone and your flesh am I' (9.22). Because kinship is normally traced in a patrilineal fashion in the Hebrew Bible, there would seem to be little justification for Abimelech's attempt to justify rule on the basis of his mother.[11] Nevertheless,

9. T.J. Schneider, *Judges* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), pp. 128-30.

10. Here and at a couple of other points in this essay, my analysis of gender matters in the story of Abimelech overlaps with suggestions made in my chapter on 'Gender Criticism', in G.A. Yee (ed.), *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 2007), pp. 183-201.

11. See further N. Steinberg, 'Social Scientific Criticism: Judges 9 and Issues of Kinship', in Yee (ed.), *Judges and Method*, pp. 46-64.

his rhetorical appeal, linking kingship to kinship, works. The men of Shechem give Abimelech seventy pieces of silver, after which Abimelech hires men and kills his seventy brothers.

The reference to a woman at the beginning of Abimelech's tale, in circumstances that involve conflict and eventually death, therefore looks ahead to the appearance of the woman of Thebez at the end of Abimelech's tale, in another scene involving conflict and death. However, the scene in which Abimelech kills his brothers, the sons of other women, also looks ahead to the woman of Thebez in a different way. Abimelech, the 'one man' who would rule over Shechem, literally kills his brothers 'on one stone' (9.5). The story that develops between this point and the eventual appearance of the woman of Thebez is, as J. Gerald Janzen in particular has argued, constructed so as to keep the audience aware of thematic continuity. Abimelech's surviving brother will repeat at the end of a parable the phrase, 'on one stone', thereby giving, in Janzen's words, 'further narrative momentum to the motif of "singleness"'.[12] When Abimelech is, later on in the story, attacking another enemy, that enemy refers to 'one company', or more literally, 'one head', that he sees coming from a particular direction (9.37). Janzen therefore suggests that Abimelech is singled out in his enemy's discourse as 'Number One'.[13] It is surely no accident of vocabulary, then, that 'Number One', this 'one man', or 'one head', who has killed his seventy brothers born to other women on 'one stone', is finally killed by 'one woman', a woman who drops a stone on the head of the man who would be head over Shechem. As at the beginning of his story, so also at the end, Abimelech's fate is shaped by a woman. Moreover, the narrator is careful to underscore connections between the earlier and later sections of the story, noting about Abimelech's death that 'God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech which he did against his father in killing his seventy brothers; and God also made all the wickedness of the men of Shechem return onto their heads' (9.56-57a).

While the role played by this one woman of Thebez is small, then, it is nevertheless significant. She serves as an instrument of God's retribution for the deaths of Abimelech's seventy brothers, a retribution that is textually correlated (by means of references to women and stones) with the start of Abimelech's career.[14] This relation to retribution may at least help to explain, moreover, why the Woman and Abimelech are later referred to in

12. J.G. Janzen, 'A Certain Woman in the Rhetoric of Judges 9', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38 (1987), pp. 33-37 (34).

13. Janzen, 'A Certain Woman', p. 35.

14. On the theme of retribution and its literary demonstration, see also T.A. Boogaart, 'Stone for Stone: Retribution in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32 (1985), pp. 45-56.

the book of 2 Samuel. For that later reference occurs in yet another story of retribution, a retribution that will fall upon David and the son that he sires by a woman who belongs to a man David has had killed.

It is possible, however, that this neat reading of the story in terms of retribution, while compelling in its own terms, fails to capture the full significance of the woman of Thebez in the social imagination—the thoroughly gendered social imagination—of ancient Israel. Indeed, one linguistic detail potentially disrupts the tidy symmetry of interpretation that links one man's killing of his brothers on one stone, at the beginning of the story of Abimelech, with one woman's killing of that same man by means of a stone, at the end of the story. While the importance of the two stones in the story has been noted for centuries,[15] the two stones are not, in fact, the same kind of stone. The first stone, the 'one stone' on which Abimelech kills his brothers, is in Hebrew an *eben*. The second stone is a *pelach recheb*, understood most often as an 'upper millstone', or in Janzen's more literal rendition a '"riding" stone',[16] the portion of the millstone that rides or grinds upon the base.[17] According to 9.53, the woman 'cast down a riding millstone onto the head of Abimelech and crushed his skull'. What might account for the choice of this particular type of stone? In a mode of narrative discourse that is sparse on detail (as biblical narrative discourse, like much ancient narrative, clearly is), details that modern readers are inclined to pass over as minor in fact often carry considerable symbolic weight. If we are to assume, with Janzen, Gregory Mobley,[18] and others, that the framing of Abimelech's story with two women and two stones is significant, then it seems that we must also ask about the potential significance of the shift from one type of stone to another.

In order to explore this significance, let us recall not only the action of the woman of Thebez with her riding millstone in v. 53, but also the reference made to her by Abimelech himself in v. 54. After all, Abimelech does not die immediately after the millstone is dropped upon his head. Rather, he asks his armor-bearer, 'Draw your sword and kill me, lest they say about me, "A woman killed him"'. Abimelech's request has a parallel in 1 Sam. 31.4, where Saul unsuccessfully beseeches his armor-bearer to kill

15. Gunn (*Judges*, p. 123) notes that 'In his Proverbs commentary, Rashi (1040–1105) approves the Haggadic tradition which finds in Prov. 26.27—"Whoever rolls a stone, it will roll back on him"—the poetic justice ultimately visited upon Abimelech who slew his brothers on one stone and died by one stone'.

16. Janzen, 'A Certain Woman', p. 35.

17. Cf. Soggin, *Judges*, p. 194: '"The millstone", i.e., the upper part which rotates; the base was fixed'.

18. See G. Mobley, *The Empty Men: The Heroic Tradition of Ancient Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), pp. 146-52, which Mobley subtitles 'Abimelech and the Stones'.

him so that his Philistine enemies, whose archers have shot him, will not be able to 'come and run me through and deal ruthlessly with me'. The parallel is intriguing, since the stories of Abimelech and Saul have other points of overlap as well. Both rulers, for example, begin to get into trouble after explicit references in the text to an 'evil spirit' sent by God (Judg. 9.23-24; 1 Sam. 16.14; 18.10).

At least at first glance, gender plays no obvious role in Saul's request. Abimelech's request, on the other hand, with its anxious reference to the possibility that people will remember him for having been killed by a woman, articulates what T.M. Lemos calls male 'shame' over 'defeat at the hands of a woman…' in the Bible and other ancient texts. Lemos notes correctly that in a context where male status is closely related to military prowess, military defeat 'calls…masculinity into question' for the man who is defeated.[19] Throughout the ancient Near East, and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, manliness and military success are often assumed to go hand in hand. Military victory and defeat are referred to in both biblical and extra-biblical texts in thoroughly gendered symbolism, as Cynthia Chapman among others has pointed out.[20] Men who fail to perform adequately in a military context can be imagined by biblical writers to 'become like women', as Jer. 51.30 puts it. If a warrior's manliness is put at risk, then, when another *man* defeats him, how much more so might this prove true for the warrior who is defeated by a woman?

Read against this background, Saul's request to his own armor-bearer in 1 Sam. 31.4 begins to look even more similar to the request of Abimelech than most commentators have realized. If military defeat can be understood in the ancient Near East as a kind of emasculation, then Saul's anxiety about his treatment by his enemies can be read as a fear of just such shameful emasculation. One might even hear in Saul's language about being 'run through' a fear of bodily penetration with phallic overtones. Moreover, in his request to his armor-bearer, Saul refers explicitly to his enemies as 'uncircumcised Philistines', or more literally, 'foreskinned Philistines'. Circumcision is sometimes interpreted today, under the influence of psychoanalysis, as itself a kind of feminization.[21] However, its normative status in Israel

19. T.M. Lemos, 'Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006), pp. 225-41 (234).

20. C.R. Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite–Assyrian Encounter* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004). For an important precursor to the exploration of gendered symbolism in biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature carried out more recently by Chapman, Lemos, and others, see H.A. Hoffner, Jr, 'Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity: Their Use in Ancient Near Eastern Sympathetic Magic Rituals', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966), pp. 326-34 (329-32).

21. See H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 158-62.

probably indicates that, in biblical literature at least, it is the 'foreskinned Philistines' rather than the circumcised Israelites who are understood to be inadequate embodiments of manhood. Hence David Jobling can suggest that the frequent references to the Philistines as 'foreskinned' in Judges and 1 Samuel occur in the context of a representation of those Philistines as in some sense 'womanish'.[22] Thus the parallels between the requests of Saul and of Abimelech are quite symmetrical indeed. Whereas one ruler who is fighting without God's favor, Saul, asks his armor-bearer to kill him in order to avoid being slain by enemies deemed 'womanish' (to borrow Jobling's word), another ruler who is fighting without God's favor, Abimelech, asks his armor-bearer to kill him in order to avoid being slain by an actual woman.

Moreover, literary appeals to the male sense of shame and horror over 'defeat at the hands of a woman' are not limited in Judges to the story of Abimelech. Lemos herself, in fact, while discussing the theme, refers not to Abimelech but rather to the tale of Barak, who in ch. 4 of Judges fails to receive glory for the defeat of Sisera when Sisera is killed by a woman, Jael. So too, Mieke Bal argues that the narrated deaths of Abimelech and Sisera are both structured in Judges around what she calls a shared 'ideologeme of shame and gender', an ideologeme explored by much anthropological literature on honor and shame and deployed in much biblical scholarship making use of such anthropological literature.[23] While the parallel is not exact, the story of Jael's killing of Sisera does offer an intriguing point of comparison with Abimelech's death, not only by referring to Barak's loss of military glory for his failure to kill Sisera but also in its representation of the slaying of Sisera himself by the Kenite woman, Jael. As Victor Matthews notes, there are 'obvious convergences' between these two stories 'in which villains are destroyed by an unlikely hero, a woman'.[24]

In order to explicate these convergences further, we have to note not only that both Abimelech and Sisera are warriors killed by women; but also that, for both soldiers, death comes from above. Judges 4.21 recounts in graphic detail how Jael thrusts her weapon, a tent peg, into the head of the sleeping general Sisera, so that it 'went down into the ground'. In Judges 9,

22. D. Jobling, *1 Samuel* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), pp. 214-17, 230-31.

23. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, pp. 217-18. For a convenient introduction to the anthropological literature, see D. Gilmore (ed.), *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean* (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987). On the use of such literature for biblical interpretation, see my *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 234; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

24. V.H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 111.

the weapon used against Abimelech is thrown by a woman from a tower. It, too, therefore goes down into its target, once again a man's head.

The possible connotations of these parallel downward, and deadly, penetrating movements, begin to become apparent when we recall a point made by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In an important discussion of gender symbolism, Bourdieu argues that gender assumptions gain much of their force or symbolic weight from what he calls the 'insertion' of the opposition between women and men 'into a system of homologous oppositions'.[25] These include oppositions between outside and inside, public and private, dry and wet, up and down, active and passive, and so forth. Such oppositions shape our social world, our perceptions of that world, and the bodily dispositions produced by our interactions with that world. As a consequence, the systems that the oppositions form seem natural and embodied even though they are produced and sustained by ongoing social practice. In the context of exploring such systems of oppositions, Bourdieu relates the significance of the opposition between up and down, 'on top or underneath', to male erection and sexual intercourse.[26] Here we must recall that such intercourse is, throughout the ancient world and in many cultures still, understood as the conjunction of a dominant subject (which, moving on top, penetrates its object) and a subordinate object (which is penetrated from above). While the former position is normatively associated with men, the latter position is normatively reserved either for women or for subordinate males who become feminized.

When recollection of this ancient conceptualization of intercourse is joined to Bourdieu's analysis, we begin to realize that it is not only the case that Abimelech and Sisera are both shamed by being killed by women. In addition, the shame associated with their deaths is intensified symbolically when the text makes both men objects of female subjects who come at them from the male position up above, or on top. That is to say, Abimelech and Sisera are slain by women who are each, in turn, represented in symbolic phallic positions. Their killings involve not only death at the hands of women, but also a kind of spatial gender reversal, which might even be said to 'queer' the scene of death through the 'insertion' (to use again Bourdieu's word) of male warriors beneath in the penetrated position and women up above in the role of aggressive penetrator, the role of the top, normatively reserved for men.[27]

25. P. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (trans. R. Nice; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 7 and *passim*.

26. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, pp. 7-22.

27. On my use of the word 'queer' here, see further my discussion in 'Queer Commentary and Biblical Interpretation', in K. Stone (ed.), *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 334;

This queer symbolic point seems to be underscored, moreover, by the women's choice of weapons in the slayings of Sisera and Abimelech. As Gale Yee notes, the tent peg that Jael uses to kill Sisera functions symbolically as a 'ravaging phallus' in the 'unmanning' of Sisera in Judges 4 and 5.[28] Other readers have recognized the sexual symbolism at work in Judges 4 and 5 as well.[29] The riding millstone used as a weapon by the woman of Thebez in ch. 9, on the other hand, has drawn much less attention than Jael's tent peg. Those scholars who refer to it seldom inquire about its possible gendered connotations. Indeed, when commentators do reflect on the gendered dimensions of millstone, they sometimes restrict their attention to such matters as the supposition that a woman might be unable to throw a millstone by herself. Boling, for example, concludes on this very basis that the story must be 'hyperbole'.[30] However, such discussions miss entirely the symbolism of gender, sexuality, and spatial relations that structures the story of Abimelech and motivates the choice of this riding millstone as a weapon for the woman of Thebez. For according to Bourdieu, a millstone symbolizes in some Mediterranean cultures sexual intercourse by virtue of 'its moving upper part and its immobile lower part'.[31] Like Jael with her tent peg, then, the woman at Thebez uses a weapon that can symbolize (to borrow Yee's language) a 'ravaging phallus' in order to 'unman' a male opponent. The 'unmanning' of Abimelech, like that of Sisera, is therefore accomplished in multiple ways by the gender symbolism deployed in Judges 9.

Abimelech, of course, wishes to avoid the fate of being remembered for dying in a way that would be seen as shameful by most ancient men. Thus he asks his armor-bearer to slay him. As we have noted already, however, Abimelech and the woman of Thebez are recalled by Joab in 2 Samuel. Note the exact words spoken about them in 2 Sam. 11.21: 'Who killed

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), pp. 11-34; and *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2005).

28. G.A. Yee, 'By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4', in C.V. Camp and C.R. Fontaine (eds.), *Women, War, and Metaphor: Language and Society in the Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Semeia, 61; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 93-132 (116).

29. See, e.g., S. Niditch, 'Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael', in P.L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); D.N. Fewell and D.M. Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 and 5', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1990), pp. 389-411 (393-94); and J.C. Exum, 'Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?', in Yee (ed.), *Judges and Method*, pp. 65-89.

30. Boling, *Judges*, p. 182. For another interpretation of the gendered significance of the millstone that is different from my own, see Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, pp. 220-21.

31. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, p. 18.

Abimelech…? Did not a woman throw down on him a riding millstone from upon the wall so that he died at Thebez?' Nothing at all is said about Abimelech's armor-bearer in this later version of the story. Abimelech is rather remembered for exactly the sort of unmanly death that he hoped to avoid. In this earliest recorded instance of the story's reception, the slaying of Abimelech, which amounts (as we have seen) to the symbolic unmanning of the man who would rule over Shechem, is attributed to the woman of Thebez.

But why does 2 Samuel refer to Abimelech and the woman of Thebez at all? Joab cites the story when sending a messenger to David with news of the death of Uriah, whom David has secretly ordered Joab to let die in order to conceal David's intercourse with Bathsheba. Oddly, though, Abimelech's death at the hand of a woman is recalled by Joab as part of an imagined discourse, which Joab seems to anticipate coming from the mouth of David when David learns that Israelite soldiers have been killed. David himself, however, never in fact speaks it. Thus scholars sometimes disagree about the function of the reference to Abimelech and the woman of Thebez in 2 Samuel 11. Something more seems to be taking place than simply a recollection of poor military strategy. While it might seem at first that Uriah is being compared in some way to Abimelech (since both men die during battle), readers of the story often sense that in fact a comparison is more likely being made between Abimelech and David.[32] A problem remains with the comparison, however, since in 2 Samuel 11 the actual agents of death—David, Joab, and the soldiers of the city against which Joab fights—are all male. There is, to be sure, a female character in 2 Samuel 11, specifically Bathsheba. However, Nathan's parable to David in 2 Samuel 12 indicates that Bathsheba is understood to be an object in this particular story, and is quite clear about the fact that David is the man responsible for the misdeed that provokes divine anger. The text can therefore hardly be saying in any straightforward way that Bathsheba is responsible for the fates of either Uriah or David. What is the actual point, then, of the reference to Abimelech and the woman of Thebez? Should we follow Mieke Bal, for example, who suggests that the reference in 2 Samuel to a deadly woman, in a story where only men are involved in killing, 'has something to do with…an unconscious fear of women'?[33]

While I believe Bal is partly correct, the nature of the fear motivating the appearance of the woman of Thebez in 2 Samuel 11 needs to be explicated further. Joab's reference to the woman of Thebez does represent a male fear.

32. See, e.g., M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 219-22.

33. M. Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 34.

However, that fear may have less to do with women as such than with ever-present threats to manhood, to being unmanned. For we have seen that, in Judges 9, the woman of Thebez represents among other things a male fear of unmanning, indeed a royal male fear of the unmanning of a ruler, by way of a violent gender reversal. Such fear of emasculation can indeed involve women, and often in the Bible and in the book of Judges it does. However, the fear of emasculation appears in other contexts in the Bible as well, particularly in military scenes. If that fear of unmanning resurfaces in 2 Samuel 11 in the recollection of Abimelech and the woman of Thebez by Joab, as Joab prepares a message for David, it may be partly because David's manly honor and reputation are, like Abimelech's honor and reputation in Judges, very much on trial throughout a series of chapters in 2 Samuel. Although I can only allude briefly here to arguments I have made in more detail elsewhere,[34] it is important for us to recall that David's career has over the course of his story been recounted in terms of the semiotics of manhood. In 1 Sam. 26.15, David taunts one male enemy by asking, 'Are you not a man?' In 2 Sam. 10.2-6, however, just one chapter prior to the story of David, Uriah, and Bathsheba, other enemies of David insult him in turn. They shave the beards and cut the skirts of his male messengers, acts which amount to a kind of threatened symbolic castration of David himself. The enemies who challenge David's manhood in 2 Samuel 10 are, moreover, Ammonites, who are still fighting Israel at the beginning of ch. 11; and the leader sent by David to respond to an army hired by the Ammonites is none other than Joab, who therefore must know about the gendered challenge that has been made against his king.

With these and other jousts of manhood in the background, we can therefore note how 2 Samuel 11—the chapter in which the woman of Thebez from Judges finally reappears in Joab's speech—actually opens. In 2 Sam. 11.1, the narrator places the story in the spring 'when kings go out' to do battle. Almost immediately, however, we are told by contrast that one king—David—has stayed home in Jerusalem while his general, Joab, and 'all Israel' are doing battle against the Ammonites. David may, therefore, be represented as acting in an especially un-kingly way. Within a particular cluster of assumptions having to do with kingship, warfare, and masculinity, this 'un-kingliness' on the part of David can easily be read as a failure of manliness.

As the chapter proceeds to narrate the circumstances of David's liaison with Bathsheba, one might, of course, imagine that Uriah is actually the one who has been most 'unmanned' in the story, specifically by David. David, after all, is the one who takes Uriah's woman and then has Uriah killed. David's ability to collect women does function as a positive signifier

34. See my *Sex, Honor and Power*, pp. 85-127; *Practicing Safer Texts*, pp. 68-77.

of his manliness elsewhere, as when the growing power of 'the House of David' in comparison with 'the House of Saul' is illustrated by the accumulation of women and sons in 2 Sam. 3.1-6. However, the particular circumstances under which David takes Uriah's woman are clearly evaluated negatively in the book of 2 Samuel, as Nathan's parable to David makes clear. Moreover, the fact that David, a king who already has many women (a point also stressed by Nathan's parable), exploits Uriah's absence and seizes his property—that is, his one woman—while Uriah is away on the battlefield fighting for David, at a time of year when kings ought to be at war, only intensifies the doubts that might arise about David's royal manhood and leadership over the course of several chapters. As anthropologists of masculinity have pointed out, the achievement of manhood in the eyes of others is a complex social and embodied process, which involves performance, calculation, and the possibility of failure and inadequacy.[35] David has, over many chapters, been represented in ways that demonstrate his competence at embodying Israelite norms of manhood, and hence his skill and success at what gender theorist Judith Butler has called the 'stylized repetition of acts', which produce proper gender as performative effect.[36] Now, however, David has begun to run aground on the difficulty, also noted by Butler, that one is seldom able to inhabit gender norms with perfect consistency or total efficacy.[37] David's royal manhood has begun to seem, by Israelite standards, unstable. This instability of David's royal manhood can apparently be sensed by others, since his own son Absalom plays upon the perception of David as a failed or failing man when he has sexual relations with David's concubines on the roof of the palace, before 'all Israel', in 2 Samuel 16. By the beginning of 1 Kings, moreover, David's manhood has departed entirely, as the narrator indicates by noting that David is no longer able to have sexual relations with the young woman who shares his bed to keep him warm (1 Kgs 1.1-4).

Keeping all of this in mind, then, we can return to Joab's message to David in 2 Samuel 11. When Joab recalls the woman of Thebez and Abimelech, this recollection might be read on one level simply as an

35. See, e.g., M. Herzfeld, *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); R. Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); A. Cornwall and N. Lindisfarne (eds.), *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

36. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 139-41 and *passim*.

37. Among many publications where Butler makes this point or ones close to it, see especially her essay 'Critically Queer', in her *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 223-42.

anticipation of a question that David could ask about military strategy: Why would one go close to a city to fight, remembering the bad end to which Abimelech came when he did the same thing? On another level, however, Joab's reference to Abimelech and the Woman remembered for killing him can be read as a kind of subtle commentary by the book of 2 Samuel on David's own diminishing manliness, which is thought to have implications for his ability to rule effectively. Joab recalls the woman of Thebez because she represents an earlier moment of Israelite tradition when a ruler was unmanned in circumstances involving a woman.

In the biblical imagination, the woman of Thebez therefore symbolizes a certain male insecurity over the threat of unmanning and gender reversal. This insecurity motivates the gendered political rhetoric used in Judges to characterize Abimelech negatively. However, it also plays a role in 2 Samuel 11, where recollection of the woman of Thebez serves to signal the downward path of failed royal manhood that David has begun to travel. By exploring the deployment of this female symbol of unmanning in Judges and in the reception of the Judges story in 2 Samuel, we gain further insight into the gendered social world that gave us the Bible, even if, alas, we once again learn very little about the lives of actual ancient women.

We may, however, also catch a glimpse here of the roots of our own gendered world. For the fear of unmanning has by no means disappeared from political rhetoric. After all, the semiotics of manhood still plays a role in political affairs, as one quickly realizes when one analyzes the swagger with which certain world leaders walk across the stage of politics, or leap out of helicopters onto battleships to demonstrate their supposed manly success at war.[38] It should come as no surprise, then, that the fear of unmanning is still actively manipulated in the public sphere, as when US governors attempt to shame their political opponents by denouncing them as 'girlie men' or political media sensations stoke up partisan audiences by calling male adherents to other political perspectives 'faggots'.[39] The force of the

38. The reference here is to US President George W. Bush. See further my article 'Burning Bush: Or, Queering Bush's Bible', forthcoming in *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds*.

39. I refer here, respectively, to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who in 2004 denounced opponents in the California legislature as 'girlie men'; and conservative media pundit and author Ann Coulter, who in 2007 referred to former US Senator and Vice-Presidential Candidate John Edwards as a 'faggot'. See P. Nicholas, 'Schwarzenegger Deems Opponents Girlie Men', *San Francisco Chronicle* July 18, 2004 (online at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2004/07/18/MNGH57NKAF1.DTL> [accessed May 17, 2007]); and United Press International, 'Ann Coulter Calls John Edwards A Faggot', March 2, 2007 (online at <http://www.upi.com/NewsTrack/Quirks/Ann_Coulter_calls_John_Edwards_faggot/20070302-105935-6328r/> [accessed May 17, 2007).

latter insult depends on continued fear of gender reversal, or what Butler, reflecting on heterosexism, has called 'terror over…no longer being a real and proper man', a terror that works 'through the policing and the shaming of gender'.[40] While it is tempting simply to turn away from such spectacles of shaming in disgust, denouncing them as evidence that contemporary political discourse has reached a new low, reflection on the woman of Thebez perhaps shows us instead that the rhetoric of unmanning in political discourse has a very long history in the traditions that inform so many of us.

Attention to the one woman of Thebez thus gives us a glimpse into one moment of that long history, while simultaneously revealing a potential weak spot in the edifice of manly politics and the politics of manhood which many of us rightly wish to challenge. For the 'terror' of being unmanned itself reveals that gender is not a single, stable, permanent substance, but something that can be challenged and lost. And if it can be challenged or lost, then it can also be changed or transformed. Thus the woman of Thebez serves as a figure not only of an 'undoing' of gender that terrifies, but also of an 'undoing' of gender that gives hope,[41] precisely because she defeats a character who figures in turn a certain violent, gendered leadership with which too many of us—women, gay men, transgendered persons, people of marginalized races, nations, and classes, and many others as well—still have to contend.

40. Butler, 'Critically Queer', p. 238.
41. Cf. J. Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

# The Dissemination of Jephthah's Daughter*

Susanna Bede Caroselli

When she hears the news of her impending sacrifice, the Daughter of Jephthah asks for only one thing: that she may have two months with her companions to 'bewail her maidenhood', to mourn what is never to be—she will die without a husband, without children. Though she left no children of her body, Scripture tells us that she inspired a custom 'for the maidens of Israel to go every year, for four days in the year, and chant dirges for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite' (Judg. 11.40).[1] For centuries exegetes, scholars, poets, musicians, and artists, like the maidens of Israel, have remembered her and her disturbing story of sacrifice. Commentary on Judg. 11.30-40 began with Flavius Josephus and Pseudo-Philo in the first century CE, and the episode of Jephthah and his Daughter continues to be explored in contemporary biblical studies and theology.[2]

Jewish and Christian scholars seem always to have struggled with a narrative culminating in the forbidden practice of human sacrifice: Jephthah is criticized by one, excused by another, even lauded by a third; the Daughter is admired, pitied, even chastised. Literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical readings were all employed (sometimes in confusing combinations) to make sense of the narrative, with little agreement. Scholars disagreed with one another; some—Ambrose, for one—disagreed with themselves, arguing for both positive and negative representations of the Daughter and her father.[3]

* For Phineas Tobe, of blessed memory.

1. *TANAKH* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), is the source for English translations in the present study.

2. I have deliberately capitalized *daughter* throughout this article when referring to the Daughter of Jephthah in order to acknowledge her status as a distinct individual.

3. John L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 118-21. Thompson provides an excellent overview of commentaries from the first century through the Reformation, as well as modern feminist readings. For rabbinic and feminist readings, see also Barbara Miller, *Tell It on the Mountain: The Daughter of Jephthah in Judges 11* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005).

There is another body of commentary on this episode, that provided by visual imagery. Appearing first in the seventh century, imagery of the narrative of Jephthah and his Daughter occurs in some of the most important extant manuscripts of the medieval period, created for the rulers of France, Italy, and England and in the imperial scriptorium of Constantinople. This discussion will omit illustrated Bibles, in which Jephthah's story follows logically that of Gideon and precedes that of Samson, to consider instead some depictions in which the imagery is out of context, chosen for particular motives. In those contexts, who is this young woman, and how and why is her story presented?

The offering of Isaac by Abraham was identified in early Christian theology and imagery as a type of the death of Jesus on the cross, the willingness of a father to countenance the death of an only child; examples may be seen in catacomb paintings and on sarcophagi in the fourth century.[4] These are not identical narratives, the most striking differences being that while Jesus goes consenting to his death, Isaac is kept in ignorance until the moment before and, more importantly, does not die. But consider the story of Jephthah's Daughter: she insists that her father's rash vow to God be kept and she goes to her death without being rescued by any heavenly agency. Is there evidence, visual or written, that her sacrifice was ever recognized as an equal, or even a better, type of the Crucifixion?

The earliest known representation of Jephthah's Daughter is found in the Christian East. A pairing of scenes, the Offering of Isaac and the Sacrifice of the Daughter, can be found in a venerable location, the church of the monastery of St Catherine at Mt Sinai. The images flank the noted sixth-century apse mosaic of the Transfiguration, but postdate it, being painted in the seventh century directly on the marble revetment of the pilasters at the opening of the apse. The Offering of Isaac, on the north pilaster, has always been visible; the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter (Fig. 1), on the south pilaster, was covered by a seventeenth-century icon in an elaborate marble frame. Kurt Weitzmann, who discovered the second panel in 1963, suspected that there was a pendant scene to the Offering of Isaac (but admitted that he could not guess what it might be and was surprised by its

4. The Offering of Isaac was first used as one of the many 'prayer in peril' motifs from the Hebrew Bible depicted on catacomb walls in the late third and early fourth centuries, such as an image of Abraham and Isaac both orant in cubiculum A3 of the catacomb of Callixtus, Rome; see Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 214-15. One of the best-known early representations of the scene in its typological framework is carved on the marble sarcophagus of the Roman prefect Junius Bassus, dated 359; for a detailed discussion of the rich imagery, see Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus: Neofitus iit ad Deum* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

subject).[5] The paintings present us with similar elements: the two fathers stand beside altars on which their children kneel. Both scenes are shown within enclosures suggesting sacred precincts; both fathers are distinguished by haloes (as is Isaac but not the Daughter). The differences are in the stage of the narrative: Abraham's head is averted and his knife is still inches away from his son's neck, while Jephthah fixes his eyes on the sword that is even now cutting his Daughter's throat.

Figure 1. *Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter, seventh century, mural; Sanctuary, Church of the Monastery of St Catherine, Mt Sinai, Egypt.*

The only other known example of the juxtaposition of the sacrificial scenes is found, in much better condition, in thirteenth-century frescoes inspired by the Mt Sinai paintings in the Monastery of St Anthony at the Red Sea.[6] This ancient house was founded in the third century at the reputed site of the cave of Anthony the Abbot, which lies across the present-day Gulf of Suez from the Sinai Peninsula. Here the two scenes are on the same surface, high in the arch spandrels on the south wall of the altar area (Fig. 2).

5. Kurt Weitzmann, 'The Jephthah Panel in the Bema of the Church of St Catherine's Monastery of Mount Sinai', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18 (1964), pp. 341-52 (341-42, 350-52).

6. Elizabeth S. Bolman (ed.), *Monastic Visions: Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St Anthony at the Red Sea* (New Haven, CT: American Research Center in Egypt and Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 66-68.

Figure 2. *Offering of Isaac and Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter, thirteenth century, fresco; Sanctuary, St Anthony's Church, Deir Anba Antonius, Egypt. Photograph: Patrick Godeau, courtesy of the American Research Center in Egypt*

As at Mt Sinai, the scenes are compositional mirrors of one another: the altars upon which the sacrificial fires are already burning are separated by only a few inches above the keystone of the arch. The children kneel, not on the small altars but in front of them, facing one another; both are stripped to the waist. Their fathers hold their children's hair in their left hands, as at Mount Sinai, pulling their heads back to expose their throats. And once again Abraham has averted his face from the scene, his knife inches from Isaac's throat, and looks up to the hand of God emerging from the upper left corner of the composition. On the other side of the spandrel Jephthah seems to cast a poignant look at the tableau of salvation opposite him, for he has already cut his daughter's throat: her eyes are closed and blood has begun to flow.

This juxtaposition of the two sacrifices establishes a considerable significance for the story of Jephthah's Daughter at the beginning of its visual history. There can be no doubt that Jephthah was considered worthy to stand beside Abraham in faith. Since the typology of the Offering of Isaac had been well established by this time,[7] the use of its format for the Sacrifice

7. Robert Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 85.

of Jephthah's Daughter suggests a high regard for the latter episode. This is confirmed early in eastern writings: the first-century Hellenistic Jewish commentator Pseudo-Philo puts a comparison of the two sacrificial offerings in the mouth of the Daughter herself in his expansion of the story.[8] In a late third-century treatise on virginity, the *Symposium*, Methodius of Olympus refers to her as 'nobly fulfilling the image of [Christ's] flesh'.[9] And she is singled out in the writings of the fourth-century Deacon Ephrem the Syrian, whose hymns were central for Syrian liturgy, and whose biblical exegesis was known and respected throughout the eastern Christian world.[10] In one of his Hymns on Virginity, Ephrem likens the sacrifice of the Daughter to that of Christ:

> Jephthah's daughter bowed her neck to the sword;
> her pearl, delivered from all dangers, remained with her and consoled her…
> Jephthah's daughter willed to die to fulfill her father's vow…
> Jephthah poured out his daughter's blood,
> but your Bridegroom shed His blood for love of you.[11]

In the monastery churches of St Catherine and St Anthony, the sacrificial scenes overlooked the consecration of the Eucharist at the altar; at Mt Sinai they would be perceived as wings to an enacted altarpiece of the great sacrifice itself. No clearer message could be sent that the offerings of Isaac and the Daughter were equal in their prefiguration of the death of Christ.

The beautiful twelfth-century *planctus* of Peter Abelard acknowledges the link between the sacrificial offerings of Isaac and the Daughter,[12] but there is no visual imagery in the west to honor her in this way. Some western commentary can be found that treats the Daughter as a type of Christ, from a work of c. 450 by Quodvultdeus, a follower of Augustine and later Bishop of Carthage, to Hugh of Saint-Cher in the thirteenth century and Denis the Carthusian in the fifteenth.[13] But the only imagery that makes this connection occurs in the lavishly illustrated *Concordantia caritatis* of 1351 of Ulrich of Lilienfeld, a homiletic sourcebook that often depicts typological

8. 'Pseudo-Philo' (trans. D.J. Harrington), in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 353, section 40.2.

9. Translation from Margaret Alexiou and Peter Dronke, 'The Lament of Jephtha's Daughter: Themes, Traditions, Originality', *Studi medioevali*, 3rd Series, 12.2 (1971), pp. 819-63 (852).

10. Saint Catherine's library preserves ancient codices of his work in both Syriac and Greek; see Weitzmann, 'Jephthah Panel', p. 352.

11. Hymn 2 on Virginity, vv. 10-11; Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns* (trans. Kathleen E. McVey; New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 268-69.

12. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, pp. 144-50 (146).

13. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, pp. 133-34, 142, 152-54.

iconography found nowhere else.[14] Here the lamentation of the companions of Jephthah's Daughter is likened to the weeping of the women of Jerusalem as they follow Christ to Golgotha (Lk. 23.27-28).[15]

Images of the Daughter are visually deployed for other purposes. For the most egregious of these, Jephthah becomes the hero, the Daughter not so much the victim as the villain. Christian commentators were challenged by the inclusion of Jephthah among the just judges of Israel in the epistle to the Hebrews (11.32): Jephthah therefore must be good and his actions must have been right, which means his daughter was somehow at fault.

A disturbing example of this attitude may be found in a small group of manuscripts created in the early thirteenth century, the *Bibles moralisées*, among the most lavishly illustrated in medieval Europe (Fig. 3). Although, as in any Bible, the books are in a canonical sequence, they do not present Scripture in its entirety: they abridge or skip narratives and omit most of the New Testament with the exception of the book of Revelation. The biblical text is heavily tinkered with, filtered through centuries of exegetical material, and reduced to explanatory captions. The images are the Bible; the written text is helpful but not completely essential to their comprehension or their purpose. (Indeed, in a reversal of usual practice, the text was copied in after the images were completed.[16]) Their quality and lavishness suggest a recipient in the highest level of society, and most scholars believe that these manuscripts were made for the Capetian monarchs of France and their immediate court circle under the supervision of one of the powerful monastic orders in Paris, probably by the Augustinian Canons of Saint-Victoire, who enjoyed much royal patronage.[17]

In each manuscript, a biblical scene is paired vertically with another that presents an aspect of church or society contemporary to the thirteenth-century viewer/reader; the tone is instructive, sometimes even critical or admonitory. I would suggest the term *paraenesis* in its original philosophical sense, what Everett Ferguson defines as 'a moral exhortation to follow a given course of action or to abstain from a contrary behavior'.[18] These were instruction books on kingship promoting the concerns of the Church and

14. Lilienfeld Stiftsbibliothek, MS 151, fol. 90v.

15. A second type from the Hebrew Bible on the same folio depicts women mourning the death of King Josiah (2 Chron. 35.25).

16. Gerald B. Guest, *Bible moralisée: Codex Vindobonensis 2554, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek* (London: Harvey Miller, 1995), p. 11.

17. For information about the moralized Bibles and the earliest codex, see Reiner Haussherr, *Bible moralisée: Faksimile Ausgabe im Originalformat des Codex Vindobonensis 2554 der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1973), and Guest, *Bible moralisée*.

18. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 3rd edn, 2003), p. 322.

its clerics: 'suggestions' range from mounting a new Crusade to treating with respect the philosophers of the University of Paris (the aforementioned Victorine canons).

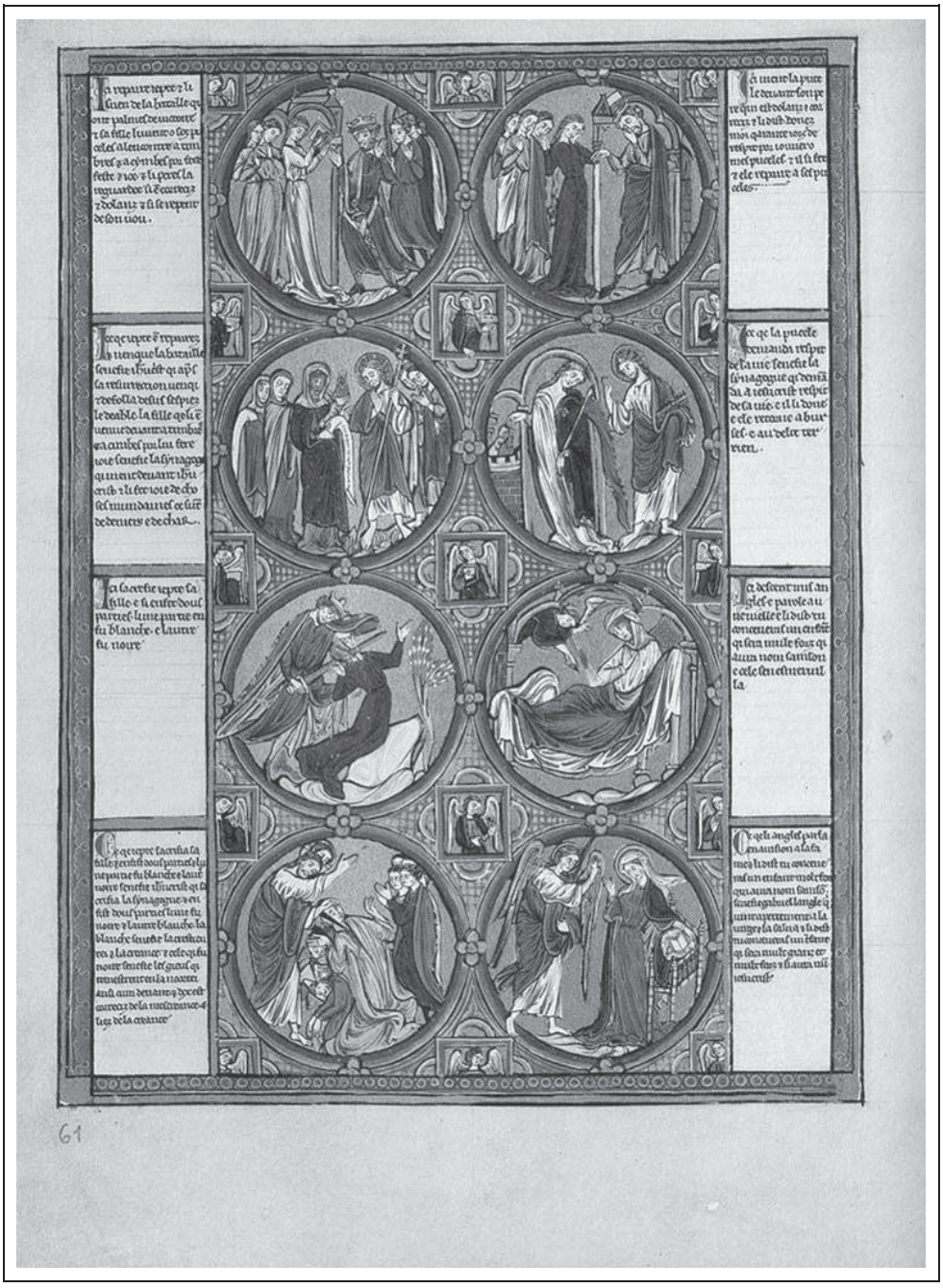


Figure 3. *Page with scenes from the narrative of Jephthah's Daughter,* Bible moralisée, *Paris, c. 1215/20; Vienna: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis 2554, fol. 61v.*

Codex Vindobonensis 2554, arguably the earliest of the moralized Bibles, was probably produced in the second decade of the thirteenth century for Queen Blanche of Castile, who in 1226 became regent of France for her

son, Louis IX.[19] Although unfinished, it is the most densely illustrated of all extant copies: the exploits of Jephthah as a warrior fill eight roundels and the narrative of the Daughter, three. In the first scene of her story she greets her father after his victory; in the moralization below, the placement of the figures is calculated (as in the entire manuscript) so that the viewer may clearly perceive equivalencies from one image to another. In both the image and the caption the victorious Jephthah is identified with the resurrected Christ, while the Daughter is 'Synagogue, who comes before Jesus Christ and celebrates worldly things, which are money and the flesh'.[20] Where the Daughter asks for time to lament, her counterpart Synagogue uses the respite granted her by Christ to return to money and 'earthly delights'. And finally, as Jephthah cleaves open his Daughter's head, Christ bisects Synagoga into a black half and a white half (Fig. 4): 'The white signifies Christianity and faith, and that which is black signifies the Jews who remain in darkness as before, and God is angered by their miscreance and is happy with their faith'.

The marked anti-Semitic nature of the moralized Bibles has long been noted (and is not unique in monastic manuscripts of this time).[21] The many moralizations featuring Jews are varied in their messages: some are clearly inflammatory; others, albeit in the minority, suggest compassion. In the narrative of Jephthah's Daughter, Synagogue—who in early Christian art had been a positive or neutral presence—is greedy and duplicitous (traits often attributed to Jews in the moralized Bibles), but half of her, the converted Jews, causes God to rejoice. Such shifting attitudes actually mirror an erratic policy toward Jews on the part of the monarchs of France. King Louis VIII and Queen Blanche were said to have been more tolerant than their predecessors, and the overall message of the three pairs of images (in Vienna 2554 and several other moralized Bibles) may have been a strong suggestion by the clerics to convert or control the Jews of France. Not surprisingly, in 1223, during the first few months of his reign, Louis VIII passed a *stabilimentum* that essentially deprived the Jews of France of authority, power, and sustenance.[22]

19. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis 2554; for a discussion of the dating of this and another version, also in Vienna (Codex Vindobonensis 1179), see Guest, *Bible moralisée*, pp. 9-12.

20. The translations from the French text of Codex Vindobonensis 2554 are taken from Guest, *Bible moralisée*, p. 100.

21. See Sara Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the* Bible moralisée (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), for a focused study of this subject.

22. William C. Jordan, *The French Monarchy and the Jews from Philip Augustus to the Last Capetians* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), pp. 93-104.

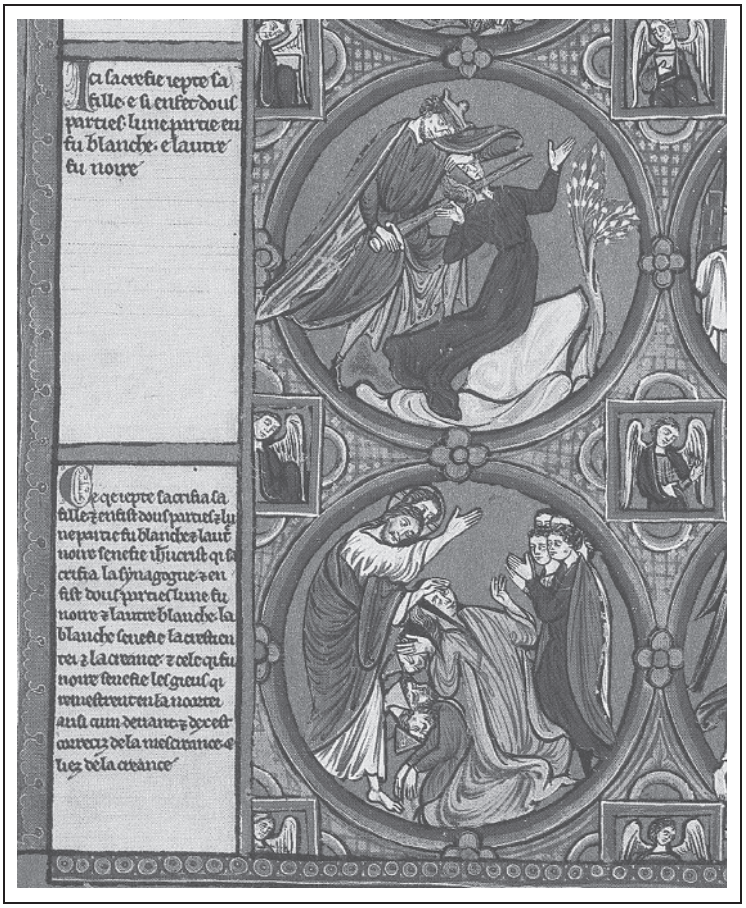


Figure 4. *Detail of Figure 3.*

Another visual appropriation of the narrative of Jephthah's Daughter is found in the genre of the *Speculum humanae salvationis*, The Mirror of Human Salvation. The original Latin manuscript was written between 1309 and 1324 by an anonymous author, probably a Dominican monastic from Saxony.[23] It was quickly copied and circulated, soon translated into German, and later into French, English, Dutch, and Czech. Several hundred versions were made, nearly all of which were illuminated following the model of the original. Four editions of a blockbook were printed in Latin and Dutch in the Low Countries beginning around 1468, and there are sixteen incunabula from eleven presses, making a total of more than 350 extant versions.[24]

The *Speculum* was influenced by the earlier *Biblia pauperum*, the Bible of the Poor, which had juxtaposed each scene from the life of Christ with two

23. Ludolf of Saxony has been put forward as the author, as have Vincent of Beauvais and Henricus Suso, among others; see Adrian Wilson and Joyce Lancaster Wilson, *A Medieval Mirror:* Speculum humanae salvationis, *1324–1500* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 26-27.

24. Wilson and Lancaster Wilson, *Medieval Mirror,* pp. 10-11.

episodes from the Hebrew Bible and four comments from the Prophets.[25] Like the *Biblia pauperum*, the *Speculum* was meant to serve as a preacher's aid by illuminating the connection between the two Testaments and other literature, providing dramatic sermon illustrations. In the typological presentation that makes up most of the *Speculum*, each episode of salvation history from the birth of the Virgin Mary to the Last Judgment is accompanied by three other scenes from Hebrew Scripture or medieval or classical sources. Captions and paragraphs identify and explain the typology and often indicate the source of the type. The iconography was standardized in the manuscripts, blockbooks, and incunabula; each *Speculum* presented the same scenes in the same order.

The 'primary' scene in Chapter 5 is the dedication of the young Virgin Mary in the Temple in Jerusalem (Fig. 5, left). She is usually depicted standing or kneeling on an altar between her mother and the high priest. In the blockbook, the caption identifies the scene as 'Mary was offered to the Lord in the Temple' (*Maria [oblata] est domino in templo*). The second of the three accompanying scenes is captioned: 'Jephthah offered his daughter to God' (*Jepte obtulit filiam suam domino*) (Fig. 6, left). Though the image may differ from manuscript to manuscript, the sacrificial scene is always depicted, with Jephthah swinging his sword or stabbing his Daughter. In the blockbook, a mounted and armored Jephthah seems about to execute her at the moment she has come out to celebrate his victory; this unusual scene was probably not determined by someone's lack of knowledge of her two-month respite but by the desire to present all the most recognizable elements of the narrative at the same time.

The juxtaposition of the dedications of Mary and the Daughter honors the latter as a type of the Virgin Mary, but seems to equate the death of one innocent girl with the comfortable protected life of another. In order to understand the typology fully, a reading of the iconography should include the other two scenes that prefigure the presentation of the Virgin in the Temple of Jerusalem. The first accompanying scene illustrates a story reported by the first-century CE Roman author Valerius Maximus about two fishermen who caught in their net a golden table, which they offered to Apollo (Fig. 5, right): 'The golden table from the sand was offered in the temple of the sun' (*Mensa aurea in sabula oblata est in templo solis*).[26] This offering of a precious object in a temple is a clear type of the offering of Mary by her parents.

25. See *Biblia pauperum: A Facsimile and Edition* (ed. Avril Henry; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

26. Valerius Maximus, Roman historian and writer of the first century CE, was the author of *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri ix* (usually translated as *Nine Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings)*, c. 31 CE; see Wilson and Lancaster Wilson, *Medieval Mirror*, p. 150.

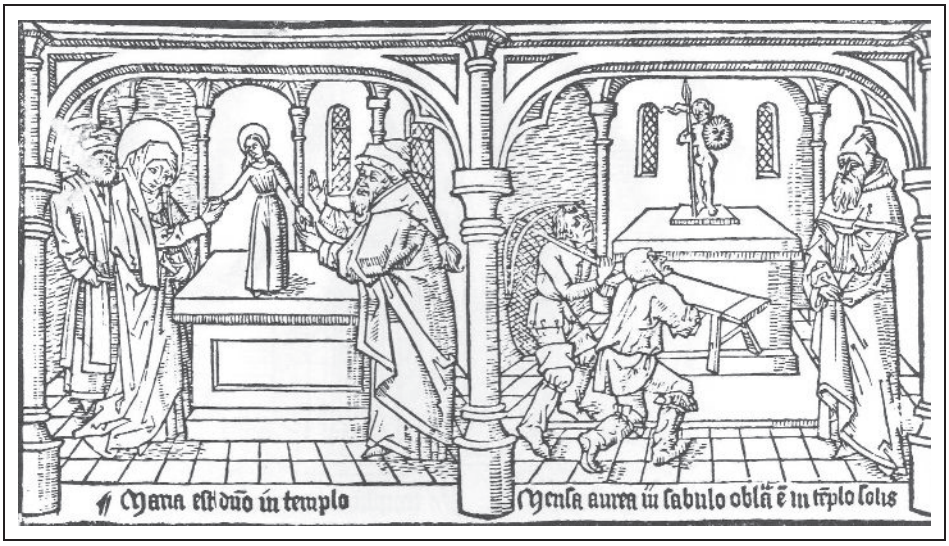


Figure 5. *Presentation of Mary and Offering of the Golden Table*, Speculum humanae salvationis, *Netherlands, 1309/24*.

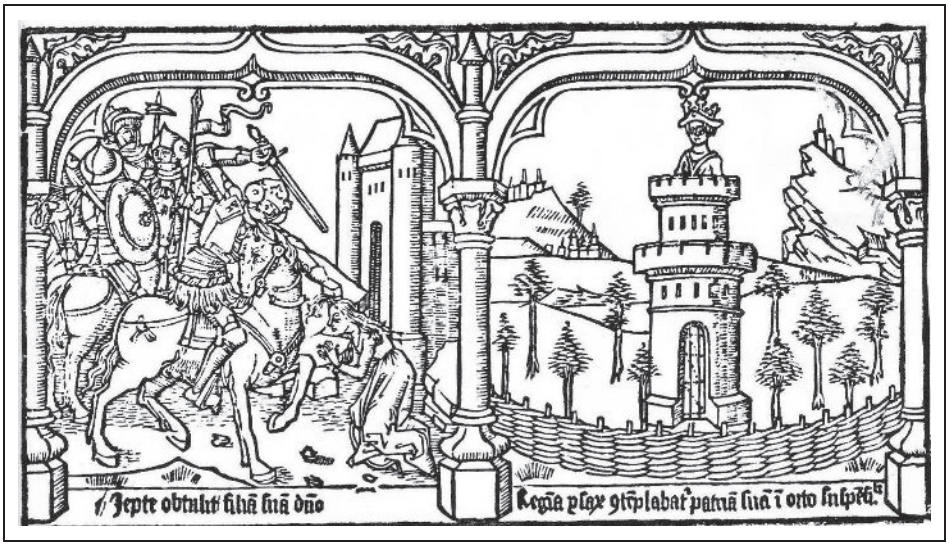


Figure 6. *Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter and Queen of Persia*, Speculum humanae salvationis, *Netherlands, 1309/24*.

The fourth image in this group depicts a woman identified in the block-book caption as the Queen of Persia, who 'in her hanging gardens contemplated her land' (*Regina persarum contemplatur patriam suam in orto suspensili*) (Fig. 6, right). There is some conflation or confusion here: it was not a Queen of Persia but an Assyrian queen, Semiramis, a legendary monarch identified variously with Nineveh, Babylon, and Assyria itself, who was said to have built the original hanging gardens of Babylon that were later expanded by Nebuchadnezzar II. The image in the blockbook, however, depicts a woman sitting Rapunzel-like in a locked tower without a garden in

sight. This is not the only example in *Speculum* manuscripts of error or, more likely, deliberate distortion of the narratives to promote the closest possible correspondences between antetype and type. Indeed, the image is sufficient, no matter the identity of the lady: she has shut herself away (or been shut away—in some images the portal is conspicuously locked from the outside) just as Mary remained in the Temple of Jerusalem until puberty. The scene is illustrative of separation from the world, just as Mary withdraws into the Temple precinct.

This chapter of the *Speculum* presents themes of offering and isolation, of being dedicated to a god and being set apart, and the narrative of Jephthah's Daughter represents these two themes even better than the other two types in the chapter, which address one theme or the other. The iconography, established in the early fourteenth century, also suggests an awareness of another point of view that emerged in the early thirteenth century in Jewish commentary and then communicated to Christian exegetes: that Jephthah did not kill his Daughter but dedicated her to God, to live in perpetual celibacy. It was David Kimchi who introduced this possibility, though crediting it to his father Joseph, based on a different reading of the conjunction *waw*—as 'or' rather than 'and'—in Judg. 11.31: 'then whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's *or* shall be offered by me as a burnt offering'. Thus, an animal would be sacrificed but a person would be reserved for God's service.[27] This interpretation was welcomed by both Jewish and Christian commentators, who had always struggled with the idea of the 'just judge' Jephthah killing his only child in an illegal sacrifice. In the imagery, however, the imminent or actual execution continues to be the primary image to illustrate the story of Jephthah's Daughter. One notable exception is a group of manuscripts known as the Pamplona Bibles, which depict the Daughter being walled up like a little anchoress.[28]

A far different use is made of the narrative of Jephthah's Daughter in a work of the late fourteenth century, the *Confessio amantis* by John Gower (c. 1330–1408), a friend and colleague of Chaucer and, in the critical judgment of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, his literary equal.[29] In his

27. Frank Ephraim Talmadge, *David Kimchi: The Man and the Commentaries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 7.

28. The three manuscripts called the Pamplona Bibles were made in the royal scriptorium at Pamplona around 1200. The first was made for King Sancho of Navarre; though the owners of the other two manuscripts are not known, it is clear that they were made by the same artists. See François Bucher, *The Pamplona Bibles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

29. John H. Fisher compares their work and thought in *John Gower, Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), especially pp. 204-302.

poem of more than 30,000 lines, one of the earliest literary works in English, Gower introduces an aging man who has been frustrated in love. His appeal to Venus is rewarded: she will release him from the unhappiness of love, but only after he recounts his experience as a lover, with all its joys and sorrows, to her priest. The confessor, Genius by name, leads Amans, the lover, through a consideration of the seven vices, examining him for evidence of these behaviors and instructing him by means of dozens of cautionary tales taken primarily from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and other Roman and medieval literature.

Gower makes use of a few biblical narratives as well in the *Confessio*, and that of Jephthah's Daughter is one of them. The Daughter's tale is told in the fourth book, which is dedicated to the vice of Sloth, on the face of it a puzzling association. But Gower is not loath to tinker with a story in order to suit it to his needs. The biblical narrative in Judges 11 focuses on Jephthah and his military adventures, with the Daughter's sacrifice as a by-product of a vow made on the eve of battle, while Gower's ninety lines put the narrative emphasis on the Daughter, particularly on her request for time to 'bewepe hir maidenhod'[30] and her lament itself, which centers on the lost opportunity to bear children. Of the sacrifice we are told only that 'sche deiede a wofull Maide' (line 1595); Jephthah does not reappear as the agent of her death.

Where is the sloth in this? We must turn to Genius, who prefaces the tale with an admonition to the maiden of marriageable age who out of simple sloth puts off her nuptials (and, thus, the bearing of children that is her duty) only to find out that she has waited until it is too late (lines 1498-1501). The point of Gower's version of the story, which the lover echoes at the end (lines 1596-1601), is this: rather than dally as a virgin, the Daughter should have been wed and procreating, then she would not have needed to lament her childless state at the moment of her untimely death.

The gather-ye-rosebuds 'moral' of this tale raises the question of the nature of the *Confessio*. Is it simply an example of the literature of courtly love? Despite the presence of Venus, Cupid, and Genius and the inclusion of secular tales, the *Confessio* cannot be perceived as a secular work. As Edwin Craun has pointed out, Genius employs the sequences and methods prescribed for a Christian confessor.[31] The examination of the penitent is

30. Lines 1565-66; the text used for the present study is the third and final recension of 1393 printed in *The Complete Works of John Gower* (ed. G.C. Macaulay; Oxford: Clarendon, 1901), II, lines 1505-1601. The same text is also available on-line through the Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/GowConf.html>.

31. Edwin D. Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 113-56.

structured around the seven vices/sins as designated by the Church. At the conclusion of the poem the lover is freed from the pain of love, given absolution by Genius, and restored to reason, declaring the supremacy of divine love. Given the moral tone of most of Gower's writings, it is more likely that the *Confessio* seeks ultimately to point out the shortcomings of courtly love. Might 'Moral Gower', as Chaucer called him in the epilogue to *Troilus and Criseyde*,[32] have appropriated the tale of Jephthah's Daughter as a comment on the foolishness of maidens and a promotion of the moral stability of the married state?

Figure 7. *Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter, John Gower,* Confessio amantis; *New York: Morgan Library, M.125, fol. 76r.*

An early fifteenth-century illumination representing the narrative of Jephthah's Daughter (Fig. 7) is found in an English manuscript of the *Confessio amantis* in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.[33] The moment depicted is, however, an odd choice to illustrate Gower's text: despite the

32. Book V, strophe 266, line 1856.
33. John Gower, *Confessio amantis*, New York: Morgan Library, MS M.125, fol. 76r.

fact that Jephthah's sacrifice of his Daughter is the least prominent episode in Gower's poetical account, the single miniature illustrating the narrative depicts her death, or, more accurately, the aftermath of an execution. Jephthah's sword has completed its arc; his left hand is raised in an odd gesture of surprise, or perhaps compassion? The Daughter's body remains decorously and devoutly upright, while her head rests a few feet away, gracefully balanced on her neck, her headdress intact, a prim expression on her face. This scene is, to be sure, the most recognizable action in the narrative of Jephthah's Daughter, the one that readers would be most likely to recognize, which may have dictated its choice.

The illumination locates the narrative in a more religious context than does Gower's text. Behind the figures is an altar, specifically identified as such by an anachronistic Crucifixion scene on its reredos. True, the Daughter is not *on* the altar as she was in the *Speculum*, but she is near it and seems to have been kneeling facing it in an attitude of prayer. The depiction of her decapitation is unique, to my knowledge. Beheading, like all medieval methods of execution, was the assigned punishment for specific crimes, but Jephthah's Daughter is not a criminal. Decapitation, however, was also the medieval epitome of the 'honorable death' and would have identified the Daughter as a person of stature. Furthermore, as Mitchell Merback has said, 'it brought no stain of infamy on either the condemned or, just as important, *on his or her family*'.[34] Although Jephthah disappears in Gower's text, he emerges in the illumination—parent and executioner—as an honorable man.

Might the viewer/reader also see in this image the Daughter's just deserts for her sloth? In dress and deportment she is similar to the other elegant ladies depicted in the manuscript's miniatures, many of whom are presented by Gower as examples of foolish or wicked behavior. The women of the Morgan *Confessio* are all depicted as haughty court ladies. Did the images as well as the text seek to ridicule and demean the enterprise of courtly love, with it ardent lovers and distant objects of desire?

A type of Christ, a type of the Virgin Mary, the personification of Synagogue and of the slothful maiden—perhaps the Daughter's anonymity, her absence from more standard typologies, made her vulnerable to such diverse appropriation in the Middle Ages. In the Renaissance and after, images from the Daughter's narrative become less frequent and are usually limited to literal readings of the dramatic encounter between father and daughter and the poignant lament. Despite hundreds of operas, oratorios, plays, and poems from the Baroque and Romantic eras, despite concentrated attention

34. Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 141, italics added.

by biblical scholars and theologians, visual imagery of this narrative has steadily decreased. Because we are such a visually oriented culture, if the Daughter does not exist in imagery, for many she does not exist at all. Self-styled biblically literate individuals have confessed to me that they had not heard this and other of Scripture's more disturbing stories, and a few have expressed disbelief that these narratives are in the Bible at all.

Does the visual dissemination of Jephthah's Daughter now end?

Perhaps not. I have learned in the past few years that many people want to discuss these images and their interpretations, not just in intellectual engagement, but for spiritual and emotional benefit. The closer someone is to violence, whether it be as victim or caregiver, the more the images resonate. Those who have suffered find them empowering and consoling, especially as evidence that Holy Scripture recognizes and acknowledges the nature of their suffering. Those who would maintain a distance are reminded that such suffering is still present in the world. Images of Jephthah's Daughter, of the Levite's Concubine, of Dinah, of Tamar, and of so many others will be needed as long as any human being suffers from foolishness, expedience, or cruelty.

# Asking at Abel: A Wise Woman's Proverb Performance in 2 Samuel 20

Katheryn Pfisterer Darr

## *Introduction*

Neither the narrator of 2 Samuel 20 nor Joab, David's erstwhile general, seems surprised that a 'wise woman' (אשה חכמה) on the wall surrounding Abel Beth-maacah shouts for Joab as his soldiers besiege her city. Crises, including military crises, cry out for level heads, savvy strategies, and the ability to enact those strategies successfully. And a wise woman's role, rooted in tribal ethos and maternal sagacity, includes stepping into the breach when disaster threatens not only the domestic sphere, but also the public village and tribal settings of Iron Age Israel.[1]

Moreover, it is not surprising that this unnamed wise woman performs a proverb, followed by a rhetorically charged rebuke of and challenge to the trouble-maker below. Proverb performance (henceforth PP; plural PPs), the purposeful citation of a saying in a social interaction setting, often occurs in conflict situations;[2] and the ability to reframe and resolve disputes by citing an apt adage at precisely the right moment bespeaks a type of wisdom as old as the folk.[3] When the conflict created by Sheba son of Bichri's presence in Abel Beth-maacah on one hand, and Joab's determination to extricate the rebel at any cost on the other, threatens her city, Abel's wise woman wields not only authority,[4] but also the power of carefully crafted words.

In this essay, I analyze the wise woman of Abel's sole, brief appearance in the Hebrew Bible, focusing especially on her PP. Because she occupies only

1. See Claudia V. Camp, 'The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981), pp. 14-29.

2. See my 'Proverb Performance and Transgenerational Retribution in Ezekiel 18', in Stephen L. Cook and Corrine L. Patton (eds.), *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World: Wrestling with a Tiered Reality* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), pp. 199-223 (207-208).

3. In this essay, I use 'proverb', 'saying', and 'adage' synonymously.

4. See my brief remarks about proverbial authority in 'Proverb Performance and Transgenerational Retribution', pp. 208-209.

seven verses, our wise woman qualifies as a 'lesser known' character in ancient Israel's cast of saviors. Keep in mind, however, that she is no bit player to Abel's inhabitants, who live to tell of her intelligence and courage, or to Joab, who adds this episode to his arsenal of war stories involving women, or to Sheba, who literally loses his head over her.

The story of Sheba's revolt against King David, like so many narratives in the books of Samuel, challenges textual critics at multiple points. For our purposes, the main problem concerns the scope, theme, and contextualized meaning of the wise woman's saying as it appears in the Masoretic text (MT) on one hand, and the Septuagint (LXX) on the other. Because the proverbs in these two textual traditions appreciably differ, and because one cannot simply assume the superiority of MT, we shall analyze both.

Before turning to that conundrum, however, we shall undertake two tasks. First, we will examine the literary account of the social interaction setting in which the wise woman of Abel is said to perform her proverb. This step is crucial because the meaning of any contextualized saying cannot be determined by analyzing the adage alone. As Peter Seitel, following M.M. Bakhtin and others, observes, a proverb's 'theme' remains relatively constant, but its 'meaning' depends upon its specific context of usage:

> Theme emerges as the result of relationships perceived between the constituent parts of a work or utterance; the theme of a repeated utterance or work remains relatively constant. Meaning, in contrast, emerges as the result of relationships perceived between the utterance or work (in part or as a whole) and the context in which it is spoken or otherwise performed and received; the meaning of a repeated utterance or work changes with its context of performance and/or reception.[5]

Second, I will describe Peter Seitel's interpretive method for analyzing the logic of PP, in which 'finalization' at the levels of composition, style, and theme plays a crucial role.[6]

### *Aspects of Context: Vivid Present and Broader Horizon— The Vivid Present of the Wise Woman's Proverb Performance*

The aspect of context most crucial for determining a proverb's meaning is what William Hanks calls the 'vivid present', namely, the immediate

5. Peter Seitel, *The Powers of Genre: Interpreting Haya Oral Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 4-5. See especially M.M. Bakhtin, 'The Problem of Speech Genres', in M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (trans. Vern W. McGee; ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 60-102.

6. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, pp. 17-19, 28-32, 37-48. I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Seitel, who helped me think through several aspects of this essay.

interactional setting in which it is cited.[7] It includes 'the participants; the multidimensional institutional and noninstitutional relationships that associate and divide them; and the topics, utterances, and acts that have gone before the work or utterance in question and those that are expected to follow'.[8] The vivid present of the wise woman's PP is (the literary account of) Sheba's revolt against Davidic rule and Joab's attempt to capture him by besieging Abel Beth-maacah (2 Sam. 20.1-22).

### *The Broader Horizon of the Wise Woman's Proverb Performance*

One cannot comprehend this episode fully, however, apart from the larger narrative (what Hanks calls the 'broader horizon') against which it unfolds.[9] The story of Sheba's revolt reverberates with stories and ciphers integral to the broader horizon of David's life. Aspects of two tragic themes, in particular, surface in 2 Sam. 20.1: (1) David's ongoing clashes with King Saul, Saul's would-be (more accurately, would-not-be) successors to Israel's throne, and Saul's Benjaminite tribesmen, whose bitterness toward David persists long after Saul's death; and (2) the death of David's beloved son Absalom, the ruthless usurper of his father's throne, and its consequences.

In 2 Samuel 18–19, readers learn that Joab and his arms-bearers have killed Absalom (18.14-17), the pan-Israelite army that backed Absalom's failed coup has disbanded (19.9), and all the people are debating what to do next. David, their old deliverer, has fled; Absalom, their newly crowned king, is dead. All things considered, should they not shift their allegiance back to David? (19.10-11).

'In terms of political psychology', J. P. Fokkelman observes, 'this speech by the people is an extremely delicate and sensitive moment…' Only days earlier, they were locked in violent struggle for Absalom. Now, they are on the brink of realigning themselves with David, 'a political detail of primary significance for any leader who has been repudiated but then recalled. At least if he is in his right mind.' But, Fokkelman adds, David obviously is not in his right mind because he commits a momentous blunder.[10] Instead of responding to their overture with words and acts of reconciliation, David discriminates in Judah's favor, sending messengers to his tribe's elders and to Amasa, the late Absalom's military commander. To the former he says, 'You are my kinsmen, my own flesh and blood! Why should you be the last to

7. William F. Hanks, *Language and Communicative Practices* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), p. 142.

8. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, p. 5.

9. Hanks, *Language and Communicative Practices*, p. 142.

10. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel. I. King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), p. 290.

escort the king back?' To the latter he vows, 'You are my own flesh and blood. May God do thus and more to me if you do not become my army commander permanently in place of Joab!' (19.13-14).[11] The text says nothing about the effect of David's appeal on Judah's elders, but Amasa 'swayed the hearts of all the Judites as one man' (v. 15a). David sets out, and his tribesmen escort him across the Jordan (v. 40a).

There is a price to pay for preferential treatment, however. All the men of Israel approach David and ask, 'Why did our kinsmen, the men of Judah, steal you away and escort the king and his family across the Jordan, along with all David's men?' (v. 42). Their words are diplomatic—to a point. They refer to Judah's men as 'our kinsmen' (implicitly claiming David as their kinsman as well!), but their resentment surfaces in the use of גנב, 'to steal', to characterize how Judah's soldiers gained access to David and his entourage. David does not respond, but Judah's troops defend themselves: David is our kinsman. Why should you be angry? We've received no preferential treatment—though, of course, they have. Not surprisingly, Israel's army is not appeased: 'We have ten shares in the king; and in David too, we have more than you', they reply. 'Why then have you slighted us? Were we not the first to propose that our king be brought back?' (v. 44a). For readers attuned to Israel's historical traditions, the number ten not only emphasizes the disparity between the number of northern and southern tribes, but also presages the bifurcation of David's kingdom following the death of his son and successor, Solomon.

2 Samuel 19 concludes with the words '…the men of Judah prevailed over the men of Israel'. But the conflict dividing them remains. In 2 Sam. 20.1, readers learn that a certain 'scoundrel', Sheba son of Bichri, a Benjaminite like Saul, 'happened to be there' (2 Sam. 20.1). Sheba blows the shopar and issues a stylistically elevated call for secession from David's kingdom: 'We have no portion in David, / no share in Jesse's son! / Every man to his tent, O Israel'.[12] According to v. 2, all the Israelite troops follow Sheba, leaving only Judah's forces to accompany their king to Jerusalem.

Back at his palace, David confines his ten (that number again) concubines, with whom Absalom publicly fornicated as part of his claim to his father's throne, to seclusion under guard and forced celibacy. He then dispatches Amasa, his newly appointed general, to round up Judah's soldiers

11. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are from *JPS Hebrew–English TANAKH* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2nd edn, 1999/5759).

12. In this context, the phrase 'Every man to his tent, O Israel' functions as 'a call to complete secession from the Davidic state' (Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, p. 319). In some other contexts (e.g. 2 Sam. 19.9; 20.22), however, it serves as a call for standing troops to disband. See P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel* (Anchor Bible, 9; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 428-29.

and bring them to Jerusalem within three days. Amasa sets out on his mission; but for some unspecified reason, he misses David's deadline. Fokkelman attributes his tardiness to low morale among the troops: 'the able-bodied men of Judah who have just come home from a bloody war [ ] they have lost against David are [ ] certainly not waiting impatiently to start a civil war in favour of David'.[13] Whatever its cause, Amasa's delay has already afforded Sheba a three-day head start. So David says to Abishai, Joab's brother and an aggressive enemy of Saul and his clan, 'Now Sheba son of Bichri will cause us more evil than Absalom' (v. 6a). Is David indulging in hyperbole? Better, does he recognize that the already-stretched seams connecting his kingdom's northern and southern tribes surely will burst apart if Sheba son of Bichri succeeds? 'So take your lord's servants and pursue him', David orders Abishai, 'before he finds fortified towns and eludes us'. Abishai, followed by Joab's men, the Cherethites and Pelethites, and all the warriors, sets out in hot pursuit of Sheba (v. 7).

Although v. 7 refers to Joab's *men*, v. 8 places *Joab* among Abishai's soldiers. What happens next presents yet another example of Joab's readiness to size up situations and then take matters into his own hands—literally in this case. When Amasa finally appears, Joab greets him with a disarming question ('How are you brother?'), grasps Amasa's beard with his right hand (as if to draw him close for a kiss), and then—like Ehud to Eglon (Judg. 3.15-26)—plants a sword in his belly with his left hand and disembowels him. His rival dispatched, Joab (with Abishai) continues searching for Sheba. But the soldiers, like modern-day drivers coming upon an accident on the highway, stop to view the carnage—the body of the man whom David swore would 'become my army commander permanently in place of Joab' (2 Sam. 19.14). One of Joab's henchmen attempts to hurry the troops along, but fails until he drags Amasa's corpse from the road and conceals it beneath a garment.

### *Sheba at Abel Beth-maacah*

Meanwhile, Sheba has already passed through Israel's tribal territories and entered Abel Beth-maacah,[14] one of the fortified cities David feared he would find, followed by his kinsmen, the Bichrites (LXX; MT 'Berites'). Our typically sparse Hebrew narrative says nothing about how Sheba and his men are able to enter the city. Perhaps they pass though its gates without

13. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, p. 324.

14. Abel Beth-maacah (Tell Abil), a town located at the northern extreme of Israelite territory some four miles west-north-west of Dan (Tell el-Qâd), will be conquered by Ben-hadad at the beginning of the ninth century BCE (1 Kgs 15.20) and by Tiglath-pileser III in 734 BCE (2 Kgs 15.29).

arousing suspicion. Perhaps they manufacture some ruse explaining their presence. Perhaps they catch Abel's inhabitants off-guard and enter by brute force. Or perhaps Abel's inhabitants welcome a rebel whose rejection of David coincides with their own appetite for local rule. The narrative also does not tell us how the people react when Joab and his troops reach the city and straightaway throw up a siege mound in order to batter the wall (vv. 15-16a). The next words belong to a wise woman shouting from the city:

> 'Listen, Listen! Tell Joab to come over here so I can talk to him.' He approached her, and the woman asked, 'Are you Joab?' 'Yes', he answered; and she said to him, 'Listen to what your handmaid has to say'. 'I'm listening', he replied. And she continued, 'In olden times people used to say, 'Let them inquire of Abel',[15] and that was the end of the matter. I am one of those who seek the welfare of the faithful in Israel. But you seek to bring death upon a mother city in Israel! Why should you destroy the Lord's possession?' (2 Sam 20.18-19).

As noted in my introduction, our narrator nowhere signals surprise at the wise woman's presence. Neither הִנֵּה nor הֵן heralds her appearance;[16] and the sentence's syntactical structure (*waw conversive* + imperfect verb + subject + attributive adjective) is typical, not emphatic. Moreover, this unnamed woman is not defined by her relationships with men. Nothing is said of her father, or of a husband, living or deceased, or of offspring. Rather, the text describes her solely in terms of her personal qualification for the leadership she exercises: she is 'wise'. The absence of additional information suggests that her social role needs no further introduction, and other aspects of her identity are simply irrelevant here. Her location on the wall is precarious; presumably, a well-aimed arrow could bring her down. Nehama Aschkenasy opines that a garment signaling her status protects her from enemy archers and increases Joab's willingness to listen to her,[17] but the text affords her no such protection. Such speculation serves solely to qualify her courage in confronting the crisis head on.

The wise woman's first words are paired imperatives: 'Listen! Listen! Tell Joab, "Come here so I can talk to you"' (author's translation). Perhaps she repeats her command because the sound of the battering ram threatens to

15. The text does not specify what 'inquiring at Abel' entailed. Following E. Poethig ('The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel' [PhD dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, NY, 1985], p. 55), C.L. Meyers suggests that Abel was an oracular center; see *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 160.

16. Both of these forms, traditionally translated 'lo!' or 'behold!', serve to emphasize the following word, phrase, or clause.

17. Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University, 1998), p. 99.

drown out her demand that Joab be brought within earshot. Joab, apparently, keeps his distance from the assault, well-aware of the danger of coming too close to a tall structure under siege. Aschkenasy points to parallels between our narrative and Judg. 9.50-59, in which Abimelech, a ferocious warrior renowned for his atrocities, enters the city of Thebez to burn the tower in which its populace has sought refuge.[18] Abimelech approaches the tower door to set it on fire, but an unnamed woman on the roof drops an upper millstone on his head and cracks his skull, so that he cries out to his arms-bearer, 'Draw your dagger and finish me off, that they may not say of me, "A woman killed him!"' (Judg. 9.54).

Joab knows this story. Indeed, he once cited it in a conversation he imagined might transpire between King David on one hand, and the messenger Joab sent to inform David of the deaths of Uriah the Hittite and some of David's choice soldiers on the other:

> When you finish reporting to the king all about the battle, the king may get angry and say to you, 'Why did you come so close to the city to attack it? Didn't you know that they would shoot from the wall? Who struck down Abimelech son of Jerubbesheth? Was it not a woman who dropped an upper millstone on him from the wall at Thebez, from which he died? Why did you come so close to the wall?' Then say: 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite was among those killed' (2 Sam. 11.19b-21).

Despite the danger, Joab approaches the wall; and the wise woman asks, 'Are you Joab?' After Joab confirms his identity, she gives him an order as well, albeit one tempered by his status, soldiers, and siege works: 'Listen to what your handmaid has to say' (20.17).[19] 'I'm listening', Joab replies, whereupon the wise woman of Abel quickly 'keys' her PP with a phrase, 'They used to say in olden days',[20] that foregrounds the anonymous saying's longevity, pedigree, and authority.[21] 'They' refers to the two characters' esteemed ancestors; in this context, the third person plural pronoun not only creates the indirection (protection) proverbs can provide when less powerful parties challenge more powerful parties, but also posits an intimate ancestral link between woman and warrior in Joab's mind. Surely so venerable a saying deserves rapt attention. But what did they say in olden days?

18. Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, pp. 97-100.

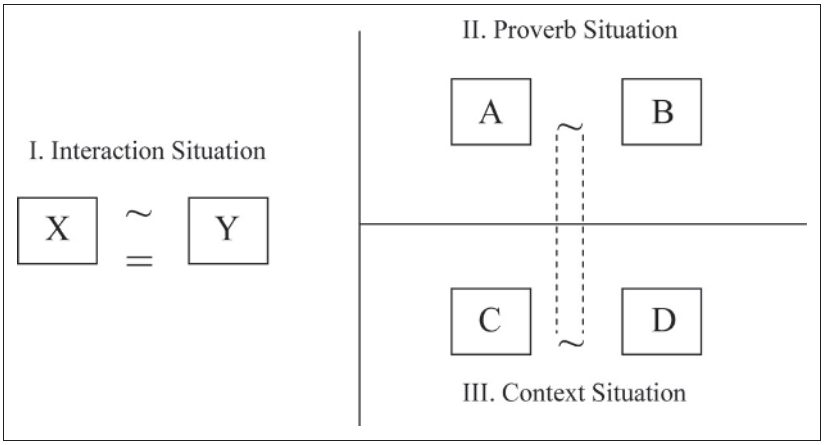
19. According to *Gen. R.* 94.9, her question included a bold, personal rebuke: 'Your name is Joab, she said to him, meaning that you are a father (אב) to Israel, whereas in fact you are only a destroyer, and do not fit your name' (*Midrash Rabbah*. II. *Genesis* [trans. H. Freedman; London; New York: Soncino, 3rd edn, 1983], p. 877).

20. Author's translation. Hebrew בראשנה, a feminine singular adjective meaning 'former' (time) with prefixed ב ('in'), signals ages-old practice.

21. David uses the same tactic when he keys the proverb he cites for King Saul in 1 Sam. 24.14 ('Wicked deeds come from wicked men') with the introductory phrase, 'As the ancient (קדמני) proverb has it'.

*Peter Seitel's Model for Proverb Performance*

When a person performs a proverb in a specific social interaction, Seitel observes, '[a] topic of conversation is described through metaphorical reference to the situation portrayed in a proverb text'.[22] This process involves three separate domains or situations: the situation in which the saying is cited; the situation present in the proverb construed literally; and the situation to which the adage is applied. Seitel's well-known diagram illustrates these three domains:[23]




In this diagram, a proverb speaker (X) asserts to an audience (Y) in an interaction situation (I) that the relationship between persons/entities in the proverb situation (II) is analogous to, or is the negative analogy of, the relationship between persons/entities in the context situation (III).[24] The symbol linking X and Y represents the relationship between speaker and hearer, including age, gender, and social status.[25] In Isa. 37.1-4, for example,

22. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, p. 5.

23. Peter Seitel, 'Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor', in W. Mieder and A. Dundes (eds.), *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb* (New York: Garland, 1981), pp. 122-39 (138); reprinted from *Genre* 2 (1969), pp. 143-61. This version of Seitel's model appears in 'Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor', in D. Ben-Amos (ed.), *Folklore Genres* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), pp. 125-43.

24. Asserting that proverb and context situations are analogous is one of two important strategies for PP. Seitel's diagram reflects that strategy: the parallel, broken lines connecting (II) and (III) represent the analogous relationship that the speaker posits between these two domains. The second strategy asserts that these two situations are analogously opposite and seeks 'to redirect the attitudes of the [r]eceiver' (Carole R. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament: A Contextual Study* [Bible and Literature Series, 5; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982], p. 163). Because both the MT and LXX versions of our wise woman's PP employ this second strategy, we shall construe the lines in Seitel's diagram to represent the assertion that the two domains are analogously opposite.

25. Seitel, 'Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor' (1969), pp. 147-48.

King Hezekiah (X) says to Isaiah (Y) via messengers that the relationship between persons in the proverb situation ('Babes are positioned for birth [A], but there is no strength to deliver' [B]; author's translation) is analogous to the relationship between persons in the context situation (Jerusalem's helpless inhabitants are surrounded and in deadly peril [C], but Hezekiah and his advisers are incapable of delivering them [D]).[26] In Ezek. 18.2b, by contrast, YHWH (X) asserts to Ezekiel and his audience (Y) that the relationship between persons in the proverb situation ('Parents eat sour grapes [A], but their children's teeth are set on edge' [B]) is analogously opposite to the relationship between persons in the context situation, because the Babylonian exiles (C) are not being punished for their parents' sins (D).[27]

### *The Logic of Proverb Reception*

'Finalization', 'the sense of completion achieved in an artistic work…the awareness by performer and audience that a work or some part of it is finished, complete',[28] is crucial for discerning the logic of proverbs and PPs. With M.M. Bakhtin,[29] Seitel observes that finalization in generic utterances (e.g. proverbs) occurs on three dimensions—composition, theme, and style[30]—at three levels respectively: (1) the proverb cited; (2) the entire utterance in which the proverb appears; and (3) the occasion on which the proverb is performed, including the specific situation to which it refers.[31] Three dimensions at three levels yield nine loci where finalizations characteristic of PP emerge.[32] Because a discussion of finalization at all nine loci of our wise woman's PP exceeds this essay's limits, I shall focus on the three levels of thematic finalization.

26. See my analysis of Hezekiah's PP in *Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 205-17. Hezekiah's saying is a multi-descriptive proverb consisting of two topics and two comments: (topic A) 'Babes' (comment A) 'are positioned for birth'; (topic B) '(but) there is no strength' (comment B) 'to deliver'. See Alan Dundes, 'On the Structure of the Proverb', in *The Wisdom of Many*, pp. 50-52; reprinted from *Proverbium* 25 (1975), pp. 961-73.

27. See my analysis of Ezekiel's PP in 'Proverb Performance and Transgenerational Retribution', pp. 199-223. The 'sour grapes' saying in Ezek. 18.2b is a multi-descriptive proverb consisting of two topics and two comments: (topic A) 'Parents' (comment A) 'eat sour grapes'; (topic B) '(but) the children's teeth' (comment B) 'are set on edge'.

28. Darr, 'Proverb Performance and Transgenerational Retribution', p. 17.

29. See Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, especially pp. 60, 76, 77-78; cited in Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, p. 37.

30. Seitel likens these three dimensions of a literary work to the 'form, material, and technique' of a woodcarver (*The Powers of Genre*, pp. 14, 16).

31. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, p. 37.

32. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, p. 37.

a. *Thematic Finalization at the Level of the Proverb*

Early in *The Powers of Genre*, Seitel asserts that '[g]eneric compositional finalization creates the underlying logical form of an utterance, a section of an utterance, or an exchange of utterances'.[33] In proverbs, compositional finalization produces this logical form by 'isolating the semantic contrasts that articulate [proverbial] themes'.[34] These semantic contrasts consist of 'paired, parallel, and opposed propositions'.[35] In some sayings, both propositions are explicit. In others, however, only one proposition is explicit; the audience must supply the implicit, contrasting proposition. Seitel's example of thematic finalization at the level of a Haya proverb clarifies these concepts:[36]

> The theme articulated by the proverb, *Egenda mpoola enywage*, '[The cow that] goes slowly drinks well', can be glossed as 'taking care'. The *theme* achieves completion at the [level of the proverb itself]…through an implied contrast between two cows. One cow goes slowly and arrives at a watering place after the others have finished drinking. By then, the mud they stirred up has settled, and so the cow drinks clean water. The other, implied, contrasting cow goes quickly with the others and drinks muddy water. This contrast—between going slowly and drinking well and going quickly and drinking poorly—articulates the theme, even though the latter elements are unspoken. The theme attains finalization at this level when a listener supplies the necessary contrast.[37]

b. *Thematic Finalization at the Level of the Entire Proverb Utterance*

At the level of the entire proverb utterance, thematic finalization occurs when an analogy is understood to obtain, or not to obtain, between the proverb situation (II) and the context situation (III) to which the proverb situation is applied metaphorically.[38] The entire utterance usually includes a literal reference to that context situation.[39]

33. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, p. 28.

34. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, p. 28. In proverbs, themes ('abstract, culturally specific ideas') are produced by 'relationships between symbols present or implied in a text' (p. 31).

35. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, p. 28.

36. The oral literature of the Haya, a people living in Kagera Region in northwestern Tanzania, is the focus of Seitel's ethnographical research in *The Powers of Genre*; see pp. 19-27.

37. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, p. 38.

38. Seitel defines proverbs as 'the strategic social use of metaphor…the manifestation in traditional, artistic, and relatively short form of metaphorical reasoning, used in an interactional context to serve certain purposes' ('Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor' [1981], p. 122).

39. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, p. 38. In the MT, this literal (but also metaphorical) reference appears in v. 19b.

c. *Thematic Finalization at the Level of the Performance Context*
Finally, thematic finalization is achieved at the level of the performance context (third level) when the audience understands that the proverbial theme (first level), the negative analogy of the context situation to which it is applied metaphorically (second level), applies to him or her.[40]

Thus far, I have summarized the narrative context (vivid present and broad horizon) of our wise woman's PP and described Seitel's interpretive method for analyzing the logic of PP at three levels of thematic finalization. Now, we turn to the wise woman's words to Joab in vv. 18-19 as preserved in MT and LXX. We shall discover that variations in the proverbs preserved in these two textual traditions affect our analyses of thematic finalization at the level of the proverbs themselves. However, the logic of the wise woman's PPs and her strategy—changing Joab's attitude so that he recognizes the folly of his actions and ends the siege peacefully—remain the same in each case.

## *The Wise Woman's Proverb Performance in* MT

The MT of 2 Sam. 20.18 is intelligible but problematic at several points:

ותאמר לאמר דבר ידברו בראשנה לאמר
שאול ישאלו באבל וכן התמו

> And she said, 'In olden days they used to say,
> let them ask in Abel and so they settled [the matter]'.[41]

Critics who emend the MT not only point to the rare pairing of a qal infinitive absolute (שָׁאוֹל) with a piel imperfect (יְשַׁאֲלוּ),[42] but also question whether התמו[43] can function as an intransitive verb.[44] Because proverbs often exhibit linguistic rarities and peculiarities, as well as compressed syntax, and so on, however, the presence of these features cannot prove that MT is corrupt.[45]

40. Seitel, *The Powers of Genre*, pp. 38-39.

41. Author's translation. I have omitted interior quotation marks that would indicate the proverb's scope. Note that the direct object ('the matter') of התמו ('and so they settled') is implicit.

42. The other, possible occurrence appears in Josh. 24.10.

43. Hiphil perfect third masculine singular of [תמם], תם, 'to finish, complete, perfect' (here, 'resolve, settle').

44. BDB endorses reading the MT הֲתַמּוּ as הֲתַמּוּ (qal perfect third masculine plural of [תמם], תם; 'to be finished, complete, come to an end, cease') with interrogative ה. As we shall see, this emendation is based on the LXX.

45. D. Barthélemy defends the MT in 'La qualité du Texte Massorétique de Samuel', in E. Tov (ed.), *The Hebrew and Greek Texts of Samuel: 1980 Proceedings IOSCS-Vienna*

### *Identifying and Analyzing the Wise Woman's Adage: 'Let them ask in Abel'*

Scholars who follow MT disagree about which forms in v. 18 constitute the proverb proper. In her brief analysis, Carole Fontaine limits the wise woman's adage to just three forms, שאול ישאלו באבל ('Let them but ask at Abel').[46] A 'single descriptive element' saying, it consists of a topic ('unspecified persons of former times who sought counsel') and a comment ('should ask at Abel')[47] expressing positive causation (A → B). In her view, ובן התמו ('and thus they settled a matter') is an 'appended appraisal'.[48]

Fontaine's groundbreaking study of traditional sayings in the Hebrew Bible appeared some seventeen years before Seitel published his method for analyzing the logic of PP. When we apply Seitel's method to Fontaine's version of the proverb, however, we see how thematic finalization occurs at the levels of the proverb itself, the complete utterance of which it is part, and the performance context. The theme of the proverb ('wisely inquiring of Abel') emerges from semantic contrasts between the explicit proposition 'they wisely inquire of Abel' and the implicit proposition 'they do not wisely inquire of Abel'. Thematic finalization is achieved at this level when the audience (Joab and readers) supplies the necessary contrast. Thematic finalization occurs at the level of the entire utterance when the audience understands that the proverb's theme (wisely inquiring of Abel) and the specific context situation to which it is applied metaphorically (unwisely attacking Abel) are analogously opposite. The former neither names nor explains the latter. Finally, thematic finalization occurs at the performance context level when Joab (and readers) realizes that the proverbial theme (wisely inquiring of Abel), the negative analogy of the context situation (unwisely attacking Abel), applies to him.

Inserting the results of Fontaine's brief analysis into Seitel's diagram yields the following: the wise woman (X) asserts to Joab (Y) in their specific interaction situation (I) that wisely inquiring of Abel in the proverb situation (II) and unwisely attacking Abel in the context situation (III) are analogical opposites. Joab should have emulated his esteemed ancestors' wise (ethical) actions by seeking counsel at Abel, ostensibly a city with a

(Jerusalem: Academon, 1980), pp. 1-44 (31-33). See also Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, pp. 331-35.

46. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings*, p. 240; so also the translators of RSV, NRSV, NIV, and *TANAKH*.

47. See Dundes, 'On the Structure', pp. 50-52.

48. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings*, pp. 240-41; see also her discussion in *Smooth Words: Woman, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2002), pp. 191-95.

reputation for dispensing good advice about difficult matters. The wise woman's strategy aims at redirecting Joab's attitude such that he abandons his siege of Abel and withdraws his troops peacefully.

The relationship between the wise woman and Joab, represented by the symbol linking X and Y in Seitel's diagram, includes age, gender, and social status. Here, I comment on these categories only briefly, recognizing that each has spawned enormous bodies of research and publications in multiple fields.

(1) Age. Although our text says nothing about either character's age (including their relative ages), both the wise woman and Joab likely are at least middle- or upper middle-aged.[49] An Israelite female probably assumed the social functions of a 'wise woman' in early Israel only after acquiring considerable knowledge and experience.[50] The first biblical reference to 'Joab son of Zeruiah' appears in a narrative about King Saul's erratic attempts to kill the then-youthful David (1 Sam. 26.6).

(2) Gender. The wise woman is female; Joab is male. One should not simply assume, however, that women were subservient to men in all aspects of early Israelite society. Males dominated in many arenas, but Meyers demonstrates that '…the absence in early Israel of developed hierarchies in political and economic spheres created an atmosphere that would have allowed for nonhierarchical gender relationships'.[51]

Nehama Aschkenasy emphasizes the importance of gender for our wise woman's PP: 'Her position on the wall of a city enhances her femininity as well as sexual vulnerability, thus disarming Joab'.[52] But this comment seems more eisegetical than exegetical. Our text says nothing about either the wise woman's appearance (compare, among many examples, 2 Sam. 13.1 and 2 Sam 14.27) or femininity, or disarming sexual vulnerability. She posits an intimate ancestral link with Joab, but no explicit reference suggests sexual intimacy. To the contrary, her verbal interactions with the soldiers and with Joab showcase her courage and authority. True, she and all Abel's inhabitants are at risk, but the wise woman chooses to play on her strengths, not her weaknesses. Spatially, she is on top; but she presents herself as 'on top' of the crisis as well.

49. The age of the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14) permits her plausibly to play the role of an Israelite widow with two sons, at least one of whom is old enough to be held accountable for murdering his brother.

50. See also Camp, 'The Wise Women of 2 Samuel', p. 25.

51. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, p. 169. See also Norman K. Gottwald, 'Domain Assumptions and Societal Models in the Study of Pre-Monarchic Israel', in G.W. Anderson *et al.* (eds.), *Congrès international pour l'étude de l'Ancien Testament* (Vetus Testamentum Supplement, 28; Leiden: Brill, 1975), pp. 89-100.

52. Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, p. 101.

(3) Social status.[53] In our story, the wise woman of Abel wields the power of a recognized local leader whose knowledge, experience, and authority equip her to deal with various crises confronting her community (in whole or in part). Joab acts as if he were King David's highest-ranking military commander, possessing the requisite military power to destroy the city. Nevertheless, Joab's immediate willingness to speak and then negotiate with her will testify to the success of the wise woman's strategy. He will respond to her PP by beating a hasty verbal 'retreat', insisting that he does not seek the city's destruction—though clearly, he is willing to pay that price.

*'Let them ask in Abel, and so they settled (the matter)'*

Other scholars surmise that the wise woman's saying includes וכן התמו ('and so they settled [the matter]'). Fokkelman defends this position in his extended stylistic analysis of vv. 18-19, which he translates:

> In olden times it was said:
> 'Everyone asks (advice) of Abel, and they follow it'.
> I (stand for/belong to) the peace-loving, the faithful in Israel.
> You are seeking to kill a city, a mother in Israel!
> Why do you destroy the inheritance of Yahweh?[54]
> S. Pisano concurs and interprets the proverb to mean 'No sooner said than done'.[55]

By this reckoning also, the wise woman's saying consists of a single descriptive element with one topic ('Let them ask of Abel' [A]) and one comment ('and so they settled [the matter]' [B]) expressing positive causation (A → B). The proverb's theme emerges from semantic contrasts expressed by ratios of acts and conditions in the explicit proposition ('wisely asking of Abel and settling [the matter] well'[56]) and the implicit proposition ('not wisely asking of Abel and not settling [the matter] well'). Thematic finalization occurs at this level when Joab (and readers) supplies the necessary contrast. At the level of the entire proverb utterance, the audience achieves thematic finalization when it understands that the contextualized theme

53. Any discussion of the relative social statuses of the wise woman and Joab must consider their ages and genders.

54. See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, pp. 333-35; his translation appears on p. 333.

55. Stephen Pisano, *Additions or Omissions in the Books of Samuel: The Significant Pluses and Minuses in the Massoretic, LXX and Qumran Texts* (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1984), p. 148; cited in Robert P. Gordon, 'The Variable Wisdom of Abel: The MT and Versions at 2 Samuel xx 18-19', *Vetus Testamentum* 43 (1993), pp. 215-26 (216).

56. That is, they settle the matter well (ethically) by following the practices of Israel's esteemed elders.

(= meaning) of the wise woman's saying ('wisely inquiring of Abel and settling [the matter] well'), and the context situation ('Joab unwisely attacking Abel and not settling [the matter] well') are analogously opposite. The proverb's theme neither names nor explains the context situation. Thematic finalization occurs at the performance level when Joab (and readers) recognize(s) that the proverb situation, analogously opposite to the siege situation, applies to him.

Inserting the results of this analysis into Seitel's diagram yields the following: the wise woman (X) asserts to Joab (Y) in their conversation (I) that the relationship between wisely asking of Abel and settling the matter well in the proverb situation (II) is the negative analogy of Joab unwisely attacking Abel and not settling [the matter] well in the context of his siege (III). In this case also, the wise woman's strategy seeks to change Joab's attitude so that he recognizes the folly of his actions and withdraws his forces peacefully.

To summarize: scholars who follow the MT disagree about precisely which words in v. 18b belong to the wise woman's saying. One's decision on this issue affects the contents of the proverb's topic and comment. In both cases, however, thematic finalizations at the levels of the entire utterance and the performance context remain the same (wisely inquiring/unwisely attacking), as does her strategy.[57]

In v. 19, our wise woman rounds out her PP with a rhetorically rich rebuke of and challenge to Joab that includes a literal reference to the context situation. Abandoning proverbial indirection, she employs 'I' to situate herself and Abel's 'citizens' among the peaceable and faithful of Israel[58] and 'you' to accuse Joab of 'matricide'. Abel Beth-maacah is a (fortified) city, a 'mother in Israel'. As such, she protects not only those residing within her wall's protective embrace—and a mother's instinct to protect her young is proverbial—but also inhabitants of her 'daughter' towns (surrounding

57. According to *Gen. R.* 94.9, the wise woman rebukes Joab (and David) for violating the Torah—specifically, the command in Deut. 20.10 that a city facing attack be given an opportunity to surrender unscathed. The wise woman says, 'Do not you and David possess learning, yet, *And so they ended*, by which she meant, Have the words of the Torah ended by now? Is it not written, *When you draw near to a city, to fight against it, then proclaim peace to it* (Deut. XX, 10)?' (*Midrash Rabbah*, p. 877). In this case, the woman criticizes Joab for violating a commandment in the Torah, but his offense remains unwisely attacking Abel without first offering its inhabitants a peaceful alternative to destruction and bloodshed.

58. The text is difficult. S.R. Driver likens the woman's use of the first person singular pronoun ('I') for the community, followed by a plural predicate referring to the community's individual members of that community, to Gen. 34.31b: 'I (= "my men") are few in number'. See Driver's *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2nd revised and enlarged edn, 1960), p. 346.

villages), for whom she opens her gates when men like Joab threaten the lives of mother and children.[59] Moreover, our wise woman combines pragmatism and poetic imagery with piety, buttressing her maternal metaphor with a theological claim: Mother Abel is not just another obstacle in Joab's imprudent and destructive path. She is YHWH's possession, the Lord's heritage. As Claudia Camp observes, when Yahweh's inheritance is placed in parallelism with 'a mother in Israel', we should 'expect the latter to carry a metaphorical surplus of meaning beyond the obvious "biological" association of city and surrounding towns'.[60] Like the prophetess Deborah (Judg. 5.7), Abel links 'a long reputation for wisdom and faithfulness to the tradition of Israel'.[61]

### *The Wise Woman's Proverb Performance in the LXX*

The LXX preserves two versions of our wise woman's proverb. In English, the first version (v. 18a), including its 'keying' phrase, reads 'Of old time they said thus, "Surely one was asked in Abel and Dan whether the faith ful in Israel failed in what they purposed" '.[62] The second version (vv. 18b-19a), whose similarity to the MT is unmistakable, reads 'they will surely ask in Abel, even in like manner, whether they have failed'.[63] Applying Paul de Lagarde's third axiom[64] to the doublet enables us to separate it into Old Greek on one hand, and an early Jewish attempt to bring the LXX into greater conformity with a proto-MT on the other.[65] The Old Greek of vv. 18-19, minus the subsequent addition, likely read: 'And she

59. Aschkenasy opines that the wise woman describes Abel as 'a mother in Israel' to shield herself from harm: 'By alluding to the city's feminine nature, the woman also protects herself, justifying her interference in the male domain of politics and war by giving it a feminine dimension. She pleads on behalf of women, as well as the woman that is the city' (*Woman at the Window*, p. 101).

60. Camp, 'The Wise Woman of Second Samuel', p. 27.

61. Camp, 'The Wise Woman of Second Samuel', p. 28.

62. In the LXX, the wise woman's proverb spans the equivalent of MT's vv. 18-19a.

63. Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1986), p. 433; originally published in London by Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1851).

64. Paul de Lagarde, *Anmerkungen zur griechischen Übersetzung der Proverbien* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1863), p. 3: 'wenn sich zwei lesarten nebeneinander finden, von denen die eine den masoretischen text ausdrückt, die andre nur aus einer von ihm abweichenden urschrift erklärt werden kann, so ist die letztere für ursprünglich zu halten'. Driver's translation, 'If two readings co-exist, of which one expresses the Massoretic text, while the other can only be explained from a text deviating from it, the latter is to be regarded as the original', appears in *Notes on the Hebrew Text*, p. xliv.

65. The second version appears already in $LXX^{BA}$. See Gordon, 'The Variable Wisdom of Abel', p. 217.

spoke, saying, 'Of old time they said thus, "Surely one was asked in Abel, and Dan, whether the faithful in Israel failed in what they purposed". But thou seekest to destroy a city and a mother city in Israel: why dost thou seek to ruin the inheritance of the Lord?'

### *Identifying and Analyzing the Wise Woman's Proverb*

The difference between the LXX and MT involves the last two forms of v. 18 and the first two forms of v. 19 in the MT.[66] In the LXX, the proverb proper not only reports the traditional practice of asking someone in Abel and Dan,[67] but also supplies the query's contents, that is, 'Did the faithful in Israel fail in what they purposed?', that is, did they fail to uphold the traditional (wise, ethical, religious) beliefs and practices of Israel's esteemed ancestors? This version of the wise woman's saying might be described as a 'multi-descriptive element' proverb with two topics and two comments:[68]

| | |
|---|---|
| SEGMENT A | |
| *Topic 1* | *Comment 1* |
| Surely one was asked | in Abel and Dan |
| SEGMENT B | |
| *Topic 2* | *Comment 2* |
| Whether the faithful in Israel | failed in what they purposed. |

In this version of the wise woman's adage, Dan appears alongside Abel as a city whose inhabitants have a reputation for dispensing good advice. One might think the presence of 'Dan' (which plays no role in Sheba's revolt) argues against the 'authenticity' of her saying as it appears in the LXX. Because proverbs tend to have fixed traditional forms, however, they also tend to remain linguistically stable regardless of the utterances in which they appear.[69]

66. Barthélemy, 'La qualité du Texte Massorétique', p. 31. In v. 18, the LXX translates ἐν Δάν ('in Dan') for MT וכן ('and thus, so') and ἐξέλιπον ('carried out, brought to an end, fulfilled') for MT הֲתַמּוּ, which the LXX translator read as הֲתַמּוּ, the qal perfect third masculine plural of [תמם], תם, 'to be finished, complete, come to an end, cease' with interrogative ה (i.e. 'have the faithful in Israel failed [= "ceased"] in what they purposed?'). In v. 19, the LXX presupposes אשר ('that which, what') for MT אנכי ('I') and שָׂמוּ *śāmû* (qal perfect third common plural of שׂום, שִׂים, 'to put, place, set') for MT שְׁלֵמֵי ('the faithful [pl.] of [Israel]'). The Hebrew consonantal text before the LXX translator was likely שאל ישאלו ובאבל ובדן התמו אשר שמו עמוני ישראל.

67. The two towns appear together in 1 Kgs 15.20.

68. Dundes, 'On the Structure', pp. 51-52.

69. See Neal R. Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean: Semantic Studies in English Proverbs* (Berlin: Mouton, 1985), pp. 43-46.

Using Seitel's interpretive method, we can analyze thematic finalization at the three levels of the wise woman's PP. At the proverb level, thematic finalization is discerned in semantic contrasts between the explicit proposition ('they wisely asked someone in Abel and Dan whether the faithful in Israel failed in what they purposed') and the implicit proposition ('they unwisely did not ask someone in Abel and Dan whether the faithful in Israel failed in what they purposed').[70] Thematic finalization occurs when the audience (Joab and readers) supplies the necessary contrast. Thematic finalization occurs at the entire utterance level when the audience understands that the contextualized theme (= meaning) of the wise woman's saying (they wisely asked someone in Abel and Dan…) and the context situation to which it is applied metaphorically (Joab unwisely attacking Abel) are analogously opposite. The proverbial theme neither names nor explains the context situation because Joab has besieged Abel without first asking someone in the city if its inhabitants act according to the wise and ethical practices of Israel's ancestors. Finally, thematic finalization occurs at the level of the performance context when Joab (and readers) recognize(s) that the proverbial theme (wisely asking someone in Abel and Dan), the negative analogy of unwisely attacking Abel, applies to him. Ought not he, also, act according to traditional Israelite practice?

Returning to Seitel's diagram, we see that the interaction situation (I), including the relationship between the wise woman (X) and Joab (Y), remains the same as in the two possible MT readings analyzed above. The LXX saying differs appreciably from those readings. However, neither the semantic contrast between 'wisely asking' in the proverb situation (II) and 'unwisely attacking' in the context situation (III), nor the wise woman's strategy (changing Joab's attitude so that he ends the siege peacefully), changes.[71]

In the Old Greek also, our wise woman rounds out her PP by rebuking and challenging Joab, including a literal reference to the context situation ('thou seekest to destroy a city and a mother city in Israel: why doest thou seek to ruin the inheritance of the Lord?', v. 19b). In this case, her post-proverb comments are briefer because, as noted above, the proverb is longer, incorporating the slightly altered equivalent of v. 19b in the MT. Nevertheless, her use of 'you' to rebuke Joab drives home the potentially fatal consequences of his failure to emulate their shared, Israelite ancestors.

70. In this example, creating the implicit, contrasting proposition requires negation of Segment A, topic 1, only.

71. As in earlier examples, I and II are analogously opposite.

### *Sheba Loses His Head*

In the MT and LXX, Joab's willingness to negotiate with our wise woman testifies to the success of her strategic PP. Indeed, the warrior responds to her words by 'backing off' verbally, insisting that destroying the city is not his true intent: 'Joab replied, "Far be it, far be it from me to destroy or to ruin! Not at all! But a certain man from the hill country of Ephraim, named Sheba son of Bichri, has rebelled against King David. Just hand him alone over to us, and I will withdraw from the city"' (vv. 20-21b, *TANAKH*).

Without hesitation, the woman promises Joab that Sheba's head will be thrown over the wall. Then, she presents her wise proposal before all the people of Abel, who cut off Sheba's head and toss it down to Joab. Satisfied, Joab blows the horn (as did Sheba son of Bichri in v. 1); and the soldiers disband, each to his own tent. We can only imagine how the city celebrated its survival. But Joab returns to Jerusalem, where David—who will never forget or forgive that he slaughtered Amasa (1 Kgs 2.5-6)—is waiting.

### *Conclusion*

Tradition sometimes ascribes the famous line, 'The tongue is mightier than the blade', to Euripides, the Greek playwright who died c. 406 BCE. Whatever its source, this aphorism serves as an especially apt summary of the wise woman of Abel's PP in 2 Samuel 20. With wisdom, courage, and finely wrought words, she convinces Joab, David's impulsive, imprudent, and brutal warrior, that his decision to retrieve Sheba by destroying or threatening to destroy Abel Beth-maacah is ill-conceived, ill-accords with their shared Israelite tradition, and illustrates his own folly. Her strategy succeeds in part because she capitalizes on the indirection proverbs can provide.

In 'Saying Haya Sayings', Seitel distinguishes between two proverb uses among the Haya.[72] When speakers employ a proverb to signal or create harmony between themselves and their audiences (an irenic proverb usage), the Haya call it *enfumo*. When speakers perform a proverb to signal or create a disharmonious relationship between themselves and their audiences, the Haya call it *omwizo*.[73] Drawing upon this cross-cultural insight, we can identify our wise woman's proverb usage as *enfumo*, not *omwizo*. To

72. Peter Seitel, 'Saying Haya Sayings: Two Categories of Proverb Use', in J.D. Sapir and J.C. Crocker (eds.), *The Social Use of Metaphor: Essays on the Anthropology of Rhetoric* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), pp. 75-99.

73. Seitel, 'Saying Haya Sayings', p. 83.

be sure, Joab is her enemy in the current situation; and she criticizes his actions—implicitly in v. 18, explicitly in v. 19. But she begins her speech to Joab with a time-honored saying, letting him know that a wise Israelite will understand the implicit message her adage both hides and discloses. Joab commands an army. But in the end, wise words win the day.

# From Biblical Blanket to Post-biblical Blank Slate: The Lives and Times of Abishag the Shunammite

Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg

Despite the fact that Phyllis Bird was quick to assure us that 'although wives, together with children, slaves, and livestock, were counted among a man's possessions…neither wives nor children were understood as property'[1] in ancient Israel, many feminist biblical critics note the frequency with which biblical women are treated as objects, if not precisely as chattel. There are, of course, exceptions—feminist criticism has made us all aware of the power of Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel; of Rahab and Deborah; of Bathsheba who begins her biblical legacy as wife of Uriah and object of David's desire and ends it negotiating for the throne. But these—and other—named women aside, feminist biblical criticism of the past thirty years has shown again and again that women are objects, not subjects, in the Hebrew Bible.

Despite this truism, occasionally the objectification of a biblical woman retains the capacity to shock. This is particularly true in cases when the objectification is concrete rather than (merely?) legal or symbolic. One thinks, for instance, of two women who literally become objects: Lot's wife, transformed into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19), and the Levite's Concubine who, in an especially haunting tale, is carved up posthumously and sent, like grisly parcel post, throughout the tribes (Judg. 19). To these, we might add young Abishag the Shunammite, who comes to function as a pre-electricity electric blanket to warm the aging David (1 Kgs 1). Unlike Lot's wife and the Levite's Concubine, whose transformation from human to object is concurrent with death, Abishag is at once both a person (a living human being) and an object (a mantle or blanket).

While the idea that woman was object seems not to have troubled biblical writers, many subsequent interpreters (especially recent feminist ones) have sought to transform biblical women into subjects. One might expect

1. Phyllis Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 64.

the post-biblical interpreters who return to the figure of Abishag to rehabilitate her, to flesh out her human dimension and underplay—or even abandon—her functional one. Curiously, this is not at all Abishag's interpretive legacy. As we will see, she has the barest of midrashic and patristic afterlives; Medieval, Renaissance, and Reformation commentators are on the whole uninterested in her. Although Dryden and Byron make (only passing) mention,[2] it is not until the late nineteenth century that she truly makes her literary debut. Dickens may have had her in mind when he crafted *Great Expectations*' Miss Havisham, the jilted bride;[3] Dostoevsky briefly names her, but she is central nonetheless to the plot of *The Adolescent*. In the twentieth century, if she did not actually come alive as a character, her name certainly becomes a byword—even a buzzword. Abishag frequently creeps into twentieth-century writing, which makes few sustained allusions to her (contrary to what we might have expected), but offers recurring passing mentions that connote a wide variety of things. What we find, in examining contemporary references to Abishag, is that she becomes whatever it is we want her to be: she is the locus for reflections on youth *and* aging, on beauty *and* ugliness, on chastity *and* sexuality. She is a blank slate onto which we project our anxieties, fears, and fantasies.

## *Abishag, Biblical Blanket*

So who is this Abishag? The biblical narrative is scarce:

> King David was old and advanced in years; and although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm. So his servants said to him, 'Let a young virgin be sought for my lord the king, and let her wait on the king, and be his attendant; let her lie in your bosom, so that my lord the king may be warm'. So they searched for a beautiful girl throughout all the territory of Israel, and

2. Dryden, in *Absalom and Achitophel*, notes that 'Israel's monarch, after Heaven's own heart,/ His vigorous warmth did, variously, impart/ To Wives and Slaves; And, wide as his Command,/ Scatter'd his Maker's Image through the Land' (*John Dryden: The Major Works* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], p. 401). Byron refers to Abishag in *Don Juan*, Canto CLXVIII:

> Of his position I can give no notion:
> 'Tis written in the Hebrew Chronicle,
> How the physicians, leaving pill and potion,
> Prescribed, by way of blister, a young belle,
> When old King David's blood grew dull in motion,
> And that the medicine answer'd very well
> Perhaps 'twas in a different way applied,
> For David lived, but Juan nearly died.

3. 'Abishag', in David Lyle Jeffrey (ed.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 6-7.

> found Abishag the Shunammite, and brought her to the king. The girl was very beautiful. She became the king's attendant and served him, but the king did not know her sexually (1 Kgs 1.1-4).

Even as person (let alone as blanket), Abishag is objectified in the biblical narrative: she is described as 'very beautiful'. In this respect, she is in select biblical company—it is an epithet reserved for Sarah,[4] Bathsheba, and the beloved in the Song of Songs.[5] Other biblical descriptors fail to transform her into a subject. In addition to her beauty, she is defined by her youth, her virginity, and her place of origin—a little village in the tribe of Issachar, known for having been the site of the Philistine encampment on the approach to battle with Saul (1 Sam. 28.4) and the recurrent resting place of Elisha on his travels (2 Kgs 4). The significance of 'the Shunammite' is elusive, but Abishag is never mentioned without the epithet.

Abishag is the fulfillment of a generic idea: a young virgin[6] who will wait on the king, who will be his attendant and lie in his bosom. David's men look for a beautiful girl and they find Abishag, who exceeds expectations: she is *very* beautiful. Apart from this aberration, however, everything the king's servants imagined is fulfilled: they sought a young virgin (נערה בתולה) and a young woman is brought;[7] they declared that she would wait on the king (ועמדה לפני המלך) and be his attendant (ותהי־לו סכנת), and she becomes his attendant (ותהי למלך סכנת) and attends to him (ותשרתהו), which is not precisely the same verb as the 'waiting on' they had imagined,

4. The rabbis take care to assert that Abishag never approached Sarah's attractiveness: 'And the damsel was fair, until [she was] exceedingly [so]. R. Hanina b. Papa said: Yet she never attained to half of Sarah's beauty, for it is written, "until…exceedingly", "exceedingly" itself not being included' (*Sanh.* 39b).

5. Over the ages, there have been a number of interpretations linking the very beautiful Abishag the Shunammite with the very beautiful Shulammite woman from Song of Songs. This view was particularly prevalent toward the end of the nineteenth century—see, for instance, 'Canticle', in T.K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black (eds.), *Encyclopedia Biblica* (New York: Macmillan, 1899). T.K. Cheyne addressed problems with the connection in a 'Naamah the Shunammite', an 1899 article in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*. In the early twentieth century, Edgar J. Goodspeed and H.H. Rowley both endeavored to undo this association, showing the ways that it has no philological grounding. See E.J. Goodspeed, 'The Shulammite', *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* (1934), pp. 102-104, and H.H. Rowley, 'The Meaning of "The Shulammite"', *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 56.1 (January 1939), pp. 84-91.

6. The reason for a virgin is physiological rather than sexual, according to eighteenth-century Baptist Bible commentator John Gill: it was important that David be brought a virgin, 'not only a young woman, but a virgin, that has more natural heat than women that have bore children have, which is abated thereby'.

7. Interestingly, she is described as 'the very beautiful young woman' (הנערה יפה)—no mention is made of her virginity.

but the sense is there); they envision her lying in his bosom, which we assume she does—although, the text does not say as much and is in fact quite careful to make clear, 'the king did not know her sexually' (1 Kgs 1.4). David, it seems, knew *everyone* sexually, but Abishag has a legacy of her own. She is the one who, though she lay in his bosom, did not *know* David. She slept with him, certainly: she was, in both senses of the word, his comforter.

### *Abishag, More Than Merely Biblical Blanket?*

We next hear of her when Bathsheba approaches David to ask that he grant the throne to her son Solomon. Abishag seems to be present during the queen's entreaty, but—as usual—she is silent: 'So Bathsheba went to the king in his room. The king was very old; Abishag the Shunammite was ministering to the king' (1 Kgs 1.15). The job description had made clear she would be an attendant to the king (ותהי למלך סכנת), and upon her hire we are told she was an attendant to the king and ministered to him (למלך סכנת ותשׁרתהו)—why then this third assertion that she was ministering to (משׁרת) the king?

Medieval commentators David Kimchi (Radak) and Levi Ben Gershom (Gersonides) assume that the apparent redundancy conveys something specific about the nature of her work. Radak focuses on the term סכנת, understanding it in the sense that it appears (as a verb) in Job 22.2: 'Can a mortal be of use/be profitable (יסכן) to God?' In his view, Abishag was profitable to David. Gersonides looks at the same word in the context of Isa. 22.15, where it means 'steward' or 'treasurer'. He understands her to have been in command of the royal purse. Either because she was profitable or because she was treasurer (a position of considerable power), these medieval interpreters understood Abishag to have been of practical benefit to the king. In this respect, she seems to embody the ideal of the woman of valor (Prov. 31): she is endowed with beauty and brains; her ability to run a household and a business make her husband proud.

Modern biblical scholars have understood the lexical superfluity in 1 Kgs 1.15 somewhat differently. For Lillian Klein, that Bathsheba notices Abishag the Shunammite ministering to the king but 'ignores the maiden: "She bowed and did obeisance to the king" (1 Kgs 1.15)…suggests some tension between the women and could imply Bathsheba's resentment of the younger woman'.[8] Adele Berlin, in her literary reading of King David's wives, takes this idea considerably further. She notes that 'there is no need

8. Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 66.

to remind the reader so soon about Abishag's ministrations'[9]—the repetition must signal that someone besides the reader has noticed them. This someone is, of course, Bathsheba, 'who was once young and attractive like Abishag [but] is now aging, and has been, in a sense, replaced by Abishag, just as she comes for the purpose of replacing David with Solomon'.[10] Bathsheba's recognition of the young woman is tinged with jealousy, as the older woman 'silently notes the presence of a younger, fresher woman'.[11] In this modern reading, which focuses on what Bathsheba has become, we catch a glimmer of what Abishag will become over the centuries: the locus for fantasy and—far more often—fear. The biblical blanket becomes a blank slate for later interpreters, who repeatedly project onto her their (or society's) anxieties about aging, impotence, and decline (among other things). But let us return to the biblical Abishag before we get too caught up in the postbiblical one.

As feminist scholars have long noted, biblical women are often depicted exclusively in terms of their relationship to males—daughters left their fathers' homes for their husbands', all with the goal of becoming mothers to sons. Despite its poetic beginnings, with man leaving his parents to become one flesh with his wife (Gen. 2), marriage itself was a legal transaction between *men*. As Drorah Setel reminds us, in Biblical Hebrew,

> there is no verb 'to marry'; a man 'takes' a woman for himself, thus transferring her possession from her father's household to his own. [Moreover], virginity is not an ethical but an economic condition; women who are sexually active while in their father's household diminish their property value in a marriage transaction.[12]

Women had economic or reproductive worth for the men who possessed them.

When the very old David does die, Abishag becomes implicated in the succession and is thus objectified in another way, becoming an emblem of David's kingship, an object of potential political worth. Although David grants the throne to Solomon, son of his beloved Bathsheba, Adonijah makes a final bid for power:

> So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established. Then Adonijah son of Haggith came to Bathsheba, Solomon's mother. She asked, 'Do you come peaceably?' He said, 'Peaceably'.

9. Adele Berlin, 'Characterization in Biblical Narrative: David's Wives', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982), pp. 69-85 (74).

10. Berlin, 'Characterization in Biblical Narrative', p. 74.

11. Berlin, 'Characterization in Biblical Narrative', p. 74,

12. T. Drorah Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea', in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 86-95.

> Then he said, 'May I have a word with you?' She said, 'Go on'. He said, 'You know that the kingdom was mine, and that all Israel expected me to reign; however, the kingdom has turned about and become my brother's, for it was his from the Lord. And now I have one request to make of you; do not refuse me'. She said to him, 'Go on'. He said, 'Please ask King Solomon—he will not refuse you—to give me Abishag the Shunammite as my wife'. Bathsheba said, 'Very well; I will speak to the king on your behalf'. So Bathsheba went to King Solomon, to speak to him on behalf of Adonijah. The king rose to meet her, and bowed down to her; then he sat on his throne, and had a throne brought for the king's mother, and she sat on his right. Then she said, 'I have one small request to make of you; do not refuse me'. And the king said to her, 'Make your request, my mother; for I will not refuse you'. She said, 'Let Abishag the Shunammite be given to your brother Adonijah as his wife'. King Solomon answered his mother, 'And why do you ask Abishag the Shunammite for Adonijah? Ask for him the kingdom as well! For he is my elder brother; ask not only for him but also for the priest Abiathar and for Joab son of Zeruiah!' Then King Solomon swore by the Lord, 'So may God do to me, and more also, for Adonijah has devised this scheme at the risk of his life! Now therefore as the Lord lives, who has established me and placed me on the throne of my father David, and who has made me a house as he promised, today Adonijah shall be put to death.' So King Solomon sent Benaiah son of Jehoiada; he struck him down, and he died (1 Kgs 2.12-25).

Here we see enacted the very kind of transaction about which Setel spoke—the transfer of a woman from one man's house to another—although here the transaction is brokered by a woman. Abishag's status as object is underscored when Bathsheba (subject) speaks her name: 'Let Abishag the Shunammite be given to your brother Adonijah as his wife'. The objectification is double: Bathsheba treats her as some*thing* that can be given by one man to another and describes her as *Adonijah's wife*.

It is curious that Bathsheba, who had been so strategic about getting Solomon onto the throne, would bring Adonijah's entreaty to her son. Solomon sees his mother's request—which he recognizes as being 'Adonijah's scheme'—as tantamount to a request for the kingdom.[13] Adele Berlin posits that Bathsheba brought Adonijah's appeal to Solomon knowing it would incur his wrath: she argues that one could read this episode as further evidence of Bathsheba's skill as tactician. She has created 'the opportunity to get her son's rival out of the picture once and for all'.[14] And it works. Outraged, Solomon condemns Adonijah to death.

13. Ken Stone has argued that Adonijah's request in fact reflects an effort to recover his reputation. See Chapter 6 of his *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 234; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

14. Berlin, 'Characterization in Biblical Narrative', p. 75.

Berlin wonders whether there is not another factor in play here. Recalling 'how the narrative hints at Bathsheba's perception of Abishag',[15] she speculates whether Bathsheba is not also acting out of jealousy. In this psychologically fraught explication, Bathsheba does not want her son to have the young woman who functions as rebuke, as reminder of her own lost youth and beauty. Even if this is not the case, Berlin assures her reader that 'the opportunity to have Abishag at the center of a troublesome issue would not be lost on Bathsheba'.[16] The fate of Abishag the Shunammite is left unrecorded: she was a threat when she was the object of Adonijah's entreaty; with Adonijah dead, she is of no consequence. And so it seems to be with Abishag. Her scriptural life is transitory indeed: she is brought in for one man, is nearly reassigned to another, and is then textually abandoned. What are we supposed to make of her?

### *Post-Biblical Portraits*

Even the ancient rabbis, notorious for seeing full figures in the barest of scriptural skeletons, seem unable to get much of a sense of Abishag. They ask, 'What are the facts regarding Abishag?' and in their answer they begin to spin her literary afterlife:

> It is written: King David was old, stricken in years etc. His servants said unto him, Let there be sought etc. Further it is written, They sought for him a fair damsel etc.; and it is written, And the damsel [Abishag] was very fair, and she became a companion to the king and ministered unto him. She said to him, 'Let us marry', but he [David] said: 'Thou art forbidden to me'. 'When courage fails the thief, he becomes virtuous', she gibed. Then he said to them [his servants], 'Call me Bath-Sheba'. And we read: And Bath-Sheba went to the king into the chamber. Rab Judah said in Rab's name: On that occasion Bath-Sheba dried herself thirteen times (*Sanh.* 22a).

In the rabbinic account, which is slightly longer than the account in 1 Kings 1, Abishag has considerable more agency—and gumption—than her biblical alter ego. She proposes to the king, or at least suggests, 'Let us marry'. When the king claims he cannot marry her as he already has as many wives a man can legally have (an astonishing eighteen), she points out—rather vindictively, it seems—that exceeding the spousal quota would be among the least of his sins. She does not stop there, however: she teases him, making gibing reference to his virtue (that is, his impotence). In response, he summons his beloved Bathsheba to his chamber and proves his virility by having sex with her thirteen times.

15. Berlin, 'Characterization in Biblical Narrative', p. 75.
16. Berlin, 'Characterization in Biblical Narrative', p. 75.

The Talmud does not see Abishag exclusively as a callous beauty who receives a royal rebuke. The very next passage seems implicitly to be at least somewhat concerned with Abishag's fate. What will become of her after David dies? *Sanhedrin* 22a suggests that the law concerning the maximum number of wives was abrogated so that David could have *yihud* ('union') with Abishag. She would then have been permissible for marriage: 'R. Shaman b. Abba said: Come and see with what great reluctance is divorce granted; King David was permitted *yihud* [with Abishag], yet not divorce [of one of his wives]' (*Sanh.* 22a). While the valence of this midrash lies primarily in denouncing divorce (it is preferable to exceed the permitted number of wives than to divorce one to make room for another), the outcome of the story is that Abishag gains a place in the house of David. She is now a kingly widow.[17]

She is afforded another position of honor in the *Pirke deRabbi Eliezer*, which understands her to be the wealthy woman of Shunem who fed and put up Elisha the prophet whenever he passed through town (2 Kgs 4.8-37). In return, Elisha granted her a son in her old age; when that son fell ill and died, Elisha brought him back to life (*PRE* 33). In his *Exposition of the Old Testament*, John Gill notes that 'the Jews say [the woman of Shunem] was the sister of Abishag the Shunammite, and the mother of Iddo the prophet'[18]—not Abishag herself. Once again, she proves difficult to pin down.

In fact, most everything about Abishag is unstable. She goes from having a marginal biblical role to having a marginal religious interpretive afterlife: apart from what we have seen, we do not find her in classical or medieval midrash; she has virtually no presence in patristic, Renaissance, or Reformation literature. Among the few Christian interpreters who mention her, she is variously cast as chaste and wise, a type of the Virgin and of resurrection. When Jerome picks up her story, it is in a letter to Nepotian discussing the relationship of sexuality to knowledge. He touches on the figure of Abishag to extol briefly the virtue of 'this wife and maid, so glowing as to warm the cold, yet so holy as not to arouse passion in him whom she warmed'.[19] In Jerome's exegesis, Abishag is connected to wisdom herself and she also illustrates 'the greater wisdom of old man'.[20] Cyril of Jerusalem uses her as evidence that when the Hebrew Scriptures say young woman, they also mean virgin (Abishag, like Mary, was both).[21] In his 1582 treatise for

17. And thereby able to bestow the power of succession.

18. John Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament* (6 vols., 1748–63), note on 2 Kgs 4.8. He cites as his source *t. Baba Bathra* 57.2. The citation is incorrect.

19. Jerome, Letter 52 (To Nepotian): 3.

20. Jerome, Letter 52 (To Nepotian): 3.

21. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetes* 12.21.

women on virginity and prayer, Thomas Bentley likens Queen Elizabeth to Abishag, Martha, and the widow of Zarephath—all biblical types associated with spiritual renewal and resurrection.[22] This one scant figure from the Bible summons a diversity of interpretive possibilities for the theologically minded. When she is mentioned, however, it is often only in passing: her name is invoked to make a point or to conjure a type.

## *Abishag, a Word of Caution*

Curiously, the same remains true for many of the more contemporary literary references to Abishag. Rather than develop the figure of Abishag, putting flesh on the biblical skeleton, a number of novelists and poets contract her further.[23] For these writers, Abishag does not need to be described or drawn out. Rather, her name needs merely to be invoked. Abishag is transposed from person to cautionary tale; an allusion to Abishag is a shorthand alerting the reader to any one of a number of rather diverse perils—sedition, vanity, aging, impotence, failing marriage, muteness. Repeatedly, she is no longer the young woman become a blanket, but the young woman become a blanket become a blank slate onto which interpreters project fears and fantasies.

Dostoyevsky refers to Abishag in *The Adolescent* (also called *A Raw Youth*), his 1895 novel about a generational conflict between father and son. A Russian aristocrat named Versilov fathers an illegitimate son, Arkady, whom he sends off to boarding school; the focus of the novel is Arkady at 19, summoned to St Petersburg to meet the father he has met only once. The relationship between father and son is fraught indeed, as Arkady strives to establish his legitimacy as a son while father and son both fall in love with the young widow Katerina Akhmakov. Akhmakov has father issues of her own: she is at the center of a blackmail scandal involving a letter she wrote some years earlier requesting that her wealthy, aged, mildly senile father be declared insane. If he learns of the letter, her father will most certainly disinherit her. Arkady both wants this complex woman and wants to humiliate her; this inner conflict is further complicated by his desire to save his father's reputation, which is sure to be ruined by his association with Akhmakov. Thus, when Arkady enlists the help of another

22. John N. King, 'The Godly Woman in Elizabethan Iconography', *Renaissance Quarterly* 38.1 (Spring 1985), pp. 41-85 (72).

23. There are some exceptions in Jewish literature: in a chapter entitled 'Abishag, the Body's Song', Murray Baumgarten has described the ways that Jacob Glatstein, Itzik Manger, and Gladys Schmitt develop the figure of Abishag. See Murray Baumgarten, *City Scriptures: Modern Jewish Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

man, Lambert (who also wants both Akhmakov and her money) to scare the woman away from his father, he asks him, 'Do you know the story of Abishag?'

With the plot of the David story lurking beneath the structure of *The Adolescent*, this unanswered question presents a mixed sign. One presumes Arkady is signaling his intent to usurp his father's position by sleeping with his younger lover, like the biblical Adonijah. But perhaps he is protecting his father, well aware that Abishag ultimately provided no comfort to King David, and her companionship served only to highlight his frailty. 'The story of Abishag' becomes either shorthand for sedition or impotence.

Likewise, for Robert Frost, the youthful beauty functions entirely as a warning. The lesson of the dark 'Provide, Provide'[24] is 'Die early and avoid the fate' of 'fall[ing] from great and good' into decrepitude and decay. The poem begins, 'The witch that came (the withered hag)/ To wash the steps with pail and rag/ Was once the beauty Abishag'. There is no savoring lost splendor: the focus is wholly on its decayed form. Once the young beauty, the companion of kings; now the withered hag, the char with pail and rag. Beauty is fleeting, cruel in its ephemerality. One must do all that one can—'occupy a throne,/ Where nobody can call *you* crone'; surround oneself with 'boughten friendships'—in order to stave off the end that Abishag embodies. Without such fortification, one is destined to become the crone.

In her poem, 'Abishag',[25] Shirley Kaufman zooms in on the biblical text, invokes its specifics. She describes in uncomfortable detail the tense relationship between the frail old king and the young woman, 'ordered/ for the old man/ to dangle around his neck'. They are opposite in every respect: her flesh is bright, his hands, if pinched, might turn to powder. He shivers against her warm body, 'her breasts/ against him like an accusation'. The pair takes no pleasure in each other, nor comfort either: 'he can do nothing else/ but wear her, pluck at her body/ like a lost bird/ pecking in winter'. He is the lost bird, the lost traveler, who has '[spread] her out/ like a road-map', but who still cannot find his way. 'He's cold from the fear/ of death, the sorrow/ of failure'—even her bright flesh cannot warm him. She can make no use of him either: 'she feels his thin claws, his wings/ spread over her like arms, not bones/ but feathers ready to fall'. When his feeble body jerks, she tells him 'cruelly, submissive in her bright flesh', 'Take it easy'.

The familiar figures of David and Abishag, recognizable at a distance, become distorted on closer examination. The details—his frail arms, his feeble legs, her submissiveness—make the couple foreign to us, make us

24. Robert Frost, 'Provide, Provide', in *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged* (New York: Henry Holt, 1979), p. 307.

25. Shirley Kaufman, 'Abishag', in *Claims* (Riverdale, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 1984), p. 48.

aware of how unfamiliar they actually are. Here Abishag thinks and speaks, but her thoughts and words are mean. 'She thinks if she pinches/ his hand it will turn to powder', and it seems—once we hear her tell him 'cruelly', 'Take it easy'—that she is not merely observing his hand, but in fact contemplating pinching it into oblivion. This Abishag bears little resemblance to the ideal of the selfless young beauty. Rather, she reminds us of the Abishag of the Talmud who taunts the king with offers of marriage, of the tease who harps on his impotence. This Abishag is a symbol not of youth's inevitable decay, as in Frost, but of youth mocking age.

Youth can be depicted as sympathetic and still serve a cautionary function. When Jerome Mazzaro invokes Abishag's name, it seems at first to be an allusion to her lack of voice. His 1979 poem, 'Fall Colors', describes hunting season 'along these miles between Hamburg and Eden'. It is a landscape of 'streams and steady hums/ of rushing water [obscured by] turning leaves', populated by 'one/ odd man fishing those capped, dark blue rapids,/ his hipboots severed by the river's line' and peppered with 'empty cars' whose 'owners with their rifles underarm/ stalk carefully the wilds for would-be-game'. It is hardly a place we would expect to find Abishag. Even in town, where 'two youngsters claim a lonely bench/ beside the movie house, waiting for cars/ with girls and trophies of a summer sort', she might seem more in context. When a car does arrive, 'landing [the boys] with its catch', she is not the young beauty Abishag, however. Rather, she appears in the final lines of the poem, a simile rather than a subject: 'Next week, the pearl grey mist of early fall/ will mute like Abishag the few leaves left'.[26]

Mute like Abishag the few leaves left? As we have seen, the Bible preserves few of Abishag's actions: we have no record of her speech. In this respect, she is scripturally mute. But Mazzarro seems not to be alluding to her silence. Rather, he uses 'mute' not as an adjective but as a verb. As Abishag muted, so will the 'pearl grey mist of early fall' mute 'the few leaves left'. But what might the direct object of Abishag's transitive verb be? The passages in Kings allow few possibilities: the shivering of the king, perhaps, or the discomfort of age. Both are acts of compassion. But her muting could equally drain the king as comfort him. To mute a color rather than a sensation or a sound is to diminish its vibrancy. In the context of the poem, with its wistful nostalgia, this seems the more likely reading. The speaker watches the hunters on the road and the cars pull up in town beside the movie house: it is all 'so much like [his] own boyhood these scenes are/ and yet the present's truer to their marks'. The reference to Abishag follows immediately this reference to a past that fades alongside a vibrant present. If Abishag mutes, it is not chills or cries of discomfort, but youthful glory and

26. Jerome Mazzaro, 'Fall Colors', *The Hudson Review* 32.4 (Winter 1979–80), p. 535.

masculine vitality. As the mist mutes and greys the few remaining leaves, so Abishag mutes and greys the diminishing king.

Abishag is frequently a symbol of what is lost. In a 1999 poem, Deborah Burnham imagines Abishag's life after her flirtation with royalty: 'when the King dies, she will be sent home, used,/ and useless, never knowing that a man's/ ribs are not cool stone rods under her cheek'.[27] Sympathetic to the young woman, the poem nonetheless sustains the depiction of Abishag as object—she will, in time, 'be sent home, used,/ and useless'. She will become an object that has lost its function. Before David dies, however, she has a purpose: 'she ties/ a shawl around her chest; when she has warmed it/ she swaddles the old King, and puts his cooled/ shawl about her shoulders'. Then, as quickly as it came, her moment as subject is gone; Burnham's poem shifts to the king, who 'wakes;/ his hands repeat a battle on her back but he/ has lost the violent joy that bubbled/ in his groin'. Abishag, the subject of four verbs, is reinstated as object—no longer, it seems, a blanket but something more like a drum. In its title, 'Abishag the Shunammite', the poem purported to be about the young girl, but ultimately it is about the king, the man who once 's[a]ng while thrusting/ swords' in the bedroom, 'where his wives once smiled at the hot/ honey of his song'. It closes with his attempting once again to sing, but his is a failed attempt: 'his breath/ is warm, like the faint heat in folds of air/ where his stories lie, where small flames vanish/ when they are blown out'. The poem about the Shunammite is in fact a reflection on the King's impotence—an impotence that, ironically, leaves Abishag 'used and useless'.

Whereas the first few writers we looked at invoked Abishag's name only, Deborah Burnham gives the biblical cipher a few new scenes. Joseph Heller goes one further and gives her a handful of lines. This does not mean, however, that in his retelling she becomes a more developed character than she is in the Bible. In *God Knows*,[28] Heller's 1984 comic novel about King David, Abishag is still little more than a beautiful virgin brought in to serve the king. The novel lingers over descriptions of her body, underscoring the biblical depiction of her as object, and when it adds a new dimension to her character, it is only to make her—as did the writers above—into a symbol. In this case, she is primarily a marker of reproach.

In *God Knows*, David—sardonic and aged, unapologetically irreverent—tells his version of the biblical story. In his estimation, it all turns on two soured relationships: the one he had with God and the one he had with Bathsheba. As the novel opens, he tells his reader: 'I've got a love story and a sex story, with the same woman no less, and both are great, and I've got

27. Deborah Burnham, 'Abishag the Shunammite', *Poetry* 173.5 (March 1999), p. 335.

28. Joseph Heller, *God Knows* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

this ongoing, open-ended Mexican stand-off with God, even though He might now be dead'.[29] This King David has begun his decline. He is chilled through with a cold that is less a consequence of old age than of having lived through the deaths of his best friend Jonathan, a number of his sons, and his wife Abigail—to say nothing of the rape of his daughter Tamar.[30] For warmth, his people bring him Abishag.

The aged king takes cold comfort in the young beauty: although she tends to his every need, cooking and cleaning for him, grooming him and caring for him bodily (and claiming all the while to enjoy doing so),[31] she will never replace David's beloved Bathsheba, whom he still desires. Despite the weight she has gained in middle age, Bathsheba 'arouses desire in [him] in a way Abishag has not been able to'.[32] One wonders here whether Heller was familiar with the midrash in the Gemara, about David renouncing Abishag and summoning Bathsheba.

If so, the writer is playing even further with the tradition. Heller's Bathsheba will not come near David. When once he 'could sweep her off her feet and onto her back every time [he] tried', 'nowadays' the king lies 'shivering in bleak and friendless longing' while, for her part, Bathsheba does nothing more than gaze at Abishag 'with heavy, painted lids and ply the unspoiled girl with worldly questions and homely bits of female wisdom'.[33] She advises the young virgin, 'Don't comb his hair so carefully or keep him so clean. Hurt him once in a while, let him get dirty. Don't make such good meals, don't be so good around the house. Who needs it? He never finishes what you give him anyway. Let his lamp go out once in a while.'[34] Thus Abishag obliquely becomes a reminder of the ephemeral nature of the legendary love affair between David and Bathsheba.

In David's last days, the situation is no different. The king remarks, '"Well, it's all over, isn't it?"…and Abishag the Shunammite hears [him] in silence with a face that is serious, composed, and non-committal.'[35]

29. Heller, *God Knows*, p. 8.

30. Heller's account of David's state is resonant with John Gill's assessment, written some 250 years earlier: 'There are many persons at the age he was, that are lively, healthful, and robust, comparatively speaking at least; but David's strength was impaired, and his natural force abated by his many wars, fatigues by night and day in campaigns, and the many sorrows and afflictions he met with from his family and his friends, as well as enemies; which exhausted his natural moisture, weakened his nerves, and drank up his spirits, and brought upon him the infirmities of a decrepit old age very soon' (Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament*, on 1 Kgs 1.1).

31. Heller, *God Knows*, pp. 81-84.

32. Heller, *God Knows*, p. 82.

33. Heller, *God Knows*, pp. 82-83.

34. Heller, *God Knows*, p. 83

35. Heller, *God Knows*, p. 347.

Apparently unmoved by David's impending death, she goes through their nightly ritual. She grooms the king and covers him with clothes before she washes and perfumes herself that she can stand 'before [him] unclothed for a few moments, that [they] may cherish each other with [their] gazes before she curls in beside [him] to lie in [his] bosom'.[36] David acknowledges, this arrangement 'doesn't sound bad, does it? But I will get no heat. And I will not know her in marriage. And again I will wish for Bathsheba.'[37]

Bathsheba, who draws near the king once more—not to rekindle their flame but to intercede on behalf of her son, Solomon—dismisses her former love. When he grants Solomon the kingdom, she offers him 'no more than a cursory blessing and a chaste kiss on the forehead'[38] by way of thanks. When he pleads with her, 'Lie here with me tonight… Make me happy once more', she responds, 'Use Abishag for that'.[39] And though he quotes to Bathsheba from the Song of Songs, the poem he wrote in her honor,[40] 'she bestows a kiss and goes away. God has let [David] down again.'[41] With Bathsheba gone, Abishag comes to the king, anointed and beautiful, but her charms are lost on the king. He can think only of God, of Saul, of all that he has lost. His thoughts break and he notices her again—it is the gaze with which the novel ends:

> Abishag my angel has risen from her chair and approaches me without noise, wearing only a vivid scarf. Her eyes are as dark as the tents of Kedar. I want my God back, and they send me a girl.[42]

This girl, the beauty Abishag, cannot stand in for the Bathsheba David still desires or the God he has lost. Rather, in this account, Abishag is an emblem of reproach. She is the symbol of Bathsheba's reproach of David,[43] of God and David's mutual reproach, of David's reproach of his own legacy.

Abishag may serve another cautionary function. When Dan Pettee muses about ideal love, he invokes Abishag not as an example, but as evidence of the (unlikely) possibility that there could be love without sex.[44] His 1989 poem, 'Ideal Love; Or, Another View of It', follows Prince and Princess on a

36. Heller, *God Knows*, p. 347.
37. Heller, *God Knows*, p. 347.
38. Heller, *God Knows*, p. 351.
39. Heller, *God Knows*, p. 351.
40. This detail is biblically incorrect, but Heller plays with biblical authorship in a number of instances. Bathsheba, in his telling, is responsible for some of the Psalms.
41. Heller, *God Knows*, p. 352.
42. Heller, *God Knows*, p. 353.
43. The beloved wife approaches the husband solely to petition for the kingdom on Solomon's behalf.
44. Dan Pettee, 'Ideal Love; Or, Another View of It', *boundary 2* 16 no. 2/3 (Winter–Spring 1989), pp. 250-51. Available online at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/303318>.

lust-filled tour of an old manse, under what they suppose to be the spell of love. A parenthetical insertion suggests otherwise: 'now, bide a minute,/ remarks the Muse: lust is writhing on the rack,/ or eagle-spread upon the desert bronze'. Young, reckless, consumed with each other, Prince and Princess are in love's 'quixotic trance'—they are caught up in romantic archetypes and fantasies. The poem sees what they (for the moment, at least) cannot: those who pretend that love is anything other than lust are deluding themselves. There is, the poem suggests, no love without lust. Ask Abishag. She is the symbol of the impossibility of ideal love.

### *Abishag, Byword for Male Fantasy*

Unlike her scriptural king-consort, who is unmoved by Abishag's beauty, male writers return to dwell on it over and over again. It turns out Arkady is not the only character in *The Adolescent* who knows the biblical tale, which means Dostoevsky is able to work through a second image of Abishag in the novel. Sokolsky, an older prince infatuated with a younger woman, calls the object of his desire 'the biblical beauty'. He babbles, 'Ah, *quelle charmante personne!* What do you think? *Les chants de Salomon…non, ce n'est pas Salomon, c'est David qui mettait une jeune belle dans son lit pour se chauffer dans sa vieillesse. Enfin, David, Salomon*, all that keeps spinning around inside my head—there's a real jumble inside my head right now.'[45] And then, in a rather lucid conclusion of these thoughts, he declares, 'Everything, *cher enfant*, can be sublime and at the same time ridiculous. *Cette jeune belle de la vieillesse de David—c'est tout un poème*, while someone like Paul de Kock would have turned it all into *une scène de bassinoire* and made us all laugh.'[46] In the view of the old man (the novel's other David figure), Abishag is not a harbinger of impotence but a symbol of beauty, vitality, poetry. She is sublime, but, like 'everything, … at the same time ridiculous'. Human being and at the same time electric blanket.

Sokolsky is wise enough to recognize what is ridiculous in Abishag—that is, her function for the aging man. Other male writers seem not to be so aware. Making no apology for the king's (or their) age or undesirability, they (or the speakers of their poems) imagine themselves in the place of the king, doing precisely what King David did not. In 'King David Old', Robert Lowell reads against the grain of the biblical text and gives us consummated passion, despite the fact that Abishag is generally a symbol of unconsummated desire.

45. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Adolescent* (trans. Andrew MacAndrew; New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), p. 315.

46. Dostoevsky, *The Adolescent*, p. 315.

Lowell restates the biblical assurance that King David 'knew her not'—and then goes on to offer a description of her that could scarcely have come from one who knew her not. She is 'cool through the hottest summer day, and moist; a rankness more savage than all the flowers, as if her urine caused the vegetation'.[47] She is the source of nature and culture, bringing forth not simply the vegetation, but Jerusalem itself, 'leaping from the golden dew'. And, as if to prove the Bible wrong, within this fecundity, 'the Monarch's well-beloved shaft/ lay quaking in place'. The consequence of this placement is world-altering: 'men thought the world was flat/ yet half the world was hanging on each breast'; the union as momentous as when 'Sion had come to Israel'. It is a 'clinch [that] is quickly broken', and we do not know whether it is David's orgasm or David's death that causes the break.

Death is of course a hazard when the very old copulate with the very young. Often allusions to Abishag have little to do with the warmth of a young and beautiful woman and everything to do with fantasies of virility in aging men. Edmund Gosse's 1911 poem, 'Abishag' promises, in its title and opening line at least, to be about the 'little tender rose of Bethlehem', but a line in it shifts from Abishag to David. 'Lo!' the speaker says, 'I am harsher than the salt sea-shore/ and purblind, like some beggar'. He describes himself as unkempt, 'with knotted hair, and beard that hath not known/ the comb's caress for wandering wasted years'. In this state, he is inaccessible to the young beauty: he knows her 'fingers are too fresh and cool/ to lie within [his] gnarled and leathern hands'; her kiss would be 'like dew on dust'. And yet, as certain as he is—and we are—that a beautiful young virgin would be repelled by his decrepitude, he has no impediment imagining himself with her. This is the hubris of January when faced with the blossom of May. In this case, the speaker 'gaz[es] in the pools of [her] dark eyes', and declares, 'The mirrored portrait of myself seems young'. Abishag is not merely the locus of male desire (and particularly, the desire of the older male): she has a transformative effect on the senior suitor. He goes from knowing he is old and repellant to envisioning himself as young. Further to the idea of Abishag as object, it seems not to matter in the least how Abishag sees him: once he has convinced himself of his desirability, the expectation seems to be that she will apprehend it too. The limitations of the male body and male beauty are always surmountable.

Even when the focus of the poem is on the woman's body, that body seems often to exist for the benefit of the male reader (if not the biblical king). In Jakov Fichman's early twentieth-century Hebrew poem 'Abishag', the young beauty gains the voice Scripture has denied her, and she uses it to sing of her neglected body. She laments that she is 'wast[ing her] teeming age'; her 'woods of chastity grow taller daily' as a 'locust wilderness devours

47. Robert Lowell, 'King David Old', in his *History* (New York: Farrar, 1973), p. 27.

[her] bloom'. Every stanza reminds us: Abishag is a symbol of fertility and efflorescence. She is full and ripe; her 'heavy blossom aches,/ and all [her] unconceiving, unattempted flesh/—a vine neglected—yearns the gathering'. This is an Abishag who, at least on the face of it, mourns for her body, the fruit of which will decay if not gleaned and eaten. She is acutely aware of what she is losing, even if old David is unconcerned: she despairs, 'All my warmth I give to the old King—his heart plays the weeping of my Spring'. It is hard to be convinced by this sustained lament: it claims to be about Abishag's suppressed desire but in fact expresses male desire (for Abishag). Fichman's poem is far less about Abishag's sense of her own body than about the male perception of that body. The male appropriation of the female voice becomes a further objectification: Abishag is not rendered subject through this poem, despite the fact that she is its speaker. Rather, she is subjected to a sustained male gaze.

### *Abishag, Byword for Female Fears?*

Deborah Burnham had worried about what would become of Abishag after King David. What does the world do with a very beautiful young virgin once she is 'used and useless'? Joe-Anne McLaughlin has written a cycle of Abishag poems that explicitly addresses what little use the world has for a former blanket to a king. The first of these is sassy, a bold look back on a bold life. In 'Abishag's Brag', Abishag recounts, 'Girl, in my foxtails/ and fishnets, I was all/ city. Exotic/ as a Vatican/ bagel, accessible/ as Port Authority'.[48] This was a woman who wiggled when she walked, a woman 'out of this world gorgeous'. This was no virgin; this was a woman who had men. Many men, it seems. And after 'one night of me/ a fellow would/ be lonely/ all ways'.

There is a swagger to this Abishag that has become muted by the time we next encounter her. The second Abishag poem (they are interspersed throughout a collection of poems) is less recollection of what Abishag was like than what Abishag's life was once like. In 'Abishag Enjoins her Cats to Eat',[49] Abishag is older, hungrier, in the company of cats she calls 'old ladies'. She laments, 'Once it was tenderloin medium rare./ For you, sweet cream and calf's liver'; now it is 'victuals…not to our taste'. As in the last poem, everything is told in retrospective, but the tone is wistful: 'Alas for the tastes prosperity fostered./ Our hour of picking and choosing has fled. Alas for a nip of cognac.' No more fine food, no more liqueur. In every respect this Abishag's station has changed: 'Was I a beauty? Now I wash

48. Joe-Anne McLaughlin, 'Abishag's Brag', in *JAM* (Rochester, NY: Boa Editions, 2001), p. 13.

49. McLaughlin, 'Abishag's Brag', pp. 21-22.

plates.' The Abishag here is not unlike her biblical forerunner: she is waiting out her last days. She says to her cats, 'Tomorrow no doubt shall find us/ Less particular or dead'.

Abishag's decay (and proximity to death) is the driving theme of the last two poems in the cycle. 'Abishag Confronts her Mirror after a Stroll' has her returning home, horrified to see herself as the world outside has seen her:

> A woman without teeth
> should not leave her room
> or if she must
> let her keep moving.[50]

She should not loiter, even on cathedral steps. A woman without teeth should be asked to keep moving. This is the command she issues the world, but she reserves a command for herself: 'None of this nonsense about the past./ No more of this breaking into tears.' Although she seems not to have anywhere to go, the woman without teeth must keep moving: if she stops, she will not only disturb those who look upon her, she runs the danger of dwelling on the past. She must summon courage and a forward focus: 'she should move on'.

If the Abishag of the last two poems seemed decrepit, the Abishag of the final poem in the cycle seems more comfortable. She is not surrounded by a litter of cats, not wandering the streets without apparent aim. Rather, as the poem's title indicates—'Abishag: Our Lady of Sorrows Rest Home, February 14, 1983'[51]—she is sedentary. It is Valentine's Day, she is sitting with a box of chocolates. She craves 'nothing more/ than bon-bons and buttered rum, hot/ buttered rum and/ bon-bons, one,/ then another,/ then another one'. Her thoughts flit for a moment to a past—'What's become/ of the appetites/ I knew when young'—but her attention returns immediately to the material world, to satiable cravings. She seems to exist only in the present, only in this moment in a chair in a nursing room, contemplating Valentine's candy. This is her legacy, and it is not lasting.

Adele Berlin read 1 Kgs 1.15 in light of female anxieties about aging. In that reading, Bathsheba was threatened by the young and beautiful virgin who ministered to her husband. In the imagination of Robert Frost, that young and beautiful virgin has become a withered hag—a symbol of anxiety about aging. In the hands of Joe-Anne McLaughlin, Abishag has also aged, but this aged Abishag is not a sardonic byword in the way she was for Frost. Here, Abishag is the locus for a sustained reflection on what it might be to grow old, alone, what it might be to have traveled worlds from one's youth.

50. McLaughlin, 'Abishag's Brag', p. 29.
51. McLaughlin, 'Abishag's Brag', p. 59.

Robert Pinsky, in his *Life of David*, reflects on David's twilight years: 'No life ever was more like a tale than David's, but it too spends itself like a narrative trickling or unwinding away into God's eternity, in whose wrath we pass away our days'.[52] One senses, in McLaughlin's poems, that Abishag's life was quite a lot like a tale too, and it—like David's—'spends itself like a narrative trickling or unwinding away'. Miles and years from the palace of David, this Abishag lives out her end of days in a way that parallels strangely the end of days of her king. For both David and Abishag, there is a sense that the figure who now is, the figure caught in a body that betrays, has no resemblance to the figure that once was.

### *Abishag, the Unknowable*

In the case of Abishag, precisely who that figure once was is difficult to discern. A very beautiful young woman, a virgin, a Shunammite. Paradoxically, a symbol of age, impotence, decay, loss, and death. Object, possibly subject. An electric blanket, but possibly a nurse or even a treasurer to the king. David's last wife or a cast-away after the death of Adonijah. A symbol of the throne, of succession and sedition. The locus of male fantasy and fears, of female anxiety and also female power. If we can say one thing with certainty, it is that Abishag the Shunammite is a blank slate.

52. Robert Pinsky, *The Life of David* (New York: Schocken, Nextbook, 2005), p. 182.

# Is Naomi a Liberal Pluralist? The Politics of Loss and Renewal in Jonathan Edwards's Sermon, 'Ruth's Resolution'

Jay Twomey

> In her own way, the way of empathy—three millennia before the concept of a democratic pluralist polity—[Naomi] is a kind of pluralist.
>
> —Cynthia Ozick[1]

> Theology always means—whatever else it means—theopolitics.
>
> —Catherine Keller[2]

'Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.' Ruth's declaration in the book of Ruth 1.16 (KJV) has traditionally, and rightly, been understood as a pledge of fidelity, of commitment in the face of adversity, of love. Both heterosexual and same-sex marriage ceremonies often feature some version of this text, as part of a reading or perhaps during a musical interlude—who knows, some couples may even sing along with Barry Manilow as he croons 'Where you go / I will go / Where you walk / I'm beside you / My love, where you are is where I want to be'.[3] But while Ruth's words certainly merit their celebration in any number of contexts for which love, faith, and commitment are central, it is important to recall that they are a response to Naomi's initiative. Naomi is Ruth's mother-in-law, a widow whose long experience of sorrow and difficulty may help to explain why, in the verses immediately preceding Ruth's loving promise, she does her best to convince Ruth and her other daughter-in-law, Orpah, to let her return to Bethlehem

1. Cynthia Ozick, 'Ruth', in Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (eds.), *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), pp. 211-32 (223).

2. Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), p. 135.

3. Barry Manilow, 'Where You Go', on *Scores: Songs From Copacabana and Harmony* (Concord Records, 2004). The song continues, in stirring biblical and appropriately marital fashion: 'When it starts / Take my hand / And whether it's through hell or to the promised land / God knows where / I'll be there / Where you go.'

alone. 'The hand of the Lord is gone out against me', she says, as if lamenting, I have nothing to give you, you'd be better off staying behind in Moab, so leave now, 'turn again', begone (Ruth 1.12-13). One might say that Naomi is trying to spare her daughters-in-law a future of uncertainty and loss.

That Ruth responds as she does to this warning renders her commitment all the more poignant. Other readings, however, are possible. The one I will be exploring in the pages that follow is neither romantic nor filial but suggests that the strong position Naomi takes apparently in opposition to Ruth's companionship, the very remarks which elicit Ruth's famous response, are indicative of what we would consider a postmodern politics, an ephemeral and yet tolerant and democratically potent vision of the public sphere. Naomi, in this reading, is not merely the 'little woman behind the story of Ruth and Boaz, the story of David and (from the Christian perspective) Jesus, but rather the central figure in a narrative of political possibilities directly relevant, I will argue, to early twenty-first century American experience.[4] She is relevant, however, not only because her political choices may seem to resemble our own, but also because my principal text in this study is not Ruth at all, but a 1735 sermon on Ruth by 'America's theologian', Jonathan Edwards.[5] Edwards, probably to no little extent because of his opposition to Deism and Arminianism, the religious liberalisms of his day, can represent the conservative reaction against any and all political positions which are taken to be at best deaf and at worst inimical to religious orthodoxy. In any event, Edwards has become, at least in some quarters, the founding father of American theopolitical conservatism. Take for instance the remarks of John Piper, Baptist minister and founder of the Desiring God Ministries, a major player in Christian media:

4. Making such presentist political claims about an ancient text may not be as surprising as it initially seems. Recent theoretical work on the Pauline corpus by Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, for instance, similarly reads ancient biblical documents in terms of our political moment. Cynthia Ozick, in the first of this essay's epigraphs (to which I will return below), clearly feels that Naomi is a politically prescient figure, as does Bonnie Honig, whose work I will also turn to below. Of course, scholars of the Hebrew Bible have often argued that the book of Ruth is itself a critically political text, engaging subversively with the exclusivist postexilic policies of Ezra–Nehemiah. Indeed, for one scholar, 'the book of Ruth is politically subversive in quite astonishing ways' (André LaCocque, 'Subverting the Biblical World: Sociology and Politics in the Book of Ruth', in Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg [eds.], *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2006], pp. 20-30 [24]).

5. See Robert Jensen, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

> What follows from [Edwards's theology], I have found, shocks most Christians, namely, that we should be blood-earnest-deadly serious-about blood-earnest-deadly serious-about [*sic*] being happy in God. We should pursue our joy with a passion and a vehemence that, if it must, would cut off our hand or gouge out our eye to have it… We waken to the truth that it is a treacherous sin not to pursue that satisfaction in God with all our hearts. There is one final word for finding delight in the creation more than in the Creator: *treason*.[6]

Yes, 'treason'. I should note that Piper's work is more politically complicated than this single citation would suggest.[7] Still, Piper is not alone in popularizing a neo-Edwardseanism for Evangelicals willing to engage in the public sphere; and the politics of this theology, the righteous politicization of religiously inflected perspectives has played, perhaps until just recently, a significant role in Washington. For a liberal, post-secular reader of Edwards and the Bible (like myself), then, the question has to be: Is it possible to posit (to recover, to construct) another political theology from Edwards's complex reflections on matters biblical and theological? Is it possible to engage in something of a revisionist reading of Edwards's politics, or perhaps of the contemporary appropriations of Edwards's theopolitics, such that he can speak to the left as eloquently as he apparently speaks to the right? Or perhaps a better way of framing this question would be with reference to Naomi. If Naomi can be read as a politically progressive force within a politically subversive biblical text, and if Jonathan Edwards reads her in ways that, intentionally or not, enhance that progressivism for early twenty-first-century readers, then is it possible to appropriate his reading as part of a larger project of entering, liberally, into dialogue with the theopolitics of American Christian conservatism?[8] My hope is that the answer to these questions is, or can be, yes.

6. Italics in original. John Piper, 'A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: Why We Need Jonathan Edwards Three Hundred Years Later', <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByDate/1644_A_GodEntranced_Vision_of_All_Things_Why_We_Need_Jonathan_Edwards_Three_Hundred_Years_Later/> (accessed May 30, 2007).

7. For instance, in another piece Piper criticizes ultra-conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh for his reactionary rhetoric (even if he does not directly criticize Rush's politics). See his 1994 sermon, 'Slaves of God: Free from All to Honor All', <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1994/875_Slaves_of_God_Free_From_All_to_Honor_All/> (accessed June 3, 2007).

8. One of the more intriguing, if still problematic, recent examples of the kind of presentist, or revisionist work I have in mind is the creative intervention in contemporary Edwardseanism by Janet Edwards, Jonathan's great-great-great-great-great-great granddaughter, and a Presbyterian minister in Pittsburg. She was criticized for conducting a gay wedding last year, but explained her position to the press this way: 'I would say [Jonathan Edwards's] acceptance of the Mohicans of the time is similar to my inclusion of gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered people now'. See Laura Brenckle and Rick Wills,

## *Naomi and the Liberal Subject*

I would like to begin my study proper, however, not with Edwards but with a Lucille Clifton poem entitled 'naomi watches as ruth sleeps':

> she clings to me
> like a shadow
> when all that i wish
> is to sit alone
> longing for my husband,
> my sons.
> she has promised
> to follow me,
> to become me
> if i allow it.
> i am leading her
> to boaz country.
> he will find her beautiful
> and place her among
> his concubines.
> jehovah willing
> i can grieve in peace.[9]

Here, Naomi is in mourning still for her husband and sons, and feels so radically displaced that Bethlehem is now, in her words, not home but merely 'boaz country'. She finds Ruth's clinging presence at best a nuisance, at worst a threat: for Ruth 'has promised / to follow me, / to *become me* / if i allow it'.[10] The return home is her only hope of freeing herself of Ruth, in fact; in 'boaz country', Naomi imagines she'll shunt Ruth off into marriage, and finally find the solitude she needs to 'grieve in peace'.

There is little hope in this poem, and what hope there is resides in Naomi's fantasy of a Ruth-less future: that is, one without Ruth by her side; but also one with nothing and no one to mediate, to ameliorate, her suffering.[11] More importantly, for my purposes, Clifton establishes a sharp distinction between Naomi and Ruth. Naomi, we sense, is independent, highly individuated *vis-à-vis* Ruth, who, by contrast, is nothing in herself

'Embattled Cleric Cites Ancestor's Example', *Pittsburg Tribune Review* (March 6, 2006), <http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/s_430196.html> (accessed May 30, 2007).

9. Lucille Clifton, *The Book of Light* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1993), p. 57.

10. Clifton, *The Book of Light*, p. 57, emphasis added.

11. For an entirely different reading, one that quenches Naomi's suffering by retrojecting, as it were, the happy ending of the book of Ruth into the poem's (extra-)biblical moment, see Tiffany Eberle Kriner's 'Conjuring Hope in a Body: Lucille Clifton's Eschatology', *Christianity and Literature* 54 (Winter 2005), pp. 185-208 (200).

beyond the desire to fuse with another: she's a shadow; she longs to become Naomi; and she will find her place (really, it will be found for her) in the beautiful but unindividuated collectivity of Boaz's 'concubines'. Additionally, Naomi is a figure in mourning, but she is also a woman detached and savvy enough to understand her situation, and to reason out tactics for avoiding a trap—Ruth will become her, we note, only if Naomi 'allows it'. So she is a sign of mourning, but she can manage her affect intelligently, actively, without being consumed by it.

In other words, in Clifton's reading, Naomi is something like the classical liberal subject, whereas Ruth is, well, …not, subject as she is to totalizing and apparently irrational desires, lacking in autonomy, tending perhaps towards an ecstatic enthusiasm that is precisely the inversion of Naomi's cool rationality.[12] As Wendy Brown puts it in another context, namely a critique of what she sees as liberalism's reliance upon Freudian civilizational constructs, 'If love civilized is love domesticated, then ardent attachments of any sort—to a God, a belief system, a people, or a culture—must remain private and depoliticized if they are not to endanger civilization and the autonomous individual who signifies a civilized state'.[13] In this sense, Ruth is a danger to liberal democracy. And her clinging (the traditional narrative of unambiguous affection, of loving-kindness and selfless devotion, binding Ruth to her mother-in-law Naomi, and through Naomi to Israelite society and religion) is here subjected to a dispiriting critique.

However, Naomi is only slightly more attractive a figure in the poem. Completely unempathetic, and rather self-absorbed, she cannot reason Ruth's behavior, and so she simply rejects it. From the perspective of a certain reading of the liberal tradition, in fact, Naomi's desire to organize her life as the space of mourning implicates her, to some extent, in Ruth's own irrationality. That is, 'a truly rational [and classically liberal] actor… will focus on the future, not on the past', and will strive to keep her attention from 'being emotionally misdirected'.[14] They mirror each other,

12. Chantal Mouffe describes this classical liberal subject, in negative terms, as a 'pure, rational individual', 'who only knows how to look after his own interest and who rejects any obligation that could shackle his freedom.' See her 'American Liberalism and its Critics' (trans. William Falcetano), in Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso 2005), pp. 23-40 (26, 25). Conversely, it is what in this context we might call Ruth's illiberalism, her willingness to 'erase…her very self', which makes her appealing as a biblical heroine to André LaCocque (p. 23).

13. Wendy Brown, 'Subjects of Tolerance: Why We Are Civilized and They Are the Barbarians', in Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan (eds.), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 298-317 (309).

14. Stephen Holmes, 'Ordinary Passions in Descartes and Racine', in Bernard Yack (ed.), *Liberalism without Illusions: Essays on Liberal Theory and the Political Vision of Judith*

then, with Ruth's clinging love appearing simply as the inverse of Naomi's clinging grief. Each 'cleaves' in the complex semantic range of that word, by holding passionately to that which constitutes a rupture in her being. And each, therefore, is ultimately a rather sad figure in the consideration of political possibilities

Cynthia Ozick, in her contribution to a volume entitled *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, gets us a little closer to a political reading of the text when she notes that Naomi 'is a kind of pluralist', even if she is so 'in her own way, the way of empathy—three millennia before the concept of a democratic pluralist polity'.[15] The reason for this assessment is that, out there on the border of Moab and Israel, Naomi recognizes the validity of Orpah's choice to return to her family and her gods. Political theorist Bonnie Honig appreciates this 'lovely insight into Naomi',[16] but notes that Ozick's interpretation clearly privileges Ruth over Orpah. Orpah is free to do what she likes in her theologically degraded homeland; but it would simply not be possible, Honig argues, for Ozick's Orpah to return to Bethlehem a religious Moabite. Hence, Naomi's 'pluralism is [merely] territorial', and not quite as satisfying as one requiring 'a more difficult toleration, that of [the] differences that live among us'.[17]

Whereas both Clifton and Ozick imagine a more or less traditional liberal subject in depicting Naomi as they do, they still reduce the viability of that liberalism through an intolerance of certain others: of Ruth in the case of Clifton's poem, of Orpah in Ozick's piece. Ozick's Naomi, however, is the more political of the two. For while the Naomi in Clifton may more or less adequately exemplify the basic assumptions of philosophical liberalism regarding the autonomous individual who acts rationally to secure her interests, she nevertheless does not engage with others in a way constitutive of some kind of political society, or public sphere, and hence fails to satisfy the basic requirements of a political liberalism such as that articulated by John Rawls.

In Rawls' view, a politically liberal order is one founded upon a notion of justice that allows for an understanding of 'the fair terms of social cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal, and as fully cooperating members of society over a complete life, from one generation to the next'.[18]

*N. Shklar* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 95-110 (99, 107). Holmes argues, however, that an awareness that pure rationality is but a pipe-dream can produce a more realistic liberal politics.

15. Ozick, 'Ruth', p. 223.

16. Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 50.

17. Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner*, p. 50.

18. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 3.

Rawls distinguishes between the simply rational subject and the reasonable political citizen, emphasizing the latter in order to devise an 'overlapping consensus', a set of basic moral and philosophical principles upon which the members of a pluralistic society can agree, and within which they can negotiate matters of shared concern.[19] Reasonable citizens of a pluralistic, liberal democratic polity will be free, beyond this overlapping consensus, to pursue their own more idiosyncratic interests, and to engage meaningfully with others in terms of their own 'comprehensive doctrines'—say, their religious commitments.[20] Rawls is fully aware that there is no easy way to separate out matters of philosophical or religious belief from decisions that citizens will need to make in an overlapping consensus; however he does insist that individuals and groups would have to show some 'restraint' in asserting the truth or general validity of their informing beliefs while acting in the public sphere.[21] Ideally this would ensure that the shared political life of a community is, in Honig's phrase, productive of that difficult tolerance required in a complex social order.

## *Jonathan Edwards's Naomi*

Now, it may seem odd, in the context of a discussion of liberal politics, pluralism and tolerance, to invoke the name of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards, after all, was the dire Northampton minister of 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' fame; the apocalyptic exegete who looked forward to the eventual attenuation of 'Deism, Roman Catholicism, Islam and Judaism'.[22] Indeed, Islam and 'heathenism' were linked in his mind to 'all the forces of Satan's visible kingdom'.[23] Not exactly a beacon of pluralism or toleration. Still, I would like to argue that Edwards does, in his comments on Ruth, allow for a much more tolerant conception of society than one might expect. I will begin with comments he makes about Ruth and Naomi in one of his Notes on Scripture written early in his Northampton ministry, c. 1728. There, Edwards explains that in Ruth 1.15, 'Naomi sets before her daughter the case of going with her, and the advantages of staying in her own land. So did Christ set before men the case of being his disciples, and

19. See Lecture IV, 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', in Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 133-72.

20. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 152.

21. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 153.

22. Gerald McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1992), p. 82.

23. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. John F. Wilson; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), IX, p. 463. Hereafter all citations will reference Edwards as author, and will give the volume and page numbers from the Yale *Works*.

so do his ministers in the church.'[24] Although it is far more common for readers to see Boaz as a type of Christ,[25] others of Edwards's day, the itinerant revivalist George Whitefield for instance, also linked Naomi to Christ and to the ministry by analogy with her function in the narrative. Edwards's real interest, of course, is in Ruth the convert. But it is Naomi who carefully sets out the alternative choices. Clearly she, Christian ministers, and Christ himself all hope that their constituents (Naomi's daughters-in-law, ministers' congregations, Jesus' disciples) will choose rightly; still, *that* the constituents choose, in the absence of coercion, after having been given a moderately fair view of the choices available, is what I'd like to emphasize. Ruth chooses Naomi, of course. But in the language of Edwards's comment, her response is rather passive, especially by contrast with Naomi: she is called; she is converted. Only after this does she choose, apparently, although the language of choice is oddly limited to the partisan consequences of her decision, namely, the forsaking of kith and kin, the abandoning of one group for another. Naomi, however, does not judge the choice, nor does she comment upon it in any way.

Edwards imagines an equally mild, equally tolerant Naomi in his sermon, 'Ruth's Resolution', delivered in 1735 in a fervor of religious activity that laid the foundation for the first Great Awakening in the decade to come. Rhetorically, Edwards's congregants are expected to focus on and associate themselves with Ruth in her decision to follow Naomi. Naomi represents friends and loved ones whose recent conversion—or passionate renewal of religious commitment—will eventuate in an eternal separation between them unless they, the congregants, like Ruth, follow the example of these friends in seeking saving grace. The sermon deploys an intensity of affect to roil the deepest anxieties about this impending loss. Congregants should seriously consider imitating Ruth, Edwards warns in the second person, otherwise the conversion of friends, siblings, spouses 'will be a foundation of an eternal separation…a vast separation…an exceeding and everlasting separation between you and them'.[26] In his well-known later discourse,

24. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XV, p. 85.

25. For several useful examples, see Peter S. Hawkins, 'Ruth amid the Gentiles', in Hawkins and Cushing Stahlberg (eds.), *Scrolls of Love*, pp. 75-85 (80-82). Hawkins worries that in addition to the problem of an 'anti-Jewish sentiment' (p. 81) informing Christian typological readings of the Hebrew Bible, 'traditional Christian interpretations of Ruth tend to drain the biblical text of its particularity… With a kind of plodding predictability, characters become ideas, and individual stories are subsumed into a theological master plot that offers few surprises' (p. 80). While it is difficult entirely to disagree with this assessment, I would argue nevertheless that Edwards's reading—charged as it is with a lively affect, and never quite reducible to a stable typological framework—may be considered an exception.

26. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 316.

'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God', Edwards famously exhorts his hearers with images of hellfire and damnation.[27] The same is true here, although to a lesser extent. Listeners are warned that if they choose poorly they will be 'confined to this cursed ground, that is kept in store, reserved unto fire, against the day of judgment [2 Pet. 3.7]'.[28] The real hortatory power in this sermon derives from the rhetoric of separation, from the production of an affect of loss and mourning. Edwards is quite literally asking those in his church to look around at their nearest and dearest, and to project their fear of losing them into eternity. How painful the separation will be, he says, when they recall not only that they could have been saved, but also and even more poignantly, when they remember that their friends and loved ones had all along striven to save them.[29]

Taking this into consideration, members of the community should strive to be so many Ruths who choose to go with their Naomis rather than suffer so painful a loss. They were 'companions with them in worldliness, in vanity, in unprofitable and sinful conversation'; they can also be 'companions with them in holiness and true happiness' forevermore.[30] Not that leaving this life of sin will be easy. Orpah is proof of the difficulty in making that choice. But if they are 'firm in [their] resolution to conquer the difficulties that are in the way of cleaving to them who are indeed turning from sin to God'; if they engage in a 'thorough, violent, and perpetual pursuit of salvation'; if they 'forsake all' and follow Naomi, they will, hopefully, meet with soteriological 'success'.[31]

Again, the emphasis is on *Ruth's* resolution. But in the sermon, as in Edwards's Note, Naomi is rather more complex a figure than Ruth in that she both *models* conversion, as a former sinner, for her daughters-in-law, and nearly *channels* the divinity motivating conversion. As a model of the convert, Naomi is someone who, like Ruth and Orpah and Edwards's congregation, used to 'do Satan's work', but who now has 'exchanged sin, and the world', for God.[32] Given the actual biblical text, this reading is curious as the morality of Naomi's life is never raised as an issue. Still, traditional readings of this text have also complicated Naomi's apparent innocence. Whether she is merely guilty by association given Elimilech's

27. Sermons from the 'little awakening' of the mid-1730s, the period during which 'Ruth's Resolution' was preached, could similarly invoke striking images of damnation. See Stephen R. Yarbrough and John C. Adams, *Delightful Conviction: Jonathan Edwards and the Rhetoric of Conversion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 23-40.

28. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 316.

29. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 318.

30. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 312

31. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, pp. 312, 319, 313.

32. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, pp. 309, 310.

reprehensible parsimony during a time of famine, as in Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel's reading,[33] or whether in fact she herself was directly guilty for her sons' deaths because she hadn't returned promptly to Israel after her husband died, choosing to remain among idolaters even after God's mortal warning (as in Matthew Henry's eighteenth-century commentary),[34] Naomi's sinfulness in Edwards is not without precedent.

The rhetorical ambiguity in which Edwards casts Naomi is even more interesting when Edwards takes this sinner, this convert and, without any apparent contradiction, has her stand in, suddenly, for God, or at least has her stand by his side. Edwards tells us that 'God gives every man his choice in this matter' of religious commitment, and then clarifies that for Ruth and Orpah the choice is precisely the one offered by Naomi herself.[35] One has to choose God and his people 'with a full determination', we're told.[36] But Naomi is the only one in the text who indicates, in the sermon as in the Note, the possible forms that determination can take. Of course, God's absolute sovereignty is given strident affirmation in the sermon: 'He is a God who hath all things in his hands, and does whatsoever he pleases [Ps. 115.3]: he killeth and maketh alive; he bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up; he maketh poor and maketh rich [1 Sam. 2.6-7]'.[37] This is as one would expect from the pen of an eighteenth-century Calvinist. God's people and Satan's belong, of course, each to their separate kingdoms. But a more complex language of political affiliation emerges in the sermon with reference to the social order. In particular, Edwards refers to Israel as a 'commonwealth',[38] and 'the most excellent and happy society in the world'.[39] The idea of 'the commonwealth of Israel' probably derives from the King James New Testament where, in Ephesians 2.12, Gentiles are reminded that they were once excluded from 'the covenants of promise', and hence were 'aliens from the commonwealth', from the *politeia* or citizenship, 'of Israel'.[40]

33. *Ruth R.* 1.4. *Midrash Ruth Rabbah* (trans. L. Rabinowitz), in H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (eds.), *The Midrash Rabbah* (New York: Soncino Press, 1977), IV, pp. 20-21.

34. Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of All the Books of the Old Testament*, II (London: printed for J. Clark and R. Hett, J. Knapton, J. and B. Sprint, J. Darby, D. Midwinter, 1721–25), p. 153.

35. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 314.

36. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 313.

37. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 310.

38. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, pp. 307, 312.

39. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 311.

40. See also Acts 22.28, in which Paul and the chief captain speak of their Roman 'freedom' (KJV), or *politeia*. The KJV translates a variant of *politeia* in Phil. 3.20 as 'conversation', which until the early eighteenth century could mean, according to the

In Locke's political theory, a commonwealth is a mode of political organization intending the 'good of the whole', in which 'the *legislative* power is put into the hands of divers persons, who duly assembled, have by themselves, or jointly with others, a power to make laws, which when they have done, being separated again, they are themselves subject to the laws they have made'.[41] This ephemeral, legislative authority belongs to the citizenry, which has the '*supreme power to remove or alter the legislative*' when it ceases to function according to the will of the people.[42] Locke also notes that King James I himself pledged always to '*prefer the weal of the public, and of the whole commonwealth, in making of good laws and constitutions, to any particular and private ends of*' his own.[43] The idea of a 'commonwealth of Israel', then, at least in the King James translation, suggests something other than the absolutism of divine sovereignty, even if it doesn't call God's ultimate authority into question. Perhaps this sense of a more or less democratic polity dovetailed with Edwards's affective rhetoric regarding the 'society' of loved ones to emphasize human rather than divine agency; and at any rate the sovereignty of God, in the Ruth sermon, is circumscribed by the need for people to choose him.

By contrast, Naomi is quite clearly the only one in this sermon who can function like a Lockean legislator, or to put it differently, like one who can evoke the idea of a 'commonwealth' in any sense. God may be the motive from Edwards's perspective, but only Naomi is capable of crafting a social order in response to the needs of her people. Her status as a neutral arbiter here becomes more obvious if we contrast Edwards's reading with those of other contemporary Protestant ministers and commentators, most of whom take Naomi typologically as a version of themselves. In their exegesis, as in Edwards's Note, she is akin to a minister; but unlike Edwards, they take her ministerial function to be the testing of the religious mettle of her flock. For instance, the seventeenth-century English Puritan Richard Bernard, in his

*OED*, 'the action of living or having one's being *in* a place or *among* persons. Also *fig.* of one's spiritual being.' The verse in Philippians remarks that 'our conversation is in heaven'. Edwards, I have noted above, worried about his congregational Moabites having been 'companions with them [i.e. their Naomis] in worldliness, in vanity, in unprofitable and sinful conversation' (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 312).

41. John Locke, from the *Second Treatise of Government*, excerpted in Mitchell Cohen and Nicole Fermon (eds.), *Princeton Readings in Political Thought: Essential Texts since Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 243-79 (268). All italics from Locke appear in the original.

42. Locke, in Cohen and Fermon (eds.), *Princeton Readings in Political Thought*, p. 269.

43. Locke, in Cohen and Fermon (eds.), *Princeton Readings in Political Thought*, p. 270. Locke is here citing a 1603 address to parliament.

commentary on Ruth, asserts that Naomi is a tender motherly type whose motivation in trying to get Orpah and Ruth to turn back is due to her love for them, her concern that they not be disadvantaged or put in harm's way. Yet Bernard asks, considering the religious merits of a journey from Moab to Israel, from idolatry to worship of the true God, '*whether Naomi did well, to perswade them to returne*?'[44] And in response he subordinates his realist hermeneutic of tenderness to the pastoral wisdom of testing the constancy of converts. Naomi becomes a model for ministers 'in these deceitfull dayes' who can learn from her to 'trie before we trust such as offer themselues to come among the godly, as also did our Sauiour'.[45] Eighteenth-century Baptist minister John MacGowan similarly appreciates Naomi's friendly affection for Ruth and Orpah, but suggests that her tone in addressing her daughters-in-law was carefully chosen to test their merit.[46] Indeed, by adopting a friendly attitude, it seems Naomi was able to differentiate herself from her role as a parent to whom obligations are due, and thus allowed Orpah the space to choose her own 'Pagan connections'; but the choice, we are told, is one that proves her 'unworthy of celestial felicity'.[47] Naomi similarly tests Ruth and Orpah in works by Increase Mather,[48] George Whitefield,[49] John Gill,[50] Charles Wesley[51]—indeed, it seems a fairly standard reading of the biblical text to have Naomi acting like a minister examining the sincerity of converts.

By contrast, Edwards nowhere hints that Naomi values Ruth's choice over Orpah's, or that she was testing Orpah's religious worth. Because Edwards has essentially democratized the narrative, understanding all three women as companions in sin who must choose whether or not to turn to God, Naomi's response to each woman is (and rhetorically has to be) a neutral, tolerant silence. It is my contention that in this silence Edwards

44. Richard Bernard, *Ruths Recompence: Or a Commentarie Upon the Booke of Ruth* (London: Printed by Felix Kyngston, 1628), p. 45.

45. Bernard, *Ruths Recompence*, p. 45.

46. John MacGowan, *Discourses on the Book of Ruth, and Other Important Subjects* (London: printed for G. Keith, J. Johnson and J. MacGowan, 1781), p. 64 (ECCO).

47. MacGowan, *Discourses on the Book of Ruth*, pp. 69-70.

48. Increase Mather, *Practical Truths, Plainly Delivered* (Boston: printed by B. Green, for Daniel Henchman, 1718), p. 19 (ECCO). Mather also hints that Naomi functions like Christ in the narrative.

49. George Whitefield, *Fifteen Sermons Preached on Various Important Subjects* (Paisley: printed by J. Neilson, for J. Gillies, 1794), p. 87 (ECCO).

50. John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament*, II (London: printed for the author; and sold by George Keith, 1763–65), p. 367 (ECCO).

51. John Wesley, *Notes on the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, 1765), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/ notes.ii.ix.ii.ii.html> (accessed June 5, 2007). See at Ruth 1.15.

creates a pluralistic space in which an ephemeral social order comes into being for the purposes of giving each individual member of that order the opportunity to choose what seems best to each.

Edwards himself, of course, has no doubt about whose choice is best. Because she is neglectful of the opportunities offered her, Orpah is 'unreasonable', 'sottish', 'stupid'.[52] Her idiocy *vis-à-vis* the salvation God is offering is what defines her participation in this ephemeral public sphere, and thus, from Edwards's perspective, she is really not endowed even with the rationality of a child. In another sermon written about the same time, Edwards clarifies that the choice offered by God is between 'heaven only with the self-denial and difficulty that is in the way to it', and 'the world and the pleasures of sin to man not alone, but with eternal misery [at]tached to it'.[53] He continues in the same sermon: 'God has made us capable of making a wise choice for ourselves. He has given man so much understanding, as to make him capable of determining which is best; either to [live] a life of self-denial, and enjoy eternal happiness; or to take our swing in sinful enjoyments, and burn in hell forever. The thing is of no difficult determination.'[54] But in the Ruth sermon, what is more important than her unreasonableness is Orpah's insufficient resolution. Ruth is resolved to follow Naomi and Orpah is not. When it comes to explaining Ruth's resolution, however, all Edwards can say rhetorically is that it is the inverse of Orpah's. In fact, the way Edwards's explains Ruth's choice actually relegates the idea of choice to a tertiary position. The first thing he emphasizes is that Ruth cleaves to Naomi, and the cleaving, Edwards clarifies, depends upon, secondly, her resolution and thirdly, her choice. What matters most is not the careful balancing act of a deliberative democratic moment, but 'a firm and inflexible disposition, and bent of mind to be universal in the use of means'.[55] Naomi's departure is a means to salvation, and Edwards suggests here that those in his community truly committed to conversion will exploit everything and everyone as a means to that end. But Orpah's problem is not that she, like Ruth, is firm and inflexible, nor that she uses the occasion of Naomi's departure as a means to an end, nor that her choice evinces a full determination to seek out union, because in all of these things she and Ruth are sisters. No, the problem is that the object of her resolution, her cleaving, her choice, is Moab and not Israel.

Certainly Edwards is free to argue that one type of cleaving is better than another in consideration of the long-term consequences. And he would

52. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 318.

53. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 96. The sermon is entitled, 'The Unreasonableness of Indetermination in Religion.'

54. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, pp. 98-99.

55. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 313.

undoubtedly want to claim that given those consequences Ruth is, in fact, rational, while Orpah is not. But structurally speaking Ruth and Orpah are equivalent. They are also univocal. The two responses to conversion they represent do not shift and slide over the course of the sermon the way Naomi does. Ruth is always cleaving to Naomi, breaking through the difficulties, moving on to salvation. Orpah is always failing to do the same. Edwards is most definitely aware of the nuanced range of emotional and psychological effects at play in the lives of his congregants as they consider their fates and confront their drastic options, and he is just as fully committed to making sure they embrace the only right choice. But two of the central characters in his little conversion drama—Ruth and Orpah—are not like his congregants: they are flat, black and white, either/or.

Naomi, however, is different. She is both sinner and saint, both practical and spiritual, a site of desire and an agent of choice. And as such she stands out in uneasy, unstable relief against the backdrop of Edwards's Calvinism. She is a pluralist, a deliberative democrat, a woman more committed to the process of complex social negotiations than to any specific ends. In the book of Ruth, of course, Naomi's advice to Ruth and Orpah emerges from her painful belief that 'the hand of the Lord is gone out against' her (Ruth 1.13). She imagines herself, from their perspective, instrumentally: as the source of husbands (which she can no longer supply). And then, even after Ruth stubbornly insists upon rejecting the instrumental in favor of an ethical bond, even after Ruth sticks with her through the difficult journey home to Bethlehem, Naomi can only lament that she is 'afflicted' and is now 'empty' of the 'full'ness once granted her by the Lord (Ruth 1.21).[56] Edwards does not include any of this in his sermon. His Naomi is, if one can put it this way, psychologically healthier, and far more pragmatically focused on the situation at hand, the needs of her small community, and both the possibilities and difficulties of the available options.

### *Naomi's Liberal Project?*

There are several objections one could lodge against this interpretation of Edwards's reading of Naomi. Can one understand Jonathan Edwards, the darling of some contemporary American Christian conservatives, to be advocating what we might consider a liberal, pluralist, even secular project? The immediate answer should probably be no, but I am not the first to

56. Irmtraud Fischer argues, partly because of this and similar moments in Ruth, that Naomi is insufficiently a feminist character in what is arguably one of the Bible's most pro-woman books. See her 'The Book of Ruth: A "Feminist" Commentary on Torah?', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 24-49 (31).

think of Edwards's political theology in nearly progressive terms. Gerald McDermott has referred to Edwards's 'incipient egalitarianism and its connection with Revolutionary [that is, American Revolutionary] consciousness'.[57] McDermott was drawing on over twenty-five years of scholarly reflection upon Edwards's politics, reaching back to Alan Heimert who, in *Religion and the American Mind*, claimed that 'the spokesmen of the early American democracy' were Edwards's 'ideological heirs'.[58] I am not interested in tracing such a genealogy here, and perhaps, ultimately, it is not really necessary to do so. In this study I have tried to read Edwards's Ruth sermon somewhat against the grain, and in conjunction with otherwise unconnected concepts from political theory, in order either to recover or construct democratic possibilities in the person of Edwards's Naomi.[59]

Perhaps more problematic are the specific political paradigms adduced for this study. John Rawls' work has been criticized for failing adequately to consider the role of religious and other deeply held commitments in the construction of political identity. William Connolly, for example, argues that Rawls' 'reasonable' liberalism cannot account for layered and complex socio-cultural systems, in 'deeply conflictual' cultural traditions; it also

57. McDermott, p. 175.

58. Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 64.

59. The choice of infinitives in this sentence depends upon one's perspective, of course, and it must be noted that Stephen Yarbrough and John Adams, who have written an important study of Edwards's rhetoric, would likely disagree with an essential component of my reading of Edwards's sermon. In their discussion of 'A Divine and Supernatural Light' (1734) they make a distinction between the kind of choice Ruth and Orpah might make as reasonable citizens engaging in the public sphere and the grace-infused choice of the convert. Edwards, they note, insists here, as he will later in his important religious tract on *Religious Affections*, upon a distinction between the 'natural man' and the 'spiritual man'. The natural man can choose rationally given the evidence of the senses, and is even aided in a general way by the Holy Spirit from time to time. As Edwards puts it in the Ruth sermon, 'a natural man may choose deliverance from hell; but no natural man doth ever heartily choose God and Christ, and the spiritual benefits that Christ has purchased, and the happiness of God's people, till he is converted'. He goes on to indicate that Orpah is emblematic of the natural or 'carnal' man, for: 'she was not fully determined in her choice…her whole soul was not in it as Ruth's was' (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 314). Yarbrough and Adams would say that Ruth has not really made a decision; her choice to follow Naomi is not really a matter of choice, but a passionate striving motivated by grace (*Delightful Conviction*, p. 34). And as they put it, 'to accept Grace is…to believe that you need not know and master the world because the world already has a master and he can tell you what you really need to know' (p. 39). However, even if the theology is consistent across Edwards's works, the specific language of the Ruth sermon requires one to take seriously the language of choice. Edwards is clearly asking his congregation actively and resolutely to come to a decision regarding their religious commitment.

excludes religious or asecular players, even though 'every other constituency [besides the Rawlsian secularists] articulates some of its most fundamental presuppositions as it presses its claim in public life'.[60] As far as the Ruth sermon goes, perhaps this is a moot point, if only because religious belief is foregrounded in the public sphere Naomi creates in Edwards's reading. Edwards cites Ruth 1.15 in which Naomi reminds Ruth that Orpah has returned 'unto her gods',[61] all but encouraging—in the total absence of any critical commentary on Moabite religion—the consideration of non-universal 'comprehensive doctrines' as part of the 'overlapping consensus'. But for Rawls, as I noted above, the liberal democratic system must be understood to function across time, 'from one generation to the next'. In the Ruth sermon, Naomi creates a political space which is ultimately ephemeral. This perhaps is an indication that whatever else she may be doing, she is not creating a social order at all, despite her apparently tolerant pluralism. In conjunction with this objection we might also consider the fact that Locke's discussion of the commonwealth requires, in addition to a temporary, transitory legislative function, the executive power to enforce the law.[62] Clearly, when Naomi pauses in the liminal space between Moab and Israel to establish a mechanism for negotiating the interests of Ruth and Orpah, along with her own, she does not imagine the development of an enduring social system, nor does she want (or have the wherewithal), to insist punitively upon obedience. The space she creates is a space of free choice, and not of law at all.

But I would argue that precisely because of this one is all the more tempted to understand Naomi's role in the Ruth sermon politically. Postmodern articulations of the political frequently dovetail, if they also radically depart from, the ideals of traditional liberal political theory. Giorgio Agamben's work on the political, for instance, and especially his idea of 'whatever singularity'—a temporary community that does not affirm identity, in which individuals 'co-belong without any representable condition of belonging'[63]—could be parsed as a modification of Rawls' overlapping consensus. In particular, the latter is dependent upon an 'original position', an understanding of the basics of political life arrived at by

60. William Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 64. Seyla Benhabib attempts to redefine the Rawlsian free political subject in terms of those associational identities and commitments Rawls excludes from playing a determinative role in the public sphere in her book, *The Claims of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 132.

61. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, XIX, p. 308.

62. Locke, in Cohen and Fermon (eds.), *Princeton Readings in Political Thought*, p. 269.

63. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (trans. Michael Hardt; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 84-86.

abstracting rational agents from 'the contingencies of the social world' and by 'eliminat[ing] the bargaining advantages that inevitably arise within the background institutions of any society from cumulative social, historical, and natural tendencies'.[64] Once they are so abstracted, individuals in this thought experiment, Rawls contends, would be able to decide upon how to make the social order function fairly and equitably. Agamben's political vision seems almost to combine a version of this original position with the ephemeral status of the legislative function in the Lockean commonwealth, and as such it helps to elucidate what I have taken to be Naomi's role in Edwards's sermon. Edwards imagines a Naomi who produces new social possibilities politically: first, by foregrounding issues of belonging and identity—the 'contingencies of the social world' of Moab in particular—and thus indicating the difficulties of thinking beyond those specific contingencies; but second, by imagining nevertheless that one can choose one's identity, revealing thereby the constructedness of social and religious being.[65]

Now, Edwards himself, obviously, valorizes Naomi as a type of the convert whose example can lead others to salvation. In this homiletic appraisal, she represents the only right choice. But rhetorically, when the sermon imagines an exchange among the three women, and thus treats them as characters in a narrative rather than merely as types, Naomi is a curiously

64. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 23.

65. There is very little comparative work on Rawls and Agamben. Paul Cefalu (*Revisionist Shakespeare: Transitional Ideologies in Texts and Contexts* [New York: Palgrave, 2004]) discusses Rawls's original position and Agamben's notion of 'bare life' in a political explication of *King Lear* but does not, in the process, note their similarities and differences. It seems to me, however, that one could profitably understand what Cefalu sees as Lear's critique of the Rawlsian position in terms of Agamben's project. In his madness, Lear does descend into something like the 'original position', but he does so in a way that, as Cefalu puts it, insists upon 'context-sensitive empathy, rather than the perceptions of natural laws or rational choices' (pp. 131-34). Heesok Chang, in a review of Agamben's *The Coming Community*, speaks of Agamben's politics in rather similar terms. In the 'original condition' as it appears in Agamben's idea of community—that is, not as a thought experiment but as the experience of political organization stripped down to its basics—'[t]he other always matters to me only when I am taken with all of his/her traits, such as they are. This defining *generosity* of the singular means that *quodlibet ens* ["whatever entity"] is not determined by this or that belonging, but by the condition of belonging itself' (italics mine). See Heesok Chang, 'Postmodern Communities: The Politics of Oscillation', *Postmodern Culture* 4.1 (1993), par. 50. A rather more direct response to Rawlsian political theory, but along the same lines, is that of William Connolly. He envisions, as an ideal, a 'politics of becoming' which, as he puts it in a recent book on pluralism, arises 'out of historically specific suffering, previously untapped energies, and emerging lines of possibility eluding the attention of dominant constituencies' (*Pluralism* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005], pp. 121-22).

ambivalent figure who can be read as the initiator of what Ozick identifies in my first epigraph as an empathetic, tolerant 'democratic polity', one which produces a pluralistic space for choice by refusing an executive function, by treating as optional rather than as constitutive the accidents of identity. And precisely because of this it does not faze her in the least that Orpah and Ruth come to embrace such drastically different paradigms for themselves. The possibility that they might do so is, after all, the whole point of the political situation Naomi has created.

# The Strange Case of the Disappearing Woman: Biblical Resonances in Kafka's Fräulein Bürstner*

Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor

This volume considers lesser-known women in the Hebrew Bible, female figures who not only receive scant attention in the biblical text, but who are rendered all the more enigmatic by what little has been said about them. Even those who go on to cast a long shadow in subsequent interpretation remain largely indecipherable—little known—in their biblical context. Such an ephemeral character surfaces briefly, may say something that is variously interpreted (or misinterpreted) both by those around her and by later exegetes, and then disappears, taking with her any insight into her motivation, intention, and meaning. Job's wife is this kind of an enigmatic woman: she appears for a moment in the prose prologue to the book (Job 2.9-10), conveys advice to her husband that has contested meaning, is barely mentioned in the book's extensive poetic sections,[1] and resurfaces indirectly (if at all) in the epilogue on Job's restoration.

The problem of the enigmatic woman does not belong to the biblical text alone, but has been passed on to modern literature as well. It is precisely on this legacy that I want to focus, for, indeed, the description above also describes a female character in a book that has often been compared to the book of Job, Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. In that work, Fräulein Bürstner, a fellow boarder at Josef K.'s rooming house, makes a long-awaited appearance after K.'s arrest, is misread and mishandled by him, disappears from view for the remainder of the narrative, only to be sighted fleetingly (if at all) at the end of the novel. There is general agreement that K.'s early encounter with Fräulein Bürstner is important, but little consensus on its significance; nor is

* I am grateful to Cynthia R. Chapman, Larry D. Bouchard, and Jennifer L. Geddes for commenting upon early drafts of this essay. Any obstinate errors are my own.

1. Job makes few references to his wife and children in the poetry of the book: Job 19.17-18 and 29.5; 31.9-10; Job 19.10 may be an additional metaphorical reference to his dead children. See Michael D. Coogan, 'Job's Children', in Tzvi Abusch *et al.* (eds.), *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 135-47.

her half-appearance in the final scene any better understood.[2] A Kafka scholar might well point out that the key to comprehending Fräulein Bürstner's role in the novel is to be found through a comparison with other female figures in Kafka's writing. His biographer might derive her significance from a consideration of Felice Bauer, to whom Kafka was twice engaged and whose initials Fräulein Bürstner shares; it is widely noted that Kafka wrote *The Trial* in the wake of a painful confrontation with Bauer.

Instead of these approaches, I offer the perspective of a biblical scholar with literary interests who will argue that the depiction of Fräulein Bürstner is illuminated, first, by looking at the depiction of Job's wife in the biblical text. A comparison between these enigmatic women reveals that each establishes and nuances the character of the male protagonist, particularly in how he interprets and responds to her and in how he yields to or resists her. Job's wife in the biblical text has traditionally been read as a foil for her husband's righteousness; his rebuff of her advice is taken as affirmation that he has passed the satan's testing. Reading Fräulein Bürstner with the example of Job's wife in mind, by contrast, feeds the reader's growing sense that K., unlike Job, is no spotless innocent. The encounter with Fräulein Bürstner provides a key indication of his tendency to act with self-incriminating guilt, a pattern that he will replay in the body of the novel; his failure to read Fräulein Bürstner's meaning, intention, and value signal the larger problem of his inability to assess what is happening to him and his propensity to implicate himself.

Biblical scholars and Kafka critics have long discussed the relationship between *The Trial* and the book of Job.[3] My interest here is not to rehearse or reformulate the arguments for or against reading *The Trial* as a commentary on the book of Job. Neither is it to assert or characterize literary dependency on certain biblical texts; it is enough, for my purposes, to point out that a comparison between the two texts continues to be made. As early

2. Britta Maché, 'The Bürstner Affair and its Significance of the Courtroom Scenes and the End of Kafka's *Prozeß*', *Germany Quarterly* 65 (Winter 1992), pp. 18-34.

3. Both works subscribe, roughly, to the following synopsis: The protagonist suddenly finds himself charged with an unspecified crime which he does not believe that he has committed. Despite his protestations, he cannot uncover the cause for his persecution; his claims of blamelessness fall on deaf ears. His sense of the order of the world is violated by what he considers to be unjust proceedings. Agonized and vilified, furious and fearful, he desperately seeks a way to plead his cause, to clear his name, to establish his innocence, but finds none. For more on the relationship between Job and *The Trial*, see Nahum Glatzer, *The Dimensions of Job: A Study and Selected Readings* (New York: Schocken, 1969); Stuart Lasine, 'The Trials of Job and Kafka's Josef K.', *German Quarterly* 63 (1990), pp. 187-98, and 'Job and his Friends in the Modern World: Kafka's *The Trial*', in L. Perdue and W. Gilpin (eds.), *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), pp. 144-55.

as his 1947 biography of Kafka, Max Brod, who was responsible for preserving the fragments that make up the novel and publishing it posthumously, explored the thematic connections between the biblical Job and *The Trial*.[4] Northrop Frye went so far as to describe *The Trial* as 'a kind of "midrash" on the book of Job'. [5] Still, while we know that Kafka was an interested reader of the Bible and Jewish interpretation, Kafka's letters do not betray a connection between *The Trial* and the book of Job or indeed a specified curiosity in that particular biblical book. Further, to observe how *The Trial* interacts with the biblical book is as much an acknowledgment of divergence as it is of convergence.[6] The opening line of *The Trial*, for example, reads: 'Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested'.[7] If read as commentary—ironic commentary, to be sure—on the Joban prologue, this opener reveals the degree to which the narrative proceeds without the privileged, even objective, perspective of the biblical book; in Job, the audience understands that the origins of Job's suffering have to do with a wager between God and the satan and, further, that Job must be righteous in order to be the subject of the wager.

As for Josef K., however, the cause of his suffering remains a mystery.[8] K., a low-level bank manager, wakes up one morning and is arrested in his boarding house for a crime that is never named. Despite his efforts to understand his situation, the reasons for his arrest are never laid bare, and he is subjected to a legal process that lacks any semblance of transparency. These are also features which resonate with Job's complaint against God. But while the power of the biblical book of Job rests on its premise that Job is righteous and innocent—and therefore that his claims of unjust suffering are valid—*The Trial*'s power comes in the uncertainty, both on the part of the reader and of K. himself, over whether K. is indeed fully without guilt.

4. Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography* (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), pp. 175-180.

5. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1982), p. 195, and *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 42.

6. Robert Alter notes Kafka's propensity for an 'iconoclastic' treatment of Scripture more generally in 'Franz Kafka: Wrenching Scripture', in his *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 63-96 (66).

7. Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (trans. Breon Mitchell; New York, Schocken Books, 1998), p. 3, hereafter referred to as 'Mitchell'; Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (trans. Willa and Edwin Muir; New York: Schocken Books, rev. edn, 1992), p. 1, hereafter referred to as 'Muir'; Franz Kafka, *Der Prozess* (ed. Max Brod; Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 7th edn, 1980), hereafter referred to as 'G'. On the difficulty of translating the opening line of the novel, see pp. xviii-xx in Mitchell's translation.

8. His is a horizontal—not a vertical—world.

While *The Trial* is most often compared to the book of Job, Kafka's writings are more generally biblically fraught. Robert Alter has described in some of Kafka's later writings 'an elaborate network of conflated allusions' to various biblical texts.[9] Accepting this, we might consider the episode with Fräulein Bürstner in light of other biblical episodes with enigmatic women. That is, while the structure of the relationship between K. and Fräulein Bürstner is elucidated through a comparison to Job and his wife, the content of their exchange is additionally clarified by a comparison to the encounter between Joseph and Potiphar's wife; the episode thus read calls into question K.'s judgment and his desire to yield to temptation. Finally, the gravity of the eventual estrangement between K. and Fräulein Bürstner is brought into finer focus by a consideration of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9. In this light, K. appears as the callow youth, lacking in integrity and restraint, who would forsake Woman Wisdom. This kind of conflated reading may be engendered by Kafka's rich characterization, but it is also substantiated by the literary afterlife of minor female biblical characters. In the midrashic imagination, minor female characters were filled out by and affiliated with other women (some biblical, some not). This was, indeed, the fate of Job's wife, who was variously interpreted, renamed, and alternately identified.

To explore how these biblical women shed light on Josef K.'s interactions with Fräulein Bürstner and how their encounter deepens the reader's uncertainty about K.'s character, we will begin by examining those features of the biblical depiction of Job's wife that correlate to facets of Kafka's portrayal of Fräulein Bürstner, specifically her delayed arrival and how she is interpreted by the male hero. Then we will consider Potiphar's wife and Woman Wisdom and how they further illuminate the depiction of Fräulein Bürstner and, as a result, K.

## 1. *Job's Wife and Fräulein Bürstner*

### a. *Anticipated Arrivals*

In the biblical book, the first cue that Job has a wife comes in the mention of the seven sons and daughters who 'were born to him' (ויולדו לו, Job 1.2). Job's wife, however, does not actually appear until late in the prose prologue, after both the first test, in which Job loses everything that he has, and the second in which his body is afflicted. The narrator describes Job's reaction to these horrific events (1.20-21; 2.8), but not his wife's reaction: whatever she feels about the loss of her children and the suffering of her husband goes unsaid. Her lack of presence is conspicuous if we consider that

9. Alter, 'Franz Kafka', p. 63.

Job was modeled on the biblical patriarchs of Genesis, such as Abraham and Jacob, whose wives were an integral part of their blessings and sufferings,[10] but ultimately the late appearance of Job's wife suggests that the unfolding story remains essentially his. The overall literary effect is to train the reader's eye to Job, who is the lone righteous exemplar of the parable.

In Kafka's tale, Fräulein Bürstner does not appear until after the arrest and initial inquiry, although she is already implicated in the narrative when K. is initially questioned by the Inspector in her empty room:

> As K. well knew, this room had been newly occupied not long ago by a certain Fräulein Bürstner, a typist, who usually left for work quite early and came home late, and with whom K. had exchanged no more than a few words of greeting (Mitchell, 12; Muir, 10; G, 14).[11]

Although Fräulein Bürstner is not K.'s wife, she lives in his rooming house and, like Job's wife in the biblical prologue, she is a woman with whom he shares few words. While the late appearance of Job's wife may not be a major feature of the biblical narrative, Kafka's Fräulein Bürstner really is a missing person. The text highlights her absence as K. enters her room: it gives a description of her empty blouse hanging on a window latch, a symbol of the elusiveness that will characterize her throughout the novel (G, 14; Muir, 10; Mitchell, 12).[12]

Fräulein Bürstner's late arrival becomes a matter of increasing concern for K. and creates a twofold problem. First, his intrusion into her empty room and the liberties the Inspector and his guards take in rearranging Fräulein Bürstner's furniture and personal photographs in her absence will become a source of guilt for K. He understands that her privacy has been violated and, thus, later that evening, he awaits Fräulein Bürstner's arrival to apologize to her (G, 23; Muir, 21; Mitchell, 24). Second, her absence provides further occasion for K. to implicate himself; even as he awaits her arrival to apologize for the intrusions, even after he has been assured that there is no evidence of the disturbances earlier in the day, K. again enters her empty room. Her absence, he now suggests to his accommodating landlady, Frau Grubach, says something about Fräulein Bürstner. K. notes, as he surveys the chamber, 'She often returns home quite late' (Mitchell, 25; Muir, 21; G, 23). Her delayed arrival leads to accusations about her

10. See Nahum M. Sarna, 'Epic Substratum in the Prose of Job', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76 (1957), pp. 13-25; Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (Anchor Bible, 15; New York: Doubleday, 1973), pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

11. Unless otherwise noted, the quotations from *The Trial* are from Mitchell's translation.

12. K. underlines the significance of the image when he makes mention of the blouse as he describes for Fräulein Bürstner the events that took place in her room that morning (Mitchell, 31; Muir, 27; G, 29).

character—just as, indeed, the late arrival of Job's wife was sometimes taken by interpreters as further evidence that she was an instrument of the satan, a third test of sorts.[13] But when Frau Grubach, picking up K.'s suggestion, agrees that there may be something improper about Fräulein Bürstner's behavior, K. reacts with fury and an impassioned defense of the missing woman. Frau Grubach seeks to smooth the matter over by asserting,

> 'After all, it's surely in the boarders' best interest to try to run a clean house, and that's all I'm trying to do.' 'Clean!' K. cried through the crack in the door; 'if you want to run a clean house, you'll have to start by giving me notice!' (Mitchell, 25-6; Muir, 22; G, 24).

In his eruption, K. has implicated no one so much as himself. While the absence of Job's wife functions literarily to highlight her husband's singular righteousness, Fräulein Bürstner's absence—and more particularly how K. responds to it—functions to cast doubt on K's character.

b. *Female Foils*

Traditional interpretations of the biblical text have understood the interaction between Job and his wife, at best, as affirmation of Job's integrity and, at worst, as evidence that she is an instrument of the satan. In Job 2.9, Job's wife assesses the situation—the loss of her children, the bodily afflictions of her husband—and says, עדך מחזיק בתמתך ברך אלהים ומת, which the NRSV, in a commonly accepted translation, renders 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.' Her opening question appears to disparage that very quality of her husband in which YHWH took pride—ועדנו מחזיק בתמתו, 'He still persists in his integrity' (2.3). Her imperative—'curse God'—further coaxes her husband to fulfill predictions that the satan made that, once afflicted, Job would curse God (1.11; 2.5).

In the NRSV translation and, indeed, most commentaries, Job's wife is understood to be using the verb ברך, which literally means 'to bless', as a euphemism for 'to curse'. This is not the first time or the last time that ברך is taken for a euphemism in the book of Job: the verb appears six additional times in the prose prologue and epilogue and is translated as a euphemism in each of those instances where, as in Job 2.9, God is the object (1.5, 11, and 2.5).[14] The common reasoning behind this substitution is that in the

13. See, for example, John Chrysostom, *Commentaire sur Job*. I. *Chapitres I–XIV* (ed. Henri Sorlin; Sources chrétiennes, 346; Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1988), pp. 174-91. There is, however, nothing within the biblical text itself that suggests a connection between Job's wife and the satan.

14. In the remaining three instances of ברך, Job 1.10, 21, and 42.12, the verb is used with a different object and translated literally; in 1.10, YHWH is described by the satan as blessing 'the works of [Job's] hands' (מעשׂה ידיו), in 1.21, Job blesses the name of YHWH (שם יהוה), and, in 42.12, YHWH blesses the latter days of Job (את אחרית איוב).

period of the formation and early transmission of the text, articulating the phrase 'to curse God' was considered blasphemous; the ancient audience would have understood what the verb actually meant, that ברך was a cipher for 'to curse'. Translators further defend this translation of ברך in 2.9 as a euphemism by an appeal to Job's subsequent admonishment of his wife: כדבר אחת הנבלות תדברי גם את הטוב נקבל מאת האלהים ואת הרע לא נקבל, which again has been rendered by the NRSV as, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not the bad?' Job's castigation describes her as foolish and her value diminishes in light of her husband's righteousness. The narrator's notice that 'in all this, Job did not sin with his lips' (2.10) is also taken as further objective affirmation of Job's righteousness over and against his wife's.[15] As a result of this kind of reading, Job's wife was described by Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Luther as the Devil's instrument—an interpretation that persists in many modern commentaries.

There are, however, problems with the assumption that Job's wife uses ברך solely as a euphemism for 'to curse'. The scholarly consensus on the existence of such a clear-cut convention in Hebrew is eroding[16] and, further, the verb mighte be better understood as having a trace of both meanings, to curse *and* to bless.[17] Indeed, the book of Job as a whole explores the very meaning of blessing and cursing and the overlap between the two and so it is possible that the words are intentionally ambiguous. I mention these recent attempts to nuance a purely negative reading of the meaning of Job's wife's words[18] to highlight their age-old ambiguity and their ultimate inscrutability. In light of their elusive meaning, it is no wonder that commentators rely so heavily on Job's definite and negative response to establish the character of her words, which function, in turn, to reaffirm her husband's integrity.

15. There was speculation that he sinned 'within his heart' or 'in his mind' (see Rashi, *Baba Bathra* 16a, *Targ. Job* 2.16).

16. The oft-cited examples are Ps. 10.3 and 1 Kgs 21.10, 13. See H. Brichto (*The Problem of Curse*, p. 170) who argues that Ps. 10.3 does not use the verb euphemistically, although that verse is often interpreted that way. On the meaning of ברך in 1 Kgs 21, see Ellen Davis, 'Job and Jacob: The Integrity of Faith', in D.N. Fewell (ed.), *Reading between Texts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), pp. 203-34 (222).

17. Tod Linafelt, 'The Undecidability of ברך in the Prologue to Job and Beyond', *Biblical Interpretation* 4 (1996), pp. 154-72 (156, 160-62).

18. See, for example, Carol A. Newsom, 'Job', in C. Newsom and S. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 130-36 (131-32); Linafelt, 'The Undecidability of ברך'; Claire Mathews McGinnis, 'Playing the Devil's Advocate in Job: On Job's Wife', in Steven Cook, Corrine L. Patton, and James W. Watts (eds.), *The Whirlwind: Essays on Job, Hermeneutics and Theology in Memory of Jane Morse* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 336; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 121-41.

While the interaction between Job and his wife in the biblical text has been construed as further evidence of his righteousness, the interaction between K. and Fräulein Bürstner will be another indicator of K.'s flawed character. While the biblical book proceeds upon the assumption of Job's total righteousness, the interaction between K. and Fräulein Bürstner does not. In Kafka's account, then, assurance that 'one has not sinned with one's lips' would not be understood as an assertion of innocence, but rather as a suggestion that K. may have sinned by some other means. In *The Trial*, Fräulein Bürstner, like Job's wife, will function as a foil; but where the biblical Job's wife has been interpreted as a foil for Job's righteousness, Fräulein Bürstner functions to expose K.'s shortcomings.

While the opening line of *The Trial* asserts that K. may not have done anything particularly or discernibly wrong, as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that he is not without faults. It is through his interactions with Fräulein Bürstner that this becomes increasingly evident. K.'s sense of guilt and his defensive need to maintain his innocence continue to be a source of conflict when, after K. spends a long night of waiting for her, Fräulein Bürstner returns home late at night and the two speak together in her room. He explains, 'Your room was slightly disturbed today, and in a sense it was my fault; it was done by strangers and against my will, and yet, as I say, it was my fault; that's what I wanted to ask your pardon for' (Mitchell, 28; Muir, 24; G, 26). Again, K. treads a strange line between guilt and innocence; in this account he is both the powerless victim and yet takes on the blame. This sense of guilt is present in his assessment of the fairness of the morning's arrest: '… it may have been that the commission of inquiry realized I'm guiltless or at least not quite as guilty as they thought' (Mitchell, 29; Muir, 25; G, 27).

c. *Midrashic Expansions*

The ambiguity and brevity of the appearance of Job's wife invited interpretation and expansion. In the Septuagint (LXX), for example, her words were glossed to convey the situation from her point of view; even so, they did not fully exonerate her. Her character was further elaborated upon in the *Targum of Job* and *Genesis Rabbah*, both of which identify the nameless wife of Job (in the Masoretic text) as Dinah. In the *Testament of Job*, Job's wife was bifurcated; his first wife is Sitis (Sitidos) and his second, Dinah. Sitis, the wife of the test, is an embittered and shamed woman (and a foreigner at that), who dies during the period of Job's affliction. His second wife and the mother of his new set of children is Dinah, the Israelite daughter of the patriarch Jacob.[19] This second marriage resolves the problem

19. *The Testament of Job*'s identification of Job's second wife with Dinah results from the identification of Job with Jobab, the Edomite king of Gen. 36.33; cf. LXX Job 42.17.

of Job's non-Israelite origins. As a whole, these elaborations—in which her character is embellished by affiliations to other women—served to clarify the meaning and significance of Job's wife. Similarly, in *The Trial*, the figure of Fräulein Bürstner is clarified by considering a wider range of biblical women.

## 2. *Genesis 39*

In particular, the substance of Fräulein Bürstner's encounter with K. calls to mind an unsavory episode between Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Reading the scene in her bedroom with Genesis 39 in mind casts doubt on Josef K.'s character: although K. reads her as a seductress, Fräulein Bürstner takes on the role of Joseph, who resists seduction. K., unlike his biblical namesake, sees seduction where it is not and succumbs to it nevertheless.

In Genesis 39, Joseph has risen to the position of overseer of Potiphar's household and is entrusted with all that Potiphar has (39.4, 6, 8). Day after day, Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce him (39.7, 10) and—mindful of his position—he rebuffs her (39.8-9). Eventually, she manipulates circumstantial evidence to frame him for sexual impropriety (39.11-18) and he is thrown into prison (39.20). Joseph acts blamelessly and is punished for it. In *The Trial*, the scene works the opposite way: in his encounter with Fräulein Bürstner, K. is shown to be both presumptuous about his standing in the boarding house and lacking in restraint, the very opposite of the Joseph of Genesis 39. Further, K. attempts to cast Fräulein Bürstner in the role of Potiphar's wife, both by misreading her behavior as seduction and then by suggesting that she falsely accused him of assault. For her part, Fräulein Bürstner, in a move that distinguishes her from Potiphar's wife, will spurn all these efforts.

Their conversation in her room begins with Fräulein Bürstner offering K. a seat, while she remains standing with her hat still on, 'in spite of her talk of fatigue' (Mitchell, 28; Muir, 24; G, 26). K. recounts the strange arrest that morning by reenacting it and, as the hour grows later and later, Fräulein Bürstner begins to wilt. Then she sits on the sofa and he can no longer concentrate, for he is completely 'engrossed' (*ergriffen*) by the vision of Fräulein Bürstner, 'who was resting her head on one hand—her elbow propped on the cushion of the ottoman—while she slowly stroked her hip with the other' (Mitchell, 30; Muir, 26; G, 28). The female gaze of Potiphar's wife so prominent in Genesis 39 has been supplanted by the male gaze of K. He is seduced by what he sees and mistakes Fräulein Bürstner's fatigue for an invitation to take liberties; she says as much when he rearranges the furniture in her room (G, 28; Muir, 27; Mitchell, 30-31). He re-enacts how the Inspector had shouted at him that morning and, despite

the finger that Fräulein Bürstner holds to her lips to remind him to be quiet, he cries out, 'Josef K.!' (Mitchell, 31; Muir, 27; G, 29). In Genesis 39, Potiphar's wife claims to have shouted in self-defense (39.14-15), but K.'s shout serves to announce to anyone in the house that he is in the wrong place at the wrong time. And, indeed, almost immediately, there is a knocking at the door, which is presumed to come from another boarder (G, 28; Muir, 27; Mitchell, 31) and which precipitates even more self-incriminating behavior as K. chooses this very moment to seize the reluctant Fräulein Bürstner's hand. Weary and fearful of the repercussions of being discovered with a man in her room, Fräulein Bürstner sinks back on the cushion, which K. takes as an opportunity to kiss her.[20] In a moment of misguided gallantry, he proposes the following defense:

> I'll accept any suggestion you offer as to why we were together, as long as it's halfway reasonable… If you want it spread around that I assaulted you, that's what Frau Grubach will be told and what she will believe, without losing confidence in me, that's how devoted she is to me (Mitchell, 32; Muir, 28; G, 29-30).

Joseph was the model of restraint, but K. makes unwanted advances toward Fräulein Bürstner. She rebuffs him several times and still he ends up kissing her, '… like a thirsty animal lapping greedily at a spring it has found at last' (Mitchell, 33; Muir, 29; G, 30). Joseph was aware of his power in Potiphar's household, but also of the limits of that power; K. knows that he holds great authority in the house of Frau Grubach, but he has taken this knowledge to an impossible conclusion. He is convinced that he can be in the wrong without Frau Grubach losing confidence in him. Their only similarity[21]—Joseph was framed and K. proposes that Fräulein Bürstner frame him—also indicates difference: Joseph is being framed for a crime that he did not commit and, indeed, is framed precisely because he did nothing wrong. K.'s proposal, however, while it is an exaggeration, is not pure invention but takes his improper advances as a point of departure. It may even be a script of what he guiltily desires; he suggests, after all, that the claim that he assaulted her would be 'halfway reasonable'. The interaction between K. and Fräulein Bürstner, like the interaction between Joseph and Potiphar's wife, establishes K.'s sense of his own integrity—dubious in the case of K., stalwart in the case of Joseph.

20. K. does, in fact, 'sin with his lips' in a way that Job did not.

21. There may be another similarity. In Gen. 39, the reader and Potiphar's wife only know what Joseph feels he should not do, but not what he desires to do; it is possible that he did want to yield to the seductions of Potiphar's wife and, thus, that the tale she tells on him is the articulation of his innermost thoughts. In the scene with Fräulein Bürstner, K.'s plan to protect Fräulein Bürstner may also be a guilty articulation of his own innermost desires.

When the actions of Potiphar's wife are compared to those of Fräulein Bürstner, the reader is given further insight into K.'s questionable behavior. Fräulein Bürstner is the woman who has done nothing wrong but, as she asserts, 'I can take full responsibility for what happens in my room' (Mitchell, 33; Muir, 29; G, 30). She is, in the end, a counter-example to Potiphar's wife: she refuses to manipulate the truth. K. has, however, misread her as the seductive Potiphar's wife, when, in fact, Fräulein Bürstner is more like the biblical Joseph, who will incorrectly be presumed guilty by her fellow borders. In a final twist, as he goes to say goodbye, K. thinks to himself that he wants to call her by her name but does not know what it is. Here we have the hallmark of an enigmatic woman of the Hebrew Bible—namelessness—which Kafka suggests is a result of our hero not knowing who she really is.

### 3. *Woman Wisdom*

There may be one more female figure who sheds light on the significance of the encounter with Fräulein Bürstner: Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9. Throughout the novel, K. is on a quest to understand his situation; at the start, we learn 'it was much more important to him to gain some clarity about his situation…' (Mitchell, 6; Muir, 4; G, 9).[22] Indeed, K. had initially regarded Fräulein Bürstner as 'an advisor' (*einen Ratgeber)*, because she is about to join the clerical staff of a law office and is attracted to the court of law (G, 27; Mitchell, 29; Muir, 26). In their encounter, she offers him a more measured view of his situation. Reading in light of the figure of Woman Wisdom suggests that there is more at stake in their interaction and that more is lost in her disappearance from the text. Her departure emblemizes his inability to discern the wise course of action and propensity toward bad judgment which will lead, ultimately, to his death. His poor judgment is exhibited not simply through his failure to respect her advice and her restraint, but in how he mistakes her for another sort of woman altogether, the kind of woman who would yield to him.

In Proverbs 1–9, the counterpart to Woman Wisdom is the figure of the strange, loose, Outsider Woman.[23] This woman is variously lacking in good

22. See Cyrena Norman Pondrom, 'Kafka and Phenomenology: Josef K.'s Search for Information', *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8 (1967), pp. 78-95; reprinted in James Rolleston (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretation of* The Trial (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), pp. 70-85.

23. The 'outsider woman' is designated by several terms, including אשה זרה in Prov. 2.16; 7.5; זרה in 5.3, 20; נכריה in 2.16; 5.20; 6.24; 7.5. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, 'The Social Context of the "Outsider Woman" in Proverbs 1–9', *Biblica* 71 (1991), pp. 457-73; Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Bible and Literature Series, 11; Sheffield: Almond/JSOT Press, 1985); and Carol A. Newsom,

sense, capricious, sexually promiscuous, loud, and wayward, often foreign, likely Egyptian (and thus reminiscent, particularly in Prov. 7, of Potiphar's wife). While Woman Wisdom and the Outsider Woman embody different poles of Israel's ethical norms, they bear surface similarities (compare 9.1-6 with 9.13-16): both are out in the street (1.10; 7.12),[24] both call out to the passersby, both address the simple callow youth (8.1-3 [Woman Wisdom]; 7.6-12 [Outsider Woman]). But while Woman Wisdom's call is to 'learn prudence, acquire intelligence' (8.5), and her counsel secures life (4.10), the foolish woman 'is loud; she is ignorant and knows nothing' (9.13) and her path leads to death (2.18; 5.5; 7.27). It is the task of the young man to discern the difference, to follow the Wise Woman, and to forsake her counterpart.

The significance of K.'s misreading of Fräulein Bürstner is further confirmed in an episode that Max Brod placed as Chapter 4 of the novel, entitled '*Die Freundin des Fräulein Bürstner*' (G, 67-73).[25] The chapter opens,

> Over the next few days K. was unable to exchange even a few words with Fräulein Bürstner. He tried any number of approaches, but she always managed to avoid him (Mitchell, 235; Muir. 74; G, 67).

Just as Wisdom will elude the foolish youth of Proverbs (1.28-31), Fräulein Bürstner will successfully evade Josef K. and his untoward, grasping advances; his misreading of her intentions—as seduction—has alienated her. She further shields herself by taking in a roommate, Fräulein Montag, described as a 'strange girl' (*ein fremdes Mädchen*, G, 68; Muir, 76; Mitchell, 237). To put it in the biblical idiom, Kafka has made his Woman Wisdom, Fräulein Bürstner, a roommate with the Strange Woman: Montag is German (Mitchell, 236; Muir, 74; G, 67), loud and wayward, vulgar and untoward. K. is distracted by the commotion she creates as she moves her things into Fräulein Bürstner's room:

'Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1–9', in Peggy L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 142-60.

24. As noted above, Frau Grubach describes encountering Fräulein Bürstner twice in a month walking with different gentlemen on 'outlying streets' (*entlegenen Straßen*, G, 24; Mitchell, 25; Muir, 21).

25. In the Muirs' edition, 'Fräulein Bürstner's Friend' remains Chapter 4. Critics have suggested that the episode is better placed immediately after Chapter 1. (See Hermann Uyttersprot, *Zur Struktur Kafkas 'Der Prozess'* [Brussels: Marcel Didier, 1953], and Gary Handler, 'A Textual Omission in the English Translation of Der Prozess', *MLN* 83.3, The German Issue [1968], pp. 454-56.) In the Mitchell edition, the conversation with Frau Grubach and the first encounter with Fräulein Bürstner is in the second chapter of the novel and 'Fräulein Bürstner's Friend' is published as a separate fragment, pp. 235-43.

> For hours she could be seen shuffling back and forth in the hall. There was always some piece of laundry, or a coverlet, or a book that had been forgotten, for which a special trip to the new room had to be made (Mitchell, 236; Muir, 75; G, 67).

He further finds her so distasteful that he asks for his breakfast, largely untouched, to be cleared, because 'it seemed to him as if Fräulein Montag were somehow mixed up with it all, making it disgusting' (Mitchell, 239; Muir; 78, G, 70). But, while Montag and Bürstner are distinguished from one another in appearance and manner, K., in a conversation with Frau Grubach, transfers the designation 'strange' onto Fräulein Bürstner; 'Do you really believe that I would turn against you because of a strange girl?' (Muir, 76; G, 68-69).[26]

The distinction between the two roommates continues to be articulated by their behavior, but instead of K. perceiving Fräulein Bürstner more clearly through the contrast, K. sees her less and less for who she is. While Fräulein Bürstner continues to avoid him, Montag not only makes herself available but arranges a meeting with K. (Mitchell, 239; Muir, 78; G, 70). She asserts not only that she can speak 'on behalf of' her roommate but, indeed, that she can tell K. 'more' than Fräulein Bürstner could (Mitchell, 240; Muir, 79; G, 71). K. ends the meeting by dismissing Bürstner in his mind as 'an ordinary little typist who could not resist him for long' (Mitchell, 242; Muir, 81; G, 72). Reminding him as she does of his failures and given his inability to read her true intentions, it is no surprise that he would dismiss her, but here, again, his reasoning is based on a basic misperception about who she is. And, again, he presumes she will yield to him, while, in fact, she has distinguished herself by resisting his advances.

## 4. *Endings*

The action of the book passes with no further encounter between K. and Fraülein Bürstner until the final chapter, a year after K.'s arrest and a year after his first and only conversation with Fräulein Bürstner. K. has been grabbed by two men, who may have been sent to execute his punishment and who drag him, as he struggles all the while, to his death. Kafka writes,

> At that moment, coming up a small flight of stairs to the square from a narrow lane below, Fräulein Bürstner appeared before them. He couldn't be absolutely sure it was her; there was certainly a strong resemblance. But it made no difference to K. whether it was really Fräulein Bürstner; the futility of resistance was suddenly clear to him (Mitchell, 227; Muir, 225; G, 191).

26. Mitchell translates K.'s second use of the phrase *eines fremden Mädchens* as 'some young woman' (p. 237), although this translation does not alert the reader to the repeated usage of *eines fremden Mädchens* in the passage and the transfer of the designation from Montag to Bürstner.

In the end, K. cannot recognize Fräulein Bürstner with any clarity. On one level this is not surprising, since he had already misread her as seductress and as a loose woman, when her behavior resisted that characterization. Who she really is or who she might be recedes behind his own misjudgment, which has plagued him throughout the novel. But, on another level, his reaction to her now is markedly different: he yields to the men, now walking with them, to follow her so as 'simply not to forget the reminder she signified for him' (Mitchell, 227-28; Muir, 225; G, 191-92). He thinks to himself,

> …the only thing I can do now is keep my mind calm and analytical to the last. I've always wanted to seize the world with twenty hands, and what's more with a motive that was hardly laudable.

Even though he cannot know for sure that it is she, even the hint that it may be Fräulein Bürstner is evocative enough to reveal to him that wisdom has been elusive in the year of his trial.

In the biblical account, Job's wife is not mentioned again in the final scenes of the book, the prose epilogue (Job 42.7-17); she is neither rebuked by God, as Job's friends are, nor is she described as being restored, as Job is. Again, this absence is conspicuous; she has gone from being unnamed to unmentioned. It has been argued that she is implicitly rewarded by virtue of her husband's righteousness through the birth of yet more children—but this may be making the glass too full by half.

If we now consider the biblical texts in light of Kafka's depiction of the encounter between Fräulein Bürstner and K., we might reflect further on what the absence of Job's wife at the end of the book signifies. First, our reading of the depiction of Fräulein Bürstner helps to underscore the negative effects of the trial on those closest to K.—her standing is compromised by his actions—reminding us of what the biblical text barely mentions, the losses that Job's wife suffers not only in the divine test but in the course of her husband's trial. She embodies the familial dimension in his suffering, even if Job and the biblical narrator keep that story largely out of view, leaving it for later interpreters to fill out.

We might consider, too, how Job's rebuke of his wife reflects on his character. Again, the traditional reading asserts that Job's response—and his capacity to see through his wife's advice—indicates his righteousness and his stalwart resistance to the temptation of cursing God. In *The Trial*, however, K.'s responses to Fräulein Bürstner seem explicitly designed not to cohere with what she says and who she is: he makes an elaborate show of yielding to her sexual temptations, when, indeed, she seeks not to tempt him, but, rather, to avoid him. He says she cannot resist him, when, in fact, she does an excellent job of remaining elusive. Read through Kafka's lenses,

Job's rebuke of his wife, then, would seem to be not simply a misunderstanding of his wife's enigmatic words, but would, in fact, indicate that he is quick to misjudge her. The dominant interpretive tradition of the book of Job has sought to make his wife's meaning coherent with his response, while, according to *The Trial*, the point may be that he has mistaken her meaning altogether. The biblical hero, Job, becomes for Kafka one who cannot be trusted to reflect her meaning accurately.

The mysterious half-appearance of Fräulein Bürstner at the novel's end, then, may be read as a final wry comment upon the disappearance of Job's wife: Job's wife, a comparative reading suggests, was driven away by his hasty and pejorative misinterpretation of her. This is why enigmatic women remain enigmatic, in Kafka's world: because they are misread by male characters. Like Job's wife, Bürstner's first name and who she is will not be known, least of all by K; he thought she was a seductress, like Potiphar's wife, and he thought she was a loose woman. For him, she remains, on a visceral level, like that empty white blouse hanging in the window of her room: a figure of his own projection. Driven away by K.'s failure to see her for who she is, her departure signifies to K. and to the reader the loss of knowledge, of wisdom—another brushstroke in Kafka's picture of the despair of K.'s world.

The absence of Job's wife in the book's epilogue thus provides a dark counter note to the restoration. Her situation and her future are unclear, leaving it open for the author of *Testament of Job* to deduce that she died and was replaced by another, better wife in the new order. Her shadowy presence at the close of the biblical book suggests survival and a new generation, but simultaneously bears witness to the woman barely known, who will remain that way, and to the pain and the suffering, which are not so readily overcome.

# Ms Job and the Problem of God: A Feminist, Existentialist, Materialist Reading*

Erin Runions

Like Qohelet, the poem of Job begs to be read through the central insights of Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*: that the world is dense and strange, filled with absurd contradictions and suffering; and that living honestly requires accepting the tension of the absurd, without trying to ease discomfort or pain through recourse to a higher organizing principle.[1] Yet the narrative frame of Job seems to disallow such a reading. The frame of the book of Job aims precisely to resolve the contradictions of life through recourse to a just God, who makes clear the story's meaning. As Bruce Zuckerman so compellingly argues, the frame tames the critique of the poem, makes it palatable, and brings it into the realm of canon.[2] It is very tempting to relegate the frame to a redactor, and argue, in the vein of Camus, that the Job poem recognizes that any transcendent idea that resolves the absurd contradictions of life is simply a way out of any honest engagement with the pain of living.

But the little woman of the book, Job's wife—whom I will call Ms Job[3]—does not allow me so easily to dismiss the book's narrative frame. Attending

* I am grateful to Dave Diewert and Robert Culley for helpfully engaging with a draft of this essay, and of course to both (influential former professors of Hebrew and biblical literature) for having taught me to read in the first place.

1. For readings of the contradictions of Qohelet through Camus, see Benjamin Lyle Berger, 'Qohelet and the Exigencies of the Absurd', *Biblical Interpretation* 9 (2001), pp. 141-79; Eric S. Christianson, 'Qohelet and the Existential Legacy of the Holocaust', *Heythrop Journal* 38 (1997), pp. 35-50; Michael V. Fox, 'The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986), pp. 409-27, and *A Time to Build and a Time to Tear Down: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Matthew J. Schwartz, 'Koheleth and Camus: Two Views of Achievement', *Judaism* 35 (1986), pp. 29-34.

2. Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent: A Study in Historical Counterpoint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

3. Job's wife, like other wives in the Hebrew Bible, is not given a name. Traditionally she has been called either Job's wife, or Mrs Job, both of which I find a little too proprietary. Jobine and Jobette are possibilities that are not particularly compelling. Peter Hawkins's suggestion of Jobah is probably linguistically best, but still, for the sake of quick signification, I have opted for Ms Job.

to the brief exchange between Job and Ms Job at the beginning of the text (Job 2.9-10) perhaps organizes the book's problem of God a little differently. My preference to side with Job against God[4] notwithstanding, I have found that when Job and Ms Job's interaction is taken a little more seriously as a framing device, Job does not come out looking so good—partly because he is so ill-tempered with Ms Job, and partly because this exchange gestures toward larger issues in the book. The conversation between the Job and Ms Job points to some of the socio-economic language in Job; that language causes me to think a little differently about the non-answer that God gives to Job in the final speeches of the book.

Ms Job asks Job if he is still strong in his integrity, and then tells him to curse God and die (2.9). Or does she? In fact, as many scholars have pointed out, literally she says, 'bless God and die', but ברך ('bless') has always been taken in this case as a euphemism for curse.[5] Understood this way, her legacy has been one of misogyny. Male interpreters from Augustine[6] until Victor Sasson in 1998 have accused her more or less of being the devil's gateway.[7] These interpreters have seemed to take their cue from Job himself,

4. Here I side with Edward Greenstein, who asks why scholars persistently side with God against Job, even while identifying with Job, in 'In Job's Face/Facing Job', in Fiona Black, Roland Boer, and Erin Runions (eds.), *The Labour of Reading: Desire, Alienation and Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honour of Robert Culley* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 301-17 (301-303).

5. For an excellent discussion of the uses of this verb in Job and critical examination of the traditional understanding of it as a euphemism, see Tod Linafelt, 'The Undecidability of ברך in the Prologue to Job and Beyond', *Biblical Interpretation* 4 (1996), pp. 154-72.

6. Augustine compared Job's wife to Eve in many places; for example, *Exposition of the Psalms*, Exposition 2 of Psalm 29; *Sermons I*, Sermon 15A; *Sermons III*, Sermon 81.

7. Victor Sasson, 'The Literary and Theological Function of Job's Wife in the Book of Job', *Biblica* 79 (1998), pp. 86-90. For excellent discussions of various misogynist theological and literary interpretations of Ms Job, see Rachel F. Magdalene, 'Job's Wife as Hero: A Feminist-Forensic Reading of the Book of Job', *Biblical Interpretation* 14 (2006), pp. 209-58; Claire Mathews McGinnis, 'Playing the Devil's Advocate in Job: On Job's Wife', in Stephen L. Cook, Corrine L. Patton, and James W. Watts (eds.), *The Whirlwind: Essays on Job, Hermeneutics and Theology in Memory of Jane Morse* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 336; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 121-41; Zefira Gitay, 'The Portrayal of Job's Wife and her Representation in the Visual Arts', in Astrid B. Beck *et al.* (eds.), *Fortunate the Eyes that See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of his Seventieth Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 516-23, and Ann Astell, 'Job's Wife, Walter's Wife, and the Wife of Bath', in Raymond-Jean Frontain and Jan Wojcik (eds.), *Old Testament Women in Western Literature* (Conway, AR: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1991), pp. 93-106. Gitay also discusses the counter example of William Blake's illustrations of Job, which are much more sympathetic to Ms Job.

who rather rudely tells Ms Job that she is speaking like one of the foolish women.

In protest, a number of feminist and pro-feminist biblical scholars have tried to counter misogynist ways of reading this text.[8] I would like to join their ranks. Many of these feminist readings attempt to give Ms Job some agency, reading her as influencing Job in various ways: playing devil's advocate,[9] wisely bringing about Job's acceptance of God's perspective,[10] or challenging Job to stand up to God's torture.[11] Others read Ms Job's words as having something to do with the book's larger question about the nature of the universe,[12] or the nature of God.[13] My own reading follows this latter strategy, and is strongly informed by Tod Linafelt's suggestion that Ms Job's ambiguous words set up the central problem of the text—what he calls, 'the [sublime] theological ambivalence of the book of Job…in which the undecidability of attraction and repulsion, of life and death, of blessing and curse, leaves one in a stupor'.[14] Indeed, the undecidability of the book's view of God, signaled at the outset by Ms Job, leaves readers in the realm of the absurd.

While these feminist reinterpretations rightly take Ms Job's words as their focus, I would like to scrutinize Job's response to her, though I will return to her words later on. Job rebuts Ms Job saying, 'You are speaking like one of the foolish ones', or, given the gendering of the adjective, 'one of the foolish women' (אחת הנבלות, 2.10). Job's churlish response to Ms Job's advice may not say as much about her as it does about him (opinions being

8. Here I join the company not only of Magdalene and McGinnis but of Carole A. Newsom, 'Job', in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), pp. 130-36; Ellen van Wolde, 'The Development of Job: Mrs. Job as Catalyst', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 201-21; Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), and 'Wife of Job', in Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer (eds.), *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 293; David J.A. Clines, *Job 1–20* (Word Biblical Commentary, 17; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), pp. xlviii-xlix.

9. McGinnis, 'Playing the Devil's Advocate in Job'.

10. Van Wolde, 'The Development of Job'.

11. Magdalene, 'Job's Wife as Hero'.

12. David Penchansky, 'Job's Wife: The Satan's Handmaid', in David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt (eds.), *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right: Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), pp. 223-28.

13. See Linafelt, 'The Undecidability of ברך', and Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible*, pp. 147-48.

14. Linafelt, 'The Undecidability of ברך', pp. 170-71.

windows into politics); but it causes me to ask what might be at stake in the insult. As later interpreters have made clear, for them, the nature of women is revealed. Foolishness becomes an ontological quality for women.[15] But for the text of Job, something else might be at issue, something more pertinent to the socio-economic concerns at the time of writing or editing.

Here I am picking up on the materialist reading that Clines gives in his commentary on Job, but I move it in a slightly different direction.[16] Clines suggests that the book as a whole favors the wealthy, and, as part of the wisdom literature, probably came from elite educational or court circles.[17] I wonder whether, along with its criticism of mainstream wisdom, the book also offers a critique of certain way of thinking about wealth. As I will argue, when the Jobs' narrative dispute is considered alongside related language in the poem,[18] it reflects rather badly on Job's character and suggests a negative assessment of his socio-economic conduct and aims; moreover, that critique carries with it the hint of another—that of theological justifications for social hierarchy. Historical context, in particular, the hypothesis of a

15. Walter L. Michel, *Job in the Light of Northwest Semitic*, I (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1987), also argues that foolishness equals noisiness. In his commentary on 2.9, he quotes Prov. 9.13, 'a foolish woman is noisy' (p. 33), presumably to apply to Ms Job, despite the fact that the term for foolish in Prov. 9.13 is different from that in Job 2.9.

16. For my purposes, I am using the term 'materialist' rather loosely, to mean a focus on the relationship between the text and the socio-economic context. As will become evident, I am influenced by Marxist literary criticism, but space does not permit an in-depth consideration of this methodology here.

17. Clines, *Job 1–20*, pp. lii-liv.

18. Here Newsom's argument in *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) for a dialogic relation between the various parts in the book is helpful for conceptualizing the relationship between prologue and poem. I am suggesting that the frame points to the poem, which then talks back to the frame. It can be argued that in the text's final version, the frame and the poem reinterpret each other in the light of their final socio-economic context, no matter whether the prologue/epilogue is considered to predate the poem, as by Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Anchor Bible 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), pp. xxii-xxiv; to be a literary reconstruction of an older folktale intended to accompany the poem, as argue Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation and Special Studies* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978), p. xxx; Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 35-36; and Clines, *Job 1–20*, p. lviii; or to be later redacted together with the poem, as by Avi Hurvitz, 'The Date of the Prose-Tale of Job Linguistically Reconsidered', *The Harvard Theological Review* 67 (1974), pp. 17-34 (31); Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent: A Study in Historical Counterpoint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 25-84; and Lester L. Grabbe, *Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah*. I. *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2004), p. 102.

Persian context for the final editing of Job,[19] further illuminates what appears to be a socio-economic conflict in the poem, and with it, God's non-answer to Job, and the significance of Ms Job's undecidable statement about God. Ultimately, taking the Jobs' interaction seriously leads me to a reading in which Job and God indict themselves, bringing me back to Camus, and, as it happens, Ms Job.

### *The Foolish Ones*

The construct phrase 'one of the foolish women' in Job's insult to Ms Job makes it sound like he is referring to a specific group of people. But who are they? Perhaps use of the term 'foolish' in the poem (30.8) provides a clue.[20] There, Job describes the 'children of a fool' (בני נבל), who, he says, are mocking him. Job is quite hostile to these 'children of a fool', describing them as those who were not even good enough, in his old life, to have been given a place with the dogs tending his flocks. They are those who scrounge

19. A number of scholars have posited the Persian period as the context for the final editing of Job, including, Jon Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 164, 205-20, and Hurvitz, 'The Date of the Prose-Tale of Job', pp. 30-33, or have pointed to what they read as Persian elements in the book, for example, Harmut Gese, 'Wisdom Literature in the Persian Period', in W.D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism*. I. *Introduction: The Persian Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 189-218, and Grabbe, *Yehud*, pp. 244, 345. Others note the legitimate difficulties in dating the book, including both archaisms and Aramaisms (Pope, *Job*, pp. xxx-xxxvii; Habel, *The Book of Job*, pp. 40-42; Clines, *Job 1–20*, pp. lvii-lix). Many are willing to argue for a date somewhere between the seventh and second centuries BCE (Clines, *Job 1–20*, p. lvii), or in a slightly narrower range, between the sixth and third centuries BCE; for example, Matitiahu Tsevat, 'The Meaning of the Book of Job', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1996), pp. 73-106 (101-102); Pope, *Job*, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii; David Noel Freedman, 'Orthographic Peculiarities in the Book of Job', *Eretz-Israel* 9 (1969), pp. 35-44. Freedman has used lexical and orthographic analysis to argue for a seventh- or early sixth-century Northern Israel diasporic context for the authorship of Job, though James Barr, in 'Hebrew Orthography and the Book of Job', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 30 (1985), pp. 1-33, argues, against Freedman, that the irregularities in the spelling of the MT cannot be used to establish dating.

20. Few scholars make much of this lexical connection in Job 2 and Job 30, though some make moves in this direction: Habel notices that 'Job insults his wife by comparing her with members of this class' (*The Book of Job*, p. 418); and Clines suggests that the use of 'foolish' in Job's words to Ms Job, indicates that he was essentially telling her that she spoke like a 'low-class, irreligious woman' (*Job 1–20*, p. 54). Some ignore it entirely, as for instance E. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (trans. Harold Knight; London: Thomas Nelson, 1967 [1926]), who boldly states, 'The נבלות are foolish women who have neither brain nor moral principles' (p. 20)!

for food and live in the wilderness; they are like thieves who have been expelled from their community (30.1-13). Through this intratextual connection, the 'foolish women' (הנבלות) to whom Job compares Ms Job are associated with this impoverished group. Whatever else one might say about the use of the term 'foolish' (נבל) to describe this group of people in Job 30,[21] it does seem to be inseparable from a description of socio-economic conditions. Might this lexical association imply that Job's insult to Ms Job is triggered by a larger economic sensitivity?

Certainly, Job's words about the children of a fool indicate that perchance he is feeling a little raw not only because of losing his family and having to scrape his boils with pottery, but also because of the loss of his wealth, status and security. As is often noticed, Job's lament about his humiliation by the children of a fool is emphasized by his preceding words in ch. 29, where he tells of his one-time wealth, philanthropy, and high status in the community. He describes his previous life of stature in almost comic terms. His steps were bathed in curds, oil flowed from the rocks around him; when he went into the public square, young men hid, and elders and princes covered their mouths. He was clothed in righteousness, he was eyes to the blind, feet to the lame; he was father to the poor. Job seems to paint an anime version of his former self: larger than life, all surface, in Technicolor. Now in this time of his distress, those younger and of lower rank than him mock him (ch. 30). Job's oration indicates that he is quite outraged about having been made lower than the low.

Job accuses this impoverished class of people of actively working against him, as if they were in some way to blame for his demise. Curiously, and I will come back to this point, his description of the children of a fool moves from calling them the rabble of the land to associating them with the chaos by which God overwhelms him throughout the book, metaphorized through roadworks and tempests. In 30.13-14, Job's description of his adversaries implies a situation of embattlement, whereby the enemy tears up roads and comes bursting through walls. At the same time, the language also connotes a flood, wherein water pours through a breached dyke. Indeed, the double coding of language in 30.14 transitions between the language of battle

21. W.M.W. Roth, 'NBL', *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1960), pp. 394-409, uses this passage to help him make the case that the term נבל means something like outcast (402); David J.A. Clines in *Job 21–37* (Word Biblical Commentary, 18a; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), argues for a meaning of 'outcast' or 'low-class' (p. 947). Gordis argues that the phrase here means 'nameless lowly born' (*The Book of Job*, p. 332). Habel makes the connection between this group and the economically victimized group described in ch. 24 (see below), but he seems to take a primarily moral view of the term נבל, since he blames the economic misfortune of the children of a fool on their baseness (*The Book of Job*, p. 419).

tactics on the part of the children of a fool (30.12-13), and the language of the storm, initiated by God (30.15):[22]

> On my right hand a brood is rising, they freed my feet [tripped me] and cast paths of their calamity upon me. They [the children of a fool] tear up my path. For my ruin they profit. There is no one to restrain them (30.12-13).
>
> Like [as through] a wide breach they come [like an enemy force, like water],[23] under [along with] devastation[24] they roll[25] (30.14).
>
> Terrors are turned upon me. My nobility chases like the wind. [Or, alternately: You (masculine singular) chase my nobility like the wind]. Like a dark cloud my salvation passes over (30.15).

Verse 15 picks up the intimations of the storm imagery in v. 14, as God/the wind sweeps away Job's nobility and his salvation (presumably God) passes by. Thus, very subtly, the tempestuous (bulldozing/rolling) actions of the children of the fool are associated with the storm-like actions of God.

### *Rescuing or Reviling the Poor*

A contradiction thus emerges in chs. 29 and 30, between Job's idyllic reverie about his past benevolent responses to those less fortunate than he and his present hostile thoughts about the poor and their plot against him. I would like to probe this contradiction a little, in a roughly Jamesonian way, reading the contradictions in the text as a manifestation of the text's inability to smooth over the unavoidable contradictions in the economic world of its production.[26] Why would Job shift so suddenly between remembrance of rescuing the poor and reviling them? Might the Disney version of

22. Pope notes that the figure is not entirely clear (*Job*, p. 195); Clines opts in favor of the battle imagery throughout (*Job 21–37*, p. 951). Habel takes the subject of the actions here not to be the children of a fool, but rather the terrors of v. 15 (*The Book of Job*, p. 418).

23. The noun פרץ ('breach') is battle imagery used both to describe a break in a wall (Amos 4.3; 1 Kgs 11.27; Neh. 6.1; Isa. 30.13), or a dyke holding back water (2 Sam. 5.20; 1 Chron. 14.11).

24. The noun שאה ('devastation') elsewhere describes the effects of a storm, and may contain such overtones here as well; see Zeph. 1.15; Ezek. 38.9; Prov. 1.27.

25. The verb גלל ('to roll') is only found in the hithpalpel stem here, but in other stems can represent either the action of water (Amos 5.24, niphal), or the event of being crushed in an attack (Gen. 43.18, hithpoel).

26. Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). For discussions of Jameson and biblical studies, see David Jobling, 'Deconstruction and the Political Analysis of Biblical Texts: A Jamesonian Reading of Psalm 72', *Semeia* 59 (1992), pp. 95-127, and Roland Boer, *Jameson and Jeroboam* (Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

Job's former wealth be hiding something? Does not the fact that such hostilities so easily emerge (on both sides) suggest that Job's memories might gloss over conflicts already on the boil? Might it point to a social situation in which there are hard feelings between the rich and the poor, in which philanthropy is also replete with revulsion and antagonism?

Certainly his friends think that maybe all was not as Job remembered in his glowing self-portrait. Earlier in the poem, Zophar strongly hints that Job oppressed the poor, by foreclosing on their houses (20.18-23). Eliphaz accuses him of not having helped the poor (22.6-9) and suggests that maybe he should give away some of his gold (22.24-25). The friends indicate that maybe Job is not blameless when it comes to financial wheeling and dealing. Of course the friends cannot be fully trusted, we know, but at the end of the day, the text, via God, does not accuse them of being wrong about Job, only in having spoken incorrectly about God (42.7-8) (not that God can be trusted entirely either). The point is that the text does not really indicate whether the friends are right or wrong in their assessments of Job.

In response to his friends, Job indignantly avers his righteousness as superior to God's with respect to caring for the poor. He answers the accusation of Eliphaz in ch. 24 by saying that it is God, not him, who doesn't care about the poor. There, he gives a long description of the social injustices that make the poor poorer: moved boundary stones, stolen flocks, foreclosures on the widows' and orphans' livestock. Those who go naked and hungry have to forage for food, even as they harvest it for others; they are cold and wet, without a roof over their heads; their children are taken as pledges. But God does nothing (24.1-12). Job's charge against God seems both strong and fair (even into our contemporary moment). Moreover, in his postcard picture of himself in ch. 29 (and also in ch. 31), Job tells his friends that he (in stark contrast to the God he has described in ch. 24) is kind to widows and orphans, to the poor and the needy, to those without clothes and food. But perhaps he is exaggerating just a little; because arguably, he is fairly contemptuous of the children of a fool, who are defiant in their poverty. Indeed, his hostile words toward this impoverished group belie his philanthropic claims. He seems not to care that they are without the basics. Caring for the poor and the widow seems to be fine for Job, as long as they pay him the proper respect—as long as they run and hide when they see him.

Yet perhaps the contradiction in Job's dual attitude toward the poor is not as striking as all that. Carol A. Newsom, writing on Job in the *Women's Bible Commentary*, helpfully explains the seeming disjunction between chs. 24 and 29–30 as a result of the moral order of a patriarchal, hierarchical world. As she puts it, 'Job's former solidarity with the poor seems to have evaporated before his perception that his honor—the most precious

possession a man could have in his moral world—has been trampled by those without honor'.[27] What is most important to Job is not the lives of the poor, but rather the moral codes buttressing the patriarchal, hierarchical order, of which he was the exemplary ruler: righteous and rich. In the words of Newsom, 'The moral world of ancient patriarchy…placed a high value on alleviating the distress of the poor and weak, but for the most part it could not conceive of the fundamental changes in the organization of society that would prevent the powerlessness and destitution that so often struck the widow and the orphan'.[28] Further, as Clines argues in an essay specifically on the economic issues outlined in ch. 24, Job's description of economic oppression ultimately points the finger at his own social class. Those who cause harm for the poor 'have the wealth to lend money at pledge, and they have the power and authority to remove landmarks. They must be the chieftains and ruling class—in a word, Job's kind of people.'[29] Job is precisely the kind of landowner for whom workers might 'reap in a field not their own' (24.8), or 'go naked and unclothed, starving even as they carry the sheaves' (24.10). In Clines's words, 'The real wrong in Job's eyes, however, is not the social evil, but God's indifference to it'.[30]

At the end of the day, as Newsom and Clines point out, perhaps there is no real disagreement between chs. 24, 29, and 30; but the text's staging of the seeming contradiction raises an eyebrow at the argument about wealth and righteousness upon which Job stakes his claim. Though the text as a whole works very hard to problematize the connection between righteousness and social status, Job himself does not dispute such a connection. To be sure, Job challenges God's response to the poor in ch. 24; but his words in chs. 29–30 show that he does not seriously change the terms of the debate. He seems to think that his former wealth, prestige, and righteousness were of a piece, just as the children of a fool's misery mirrors their wickedness. Job does not appear to be refuting the argument that righteousness should be rewarded by wealth, but rather to be suggesting that on the basis of this formula, he is righteous and God—who clearly does not play by these rules—is not.

Given that so much of Job is a parody—a parody of genre, a parody of belief, a parody of the friends, and a parody of God—it may not be farfetched to suggest that the poem also presents a parody of Job himself.[31]

27. Newsom, 'Job', p. 134.

28. Newsom, 'Job', p. 134.

29. David J.A. Clines, 'Quarter Days Gone: Job 24 and the Absence of God', in Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal (eds.), *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 242-58 (247).

30. Clines, 'Quarter Days Gone', p. 249, italics original.

31. See Zuckerman, *Job the Silent*, and Katharine J. Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1991).

Chapters 29–30 may gently poke fun at Job, as bathed in cream, revered by all, blameless in his dealings with the poor, yet clearly hostile toward some of them, and terrified of their chaos. The poem subtly satirizes Job's denial of the economic conflicts in which he in fact must participate by virtue of his wealth—conflicts which would indeed be likely to produce a laughing response to his demise by those impoverished in the economic system.[32]

### *Social Hierarchies and the Problem of God*

Of course, as has been discussed so often, the problem of God in Job is that God's speeches do not deal with moral questions at all, including the question of how to treat the poor. God has very little to say about either poverty or wealth in the speeches from the whirlwind. Much has been said about the startling way in which God is chiefly concerned with the animals and with processes of creation, and not really with humans at all. God seems to change the terms of the debate, entirely. As Norman Whybray so aptly puts it, the final speeches draw a 'picture of God as universal creator and maintainer of the world that goes beyond the narrow concept of [God] entertained by both Job and the friends, who saw [God] as a God whose only duty is to dispense justice to human beings'.[33]

There is one short passage in the midst of God's speeches (40.8-14), however, that seems at least to deal with social hierarchy. God challenges Job to put the proud and the wicked in their place, and to re-establish himself. God says: 'Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor… Look on all who are proud, and abase them. Look on all who are proud, and bring them low; tread down the wicked where they stand' (40.10-12, NRSV). God's words seem to describe precisely what Job was longing to do in chs. 29–30 when he conjured up the dignity and eminence of his glorious past and cursed the pride of the children of a fool. Yet God also seems to think Job cannot really do anything about social hierarchy, since the section concludes with God's assertion that God will

32. In Elsa Tamez's essay, 'From Father to the Needy to Brother of Jackals and Companion of Ostriches: A Meditation on Job', in Ellen van Wolde (ed.), *Job's God* (Concilium, 4; London: SCM Press, 2004), pp. 103-11, Tamez reflects on Job's harsh words about the poor from a Latin American perspective. To her mind, these words are a betrayal of any solidarity with the suffering of the poor that Job might have acquired. The laughter of the children of a fool is therefore to be expected. She writes, 'These wounding sentiments from Job show that he has only half crossed the threshold in his body but not his mind and his outlook. Perhaps this is why the inhabitants of this world, the one seen as dark, make fun of him—because laughing at him is like laughing at the decadence of a world of light far from the wretched' (p. 109).

33. Norman Whybray, *Job* (Readings—A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 158.

only acknowledge Job's power if he successfully completes the Herculean task of destroying all those beneath him (v. 14). These words, though characteristically slippery, hint that Job's desire for a reinstated social hierarchy is misplaced and unattainable. Furthermore, as Matitiahu Tsevat puts it, if Job were able to fulfill this task he would confirm the viability of a system of retribution: 'His criticism of God would be justified, not only by the demonstration of his own prowess, but, more important, by the demonstration that retribution is at least potentially operative in the world and need only be actualized'.[34] Rather, Tsevat argues, God's speeches shows that 'divine justice is not an element of reality'.[35]

Oddly, God goes directly on to speak in awe-inspiring terms about the Behemoth (to the end of ch. 40) and the Leviathan (through ch. 41). Why would this short section about the impossibilities of controlling social hierarchy be inserted into this long text about mythical chaos monsters, which, as many scholars have pointed out, seem to be glorified? What if we take seriously Newsom's reading of these speeches in *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* as somehow equating God to chaos?[36] She points out the 'curious level of identification between God and Leviathan' in ch. 41,[37] and also that in ch. 38, God is represented as a 'mid-wife who births the sea [chaos] and wraps it in the swaddling bands of darkness and clouds'.[38] This suggests to Newsom that these images challenge the passion of humans for order and moral order, that God is not bound by the need for human order, that God is wholly other.[39] God's chaotic order seems to trump the need for social hierarchy required by Job.[40]

Recall, moreover, that Job has related the children of a fool to the chaos of the tempest and the floodwaters. Here the poem subtly aligns God with the children of a fool against Job. It thus implies, in another way, that the social hierarchies upon which Job insists are not legitimate. Where the book opens with Job chastising Ms Job for subverting the social order by acting like one of the foolish ones, behaving beneath her class dignity; here at the

34. Tsevat, 'The Meaning of the Book of Job', p. 99.
35. Tsevat, 'The Meaning of the Book of Job', p. 100.
36. Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
37. Newsom, *The Book of Job*, p. 251.
38. Newsom, *The Book of Job*, p. 244.
39. Newsom, *The Book of Job*, pp. 252-53.
40. William Whedbee, 'Comedy of Job', *Semeia* 7 (1977), pp. 1-39, also sees God's metaphors of mythical chaos monsters as challenging Job's need for order; as such, these monsters represent a comic, festive, and playful response to Job's accusation (pp. 23-26). Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), picks up on Whedbee's reading, and uses the chaos of the speeches from the whirlwind as a way of challenging theologies constructed on strict notions of order, which, in her view, enable dominion (pp. 4-7, 124-40).

end of the book, God seems to say, 'Social order is not my concern'. If anything God seems to side with the children of a fool, and therefore with Ms Job.

### *Historicizing*

Attending to the historical context may help to sort out what stand the book might be taking on social hierarchy. Let me consider the socio-economic/ moral language I have been discussing in the context of the return from exile in Persian Yehud. Though it is difficult to date Job with any finality, it makes sense to understand it as a text that responds in some way to the exile.[41] If the poem of Job is a text trying to cope in some way with the destruction of the temple and the exile, the frame at least seems to contend with the issue of restoration. Let me consider, for a moment, that in the Persian context of the final editing of the book, the conversation between Job and Ms Job represents the varying views of the exiled elite, trying to come to terms with their relative lack of wealth on their return.

Here I take my cue from the Marxist feminist work of Gale A. Yee, who argues that the representation of women in wisdom literature (the book of Proverbs) reflects the clash between Persian-supported returning exiles and those who had stayed behind on the land.[42] Yee points to the Second Temple scholarship on the conflict between the returning exiles and those who had worked the land in the interim—those who were not particularly devoted to the religious practices or property rights of the returning elite.[43] If Ezra–Nehemiah is to be believed, when the elite returned, they came into conflict on both religious and economic terms with those to whom they returned. Ideologically analyzing Proverbs 1–9, Yee compellingly suggests that the strange woman found there functions as a figure of 'alien'

41. John W. Wright in his essay, 'A Tale of Three Cities: Urban Gates, Squares and Power in Iron Age II, Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Judah', in Philip R. Davies and John M. Halligan (eds.), *Second Temple Studies*. III. *Studies in Politics, Class and Material Culture* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 340; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 19-50, suggests that the scene of the city gate, about which Job brags in ch. 29, points to an Iron II configuration of the city (pp. 24-25), which changes substantially in the neo-Babylonian and Persian period. By the Persian period the city gate no longer functioned as a civic space, but rather as a militarized space; the square became the civic gathering place (pp. 41-47). This view is consistent with the notion that Job dreams of a pre-exilic elite status in ch. 29, but it does not necessarily indicate anything much about dating, except that the author would be aware of the pre-Babylonian role of the city gate.

42. Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

43. For example, Hans Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah during the 'Exilic' Period* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), and Grabbe, *Yehud*, pp. 285-88.

indigenous women, that is, women who were ethnically or socio-economically different from the returning *golah* (exile) community.[44] Yee concurs with scholars who argue that attempts to regain control over the land were played out in regulations on marriage.[45] In other words, when the exiles returned they initially married into the community that had remained behind; but in order to maintain control over the land thus gained, marriage with 'indigenous women' was disallowed. In opposition to the strange woman of Proverbs 1–9, the woman of valor in Proverbs 31 becomes the idealization of the proper wife taken from the *golah* elite. Yee's work is helpful in that it shows the way in which (moralized) images of women are deployed in Proverbs to work through the social and economic issues of the Persian period.

Job's marital dispute may be read as similarly representative. Consider Job's response to Ms Job in the light of a returning *golah* community, struggling to regain its former elitism in an overall economy that was, as Charles Carter has argued, relatively poor.[46] Ms Job—like women in general—would be understood as central to regaining and retaining wealth, to secure class privilege for the *golah* elite.[47] Although Ms Job appears to be a deposed woman of valor,[48] Job's words to her are suggestive of a mindset concerned with holding on to the nostalgic fiction of class status. He compares her to

44. Grabbe points out that a strong rhetorical link is made in Ezra–Nehemiah between whoever remained on the land and the vilified original Canaanite peoples of the land (*Yehud*, p. 286).

45. See Harold C. Washington, 'The Strange Woman of Proverbs 1–9 and Post-Exilic Judean Society', in Tamara C. Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards (eds.), *Second Temple Studies*. II. *Temple Community in the Persian Period* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 175; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 217-42; and, in the same volume, Daniel Smith-Christopher, 'The Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13: A Study of the Sociology of Post-Exilic Judean Community', pp. 243-65, and Tamara C. Eskenazi and Eleanore P. Judd, 'Marriage to a Stranger in Ezra 9–10', pp. 266-85.

46. Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 294; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 285.

47. For the role of women's dowries in establishing wealth in the Persian period, see Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2001), pp. 49-58.

48. Certainly the *Testament of Job* portrays Job's wife (called Sitidos) in terms that would recall the stature of a noble wife: 'Who is not amazed that this is Sitidos, the wife of Job? Who used to have fourteen draperies sheltering her chamber and a door within doors, so that one was considered quite worthy merely to gain admission to her presence? Now she exchanges her hair for loaves! Who had camels, loaded with good things, that used to carry (them) off to the proper places for the indigent—for now she gives her hair in return for loaves!' (25.1-3), cited in Susan R. Garrett, 'The "Weaker Sex" in the *Testament of Job*', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 (1993), pp. 55-70 (62).

those who threaten that former status: the foolish women, and the related children of a fool. Job's vitriol toward Ms Job and this group of impoverished people, in spite of his avowed love of the poor and the orphan (possibly only those *within* the *golah* community), might represent the hatred of the returning elite for those seen to have taken their land. He does not want to be associated with those described in Job 30.5 as, 'Driven out from society; people shout after them as after a thief'. They might be those who cared little for social hierarchy, those who 'stole' the *golah* community's land, who were eventually forced back into lower economic standing, but who, one might imagine did not quietly accept the *golah* community's claims to superiority.[49]

In the context of exile and loss of status, the standard reading for Ms Job's advice ('curse God') makes some sense. She might be angry at the injustice of the exile and her loss of status on return, so urges cursing God. In this case, as Ilana Pardes points out,[50] Job more or less agrees with Ms Job because, as the poetry makes very clear, he is angry, and comes fairly close to cursing God himself. But why then does he rebuke her? Is it because, as Pardes suggests, 'his wife dares to say something which is on the verge of bursting through his own mouth'?[51] Or maybe he recognizes the truth of her challenge to his integrity (which, as we have seen, may be slightly dodgy, in economic matters).

And yet, it is not clear whose perspective the text favors, whether that of the *golah* community, or that of the children of a fool/foolish women. Given Job's fear of the chaotic, tempestuous children of a fool and God's reverence for that same kind of chaos, it is possible that the text subtly contests the rigid boundary staking and socio-economic climbing of the *golah* community. God's non-answer from the whirlwind seems to work against order and hierarchy; it points out that there is no real relation between righteousness and societal circumstance, including lost or restored wealth. If God has

49. It should be noted that the evidence for class conflict is debated. Kenneth Hoglund argues, based on an archeological pattern of increased rural settlement sites in Judah during the Persian period, that all people—those returning and those left behind—would have been reassigned to the rural areas by imperial decree, so there would be no class conflict ('The Achaemenid Context', in Philip R. Davies [ed.], *Second Temple Studies. I. Persian Period* [Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 117; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991]), pp. 54-72 [58-60]). This a scenario with which Grabbe agrees (*Yehud*, pp. 287-88). Carter, on the other hand, argues against Hoglund's claim. He examines new data that provide little evidence of brand new settlement due to imperial policy, since 75 per cent of Persian settlements also contain Iron Age II strata (*The Emergence of Yehud*, p. 248). Yee (*Poor Banished Children of Eve*, pp. 143-44) follows Carter.

50. Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible*, p. 148.

51. Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible*, p. 145.

little to do with social standing, as the whirlwind suggests, then neither the exile nor the *golah* reclamation of wealth can be claimed as God's purpose.

In this light, Ms Job can be seen to stand in for a minority view within the new collectivity of Yehud. She might agree with God's eventual non-answer to Job, that God really has nothing to do with wealth, status, and comfort—so she advises Job to bless God (i.e. accept things) and die in peace (or even accept a kind of social death). She, like God—and presumably the wisdom school that produced Job—is changing the terms of the debate, rejecting attempts to re-establish rigid class and ethnic boundary lines. She could be read to suggest, as God does in the speech from the whirlwind, that Job's particular kind of elite integrity is not tenable or even desirable—it has nothing to do with the order of the universe. For one such as Job, so thoroughly convinced of his rightful economic place within a system of cosmic moral hierarchy, such advice might well provoke insult, precisely because it represents a position too closely allied with the alternate (read taunting) religious views of the 'indigenous'.

### *Absurd Endings*

In a sense, the text's critique of Job and his wealth—initiated by the exchange between Job and Ms Job—becomes a critique of the God of the prologue and epilogue, the God who makes wagers and does justice, according to some kind of moral order. Even though Job's wealth is restored at the end of the book—usually read as vindicating both Job and God—the poem disputes, in advance, the suggestion that this ending has something to do with Job's righteousness. In the light of the speeches from the whirlwind and the poem's parody of Job, the epilogue means nothing. The social order that is re-established in the epilogue is made irrelevant by the revelation of God's actual priorities and concerns. Job's restoration in the final chapters of the book is tainted by the parody of Job as a duplicitous caricature of himself in ch. 29. Job's final wealth can only become more of the same: patronizing pomp and circumstance. Moreover, the poem's subtle vindication of the children of a fool as divinely chaotic also seems to wink, a little, to God's threat to do folly (נבלה), or something morally disgraceful (as the term is usually understood), to Job's friends.[52] If God does not make much of social hierarchy, then neither this threat, nor Job's returned wealth (and God's agency in returning it) has any moral significance. Effectively, the God of the poem renders the God of the epilogue irrelevant.

52. For the lexical range of נבלה, from sexual abuse, to other 'unruly and disorderly' transgressions of social or religious norms, see Anthony Phillips, 'Nebalah—A Term for Serious Disorderly and Unruly Conduct', *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975), pp. 237-41.

Along these lines, Ms Job's words become the perfect framing device for an existentialist reading of Job. If neither God nor humans are the guarantors of the moral or social order, and if God is not so very concerned with the affairs of humans, then who needs God (or a contradiction-resolving notion of God)? It does not matter what Ms Job advises, because Job's God (and the formula it represents) is inconsequential—cursing or blessing God will make no difference. In this sense, Ms Job ends up saying something much like the fool (נבל) of Psalms 14 and 53—'There is no God'—but the Job poem takes her side and counters the Psalms' traditional 'affirmation of God's lordship over human destiny'.[53]

So, in fact, I end up with Camus, reading with the narrative frame, rather than in spite of it. The poem shows us the absurd contradiction between the epilogue's verdict and the social and cosmic realities that contest that verdict.[54] The poem glosses Ms Job's undecidable words, by putting into question the righteousness of Job's elitism, and God as a guarantor of that elitism. Where the undecidability of her words models, in Camusian fashion, the absurd tension between hope and despair, the poem refuses to resolve it by aligning God with a particular class interest. Rather, to her frustrated aphorism, 'Bless/curse God', the poem adds, 'What does it matter?' It argues that there is no relationship between daily circumstance and the world that transcends it;[55] that is, there is no connection, in the eyes of the poem, between the daily class conflicts of the postexilic world and the cosmic order. The text thus refuses God as an arbiter of class conflict. What is left to the reader is the task of mediating that conflict, fully aware of its absurdity.

53. Robert A. Bennett, 'Wisdom Motifs in Psalm 14 = 53', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 220 (1975), pp. 15-21 (19).

54. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (trans. Justin O'Brien; New York: Vintage, 1991 [1942]), p. 29.

55. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p. 30.

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