Longing for Egypt and Other Unexpected Biblical Tales

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This book is dedicated to my sons, Jacob and Jonah. Long may they continue to be utterly dependable and full of surprises.

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Acknowledgements

As readers will quickly see, the pages of this book are filled with the names of family, friends, teachers, students and colleagues who have helped and inspired me over many years. I am indebted to them all, and to many others I have not mentioned. I had intended to use this page to record in one place as many of these names as I could but, on 25th November 2007, life intervened. Between every line of this book is the name of someone who, from the moment I met him in August 1981, aroused in me only the most straightforward feelings of love, attachment, respect, trust and admiration: Peter Lipton (1954–2007). I do not write that in the throes of grief over my husband's untimely death of a heart attack while playing squash, or because his loss has given me licence to look back at my marriage through rose-tinted glasses. It is simply the case that, much as I am drawn to complexity, my love for Peter was utterly uncomplicated, as was most of our life together. When friends learned that we met at Oxford, they often asked if we first saw each other at a lecture or between the shelves of the Bodleian Library. But we met in a North Oxford hair-dressing salon, where I was working as a receptionist to pay off my student overdraft before figuring out that I could dispense with it more quickly if I became a bond-trader. Our academic interests and intellectual perspectives were poles apart. Peter learned to read Hebrew at his New York City synagogue's Religion School, but preferred not to understand the prayers he said at synagogue in Cambridge every week—other priorities drew him there. Left to my own devices, I would read little else but the Bible and its commentaries in their original language, and I have devoted years of my life to learning and teaching Hebrew texts. Peter was among the most brilliant analytic thinkers I have ever encountered; abstract ideas make me panic, especially when attached to letters like X and Y. I learned about the world through literature; Peter learned about it in his weekly Ethics class at the Ethical Culture School. He did not read novels, and the only poem he knew—Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'—was one I had trouble taking seriously until I heard our son Jacob recite it at the end of his father's eulogy. Peter related to the world philosophically; I internalised a philosophical idea once—Menachem Fisch interpreting *Kohelet* as a Popperian constructive skeptic. Peter liked all things in moderation; I love lots of things in extreme. Peter would not readily concede that there might be anything beyond human understanding;

I cannot imagine that there is not. Peter could tell jokes—brilliantly; I start laughing long before I reach the punchline. I never learned to pay a bill; he never learned to boil an egg. I longed to go out and see the world; he loved the view from his desk. But inexplicably, miraculously, our differences entailed deep compatibility—in desires, values, friends, our love for our children, our way of life. Our son Jonah reported in his eulogy for his father that he never heard his parents argue. We never did. I did not for one moment take that for granted, and it was an extraordinary source of strength for me, and I think for Peter. I miss him quite excruciatingly every day, and can barely contemplate the idea that I could live as long without him as I lived with him. More than most married people I know, and despite carving my own distinctive path in the end, I can honestly say that I could not have become who I am had I not been my husband's wife. Peter's contribution to this book (the parts he had read, and the parts he had not) cannot be measured and cannot be over-estimated. It breaks my heart that I cannot thank him in person.

Cambridge, July 7th 2008.

Abbreviations

b.	Babylonian Talmud
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
Exod. R.	*Exodus Rabbah*
Gen. R.	*Genesis Rabbah*
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series
Lam. R.	*Lamentations Rabbah*
Lev. R.	*Leviticus Rabbah*
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Version (Tanakh)
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
SBL	Society for Biblical Literature
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Supplement to *Vetus Testamentum*

Introduction

Tales of the Unexpected

Longing for Egypt comprises seven chapters devoted to seven distinct but overlapping biblical themes. Each chapter take as its starting point a widely or even universally held assumption or interpretation: (1) Exodus is an account of liberation from persecution and oppressive slavery; (2) God is a perfect, idealized king; (3) the Bible is inherently critical of other religions, their rituals, their followers and their gods; (4) the Bible shows little practical interest in the sins of non-Israelites; (5) the biblical conception of time is linear; (6) obedience is the ideal and anticipated response to biblical law, and (7) the Bible is inherently critical of foreign women. In each case I try to show through close readings of the Bible, sometimes through a rabbinic lens, that the textual reality is more complex. Many of my final conclusions about stock biblical ideas were unexpected even to me. Far more importantly, though, I think I show that the Hebrew Bible remains to this day replete with unexpected tales.

Although these headlines may not reveal it, all seven chapters concern Israelite self-identity and relations with non-Israelites. Arguably the Bible's most sensitive subject, for its authors and for present-day readers, identity and 'the other' are the topics most likely to generate complex texts on the one hand and, on the other, simple readings that conceal historical, ideological, textual, psychological, sociological, ethical and theological complexity. I choose interpretative complexity because it produces what seems to be the best account of the ancient text. As it happens, though, I think it also addresses the needs of many contemporary readers, religious and secular, whose own lives are deeply complex and for whom interpretative simplicity can produce readings that range from unhelpful to alienating.

If the formation and maintaining of identity in relation to 'the other' is a thread running through this book, so, quite differently, is intercession. In 1996 I read an article that changed the way I read the Bible: Yochanan Muffs' '"Who will Stand in the Breach?" A Study of Prophetic Intercession'.[1] I believe it is true to say that I have engaged with it, intellectually or

1. Chapter 1 in his *Love and Joy. Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), pp. 9-48.

emotionally or both, every day since then. The nature of its influence on my work on intercession, here and elsewhere,[2] is self-evident, but it played a significant role in shaping my thoughts on less obviously related topics such as the biblical perception of Time and, especially, Law as a vehicle for quasi-erotic engagement. It is a source of lasting regret to me that insecurity prevented me from writing to Yochanan Muffs, whom I have never met, to tell him that I had not even begun to understand the complexity, significance, and sheer all-pervasiveness of intercession in the Bible and its rabbinic interpretations until I read his seminal article.

The theme of identity and 'the other' collides with intercession at several points in this book. Their interaction is at the heart of Chapter 4, which considers the options for intercession on behalf of non-Israelites, and it underlies Chapter 5, which explores among other temporal concerns the role of time management in replacing the Temple in the Diaspora or its functional equivalent (the land under foreign rule).

Not the Spanish Inquisition[3]

As a rule, complexity has turned out to be the source of whatever I have found unexpected in the Bible. I suppose I should have expected that. On the one hand, the Bible is bound to be a complex text. Its composition history is positively baroque, comprising texts that emerged over more than a thousand years in vastly different geographical and political situations, offering diverse opinions on almost every conceivable subject, and reflecting at least two highly developed and strikingly disparate worldviews. On the other hand, the notion of complexity is distasteful to many of the faith

2. D. Lipton, 'Early Mourning: Petitionary versus Posthumous Ritual in Ezekiel 24', *VT* 56 (2006), pp. 185-202.

3. *Chapman*: *I* don't know—Mr Wentworth just told me to come in here and say that there was trouble at the mill, that's all—I didn't expect a kind of Spanish Inquisition.

[JARRING CHORD. The door flies open and Cardinal Ximinez of Spain [Palin] enters, flanked by two junior cardinals. Cardinal Biggles (Jones) has goggles pushed over his forehead. Cardinal Fang (Gilliam) is just Cardinal Fang]

Ximinez: NOBODY expects the Spanish Inquisition! Our chief weapon is surprise… surprise and fear…fear and surprise… Our two weapons are fear and surprise…and ruthless efficiency… Our *three* weapons are fear, surprise, and ruthless efficiency…and an almost fanatical devotion to the Pope… Our *four*…no… *Amongst* our weapons… Amongst our weaponry…are such elements as fear, surprise… I'll come in again. [The Inquisition exits]

Chapman: I didn't expect a kind of Spanish Inquisition. (Monty Python, 'The Spanish Inquisition')

communities from which most biblical scholars and their readers have emerged. These communities overlook the Bible's complex composition history, seek unity and even 'truth', and are prone to identify simplicity, not complexity, as the source of the Bible's extraordinary capacity to educate and inspire. So although there are strong reasons to expect the Bible to be complex (its composition history, the diverse political and geographical circumstances in which it was composed, and the different worldviews it reflects), it is easy to see why this complexity is so often overlooked (the faith communities who read the Bible favoured an anti-historical approach, sought unity and were uncomfortable with composition history). These two factors combined mean that, paradoxically, we should always expect the unexpected—this is the Hebrew Bible, after all, not the Spanish Inquisition.

Contextualizing Comments

The readings offered here are, for the most part, non-traditional and even quirky, though by accident, not by design. I could have underlined their unexpectedness and idiosyncrasy by contrasting them with readings that are more mainstream or conventional, but I was keen to avoid the defensive position entailed by setting myself up constantly against scholars with whose opinions I differ. It was emphatically *not* my aim in writing this book to show that my colleagues have been reading the Bible incorrectly, and that I alone have done it justice. For me, at least, exegesis is not a competitive sport! A dramatic consequence of this is the small number of footnotes in *Longing for Egypt*; I suspect that footnoting scholars whose opinions differ from mine would have doubled the length of the book. To take two examples, I claim in Chapter 1 that assimilation is a central theme of Exodus, running alongside the traditionally emphasized theme of persecution and oppressive slavery. As far as I know, no other scholar makes this claim, and indeed most scholarship points in the precisely the opposite direction. In Chapter 6, I argue for Law as vehicle for quasi-erotic engagement whose enemy is obedience. I am aware of no other scholar who make this claim for biblical law (though Daniel Boyarin for one has demonstrated amply the potential for erotic engagement over *halakhah*[4]), and little would be gained by listing scholarly views that are readily available elsewhere and are in any case well-known to most readers. More importantly, I want to avoid the misleading impression that I am interpreting in conscious opposition to mainstream scholarship. I think that my readings have emerged with awareness of scholarly directions not taken and gaps that might be

4. *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

filled, but primarily from the activity of studying texts with colleagues and students in a variety of contexts. For example, the possibility that Exodus addresses assimilation occurred to me during a Bar Mitzvah lesson with Sam Andrews; thank you, Sam, for stimulating me with your probing questions to think outside the Exodus interpretation box. Similarly, the idea that law demands erotic engagement occurred to me while preparing a sermon to be delivered at Selwyn College chapel on the designated Old Testament reading of the day, the opening verses of Psalm 119.

Rabbinic Reading Glasses

Several chapters of this book make extensive use of rabbinic material, mostly midrash and talmudic narratives. I devote considerable time and space to these texts mainly because I see them as a valuable lens through which to view the Hebrew Bible. The rabbis were unsurpassed close readers, who appear to have known the Bible more or less by heart, and were capable of creating vast and ornate webs of verbal and thematic connections of which modern readers can only dream (even when aided by computer search programmes). I do not assume continuity between the Bible and the rabbis; on the contrary, the rabbis frequently engage with biblical texts precisely because they recognize the absence of continuity. Yet I find that rabbinic theological 'thinking' resonates closely with my own. To stay with the two examples I have already given, the rabbis see assimilation everywhere in the Exodus story, and, needless to say, they recognize the abundant scope for erotic engagement in legal discourse—and almost everywhere else for that matter! The rabbinic perception of divine kingship has no doubt contributed significantly to the development of my own thinking on that subject.

Naturally, I am sensitive to rabbinic issues and agendas, and fully aware of the pitfalls of taking as authoritative, say, the Mishnah's interpretation of levitical laws. Biblical scholarship will not have been served well in the long-run by scholars who fail to clarify for readers, and perhaps also in their own minds, precisely how they are reading, evaluating, and using rabbinic commentaries in relation to the Bible. Having said all that, I confess a deep attraction to the rabbinic texts I analyse here; they have frequently become the object of my gaze as well as its lens. This was certainly the case with my investigation of Abraham in *Genesis Rabbah* 39.1-3, which began as a prelude to a discussion of intercession on behalf of non-Israelites, but was diverted by an unexpected discovery about the precise nature of Abraham's intercession in these texts. Finally on this matter, while my reading of rabbinic texts has frequently suggested a new perspective on biblical material, or confirmed my intuition that a particular avenue was worth exploring, clearly I could have discarded the rabbinic analysis that led me to it, or published it separately. I decided against that for two reasons. First, as I

hinted above, the use of rabbinic interpretation in biblical scholarship is, in my opinion, crying out for a more careful and systematic methodology. It is not my aim to fill that gap in the literature, but nor do I want to expand it by concealing my workings, as it were. Second, I hope that some of my analyses of rabbinic texts will interest readers whose exposure to them is generally limited to (often misleading) brief citations. I can see that rabbinic commentaries cited out of context can appear fanciful, far-fetched and irrelevant. In my own experience, however, this almost invariably reflects not the implausibility of their readings, but rather our inability to comprehend them. For example, the midrashic claim that many Israelites died in Egypt and that these were the 'Jews' who had *changed their names* seems bizarre or uninteresting when our starting point is that Exodus is a story of liberation. Yet if assimilation is identified as a central theme of Exodus, then the midrashic fiction that some Jews in Egypt changed their names goes straight to the heart of the matter.

Intertextuality

Rabbinic reading strategies have certainly reinforced my natural inclinations, honed by a first degree in English Literature, to read intertextually. So, no doubt, have the contexts in which I so often encounter biblical texts—regular shabbat Torah readings, Festival readings, *haftarot*, and *megillot* juxtaposed, intertwined and endlessly transformed in the Jewish liturgical annual cycle. Intertextuality is the *sine qua non* of some of the analyses I offer here (most notably, my reading in 'Bezalel in Babylon' of the so-called anti-idol polemics in Isaiah 40–55 in relation to the Exodus tabernacle narratives, and my interpretation of the problems posed by Ezra's foreign wives in light of Noah's flood); it has generated some surprising conclusions. More generally, though, I am interested in the connections between texts, and the mechanisms that link them, a significant one of which is the figure of Abraham. Abraham features centrally in two chapters of this book, and I interpret him in both cases as the first Jew, not in the traditional sense of the first monotheist, but as a classic border-crosser. In using that term, I have in mind Yuri Slezkine's thought-provoking and provocative *The Jewish Century*:

> All these groups were nonprimary producers specializing in the delivery of goods and services to the surrounding agricultural or pastoral populations. Their principal resource base was human, not natural, and their expertise was in 'foreign' affairs. They were the descendants—or predecessors—of Hermes (Mercury), the god of all those who did not herd animals, till the soil, or live by the sword; the patron of rule breakers, border crossers, and go-betweens; the protector of people who lived by their wit, craft, and art…

> …One could choose to emphasize heroism, dexterity, deviousness, or foreignness, but what all of Hermes' followers had in common was their mercuriality, or impermanence. In the case of nations, it meant that they were all transients and wanderers—from fully nomadic Gypsy groups, to mostly commercial communities divided into fixed brokers and traveling agents, to permanently settled populations who thought of themselves as exiles. Whether they knew no homeland, like the Irish Travelers or the Sheikh Mohammadi, had lost it, like the Armenians and the Jews, or had no political ties to it, like the Overseas Indians or Lebanese, they were perpetual resident aliens and vocational foreigners (the Javanese word for 'trader,' *wong dagang*, also means 'foreigner' and 'wanderer,' or 'tramp'). Their origin myths and symbolic destinations were always different from those of their clients—and so were their dwellings, which were either mobile or temporary. A Jewish house in Ukraine did not resemble the peasant hut next door, not because it was Jewish in architecture (there was no such thing) but because it was never painted, mended, or decorated. It did not belong to the landscape; it was a dry husk that contained the real treasure—the children of Israel and their memory. All nomads defined themselves in genealogical terms; most 'service nomads' persisted in doing so in the midst of dominant agrarian societies that sacralized space. They were people wedded to time, not land; people seen as both homeless and historic, rootless and 'ancient'.[5]

Slezkine's interests are historical and anthropological—the mass movement of Jews from the countryside to the cities following the Russian Revolution, and their subsequent contribution to the rise of 'modernity'. My interests are predominantly theological, temporal and textual: Abraham's role as go-between, that is, intercessor, between God and the nations; his role in crossing historical borders to connect Jews living in different time zones; and, of paramount significance to me, his function as a fearless traveller between texts and times, who blurs their borders as well as crossing them, and must 'do business' within them all.

What to Expect

Chapter 1, ' "The Heart Enticed": The exodus from Egypt as a response to the threat of assimilation', moves away from the standard view that oppressive slavery and persecution were the problems to which the exodus from Egypt was the solution. Its starting-point is that Exodus was written by people with their own land and two accounts of how they came there: on the one hand, they were driven by a persecuting enemy; and on the other they went to avoid assimilation. The question of which explanation to privilege is critical, particularly regarding the place of 'outsiders' in their own land. I

5. Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

draw on detailed textual evidence, especially concerning attitudes towards Egypt and slavery in Exodus and beyond, to support the unexpected notion that the Exodus authors feared loss of identity more than annihilation at enemy hands, and that they explored this anxiety in relation to the threat of assimilation in Egypt. Jews and Christians have used the Exodus story to promote liberation, but liberation is problematic as well as inspiring. Liberators can be taken for imperialists and, more importantly, liberation requires enemies, and self-identification as victims. Resisting assimilation, on the other hand, requires no external enemy and can be represented positively: we have values worth promoting and preserving within a national infrastructure. This is the message of Exod. 12.43-49, in which eligibility to eat the Passover offering—strikingly open to 'resident aliens' and 'slaves'—is conceptualized as the basis for membership of a just society.

Chapter 2, 'God's Influence on Influencing God—A right royal puzzle' calls for a more nuanced reading of the Bible's language and imagery of kingship. What I found unexpected here was that the biblical writers appear to have seen kingship both as a locus of God's power and as a vehicle through which God allows himself to be influenced. This strategy for influencing God requires consideration of some negative aspects of kingship; alongside reassuring accounts of an idealized ruler are narratives that evoke an unfamiliar, all-too-human king—the unpredictable ancient Near Eastern tyrant. Through a close rereading of these texts, I try to show that the boundaries between divine and human kingship are more blurred than the standard account suggests, and that a constructive theological value emerges once this is acknowledged. The idea of God as king does not merely inspire awe and command respect for a deity who is essentially remote. It holds out the hope that God is receptive to the needs of humanity, and offers a mechanism—namely, texts that sketch divine imperfection in the guise of flawed human royalty—by which God could be approached, challenged, and even corrected.

Chapter 3, 'Bezalel in Babylon? Biblical Attitudes to Other Religions', re-examines the widely held belief that Bible is inherently hostile to other gods, their religions, and their worshippers. I reached the unanticipated conclusion that although the Bible criticises Israelites who worship other gods, it is essentially indifferent to other religions and their own followers. This should not have been so surprising; religious practitioners are notoriously preoccupied with the details of their own religion, yet uninterested in the internal dynamics of others. An apparent Hebrew Bible exception is the author of Deutero-Isaiah's so-called anti-idol polemics (40.18-20; 41.6-7; 44.9-20; 46.1-7), which do seem to engage in detail with Babylonian religion. I suggest that Deutero-Isaiah's primary target was not Babylonian idol-makers, but Israel's priestly cult. I identify a previously unexamined set of anti-priestly polemics, concentrated in and

around Deutero-Isaiah's idol texts and alluding to the tabernacle narratives (Exod. 25–31 and 35–40). I suggest that Deutero-Isaiah's criticisms of idolatry function as veiled polemics against the Priestly worldview, whose material culture was incompatible with his notion of transcendence. A particular concern was the prediction of future events. For Deutero-Isaiah, divine intentions are revealed not through signs in the external world or human representations of it, but through the historical experiences of a personified Israel. I try to show that he emphasizes this contrast by reshaping Exodus patterns in the light of *mis pî*, the Babylonian mouth washing/opening ritual for 'enlivening' idols (see, e.g., Isa. 41.17-20). Deutero-Isaiah's God, then, is not quite beyond compare. Counter-intuitive as it may seem, he is like a Babylonian idol-maker with a difference: Israel is his living idol. My reading, if correct, suggests that even the Bible's most emphatically monotheistic texts are not inherently hostile towards other gods, provided they are not worshipped by Israelites, or to other religious practices, provided they can be 'safely' transformed without compromising Israelite identity. And with regard to the latter, we are dealing with internal dialogue and dispute, not interfaith relations.

Chapter 4, 'The Limits of Intercession: Abraham reads Ezekiel at Sodom and Gomorrah', departs from traditional representations of Abraham as the first monotheist. It came as a surprise to me that Abraham is not a light to the nations, as is usually supposed, but a model intercessor on their behalf. God promises Abraham that his name will be great and that all the families of the earth will be blessed through him (Gen. 12.1). Commentators generally equate blessings for the nations with Abraham's recognition of God's uniqueness and his dissemination of this knowledge. I suggest rather that Abraham was designated as an intercessor on their behalf (cf. Gen. 18.18; 20.7), a role that required neither presence among them, nor evidence of success in relation to them. I try to show how, contrary to standard discussion of this text, this is the reading of Genesis 12 that prevails in *Genesis Rabbah* 39.1-3, which I characterize as a midrashic narrative unit that establishes Abraham as a proto-martyr (where martyrdom represents not actual death but willingness to die as a form of intercession). The second half of my chapter reveals the same structures in Genesis 18–19 read as a theological development of Ezekiel 14. The divergence between standard prophetic intercession as represented by Ezekiel and Abraham's attempted intercession over Sodom and Gomorrah may emerge from a difference between intercession on behalf of Israelites and non-Israelites; the concept of righteousness is the key to understanding the latter. In Gen. 20.7, God calls Abraham a prophet. The context is relations with a foreign king, and the aspect of the prophetic task that is emphasized is intercession. Since this is preceded by an apparent allusion to Abraham's intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 4), we might infer that Genesis 20 clarifies and confirms the

proto-prophetic capacity in which Abraham acts in Genesis 18 and 19. In some respects, Abraham offers a model of prophetic intercession—his willingness to challenge God and 'stand in the breach', for example—but he diverges from the norm by failing to offer a warning, to appeal to the merit of ancestors, or to seek the survival of a remnant. I suggest that Abraham's distinctive model of prophetic intercession reflects his special status as an intercessor for non-Israelites.

Chapter 5, 'The Temporal Temple: Was Abraham standing at Sinai?', is on Time. Although important work has been done on this subject in recent years, most textual exegetes approach their texts on the basis of the (usually unexamined) assumption that the biblical notion of time is linear. A more nuanced view of representations of time in the Bible has unexpected interpretative implications, some of which I explore here in relation to the Abraham/Sinai dilemma. Abraham's failure to keep the *mitzvot* has troubled readers, especially Jews, for almost two millennia, but why does the Bible itself pay so little attention to the issue of Abraham's observance? If Genesis post-dated Exodus, why did its authors not create a Jubilees-style halakhic Abraham? And if Genesis came before Exodus, why are there so few examples of redactional harmonisation (cf. Gen. 26.5)? Post-biblical commentators often articulate their Abraham/Sinai anxieties temporally. Does Abraham represent a golden age from which Sinai was a decline? Or was Sinai an advance on Abraham? I suggest it was their conception of time that made Abraham's non-observance into a non-issue for biblical writers. I focus neither on linear nor cyclical perceptions, but rather on time as a spatial category. If time is perceived architecturally, so that historical periods are neither early nor late, nor even at another point on a cycle, but elsewhere in the same building, the problem of decline or advance, as it applies for example to the Abraham/Sinai debate, is minimized, if not resolved. Moreover, the idea of a present past, not just another country but an adjoining room, is as evocative for traditional Judaism in general as for biblical Israel in particular, and seems likely to have played a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of ancient Israelite and Jewish identity.

Chapter 6, 'Terms of Endearment: A (very) fresh approach to biblical law', challenges the dismaying opposition of law and love that is so often a feature of biblical scholarship. Biblical scholars, like the legal theorists addressed by H.L.A. Hart in his monumental *The Concept of Law*, privilege the notion of law as orders issued by a supreme and independent 'sovereign' being who punishes the disobedient. I attend here to an aspect of biblical law that sits in stark tension with the sovereign model: law as quasi-erotic engagement. In 'The Valediction: A Book', John Donne tells his lover that she can 'anger destiny' when he is gone by studying their manuscripts, which will record their engagement, preserve their love in the face of destiny, and create a model for future lovers. Though imperfect, this comparison elicits a

key feature of my reading here. Biblical law, especially Deuteronomic law, is not a soliloquy but a dialogue. With this in mind, I re-read Deuteronomy 31–33, where the Torah will remind God of his relationship with Moses; discourage unilateral punishment; intercede for Israel in Moses' absence; record the dialogue between God and Moses; and exemplify for Israel the dialogic ideal of law. My reading calls for a re-evaluation of the significance of love and even eroticism in relation to biblical law; of the relationship between biblical law and rabbinic legal texts, where engagement of this kind is central; and of the desirability of obedience—which arguably forecloses engagement—as a response to biblical law. I test this latter theory by reading Genesis 22 intertextually with Numbers 22, refracted through a talmudic narrative, and in the light of a concern shared by rabbis and feminists alike—Sarah's absence on Mount Moriah. My conclusions should not be surprising in the context of scholarship on rabbinic conceptions of law, where erotic engagement is now widely discussed, but they are, I think, unexpected in relation to the Bible.

Chapter 7, 'The Furnace of Desire: Forging identities in foreign bedrooms', concludes this book where it began—with longing for, or better perhaps, longing *in*, Egypt. The history of biblical interpretation polarises foreign women and Israelite men to produce cartoon-like cautionary tales of little interest. The Bible itself treats these relationships as complex microcosms by means of which such matters as identity, ethnicity, nationality, loyalty, and inheritance may be explored. This chapter opens with a radical look at Ezra's foreign wives in the light of Noah's flood, and examines the implications of that unexpected intertextual connection for understanding Ezra's objection to intermarriage. Ezra's call for separation from foreign wives is linked to concerns both Deuteronomic and 'priestly'. Yet Deuteronomic and 'priestly' texts diverge markedly on marriage and its metaphorical application to God and the land. The former permits divorce, reflecting its conditional approach to the land, while for the latter, marriage is an eternal bond, akin to its perspective on the land. Priestly marital problems are addressed via rituals or ritualized natural or political events, and where Deuteronomy bans intermarriage, priestly texts prohibit incest. I suggest that Ezra strives to reconcile these worldviews through a hitherto unidentified intertext, the Genesis flood narrative. Gen. 6.1-4 undermines the standard assumption that Ezra fears holy seed will be defiled by profane. If offspring are any guide, the sons of gods (holy) transmit their divinity to the daughters of men (profane), not vice versa. Ezra fears that intermarriage will weaken the claim on the land of the returning exiles by strengthening the people of the land. His solution, mass divorce (not expulsion), is ritualized through association with the Genesis flood. Construed legally, divorce is a harsh gesture. Ritualized as above, it both corrects and cleanses, like the waters of the flood. I then proceed to a more detailed case study—Potiphar's wife,

the foreign seductress least easily brought in from the pale. I try to show how a rejection of the simple seductress/righteous resister model in favour of a more nuanced reading in which Potiphar the eunuch brings Joseph to his house to father a child with his wife opens the text to an exploration of assimilation and identity in all its rich complexity. From Ezra's fear that the holy seed could 'strengthen' the seed of foreign women, through the connection between national identity and Deuteronomic versus priestly conceptions of marriage and divorce, to Mr and Mrs Potiphar as recipients of fertility treatment, there is much that is unexpected in this chapter.

For me, at least, the Hebrew Bible can never lose its capacity to surprise, excite, and even unsettle. My intention in writing this book was to share with people other than former teachers, students, colleagues, friends, and fellow synagogue members some of the ways in which the Bible has surprised, excited and unsettled me over the past ten years, when I have had the privilege to study and teach it regularly at Cambridge University, Leo Baeck College, Beth Shalom Reform Synagogue, Cambridge, and King's College London, and occasionally in various other venues. As will soon be clear, I am (by necessity and therefore fortunately) more interested in asking new questions than in providing answers to old ones. Several colleagues have observed—politely, I think—that some of my subjects would be better served by a monograph than a single chapter, and I too am aware of the myriad loose ends that remain. I hope to tie some of them elsewhere, but even more I hope that others will be interested in tying them.

Versions of two chapters of this book appear elsewhere. 'A Right Royal Puzzle', minus new material on Esther, is a chapter in *The God of Israel* (ed. R.P. Gordon; Cambridge University Press, 2007). 'Bezalel in Babylon' minus the theology is forthcoming in the *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*. The rest of this book is newly written, but I am grateful to family, friends, teachers, colleagues, students, and fellow congregants for criticisms, suggestions and encouragement offered formally in lectures and seminars and informally over dinner and in response to sermons, in person and in writing, in light of careful reading or hearing of my work, and on the basis of casual conversation in classrooms, dining rooms, kitchens, corridors, trains, running tracks, and supermarket aisles—in Cambridge, London, New York and Jerusalem. This book asks many questions and generates some unexpected answers. Indeed, given that I did not expect to write another book after publishing my PhD in 1999, its very existence is unexpected. Entirely predictable, by contrast, was the opportunity it presented for wonderful intellectual engagement with people too numerous to mention. I hope that, regardless of what ever else I have been able to convey in these pages, I will have succeeded in conveying that.

Chapter 1

'The Heart Enticed': The Exodus from Egypt as a Response to the Threat of Assimilation

In Alexandria

Has time taken off its clothes of trembling
and decked itself out in riches,
and has earth put on fine-spun linen
and set its beds in gold brocade?[1]
All the fields of the Nile are checkered,
as though the bloom of Goshen[2]
were woven straps of a breastplate,
and lush oases dark-hued yarn,
and Raamses and Pithom laminated goldleaf.[3]
Girls on the riverbank, a bevy of fawns,
Linger, their wrists heavy with bangles—
anklets clipping their gait.
The heart enticed[4]
forgets its age, remembers boys or girls
in the garden of Eden, in Egypt, along the Pishon,[5]
running on the green to the river's edge;
the wheat is emerald tinged with red,
and robed in needlework;[6]
it sways to the whim of the sea breeze,
as though bowing in thanks to the Lord…

Yehuda Halevi[7]

1. Ezek. 26.16.
2. Gen. 45.10.
3. Exod. 28.28.
4. Deut. 11.16.
5. Gen. 2.11.
6. Ps. 45.14-15.
7. *Poems from the Diwan* (trans. G. Levin; London: Anvil, 2002), p. 125.

Israel in Egypt[8]

It is a truth universally acknowledged that oppressive slavery and persecution are the problems to which the exodus[9] from Egypt was the solution.[10] The Israelites suffered bitterly and longed to escape, God heard their cry and freed them with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and all the rest is history. Most biblical scholarship and faith teaching proceeds from this point.[11] The book of Exodus is 'one of the most gripping narratives of the Hebrew Bible—the account of the escape of an oppressed people from bondage to freedom…',[12] and 'bondage and oppression are the key ideas in the Exodus story'.[13] Underlying my approach to Exodus is the unexpected conclusion that its authors did not see Egypt as the evil empire *par excellence*, although it has been thus characterized by many commentators in the meantime, but rather as the apex of the seductive other.[14] Oppression or no oppression, Jews and, I would argue, their biblical ancestors, were intoxicated by the idea (if not the reality) of Egypt. Yehuda Halevi's love-song to Alexandria, mapping Temple language onto Egyptian topography, is an exquisite mediaeval example of this phenomenon and, as I read the Bible, it is already present in the book of Exodus.

8. This chapter is dedicated to our friends Simon, Shoshana, Daniel and Sarah Goldhill, who make Cambridge a little less Egypt.

9. Throughout this chapter, I use 'exodus' with a lower case to refer to the event and 'Exodus' with upper case to refer to the book.

10. Profuse thanks to Sam Andrews, during whose Bar Mitzvah lessons the argument underlying this chapter first occurred to me; to Graham Davies, for discussing it with me at a formative stage; to Ellen Davis, Simon Goldhill, Hyman Gross, Gershon Hepner, Joel Kaminsky, Peter Lipton and Anthony Smith for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter; to Cheryl Exum for inviting me to present this material as a seminar paper at Sheffield University, and to John Barton for the same at Oxford University. In each case I benefited greatly from discussion following the papers.

11. See G. Larsson, *Bound For Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), especially pp. 4-111.

12. C. Meyers, *Exodus* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 33. I offer this one example from a recent commentary that I admire, but I could have cited almost any commentary on the book of Exodus, regardless of age, provenance or perspective.

13. See also M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 33.

14. For a discussion of the polarised perceptions of Egypt, see L.H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Re-Written Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998), pp. 74-89. Josephus is characterised as generally positive towards Pharaoh, reflecting his sense of being beholden to Titus and Vespasian. Philo, by contrast, is extremely negative. Rabbinic commentaries comprise the entire spectrum of responses to Egypt.

Jon Levenson stops just shy of a radical counter-reading of the kind I have in mind when, in line with many rabbinic commentators, he questions the centrality of liberation in the exodus story on the basis that slavery in Egypt is replaced not by freedom, but by service to God.[15] That Levenson does not dispense entirely with the liberation motif may be explained by his commitment in this article to J.H. Yoder's idea that '*what for* matters more than *what from*' (my italics).[16] Had Levenson focused less on worship and more on promised land, surely a central long-term goal of Exodus in its final form, he might have concluded differently. 'What from' may not matter when 'what for' is service to God; it can easily be argued that the particular form of Israel's slavery had no bearing on the form of its worship. But 'what from' certainly does affect 'what for' when both 'what from' and 'what for' concern experiences of nationhood and national identity. The *Passover Haggadah* makes the obvious point: Israel became a nation in Egypt.[17] For

15. 'Exodus and Liberation', in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 127-60.

16. 'Exodus and Liberation', pp. 145-46.

17. See, e.g., N. Glatzer (ed.), *The Schocken Passover Haggadah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1953): ' "And he became there a nation" ', teaching us that the Israelites were distinguishable there' (p. 41). I was fascinated to read Shani Berrin's personal observations on the Haggadah's use of 'distinguishable' in 'Anti-Semitism, Assimilation, and Ancient Jewish Apologia: The Story of the Exodus in the Writings of Josephus Flavius', *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 19 (2005), pp. 20-34 (24). Berrin goes to the heart of my own enterprise: 'In reading Josephus' description of the material success of the Israelites in Egypt, I was struck by the potential homiletical value of an ironic reading of a line in the *haggada* in a similar vein. In its exposition of Deut. 26.5, "and they became there" [in Egypt], "a great, mighty, and multitudinous nation" ', the *haggada* states that the word "nation" (*goy*) indicates that the Israelites were "distinctive there" (*metzuyyanim sham*). Although it will not have been the author's original intention, for me, this statement reverberates, anachronistically, with irony. The very word that is used to show the unique nature of the Jews while they were in Egypt is the word "*goy*", a word used today, often derogatorily, to describe a non-Jew, or perhaps a Jew who acts like a non-Jew. That is the opposite of the biblical usage here. As for being distinctive, *metzuyyanim* , the point of the midrash is that the Israelites in Egypt retained their separate identities, avoiding assimilation with the Egyptians. As the Rabbis famously tell us, the Israelites retained their traditional language, clothing, and names (cf. *Lev. R.* 32; *Pesiqta Zutarta Deut*. 46a). However, my own mental association with the word "*metzuyyan*" is of excellence, the mark I sought on exams and essays when I was in school, a High Distinction. This is not a connotation of separatism but rather of elitism. In contemporary terms, I am describing the somewhat paradoxical situation in which some Jews will attempt to be *metzuyyanim* by putting on black hats and isolating themselves from secular society, avoiding "the *goyim*", whereas others will attempt to be *metzuyyanim* by over-achieving in secular spheres, and materialistic acquisitions, taking pride in Jewish Nobel Prize winners, or the over-representation of Jews in the arts. My contemporised reading of this line of

this reason, we should surely be mining the biblical accounts of Israel's experience in Egypt for insights into its emerging sense of nationhood.

My conclusions in this chapter shed no light on the 'historical' Egypt, but only the Egypt of historiography, ideology and the imagination. The authors of Exodus wrote about the past as a way of writing about themselves, portraying Israel in Egypt in the light of their own concerns.[18] I suggest that alongside the fear of destruction at the hands of a powerful enemy was loss of identity through assimilation. As for who 'they' were, I remain committed to the increasingly unfashionable view that Exodus made up of the oldest material in the Pentateuch, and had a form recognisable to us by the eighth century BCE. I envisage Deuteronomy as a primarily seventh-century composition (chs. 12–26) with an exilic frame. Deuteronomy seems to me best understood as a rewriting of Exodus,[19] and the eighth-century prophets seem best read in the light of the Covenant Code. Fortunately, given the prevailing dissent over dating biblical texts, and in view of a recent tendency to place Exodus in the postexilic period,[20] my findings in this chapter are not especially date-sensitive. As far as I can tell, concerns about assimilation cannot be isolated to one particular stratum of Exodus, but are evenly distributed throughout the text.

Levenson is not alone in paying little attention to the national focus of Exodus. Perhaps the Promised Land remained just that because Christians were inclined to spiritualise it, while Diaspora Jews tended until recently to treat Zion as an aspirational ideal—the 'next year in Jerusalem' of the Passover Seder[21]—rather than a geographic entity they might soon repopulate. An interesting example of a commentator who does highlight the national focus is L. Dykstra, a Christian writing for a faith-based audience, who claims that modern Americans have more in common with Egyptians than Israelites, and urges them to read Exodus with a view to their treatment of

the *haggada* reflects some aspects of classic Jewish neuroses that are familiar themes in modern literature and popular culture. In his assertions that the Israelites built the pyramids, and his claims of Israelite economic success, Josephus exemplifies this struggle to ensure that the Jews are recognised as being every bit as good as the other nations…and more than a bit better. For Josephus, the distinctiveness of the Jews does not lie in their having had a separate set of non-Egyptian values, but rather in their having excelled beyond the Egyptians at playing the Egyptians' own game.'

18. Following, e.g., M.Z. Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995) and Y. Amit, *History and Ideology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

19. B.M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

20. J. Van Seters, *A Law Book for the Diaspora: Revision in the Study of the Covenant Code* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

21. The concluding words of the formal section of the Passover evening home service.

people at the margins of their own society.[22] Dykstra's reading is provocative in all the right ways and deserves attention, but from the perspective of an academic Bible scholar, even a liberal Jewish Zionist concerned about the present-day state of Israel, identification with ancient Israelites remains more relevant than identification with ancient Egyptians. I have in mind not the Israelites who star in the narrative, but rather their literary creators—the scribes and politicians for whom Egypt was a mirror that reflected a reverse image of their own nationalist ideals. In a much-discussed interpretation of Gen. 1.1, the mediaeval Jewish commentator Rashi asks why the Torah begins with creation instead of the first commandment:[23] 'And this day shall be a memorial for you. You should celebrate it as Festival to the LORD throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time' (Exod. 12.14).[24] Rashi's answer to his own question is defensive: should the nations accuse Israel of forcibly occupying their land, Israel can respond that, since the whole world belongs to God, he can give Israel to whichever people he chooses. But among the many alternative answers to Rashi's evocative question is one I cannot over-emphasize. The biblical authors used the account of Israel in Egypt, and what led them there, as a text to explore concepts of nationhood. We would be denied an invaluable source of insight into Israel's sense of itself as a nation had they started writing, and if we were to start reading, at Exod. 12.14.[25]

Interpretative Implications

In general, the readings I seek to complicate in this book hold no particular interest for me in and of themselves; they represent one approach to the text, and I offer another interpretation. Not surprisingly, I am inclined to find my own readings more attractive than those I counter—I doubt I would have taken the time to write the book had that not been the case—but I have no special mission to promote, say, cyclical and spatial conceptions of time over a linear notion. An exception in one direction is the widely held assumption that biblical writers saw their religion as morally and spiritually superior to other ancient Near Eastern religions. I understand why this claim

22. *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books,2002).

23. Rashi on Gen. 1.1.

24. Biblical citations follow *Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985–99), hereafter *NJPS*.

25. Exodus 1–12 arguably had a greater impact than Genesis on the national consciousness as reflected in the Bible. This may be because Genesis was written after Exodus and therefore plays a smaller role that Exodus in other biblical texts, or because Genesis reflects a paradigm that is essentially non-national (no monarchy, capital city, institutionalized religion or government) versus the (somewhat paradoxically, given Israel's post-biblical history) more influential national paradigm offered by Exodus.

is made—even if the biblical text does not actively promote this point of view, it certainly permits it—and yet I believe it has harmful consequences and is best dispelled. The reading I am about to complicate in this first chapter represents an exception in the other direction. Jews and Christians have long used Exodus to encourage the oppressed and persecuted of later generations. If I thought I could undermine the messages of the *Passover Haggadah* and Liberation Theology by diluting the message of freedom for the oppressed, I might not have embarked on this project.

Yet having commented on the positive value of the liberation motif, I cannot proceed without noting some problematic aspects of liberation as a theological and political idea. The liberation theme properly played out requires clear-cut and straightforward enemies and victims. This makes it a poor fit with Exodus, which does not describe a dramatic crisis to which God responded in order to resolve it, but a messy situation, partly but not straightforwardly initiated by God (witness the tension between 3.10, where God speaks of leaving Egypt, and 3.18, where he tells Moses to request permission to spend three days *in the wilderness*), that requires careful and continued divine stage-management. This particular messiness is theological, but it has obvious political parallels. Objectors to the 2003 invasion of Iraq highlighted conflicting views about liberation as a root problem. The west saw themselves as liberators, while Iraqis, even opponents of Saddam Hussein, saw the west as colonialists replacing a regime that, however undesirable, was at least home-grown, with one whose values were alien to the society it was 'liberating'. More fundamentally, the liberation model depends on a black and white portrayal of a situation that would be better rendered in multiple shades of grey. While circumstances exist in which victims and oppressors can be readily distinguished and identified, we more often encounter situations in which good and bad are not readily disentangled, and where a failure to acknowledge that complexity aggravates the problem. It is unfortunate, too, that the slavery and persecution motif has eclipsed all other thematic concerns, even though it is not necessarily the most meaningful focus for every generation of Exodus readers. While Jews should and do discuss persecution and liberation at Passover, both concepts remain, for better and worse, fairly abstract for many in the present generation.[26]

A further negative aspect of liberation is that victimhood—even when grounded in historical experience—is a shallow and ultimately unhelpful mechanism for constructing and promoting identity. Even if people are

26. At our 2006 Passover Seder, when the arguments presented in this chapter were at the very forefront of my mind, I was moved to hear Jews of all ages from the UK, Israel, Mexico, Brazil and the USA discussing the challenges of creating a Jewish identity in a multicultural society.

willing to throw in their lot with a particular group on the basis of persecution, of themselves or of recent ancestors, they are unlikely to be able to communicate the value of their affiliation to future generations once persecution becomes a distant memory. Moreover, liberation has the disadvantage of requiring an enemy, real or rhetorical, which can lead to enduring hostility towards the people in question. Interestingly, in view of my overall argument here, Egypt has not been a particular magnet for Jewish hostility to the other, even during times when Israel was at war with Egypt; Amalek fills that role.

I want to make some brief observations now about liberation and national identity.[27] As indicated by the following remarks by John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith—which can serve for our purposes as a working definition of nationalism—these two concepts are inextricably linked:

> Nationalism was, first of all, a doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty. The people must be liberated—that is, free from any external constraint; they must determine their own destiny and be masters in their own house; they must control their own resources; they must obey their own 'inner' voice. But that entailed fraternity. The people must be united; they must dissolve all internal divisions; they must be gathered together in a single historic territory, a homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a single public culture. But which culture and what territory? Only a homeland that was 'theirs' by historic rights, the land of their forebears; only a culture that was 'theirs' as a heritage, passed down the generations, and therefore an expression of their authentic identity.[28]

In a stimulating British Academy lecture on Nationalism and the Covenant,[29] Smith argued that the concept of nationalism was not secular and emerging from Nineteenth Century German Romanticism, as is usually supposed, but rather religious and emerging whole from the Hebrew Bible without the transforming influences of Christianity. He emphasized repeatedly the centrality of liberation in the construction of a national entity and a national identity. At this point it may be helpful to make a distinction between two different kinds of liberation, 'freedom from' and 'freedom to', only one of which sits comfortably alongside the covenantal nationalism discussed by Smith. 'Freedom from,' the form of liberation that Smith calls 'liberty from oppressors', is highly compatible with the nationalist project. It offers escape from tyranny as an explanation for why the national entity was created in the first place, and provides continued justification for its existence in the form of security from surrounding enemies. 'Freedom to'

27. For more on biblical nationalism, see S. Grosby, *Biblical Ideas of Nationality, Ancient and Modern* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

28. J. Hutchinson and A.D. Smith (eds.), *Nationalism* (Oxford Readers; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 4.

29. London, 4 May, 2006.

relates to individual rights for members of a national entity and is at the very least in tension with covenantal nationalism. Covenantal nationalism prioritises observance and obedience to the law, and it is hard to see how 'freedom to' can easily co-exist with these features of nationalism. It is not my task here to consider the history of interpretation and how the liberation came to feature so prominently in the Exodus story as interpreted by later readers, but I note in passing that 'freedom to', though not compatible with the nationalist project, is indispensable for minority groups in a Diaspora setting or when living under foreign rule. It seems plausible, then, that the 'freedom to' component of the Exodus story—minimal in the biblical text itself, as I shall show—was incorporated later, when long-term Diaspora was an issue, and highlighted later still, perhaps by Jewish interpreters living under Roman rule. It is, after all, a central theme of the Passover Haggadah, which also emerged in this period. It seems equally plausible that the emphasis on 'freedom to' led to a greater emphasis on 'freedom from'; the assertion of identity goes hand in hand with differentiation from the other, which is achieved all too often by generating hostility.

My second observation about liberation and nationalism follows from what I have just said: liberation requires an enemy. The book of Exodus was written by people with their own land and two different versions of their founding history: (1) they were driven there by a persecuting enemy; (2) they went because they were in danger of losing something valuable that could best be preserved and extended within a national structure. The two accounts are not incompatible, and may even be symbiotic, but the question of which to privilege is of critical significance, especially in relation to the place of outsiders in the new land. During his gap year in Jerusalem, the time when I was writing this chapter, my son visited *Yad Vashem*, Israel's Holocaust museum. It was a powerful experience for him, not least because all four of his paternal great-grandparents perished in Germany. Yet although he found the last exhibit—Israeli children singing *Hatikvah*—immensely moving, he could not help thinking that the causal relationship between persecution and the founding of the State of Israel, historically grounded as it is, is no longer the best take-home message of *Yad Vashem*, and that a plea to rise up against all forms of persecution, wherever it occurred, might be more appropriate. In this chapter, I reflect on the take-home message of the book of Exodus.

Assimilation and Persecution

The interweaving of assimilation and persecution occurs in the Bible itself, where threats from external enemies such as Assyria and Babylon are linked to Israel's straying after other gods (a symptom of assimilation or, more likely, a metaphor for it). Since settled immigrants are often

loath to uproot, later writers may have sought to persuade their audience that staying in Egypt or its equivalent was not an option (Isa. 40.9-11). In present times, some, mainly ultra-Orthodox, Jews have made shocking claims that the Holocaust was caused by the assimilation of German Jews.[30] In these cases, the victims of persecution themselves create a connection between assimilation and persecution, but the sense in which the two are linked is more than a political abstraction. Assimilation, and its close corollary, collaboration (two forms of sleeping with the enemy), have always represented one response to the threat of persecution, especially among Diaspora Jews or Jews living in the land under foreign rule. It is easy to see how those who preferred resistance, or believed that assimilation was no protection, as was the case in Nazi Germany, moved from seeing assimilation as an undesirable or ineffective *response* to persecution to presenting it as a *cause*. The book of Exodus works through the assimilation/persecution dynamic.

Exodus 1.7 is not alone in suggesting a typological connection between successful integration and persecution in which integration comes first. A similar pattern occurs in Num. 22.2-6, where Balak king of Moab attempts to deal with Israel's growth and success by employing a prophet to curse it:

> Balak son of Zippor saw all Israel had done to the Amorites. Moab was alarmed because the people was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites, and Moab said to the elders of Midian, 'Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field.' Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the Euphrates, in the land of his kinsfolk, to invite him, saying, There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me. Come then, put the curse on this people, since they are too numerous (עצום) for me; perhaps I can defeat them and drive them out of the land'.

In this case, Balak reacts on the basis of Israel's track record in the territory of the Amorites rather than on the basis of first-hand experience, but the essential ingredients are the same. Israel's expansion is threatening and leads its neighbours to attempt to reduce their numbers. The same pattern is reiterated with regard to Egypt in the para-liturgical Deut. 26.5-10:[31]

30. To be fair to Chief Rabbi Bakshi-Doron and his followers, their view is consistent with biblical theology. It is those of us who are happy to say that the Babylonian Exile was caused by divine retribution for Israel's infidelity, yet shocked by the suggestion that God engineered the Holocaust to punish Europe's rapidly assimilating Jews, who are inconsistent.

31. Strikingly similar vocabulary in all three texts (esp. עצום, great, or עצום ורב, great and populous) suggests a compositional or redactional relationship.

> You shall then recite as follows before the LORD your God: 'My father was a fugitive Aramaean. He went down to Egypt with meagre numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and populous (עצום ורב) nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labour on us. We cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery and our oppression. The LORD freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which you, O LORD, have given me.'

The impression of inordinate prosperity is important. That Israel flourished in Egypt prior to enslavement—foreigners were not automatically exploited as *Gastarbeitern*—emphasizes that persecution was not the default position in Egypt. Moreover, subsequent history makes it hard to see the interplay of assimilation and persecution either as a distinctively Egyptian response to Israel, or as a literary or theological trope. It is rather a reflection of human experience: successful immigrants attract attention, arouse jealousy and resentment, are accused of disloyalty, and are treated as scapegoats during periods of economic and social instability. In the case of Exodus, we cannot rule out the possibility that a narrative reflecting genuine experiences of persecution is used here for the ideological purpose of fighting assimilation. It is worth noting, though, that slavery and persecution are rarely presented as a serious threat to Israelite survival, whereas the twin threats of assimilation and lost identity are ubiquitous.[32] Leviticus 18.1-4 gives a sense of what I have I mind:

> The LORD God spoke to Moses, saying, speak to the Israelite people and say to them: I the LORD am your God. You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws. My rules alone shall you observe, and faithfully follow My laws. I the LORD am your God.

Judging from the contents of the rest of Leviticus 18, the 'practices' mentioned here are forbidden sexual relationships. Elsewhere, intermarriage is associated with a security in the land:

> You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the LORD's anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out (Deut. 7.3-4).[33]

In both Leviticus 18 and Deuteronomy 7, sleeping with the wrong person is equated with following foreign gods, rejecting God and his laws, and

32. Examples can be found in Lev. 18.1-4; Deut. 7.3-4, 13.7-12; Judg. 2.10-19; 1 Kgs 11.1-5; Ezra 10.12-15; and in many other places.

33. See also Ezra 10.12-15.

the eventual loss of security in the land. And as noted above, assimilation is almost always identified as the starting point for persecution where the two occur together, not *vice versa*; God uses Israel's enemies to punish Israel for assimilation, and later punishes the enemies for punishing Israel.[34] The standard biblical typology of assimilation and persecution does not, of course, establish beyond doubt that the same pattern occurs in Exodus. But given the typological prominence of the Exodus motif in the rest of the Bible, it is worth investigating other texts as possible sources of evidence. It goes without saying that the Bible is not a monolithic text. It was written and redacted over a period of at least eight hundred years, and expresses a multitude of voices and points of view. There is no single common thread leading straight to the gingerbread house of key biblical themes. Yet despite the Bible's diverse interests and perspectives, it is possible to identify a unifying preoccupation with Israel's relations with the people who live around and within it, and the impact of those relations on Israelite identity.

Narratively speaking, this preoccupation begins in Genesis 1, where unformed chaos is controlled by means of division and separation—light from darkness, water from water, day from night—and all life forms are created according to their different kind. It continues in the patriarchal narratives where, among many other themes and concerns, brothers representing tribes and nations, as well as themselves, engage in a sustained dance of separation and reunion; in Leviticus and Numbers, where the pervading notion of holiness, the verbal root of which signifies 'set apart', is based on classification and categorisation; and on into Deuteronomy, where the land is emptied of its Canaanite inhabitants so that Israel can exist in the safety of a vacuum of its own. Even primarily military threats, such as the many attacks against Solomon (1 Kgs 11.14-40) and Assyria's defeat of the Northern Kingdom and invasion of the Southern Kingdom (2 Kgs 17–19), are presented with an eye to the threat of willing, if reluctant, submission and the subsequent loss of Israelite identity. The prophets who address these matters are torn between representing other nations as hostile enemies on the one hand and attractive past or potential lovers on the other. In the event, the latter predominates; Israel is a constitutionally unfaithful wife who cannot cope with the demands of monogamy (Hos. 1–3), that is, an unnecessarily insecure people desperate to ally itself with other nations, especially Egypt. Whereas the threat of slavery is rarely prominent outside Exodus, anxiety about subjugation to more powerful states, especially Egypt, assimilation, and lost identity are threats that crop up again and again.

34. See, e.g., the fate predicted for Babylon in Isa. 47.

Representing Egypt

The representation of Egypt in biblical texts outside Exodus is instructive. I once published an article that opened with the observation that Israel's symbolic arch-enemy was not Egypt, as might have been anticipated, but rather Amalek, a people that was either extinct or insignificant by the time the process of demonization began.[35] At the time, I saw this as a tribute to the ethical sensitivities of biblical authors, but I am unfortunately obliged to qualify my compliment in the light of my conclusions here. I now think the biblical writers' interest in creating a symbolic enemy was not humanitarian, as I had believed and hoped; rather, there was no biblical tradition of Egypt as a particularly potent enemy. Post-biblical texts, such as the Passover Haggadah, that demonize Pharaoh may have been filling a surprising gap in the literature. For the biblical writers, Egypt was certainly a harsh regime, though arguably no harsher than the Solomonic empire for its inhabitants. Several texts suggest parallels between the two—Isa. 19.1-4, for example, and the laws of the king in Deut. 17.14-20 and 1 Sam. 8.11-18, where the king in question may be Solomon or Sennacherib or some combination of the two. Moreover, the harshness the biblical writers had in mind was manifested primarily in taxation and demands for participation in building projects. We cannot exclude the possibility that the little overt persecution that exists in Exodus other than the death decree in ch. 1 was a polemic against all powerful monarchic regimes, foreign or Israelite.[36] Be that as it may, Egypt was not only a harsh regime; it was also the place to which Israel turned at times of adversity, in other words, a place of longing. This is especially evident in Isaiah 30 and 31, where Israel is criticized for turning to Egypt for help against Assyria when the people should have relied upon God, and in Jeremiah 42–44, where Israelites are criticized for fleeing to Egypt when they should have submitted to Babylon for a limited period of divine punishment. Isaiah 48.20, 'Go forth from Babylon, flee from Chaldaea', signals the end of this period. Although there are more oracles of greater length against Egypt—see for example Isaiah 19, Jeremiah 46 and Ezekiel 29—than against the Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Babylonians, Edom, Tyre and Damascus, the explanation seems to lie in the politics of the day, not in the memory of the Exodus. Egypt, along with Babylon/Assyria, attracts more attention than the other nations because

35. 'Remembering Amalek: A Positive Biblical Role Model for Dealing with Negative Scriptural Types', in D.F. Ford and G.N. Stanton (eds.), *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2003), pp. 139-53.

36. M. Oblath, 'Of Pharaohs and Kings—Whence the Exodus', *JSOT* 87 (2000), pp. 23-43, understands the authors of Exodus to be thinking about Solomon when they wrote about Pharaoh.

its relationship with Israel was especially fraught over a long period of time. The dynamic in which Egypt as oppressive enemy vies with Egypt as inappropriate ally is clearly evident in 'historical' texts such as 1 Kings 3 and 11, where it applies to Solomon and Jeroboam, and all these concerns may be played out in narrative terms in Gen. 12.10-20, where Abraham is promised a land of his own, but goes down to Egypt as soon as the going gets tough.[37]

In several important respects, the Babylonian Exile functions as a watershed as far as Egypt is concerned; texts from that period emphasize the miraculous bringing out of Israel from Egypt in a way that earlier texts do not. This is especially evident in Isaiah 40–55, where the exodus from Egypt is offered as a precedent for a return to Judah from Babylon. In these texts, we see strong evidence of a dynamic tradition in relation to Egypt; in the hands of that prophet, the Exodus motif was transformed, reapplied and imbued with a new significance for a new generation in new political circumstances. Deuteronomy makes a similar use of the Exodus motif, though the majority of references occur in Deuteronomy's so-called exilic frame, where it is linked explicitly to the Babylonian exile,[38] as opposed to in what many scholars identify as Deuteronomy's pre-exilic core (chs 12–26). A significant exception is Deut. 26.5-10, the 'wandering Aramaean' text discussed above, as well as the law of the king in 17.16 and the rules on admission to the community in 23.8. There is no space here to analyse all Deuteronomy's references to Egypt, but the latter text in particular suggests a relatively positive outlook. Ammonites and Moabites can *never* join the congregation of the LORD—for failing to supply sustenance in the wilderness and for hiring Balaam, futilely as it turns out, to curse Israel. That children born to Egyptians must be excluded for a mere three generations may suggest that whatever happened in Egypt was not too dire.

As with the representations of Egypt discussed above, the Egypt/Mesopotamia parallel is complex. Some rabbinic commentaries portray Mesopotamia as a place of suffering, but the Bible contains much less evidence than we might wish that it was seen negatively at the time. On the contrary, the people who experienced it were extraordinarily quiet about what actually happened there, perhaps through a wish to avoid a jarring disjunction

37. I see Gen. 12.10-20 as an exilic text, polemicizing against Egypt in the way that Jeremiah does in chs. 42–44, and developing a negative typology of Egypt in the service of a structural parallel with Babylon. See my discussion of the wife-sister texts in *Revisions of the Night: Politics and Promises in the Patriarchal Dreams of Genesis* (Sheffffield: JSOTSup, 288; Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), Chapter 1 (on Abimelech's dream).

38. H. Newton, 'How and to What Ends Does the Book of Deuteronomy Invoke Memories of the Exodus Event?' (unpublished undergraduate dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge University, 2004).

between the prophetic conception of the Babylonian Exile as a punishment for sin and the positive experience of the exiles themselves. Would the author of Isaiah 40–55 have needed to work so hard on his manifesto for return had he not been addressing happily assimilated Jews? Indeed, their distilled presentation of their experience—including, I would say, in Genesis 29–31, where Jacob's tenure with Laban is a type of Israel's exile in Babylon—corresponds closely with the biblical presentation of Egypt as I have sketched it here. An important text in this connection is Ezek. 20.7-9, a rare or even unique assertion that Israel worshipped Egyptian gods in Egypt and that God brought them out to avoid punishing them in the sight of the nations—for the sake of his own reputation. Independently of this, God had promised Israel their own land (Ezek. 20.6), but the catalyst for departure was idolatry, not slavery. This suggests that Ezekiel, at least, was far more concerned with assimilation, a natural partner with idolatry, than with persecution, not generally linked to the worship of other gods. The so-called anti-idol polemics in Isaiah 40–55, which I characterize in a later chapter as part of an internal religious debate in which the prophet polemicizes against the priestly cult, may perhaps point in the same direction.[39] On the one hand, then, life in the Diaspora was not necessarily unpleasant and the temptation to assimilate was ever-present. On the other hand, the authors or redactors needed to create negative associations for the Diaspora, not least to discourage assimilation. These needs may explain the presence, later incorporation, or even later enhancement of the themes of slavery and oppression into the Exodus story.

Egypt in Exodus

How does the ambivalence towards Egypt I have sketched here relate to Exodus? In the first instance, it should caution against an overly simple reading. Even the most overtly hostile of the texts mentioned above does not portray Egypt as 'the evil other' and those, such as Isaiah 19, that use the language of oppression do so in the context of a strong monarchy, not racial persecution. As in Exodus itself, this last point is eclipsed in translations such as the NJPS rendering of Isa. 19.4, 'And I will place the Egyptians at the mercy of a harsh master, and a ruthless king shall rule them', which uses 'ruthless' instead of the less loaded 'strong'. So rather than thinking about Egyptians as an evil people single-mindedly committed to the routine oppression of minorities, we should perhaps consider Egypt as a complex society whose citizens included some who persecuted others *in extremis*. Persecution is the outcome in both cases, but we evaluate the persecutors differently depending on our underlying assumptions about their motivations.

39. I am grateful to Joel Kaminsky for pointing this out (personal communication).

I shall try to show now that the image of Egypt as a complex society fits better in Exodus than the notion of homogenous oppressors.

Exodus in its final form makes it clear that foreigners were not automatically persecuted in Egypt:[40]

> But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them. A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of a war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground. So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour… (Exod. 1.7-11a).

On this account, Israel had thrived there since the time of Joseph; its problems began when its inordinate success was seen as a threat to the host culture. The fear that Israel might join with an enemy and rise against Egypt was neither baseless paranoia nor an exclusively Egyptian anxiety. The same typology occurs elsewhere, and, historically speaking, this is probably what happened in Babylon;[41] the Pharaoh who forgot Joseph is a type of

40. I take this to be a priestly addition to Exodus.

41. Another possible example is בפרך in Exod. 1.13. *NJPS* is typical in translating this as 'ruthlessly', but its use in Lev. 25, which surely, given the subject matter, has in mind Exod. 1.13, suggests that this translation may be inappropriate. Lev. 25.35-55 is about terms and conditions of ownership of slaves, not about the quality of their treatment. Its main distinction is between the ownership of Israelites versus non-Israelites. Israelites can be owned, but not in perpetuity, while non-Israelites can be owned in perpetuity (although גר ותושב in v. 35 is a complication). Elsewhere, Egypt is usually invoked to remind Israelites not to abuse non-Israelites on the basis that they were strangers/resident aliens in Egypt. Here it is different; Egypt is invoked to remind Israelites that God redeemed them from Pharaoh, that they are thus God's slaves, and that they cannot therefore be owned by each other or by anyone else. פרך is used only in relation to Israelites (25.42, 46, 53). The prohibition of פרך in relation to Israelites could be taken to imply that it is acceptable in relation to non-Israelites: you cannot do this to Israelites, but you can do it to non-Israelites. If so, the allusion to Exod. 1.13 is not just different from the norm, it is incompatible with it. The implication of the allusion would be: Pharaoh treated you with פרך, so you cannot treat each other with פרך, but you can treat foreigners with פרך. Not only is this illogical, but it would come close to the use of Exodus to justify the abuse of foreigners. פרך is juxtaposed in v. 43 with the slightly odd formula, ויראת מאלהיך. Three of the other four occurrences of this phrase in Leviticus occur unambiguously in relation to a vulnerable group—the elderly (19.32), the blind (19.14), the impoverished (25.36). The fourth (25.17) occurs in the context of purchases and sales around the time of the jubilee, when both parties are potentially vulnerable. This suggests that פרך might signify exploitation or taking advantage; the Israelites are warned not to exploit other Israelites at their time of need, perhaps in this case by making them sign away their freedom permanently. This analysis, if correct, argues against the translation 'ruthlessly' for בפרך. Pharaoh certainly seems to have given the Israelites less favourable terms of employment following his

Nebuchadnezzar, while the Israelites in Egypt are typological forerunners of the exiles in Babylon who joined ranks with Cyrus in opposition to the Babylonian status quo. Pharaoh's edict was not unprovoked violence, but an inhumane and deeply inappropriate response to perceived and justified fear.

Another indication that persecution is not at the heart of Exodus is the more or less complete absence of examples of what might fairly be called persecution. As several scholars have observed, the evidence usually cited against Egypt is not all that condemning. Was it really so terrible that Pharaoh forced the Israelites to gather their own straw without reducing their output?[42] The dominant trend in the history of interpretation characterising Israel's slavery as oppressive has tended to rely on loaded English translations such as 'bondage' instead of 'work' for עבדה, as in 2.23. At the same time, modern sensibilities about slavery have masked the obvious point: Pharaoh was typical of ancient Near Eastern slave owners, and what Exodus describes is basically *corvée* labour. Pharaoh's demand that the Israelites gather their own straw may be seen as 'a classic union busting move' designed 'to humiliate anyone trying to improve working conditions'.[43] This is an employment crisis centred on the impossibility of serving two masters, God and Pharaoh. It is instigated by God, through the demand that Israelites worship him in the wilderness, and exacerbated by Pharaoh with his accusations of shirking and unreasonable productivity demands. From a later Jewish perspective, this is all too familiar: another Jewish (unfortunately and misleadingly labelled) 'holiday'? No wonder some nineteenth-century German Reform Jews were tempted to move Shabbat to Sunday. This tension is the crux of Moses' original request to Pharaoh, Let my people go! Later commentators, seeking to embed the theme of liberation from slavery, are inclined to quote Moses out of context. But in the first instance, it applied not to liberation from slavery or to entry to the Promised Land, but to a simple request for permission to observe a religious festival that was not in the Egyptian calendar. There is, of course, room to read this demand as the opening move in a negotiating strategy that culminates in escape and contributes to Pharaoh's obstinacy. Yet it is worth paying attention to the precise nature of the 'excuses' offered, which surely reflect what were perceived by the authors as areas of heightened tension and sensitivity. Even if Moses' request to observe a festival was just a means to an end, and

observation that they were becoming too numerous and powerful, but we cannot be sure that he treated them ruthlessly.

42. H. Gressman, cited by B.S. Childs, *Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary* (Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1974) aptly describes Pharaoh's command that the Israelites should gather their own straw as *Kinderspiel* (p. 11).

43. Joel Kaminsky, personal communication, May, 2006.

Pharaoh's increasing the workload was simply a convenient form of oppression, the choice in each case points to the bigger picture. God and Pharaoh demand different kinds of service—God wants sacrifices while Pharaoh wants bricks and mortar. It may or may not be pertinent to this discussion that, assuming that a Temple was built and Israelites built it, God eventually wants both, on which subject, more below.

The single clear-cut, no argument case of persecution in Exodus is Pharaoh's decree that all baby boys—by which all *Hebrew* baby boys is presumably intended—must be put to death. Yet even this element of the narrative is more entangled than it at first appears. Scholars identify the death decree as a plot device enabling narrators to make use of a standard 'birth of the hero' story in which a child is abandoned, loses contact with his family and his people, and yet grows up to interact with them in some striking way—often as a leader or king.[44] In parallel stories, they claim, the baby was usually abandoned at birth, but since exposing babies was not an Israelite practice, the writers needed an alternative mechanism for transporting Moses from his parental home to Pharaoh's palace. That the writers were sensitive to a contrast between Egyptian and Israelite practices in this realm is supported by the parallel contrast between Hagar the Egyptian's response to Ishmael's seemingly imminent death in the wilderness in Genesis 21—she leaves him under a bush (v. 15) and sits down at a distance (v. 16)—and Abraham's response to Isaac's apparently imminent death in Genesis 22—he holds the knife himself. Hagar's behaviour, especially juxtaposed with Abraham's, evokes exposure, as described also in Exod. 2.3-4, where Miriam too waits at a distance. At any rate, Pharaoh's death decree simultaneously achieved this end and cemented the hostility between Egyptians and Israelites that would lead to Israel's eviction. That it was a plot device and not an inherent part of the narrative is suggested by the striking lack of interest in it as the narrative unfolds. One might have expected a justificatory reference to the decree in relation to the death of the firstborn, for example, but the firstborn plague is linked to Pharaoh's stubbornness—'When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every first-born among my sons' (13.15). It looks forward—Israelite firstborn sons will henceforth belong to God—not backwards. And neither is the decree mentioned, as might have been expected given the aquatic parallels, in connection with the Egyptians drowned in the Reed Sea.

Even as it is articulated, Pharaoh's decree is complex. Phase one, all Israelite babies must be killed at birth, is easily overturned by mere midwives. Phase two amounts to severe population control: 'Every boy that is born

44. Childs, *Exodus*, pp. 4-8.

you shall throw into the Nile' (1.22). While horrifyingly inhumane, this is not far removed from present-day population laws in some countries. And once again, even if Pharaoh did intend the death of the baby boys, a woman easily overturns the decree; the intervention of Pharaoh's daughter shows that righteous people live in Egypt and are willing to stand up for the good, even against their own fathers, and even when their own father is king! Pharaoh tells all his people—not explicitly just Israelites, though that seems most likely—to throw their baby boys into (literally 'towards'—a possible hint that exposure was intended?) the river. Moses' mother complies, either absolutely or more or less, depending on the weight of the directional *heh* (ה), when she puts Moses on the bank of the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter disobeys when she takes him back: '…and she sent her slave girl and she fetched it' (2.5).[45] Her act of defiance is intensified and memorialized when, according to the Hebrew text, at least, she equates the name Moses with her action in rescuing him: ותקרא שמו משה ותאמר כי מן־המים משיתהו, 'And she called him Moses saying, "For I drew him out of the river"' (2.10). The naming of Moses thus mirrors the precise respect in which he functions as a microcosm for Israel. The one who, following the Hebrew meaning of his name, draws Israel out of Egypt is himself multiply drawn—out of the bosom of his family, out of the Nile, and out of Pharaoh's palace. At any rate, the account of Pharaoh's decree and his daughter's resistance is important, both for its demonstration that the killing was motivated by fear and an interest in population control, not by irrational hatred, and for making the point that not all Egyptians were enemies of Israel.

Even the characterisation of Pharaoh implied above—a persecutor counterbalanced by his virtuous daughter—is overly simplistic. The information that Pharaoh had forgotten Joseph hints that the death decree was a political decision grounded in reason, not irrational hatred. Had Pharaoh remembered Joseph, and thus been able to factor Joseph's contribution into the equation, he might have acted differently towards the Israelites. That Pharaoh was ultimately a reasonable man who responded to external evidence is indicated by the repeated need to harden his heart, as we see in Exod. 9.12, 10.1, and 11.10. Surely this feature of the narrative would sit uneasily in a text constructed to demonize Pharaoh? The evil tyrant post-biblical commentators love to portray would hardly need cardiac Viagra. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart has long proved problematic for commentators, who wonder why God prolonged Israelite and intensified Egyptian suffering. The motif has served as a magnet for the most empathic exegesis, as well as for the more predictable character assassination. The mediaeval Italian commentator Sforno sees the hardening of Pharaoh's heart as a divinely

45. J.C. Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (JSOTSup, 215; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 85.

given opportunity for repentance, stressing that each successive hardening allows Pharaoh to repent afresh and accrue fresh benefit.[46] The liberation theme properly played out requires clear-cut and straightforward enemies and victims. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart undermines his stature as a worthy enemy. At the worst, the notion that, left to his own devices, Pharaoh was not quite bad enough is seriously problematic. At best, God's intervention complicates the picture, much as it is complicated images of Egyptian slaves and Israelites with their own resident aliens. Egypt was not a dramatic crisis to which God responded in order to resolve, but a messy situation that required careful stage-management if the desired outcome was to be achieved.

That it was not the intention of Exodus to demonize Egypt or Egyptians is suggested by certain features of the description of the departure. For a persecuted people, the Israelites exhibit remarkably little fear when it comes to their enemies. The plagues served as the first nails in the coffin of Hebrew-Egyptian relations, much as those that afflicted Pharaoh and his household in Genesis 12 made it impossible for Abraham to go back to Egypt: 'But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram… and Pharaoh put men in charge of him [Abraham] and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed' (Gen. 12.17-20).[47] Notably, co-existence is possible in similar narratives without plagues, as is revealed by a comparison of the wife-sister story in Genesis 12 with those in Genesis 20 and 26. I see the Genesis wife-sister stories as later than Exodus, and therefore able to fulfil the role of commentaries on Exodus, but even with a different theory of composition, the parallels are significant. Plagues render more or less untenable a relationship that can thrive in the same conditions minus plagues.

The Reed Sea crossing can likewise be read as a mechanism for keeping Israel out of Egypt, though not for keeping Egypt out of Israel, as evidenced by the 'mixed multitude'.[48] Adopting the belt and braces approach to world domination, God ensures that the Reed Sea crossing preserves both the distance between the pursuing Egyptians and their Israelite quarry and, in the long term, the distance between the Israelites and Egypt. The violent drowning of Pharaoh and his army put paid to any hope Israel might have of return, and if the memory of closing waters was not deterrent enough, the forty years spent on a journey that could have been made in three days reinforced the message that Egypt was a place of the past. As the narrative unfolds, these precautions are shown to be necessary; the Israelites are not

46. Sforno, *Commentary on Exodus*, *ad loc.*

47. Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, pp. 35-62.

48. I am grateful to Joel Kaminsky for pointing out the significance of the ערב רב, the mixed multitude.

afraid of the Egyptians—the wilderness is a bigger threat to them: 'And they said to Moses, "Was it for the want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?"' (14.11). Even as the Egyptian army advances, the Israelites want to return to Egypt: 'Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, "Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness"' (14.12). This is precisely as God anticipated: '…for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war and want to return to Egypt"' (13.17). Israel's longing for Egypt does not, of course, preclude serious persecution. The nostalgia that *some* Jews from Berlin or Vienna experienced for certain aspects of German or Viennese culture is an extreme historical example of this phenomenon.[49] But Exodus is a literary text, not an account of recent history or the psychology of survivors, and it is hard to see why its authors would compromise their ideological and theological messages unless they had to. It is also important to note that all Israel clamours to return to Egypt, not just isolated individuals with unusual priorities. All these signs of widespread longing suggest that, from the perspective of the Exodus authors, life in Egypt was not so bad.

The Egyptian attitude towards Israel is complex. There is little evidence of outright racial hostility. The case of hostility most often cited—the Egyptian who beats the Hebrew (Exod. 2.11-12)—is severely undermined by the episode immediately following in which a Hebrew beats (the same verb) his fellow Hebrew. As individual cases of violent aggression, these may reflect negatively on society at large, but they are not evidence of racial hatred between Egyptians and Israelites. The prevailing Egyptian attitude towards Israel seems rather to be poised between generosity and fear. The generous behaviour of Pharaoh's daughter, and possibly also of the midwives, has already been noted. As I shall discuss in more detail below, the text makes it clear that Egyptians and Israelites were living alongside each other. Although God had to ensure that the Egyptians were well-disposed towards the Israelites when they came to borrow silver and gold—not a cup of sugar, after all!—they are described as neighbours. In certain respects, Goshen functioned as a ghetto, though possibly closer in spirit to Hampstead or Westchester than to Warsaw, but not all Exodus narratives—notably those mentioned directly above, where neighbours are Egyptian—assume that Israelites lived in Goshen. The Egyptian response to God's advance warning about the plagues indicates that there were God-fearers among them. Egyptians who feared the LORD's word brought their slaves, presumably not Hebrews, and animals indoors to safety, while those who did not exposed their property to the storm (9.20-21). Later retellings, especially

49. Some exegetes might infer from this that Exodus is indeed a historical recollection, but that reading is not an option for me.

in the Passover Haggadah, quote Exodus selectively to give the impression that Israelites left before the bread could rise because they feared for their lives: 'And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provision for themselves' (12.39). But why were they driven out of Egypt? Because the Egyptians feared for their own lives: 'The Egyptians urged the people on, impatient to have them leave the country, for they said, "We shall all be dead" ' (12.33). This sheds a new light on the 'bread of affliction'; it seems to have been the Egyptians, not the Israelites, who were afflicted. Once the Israelites had left, the Egyptians had to be urged or even forced by God to pursue them: 'Then I will stiffen [lit. 'strengthen'] Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue them, that I may gain glory through Pharaoh and all his host' (14.4), and 'Pharaoh and his courtiers had a change of heart about the people' (14.5). The picture that emerges from Exodus is by no means straightforward, but it does not readily support the standard simple reading of it.

The question underlying Exodus concerns the feasibility or otherwise of successful integration into a country ruled or occupied by foreigners while yet preserving a separate ethnic identity—the biblical *sine qua non*. The answer seems to be that successful integration will lead inevitably to persecution, which is presented simultaneously as its consequence and the catalyst for the solution. Above all, as noted above, persecution following assimilation is not a problem that is specific to Egypt; it could happen anywhere. Indeed, one might say that, among Jews at least, the exodus story has remained central precisely because it has so often been replicated elsewhere. The Egyptian experience points to the need for self-governance in a land of one's own, where there is no risk of persecution at the hands of insecure rulers in search of scapegoats? And of course a land of one's own is precisely the solution that is offered:

> And the Lord continued, 'I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians, to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites' (Exod. 3.7-8).

Yet, as noted above, Egypt, unlike Amalek (Exod. 17.16; Deut. 25.19) is not a biblical arch-enemy, but the place to which Israel turns with longing in adversity. God predicts that Israel will want to return to Egypt the moment it is confronted with an enemy: 'Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt" ' (Exod. 13.17). This reflects Israel's behaviour over

many centuries and in relation to many enemies (e.g. 2 Kgs 12.4; 18.21; Jer. 42.9-22; Isa. 36.6; Ezek. 29.15-16). Even the aspects of Egyptian life most often held up for criticism by the biblical authors are not without attraction. Egypt evokes uncontrolled sex and licentiousness: 'You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt' (Lev. 18.3). It is a land full of Mrs Robinsons (Potiphar's wife, Gen. 39) and Calvin Klein underwear models ('She lusted for concubinage with them, whose members were like those of asses and whose organs were like those of stallions', Ezek. 23.20). And yet sexual fertility can be positive, even in texts that privilege men born of initially or apparently barren women.[50] In the first instance, at least, it reflects well on Egypt that Hagar the Egyptian is spontaneously fertile (Gen. 16.4), whereas Sarah the Israelite needs help to conceive (Gen. 16.1).

The biblical opposition of spontaneous Egyptian versus divinely aided Israelite human fertility is replicated in the agricultural sphere. Yehuda Halevi's equation of Egypt and Eden stands firmly in a biblical tradition (Gen. 13.10; Ezek. 31.1-14). Israelites long for the produce of Egypt: 'We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic' (Num. 11.5). And nor is this mere wilderness whining; Deut. 11.10 contrasts Israel to Egypt to the apparent disadvantage of the latter: 'For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden'. Yet the effect is almost the opposite. Since foot can be a euphemism for phallus, and sowing for sex, while seed is an idiom for offspring, and moisture a desirable pre-condition for fertility,[51] there is more to this than farming techniques. Small wonder the Israelites got tired of manna in the wilderness.

I have already made the point that Egyptians and Israelites were not rigidly separated; this was not an apartheid state, and there is no indication of a master class of Egyptian slave owners set up in clear opposition to an underclass of Hebrew slaves. The Egyptians have their own masters and slaves: '…from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave-girl who is behind the millstones' (11.5, 12.29). The Israelites live alongside them as neighbours: '…they should ask to borrow, each man from his neighbour and each woman from her neighbour' (11.2). They have their own leaders: 'and the foremen of the Israelites, whom the taskmasters had set over them, were beaten' (5.14). And they have their own second-class citizens: 'Each woman shall borrow from her neighbour

50. See the birth narratives of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Samson, and Samuel.

51. Cf. Gen. 2.6; 18.12, where I take עדנה to signify moisture (desire), as well as pleasure.

[closer to 'house-mate'] and the lodger [or slave/concubine][52] in her house' (3.22). This is especially clear in those few situations in which Egyptians and Israelites interact directly without mediation. Even in the vicinity of the 'high stakes' first-born death decree, there is confusion about identity. Are the midwives Egyptian or Hebrew? If Egyptian, as I think, why do they have Hebrew names (1.15), why are they serving Israelites in this capacity, and why do they heed God over Pharaoh: 'The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live' (1.17)? And if Hebrew, why do they speak of fellow Israelite women with a detached objectivity, as if they were animals: 'The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth" ' (1.19). And why does God reward them for doing no more than they should be expected to do for their own people: 'And because the midwives feared God, he established households for them' (1.21)? At the risk of sounding postmodern, it seems to me that uncertainty may be the point here. The first-born decree is the identity crisis that demands clarity where formerly there was ambiguity.

Identity in the Egypt of Exodus was more fluid than we usually suppose, as is clear from the twice-repeated instruction that the Israelites should leave with 'borrowed' silver and gold:

> Each woman shall borrow from her neighbour and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians (3.22).

And:

> 'Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbour and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold.' The LORD disposed the Egyptians favourably towards the people. Moreover, Moses himself was much esteemed in the land of Egypt, among Pharaoh's courtiers and among the people (11.2-3).

The references to divine intervention may be read as a gloss to explain what is not readily explicable in light of the narrative sandwiched between these two passages, at least as it is generally construed. Would slaves live 'next door', even metaphorically, to non-slaves in a society as polarised as Egypt is claimed to have been? And even if so, would Israelite slaves be on sufficiently good terms with their neighbours to 'borrow' silver and gold, especially at a tense time (labour disputes), and when their departure, along with the silver and gold they had 'borrowed', must have seemed imminent? The

52. The meaning of the Hebrew גרת is uncertain. It may be a *hapax legomenon* denoting slave-concubine (cf. Job. 19.15-16), as D. Daube suggests in *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1963), pp. 53-54. Alternatively, it may be a construct of a feminine גר.

word in 3.22 above translated 'lodger'—evoking the image of a household struggling to make ends meet and taking in paying guests—is גר. Elsewhere in Exodus itself, and in texts that refer to it, NJPS translates גר as 'stranger': 'You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (22.20). But גר can plausibly be translated as 'resident alien' or even 'guest-worker'. Far from being strangers and migrant workers in straightforward opposition to the host culture, the Israelites have their own strangers and guest-workers. Yet again, the Hebrew blurs distinctions and preserves ambiguities that collapse under the weight of English translations.

That the Israelites have strangers in their houses and the Egyptians are servants (slaves) of Pharaoh is underlined in the account of the death of the firstborn:

> …every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; and all the first-born of the cattle (11.5).

This confusing state of affairs is elaborated in a midrash in which distinctions that clearly existed in the minds of its authors (hence the reference to 'taskmasters') are carefully blurred:

> The taskmasters were Egyptians but the officers were Israelites, one taskmaster being appointed over ten officers and one officer over ten Israelites. The taskmasters used to go the officers' houses early in the morning to drag them out to work at cock-crow. Once an Egyptian taskmaster went to a Jewish officer and set eyes upon his wife who was beautiful without blemish. He waited for cock-crow, when he dragged the officer out of his house and then returned to lie with the woman who thought that it was her husband, with the result that she became pregnant with him. When her husband returned, he discovered the Egyptian emerging from his house. He then asked her, Did he touch you? She replied, Yes, for I thought it was you. When the taskmaster realised that he was caught, he made him go back to his hard labour, smiting him and trying to slay him. When Moses saw this, he knew by means of the Holy Spirit what had happened in the house and what the Egyptian was about to do in the field, so he said, This man certainly deserves his death, as it is written: And he that smites any man mortally shall surely be put to death. Moreover, since he cohabited with the wife of Dathan he deserves slaying, as it is said: Both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death (*Exodus Rabbah* 1.28).

Read on one level, this midrash is sinister; the appointment of some Israelites to oversee others is disturbingly evocative of the organisation of Jews in Nazi Germany.[53] More constructively, it provides Moses with a stronger

53. I thank Joel Kaminsky for making me confront a comparison that, though it had occurred to me, I had avoided thinking through.

justification than that offered by Exodus for murdering the Egyptian taskmaster, though one wonders if its authors had in mind the similarities between him and King David, and what we should infer about their understanding of Exodus and monarchy if they did. Most pertinently for us, and staying closer to the biblical text, it draws attention to the iceberg tip of a complex society where identities are confusingly blurred: Israelite 'officers' mediate between Egyptian taskmasters and other Israelites, women do not recognize their own husbands in bed, with all that that entails concerning circumcision, and sexual activity across the boundaries presumably produces mixed offspring.

Distinction and Separation

Yet another kind of evidence that the authors of Exodus were concerned with assimilation is the narrative prominence of the twin themes of distinction and separation. This is especially evident in relation to the plagues. The accounts of the first two plagues, blood and frogs, mention only Egyptian victims, thus separating Israel and Egypt in human terms. A geographic separation occurs with the lice; the region of Goshen is exempt, and Israelites living there will not be affected:

> But on that day I will set apart (והפלֹתי) a region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarm of insects shall be there, that you may know that I the LORD am in the midst of the land. And I will make a distinction (פדת) between My people and your people (8.18-19).

Neither והפלֹתי nor פדת unambiguously signifies separation and distinction, but the context justifies the NJPS translations 'set apart' and 'make a distinction', and the ensuing plagues continue to highlight these themes (9.6-7, 26; 10.23; 11.6-7). All this reaches a painful conclusion with the plague of the first-born:

> And there shall be a loud cry in all the land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again; but not a dog shall snarl at any of the Israelites, at man or beast—in order that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Israel and Egypt (11.6-7).

Until this point, the overt concern of the plague narratives has been divine power as an end in itself, demonstrated for the joint benefit of Israel and Egypt (9.16). The plague of the first-born introduces the new notion that Israel must know something, namely that it is different from Egypt. As with self-selection, is this the message of choice for a group of persecuted slaves or their typological successors? Surely they would have little difficulty in distinguishing between themselves and their oppressors if they were living in the ghetto culture we usually envisage? That differentiation is offered as the divine justification for the final and most destructive plague suggests

that the need to make distinctions was very great indeed, and therefore that the threat of assimilation was potent. As noted above, the need for separation is also underlined by the Reed Sea crossing which, in the short term, preserves a safe distance between the pursuing Egyptians and their Israelite quarry but, in the long term, achieves the crucial objective of preventing Israel from returning to Egypt. This is both physical—the waves will not part a second time—and political—the violent drowning of Pharaoh and his army make peaceful co-existence an unrealistic dream.

The Risk of Exaggeration: How Oppressive Was Slavery in Egypt?

Exodus tells a story of redemption, that is the transfer of ownership from Pharaoh to God. Even commentators who acknowledge this, admitting that God does not free Israel but takes possession of them, are inclined to emphasize the contrast between slave and servant, and between the exploitative Pharaoh and God the fair employer whose employees *chose* to work for him.[54] The Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 88a conveys a different impression. As it tells it, God held Mount Sinai over Israel's heads like a barrel while 'offering' the commandments. The Babylonian Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 2b tells the same story, and even has the nations arguing with God on the basis of this apparent favouritism. Since God forced Israel to accept the Torah, but made no parallel attempt to coerce the nations, how can he criticize the nations for failing to accept the Torah? While this is a post-biblical spin with its own theological motivations, it is consistent with the Bible itself, where Israel's free will in the matter is not emphasized, any more than its liberation from slavery is emphasized.[55] Freedom and freewill are imported together into the Exodus story.

54. A typical 'faith community' example: '"*Avadim Hayenu*": We were slaves of Pharaoh, begins our response to "*Mah Nishtanah*". So are we now a free people in a free land? In *Parshat Behar*, God tells us that in the jubilee year all land must revert to its original owner, כי לי הארץ "*ki li ha aretz*": because the land belongs to God and is not ours to sell. And any Israelite who is slave to another must be released, כי לי בני ישראל עבדים "*ki li bnei Yisrael avadim*": for the children of Israel are my slaves. Can it be that we have been delivered from slavery in Egypt only to become slaves in another place? Not if עבדים "*avadim*" is understood to mean servants, not slaves. There is a world of difference between being servants of a hostile ruler in a foreign country, and serving God by carefully stewarding the land which has been promised to us: that is the liberation we celebrate together at *Pesach*' (E. Grazin, *Limmud* e-mail Torah commentary, 16 May 2006).

55. See J.D. Levenson, 'Covenant and Consent: Biblical Reflections on the Occasion of the 200th Anniversary of the United States Constitution', in D.M. Goldenberg (ed.), *The Judeo-Christian Tradition and the US Constitution: Proceedings of a Conference at Annenberg Research Institute, November 16-17, 1987* (Philadelphia: Annenberg Research Institute, 1989), pp. 71-82.

Post-biblical Judaism designates Passover as זמן חרותנו, the time of our freedom, and חג החרות, festival of freedom, but the freedom is not in the Bible itself and must be incorporated from a wordplay on Exod. 32.16.[56] Later commentators, embedding the theme of slavery versus freedom, quote out of context 'Let my people go' (5.1), and overlook God's explicit request for service, '…you shall worship God at this mountain' (3.12). Despite the fact that the Hebrew **יצא** is almost always rendered 'go out', many English translations, including NJPS, take the liberty of translating **יצא** throughout Exodus as 'go free': 'Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall *free* my people, the Israelites, from Egypt' (3.10). That 'bringing out' is not synonymous for 'liberating' is indicated by the jarring juxtaposition in NJPS of the announcements that the LORD 'freed' the Israelites from Egypt (12.51) and that every first-born *belongs* to God (13.2). This hardly sounds like freedom as usually construed.

Deuteronomy's sabbath command merits particular attention in a discussion of slavery versus service:

> Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days shall you labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day (Deut. 5.12-15).

As traditionally read, the instruction to include male and female slaves in the sabbath rest implies a contrast with Egypt, where this did not occur.[57] But several counter-readings come to mind. First, commandments one and two arguably offer Egypt as a justification for God's demand for exclusivity: God brought you out of Egypt (away from competing demands) and now you should neither have other gods nor serve them. Deuteronomy's sabbath commandment may use Egypt similarly as a reinforcement of God's right to demand service in the face of the competing demands that must have existed, especially in a discussion about slaves. God asks to be served through a day of complete rest by all occupants of the land, human and animal. The fact that he brought Israel into the land entitles him to make this demand, and the reference to slaves in Egypt may be a subtle acknowledgement that

56. Commenting on 'The writing was of God, engraved on the Tablets' (Exod. 32.16), R. Yehoshua ben Levi said, 'Do not read "engraved", but rather "freedom", for no one is free but one who engages in the Law' (*Mishnah Avot* 6.2).

57. G.W. Hepner, *Legal Friction: The Interplay of Law and Narrative and Identity Politics in Biblical Israel* (New York: Peter Lang, in preparation).

Israelites may find it particularly difficult to give their own slaves a day off, but have a special obligation to do so. A comparison with the sabbath command in Exod. 20.8-11 supports this reading. The reference there to creation justifies the command: God rested so you should rest and, by the way, he made you so should do what he asks. Similarly, God ended your slavery so he could order you to rest, and by the way, since he owns you, you must do what he says! It is also worth asking whether a desire for imitation is implicit in both sabbath commands. Since God rested on the sabbath, Israel should rest. And since God is a slave-owner who requires his slaves to rest, so Israelites should be slave-owners who require their slaves to rest. On this reading, what actually happened to Israel in Egypt is neither here nor there. At any event, we should avoid making the easy inference that references to slavery in Egypt necessarily reflect unfavourably upon Egypt, and should at the very least read them in the context of the Bible's general interest in apodictic law.

The relative unimportance of freedom in the Exodus narrative is also indicated by the initial catalyst for Israel's departure. As noted above, the tension between God and Pharaoh is exposed when God demands worship in the wilderness: 'Now therefore let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God' (3.18). Yet God makes Pharaoh refuse to let the people go to meet his demand: 'I, however will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the people go' (4.21). The conflict between Israel's two masters is intensified when Pharaoh accuses the Israelites of shirking, citing religious conflicts of interest: 'For they are shirkers; that is why they cry, "Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD our God" ' (5.8). This conflict between state and religion is the crux of Moses' original request to Pharaoh: 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness' (5.1). Exodus treats the servant with two masters dilemma, often explored *vis-à-vis* kingship (cf. 1 Sam. 8.7; Est. 3.2),[58] as a conflict of interest that is ultimately unmanageable, rendering the Diaspora untenable in the long-term.[59] The conflict is raised in its most basic form; God and Pharaoh both want to be served, Pharaoh via building projects and God via worship. The choice is crystallized in the formulaic בית עבדים, house of bondage. The concept of the 'house of bondage' is so familiar that we rarely pause to reflect on its meaning, but its significance is not obvious. Given that the Israelites were not actually imprisoned in Egypt, the term must be more metaphorical than literal, and it is tempting to see it as a variant of the

58. The fact that kingship is not explored in Exodus has serious implications for the questions I am asking in this chapter, and merits more attention than I can give it here.

59. W.H. Propp, *Exodus: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 434-35.

fiery furnace in which Israel is purified through hardship (Ezek. 22.17-22). Yet the broader contexts in which it occurs suggest another interpretation. All but one (Jer. 34.13) of the occurrences outside Exodus are embedded in warnings against false worship and following other gods (Deut. 5.6; 6.12; 7.8; 8.14; 13.6, 11; Josh. 24.17; Mic. 6.4). Perhaps the term בית עבדים, house of bondage, was chosen not to evoke Egypt, but to evoke Temple service (house of service), the desired alternative.

It is important to note that the Bible is not an abolitionist manifesto. On the contrary, it is assumed throughout that some form of slavery is inevitable and even desirable, and the account of Israel's experience in Egypt is a basis of fair treatment of slaves:

> 'Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God freed you (ויצאך, lit. brought you out), from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day' (Deut. 5.15, see also 15.12-15).

The first laws mentioned after Sinai concern the manumission of slaves ('When you buy a Hebrew slave', Exod. 21.1), but 'freedom' is by no means presented as their aspirational ideal. In extremis, slavery can be a mechanism for offering support and protection to the weak and disadvantaged, as is suggested by links in Exodus and beyond between עבד, slave, and גר, stranger or resident alien, יתום, orphan, and אלמנה, widow. These are Israel's disadvantaged, second-class citizens: 'You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless' (Deut. 24.17). And Egypt is a primary justification for treating them well: 'Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment' (Deut. 24.18). This formula is often read as if it instructs Do not oppress strangers because *you were oppressed* in the land of Egypt, but, as in the case of the Sabbath command discussed above, this is not what is said. The text does not evaluate Israel's experience in Egypt, either positively or negatively. Rather, the fact that God redeemed (purchased, but without paying the bill, as it happens) Israel from Pharaoh is used to justify a certain set of demands they must meet in their own land, including the fair treatment of those dependent upon them.

Finally, I note in passing that slavery has a function in Exodus that is unconnected with persecution and oppression. A person who was purchased as a slave automatically lost all prior status. Pharaoh's ownership stripped Israel of whatever affiliations, social or otherwise, it may have had, and the erasing of prior loyalties (familial, tribal), allowing God to 'adopt' Israel as a son, was arguably the first step in nation-building.[60] In this sense, the

60. J.L.R. Melnyk, 'When Israel Was a Child: Ancient Near Eastern Adoption Formulas and the Relationship between God and Israel', in M. Patrick Graham *et al.*

period of slavery in Egypt functioned as a form of clarification, much as the flood functions in Genesis to wipe out the inevitable confusion of primeval origins. It would be nice, though probably unrealistic, to say that slavery in Egypt paved the way for democracy in Israel. More likely, it offered the chance for a clean slate that was quickly filled with new social elites and hierarchies.

Moses as Evidence of the Assimilation Theme

A very different kind of textual evidence for the centrality of assimilation in Exodus may be detected in the representation of Moses, especially in the book's mainly biographical prologue. The opening chapters of Exodus are most readily glossed as an introduction to the hero of the rest of the book. Moses is the man who leads Israel out of Egypt to the brink of the Promised Land, and into whose hands the Sinai laws are given. Surely we need to know something about him? The answer to that question is, not necessarily. In contrast to, say, Homer, the Bible is strikingly short on biographical information about its central figures. Of Abraham, we know only his place in a genealogy, that his wife was barren, and that God issued him with a set of demands. What we learn about Abraham as a person emerges piecemeal from narratives that report events in the period that is our concern; the text is silent about Abraham's life before that time. That this is counter-intuitive may explain why many Jews search Genesis in vain for the midrashic account of Abraham's misspent youth as an assistant in his father's idol shop. But a lack of interest, or even perhaps an active suppression, of biographical information is characteristic of biblical literature in general. In prophetic texts, even Elijah who, unlike the classical prophets, features in a narrative where this sort of information could theoretically be provided, pops up in the middle of a sentence and in the middle of his life: 'Elijah the Tishbite, an inhabitant, said to Ahab, "As the LORD lives, the God whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding"' (1 Kgs 17.1). What applies to the characters that inhabit biblical texts applies also to its authors. In striking contrast to Greek writers from a similar period, Israel's self-declared historians provide no information about themselves, not even their names. In the biblical world, then, we should by no means expect biographical information about the lives and personalities of even the most important figures. The account of Moses' childhood and pre-'prophetic' call youth in Egypt is not predictable but, rather, exceptional. So why is it there?

One possible answer is the inclination of biblical narratives to extract the general and the political from the individual and private. Jacob, for

(eds.), *History and Interpretation: Essays in Honour of John H. Hayes* (JSOTSup, 173; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 245-59.

example, is of interest both as an ancestor of Israel and because he represents a paradigm according to which future generations can validate themselves and justify their actions. On this reading, Moses is a paradigm for Israel—what happens to him will happen to the people. Where Moses differs from Jacob, though, is the sense in which his early life is a prologue to the action, not the action itself. In this respect, Exodus 1–3 is closer to Hosea 1–3 than to Genesis narrative, less a complex paradigm on the Jacob model than a microcosm to highlight simple parallels. In Hosea 1–3, the prophet marries a woman who is constitutionally unfaithful, discovers that she is indeed unfaithful, isolates her, and takes her back. In the rest of the book, the pattern is repeated with God and Israel. Given the absence of character analysis or psychological insight in Hosea 1–3, unlike the Genesis Jacob cycle, it is hard to imagine that its authors intended to illuminate the rest of the book in those terms; their interest is structural. The Exodus prologue too lacks the kind of biographical information that establishes Moses' credentials or explains why he became the sort of leader he did, as is the case with stories about the young David. It even supplies information that is effectively incompatible with what follows. If Moses was raised in Pharaoh's palace by Pharaoh's daughter, for example, why did he not rely on nepotism to extract Israel from Egypt? As it is, there is barely a hint that Moses is even familiar with Pharaoh, let alone a member of his household. This suggest that the point of the prologue was not to generate psychological insights about Moses, but to highlight basic structural parallels between his life and Israel's history.

In what sense, then, does the early life of Moses serve as a microcosm of Israel as I have described it? First, and perhaps foremost, is the emphasis on hiddenness in relation to Moses, especially in the early parts of the narrative. Moses is hidden, literally by his mother (Exod. 2.2-4) and metaphorically in Pharaoh's house (Exod. 2.9-10), making him structurally similar to Joseph, whom I shall discuss in detail below, and Esther, who is likewise hidden in the king's palace (Est. 2.10), and whose name is changed to one that sounds at once sounds suitably Persian and evokes hiddenness in Hebrew (Est. 2.7). But whereas Joseph and Esther achieve what they do from within the system, Moses must leave it. The emphasis on Moses' hiddenness begins as soon as he is introduced:

> The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she *hid* him for three months. When she could *hide* him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. And his sister stationed herself at a distance to see what would befall him (Exod. 2.2-4).

At first Moses is unambiguously hidden, presumably in his mother's house. Later he is semi-concealed in a basket and among the Nile reeds—given the identification between Egypt and the Nile, the latter is already a half-

way house to Egypt—and finally he is fully concealed—even his name is changed, assuming he was named by his parents before he was weaned and taken to Pharaoh's house:

> So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, 'I drew him out of the water' (Exod. 2.9b-10).

Pharaoh's daughter's naming of Moses, especially a name that evokes being drawn from water, a symbolic birth experience, represents the another stage of his hiddenness, and Moses subsequently tries to conceal (סתר; cf. Esther) his face at the burning bush (Exod. 3.6). But what precisely is being concealed? Above all, it is Moses' identity that is hidden, but, in contrast to other similar cases, the text suggests from the outset that it will not remain concealed. Moses' name indicates that he was destined to be drawn out, first from his original Israelite background, symbolized by his rebirth from the Nile, but ultimately out of Egypt, symbolized by his Reed Sea crossing, another symbolic birth.[61]

An interesting ambiguity in the Exodus narrative centres on the question of whether Moses is newly born or reborn. God tells him that he is the God of a father Moses seems not to have known: 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (3.6).[62] This parallels Israel, whose relationship with God is at once newly established by Moses and based on a pre-existing promise to the patriarchs. There is a sense in which both Moses and Israel discover their roots, and yet the practical impact of the fact that they had roots to discover is slight to non-existent. Moses must have known that he was a Hebrew, but there is no obvious sense that he is *returning* to his people. The text reports neither how he knew about his ethnic origins (a lot depends upon the age at which he was thought to have grown up; see Exod. 2.10, where he is returned by his mother to Pharaoh's daughter), nor the practical implications of that knowledge. The ambiguity surrounding Moses' identity is mirrored in the question of whether or not he is 'going home' in geographic terms. The promised land is precisely that—promised; Exodus contains practically no indication that Moses' ancestors had previously lived there, and had thus begun to fulfil God's promise to Abraham in Gen. 12.1-3. Indeed, Moses' relationship with the land is even more tenuous than his relationship with the people. He was born among Hebrews, but not in Canaan—hence the complete absence of verbs of return; we have יצא, go out, but no שוב, go back.

61. A.G. Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 223-24, writes evocatively of God at the Reed Sea as Israel's midwife.

62. Since אביך, your father, is singular, it may refer not to the patriarchs, but to Moses' own father, with the names of the patriarchs being added later.

All this is true for Israel, as well as for Moses. We are told that the Israelites had ancestors, but nothing of how they knew or what they thought about them. Canaan is not the home to which the Israelites are returning, but the land their ancestors were promised that *they* (apparently the generation of 'Egyptian' Hebrews, not the patriarchs themselves) would be given.[63] On one level, the Exodus story makes no sense in its present form unless prior identification with Israel as a people and a land is assumed, and yet the two are not connected as strongly as one might have anticipated. The choice to present the land of Canaan in this particular way is especially striking given its role throughout the Bible and, as it turns out, throughout Jewish history, in preserving a collective identity.

Exodus opens with a list of the people who came down to Egypt with Joseph (1.1-5). If the Joseph narrative links Genesis to Exodus, this text links Exodus to Genesis. Although it is short and almost formulaic, the details turn out to be telling. In Genesis, the land of Canaan is central. Famine in the land drives the brothers to Egypt in the first place (Gen. 42.2), and once there they go backwards and forwards between Egypt and Canaan, transporting food and bringing family members who had stayed behind. Ultimately even Jacob leaves Canaan but, when he dies, he is taken back by Joseph and buried there. In Exodus 1, the land slips from view and the focus shifts to the family. The complete silence about the land of Canaan is essential to the unfolding Exodus narrative. We are about to hear the story of the journey to the *promised* land, and when the patriarchs are invoked, it is invariably as the recipients of that promise, not as former residents of or sojourners in the land. Since Exodus gives no sense that the Israelites are going home, a reference to the land in Exodus 1 would produce all the wrong expectations.

Another important feature underlined by the Moses microcosm is self-selection in relation to identity:

> Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he *went out*, יצא, to his kinsfolk and saw their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand (Exod. 2.11-12).

Just as Moses went out of Pharaoh's palace, so will Israel go out of Egypt, and just as an act of violence forces Moses to decide whether he is an

63. The early references to the patriarchs (Exod. 3.6, 16; 4.5) do not refer the the promise of land, but simply identify God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Later, the patriarchs are linked to the land, but only as recipients of a promise concerning their descendants, not as inhabitants of the land themselves: 'Then the LORD said to Moses, "Set out from here, you and the people that you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it" ' (Exod. 33.1).

Egyptian or an Israelite, so violence forces even assimilated Israelites to move firmly into one camp or the other, and eventually precludes a return passage across the Reed Sea. The final act of self-selection occurs with the command to put blood on the door posts:

> And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt (12.13).

This instruction effectively shifts responsibility from God to Israel, and the effect of the shift is to emphasize assimilation, at least alongside and even perhaps over persecution as the significant threat. People would not usually have the choice at this advanced stage to remove themselves from the clutches of persecutors; external help or a change of heart on the part of the persecutors is required. Assimilation, on the other hand, does not take the form of a crisis, and thus allows space and time for self-determination. Moreover, internal pressures as well as external are involved, thus making it easier for those affected to decide to change the course of events. Even at an advanced stage of assimilation, it is possible to reverse the process and hold fast to the original identity. Self-determination of this kind is not usually an option for the persecuted. The decision to convert to the religion of the persecutors would, of course, represent a counter example, but it does not apply in this case.

As well as settling the important question of precisely who left Egypt, self-selection addresses the even bigger question: who is, or who will be, an Israelite? The answer provided by this text is: whoever puts blood on his doorpost. According to the narrative's own logic, Egyptians who observed the activity of their neighbours and decided to follow suit could have avoided the firstborn plague and left with everyone else. Israelites who ignored the warning, on the other hand, would have perished along with the Egyptians. This last factor is inconvenient for the traditional reading, and is thus often overlooked; as noted above, persecuted slaves would not have been given the choice to assimilate. The theme of assimilation is highlighted by a midrash on the word חמשים (fifths, columns?) in Exod. 13.18, which claims that only a small proportion of Israelites left Egypt, the rest dying under cover of the three days of darkness,[64] perhaps to save

64. See *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael* (trans. J.Z. Lauterbach; Skokie: Varda Books, 1933), *Pisha* 12.79-88*:* '*Hamushim* means one in five. Some say one in fifty. Some say one in five hundred. Rabbi Nehorai says: [I swear by] the Temple Service! It was not one in five hundred that went out [but fewer]. It says, "I made you into myriads like the grass of the field" (Ezek. 15.7), and it says, "The children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and became huge" (Exod. 1.6)—a woman would give birth to six at one time. And you say that one in five hundred went out?! [I swear by] the Temple Service! It was not one in five hundred that went out [but fewer]. Rather, many Jews died in Egypt. When did they die? During the three days of darkness, as it says, "People could not see

divine embarrassment,[65] or perhaps because the midrashic author equated darkness with assimilation. The Jews who died in Egypt were those who kept their identities in the dark ('people could not see each other', Exod. 10.23)—*incognito ergo sum*.[66] Assimilation anxiety likewise underlies the teaching attributed to Rabbi Eliezer ha-Kappar: Israel possessed four particular virtues in Egypt—they were chaste, they avoided slander, they did not change their names, and they did not change their language.[67] The confused and confusing situation about who died—not to mention how they died (divine anger?)—finds a more positive echo in the account of who eventually left Egypt. Presumably Egyptians formed part of the mixed multitude (12.38), showing that the division was neither strictly ethnic nor class-based, but based on those who chose to throw in their lot.

Moses and Joseph as Evidence of Assimilation

A crucial component of Aaron Wildavsky's argument in his stimulating book on assimilation in the Joseph narrative is the idea that Moses represents Joseph in reverse.[68] Wildavsky assumes the texts in question were written in the order in which they appear, and thus concludes that Moses was introduced to undo what Joseph has done. I see the compositional primacy the other way around, with Exodus written before the Joseph narrative, and I conclude that Joseph is introduced to do whatever Moses effectively undoes. Joseph does many things, but above all he assimilates into Egypt. This suggests that the authors of the Joseph narrative saw Exodus as a solution to the problem of assimilation, and that their task was to show how that problem came to exist. Joseph was thus shaped in opposition to Moses, and the parallels enhanced by editorial additions to Exodus, mainly in ch. 2. Both Joseph and Moses are physically attractive (Gen. 39.6 cf. Exod. 2.2), a feature mentioned at precisely the point of immersion in Egypt (cf. also Sarah entering Egypt, Gen. 12.14). Moses is hidden, צפן (Exod. 2.2,3) and indeed subsequently hides, סתר, his face (Exod. 3.6), while Joseph's Egyptian name, צפנת פענח, Zaphenath-paneah, sounds like 'hidden face'

each other" (Exod. 10.23). They were burying their dead, and they thanked and praised *God* that their enemies could not see and rejoice at their downfall.'

65. Cf. *Exod. R*. 14.3.

66. I learned this phrase from H. Soloveitchik, 'Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy', *Tradition* 28.4 (1994), pp. 64-130. Soloveitchik says he learned it from his college days (n. 43).

67. *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, *Pisha* 5.17.

68. A. Wildavsky, *Assimilation versus Separation: Joseph the Administrator and the Politics of Religion in Biblical Israel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002), pp. 192-96, for many other parallels. Wildavsky too sees Moses undoing the assimilation created by Joseph, but, unlike me, assumes that Exodus is the later text.

in Hebrew (Gen. 41.45). Moses is left by the Nile in response to a decree by Pharaoh (Exod. 2.3), and Pharaoh stands by the Nile in the dream that Joseph interprets at the start of his ascent (Gen. 41.3). Moses is drawn from the water (Exod. 2.10), while Joseph is drawn (Gen. 37.1) from a pit in which there is no water (Gen. 37.24). Both narratives feature the apparent absence of witnesses at the scene of a crime at the moment they 'leave' the bosom, metaphorical or actual, of Egypt: compare 'He turned this way and that and saw that there was no man' (Exod. 2.12) with '…and there was no man from the men of the house there' (Gen. 39.11). Moses goes to a well in the land of Midian (Exod. 2.15), while Joseph is drawn from a waterless pit by Midianites (Gen. 37.28) who seem otherwise superfluous to the narrative—they double with the Ishmaelites.[69] On the face of it, both Moses and Joseph are accomplished assimilators; Moses assimilated successfully into Midian as well as in Egypt. Yet there are differences between them. The Egyptians acknowledge the impact of God on Joseph's life (Gen. 41.31), but they do not involve themselves in the details. Moses' Midianite family, by contrast, do not merely recognize and benefit from his relationship with God; at the very least, they become fellow-travellers, and at the most they participate. Zipporah saves Moses from God's attempt to kill him by circumcising their son (Exod. 4.24-26), and Jethro provides the infrastructure for the application of Sinai law (Exod. 18.13-27). The dynamic between Moses and the various non-Israelites in whose midst he lives is quite different than that between Joseph and the Egyptians and, in the end, only Moses comes out of Egypt alive.

Conclusions

The almost universally held assumption that Exodus is about oppressive slavery and persecution misses a crucial trick. It provides an inspiring model of resistance, but offers little or nothing in the way of guidance for those who find themselves wanting to sleep with the enemy. The Exodus solution to that particular problem is seclusion in a land of one's own, but this raises a still more important matter that standard interpretations pass over in silence. Nationally speaking, Israel's experience in Egypt is formative. By allowing a more complex reading of Exodus that incorporates concerns about identity, we permit at the same time a richer national template to come into focus. This template is evident throughout the chapters that

69. See E.L. Greenstein, 'An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph', in K. Gros Louis (ed.), *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), pp. 114-25. See also R. Pirson, *The Lord of the Dreams: A Semantic and Literary Analysis of Genesis 37–50* (Sheffield: JSOTSup, 355; Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 69-79.

describe Israel's sojourn in Egypt, but its implications for the new nation are clearest in relation to Exod. 12.43-51:

> The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: This is the law of the Passover offering: no foreigner, בן־נכר, shall eat of it. But any slave a man has bought may eat of it once he has been circumcised. No bound or hired helper shall eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house: you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house; nor shall you break a bone of it. The whole community of Israel shall offer it. If a stranger, גר, who dwells with you would offer the Passover to the Lord, all his males must be circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be as a citizen of the country, אזרח הארץ. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it. There shall be one law for the citizen and one for the stranger who dwells among you. And all the Israelites did so; as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did. That very day the Lord freed the Israelites from the land of Egypt, troop by troop.

The designation of Passover as God's eternal night of vigil for all Israelites (12.42) is followed by an attempt to construct a nation around who may or may not eat the Pesach offering (Exod. 12.43-51). It will not be a nation without borders or immigration controls (no foreigners or temporary workers can participate, 12.45), but the stranger, גר, and by implication the slave, עבד, will have the rights of full citizens conditional upon circumcision (12.44). Here begins the story of people whose hearts, though enticed, were not seduced, and were thus given an extraordinary opportunity. Needless to say, the cost was high, not least in terms of Egyptian lives lost, and the bill everlasting: the eternal requirements to consecrate to God all firstborn men and animals (13.1, 15), and to celebrate Passover annually (13.6). But the intended benefit was a just society, shaped by lessons learned in Egypt and distilled through the liturgical lens of the events that accompanied Israel's birth as a nation.

Chapter 2

God's Influence on Influencing God—
A Right Royal Puzzle

When my father was a king
He was a king who knew exactly what he knew,
And his brain was not a thing
Forever swinging to and fro and fro and to.
Shall I, then, be like my father
And be wilfully unmoveable and strong?
Or is it better to be right?
Or am I right when I believe I may be wrong?

'A Puzzlement', *The King and I*.[1]

Must an all-powerful king be immutable, or can he open himself to influence in whatever form it might take? Since this is 1950s Broadway, the King of Siam soon learns that real autocrats allow themselves to be educated, and since this is 1950s Broadway, education takes the form of a girl. The King of Siam's puzzle is precisely the one that interests me in relation to the God of Israel. There is no Anna, of course, not even an Asherah, but there is the choice to be influenced. Reading two biblical narratives on kingship themes in the light of two rabbinic parables concerning kings, I suggest that the biblical writers saw kingship both as a locus of God's power and, more surprisingly, as a vehicle through which God allows himself to be affected (educated). My strategy requires discussion of some negative aspects of kingship in order to uncover the constructive theological value that emerges once we acknowledge the difficulties inherent in describing God as a king. As is probably evident by now, what follows is not a comprehensive survey of divine kingship, but a reassessment of the significance of kingship language and imagery when applied to God.[2]

1. Oscar Hammerstein, 1951.

2. I am grateful to Robert Gordon for inviting me to participate in the Cambridge University Old Testament Seminar series that generated the collection in which a version of this chapter, minus some new material on Esther, appears as 'By Royal Appointment: God's Influence on Influencing God', in R.P. Gordon (ed.), *The God of*

On that day God shall be as a King over all the earth

What did biblical writers have in mind when they described God as a king? A long and unnaturally monolithic history of interpretation, both Jewish and Christian, equates divine kingship with universal rule, justice, order and stability, but there is room for a nuanced view. Alongside reassuring accounts of an idealized ruler are narratives that evoke an unfamiliar, all-too-human king. For reasons that have little to do with the texts themselves, interpreters began long ago to pore over the former texts and skim the latter. Here I take the opposite approach. Pausing briefly over traditional understandings of divine kingship as an entirely positive phenomenon, I turn quickly to an unorthodox view that emphasizes its negative aspects.

Most of the forty-seven occasions in the Hebrew Bible when the word king is applied directly to God are drawn from Psalms or prophetic texts; only two appear in the Pentateuch, both in poetic texts (Num. 23.21 and Deut. 33.5).[3] In addition to these references, as Marc Brettler shows in his monograph on the subject,[4] royal language, imagery and type-scenes pervade the Hebrew Bible, and many divine titles that do not explicitly denote kingship have royal connotations.[5] Brettler is typical of biblical exegetes in distinguishing sharply between the attributes of human kings and the royal attributes of God:

> The metaphor does not directly map Israelite royal qualities on to God; it often attempts to stress the incomparability of God as divine king by adding superlatives to his royal qualities… The superlative nature of God's kingship is also emphasized by the lack of projection on to God of expressions from the human sphere which imply royal weakness. For example, God is never called a *nasi*, 'exalted one', or *rosh*, 'head', since the usage (and not etymology) of these terms suggests diminished royal power.[6]

A detailed analysis of the contexts in which the metaphor occurs was not part of Brettler's project.[7] Had he undertaken such an analysis, he might

Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 73-93, and for his many penetrating comments on various drafts. Whatever remains that is far-fetched and fanciful testifies to the good advice I rejected.

3. It is often noted (e.g. J. Gray, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Reign of God* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979], p. 7) that the so-called Enthronement Psalms are an obvious starting point for a study of divine kingship. This seems correct but, not least because these psalms are the focus of so many studies, I shall not deal with them at all here.

4. M.Z. Brettler, *God Is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor* [JSOTSup, 76; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989].

5. E.g. נגיד, משיח, בחיר, אדני, רעה, נשיא, ראש. See Brettler, *God Is King*, pp. 29-49, for a full discussion of royal appellations.

6. Brettler, *God Is King*, pp. 162-63.

7. 'An exploration of certain additional details of the metaphor's function in

have been less confident in asserting that Israelite royal qualities are not mapped directly on to God. By rereading texts in which God is either called, or behaves like, a king, I hope to show that the boundaries between divine and human kingship are more blurred than the standard account suggests. To be sure, the majority of Hebrew Bible texts support the traditional view of God's kingship as an entirely positive phenomenon, but there are significant counter-examples that merit attention.

Although the vast majority of exegetes deal exclusively with the positive manifestations of God's kingship, there are a few exceptions. Martin Buber paved the way for approaches that emphasize its complexity with his characterization of the kingship of God as a paradox that overcomes the separation between religion and politics:

> The unconditioned claim of the divine Kingship is recognized at the point when the people proclaims JHWH Himself as King, Him alone and directly (Exod. 15.18), and JHWH Himself enters upon the kingly reign (19.6). He is not content to be 'God' in the religious sense. He does not want to surrender to man that which is not 'God's', the rule over the entire actuality of worldly life: this very rule He lays claim to and enters upon it; for there is nothing that is not God's. He will apportion to the one, for ever and ever chosen by Him, his tasks, but naked power without a situationally related task He does not wish to bestow.[8]

More recently, Stuart Lasine has published an engaging and idiosyncratic study of biblical kingship (human as well as divine) that introduces a whole new dimension.[9] If, for Buber, it is the engagement with the political, as well as cosmic, sphere that introduces tension over human versus divine authority and 'naked power', for Lasine it is that the concept of kingship is psychoanalytically laden. Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that fathers, not kings, are his real interest, but no matter! His synthesis of a dazzling array of material—anthropological, classical, historical, political and literary, as

ancient Israel would be fruitful: it would be interesting to note in exactly what genres (e.g. psalms of thanksgiving, prophecies of consolation) and time-periods the kingship metaphor is used most, to what extent specific biblical authors develop and revitalize the metaphor, and how they used it in conjunction with other metaphors to aid in the depiction of God' (*God Is King*, p. 167).

8. *Kingship of God* (trans. R. Scheimann; New Jersey: Humanity Books, 1967), p. 119. Buber's study has been criticized for its narrow, philological approach and for focusing on the Sinai tradition at the expense of Baal-related conceptions of kingship evident in some Psalms (see, e.g., Gray*, The Biblical Doctrine of the Reign of God*, p. 106). Yet given the extent to which scholarship on divine kingship draws on Psalms, and assuming that the attitude of the Hebrew Bible towards divine kingship is not homogeneous, it may be as well that he overlooked them.

9. *Knowing Kings: Knowledge, Power, and Narcissism in the Hebrew Bible* (Semeia, 40; Atlanta: Society Biblical Literature, 2001).

well as psychoanalytic—demonstrates beyond doubt that divine kingship has a dark side. In one of two chapters that address it directly, 'The Devil Made Me Do It', Lasine suggests that God's royal inaccessibility makes it difficult to call him to account for persecuting Job. Just as a human king is exempt from moral reckoning, so God is in some senses beyond the sphere of accountability, and God's kingship thus becomes a vehicle for exploring problematic aspects of his rule. In his chapter on Narcissism, Lasine sees the problematic aspects of divine rule as emerging from the dual identification of God as king *and* father:

> Readers of the Hebrew Bible are introduced to a royal God and, to that extent, are also invited to relate to him in the way that a king's subjects relate to their sovereign. The metaphors of king and father work together to identify us as members of 'the royal family', descendants of YHWH's special patriarchs and his special kings. And *that* means we might be treated with all the ambivalence, suspicion, rivalry, and string-attached love that characterize the attitude of a king when he views members of the royal family as competing to succeed—or overthrow—him. Depending on the nature of the king or the 'family dynamic', it may also mean that the father will simultaneously want his privileged children to be better than him and need them to fail at reaching that goal. He may support *and* undermine them, even if in some cases the double attitude manifests itself in 'splitting', in this case, splitting between the supported son-kings like David, who function as narcissistic mirrors, and the undermined ones like Saul, the flawed mirrors whom he eventually humiliates or smashes.[10]

To be sure, the combined metaphors of father and king offer an ideal model (patient? client?) for Lasine to analyse—Daddy writ large with a cohesive, though by no means homogeneous, brood of boys (human kings such as David and Saul). Yet it is far from clear that the biblical metaphors are as inextricably connected as he suggests. Does God's kingship really play an indispensable, or even operative, role in his fatherhood? Surely Lasine could have conducted the same case study using instead the model of God as patriarch with his trio of significant sons: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

Most fruitful for my purposes here are the chapters of *Knowing Kings* that focus on human kingship, and of particular value is Lasine's discussion of the dissemination of information—to the king and from the court.[11] He suggests that biblical authors dealt with the problem of representing Solomon by minimizing personal history—his relationships with sons and lovers, for example—while providing a data glut of stereotypical ancient Near Eastern royal imagery to conceal the real man.[12] Neither subject nor

10. Lasine, *Knowing Kings*, pp. 127-40.

11. Lasine, *Knowing Kings*, pp. 216-17.

12. Biblical comparisons with the Tabernacle (Exod. 35–40) and Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 1) spring to mind; so much detail, but who can visualize them?

reader would ever discover that Solomon, like the Wizard of Oz, was only human! Moreover, courtiers (in this case, the scribal gatekeepers of the texts that conceal Solomon from public scrutiny) avoided the fraught problem faced by, say, Stefan Heym's fictional court historian in *The King David Report*—the recording of royal flaws.[13] Ingenious as Lasine's proposal is, it may be misleading. Court appointees, through necessity, find ways of dealing with imperfection (which court-appointed painters could have thrived or even survived without a talent for straightening backs and air-brushing acne scars?). The role of the court historian is not to conceal the king behind the temple fixtures, but rather to 'package' him, ensuring that the people see only those characteristics and qualities (Solomon's wisdom, for example) that his courtiers or, in our case, scribal guardians, wish him to exhibit.[14]

Reading a Negative Metaphor Positively

Not surprisingly, Lasine devotes little space to the question of *why* biblical authors chose to describe God using terminology that implies he sometimes acts like flawed human beings. His interdisciplinary approach frees him from what some might see as the tyranny of theology; the implications of his reading for synagogue or church do not seem to trouble him greatly. Moreover, his psychoanalytic interests offer explanation enough; Lasine is writing (at least in part) as a way of coming to know himself and his place in the world. (Surely his subjects too wrote about God as a way of coming to terms with power and impotence, authority and vulnerability, control and chaos, their parents…?) I want to explore the possibility that, in describing God as a king, the biblical writers were self-consciously developing a mechanism that permitted them both to relate to God and to *affect* him. As to precisely which biblical writers were developing this mechanism, this must be addressed elsewhere. I shall merely note for now that the claims I make here point to Deuteronomic and/or Deuteronomistic authors, with their emphasis on writing and justice in connection with kingship,[15] as the most

13. *The King David Report* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

14. The book of Esther provides a perfect case study. The king's courtiers effectively manage Ahasuerus PLC, telling him how he should deal with his marital problems and issuing decrees in his name. Esther's effectiveness resides in her ability to circumvent the courtiers through personal contact with the king and write her own texts. See M. Bal, 'Lot[s] of Writing', in D. Boyarin (ed.), *Poetics Today* 15 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 89-114.

15. B.M. Levinson, 'Kingship in Deuteronomy', *VT* 51 (2001), pp. 511-34 (520-28), emphasizes the significance of justice in relation to kingship in Deuteronomy and distinguishes the attitude of the Deuteronomic author from that of the Deuteronomistic Historian. For a different line on the same subject see G. Knoppers, 'The Deuteronomist

plausible sources of this material. Two passages come to mind in which a written text limits or at least affects a king's actions and behaviour. The first is the Law of the King in Deut. 17.14-20. As Bernard Levinson observes, these verses include five prohibitions specifying what the king should *not* do, leaving him 'but a single positive duty: while sitting demurely on his throne, to "read each day of his life" from the very Torah scroll that delimits his powers (vv. 18-20)'.[16] The second is 2 Kings 22–23, in which Shaphan the scribe reads to King Josiah from a scroll (usually identified as Deut. 12–26) found during Temple repairs. The effect is powerful and immediate; Josiah tears his garments and promptly institutes the Josianic reforms. I hope to show that the divine king too was subject to the power of the text.[17]

Influencing God in Ancient Israel

In his superb article 'Who will stand in the breach?' Yochanan Muffs explores the two-directional nature of prophecy. On the one hand, prophets seek to improve human behaviour and, on the other, they try to influence God.[18] Indeed, Muffs sees this latter activity, particularly with respect to the limitation and diversion of divine anger, as the prophet's central task. There are several parade examples; Muffs mentions Abraham on Sodom and Gomorrah—'Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?' (Gen. 18.25)[19]—and Moses after the golden calf—'Turn from Your blazing anger and renounce the punishment against Your people' (Exod. 32.12). Yet given that the Hebrew Bible reflects a world-view in which every minor misfortune and catastrophe

and the Deuteronomic Law of the King: A Reexamination of a Relationship', *ZAW* 108 (1996), pp. 329-46.

16. Levinson, 'Kingship in Deuteronomy', p. 522.

17. I am grateful to Andrew Mein for inspiring input on biblical kingship, especially in the context of our joint presentation at a Cambridge MPhil Seminar, February 2003. Andrew introduced me to the suggestion made by W. Houston, following M. Walzer and A. Gramsci, that the ideology of kingship, even positively expressed, contains within itself the seeds of critique of kingship. See W. Houston, ' "You shall open your hand to your needy brother": Ideology and Moral Formation in Deut. 15.1-18', in J. Rogerson *et al*. (eds.), *The Bible in Ethics* (JSOTSup, 207; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 296-314.

18. See Muffs, *Love and Joy*, pp. 9-48.

19. 'The men went on from there to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Abraham came forward and said, "Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will you then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" ' (Gen. 18.22-25).

is attributed to God, there are surprisingly few explicit cases of divine anger management. To be sure, guilt and sin offerings function in intercessory roles in some Hebrew Bible texts (Gen. 8.20-22), but the absence of a formal language component renders sacrifice a relatively blunt instrument.[20] While many psalms are likewise intercessory, biblical narratives contain few examples of persuasive psalms in action. A good illustration is Jonah's pleading lament from the belly of the whale (Jon. 2.2-10), but it is important to bear in mind the context. The book of Jonah may be read as a catalogue of prophetic strategies that work here and nowhere else: Jonah's prophetic oracle is a mere five words long; the Ninevites repent immediately and completely; and God responds on cue by renouncing entirely his intended punishment (Jon. 3.5-10). If not quite the parody of prophecy it is often called, Jonah hardly typifies the prophetic experience, and its use of a supplicatory psalm is as likely to indicate that this was highly unusual as that it was the norm. Overlapping with intercessory psalms is prayer, formal or informal. Hannah's prayer (1 Sam. 1.9-11) is an example of effective prayer, and David's (2 Sam. 12.15-23) of a prayer that fails. Yet, once again, there are fewer instances than one might expect in a text that views God as the cause of most effects. How, then, did ancient Israelites attempt to influence God? My response to this question involves asking another. Did the biblical authors, like the biblical prophets, envisage their activity as essentially two-directional, addressing both Israel and God?[21]

A fine example of the use of a text to affect divine behaviour occurs in Jer. 51.59-64.[22] Jeremiah writes on a scroll all the disasters that will befall Babylon. He instructs Seraiah to take it to Babylon and read it aloud,

20. See S.C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 'It is a moot point whether the texts [describing sacrificial rituals] are described as early enough by a large enough consensus of modern scholars to allow them to be universally regarded as significant but, whatever their date, they make no reference to any actual words of a prayer and may imply no more than a formula of two or three words at most or, possibly, an acceptance of the need for atonement before the arrangement for its availability is undertaken' (p. 31).

21. My perspective here has much in common with Y. Amit's ideological approach, *Hidden Polemics in Biblical Narrative* (trans. J. Chipman; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000): 'At a relatively early stage the biblical authors decided to record the stories of the past in writing, to arrange them in chronological order, and to create the biblical historiography, that occupies nearly half of the Bible as a whole… The goal that confronted them was not the creation of a chronicle or the gathering of stories whose purpose was merely to amuse or to entertain, but the creation of stories by whose means it would be possible to educate and to transmit ideological messages and thereby shape the life of the faithful' (p. 43). I depart from Amit in my assumption that these polemical texts were written with the intention of influencing God as well as people.

22. I am grateful to Robert Gibbs, University of Toronto, for this example (personal communication).

concluding with the words, 'O LORD, You Yourself have declared concerning this place that it shall be cut off, without inhabitant, man or beast; that it shall be a desolation for all time' (51.62). Jeremiah tells Seraiah that, once he has finished reading the scroll, he should tie a stone to it, throw it in the Euphrates, and proclaim 'Thus shall Babylon sink and never rise again'. At first glance, this account seems unusual for its suggestion that the scroll was directed at God, and for its attribution to the scroll of quasi-magical power.[23] But is it in fact representative of a wider interest in the use of the written word to influence God?

God as King in Midrash

In order to develop this reading of the significance of divine kingship in the Hebrew Bible, I shall examine some rabbinic texts that do not so much contrast God with human kings—as appears to be the case in the Hebrew Bible—as liken him to them. Without assuming continuity between biblical and rabbinic interpretations of divine kingship, I shall read the two alongside each other in order to assess how much common ground they share. The relative directness of the rabbis as compared with the biblical writers will help, I think, to bring to the surface concerns that are buried deep in the biblical text (others may doubt that these concerns are present in the Hebrew Bible at all). It is useful in addition that, as well as being more direct (perhaps through reduced theological sensitivity, perhaps through increased desperation), the rabbis explore divine kingship via metaphor *and* simile. God *is* a king, but he is also *like* a king.[24] While it is possible that comparisons between divine and human kings were intended to demonstrate God's superiority over kings of flesh and blood—to show, somewhat perversely, that he is incomparable—a passing glance at the texts in question suggests otherwise. Rather, the use of simile as opposed to metaphor seems to create a diplomatic distance between object and description.[25] Having established that God is in one respect or another *like* a human king, the rabbis could safely express concerns and, more to the point, criticisms of God that would have appeared heretical and provocative if applied directly to him.

23. My thoughts about the use of the written words to affect God have been influenced especially by S. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Israel* (London: SPCK, 1997).

24. For a comprehensive survey of rabbinic parables of the king, see I. Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1903).

25. This is reminiscent of the care taken by Ezekiel to avoid an explicit description of God: 'Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a human form' (1.26).

David Stern's *Parables in Midrash* is centrally concerned with parables of the king.[26] His case study is *Lamentations Rabbah*, a third-century CE collection in which God is frequently compared to a human king. An especially appealing example is a parable about the king who marries a woman only to abandon her:

> R. Abba bar Kahana said: It is like a king (משל למלך) who married a woman and wrote her a large marriage-settlement (*ketubah*). He wrote to her: So many bridal chambers am I building for you; so much jewellery I make for you; so much gold and silver I give you. Then he left her for many years and journeyed to the provinces. Her neighbours used to taunt her and say to her: hasn't your husband abandoned you? Go! Marry another man. She would weep and sigh, and afterward she would enter her bridal chamber and read her marriage-settlement and sigh [with relief]. Many years and days later the king returned. He said to her: I am amazed that you have waited for me all these years! She replied: My master—O king! If not for the large wedding-settlement you wrote me, my neighbours long ago would have led me astray.[27]

Stern commends the mind that made Torah study the functional equivalent of divine presence, Israel's continuing source of hope in exile, and challenges readers to find another example in literature from this period of a woman who survives by reading! For our purposes, though, his most important observation concerns the author's critical stance on God and his treatment of Israel:

> At this point, however, we might ask: Why should that consolation be necessary in the first place? Why must the poor matrona suffer in the king's absence? Or to put these questions in the terms of the narrative's own logic: Why must the king leave his wife in the first place? Why must he journey to the foreign provinces? If these questions are never answered in the course of the *mashal*, neither are a host of others: Does it ever enter the king's mind that, after he departs, the wicked neighbours will test and torment his wife? Are the lavish promises he makes to his wife in the ketubah meant to console her in his absence? Or are they the actual gifts he promises to give her? But if his promises are sincere, why is the king, upon his return, so astonished at her faithfulness? Conversely, if he does not expect the ketubah to console his bereft wife, then is there any logical reason for her to remain faithful to him? Or are the promises in the ketubah actually false? Is not the king's absence really an act of unjustified and gratuitous cruelty to his hapless wife? Is the king criminally responsible for the suffering his abandoned wife undergoes during the period of his absence?[28]

26. *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

27. Stern's translation of *Lam. R.* 3.21, *Parables in Midrash*, p. 57.

28. Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, p. 60.

While Stern's analysis offers a perfect opening for a more sceptical approach to the kingship of God, I turn now to *mashal* that is more revealing about the rabbinic understanding of what it means to see God as a king. In the following midrash, the angel Metatron finds God crying over the death of Moses:

> Metatron came at that time, and fell on his face. He said to Him, 'Master of the Universe, Moses' life was in your hands and his death was in your hands'. The Holy One Blessed Be He said, 'Let me tell you a parable. What is this matter like? It is like a king who had a son. Time after time his father became angry with him and wanted to kill him, because he did not honour his father, but his mother used to save him from his [father's] hand. One day his mother died and the king wept. His servants said to him, "Our Lord king, why are you weeping?" He replied, "I weep not only for my wife, but for my son. So many times I have been angry at him and wished to kill him, but she saved him from my hand".' 'So too', said the Holy One Blessed Be He to Metatron, 'I weep not just for Moses but for Israel. How many times have they provoked me and I was angry at them, but he stood before me in the breach to turn back my anger from destroying them'.[29]

Whereas the *ketubah* midrash did not require that the neglectful husband be a king (a wealthy merchant would have served as well), the angry father's royal status in this midrash is central to the overall theme; the father must be as close to all-powerful as humanly possible. By unpacking the midrash, we see how the identification of the father as a king provides the peg on which the author can hang his real concern: how a beneficent, omnipotent God can harm his own beloved people.

Our initial question must concern Metatron's approach to God: why did he fall on his face? One response is that this was his customary practice but, since we can expect each and every word in these terse narratives to be meaning-laden, it pays to look further. The significance of Metatron's action seems to be twofold. First, the formal ritual evokes a court setting, thus underlining the connection between the actors in the *mashal* (the human king, his courtiers, his wife, and his son) and those in the frame (the divine king, a heavenly courtier, Moses and Israel).[30] Second, the action of falling on his face suggests that Metatron is approaching God in an intercessory role or, at least, that he has a large request or a delicate comment to make. There is nothing casual about this interaction. Metatron's opening words must be intended to provoke a divine response, but an ambiguity in the Hebrew leaves us uncertain about what kind of response they require. On

29. *Midrash Tanhuma* (ed. Buber), p. 13 (my translation).

30. The meaning of Metatron's name is obscure but, if it is derived from the Greek *meta thronos* (i.e. one who serves before the throne), we can conjecture that the choice of this particular angel reflects a court setting. See G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), pp. 377-81.

the one hand, we can read here a statement followed by an unspoken question: 'Master of the World, Moses' life was in your hands and his death was in your hands [*so why are you crying*?]'. Alternatively, what appears to be a statement could be rendered as a question: 'Master of the World, Moses' life was in your hands and his death was in your hands [*were they not*?]'. It is not hard to imagine why the latter—more of an incitement than an enquiry—might have been in the characteristically Jewish form of statement as question.[31] As it turns out, the *mashal* answers both questions: why was God crying over milk that (given his omnipotence) he must have spilt on purpose? And, far more dangerous, did God *really* have full control of the life and death of Moses?

The first reading of Metatron's question is answered in the *mashal* by the king (God's counterpart) in response to his servants (the equivalents of Metatron). The servants make explicit what I have taken as Metatron's unspoken question: 'O Lord king, why are you weeping?' The king explains that he is crying for both his wife and his son—his wife because she has died, and his son because, since his wife's death, none remains to prevent him killing his son. Though not a full account, as we shall see, the king's response to his servants goes some way to explaining how God could be crying over something he did himself and could have avoided; he is actually crying about something else! God's action ('authorizing' the death of Moses) had the consequence of harming (killing?) Israel; as well as mourning Moses, God is mourning Israel. (Of course, we have no reason to assume that the king, all-powerful as he may have been on the human stage, was responsible for the death of his wife, but that is not a helpful observation in this context.)

The second reading of Metatron's question (Moses' life and death were in your hands, *were they not*?) is more complex than the first. This is in part because, unlike the first reading (*why are you crying?*), the question is not made explicit in the *mashal*. It is also more sensitive; Metatron is asking whether God's tears signal a lack of control. This may border on heresy, but it is precisely what the king of the *mashal* concedes to his servants. He admits freely that a matter that appears to be fully within his own control—the decision to kill his own son—is, in fact, beyond his control. The king is crying because he does not want to kill his son but, now that his wife can no longer intercede, he knows he will. Using the voice of God himself (*chutzpah* or highly diplomatic), the author of the *mashal* thus suggests that God is indeed Master of the Universe, and that Moses' life was indeed in his hands, but that God does not have full control of his own hands. He needs an intercessor (Moses) to prevent him from committing through anger an act

31. Cf. the Jewish father's question to his philosopher son: 'From this you make a living?'

he desires in his heart to avoid. The final twist is that, at least on one reading of the biblical text, it was God's anger that caused him to kill Moses. We see now precisely how God can cry for his own deed—he did not want to do it!

Before proceeding to the first biblical text, we must address a final question about the midrash: what did its author hope to achieve by means of this daring, almost heretical, text? It is difficult to answer this question in full without considering the historical context in which it emerged, and that discussion belongs elsewhere. Suffice to say for the present that, like many texts of its type, this midrash addresses the disturbing question of how an all-powerful God who loves his chosen people can permit them to suffer oppression and persecution. The primary response, as I have suggested above, is to separate God's anger from his love.[32] The secondary response is to emphasize the importance of an intercessor. Based on the *mashal* alone, the outlook seems bleak; the king's wife is dead and so is Moses. Returning to the frame itself, we find another intercessor: Metatron. This is not the place to discuss angelology in rabbinic thought. It seems plausible, though, that the author of the midrash is suggesting that, in the absence of prophets, Jews should turn to angels, who serve as active intercessors as well as passive messengers.[33]

Standing before the King

The Metatron midrash offers a profound insight into the rabbinic understanding of the kingship of God, equated here with omnipotence. We turn now to the Hebrew Bible in order to discover whether the same models are present there. Our case study is a text that, paradoxically in some respects, articulates with extraordinary clarity the essence of divine kingship—the account in 1 Samuel of God's accession to the people's request for a human king. Although 1 Sam. 12.12-25 will be our primary focus, it may be helpful to glance first at a verse from ch. 8:

> Heed the demand of the people in everything they say to you. For it is not you that they have rejected; it is Me they have rejected as their king (1 Sam. 8.7).

32. Another midrashic approach to this is to distinguish God's attribute of justice from his attribute of mercy and hope that the latter will outweigh the former. See, e.g., *Num. R.* 16.22.

33. Muffs, *Love and Joy*, equates angels and prophets with various ancient Near Eastern mediators: 'From a functional point of view there are similarities between the late Jewish angel, the biblical prophet, the Mesopotamian king or god and the Babylonian *ahiz abutti* [literally, "assuming a fatherly attitude on behalf of someone"]' (p. 38). For examples of angelic intercession in midrash, see T. Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 108-15.

Reading this in the light of the midrash highlights an important parallel. Just as, in the *mashal*, it is God who draws the comparison between himself and a human king so, in 1 Samuel, it is God who establishes the divine/human king equation. As noted above in relation to the midrash, this may be a product of piety, or even fear, on the part of the writer. Someone who envisaged himself making a constructive but nonetheless unflattering comparison between God and a human king might well have wished to attribute it to God himself. Although the author of 1 Samuel is less explicit than the author of the midrash (this contrast may be explained by the difference between metaphor and simile), God's language here is strikingly anthropomorphic. For example, the Hebrew מאס can mean 'despise' as well as 'reject', and the continuation of God's speech to Samuel suggests that it carries an emotional weight in this context: 'Like everything else they have ever done since I brought them out of Egypt to this day—forsaking me and worshiping other gods—so they are doing to you' (1 Sam. 8.8). Occurrences of the same root in 15.23, 26 and 16.1, 7 suggest that Saul is a pawn in a divine vendetta. Look what happens when you ask for a human king![34]

Immediately after Saul's inauguration at Gilgal (11.14-15), Samuel confronts the people with their failure to turn to God in their latest crisis (despite a series of divine interventions to save them from assorted enemies outlined in 12.1-12):

> 'But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was advancing against you, you said to me, "No, we must have a king reigning over us"—though the LORD your God is your King. Well, the Lord has set a king over you! Here is the king that you have chosen, that you have asked for. If you will revere the LORD, worship Him and obey Him, and will not flout the LORD's command, if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, [well and good]. But if you do not obey the LORD and you flout the LORD's command, the hand of the LORD will strike you as it did your fathers. Now stand by and see the marvellous thing that the LORD will do before your eyes. It is the season of the wheat harvest. I will pray to the LORD and he will send thunder and rain; then you will take thought and realize what a wicked thing you did in the sight of the LORD when you asked for a king.' Samuel prayed to the LORD and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day, and the people stood in awe of the LORD and of Samuel. The people all said to Samuel, 'Intercede for your servants with the LORD your God that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins the wickedness of asking for a king.' But Samuel said to the people, 'Have no fear. You have, indeed, done all those wicked things. Do not, however, turn away from the LORD your God, but serve the LORD with all your heart. Do not turn away to follow worthless things that can neither profit nor save but are worthless. For the sake of His great name, the LORD will never abandon His people, seeing that

34. For a similar exposition, see J.C. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 16-44.

> the LORD undertook to make you His people. As for me, far be it from me to sin against the LORD and refrain from praying for you; and I will continue to instruct you in the practice of what is good and right. Above all, you must revere the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; and consider how grandly He has dealt with you. But if you persist in your wrongdoing, both you and your king shall be swept away' (1 Sam. 12.12-25).

Unlike the many biblical texts that use royal terminology and imagery without identifying God as a king, this one is explicit: 'the LORD your God is your King' (12.12). It is also ideal for our purposes in being centrally concerned with the comparison between human and divine kings. The people have a divine king, but they want a human one, and what ensues is a trial of strength, not unlike God's with Pharaoh in Egypt. Samuel highlights the contrast: 'Here is the king that you have chosen [12.13]… Now stand by and see the marvellous thing that the LORD will do before your eyes' (12.16). At first glance, this seems quite different from the midrash, where God compared Himself to a human king to show the *similarities* between them; the point here is to demonstrate the *differences*. A second look at the two texts suggests that, after all, they have much in common. First, the very act of staging the contest assumes that, at some basic level, the contestants belong in the same category. Even if the biblical narrative aims to demonstrate God's superiority over Saul, this is achieved by emphasizing the extent to which the two are rivals for the same throne. Admittedly, the biblical text presents an image of God that is not obviously anthropomorphic in all respects—human kings cannot send thunder and rain at will—but in the context of his reaction to the people's request for a flesh and blood king, God's actions are all too human. Moreover, it is not unusual for ancient texts to present dramatic weather conditions as manifestations of divine anger.[35]

A reading of 1 Samuel 12 against our midrash highlights the centrality of the intercessor in the biblical text. In the midrash, God is distressed by the death of Moses and the *mashal* reveals that what most distresses him is the loss of his intercessor. Just as the king fears he will unwillingly kill his son without the intercession of his wife, so God fears that he will (unwillingly) destroy Israel without mediation from Moses. According to the midrash, God does not have full control of his own anger, which is precisely what Samuel teaches the Israelites about their divine king in 1 Samuel 12. The biblical text provides two crucial pieces of information. First, an intercessor is essential because God is capable of harming those who anger or reject him: 'But if you do not obey the LORD and you flout the LORD's command, the hand of the LORD will strike you…' (v. 15). Second, although Saul is the

35. See L.C. Taub, *Ancient Meteorology* (London: Routledge, 2003) for a discussion of Theophrastus's (c. 370–287 BCE) response to the question of whether thunderbolts represent divine anger (pp. 125-26).

natural candidate for the job in the world order just launched, the intercessor will not be a king, but the prophet: 'The people all said to Samuel, "Intercede for your servants with the LORD your God that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins the wickedness of asking for a king" ' (v. 19). The question remains as to whether the kingship of God is an essential component of the biblical narrative or whether, as with the *ketubah* midrash, this detail is dispensable. I suggested that the Metatron midrash offers a model to explain how an all-powerful God can allow harm to befall people he loves. The king signifies God's omnipotence and, through him, the midrash demonstrates that God can control everything except his own anger, for which he needs the help of an intercessor. The figure of the king is thus indispensable to the workings of the Metatron midrash. 1 Samuel 12 addresses the same dilemma in a remarkably similar way, but does not offer the familiar biblical explanation—divinely inflicted harm is a punishment for wrongdoing. Rather, it makes the more theologically troubling counter-suggestion that God is capable of acting like a king of flesh and blood who inflicts harm not only as a punishment but also in anger, which, in this case, takes the form of retaliation for a perceived slight.[36] The people respond to this threat by begging Samuel to intercede for them (v. 19), which he agrees to do (v. 23), and the classic triangle (king—prophet—people) is thus established.

Textual Intercession

Both texts I have examined thus far focus on a significant person (the king's wife and God's trusted prophet) who can act as an intercessor and, in particular, manage anger. I shall turn now to two texts that offer a more readily generalized model of dealing with divine anger. 'This is a difficult thing to express, impossible to utter plainly' opens Shimon ben Yochai's extraordinary interpretation of God's response to Cain in the wake of the world's first murder, 'Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground' (Gen. 4.10):

> It is like two athletes standing and wrestling before the king. Had the king wanted to separate them, he could have done so. But the king did not wish to separate them. One overwhelmed his partner and killed him. He cried out [as he was dying], 'Who will bring my case before the king?' Thus, *The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground*.[37]

36. I am grateful to Robert Gordon for pointing out that intercession in relation to God as king must be seen as a subset of intercession in relation to God as God. It is indeed the case that the Hebrew Bible offers many solutions to the problem of identifying an effective intercessor. My remit here is to focus on one that is little discussed: intercession via the language and imagery of the royal court.

37. *Gen. R.* 22.9 (my translation).

This complex midrash contains any number of things a second-century CE rabbi might have found hard to say.[38] Most obviously, it implicates God in the death of Abel. Just as the king could have called a halt to the wrestling match whenever he pleased, but chose to look on, so God could have intervened to prevent Cain from killing Abel, but remained passive. This is critical enough, but the criticism intensifies as the midrash is unpacked. The human king in the *ketubah* midrash hardly needs to be a king at all, and the king in the Metatron midrash is a generic royal figure. In sharp contrast to these, the king in this midrash from *Genesis Rabbah* is clearly a Roman Emperor (who else would have gladiators?), and the effectiveness of the *mashal* depends on our identification of him as such. The attribution of the *mashal* to a rabbi who, according to tradition, spent thirteen years in a cave hiding from the Romans drives home the difficulty; God is likened to a Roman Emperor by one of the rabbis most closely associated with Roman persecution.

Our primary evidence for the identity of the king is the presence of the wrestlers. We must now take a closer look at these figures, since they magnify the implied criticism of God in several different ways. As well as identifying the king as a Roman Emperor, and thus a highly negative figure in this context, the wrestlers imply that God was playing games with Cain and Abel; 'As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; they kill us for their sport' (*King Lear* 4.1). How much more palatable this *mashal* would be if the two adversaries were soldiers on the battlefield, fighting for national security, or even for the honour of their king. Instead, they are merely providing entertainment! The wrestler motif also forces us to accept that they really were powerless before the king—a gladiator who 'eased off' on his opponent was liable to be punished for disrupting the king's entertainment. More disturbingly, it suggests a sense in which Roman Emperors were in fact superior to God. Since gladiators were expensive to maintain, their owners were unlikely to allow fights to get out of control in this way. God, by contrast, did not value his creatures sufficiently to preserve their lives.[39]

Finally, the wrestlers would not have been enemies at all but for the circumstances into which they were thrown. On the contrary, the stronger of the two is forced to overpower and kill someone who is described as his 'friend' or 'companion'. This points back to the Cain and Abel narrative. It was God's (apparently arbitrary) choice of one sacrifice over the other

38. It is difficult to date the material in *Gen. R.*. beyond a generally agreed fifth-century CE *terminus ad quem*. This midrash may thus be considerably later than the second century CE, but I am assuming that, even if the *mashal* did not originate with Shimon ben Yochai, the attribution to him was not arbitrary.

39. See *Lam R.* 5.1 for a similar midrash in which the Congregation of Israel draws God's attention to the fact that a man who owns gladiators cares more for them than God cares for his people. The man protects his property by making the stronger gladiator submit to the weaker; God leaves Israel unprotected among the nations.

that caused the conflict—would the brothers have been enemies at all but for this favouritism? More generally, and in some ways more disturbingly, it comments on the Roman-Jewish conflict. The *mashal* is usually understood to address the question of why God allowed the Romans (the stronger wrestler/Cain) to persecute his people (the weaker wrestler/Abel).[40] On my reading, it asks in addition whether Romans and Jews would have been enemies at all without God's involvement. Taken to its logical conclusion, the midrash is unremittingly pessimistic (from a Jewish perspective): the Jews will ultimately be overpowered.

The parable ends with the dying wrestler's question: 'Who will bring my case before the king?' As is so often the case with midrashic questions (cf. Metatron's above), it is hard to identify a single answer, not least because of the difficulty of determining the precise gist of the question. The immediate response comes from the biblical verse on which the midrash hinges: 'The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground' (Gen. 4.10). Who will speak on behalf of the weaker wrestler/Abel? His own blood will call attention to the crime. But the question of who will notify the king of this injustice raises the more complex question of what good that will do. If the king is ultimately responsible, through his failure to intervene, for the death of the wrestler/Abel, how can he pass judgment on the stronger wrestler/Cain? Perhaps it is this that Shimon ben Yochai finds so difficult to articulate: God's position as the final arbiter of justice is severely compromised by his omnipotence. A third possible response concerns articulation. Shimon ben Yochai refers specifically to something that is impossible to articulate directly (*say* or *utter with the mouth*), but this leaves open the possibility that he can express it indirectly, through the medium of the *mashal*, for instance. Another answer to the question of who will bring the dying wrestler's case before the king is thus that, just as Metatron may function as the intercessor in the preceding midrash, so Shimon ben Yochai may be the intercessor here—for Abel and for the Jewish people. This leads to a fourth possible answer. It may not be the rabbi himself who acts as the intercessor here, but rather the *mashal*. Ben Yochai's contribution (as presented in this text) is to give the *mashal* as a gift to the Jewish people; henceforth, those who interpret it can use it as vehicle for intercession.[41]

40. See, e.g., C. Pearl, *Theology in Rabbinic Stories* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), who identifies this as 'the first Holocaust Midrash' since Simon ben Yochai questions God's silence (p. 65).

41. *Gen. R.* 35.2 supports my association of Shimon ben Yochai with intercession: 'Thus did R. Shimon ben Yochai say: If Abraham is willing, he can effectively intercede for [all generations] from his days until mine, while I can intercede for [all generations' from my time until the coming of the Messiah. If he is not willing, let Ahijah the Shilonite unite with me, and we can intercede from all the days of Abraham until those of the Messiah.'

God as Reader

Genesis Rabbah thus self-consciously depicts the Jewish God behaving like the human king of a hostile foreign nation. Is this a rabbinic innovation or a phenomenon already present in the Hebrew Bible itself? To address this question, I turn to the account of interactions between Hezekiah and Sennacherib in 2 Kings 18–19.[42] Hoping to persuade Judah to welcome him with open arms, Sennacherib sends messengers to tell the people that they might as well give up—the king of Assyria *always* gets his way. At first glance, Sennacherib seems to be contrasting himself with Hezekiah, king of Judah, but it soon emerges that he is actually comparing himself to God[43]:

> And the Rabshakeh stood and called in a loud voice in Judean: 'Hear the words of the Great King, the King of Assyria. Thus said the king: Don't let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you from my hands. Don't let Hezekiah make you rely on the LORD, saying: The LORD will surely save us: this city will not fall into the hands of the king of Assyria. Don't listen to Hezekiah. For thus said the king of Assyria: Make your peace with me and come out to me, so that you may all eat from your vines and your fig trees and drink water from your cisterns, until I come and take you away to a land like your own, a land of grain [fields] and vineyards, of bread and wine, of olive oil and honey, so that you may live and not die (2 Kgs 18.28-32).

Sennacherib's promises to Israel are strikingly reminiscent of God's in passages such as Deut. 8.7-10. The parallels seem likely to have been intentional, but what should we infer from them? Read at face value, Sennacherib's letter may evoke God's words as further evidence that the

42. This episode and its parallels in Isaiah 36–37 and 2 Chronicles 32 have attracted a vast scholarly literature, much of which is devoted to identifying the chronological relationship between the three texts and the redactional components. There is no space here to rehearse the highly complex redactional history of the three accounts of the fall of Sennacherib. For detailed discussions of the issues, see B.S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (Studies in Biblical Theology, 3; London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 69-111, and R.E. Clements, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem* (JSOTSup, 13; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1980), pp. 52-71. Recent scholars have tended to identify the version in 2 Kings as the oldest of the three (see, e.g., A. van der Kooij, 'The Story of Hezekiah and Sennacherib', in J.C. de Moor and H. van Rooy [eds.], *Past, Present, Future: The Deuteronomistic History and its Prophets* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000], pp. 107-19 [108n.]). Van der Kooij offers a succinct review of theories about the redactional components of the 2 Kings text (pp. 108-11). Most agree to three distinct parts: A, 18.13-16; B1, 18.17–19.9a, 36-37; B2, 19.9b-35. I follow van der Kooij in accepting this composition history while yet attempting a final form reading (p. 107).

43. For the view that Sennacherib is portrayed as a counterpart to God, and that the Rabshakeh is thus his prophet, see D. Rudman, 'Is the Rabshakeh Also among the Prophets? A Rhetorical Study of 2 Kings xviii 17-35', *VT* 50 (2000), pp. 100-10.

Assyrian king and the God of Israel are interchangeable. Read as a literary construct, the author may be using Sennacherib to express a thought that he cannot articulate in his own voice: it sometimes seems that there is little to choose between being servants of God and slaves of an Assyrian king.[44] That we are dealing here with a showdown between Sennacherib, King of Assyria, and God, King of Israel, is further emphasized by the conspicuous absence of references to Assyrian gods, and an interestingly and unusually 'archival' reference to the previous kings of Assyria:[45]

> The Rabshakeh, meanwhile, heard that [the king] had left Lachish; he turned back and found the king of Assyria attacking Libnah. But [the king of Assyria] learned that King Tirhakah of Nubia had come out to fight him; so he again sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, 'Tell this to Hezekiah, king of Judah: Do not let your God, on whom you are relying, mislead you into thinking that Jerusalem will not be delivered into the hands of the king of Assyria. You yourself have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the lands, how they have annihilated them; and can you escape? Were the nations that my predecessors destroyed—Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the Beth-edenites in Telassar—saved by their gods? Where is the king of Hamath? And the king of Arpad? And the kings of Lair, Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah?' (2 Kgs 19.8-13).

For Brevard Childs, the Rabshakeh speeches represent a stage in an emerging tradition, exemplified in Daniel (e.g. 3.15; 5.23), of enemy as blasphemer.[46] I want to explore the possibility that the speeches are an example of the phenomenon observed in the midrashic texts, namely the attribution to the enemy of complaints and accusations the author shies from articulating directly.[47] Again in common with the midrash, the criticisms hinge on the points of similarity between God and human kings, and it is the implied reproach that provokes God into action.[48]

44. For a discussion of criticism placed in enemy mouths see P. Machinist, 'The "Rab Saqeh" at the Wall of Jerusalem: Israelite Identity in the Face of the Assyrian "Other" ', *Hebrew Studies* 41 (2000), pp. 151-68.

45. I am grateful to Robert Gordon for this last observation, and for pointing out that the Assyrian emperor is a self-worshipping 'monotheist' with a distinctly Deuteronomistic attitude towards other gods (see 2 Kgs 19.18).

46. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, p. 89.

47. Cf. Moses in Deut. 9.28: 'Else the country from which You freed us will say, "It was because the LORD was powerless to bring them into the land that He had promised them, and because He rejected them, that He brought them out to die in the wilderness" '.

48. Commenting on Isaiah 37, C. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39* (Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), sees the repetition of the word king in this passage as an indication that the Assyrians are dealing with Hezekiah, not Isaiah. One might also see the seven occurrences of the root מלך as a key word highlighting the contrast between human and (genuine) divine kingship.

As far as we can tell from the biblical account, Sennacherib's message to the people of Judah is memorized and repeated by the Rabshakeh; there is no mention of a written proclamation. This is emphatically not the case when it comes to the Assyrian king's message to Hezekiah:

> Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Hezekiah then went up to the House of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: 'O LORD of Hosts, Enthroned on the Cherubim! You alone are God of all the kingdoms of the earth. You made the heavens and the earth. O LORD, incline Your ear and hear; open Your eyes and see. Hear the words that Sennacherib has sent to blaspheme the living God! True, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have annihilated all the nations and their lands, and have committed their gods to the flames and have destroyed them; for they are not gods, but man's handiwork of wood and stone. But now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hands, and let all the kingdoms of the earth know that You, O LORD, alone [are God]' (2 Kgs 19.14-19).

The image of Hezekiah spreading out Sennacherib's letter in the Temple 'before the LORD' is extraordinary for what it implies about God and the written word.[49] Most exegetes pass over the letter with little or no comment. In part, this may reflect difficulties such as the apparent inconsistency between the standard messenger formula in 19.10a ('Tell this to Hezekiah, King of Judah'), implying an oral delivery, and the reference to written texts in 19.14. More likely, the lack of interest in the letter is related to the corresponding surfeit of attention paid to Hezekiah's prayer. According to Childs, Hezekiah offers as royal priest the prayer of his people and, in so doing, he joins David and Solomon as 'types of the righteous king whose heart is perfect before God'.[50] The prophet's role diminishes and is assumed by the king: 'The emphasis falls fully on the power of God in his word which then effects its task. The larger form is, therefore, not the prophetic legend which centres in the prophet's role such as in 1 Kings 14 or 2 Kings 1, but a similar genre which focuses on a picture of a pious king' (p. 101).[51] Childs seems to me correct in his observation that the text highlights the declining importance of the prophet, but I do not share his view that the pious king now fills the prophet's role. Rather, I see this narrative as emphasizing the extent to which a prophet can be replaced by a written text (the text, in this case, of Sennacherib's provocative letter) or, at the very least, as making the point that oral prayer and written word make a powerful combination. Comparative ancient Near Eastern material supports the emphasis on letters

49. Josephus, *Antiquities* 10.16, has Hezekiah ridiculing the letters and storing them in the Temple.

50. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, p. 100.

51. See C. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, pp. 254-56, for a reading that likewise emphasizes the prophet/king dichotomy and the power of Hezekiah's prayer.

as tools of intercession.[52] In relation to Mesopotamia, Sharon Keller demonstrates both that the writing of letters must be added to prayers, hymns and offerings as methods of reaching into the divine sphere, and that the gods conveyed their intents through writing. With regard to the Hebrew Bible, she shows that 'the biblical authors accepted the idea that people felt comfortable with the concept of presenting God with written documents as well as the idea of having God communicate with humankind…through written messages that He Himself wrote'.[53] Closer to home (in literary terms), W. Hallo makes a convincing case for a Sumerian prototype for Hezekiah's *written* prayer in Isa. 38.10-20 (cf. v. 9).[54] Although the prayer is not present in 2 Kings, and is specifically concerned with royal illness, its inclusion in Isaiah may signal a general interest in the power of the written word in relation to Hezekiah and Isaiah. And still closer to home (in terms of historical setting), Assyrian letters between gods and kings on the topic of military campaigns may constitute ancient Near Eastern support for the notion that Hezekiah intended God to read and respond to Sennacherib's letter.[55]

The parallels between the biblical text and the midrash are self-evident. First and foremost, both contain implied criticisms of God. Shimon ben Yochai suggests that God is behaving like a Roman emperor. He cannot utter that thought in his own words, but expresses it indirectly in the form of the parable of the two athletes. (Nathan's parable in 2 Samuel 12 and the wise woman's personal history in 2 Sam. 13.39–14.23 show that the use of a story to show a king the error of his ways was by no means innovative.) Sennacherib's letter, in which the king likens himself to God, allows Hezekiah to do the same as Shimon ben Yochai—namely, to point out to God that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between his actions towards Israel and the actions of a hostile foreign ruler. I must emphasize that the aim of the criticism is constructive; both ben Yochai and Hezekiah hope that God

52. Thanks to Robert Gordon for drawing my attention to this highly relevant ancient Near Eastern material.

53. 'Written Communications between the Human and Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel', in K. Lawson Younger, W.W. Hallo and B.F. Batto (eds.)*, The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1991), pp. 299-313 (309).

54. 'The Royal Correspondence of Larsa: 1. A Sumerian Prototype for the Prayer of Hezekiah', in *Alter Orient und Altes Testament: Cuneiform Studies in Honor of Samuel Noah Kramer* (Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1976), pp. 209-24.

55. See 'Letters from Gods' (especially 47, 'Letter from Ninurta to an Assyrian King'), in A. Livingstone (ed.), *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* in *State Archives of Assyria*, III (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), pp. 108-15. For an analysis of these letters from gods and reports from kings, see 'Literarisierte Formen der Kommunikation: "Gottesbriefe" und "Königsberichte" ', in B. Pongratz-Leisten (ed.), *Herrschaftwissen in Mesopotamien* (State Archives of Assyria Studies, 10; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 210-65.

will acknowledge it and change his ways. The *mashal* and Sennacherib's letter thus function as media of intercession, substitutes, in a sense, for the prophetic intercessor.

The midrash also highlights the biblical interest in God's responsibility for Judah's conflict with Assyria. The choice of the athlete motif in the midrash, particularly in combination with the word חבר (friend or companion) implies that, but for the king, there would have been no hostility. This is also the case for Cain and Abel; God caused the ill feeling between them by favouring Abel's sacrifice over Cain's. The midrash thus posits a divine cause for the Roman and Jewish conflict in second-century CE Palestine. It was not simply that God could have stopped the persecution had he chosen to intervene; he caused it in the first place by singling out the Jewish people. Bearing this in mind, the biblical text reveals more complex themes than were initially apparent. Writing of Isaiah 37, Childs draws attention to two 'startling' arguments in Sennacherib's attempt (as reported by the Rabshakeh) to persuade the people of Judah to join his empire. First, God will not protect them because Hezekiah has offended him by cutting down his altars. Secondly, God himself told Sennacherib to attack Judah and destroy it. It is certainly true that both arguments sound shocking, but are they the parodies of Israelite belief that Childs suggests?[56] More plausibly, I think, they feed into insecurities about which Israel seeks divine reassurance.

Despite the happy ending, at least for Judah—God kills 185,000 Assyrians in one night—this narrative is problematic, theologically speaking. Why does God allow Israel to suffer until Hezekiah shows him Sennacherib's taunting letter? As Childs notes, the Hebrew Bible often reports God's negative judgments against other nations, but seldom reports the negative judgments of other nations against God. Childs attributes the unusual inclusion of these negative judgments to genuine historical memory.[57] My own view is that, in the text before us, historical memory is overlaid with theological reapplication; later writers, interested in the judgments as a form of divine intercession, applied them to the impending fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE.[58]

The prophetic attempt to change and improve human behaviour involves, above all, highlighting crimes and character flaws. In this chapter I have (only just) begun to explore the sense in which the same strategy works for divine behaviour. Prophets intercede in the hope of persuading God to

56. B.S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 273-74.

57. Childs, *Isaiah*, p. 274.

58. For a discussion of the exilic voice in these texts, see R.E. Clements, 'The Prophecies of Isaiah to Hezekiah concerning Sennacherib', in his *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracle to Canon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), pp. 35-48 (45-46).

redirect or modify a threatened punishment. Like Abraham over Sodom and Gomorrah, they suggest that the proposed punishment may not befit a just, benevolent ruler but, unlike Abraham, they couch their criticism diplomatically. Read in the light of two rabbinic midrashim, the biblical texts I have examined here offer a brand of criticism that is very cautious indeed; it is expressed indirectly by means of an implied comparison between God and a human king. The criticism is attributed in the first instance to someone (Samuel or Sennacherib) other than the author of the narrative in which it occurs, thus enabling the author to distance himself from the opinions expressed therein. Since it appears in the context of an historical account of events that have already occurred, it acquires a diplomatic distance from the author's real concerns. Most significantly, it is not spoken but written. The language of divine kingship is a vehicle through which this criticism can be expressed (the implied comparison between God and human kings), as well as being a model for presenting it (court protocol).[59] Finally, it may help to return briefly to the *ketubah* midrash analyzed by Stern. On the one hand, the *mashal* suggests that the important reader is the bride (Israel), who survived by reading the marriage contract (the Torah) written by her husband (God). On the other hand, a *ketubah* is only worth the parchment it is written on if, when the going gets tough, the husband who wrote it is forced to reread his text and fulfil his obligations or pay the penalty. In the end, it is his reading, not his wife's, that makes a difference.[60]

God versus Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther

The book of Esther combines an explicit focus on reading and writing with implicit attention to the relationship between God and a foreign king. Ahasuerus's actions are dictated by texts that he has purportedly written (1.19-22, 2.1, and 6.1-3), and Esther's success in protecting her people depends upon her ability to circumvent texts written in Ahasuerus's name by gaining direct access to him and writing her own texts. I have tried to show elsewhere[61]

59. Of particular interest here is the identification in 1 Chronicles of prophets as court historians: 'The acts of King David, early and late, are recorded in the history of Samuel the seer, the history of Nathan the prophet, and the history of Gad the seer, together with all the events that befell him and Israel and all the kingdoms of the earth' (29.29-30).

60. In this chapter I have made some big claims based on close readings of a small body of texts which, in some cases, I have been obliged to reinterpret fairly radically. Lack of space prevents me from taking the necessary next step—the application of the theories generated here to a broader range of texts. My own sense, not surprisingly, is that these ideas do apply more widely and are worth pursuing.

61. 'The Woman's Lot in Esther', in K. O'Grady, A.L. Gilroy and J. Gray (eds.), *Bodies, Lives, Voices: Gender in Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 133-51.

that although God is famously absent from Esther (aside from the possible allusion in 4.23), King Ahasuerus may be read as a concrete manifestation of God's invisible and intangible attributes.[62] Readers of Esther perceive what God *is* by seeing what Ahasuerus *is not*, and understand what God *is not* by learning what Ahasuerus *is*. Thus Ahasuerus cannot revoke formal decrees; once he banishes Vashti, he is unable to bring her back, no matter how lonely he is without her. Despite occasional assertions to the contrary (1 Sam. 15.29), God can and does reverse decisions, removing Saul from the throne upon which he installed him (1 Sam. 15.35), and even blotting out from the face of the earth the people he himself had created (Gen. 6.5). While Ahasuerus cannot revoke decrees, he changes his mind at the drop of a hat, routinely following the advice of the last person to address him. God, though responsive to intercession, as for example following the Golden Calf episode (Exod. 32–34), is flexible, not fickle. Ahasuerus is much less than the sum of his parts—all trappings and no content, his golden sceptre an empty promise (Est. 5.2). God has trappings in abundance (Exod. 25–31 and 35–39), and moreover they are strikingly similar to the trappings of Ahasuerus,[63] but they are a sign of God's majesty, not its source. Although I stand by the data that underpins my earlier observations about God and Ahasuerus, I think it demands a more nuanced explanation than I offered there. Ahasuerus and God are, of course, *different* in the respects I have just mentioned (and in others), but Esther's author is more interested than I had previously seen in their *similarities*. Just as Shimon ben Yochai's parable of the wrestlers asks why God was behaving like a Roman emperor, so the book of Esther asks why God is behaving like a Persian king. As I now read Esther, its author intends to highlight parallels between God and Ahasuerus, perhaps in the hope that God will act to differentiate himself from his human rival. And since the book of Esther, unlike Shimon ben Yochai's parable, is a comedy (whether defined classically or colloquially), carnivalesque reversals and absurd humour underscore the message.

The prologue of Esther sets the stage: Ahasuerus banishes a beloved wife who has disobeyed him and he cannot bring her back. The underlying issue is Israel's exile—God too has banished a beloved wife, but is he,

62. I am grateful to my friend and former student Rachel Benjamin for pointing out to me that the God–Ahasuerus duality is reflected in המלך (*hamelekh*) scrolls—a *megillat* Esther in which every column begins with the word *hamelekh*, the king, referring literally in the text to Ahasuerus, but in the mind of the *sofer*, the scribe, to God.

63. Ahasuerus's majesty (Est. 1.4); cf. the High Priest's garments (Exod. 28.2). Blue, purple, and byssus (Est. 1.6) are associated with the tabernacle narratives, and also with the temple-hangings in 2 Chron. 3.14. The vessels used in Ahasuerus's banquet (Est. 1.6) mirror the tabernacle vessels (Exod. 27.19; 38.3); cf. also 2 Chron. 28.24; 36.10, 18; Neh. 13.9; Dan. 1.2. In Est. 1.5, the enclosure, חצר גנת ביתן המלך, mirrors Exod. 27.9-19 (חצר המשכן).

like Ahasuerus, bound by his own decrees? Esther's author drives home the point with a brilliant comic touch, in an early example of the dictum that humour sugar-coats criticism. Whereas Vashti is punished because she will *not* show her beauty (read plausibly by rabbinic commentators as her nakedness[64]) to the people and the officials (1.11), Israel is punished precisely because she *does* reveal her beauty (literally, her nakedness). The Holiness Code opens with a catalogue of types of incest that are described as 'revealed nakedness' (Lev. 18.5-18), and closes with the threat of temporary exile (Lev. 26.43-45). This section of Leviticus thus implies that the revealed nakedness of people will lead to the nakedness (emptiness) of the land through exile. Ezekiel represents this graphically in the parable of the sisters Oholah and Oholibah, who relish the chance to display themselves to the nations (Ezek. 23.9, 22, 30) and their leaders (23.12, 23): 'So the Babylonians came to her for lovemaking… She flaunted her harlotries and exposed her nakedness, and I turned from her in disgust' (Ezek. 23.18).[65] The author of Esther at once diminishes Israel's crime by making a joke of it—foreign kings positively *beg* their wives to seduce the neighbours—and provokes God into demonstrating that he, unlike the weak and feeble-minded Ahasuerus, can revoke decrees concerning banishment and exile.

Having established by means of a parallel involving the marital relations of human and divine kings that God should act to end Israel's exile, the author of Esther creates a second parallel to underline the need for divine intervention and the mechanism by which it might be achieved. As mentioned above, Ahausuerus's palace is strikingly similar to the Tabernacle. Esther 2 and 4 may be read as a harsh parody of the rituals associated with the Tabernacle, the Temple's priestly blueprint, especially on the Day of Atonement. The Hebrew בירה (*birah*), fortress, occurs in 1 Chronicles in relation to the Temple (21.1,19). The beautiful young women assembled in the Shushan the capital (*Shushan habirah*) are reminiscent of the priests, whose physical appearance is associated with beauty (Exod. 28.2, 40). The cosmetics with which the young women adorn themselves are reminiscent of the anointing oils and incense used in Temple worship (Est. 2.12-13 cf. Exod. 30.22-37). The insistence on the proper attire required by those wishing to enter the palace (Est. 4.2) mirrors the attention to sartorial detail in relation to the priestly garments. Indeed, the word לבד (*levad*), literally 'unless', following immediately after להמית, put to death, in Esther 4.11, may allude to בד (*bad*), linen, the fabric worn by Aaron and his sons lest they die when they enter the Tent of Meeting or serve at the altar (Exod. 28.42-43, Lev. 16.4).

64. *Est. R.*. 3.13, 14.

65. J. Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel. The City as YHWH's Wife* (SBL Dissertation Series, 130; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), highlights the centrality in these Ezekiel passages of the language and imagery of seeing and exposure.

Mordecai, equated by many commentators with Moses,[66] precludes himself from entering the king's palace by wearing not linen, בד, but sackcloth; his form of intercession—a combination of outspoken accusations and aggressive demands, not unlike Moses' over the calf and elsewhere—is not acceptable there. Esther, on the other hand, may enter Ahasuerus's palace and even his inner sanctum. Although Esther is one of many woman who serve the king on rotation, we must infer from the beauty competition that she has special status. The description of the transfer of power from Vashti to Esther by crown (Est. 2.17) is reminiscent of the confirmation of the High Priest's status with by means of his head-dress (Exod. 29.6). Esther, then, is an Aaron to Mordecai's Moses.[67]

Esther's intervention over the plot of Bigthan and Teresh (2.21-23) sends a mixed message. On the one hand, it is the source of Ahasuerus's gratitude to Esther, but on the other, their deaths by impaling (literally, 'on trees') show that Ahasuerus does not beat around the bush if he thinks that someone is acting against him. This may explain Esther's agitation (4.4) when confronted with Mordecai's aggressive and provocative response to Haman's decree (sackcloth and ashes, weeping and wailing, imitated by Jews throughout the land, Est. 4.1-3), and we must assume that it remained on her mind as she prepared to enter Ahasuerus's inner court (5.2). The deaths of Bigthan and Teresh 'on trees' were good for Mordecai and Esther, giving Esther the ticket she needed to visit Ahasuerus unbidden, but they underlined the sheer precariousness of life at court. As we see when Haman is impaled on the tree he prepared for Mordecai, reversals are the norm (Est. 7.10) and they can work in both directions. Significantly for our purposes, the deaths of Bigthan and Teresh, one link in a chain of events that leads to communal fasting and Esther's entry into the king's inner sanctum, underline the parallels between her situation and that of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. Both enter the 'Holy of Holies' in fear of their lives, not least on account of recent examples of servants of the king who have died at his hand (Leviticus 16 opens with a reference to the deaths of two other wrong-doers, Nadab and Abihu). And both face the challenge of convincing the king to show mercy to Israel. The reference to clothing (Est. 5.1; cf. Lev. 16.4), and the use of תעמד (Est. 5.1, cf. 4.14) and נכח (twice in 5.1), two classic verbs of intercession, intensify still further the parallels between Esther and Aaron.[68]

66. One example: both are male nursing mothers (Est. 2.7; cf. Num. 11.12)!

67. For other parallels between the books of Exodus and Esther, see G. Gerleman, 'Studien zu Esther: Stoff–Struktur–Stil–Sinn', reprinted in C.A. Moore (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Esther* (New York: Ktav, 1982), pp. 130-41. Gerleman does not discuss parallels between God and Ahasuerus, or between the Tabernacle and Ahauserus's palace.

68. The parallel with Aaron highlights Esther's role as an intercessor—another example of a woman in this function.

The observations I have made thus far are open to various interpretations.[69] On the one hand, the book of Esther could be intended as a polemic *against the Diaspora*, ridiculing Ahasuerus and his palace in comparison with God and the Jerusalem Temple. Alternatively, it could constitute a polemic *against the Jerusalem Temple* and its priesthood by pointing out the respects in which the concept of a temple-dwelling God influenced by bizarre rituals barely differs from a foreign king in his palace responding to the sexual overtures of a Jewish orphan. A detail I have not yet mentioned tips the balance towards perceiving in Esther a negative attitude towards the Temple. The lots (גורל) that feature so prominently in the High Priest's activities on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16.8) are in Esther a vital component of Haman's destruction of the Jews (גור הוא הגורל, Est. 3.7). Is it possible that the originator of the rabbinic analogy between Purim and Yom Kippur, a day like Purim, identified a central motivation for the author of the book of Esther?[70] And yet, taking all into consideration, it seems unlikely that an anti-Temple or anti-Priestly polemic was the end that Esther's author had in mind, especially if my observations about parallels between the banishment of Vashti and Israel's exile. Rather, the parallels between God and Ahasuerus and their respective domiciles seem best interpreted as a means of galvanising God into action through harsh criticism concealed by comedy. That Esther's interaction with Ahasuerus read in the of the priestly parallel borders on heresy may explain the absence of God's name in this book—to make these criticisms explicitly would have been to dice with death. Yet Esther read in this way is no more heretical than Simon ben Yochai's unutterable parable of the wrestlers. Both texts serve the purpose of arousing God's compassion towards his people, the wrestlers' parable through its implicit accusation of injustice, and Esther though its implication that, in the absence of any other kind of intervention, Israel's future hope rests on a mere woman and her capacity to arouse a foreign king.[71]

God as King in Jewish Liturgy

The image of God as king is pervasive in Jewish liturgy—every blessing opens with the words, 'Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the

69. There are other parallels between Esther and the Exodus Tabernacle texts that deserve attention I cannot give them here. Intriguing, for example, is the possible link between the half-shekel tax (מחצית השקל) detailed in Exod. 30.11-16 and the silver Haman offered to pay (לשקול) into the king's coffers in Est. 4.7 (I thank Gershon Hepner, personal communication, Purim 2007, for this suggestion).

70. *Tikkunei Zohar* 57b. The analogy is based on a Hebrew wordplay—יום כיפור, *yom kippur* (day of atonement) sounds like יום כיפורים, *yom ki purim*, a day like Purim.

71. Esther thus invites comparison with Abraham in *Gen. R*. 39.1-3, a text I analyse in detail in Chapter 4 of this book.

universe'—but in the liturgy of the ימים נוראים, the Days of Awe, the presence of God as king is palpable. During the Days of Awe, the Kedushah, the focal point of the Amidah service, concludes with the words 'the Holy King' instead of the usual 'the Holy God'. The Musaf service on Rosh HaShanah (when the majority of shofar-blowing occurs) is constructed around the themes of Sovereignty, Remembrance and Shofar. And each line of the solemn prayer repeated throughout the Days of Awe begins 'Our Father, our King'. It is often noted that God's kingship is equated at this time with universal power and world order:

> Our God and God of our fathers, reign over the whole universe in thy glory, and in thy splendour be exalted over all the earth. Shine forth in the majesty of thy triumphant strength over all the inhabitants of thy world, that every form may know that thou hast formed it, and every creature may know that thou hast created it, and that all that hath breath in its nostrils may say: The Lord God of Israel is King and his dominion ruleth over all.[72]

But the image of divine kingship is associated just as closely with another, less reassuring theme, judgment:

> This day the world was called into being: this day thou causest all the creatures of the Universe to stand in judgement as children or as servants. If as children, have pity upon us as a father pitieth his children; and if as servants, our eyes wait on thee until thou be gracious unto us and bring forth thy judgement as the light, O God, terrible and holy.[73]

Given this view of God as both all-powerful controller of the universe *and* stern judge of each and every being within it, it is easy to see why God's kingship features so prominently in the High Holyday liturgy. Yet we may need to look elsewhere for the real explanation for the predominance of the image. The idea of God as king does not merely inspire awe and command respect for a God who is essentially remote. It holds out the hope that God is attentive and receptive to the needs of humanity, and offers a route by which he can be approached. Regardless of whether or not Jewish liturgy is in continuity with the biblical text in this respect, it seems to share the perspective of the Hebrew Bible, at least as I have read it here, on the complex significance of God as king. I conclude with a retelling of a Hasidic parable, cited in this version at the beginning of a *High Holyday Machzor*, that articulates with elegant brevity the range of ideas I have explored in relation to the kingship of God:

72. See the blessing before the shofar blast connected with God's sovereignty (H. Adler, *Service of the Synagogue* [*New Year*] [London: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1949], p. 157).

73. See again Adler, *Service of the Synagogue*, p. 157.

> Why sound the shofar in Elul [the month leading up to the Days of Awe]? In Elul, God can be compared to a king who leaves his palace to tour the land to acquaint himself with his subjects at their work. In Tishri [the month during which the Days of Awe occur] He is the king who sits in the inner court of a fortified palace, passing judgements on His people. When a king leaves his palace and walks the land everyone can meet him with great ease, but when he is in his castle, interviews are less readily available. You must first get to the top of the steepest of hills where stands the castle. You must then convince the guard at the gate that you are genuine and then at the next gate and next gate and all the gates. If you have the strength for all this, you may reach the inner chamber where the supreme judge sits on His throne entering life or death in the book before Him. So get to know the king in Elul when he comes out to meet you. Study and repent and do good deeds and then it might be, when you go to the castle in Tishri, you will be less terrified on the journey and more familiar with the judge. Why sound the shofar in Elul? To remind you that the king is in the field each day.[74]

74. Retold by David Freeman, *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship: Prayers for the High Holydays* (London: Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1990), p. 2.

Chapter 3

Bezalel in Babylon?
Biblical Attitudes to Other Religions

The Tina Gandhi Question

This chapter addresses a question that arose during a supervision with Tina Gandhi, the first Hindu undergraduate I taught at Cambridge University. We were analysing Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush: Why did God appear in a bush? Why did the bush burn without being consumed? Why did Moses hide his face? I was poised with my (playful) opening interpretation—God appears in a burning bush that is not consumed because it is impossible to replicate—when I stopped myself. For the first time, I felt unhappy with the Bible's perspective on idols and images. Before long, I recognized my reservations as the tip of an iceberg of anxiety about the Bible's view of other religions. This is a subject upon which teachers in faith communities and academic commentators are more or less as one; the Bible simply and straightforwardly condemns other religions, rejecting their gods and denigrating their worshippers. Yet while Molech worship, for example, is condemned roundly and in no uncertain terms, the Bible is disconcertingly—at least for those who wish to hold a hard line—short on hostility. So where does the Bible, as opposed to its history of interpretation, stand on other religions? That is 'the Tina Gandhi question'. I have been wrestling with it ever since, and this chapter represents just one stage of a struggle to come up with an answer that satisfies me, let alone anyone else.[1]

To be clear at the outset, I do not claim that the Bible is a bastion of religious tolerance and relativism. All roads may lead to Rome but

1. I dedicate this chapter to Gershon Hepner. He will not appreciate its underlying liberal leanings, I am afraid, but his enthusiastic response in December 2004 to my email about anti-priestly polemics in Deutero-Isaiah convinced me that it was worth putting this into print. I thank John Jarick in his capacity as Honorary Secretary of the Society for the Study of the Old Testament for inviting me to deliver the paper on which this chapter was based at its Summer Meeting, Edinburgh, 2005. Thanks also to the many members of the audience who gave constructive feedback and/or encouragement during the session and afterwards.

not, for the biblical authors, to Jerusalem. Rather, I hope to show that the picture is far more complex than is usually allowed, and the conclusions unexpected. The biblical authors show strikingly little interest in other religions and, contrary to popular belief, do not bother to condemn or even undermine them—*except* when practised by Israelites. Idolatry as practised by Israelites is a whole different ball game, but even there the identity of the players is not always obvious, as when the 'pagan' shrines whose destruction is advocated by Deuteronomy are in fact, at least according to many contemporary scholars, the unacceptable shrines of Israelites. The habit that persists to this day among some Orthodox Jews of dismissing as *goyim*, a derogatory term for members of other national and ethnic groups, those Jews whose practices do not conform to their own standards may have its origins in Deuteronomy. It has always been the case that members of one's own religion are infinitely more condemnable than members of other religions, and that the best possible condemnation is to conflate the two. That is, to suggest that their doctrine or practice has put them beyond the pale of their own religion and, for all intents and purposes, they might as well be members of another. So, for example, Orthodox Jews might call Reform Jews *goyim*, to indicate that their conception of Judaism is so deeply unacceptable that they have rendered themselves non-Jews.

More generally, and less extremely, followers of one religion are inclined to pay little attention to other religions, rarely engaging with them critically or in depth, except insofar as this helps them to define their own religion. Many Jews know that some Christians have difficulties with the ordination of women and homosexuals, and some may have their own views on the matter, but they are extremely unlikely to familiarize themselves with the complex theological background of the debate. I move in circles where I encounter Jews who are more than averagely interested in women's ordination—I spent several years teaching at a non-orthodox rabbinical seminary as well as in a university. Yet I can count on one hand the occasions on which I have heard a Jew make more than passing reference to the ordination of Christian women. Similarly, many Christians know that a high percentage of Diaspora Jews marry non-Jews, and they might guess that this raises sensitive issues, both practical and theological. Yet few Christians are familiar with the intricacies of the fraught debates conducted in progressive synagogues—usually more hospitable than their orthodox counterparts towards intermarried couples—about such issues as the burial of non-Jewish partners of synagogue members. Nor is this general state of ignorance and/or indifference limited to the Jew or Christian (or Hindu or Muslim) on the street. Even professional theologians usually have but a slender grasp of religions other than their own.

What Does Hosea's Wife Have to Teach Us?

A text that merits scrutiny with regard to the biblical attitude towards other religions is Hosea 1–3. This is usually read as a condemnation of the Canaanite fertility cult and primitive polytheism but, more plausibly, I think, it pushes the limits of Israel's own religious development. What looks like an attack on Canaanite gods is rather an attempt to explain how a single male God can deal with agricultural fertility. If I am correct, the other gods themselves are not the object of Hosea's interest; they are merely the vehicle through which he articulates his own religious position. Can Israel compartmentalize? Can Israelites worship God and observe the laws while continuing to participate in Canaanite fertility cult? The answer—by no means self-evident in the eighth century BCE—is a firm No; that would constitute the theological equivalent of adultery. Indeed, the prominence of the adultery theme in Hosea's prologue is evidence that condemning Canaanite gods, or questioning their efficacy or their existence, as some scholars would have it, is not the point of the exercise. The other men with whom a woman might be tempted to commit adultery are not necessarily bad in themselves; they are simply inappropriate partners for a married woman in a society (is there any other kind?) where women have only one man. Likewise, the Canaanite gods are not bad—powerless or non-existent; they are simply inappropriate objects of worship for members of a religion whose one God demands exclusivity. Biblical scholars have tended to assume that the cult is ruled out for being 'pagan' and therefore inferior, but that does not seem to me to be the case. Indeed, as I and many others read Hosea 1–3, Hosea is indebted to Canaanite religion for the model that lies at the core of his own theology. Gomer represents not primarily the *people* of Israel, but the *land*. God is in a permanent relationship with the land of Israel, and Hosea borrows and adapts for Israelite religion the Canaanite notion that fertility is generated by the annual sexual union of Baal and an approximation of mother earth. For Hosea, though, it is not the sexual aspect of this relationship that counts, but the legal contract, which is why the human role—and there always is a human role—in this divine dynamic is not sacred sex between a priest and prostitute, but the keeping of the terms and conditions of the covenant (the marriage contract). In order to promote agricultural fertility, Israelite worshippers need not stimulate God by example into copulating with the earth, but must rather remind him by example—namely keeping their covenant with him—that he has an everlasting covenant with the land of Israel and cannot abandon it.

The idea that Gomer represents the land of Israel (not the people) is hardly new; W. Robertson-Smith explored it in 1882,[2] and it has been taken up lately

2. *The Prophets of Israel* (London: A. & C. Black, 1882), pp. 169-77.

by literary and feminist exegetes,[3] responding respectively to the poetry and to the gender questions raised by this identification. Not surprisingly, perhaps, few of these scholars go on to consider the implications of their reading for the rest of the book, yet chs 4–14 read very differently depending on whether Gomer is seen as a figure for the land or for the people. On the Gomer/people reading, chs 1–3 may be read as a microcosm of 4–14, establishing at the outset that the covenant with the people is eternal. On the woman/land reading, only God's covenant with the land is eternal (closer to the Holiness Code perspective), and all bets are off as far as the people are concerned. This uncertainty is, I think, fully in keeping with the theological tenor of chs. 4–14, though I can see arguments in the other direction. The primary theological significance of the Gomer/land reading as worked through in chs 4-14 is its attention to the knowledge of God. Lack of knowledge of God is a root problem in Hosea, but what precisely is it that people have not been taught? One possibility is they have not understood God's relationship with the *land* of Israel. They lack an adequate explanation for what must have seemed problematic at the time: the land was once fertile by virtue of its relationship with Canaanite gods, and yet Israelites were being told to abandon the Canaanite cult. Is it safe to do so? Will God function effectively in place of the cult? What new dynamic accounts for this shift? What is their new role with respect to God and the land? On my reading of chapters 1-3, the allegory provides precisely the account they needed; all that remained was for the priests to convey it to the people. Needless to say, this reading assumes that the author of Hosea 1–3 and his audience were on a steep theological learning curve; it will be less than convincing for readers who allow no room for development. The point I want to emphasize, though, is that God's relationship with the land as construed here is not in the end so different from Baal's. The most commonly offered account of Hosea 1–3 as a rejection of a primitive, pagan fertility cult in favour of something more spiritual is, at best, misleading. Hosea 1–3 does in the end constitute a comment on Canaanite religion, and indeed it borrows from it more extensively than is immediately apparent, but as part of an internal dialogue about the development of Israelite religion. The other gods/lovers are unacceptable only because the land of Israel has committed itself to an exclusive relationship with God.

3. F. van Dijk-Hemmes, 'The Imagination of Power and the Power of Imagination: An Intertextual Analysis of Two Biblical Love Songs: The Song of Songs and Hosea 2', *JSOT* 44 (1989), pp. 75-88; O. Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh: Ancient Near Eastern Art and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: JSOTSup, 261; Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 50-53; F. Landy, *Hosea* (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); A. Keefe, *Woman's Body and Social Body in Hosea* (JSOTSup, 338; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

A Case Study: Deutero-Isaiah's 'Anti-Idol' Polemics

Although Hosea 1–3 is an important text in this debate, requiring a great deal more attention than I have given it here, I use it merely as a prologue—Eli and his sons to Saul and David and theirs, or Gloucester and his sons to Lear and his daughters—establishing that the pattern I am about to uncover is not unique. I turn now to my central interest, a set of texts that is ideally placed to focus this discussion: the so-called 'anti-idol' polemics, satires or parodies in Isaiah 40–55.[4] Does Deutero-Isaiah's sustained and detailed attack on Babylonian idol-worship undermine my view that religious practitioners are fundamentally self-absorbed? Is it the exception that proves the rule? Or, as I hope to show, was Deutero-Isaiah engaging with Babylonian religion only insofar as it helped him to define late-exilic or early postexilic Judaism? To be clear, I do not doubt that Deutero-Isaiah was critical of idol-worship for Jews. I do not even doubt that he was negative about idol-worship in general. What I doubt is that he was interested in condemning idolatry as practiced by Babylonians or Persians to the extent that he discussed it so extensively in a text that is clearly directed at Jews.

For the purposes of this chapter, I shall classify as idol-texts Isa. 40.18-20, 41.6-7, 44.9-20, and 46.1-7.[5] I shall not address compositional questions here. Suffice to say that before starting this project in earnest, I had assumed that the first three idol-texts are later interpolations, with the fourth by Deutero-Isaiah, by whom I mean the main author of Isa. 40–55, or a third author. I now question this assumption on the basis that all four texts relate more significantly and interestingly than I had thought to their broader literary context. On my reading, Deutero-Isaiah's anti-idol polemics function primarily as anti-Priestly polemics.[6] By anti-Priestly polemics, I mean the supposedly hostile prophet/cult dichotomy that has preoccupied many biblical scholars.[7] Rather, I am concerned with the negotiation of theological and

4. Hereafter Deutero-Isaiah for convenience and with commitment but in full knowledge of the difficulties entailed.

5. For a detailed discussion of the composition of the anti-idol polemics, see W. Roth, 'For Life, He Appeals to Death (Wis. 13.18): A Study of Old Testament Idol Parodies', *CBQ* 37 (1975), pp. 21-47 (21).

6. If I am correct about this, it is either supremely ironic or a sign of their immense complexity that the rabbis selected Isa. 43.21–44.23 as the *haftarah* (reading from the prophets) for *Va'yikra* (Lev. 1.1–5.26), and Isa. 40.1-26 as the *haftarah* for the sabbath of consolation following Tisha B'Av, the mourning of the destruction of the Temple. (It is interesting to observe that the *haftarot* to other *parshiot* of Leviticus are likewise open to being read as anti-Temple or anti-Priestly polemics. See, e.g, Jer. 7.21–8.3 on *Tsav* and 2 Sam. 6.1–7.17 on *Shemini*.)

7. See Z. Zevit, 'The Prophet versus Priest Antagonism Hypothesis: Its History and Origin', in L.L. Grabbe and A. Ogden Bellis (eds.), *The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets, and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter*

political tensions between Deutero-Isaiah's worldview and the worldview of the (broadly speaking) 'priestly' writers.[8] Indeed, it seems likely that Deutero-Isaiah preferred polemical allusions over explicit criticism precisely in order to avoid hostile polarisation at a time when unity was at a premium.[9]

In a 1968 article, Moshe Weinfeld identified a number of polemical allusions in Deutero-Isaiah to priestly creation texts: Isa. 45.6-7, 9 (God created light and darkness) and 45.18-19 (the earth not created as chaos) reflect Gen. 1.1-3; Isa. 40.18 (God is beyond comparison) and 40.13-14 (no other beings were involved in creation) reflect Gen. 1.26; and Isa. 40.28 (no rest) reflect Gen. 2.2 and Exod. 31.17.[10] Benjamin Sommer subsequently found additional allusions to priestly texts (Num. 18) in Isaiah 61 and 65.[11] Although similarities have been noted between Deutero-Isaiah's idol texts and the Tabernacle narrative in Exod. 25–31 and 34–40,[12] no one to my knowledge has proposed that Deutero-Isaiah alludes explicitly and intentionally to the Tabernacle texts. The occurrence of apparent allusions to the Tabernacle narratives alongside allusions to other priestly texts, both within and around the idol-texts, suggests either that the idol-texts are not, as is often supposed, the work of a separate author, or that they were carefully woven into the main text with an eye to language, imagery and ideas that were already present. The fact that Deutero-Isaiah engages with priestly texts on the theme of both Temple and Creation may show that these two themes were connected in his own theology. More likely, I think, it may show that he recognized that Temple and Creation are inextricably linked in priestly theology. If I am correct, Deutero-Isaiah was engaging more holistically with priestly theology than is usually supposed.

Prophets (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), pp.189-213; and R.P. Gordon, 'The Study of Two Paradigm Shifts', in R.P. Gordon (ed.), *The Place Is Too Small for Us: The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 3-26 (9-12).

8. It seems to me most likely that Deutero-Isaiah's polemics target those writers usually dsignated Priestly (P), as opposed to those we might designate Holiness School (HS), though this raises some difficult questions about Gen. 1 that I cannot debate here.

9. I assume that Deutero-Isaiah was writing in Babylon, and that his main interest was in persuading as many Jews as possible to return to Judah. This project would surely have been jeopardised by overt hostile criticism of one group or another whose participation was required.

10. 'God and the Creator in Gen. 1 and in the Prophecy of Second Isaiah', *Tarbiz 37* (1968), pp. 105-32 [Heb.].

11. *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 142-49.

12. See, e.g., R.N. Whybray, *The Heavenly Counsellor in Isaiah xl 13-14: A Study of the Sources of the Theology of Deutero-Isaiah* (Society for Old Testament Study Monograph Series, 1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 13, 60.

The claim that one biblical text, or almost any text for that matter, alludes explicitly to another is not easily supported. I am grateful to David Aaron for suggesting that I consider a more fluid model of allusion, involving 'floating motival elements and clusters (matrices), [and] semantic fields that are readily engaged and adapted, whose goal was to stabilize an otherwise unstable world of ideas'.[13] The notion of speaking more broadly of an interaction between different worldviews and the language in which they are articulated holds significant attractions for me, not least because it moves me towards my own final position—namely, that what lies before us is evidence of two competing visions for the future of the Jewish people in Judah. My project here, then, is not to demonstrate verse for verse allusions, but to try to show that Deutero-Isaiah is alluding with purpose and intent to a specific body of texts that reflect an opposing worldview. This does not liberate me from the need to identify and examine specific verses. Texts remain our primary source of evidence of those worldviews and the people who held them. The most effective (perhaps the only) way to show that Deutero-Isaiah was responding to a set of ideas and images that reflect a priestly worldview is to locate that worldview in priestly texts and then to show via yet other texts how Deutero-Isaiah responded to it.

My assumption is that Deutero-Isaiah responded to the priestly worldview he hoped to counter or undermine by means of a set of textual allusions that I hope now to reveal.[14] In order to make this exercise as 'scientific' as possible, I have limited my selection to examples that came to mind during the course of a fairly cursory reading of the text. My claim that the allusions I identify are not simply wordplay for its own sake, but have a serious theological and political point, entails that they would have been evident to

13. I thank David Aaron in addition for his detailed and extremely helpful comments on a preliminary outline of this chapter.

14. For methodology see, e.g., G.W. Hepner, 'Verbal Resonances in the Bible and Intertextuality', *JSOT* 96 (2001), pp. 3-27; B. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads*, pp. 18-22; R. Schultz, *The Search for Quotation: Verbal Parallels in the Prophets* (JSOTSup, 180; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); for examples in Deutero-Isaiah see, e.g., M. Polliack, 'Deutero-Isaiah's Typological Use of Jacob in the Portrayal of Israel's National Renewal', in H.G. Reventlow and Y. Hoffman (eds.), *Creation in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Sheffield: JSOTSup, 319; Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 72-110; M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), esp. pp. 363-64. R.B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), offers seven tests: Availability, Volume, Recurrence, Thematic Coherence, Historical Plausibility, History of Interpretation, Satisfaction (pp. 29-32). The allusions I identify here clearly fail the History of Interpretation test; to my knowledge, no one has discussed them before. Fortunately, however, Hays cautions against rejecting proposed allusions on the basis of this test, provided they pass his other tests. As far as I can tell, they do and I hope to show that they score especially well with regard to Satisfaction (illuminating the surrounding discourse).

the audience it was intended to impress. Had I wished to be really scientific, I would have restricted my examples to those I could detect with my ear rather than my eye, since I assume more people heard than read these texts. As it is, I have excluded only those examples generated by concordances and computer word searches.[15]

As is so often the case with textual interpretation of this kind, there is a chicken and egg problem. The plausibility of my general claim cannot rest on any one of the categories outlined here. Rather, a concentration of evidence from all five categories is required. And yet each category must stand on its own merits. Bearing this in mind, I suggest that the plausibility of my claims should be assessed in three stages. First, the categories themselves must be deemed reasonable guides to the activity of textual allusion. Second, the evidence within each category must be deemed plausible. Third, the overall plausibility of the argument must be deemed convincing. As indicated above, I am not claiming that Deutero-Isaiah is alluding explicitly to specific verses from priestly texts, even though they are the source of his familiarity with priestly language and modes of expression. When he describes God's stretching out the heavens like a 'tent', for example, he may not have in mind a specific occurrence in a priestly text of the word 'tent'. Rather, he mentions the tent because it features in many priestly texts and plays a central role in the priestly worldview. Yet although I do not claim that Deutero-Isaiah alludes to a particular verse, but rather a set of texts of which a given word is characteristic, I must nevertheless locate the given word in a range of priestly texts. As noted above, these texts are my only evidence that the word was indeed typical of priestly language. This leads to a final point on this subject. Words alluded to are likely to be distinctive vocabulary that might reasonably be identified as hallmarks of a particular worldview. If my claims about intentionality and purpose are correct, it would make little sense for Deutero-Isaiah to allude to words and terms that are dispersed evenly throughout the Bible and thus incapable of evoking a particular competing vision or concept.

In addition to verbal links of the kind discussed above, an alluding text should have thematic connection with a source text. Just as thematic coherence is, for Martin Buber, a *sine qua non* for the identification of leading words,[16] so it is essential if textual allusions are to be classified as intentional as opposed to random. In our texts, the main thematic link is workmanship,

15. I have, however, used concordances and computers to supply some of the supporting evidence offered here.

16. M. Buber, 'Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative', in M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation* (trans. L. Rosenwald; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 114-28 (114-15).

which is applied in both the alluding text and the source text to man-made structures *and* to the created order. In Deutero-Isaiah, the workmanship theme emerges from the idol polemics and from the many texts in which God creates, including those (e.g. Isa. 40.12, 15) that portray him as a master builder who measures water, gauges skies and weighs mountains. In the priestly texts in Exodus, the workmanship theme is manifested in the construction of the Tabernacle and through explicit references to the priestly creation narrative (Exod. 31.12-17, 35.2, 40.33b). It is the combination of human and divine workmanship that gives Deutero-Isaiah and the Tabernacle texts thematic coherence. Building language applied to divine creation is common throughout the ancient Near East,[17] and occurs in Job (38.1-7), another possible source text for Isa. 40.13-14. G. von Rad identifies anti-idol polemics in general with Wisdom, while acknowledging that Deutero-Isaiah is different; his polemic is part of his prophetic message as a whole.[18] H.D. Preuss perceives a Wisdom influence on the idol texts.[19] Yet, crucially I think, Job lacks an interest in human workmanship. Since Deutero-Isaiah, like the priestly writers, engages extensively with priestly ideas on the theme of divine and human workmanship, it seems unlikely that Job, which focuses only on divine workmanship, is the source of Deutero-Isaiah's interest in idols. I myself see Job as a postexilic text, which would in any case rule out the possibility that Deutero-Isaiah was alluding to it. The likelihood that Deutero-Isaiah alludes to the Tabernacle texts, not to Job, increases if we take into account the allusions to priestly texts in Genesis observed by Weinfeld, and examples of distinctive priestly vocabulary: תועבה, abomination (Isa. 41.24, 44.19); דמות, likeness (Isa. 40.18; cf. 25 occurrences elsewhere, mostly in Ezek. 1); ברא, create (Isa. 42.5, 43.7, 45.8, 18; cf. 48 occurrences elsewhere, 11 in Gen. 1–6, 16 in Deutero-Isaiah); תולעת, thread (Isa. 41.14; cf. 25 occurrences elsewhere, mostly in priestly texts, 15 in Exod. 25–40).

A strong indication of an intertextual relationship between two texts is the presence in both of clusters of semantically identical words, highlighted by a range of devices that I shall illustrate. The overlapping vocabulary could be explained by common interests and shared experience, but in this case, as I shall argue below, it seems likely that one text is self-consciously alluding to the other. For reasons I shall soon outline, it seems most likely that Deutero-Isaiah is the 'alluding text' here, while the priestly writing I

17. V.A. Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in the Light of Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic Writings* (JSOTSup, 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), p. 242.

18. *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 179-80.

19. *Verspottung fremder Religionen im Alten Testament* (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament, 5/12; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1971), p. 212.

have in mind is his 'source text'.[20] A crucial element of Deutero-Isaiah's theology is that God created the world alone. At first glance, this seems self-evident and entirely consistent with the view of God as creator found in the rest of the Bible, but the reality is more complex. In the first place, there are remarkably few texts that say anything one way or another about God as creator. Some of these do not address explicitly the question of whether or not God had accomplices, and at least one (Prov. 8) assumes that he did. In the case of priestly texts, it is not so much that God may have had a helper, as that the act of creation is inextricably connected with the building of the Temple. Deutero-Isaiah, it seems to me, wants to sever this connection, and thus his denial that God received a plan for creation recalls the commission of Bezalel. The allusions to Exodus 25–39 effectively undermine the priestly pairing of creation and the Tabernacle, with its implied creative partnership between Bezalel and God.[21]

Isaiah 40.13-14 uses three distinctive (in the context of Isaiah) terms, 'spirit of the LORD', 'knowledge', and 'understanding':

מי־תכן ***את־רוח יהוה*** ואיש עצתו יודיענו: את־מי נועץ ויבינהו וילמדהו בארח משפט וילמדהו ***דעת*** ודרך ***תבונות*** יודיענו:

Who has plumbed *the spirit of the* LORD,
What man could tell Him his plan?
Whom did He consult, and who taught Him,
Guided Him in the way of the right?
Who guided Him in *knowledge*
And showed Him the path of *understanding*?

All three terms occur in one of the Exodus source texts I envisage for Deutero-Isaiah:

ראה קראתי בשם בצלאל בן־אורי בן־חור למטה יהודה: ואמלא אתו ***רוח אלהים*** *בחכמה* ***ובתבונה ובדעת*** ובכל־מלאכה:

See I have singled out by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have endowed him with a *divine spirit* of *wisdom*, *understanding* and *knowledge* in every kind of craft (Exod. 31.2, 3).

20. Cf., Fishbane's *traditio* and *traditum*, in *Biblical Interpretation.*

21. *Exod. R* 34.1-38.9 and 48.1-52.5 identify and expand many parallels between the design of the Tabernacle and the order of the universe as described in Gen. 1. See, e.g., 35.6, 'R. Hiyya b. Abba said: This teaches that the gold clasps in the Tabernacle looked like the glittering stars in heaven'; and 50.1, 'AND BEZALEL MADE THE ARK (37.1). It is written , *The opening of your words give light; it gives understanding to the simple* (Ps. 119.130). When God created the world it was full of water everywhere, for it says, *And darkness was on the face of the deep; and the spirit of the* LORD *hovered over the face of the waters* (Gen. 1.2)'. Scholars disagree over whether parallels of this kind have a firm textual basis in the Bible. Since there is no space here to make the case, I shall comment only that the notion that the Temple, and thus in our texts the Tabernacle, is a microcosm of the universe is at the heart of priestly theology as I understand it.

Two terms, understanding and knowledge, occur in the other Exodus source text:

ועשה בצלאל ואהליאב וכל איש חכם־לב אשר נתן יהוה חכמה ***ותבונה*** בהמה
לדעת לעשת את־כל־מלאכת עבדת הקדש לכל אשר־צוה יהוה׃

> Let, then, Bezalel and Oholiab and every person wise of heart in whom the LORD has given the wisdom and *understanding* that produces the *knowledge* required to undertake all the tasks connected with the service of the sanctuary according to all that the LORD has commanded (Exod. 36.1).

The absence in Exod. 36.1 of the term 'spirit' may be explained by the fact that it is identified with the initial call. Since it was reported in connection with Bezalel's commission (Exod. 31.3), and again in 35.31, that Bezalel was filled with the divine spirit, the narrator did not find it necessary to repeat this information. Notably absent from the alluding text, but present in both source texts and in the almost identical formula in Exod. 35.31, is the word חכמה, wisdom. It is not clear why wisdom is excluded from Isa. 40.13,14. Perhaps משפט בארח, in the way of justice or the right, takes the places of wisdom here, or perhaps Deutero-Isaiah associates wisdom not with a plan or design, his theme here, but with its execution, his subject in 40.20, where wisdom is mentioned. It is important to note that the rhetorical questions posed here in vv. 13 and 14, again in v. 18 ('To whom, then, can you liken God, What form compare to him?'), and later in the idol texts (see, e.g., Isa. 44.7 and 46.5), may suggest that Deutero-Isaiah is even here beginning to weave the web of allusions that will ultimately contrast God with the Babylonian idol-makers.[22]

A particular issue for Deutero-Isaiah seems to be the possibility that God created the universe according to a plan derived from, or perhaps shared with, the Temple. This idea resurfaces in Isa. 44.13, where the idol, created to live in a shrine, is shaped according to the pattern of a man:

חרש עצים נטה קו יתארהו בשרד יעשהו במקצעות ובמחוגה יתארהו ויעשהו
כתבנית איש כתפארת אדם לשבת בית׃

> The craftsman in wood measures with a line
> And marks out the shape with a stylus;
> He forms it with scraping tools,
> Marking it out with a compass.
> He makes it according to *the pattern* of a man,
> The beauty of a man to dwell in a shrine.

The concept of a pattern for the Temple occurs frequently in texts with a priestly outlook. Five of the Bible's twenty occurrences of תבנית, pattern,

22. See M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 46-48, for a discussion of the role of rhetorical questions.

are in Deuteronomy 4 (vv. 16–18), a text replete with priestly vocabulary and themes, and three are in Exodus 25 (vv. 9, 40):

ככל אשר אני מראה אותך את ***תבנית*** המשכן ואת ***תבנית*** כל־כליו וכן תעשו׃

> Exactly as I show you—the *pattern* of the Tabernacle and the *pattern* of all its furnishings—so shall you make it (Exod. 25.9).

It is worth noticing too that it is not only the Tabernacle that is made according to a pattern; the contents, vessels that may be equated to the idol mentioned in Isa. 44.13, likewise have a pattern. The possible Temple resonances of בית, shrine, in Isa. 44.13 are reinforced by the immediate mention of cedars, the tree most closely associated throughout the Bible with the Temple (cf., e.g., 1 Kgs 6.14-18, 7.2-12). They are further underlined by Isa. 44.15-17 which, with its focus on fire and meat, may be read as a broad-brush caricature of the priestly cult. That Deutero-Isaiah is parodying at the same time the priestly notion that the Tabernacle/Temple is a mirror, replica or microcosm of creation is suggested by parallels between Isa. 44.13 and Isa. 40.22. Both verses contain the word לשבת, to dwell, while ובמחוגה, compass, in 44.13 reflects חוג, vault, and בחגבים, grasshoppers, in 40.22. Deutero-Isaiah's equation of the earth's human inhabitants with grasshoppers may represent a subtle criticism of priestly anthropocentrism (particularly the idea that man is made in God's image), in which case, as we should indeed expect from its context, his reference to the 'beauty' of a man is tongue in cheek.

Isaiah 40.20 alludes to the ideal expressed in texts from many different provenances that the craftsman (a smith, in these cases) commissioned for a sacred project should possess wisdom:

המסכן תרומה עץ לא־*ירקב יבחר* ***חרש חכם*** *יבקש־לו להכין* פסל לא ימוט׃

> As a *gift*, he *chooses* the *mulberry*—
> A wood that does not *rot*—
> Then seeks a *wise craftsman*
> To make a firm idol,
> That will not topple.

That this is an allusion to a priestly text in particular is suggested by the presence of several other words—most obviously תרומה, gift, which occurs predominantly in priestly texts—that are identical or sound similar to typical priestly terminology. Exodus 35.35 is one of several that describe the perfect craftsman, like Deutero-Isaiah's idol-maker, as having wisdom or being wise of heart (e.g. 28.3; 31.6; 35.10; 36.2,8).

מלא אתם ***חכמת־לב*** לעשות כל־מלאכת ***חרש*** וחשב ורקם בתכלת ובארגמן
בתולעת השני ובשש וארג עשי כל־מלאכה וחשבי מחשבת׃

> They have been endowed with the *skill* to do any work—of the *carver*, the designer, the embroiderer in blue, purple, crimson yarns, and in fine linen, and of the weaver—as workers in all crafts and as makers of designs.

As well as alluding above to the plan and the workman responsible for executing it, Deutero-Isaiah may allude to the product, the Ark of the Covenant in this case:

יצרי־פסל כלם *תהו וחמודיהם* בל־יועילו ***ועדיהם*** המה בל־יראו ובל־ידעו
למען יבשו׃

The makers of idols
All work to *no purpose*;
And *the things they treasure*
Can do no good,
And [as for] *their witnesses*, they[23]
neither look nor think,
And so they can be shamed (Isa. 44.9).

That the Ark is intended here is suggested by its pairing with וחמודיהם (their treasures), a root associated with the Temple (Ezek. 24.25). The allusion may be underscored by the presence in the same verse of תהו, void, a term that is prominent in the Genesis 1 creation narrative (Gen. 1.2). Exodus 27.21 contains one of nineteen occurrences of עדת, Covenant, in Exodus 25–39:

באהל *מועד* מחוץ לפרכת אשר על־***העדת*** יערך אתו אהרן ובניו מערב עד־בקר
לפני יהוה חקת עולם לדרתם מאת בני ישראל׃

Aaron and his sons shall set them up in the Tent of *Meeting*, outside the curtain which is over [the Ark of] the *Covenant*, from evening to morning before the LORD. It shall be a due from the Israelites for all time, throughout the ages.

As I read Isa. 44.9, the 'witnesses' are the idols they manufacture. Deutero-Isaiah equates idols with the Ark, and elsewhere contrasts these false witnesses with Israel, God's true witnesses (cf., e.g., Isa. 43.10, 12).

Deutero-Isaiah constructs a web of allusions that links the fabrication of idols with creation. As in 40.22 (see below), there is a possible self-allusion: ירקענו, overlaid it, in 40.19 with reference to idol-makers and idols contrasts with רקע, overlaid, in 44.24 with reference to God and the earth:

הפסל נסך חרש וצרף בזהב ***ירקענו*** ורתקות כסף צורף׃

The idol? A woodworker shaped it,
And a smith *overlaid* it with gold,
Forging links of silver (Isa. 40.19).

כה־אמר יהוה גאלך ויצרך מבטן אנכי יהוה עשה כל נטה שמים
לבדי ***רקע*** הארץ מי אתי [מאתי] ׃

Thus said the LORD, your Redeemer,
Who formed you in the womb:

23. I depart here from NJPS, which reads 'As they themselves can testify', moving 'they' to the beginning of the next line.

> It is I, the LORD, who made everything,
> Who alone stretched out the heavens,
> And unaided *spread out* the earth (Isa. 44.24).

These may further allude to the Tabernacle as described in Exod. 39.3, and to the creation of the world in Gen. 1.6. The threefold repetition in Exod. 39.3 of בתוך, among, recalls Gen. 1.6, where רקיע, spread out, is juxtaposed with בתוך, among:

> וירקעו את־פחי הזהב וקצץ פתילם לעשות *בתוך* התכלת *ובתוך* הארגמן
> *ובתוך* תולעת השני *ובתוך* השש מעשה חשב :

> *They hammered out* sheets of gold and cut threads to be worked into designs *among* the blue, [*among*] the purple, and [*among*] the crimson yarns, and [*among*] the fine linen.

> ויאמר אלהים יהי *רקיע בתוך* המים ויהי מבדיל בין מים למים :

> God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water' (Gen. 1.6).

There is evidently no polemical tension between these two texts; the craftsmen are simply mirroring God's work of creation.

Deutero-Isaiah's image in 40.22 of the world as a tent in which people dwell recalls the Tent of Meeting that covers the Tabernacle:

> הישב על־*חוג* הארץ וישביה *כחגבים* הנוטה כדק שמים וימתחם *כאהל* לשבת:

> It is He who is enthroned above the *vault* of the earth,
> So that its inhabitants seem as *grasshoppers*;
> Who spread out the skies like gauze,
> Stretched them out like a *tent* to dwell in.

The word אהל, tent, appears throughout the Tabernacle narrative (about 60 occurrences):

> ויפרש את־*האהל* על־המשכן וישם את־מכסה *האהל* עליו מלמעלה
> כאשר צוה יהוה את־משה:

> He spread *the tent* over the Tabernacle, placing the covering of *the tent* on top of it—just as the LORD had commanded Moses (Exod. 40.19).

Whereas the priestly authors construct a positive link between the Tabernacle and the universe, with the Tent of Meeting mirroring the dome of the heavens, Deutero-Isaiah sets them in opposition. Why God would want to live in a tent erected by people (grasshoppers!) when he has a dwelling place whose roof is the sky? The polemical intention occurs elsewhere. Isaiah 44.13 uses the term תפארת, beauty, in relation to a man in a בית, house or shrine:

> חרש עצים נטה קו יתארהו בשרד יעשהו במקצעות ובמחוגה יתארהו
> ויעשהו *כתבנית* איש *כתפארת אדם* לשבת בית :

The craftsman in wood measures with a line
And marks out the shape with a stylus;
He forms it with scraping tools,
Marking it out with a compass.
He makes it according *to the pattern* of a man,
The *beauty* of a man to *dwell in a shrine*.

In conjunction with a term, תבנית, pattern, that has strong Temple building associations, this may allude to Aaron and his sons, as described in Exod. 28.2, 40. Given its context in an idol polemic, the phrase בתפארת אדם, according to the beauty of a man, has mocking undertones that are transferred, via the allusion, to Aaron and his descendants:

ועשית בגדי־קדש לאהרן אחיך לכבוד ולתפארת

Make sacral vestments for your brother Aaron, for honour and *for beauty* (Exod. 28.2; see also v. 40).

Deutero-Isaiah may wish to contrast the man-made beauty identified here with a select group of Israelites (the priests) with divine beauty associated with the people as a whole (Isa. 44.13b, 'And I will bestow…my beauty upon Israel'). The contrast, if intentional, is surely disparaging of what Deutero-Isaiah sees as priestly particularism.

Assuming that textual allusion is a meaningful attempt to shape opinion, rather than an intellectual exercise, or wordplay for its own sake, the intended audience must be able to recognise the allusions it encounters. Audiences at this time were more likely to hear than read texts, and it seems probable that writers wishing to suggest ideas without articulating them explicitly would work accordingly. Visual techniques, such as patterning words on a page, require sight of the text. Homonyms are effective whether a text is read or heard, but they are especially appealing for a writer who expects his work to be transmitted orally. We might also expect semantically identical words, such as discussed above, to be reinforced by homonyms. Here below are examples of verses that evoke priestly texts through a set of words that are semantically identical (same root, same meaning) to typical priestly vocabulary, such as חכם חרש, wise or skilled smith (see above), in combination with words that merely *sound* similar to vocabulary that belongs in that context. This device will be most effective if the alluding homonym is unusual and difficult. Such is the case in Isa. 40.20, a notoriously difficult verse:

המסכן ***תרומה*** עץ לא־ירקב ***יבחר חרש חכם*** יבקש־לו להכין פסל לא ימוט׃

As a *gift*, he *chooses* the *mulberry*—
A wood that does not *rot*—
Then seeks a *wise craftsman*
To make a firm idol,
That will not topple.

The word תרומה (*terumah*) is not easily translatable in this context. Since some commentators favour 'raised up' without a sacrificial connotation, I shall treat it as a homonym, but it may better be read as a semantically identical allusion. As noted below, it occurs in conjunction with other terms that are identical (חרש חכם, wise smith) or sound similar (המסכן, mulberry?) to characteristically priestly vocabulary:

וידבר יהוה אל־משה לאמר׃ דבר אל־בני ישראל ויקחו־לי ***תרומה***
מאת כל־איש אשר ידבנו לבו תקחו את־***תרומתי***׃

> The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him (Exod. 25.1).

The Bible contains 76 occurrences of תרומה (*terumah*), 15 of which are in Exod. 25–31 and 34–40 , with most others appearing in priestly texts.

This reading of תרומה (*terumah*) is supported by the presence in Isa. 40.20 of a word (ירקב'), whose meaning in this context is not immediately obvious but recalls a familiar source word (draw near). Here, attention is drawn to the unusual word through its pairing with a word that echoes it (יבחר'), not unlike the category of 'sounds like' clues in a game of charades. The fact that a word stands out in the alluding text, either because it would be unusual in any context or because it is out of place in this particular context, makes it more likely that it was chosen to enhance an allusion to the source text. It is worth noting that Isa. 40.20 mentions a wise craftsman, חכם חרש, immediately after ירקב (rot):

המסכן תרומה עץ לא־***ירקב*** ***יבחר*** חרש חכם יבקש־לו להכין פסל לא ימוט׃

> As a gift, he *chooses* the mulberry—
> A wood that does not *rot*—
> Then seeks a wise craftsman
> To make a firm idol,
> That will not topple (40.20).

In both source texts, the relevant verb appears in close proximity to a term denoting wisdom חכם־לב, wise of heart, and חכמה בלבו, wise in his heart (see Exod. 28.3 in the case of 28.1):

ואתה ***הקרב*** אליך את־אהרן אחיך ואת־בניו אתו מתוך בני ישראל לכהנו־לי אהרן
נדב ואביהוא אלעזר ואיתמר בני אהרן׃

> You *shall bring forward* your brother Aaron, with his sons, from among the Israelites, to serve Me as a priests; Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, the sons of Aaron (Exod. 28.1).

ויקרא שמה אל־בצלאל ואל־אהליאב ואל כל־איש ***חכם־לב*** אשר נתן יהוה
חכמה בלבו כל אשר נשאו לבו ***לקרבה*** אל־המלאכה לעשת אתה׃

> Moses then summoned Bezalel and Oholiab, and every *wise* person whom the LORD had endowed with *wisdom*, everyone whose *heart was inspired*, to *approach* the work and execute it (Exod. 36.2).

The most notoriously problematic word in the anti-idol polemic occurs in the verse I have just mentioned, Isa. 40.20:

המסכן תרומה עץ לא־ירקב יבחר

> As a gift, he chooses the *mulberry*—A wood that does not rot…

A good deal of scholarly attention has been devoted to the *hapax legomenon* המסכן (ha'mesukhan), mulberry. Following an excellent survey of the exegetical options, H.G.M. Williamson concludes that עץ, tree, was a gloss on the already unfamiliar המסכן, mulberry.[24] Williamson's conclusion may lend support to my claim that the word was selected for reasons other than its meaning. Perhaps Deutero-Isaiah used it because it sounds like המשכן (ha'miskhan), the Tabernacle, and he intended to highlight the similarity between the activity of making idols and the material culture of the Israelite priests:

ככל אשר אני מראה אותך את תבנית *המשכן* ואת תבנית כל־כליו וכן תעשו׃

> Exactly as I show you—the pattern of the *Tabernacle* and the pattern of all its furnishings—so shall you make it (Exod. 25.9).

The likelihood that an allusion is intended here is increased by its juxtaposition with תרומה (*terumah*), a typically priestly term, as noted above. In some cases, the alluding text contains vocabulary that does not replicate the terminology of the source text, as in the example above, but rather paraphrases it. As well as referring to a source text by paraphrasing it, an alluding text may respond to or engage with the source text by saying the opposite. It goes without saying that a completely unexceptional claim that appears in two texts is not evidence of allusion, which raises the question of whether the claim that God created the world is unexceptional. This is not the place to debate the matter in full, but it is worth noting that most explicit and unambiguous references to God as creator occur in priestly texts or in Isa. 40–55. This indicates neither that Deutero-Isaiah absorbed the concept of creation from priestly texts, nor that he was engaging with them when he referred to it. He could have formulated the concept independently, or both authors could have been influenced by the same external source. Given the other allusions to priestly material, however, it seems most likely that allusion to a priestly text is intended.

Deutero-Isaiah describes God as creator in language that mirrors priestly creation texts.[25]

24. 'A Case of Not Seeing the Wood for the Trees', *Biblica* 67 (1986), pp. 1-20 (16).
25. Identified by M. Weinfeld, 'God and the Creator'.

הלוא ידעת אם־לא שמעת אלהי עולם **יהוה בורא קצות הארץ** לא ייעף
ולא ייגע אין חקר לתבונתו׃

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is God from of old,
Creator of the earth from end to end,
He never grows faint or weary,
His wisdom cannot be fathomed (Isa. 40.28).

The use of **ברא** (cf. Gen. 2.2) suggests that Genesis 1.1–2.2 is the source text, but we cannot rule out the possibility that Deutero-Isaiah was adapting Exod. 31.17 through the use of a verb that he associated specifically with divine creation:

ביני ובין בני ישראל אות הוא לעלם כי־ששת ימים **עשה יהוה את־השמים**
ואת־הארץ וביום השביעי **שבת ויינפש**׃

[It shall be a sign for all time] between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days the LORD *made heaven and earth*, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed.

Deutero-Isaiah asserts that God created the earth and, without pausing even for a conjunctive *vav*, let alone a breath, that he was neither faint nor weary. This represents a polemic against the anthropomorphic priestly God, who rests at the end of His creative act.[26] Two verbs indicate fatigue in Isa. 40.28:

הלוא ידעת אם־לא שמעת אלהי עולם **יהוה בורא קצות הארץ לא ייעף**
ולא ייגע אין חקר לתבונתו׃

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is God from of old,
Creator of the earth from end to end,
He never grows faint or weary,
His wisdom cannot be fathomed.

These two verbs of fatigue may respond to the two verbs indicating rest and rejuvenation in Exod. 31.17: שבת ויינפש, he ceased from work and was refreshed.

Identifying the How and Why

As well as identifying thematic coherence, it is necessary to construct a more detailed theory of how and why the alluding text relates to the source

26. Identified by M. Weinfeld, ‘God and the Creator’.

text. This issue can best be addressed in relation to several sub-questions. First, we must ask if Deutero-Isaiah can plausibly have been familiar with the Priestly texts I claim he uses. A *sine qua non* of intertextual allusion is the theoretical possibility that the author of the alluding text had access to the source text. This is perhaps the biggest challenge, since the text is our only source of evidence. The process of deriving evidence about the relationship between texts from the texts themselves is unavoidably circular, and perhaps the strongest assertion we can make is that nothing categorically excludes the possibility that Deutero-Isaiah read the Exodus Tabernacle narrative. Scholars disagree about date and location of both Deutero-Isaiah and the priestly texts, with theories ranging from an exilic Babylonian to a postexilic Judean provenance for Deutero-Isaiah, and a preexilic Israelite through exilic Babylonian to postexilic Judean provenance for the priestly texts. While there are combinations of the above that could rule out the relationship I have suggested here (an exilic Deutero-Isaiah and postexilic priestly texts), the provenance is too uncertain to be allowed veto power. Similarly, the absence of archaeological or secure biographical evidence makes it impossible to ascertain how Deutero-Isaiah might have had access to priestly texts; too little is known about scribal schools and archives, either in Babylon or in Judah. Perhaps the most we can claim is that we know nothing that would preclude access.

Even if a relationship of some kind between Deutero-Isaiah and the Tabernacle narratives can be established, it remains to determine that the prophet was alluding to the priestly text and not *vice versa*. Since, as noted above, uncertainty about the provenance of either texts renders dates inconclusive in this debate, we must resort to logic. First, it is not easy to see why a priestly author might allude to anti-idol polemics in Deutero-Isaiah. Human workmanship is a crucial component of the priestly worldview as it is manifested in Exodus 25–39, and as indicated by the centrality of the Temple. Drawing attention to the parallels with idol worship serves only to undermine craftsmen and their projects, unless the point is to make a contrast. This idea—an intentional contrast between priests and idol makers—cannot be ruled out. The golden calf narrative (Exod. 32–34) may have been placed between the instructions for the Tabernacle (Exod. 25–31) and their execution (Exod. 35–39) to show how the material culture of the priests differs from idolatry. (The calf was not commissioned whereas the Tabernacle was, for instance, and the people seem to regard the calf as a god, not as a site or focus of worship, as they regard the Tabernacle.) Yet even if the golden calf supported the priestly worldview, is it plausible that Deutero-Isaiah's 'anti-idol' polemics functioned similarly? The similarities between idol-makers and the builders of the Tabernacle seem far greater than the differences, and what differences there are (once again, the idols are not commissioned) do not stand out.

Second, while Deutero-Isaiah's notion of a transcendent God conflicts problematically with the priestly idea of an anthropomorphic God, which may account for his polemical allusions to the creation narrative, the incompatibility is less pronounced in the opposite direction. Deutero-Isaiah's categorical denial that God has a shape or form plays a significant role in his claim that God is transcendent. Moreover, his transcendent God fits poorly with the notion of a God who dwells in a Temple in Jerusalem. This may explain why Deutero-Isaiah is almost totally silent on the subject of the Temple, and why the few references that do occur relate not to its religious function, but to its role in establishing Cyrus either as David's successor or as his replacement. In Isa. 44.28 and 45.1, Cyrus, like David, is a 'shepherd' who will build Jerusalem, found the Temple, and serve as God's anointed. On this reading, the Temple is closer in spirit to a royal palace, as signalled perhaps by the use of היכל, than to a House of God, and Deutero-Isaiah's equation of the idol-makers with the builders of the Tabernacle enabled him to undermine still further the idea that the Temple was God's home in Jerusalem. The situation is quite different for the priestly authors, who anthropomorphize God by saying that man is made in his image and implying that he lives in a Temple, but not by the negative strategy of denying divine transcendence. In other words, the priests, unlike Deutero-Isaiah, do not establish what God is by asserting what he is not. To be sure, their emphatic anthropomorphism could be in response to Deutero-Isaiah's notion of transcendence, so that their assertion that God rested on the seventh day was intended precisely to counter Deutero-Isaiah's claim that God never wearies or weakens. Yet this seems far-fetched, to say the least; the priests were hardly short of motives for suggesting that God rests on the seventh day and that people should keep the Sabbath in imitation.

Third, the language shared by the idol polemics and the Tabernacle texts is the priestly authors' standard fare, but not Deutero-Isaiah's. No reader or hearer could reasonably be expected to make the leap from Exodus 25–39 to Deutero-Isaiah on the basis of linguistic clues. We see in Tabernacle narratives exactly the type and distribution of language and imagery we should expect in priestly text, and there is nothing that cries out, 'interpret me' with reference to another biblical text! In Deutero-Isaiah, though, the language and imagery of the idol texts stand out from the text that surrounds it, prompting critically trained Bible scholars to assume a later hand, and other readers to think about where they have encountered language like this before. Once again, this indicates a relationship in one direction but not the other. Finally, the polemic is richer and more potent in one direction than the other. Read as a polemic against Deutero-Isaiah, the priestly texts might counter the prophet's notion of God, but they neither fault him for forming it, or function as a convincing attack on worshippers of transcendent beings. Read as a polemic by Deutero-Isaiah against priestly texts, on the other

hand, it contrives to offer a counter view of God while suggesting at the same time that the priestly view is lacking.

Having dealt as thoroughly as I can with the relationship between Deutero-Isaiah and the Exodus 25–39, I must address the possibility that Deutero-Isaiah was alluding to a text *other than* Exodus 25–39. I explained above that I exclude Job as a source for Deutero-Isaiah in part because Job deals with divine workmanship, but not human. For the opposite reason, I exclude also the Temple building texts in 1 Kings 6–8 and 1 Chronicles 28–29 as likely sources; there we encounter human workmanship, but no divine creativity. Where Exodus 25–39 connects the building project with Shabbat and creation, the Solomonic account is linked to the monarchy, the Exodus from Egypt, the law, and the cult as a locus of forgiveness of sin. To be sure, the Tabernacle narrative's interest in creation is most clear when it is read in conjunction with Genesis 1, but there is evidence that the priestly authors themselves did that. The Tabernacle narrative contains many apparent allusions to creation, and moreover, as noted above, Exodus 25–39 is linked to creation through explicit references to Shabbat. But perhaps the most powerful argument that Deutero-Isaiah is polemicizing specifically against a priestly text is that the Bible's most detailed and sustained attack on idol-makers outside Isaiah 40–55—the golden calf narrative—also engages with a priestly narrative. As mentioned above, the calf narrative can be read positively, highlighting the differences between idolatry and priestly materialism, or negatively, emphasising similarities between the two. Either way, the juxtaposition of the calf narrative and the Tabernacle texts creates an intense engagement between a polemic against idol-makers and a priestly work. Naturally, this equation in Exodus does not prove beyond doubt that Deutero-Isaiah had in mind the same model when he penned the idol texts but, in the absence of evidence to the contrary and the other forms of support outlined above, it suggests the most plausible account of his interests.

Why, then, might Deutero-Isaiah have alluded to the Tabernacle narrative? Scholars generally focus on monotheism and/or visual representation of the divine when discussing Deutero-Isaiah's idol polemics.[27] The former interest is, I think, implausible and merits re-examination, but the latter should be pursued. Somewhat surprisingly, the Bible is more or less silent about representing God; the second commandment prohibits images of anything in the natural world, but images of God are not mentioned.

27. G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, I (Old Testament Library; San Francisco: Harper, 1965), p. 107. I am grateful to Nathan MacDonald for giving me early access to a stimulating paper that deals with images, 'Aniconism in the Old Testament', in R.P. Gordon (ed.), *The God of Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 20-34. MacDonald sees a contrast between the idols of the nations who cannot see or hear and Israel, whose eyes and ears have been opened so that they can be God's witnesses.

Exegetes try to fill the gap by citing texts that seem sensitive about portraying God, and Deutero-Isaiah is often utilized for this purpose, but perhaps inappropriately. The anti-idol polemics respond to questions: to whom can God be compared? The answer we usually assume runs along the lines of 'no one, and certainly not idols', but the answer is in fact 'no one, and certainly not idol-*makers*'.[28] When Isa. 40.18 poses the familiar question, 'To whom then can you liken God, What form compare to him?' the immediate answer is 'the idol'. So accustomed are we to seeing the contrast between God and idols as the underlying theme of this text that we think no further. Yet thereafter, the author's attention shifts completely to the idol-maker: 'a woodworker shaped it, and a smith overlaid it with gold…'. Similarly, Isa. 41.4 poses the question, Who has wrought and achieved this…? The immediate answer is, he who announced the generations from the start…, but the text that follows (41.6) may be read as a continuation of this: I the LORD (v. 6)… [not idol-makers] each one [of whom] helps the other, saying to his fellow, take courage. Again, Isa. 44.7 asks, Who like me can announce, Can foretell it and match me thereby? … Is there any God but me? This time the answer focuses directly on the idol makers (44.9): The makers of idols all work to no purpose… Who would fashion a god or cast a statue that can do no good? And finally, the questions posed in Isa. 46.5—To whom can you compare me or declare me similar? To whom can you liken me so that we seem comparable?—are answered in 46.6 with reference to idol makers, not idols: Those who squander gold from the purse and weigh out silver on the balance. The decision to respond to Deutero-Isaiah's question—Who is like God—with the answer 'idol-makers', not 'idols', has significant theological consequences.[29] On this reading, the idol-texts can hardly be making the point

28. Roth, 'For Life', p. 27: 'The logical and, in most cases, grammatical subject is the idol-maker, while the image appears as the direct and logical object'; R.J. Clifford, 'The Function of the Idol Passages in Second Isaiah', *CBQ* 42 (1980), pp. 450-64, notes the God–idol-maker contrast among others (p. 451). For a thorough treatment of the subject and its implications, see K. Holter's excellent *Second Isaiah's Idol-Fabrication Passages* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 87: 'It is the major thesis in the present work that what have to be—ironically!—likened to God in the idol-fabrication passages are the *idol-fabricators* and not the idols or gods themselves'. Holter sees the idols as personifications of the nations and concludes that the contrast may indicate a more radical nationalism in Deutero-Isaiah than is usually supposed (p. 239). See also Holter's *Deuteronomy Four and the Second Commandment* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

29. Holter, *Second Isaiah's Idol-Fabrication Passages*, flags that his reading has theological implications he is unable to pursue. D. Rudman, 'The Theology of the Idol-Fabrication Passages in Second Isaiah', *Old Testament Essays* 12/1 (1999), pp. 114-21, takes up Holter's torch and concludes that the idol texts are a polemic against reliance on human agency (p. 115); in other words, it is an anti-Cyrus polemic (p. 119). This

that an invisible God is better than visible idols. Rather, they must be making a point that can logically be inferred from the text. I suggest that the answer lies in two different concerns that arise again and again in Deutero-Isaiah: the power of prediction and the lessons of history. The message the prophet seems to send is that God's future plans will be revealed not through signs in the natural world or artificial representations of it, the mechanisms of priestly religion, but through God's past actions.

It is easy to see why most commentators have failed to discuss this in detail. The contrast between the mighty God of Israel and impotent Babylonian idols is the one we have come to expect, and is, moreover, a cornerstone of monotheism: God is powerful while idols are helpless, God can predict and idols cannot.[30] But why compare God to a Babylonian idol-*maker*? A possible answer lies in the parallels I have implied between Babylonian religion and the Israelite priestly cult. Deutero-Isaiah explicitly contrasts God with idol-makers; he denies that idols, and hence their makers and all those who depend upon them, can predict the future. Implicitly, Deutero-Isaiah equates priests with idol-makers; if neither the idols nor, by extension, their makers and worshippers, can predict the future, nor can the priests nor the artefacts of their material culture. Moreover, the simultaneous equation with priests and contrast with God suggests at once that the priestly cult is heavily and inappropriately influenced by Babylonian religion, especially, perhaps, in its focus on a material culture, and that it has little to do with the God of Israel.

Predicting the Future

Whether Deutero-Isaiah was writing in exile immediately prior to return, as seems to me most likely (at least for chs. 40–48), or in Judah soon afterwards,[31] Israel's future would surely have been a central preoccupation (41.21-24, 26-28; 43.9-10; 45.20; 47.10-11; 48.3-8, 14-16). This was a time of great political and religious uncertainty, when different options

is an intriguing reading that deserves more attention than I can give it here. Suffice to say for now that it creates a tension between the idol texts and the strikingly pro-Cyrus passages in, e.g., Isa. 45.1-8. It is one thing to hint that Cyrus is God's puppet and quite another to lampoon him as a deluded idol-maker. G.K. Beale, 'Isaiah vi 9-13: A Retributive Taunt against Idolatry', *VT* 41 (1991), pp. 257-78, sees the idol texts as a judgement against Israel; God's own people are the idols who do not see or hear God's message (p. 277).

30. See, e.g., H.D. Preuss, *Verspottung fremder Religionen im Alten Testament*, pp. 208-15.

31. H. Barstad, 'On the So-Called Babylonian Literary Influences in Deutero-Isaiah', *SJOT* 1 (1987), pp. 90-110 (90 n. 1).

presented themselves, from peaceful acceptance of Persian rule to struggle for national autonomy under a reconstituted monarchy, and no doubt others in between. It is plausible that the priestly worldview reached its present form in response to this uncertainty. A fundamental objection to idols is that they cannot predict (41.21-24). I suggest that Deutero-Isaiah was unhappy with the priestly way forward, both in terms of content (its apparent focus on the Temple and the cult) and form (its predilection for the tangible and visible). Moreover, he suggests that the priests are not in a position to predict future events; their mechanisms for prediction are no better than idols, whose most serious limitation, as he repeatedly shows, is their inability to predict.

Deutero-Isaiah's discussion of failed prediction is not limited to idols; he targets Babylonian religion (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say Babylonian science) for a similar failing. Isaiah 47.12-13 forms part of what appears at first glance to be a sustained attack on Babylonian religion:

עמדי־נא בחבריך וברב כשפיך באשר יגעת ***מנעוריך*** אולי תוכלי הועיל ***אולי תערוצי*** : נלאית ברב עצתיך יעמדו־נא ויושיעך הברו [הברי] ***שמים*** החזים ***בכוכבים מודיעים*** לחדשים מאשר יבאו עליך :

> Stand up, with your spells and your many enchantments on which you labored *since youth*! Perhaps you'll be able to profit, perhaps you will find strength. You are helpless, despite your art. Let them stand up and help you now, the scanners of *heaven*, the *star*-gazers, who *announce*, month by month, whatever will come upon you.

As with the idol-texts, however, Babylonian religion is characterized so as to recall priestly texts. Thus מודיעים in conjunction with כוכבים recalls מועדים, while מנעוריך evokes מארת, and the difficult אולי תערוצי may even recall להאיר על־הארץ (Gen. 1.14-19). Counter-intuitive as it may seem, Gen. 1.14-19 may be read as an implicit validation of Babylonian religion:

> God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times—the days and the years; and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth.' And it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth, to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that this was good.

On this account, God creates the sun and the moon, but then allows them to determine the set times at which all things occur. Commentators traditionally read these verses as anti-pagan polemics undermining the deification of the sun and moon (since God created them, they cannot be divine), but this seems implausible, both in view of their likely Babylonian provenance (the sun and moon were not worshipped as gods there) and because the

verb *mashal*, rule, has precisely the personifying and, moreover, controlling, connotations that we might expect authors with an anti-deification agenda to avoid. Rather, the Genesis account suggests that God abdicated responsibility to the sun and the moon, and that the best way to learn about the times and dates of things is to thus to study the sun and the moon, as the Babylonians do. Or, to express this the other way around, the priestly author of Genesis 1 finds a way of reconciling Babylonian astronomy with Israelite theology. God created the sun and the moon and endowed them with a sphere of influence (the calendar); all those wishing to operate within that sphere should henceforth study the sun and the moon, not God.

While Deutero-Isaiah may equate the priestly cult with certain aspects of Babylonian religion to undermine its credibility as a source of future hope, he does *not* ridicule Babylonian religion in total. He simply claims that it is not up to the task of predicting future events and saving people from all impending disasters (cf., for Israel, the prediction of Cyrus, and the exile, respectively). God's interactions with Cyrus offer additional evidence that Deutero-Isaiah's primary target was not Babylonian religion. God seems to adopt a 'when in Rome' attitude with Cyrus, promising him אוצרות חשך, treasures concealed in the dark, and ומטמני מסתרים, secret hoards, in Isa. 45.3, despite telling Israel he will not speak to them בסתר, in secret, במקום ארץ חשך, in a dark land (Isa. 45.19).[32] This language is strongly reminiscent of Late Babylonian omen tablets (cf. especially Akk. *nisirtu*)[33] and, read collectively, the two biblical texts imply that Babylonian religion, though inappropriate for Israel, is acceptable for its own practitioners. Moreover, even while Deutero-Isaiah rejects certain features of Babylonian religion for Israel, he seems to adopt and transform others. In order to illustrate Deutero-Isaiah's adoption and transformation of components of Babylonian religion, I want to return to a question that was implicit in a claim I made earlier, but that I did not address. I pointed out that Deutero-Isaiah contrasts the inability of idols to predict with God's predictive power, but I did not explain how I think God predicts according to Deutero-Isaiah. The obvious answer is via the prophet, but it is surprisingly hard to come up with textual evidence to support it. My own response is that Deutero-Isaiah's God predicts the future through his activity in Israel's history, and I shall conclude this chapter by attempting

32. K. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary* (ed. P. Machinist; trans. Margaret Kohl; Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) interprets 45.3 as a reference to money (p. 226) and 45.19 to the underworld (p. 246) but although he notes that v. 19 is difficult, hinting dissatisfaction with his reading of it, he does not relate these verses to each other.

33. LBAT 1526 rev. 17, discussed by F. Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 212.

to draw out a tantalizing connection between this form of prediction and Deutero-Isaiah's idol-texts.

Mouth-washing

In the past, Bible scholars routinely dismissed idol worship as primitive self-delusion, and assumed that the biblical prophets were equally dismissive of the pagan religions that surrounded them. How can a block of wood made by human hands be divine or in any meaningful sense represent divinity? Lately, though, Assyriologists have begun to recognize that ancient Near Eastern idolatry was more sophisticated than their predecessors believed. In particular, they have paid renewed attention to the ritual that aimed to effect the transformation from human artefact to divinity, *mis pî*, the mouth washing or mouth opening ritual.[34] Accounts of the *mis pî* ritual (or rituals) differ, and it is sometimes said to have occurred in the idol-maker's workshop,[35] but it is usually claimed to have included the following components: the idol is (1) processed to (2) a body of water—past (3) an orchard and (4) channels of water—where the idol's (5) mouth is washed and/or opened four times with sweet foods, after which its senses are awakened and (6) it can taste and smell; (7) the idol-maker then symbolically cuts off his hand and (8) denies that he made it. Deutero-Isaiah seems variously to reflect or reverse the components of *mis pî* in relation to Israel, and may have shaped the Exodus pattern that underlies his text in light of this ritual. Possible allusions to its component parts may be found throughout Deutero-Isaiah, but Isa. 41.17-20 offers a concentrated glimpse:

> The poor and *needy*
> *Seek water*, and there is none;
> Their tongue is parched with thirst.
> I the LORD God respond to them.
> I, the God of Israel will not forsake them.

34. See, e.g., V.A. Hurowitz, 'The Mesopotamian God Image, from Womb to Tomb', *JAOS* 123 (2003), pp. 147-55; C. Walker and M. Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mis Pî Ritual* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001); M. Dick, *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Creation of the Cult Image* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), see especially pp. 1-53; A. Berlejung, 'Washing the Mouth: The Consecration of Divine Images in Mesopotamia', in K. van der Toorn (ed.), *The Image and the Book*: *Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), pp. 45-72; T. Jacobsen, 'The Graven Image', in P.D. Miller *et al.* (eds.), *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 15-32.

35. Rudman, 'The Theology of the Idol-Fabrication Passages in Second Isaiah', p. 119.

I will *open up streams* on the bare hills
And *fountains* amid the valleys;
I will turn the desert into *ponds*,
The arid land into *springs of water*.
I will plant *cedars* in the wilderness,
Acacias and *myrtles* and *oleasters*;
I will set *cypresses* in the desert,
Box trees and *elms* as well—
That they[36] may *see and know*,
Consider this and comprehend
That the *LORD's hand has done this*,
That the Holy One of Israel has *wrought it*.

The word used here for needy, האביונים, evokes the Hebrew for stone. While Deutero-Isaiah's idols are made of wood and metal, stone is a common material for idols, and the fact that this word does not scan is a possible indication that it was included to enhance the parallel between the account of Israel's journey from Egypt to Israel and the *mis pî* ritual.[37] The reference to water, recalling a motif of the procession out of Egypt, mirrors the water to which the idol is carried. The precise language used here also evokes the ritual. God promises that he will *open* streams. Open is not a verb commonly used in connection with water, and the word for streams, שפיים, recalls lips. Three other kinds of water are mentioned in addition to שפיים, paralleling the four mouth openings. Seven kinds of trees are mentioned, signifying perhaps an orchard,[38] and all this is to that ensure that 'they' will see and know that the LORD's *hand* (7) made 'this' and created, בראה, 'it'. It is not clear whether the subjects here are the onlookers or the processors. The people who will see and know (have their senses awakened) could be the observers,[39] but since no observers have been mentioned thus far, 'it' seems more likely to signify the people being processed. 'This' could refer either to the event or the people being brought out, as could 'it' but, assuming that 'this' and 'it' have the same point of reference, the latter seems more likely. Perhaps Deutero-Isaiah contrasts God with Babylonian idol-makers/Israelite Priests to highlight an essential difference. Priests and idol-makers manufacture material objects (idols/cult paraphernalia) and 'read' them as signs of divine involvement in the world.[40] God creates Israel, and they, his

36. NJPS reads 'men' not 'they'.

37. R.N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* (New Century Bible Commentary; London: Oliphants, 1975), *ad loc.*

38. *Exod. R.* 35.1 cites this passage in relation to Exod. 26.15, implying that all seven trees mentioned in Isa. 41.19 are types of cedar.

39. NJPS.

40. For a discussion of ancient Near Eastern semiology, see Z. Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), especially pp. 121-49.

witnesses, אתם עדי (43.10), are the signs of his activity in the world, past, present and future. To whom can God be compared? Perhaps to an idol-maker after all, but whereas the idol-maker produces lifeless imitations of wood and metal, God makes living idols!

Two or Three Isaiahs and Other Implications

Several more general conclusions may be drawn from my observations here, and I offer them now in case they stimulate further thought on this subject. The Tabernacle narrative is an important priestly text that serves, among other things, to validate the Temple by suggesting that the blue-print for its prototype was given at Sinai. The possible allusions I have identified in Isaiah 40–55 suggest a stronger opposition to the Temple than the allusions Sommer sees in Isaiah 61–65, which indicate no more than a need for the reorganization and democratization of Temple service. This is precisely what we should expect. The Temple is barely mentioned in Deutero-Isaiah and, where it is mentioned, it is connected with Cyrus and seems to serve a political—the validation of Cyrus's rule—rather than a religious function—the home of the cult. Indeed, Deutero-Isaiah shows no practical interest at all in the restoration of the cult, and it is difficult to see how it is compatible with his non-anthropomorphic, transcendent God. This line of reasoning, if correct, makes it hard to see how Deutero-Isaiah can be one and the same author as Trito-Isaiah, whose interest in the Temple is so concrete.[41]

As Holter points out, the recognition that the anti-idol polemics contrast God with idol-makers not, as usually supposed, with idols and false god, entails a significant reassessment of what is usually seen as a central proof text for Deutero-Isaiah's absolute monotheism. If I am correct to see in these texts not opposition to any form of Babylonian religion (idols or idol-makers), but rather evidence of an inner-Israelite debate,[42] we must re-evaluate the standard view that Deutero-Isaiah's condemnation of idolatry was a pillar of his monotheism. There is, of course, no need to revisit the view that Deutero-Isaiah was a monotheist; the text contains many powerful monotheistic claims apart from the inference from idolatry.[43]

41. Contra, e.g., Sommer, *A Prophet Reads the Scripture*.

42. I am grateful to Knut Holter for his generous response to an outline of the paper on which this chapter was based, and especially for confirming that he too sees the idol polemics as a message intended for Israel's benefit (personal communication, 14 December, 2005).

43. See B. Halperin, ' "Brisker Pipes than Poetry": The Development of Israelite Monotheism', in J. Neusner *et al.* (eds.), *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 77-115.

Isaiah 40–55 contains few indications of what its author hoped would happen once the exiles had resettled in Jerusalem. Certainly, the positive account of Cyrus suggests a pro-Persian stance that is in keeping with the prophet's approaching-universalist outlook.[44] Yet Deutero-Isaiah seems long on inspiring vision and short on practical detail on such crucial matters as worship, social organization and identity. The possible anti-priestly polemic I have identified here implies that he was more engaged with the politics of restoration than this account allows. The anti-priestly, and especially anti-Temple, polemics suggest that he opposed a society that revolved around the Temple and the cult, and may even have wished to diminish the central role of the Sabbath. His own version of the future was less time-bound and more concerned with land, indicating perhaps, that despite his universalist leanings, the only future he saw was in Judah, in contrast to priestly writers who saw a possible future for Israel outside the land.

Occurrences of distinctive vocabulary and concepts embedded in otherwise alien texts are usually taken as indicative of redaction by another hand. Priestly language in Deuteronomy 4 is thus seen by most exegetes as the later contribution of a priestly editor. My conclusions here suggest that we should ask whether writers from one school utilized a concentration of language and ideas from another school with the intention of evoking it in order to engage with it, whether negatively, positively, or selectively.

Most importantly, at least for me, this analysis suggests that although Deutero-Isaiah was critical of priestly religion, especially for its dependence on images and representations (42.8, 17; 45.16, 20), he may not have intended to criticize Babylonian religion as practiced by Babylonians. Rather, his own co-religionists were the object of his condemnation, and even in their case, if there is any truth in the claims I have made about his use of the *mis pî* ritual, he did not have a *carte blanche* objection to borrowing from other religions. As I noted at the outset, Deutero-Isaiah's idol texts are frequently offered as parade examples of biblical condemnation of other ancient Near Eastern religions. If I am right that what they convey is evidence of an internal debate, not an assertion of the superiority of one religion over another, we should investigate whether or not the same is true for other biblical authors who seem to attack other religions. Have we been labouring under an unfortunate misapprehension about the biblical perspective on other religions? And is it too late—in the big sweep of the history of interpretation—to re-evaluate the Bible's attitude towards other religions as an aid to rethinking our own?

44. Space does not permit me to enter the Deutero-Isaiah particularist/universalist fray. In a nutshell, I see universalism as the logical extension of Deutero-Isaiah's theology, but think that he himself had not made that leap.

Chapter 4

The Limits of Intercession: Abraham reads Ezekiel at Sodom and Gomorrah

Enter in mourning habits, VIRGILIA, VOLUMNIA, leading young MARCIUS, VALERIA, and Attendants

> My wife comes foremost; then the honour'd mould
> Wherein this trunk was framed, and in her hand
> The grandchild to her blood. But, out, affection!
> All bond and privilege of nature, break!
> Let it be virtuous to be obstinate.
> What is that curt'sy worth? Or those dove's eyes,
> Which can make gods forsworn? I melt, and am not
> Of stronger earth than others. My mother bows;
> As if Olympus to a molehill should
> In supplication nod: and my young boy
> Hath an aspect of intercession, which
> Great nature cries 'Deny not.' Let the Volsces
> Plough Rome and harrow Italy: I'll never
> Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand
> As if a man were author of himself
> And knew no other kin.
>
> Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* V.iii.

Coriolanus's young son is not the only one to have 'an aspect of intercession'. The entire montage is calculated to affect: mourning habits, assembled generations of a single family, gentle mothers and appealing infants, and a dove-eyed woman to lead them by the hand. Coriolanus resolves to resist, but not before Shakespeare has immortalized the tropes of classical intercession, highlighting in the process the clash, or otherwise, of the personal and political, the emotional and the rational, the familial and the national. In this chapter, I want to examine the tropes of intercession in relation to the figure of Abraham, first as interpreted in a rabbinic text, and then the Bible. The founding patriarch is frequently associated with intercession on behalf of his descendants, who appeal in their prayers to his merit.[1] Somewhat

1. This is especially evident in the *selichot* liturgy, the preparation for Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur and the Ten Days of Repentance.

surprisingly, in view of his activity at Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham is seldom identified as an intercessor on behalf of the nations. This is the role I shall explore here.

Regardless of its composition history, Genesis 12 to 26 in its final form stages the Abrahamic drama against the backdrop of the nations:

> And the LORD said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and it will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you' (Gen. 12.1-3).

An apparent paradox lies at the heart of God's paradigmatic command that Abraham should leave his home among the nations of the world in order that the nations will be blessed through him. If God wanted Abraham to exist in what amounts to a national vacuum, why insist that he bring blessings to all the families of the earth? And if God wanted Abraham to bring blessing to all the families of the earth, why remove him from their midst? Could Abraham and his descendants not benefit the nations and families of the earth more effectively by living among them? The answer to these questions depends in part on the definition of blessing. Most traditional commentaries equate blessing here with knowledge of God and, in particular, his uniqueness. On this reading, the call to Abraham is hard to understand. It is not clear why Abraham and his descendants required the comparative isolation of their own land, an objection that applies even if the families of the earth are understood as Jews living in the Diaspora. In this chapter, I shall complicate the notion of blessing, suggesting that, along with its customary associations of teaching and example, blessing should be equated with intercession. Once intercession has been added to the equation, the need for a land of one's own begins to make sense. Intercession requires a degree of separation between the intercessor and the object of intercession, and this was achieved when Abraham interacted with the nations against the backdrop of his own land, whether land is understood literally or conceptually. Over time, land was used less as a spatial or geographic differentiator, and more as a marker of distinctive identity. Adam Gopnik's account of his first childhood visit to New York City—no doubt so resonant for me because it describes my own feelings—expresses perfectly the need for fluidity:

> I remember looking out the window of the little maid's room where we had been installed, seeing the lights of the Palisades [New Jersey] across the way, and thinking, *There! There it is! There's New York, this wonderful city. I'll go live there some day*. Even being in New York, the actual place, I found the idea of New York so wonderful that I could only imagine it as some other place, greater than any place that would let me sleep in

> it—a distant constellation of lights I had not yet been allowed to visit. I had arrived in Oz only to think, *Well, you don't live in Oz, do you?* … Ever since, New York has existed for me simultaneously as a map to be learned and a place to aspire to—a city of things and a city of signs, the place where I actually am and the place I would like to be even when I am here.[2]

Various explanations can be offered for a biblical interest in intercession on behalf of the nations. On one reading, it could be seen in the light of developing monotheism and peaceful co-existence with foreigners under Persian hegemony. The authors of our texts sought mechanisms for extending to others the benefits they claimed for themselves. Related to this, but less altruistically, they may have been motivated by the need to remove from the land what they saw as the polluting effects of all sin, whether Israelite or non-Israelite. Quite differently, they may have used intercession as part of the process of 'transforming the foreigner', according to which 'the enemy will be defeated by being transformed so that it is no longer a threat to the Jewish people'.[3] This latter explanation seems to fit better with the rabbinic texts I shall analyse here than with the biblical ones, but I mention it at the outset in case the ensuing analysis sheds light on its development.

In the first part of this chapter, I shall use the first three midrashim on לך־לך (*lekh lekha*) in *Genesis Rabbah* 39.1-3 to define and develop the profile of Abraham as intercessor for the nations, and to explore its theological implications.[4] A distinctive function of midrash as a genre of commentary is gap-filling.[5] Most is made of textual gap-filling, the parade example being the midrashic articulation of Isaac's thoughts as Abraham led him up Mount Moriah. Arguably more important, though, is

2. *Through the Children's Gate. A Home in New York* (New York: Knopf, 2006), p. 5.

3. D. Smith-Christopher, 'Between Ezra and Isaiah: Exclusion, Transformation, and Inclusion of the "Foreigner" in Post-Exilic Biblical Theology', in M.G. Brett (ed.), *Ethnicity and the Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 117-42 (130).

4. The shift from biblical texts dealing with Israel and the nations to rabbinic texts dealing with Jews and non-Jews highlights complex questions about Israelite/Jewish identity that fall outside the scope of this chapter. I follow D. Boyarin, J. Lieu and others in seeing the post-biblical period in question as a time when boundaries were often indistinct and 'Jewish identity' was in flux. My analysis in the first part of this chapter, and indeed the second, may have implications for this discussion, but I shall not stray from my primary area of concern in order to examine them.

5. For discussion of the genre, see D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); G. Hartman and S. Budick (eds.), *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); B. Holtz, 'Midrash', in B. Holtz (ed.), *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), pp. 177-211; Stern, *Parables in Midrash.*

experiential gap-filling—attempts made by authors to fill temporal, theological, and political gaps between their own lives and their biblical blueprint. This activity is especially evident in connection with highly charged biblical texts that point forward to future generations as they highlight the dissonance between the expectations these texts generated and the experiences of their readers. Not surprisingly, particular attention is paid to the call of Abraham in Genesis 12, where Abraham, the first monotheist and the first Jew from the rabbinic point of view, is promised that he and his descendants will be the source of blessings for all the nations/families of the earth; those who bless him will be blessed and those who curse him will be cursed. God's promise surely rang hollow in the ears of those who saw themselves as heirs to Abraham's blessing for the harsh reality of life under Rome. Jews were 'cursed' by Rome, but if Rome was cursed in return, the evidence was sorely lacking. On the contrary, far from being cursed, directly or indirectly, by the Lord of the Universe, Rome itself appeared to be ruling the known world. I see *Gen. R.* 39.1-3 as a narrative unit that helps explain this dilemma and offer reassurance. My justification for reading it holistically is threefold: all three midrashim use similar imagery to raise and treat a series of closely related concerns; they are structurally coherent, beginning and ending with Abraham and the Temple, with the third midrash resolving the problem raised by the first and the second effecting a transition between the two; and each draws its *petihta* from similar biblical texts. Read not atomistically but as a narrative unit, these texts establish Abraham as a proto-martyr,[6] where martyrdom represents intercession.[7]

In reading martyrdom as intercession, I have in mind especially Steven Weitzman's analysis of these themes in texts dealing with the destruction of the Temple.[8] Weitzman finds a constructive account of the voluntary deaths of Jews in an account by the Roman historian Dio Cassius (c. 160–230 CE). 'They met their deaths willingly', Dio Cassius claims,

6. I am grateful to Deborah Green for directing me to her unpublished PhD dissertation on scent, University of Chicago, 2005. For different reasons, and based on different texts (in my case *Gen. R.* and in hers the parallel texts in *Song R*), we reached similar conclusions about Abraham's martyr-complex. Many thanks to Michael Fishbane for his penetrating comments on an earlier draft of the rabbinic material in this chapter and, especially, for helping me to see what I should have known all along—that my real interest is not martyrdom but intercession.

7. On martyrdom as intercession (cf. 2 Macc. 6.12-17; *4 Macc.* 6.28-29; 17.20-22), see J. Lieu, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), pp. 80-81.

8. See S. Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege. Cultural Persistence in Jewish Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), especially 'Playing Dead', pp. 138-57, for the view that willingness to die, rather than actual death, is intended.

'some throwing themselves on the swords of Romans, some slaying one another, others taking their own lives, and still others leaping into the flames. And it seemed to everybody … [that] it was victory and salvation and happiness to them that they perished along with the temple (*Roman History* 66.6.2-3).[9] Weitzman equates this account with Jewish texts from the Seleucid period that describe the practice, real or more likely rhetorical, of 'dying for the law'. In 2 Maccabees, the scribe Eleazar along with a mother and her seven children die rather than eat pork, and their deaths represent 'the turning point in the Maccabean Revolt, laying the groundwork for the defeat of Antiochus by helping to soften God's anger against Israel and redirect it against the enemy'.[10] In *4 Maccabees* (6.26-29), as Weitzman sees it, their deaths function in the absence of a working Temple like 'the Yom Kippur sacrifice, the blood of which was used to purify the sanctuary and ransom or expiate Israel's sins'.[11] He identifies a similar train of thought in Greek versions of Daniel 3, where Daniel's three friends 'offer their lives in lieu of the offerings they might have offered had the Temple been standing. When the only options left were betraying the law of Moses or accepting death, the choice of death was thought to offer one last chance to enlist God's help against the enemy'.[12] As flagged above, however, it is not clear that the voluntary deaths recorded in these texts ever occurred. Perhaps those concerned merely threatened to die, and had no intention of carrying it through. Or perhaps, as Daniel Boyarin has it, we are dealing with a 'a discourse, not just a practice but a way of talking about that practice that does its own cultural work'.[13] In the second part of this chapter, I shall try to demonstrate that the idea of Abraham as an intercessor for the nations is already present in the Bible. My focus will be the Genesis accounts of Abraham at Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18–19) and Gerar (Gen. 20), read as an intertextual expansion of Ezekiel 14. I hope to show both that the midrashic reading of Abraham is firmly rooted in the Bible, and that approaching the Bible through this rabbinic lens is a helpful strategy for getting to grips with some extremely complex texts.

9. T. Rajak, 'Dying for the Law: The Martyrs' Portrait in Jewish-Greek Literature', in M. Edwards and S. Swain (eds.), *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 39-67, cited by Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege*, p. 139.

10. Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege*, p. 140.

11. Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege*, p. 140.

12. Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege*, p. 141.

13. D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 94-95, cited by Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege*, p. 144.

The Burning Fortress

Jews and Christians alike have seen in God's opening words to Abraham evidence of a missionary role of some kind. Abraham conceives the world differently from all those who went before him—he recognises that the universe must be ruled by one God—and is called upon to disseminate this new knowledge throughout the world. As traditionally read, *Genesis Rabbah* 39.1 reinforces the first step of Abraham's missionary activity, his recognition that the world has a single overseer:

> *And the* Lord *said to Abram, 'Take yourself from your land etc…'*. Rabbi Isaac[14] opened (Ps. 45.11), *Listen, daughter, and look, and incline your ear, and forget your mother and your father's house*. Rabbi Isaac said, This is like someone who travels from place to place, and sees a certain fortress burning. He said, Would you say that this fortress has no overseer? Above him, the overseer of the fortress peeked out. He said to him, I am he, the overseer of the fortress. Thus it was when our father Abraham said, Would you say that this world has no overseer? the Holy One Blessed be He peeked out over him and said, I am He, the Master of the World. *So shall the King desire your beauty, for he is your Lord. So shall the King desire your beauty.* To beautify you in the world. *And to bow down to him*. Hence, *And the* Lord *spoke to Abram*.

This text has a classic midrashic structure, commencing with the opening words of the *mathil*, the biblical verse for comment; moving to the *petihta* (a seemingly unrelated Hebrew Bible text that will be brought to bear on the verse for comment); offering a *mashal*, parable, on the verse for comment; interpreting the parable (the *nimshal*); returning to the *petihta*; and closing, as it opened, with the verse for comment. Deciding how much of the *mathil* or *petihta* verse or verses must be brought to bear involves an exegetical judgment call. It is often the case in midrashim thus structured that connection between the *petihta* and the *mathil* is found in the unquoted continuation of one or the other or both (the rabbis either assumed their audience knew the Bible by heart or wanted them to make the effort to find out). In the midrash at hand, we need to extend both *mathil* and *petihta*. The primary connection is self-evident; both Abraham and the young woman addressed in Psalm 45 are instructed to leave their fathers' houses.[15] Yet we need to read well beyond the opening verse to

14. A Fourth Generation *Tanna* who moved between Babylonia and Israel, c. 200 CE.

15. The feminization of Abraham fits well with the typology of martyrdom. Cf. D. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, p. 111, on the *Mekhilta* on Exod. 15.2. Significantly, perhaps, a verse from the psalm that precedes the *petihta*, Ps. 44.23 ('For your sake we are killed all day and are counted as sheep brought for slaughter') features in many martyrological accounts.

understand how the *petihta* raises and develops the themes of the midrash as a whole:

> Take heed, lass, and note, incline your ear: forget your people and your father's house, and let the king be aroused by your beauty; since he is your Lord, bow to him. O Tyrian lass, the wealthiest people will court your favour with gifts, goods of all sorts. The royal princess, her dress embroidered with golden mountings, is led inside to the king; maidens in her train, her companions, are presented to you. They are led in with joy and gladness; they enter the palace of the king. Your sons will succeed your ancestors; you will appoint them princes throughout the land. I will memorialize your name for all generations, so peoples will praise you forever and ever (Ps. 45.11-18).

Psalm 45 describes a young woman called to arouse through her beauty the love of the king. The sequence of events suggests that separation from her people and her father's house is a necessary precursor of her act of intercession, and that the ultimate beneficiaries may be other peoples—the ones who will praise her for ever and ever. In the psalm itself, the king is David; as appropriated by the midrash, the king is God. The princess, virgins or young women in tow (they will become important later), enters the king's palace (the Temple, if we have in mind God the King). The unit as I think it should be identified closes with a reference to the king's descendants and his name, and the promise that peoples will praise him for ever. This resonates with the reference to Abraham's name in the *mathil*, and also with the *petihta* in *Gen. R.* 39.2 (cf. על־כן עלמות אהבוך). The promise of posterity through descendants will become central in my explication of the biblical texts.

The precise identification of rabbinic authors or speakers in midrash is triply complicated. First, we may be uncertain about which one of a number of rabbis with the same name is intended. Second, we may (and usually do) lack reliable biographical information even when the identity of the rabbi is certain. Third, even when we can be certain about the identity and have reliable biographical information, there is no guarantee that the rabbi in question is responsible for the words attributed to him. In this case, Rabbi Isaac seems to have been a sage of the second or third century CE who was based in Jerusalem but travelled back and forth to Babylon.[16] If this is so, it is significant that the *mashal* is attributed to him, even if he did not in fact utter it. For this short midrash now has a second mirror for Abraham in addition to the beautiful princess: Rabbi Isaac himself. God calls Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees (Gen 15.8), which means that both Abraham and Rabbi Isaac are familiar with the road between Babylon to Israel. If the intention of the

16. H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. M. Bockmuehl; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 98.

midrash is in part to identify a model (Abraham), it may also have wished to identify an appropriate follower for its own time: Rabbi Isaac.

Moving to the *mashal*, we find Abraham's fourth reflection: the man travelling from place to place. Although the Bible uses מקום almost exclusively in spatial terms, the identification of מקום with the *place* where God will make his name or presence dwell (e.g. Deut. 12.5) leads almost seamlessly to its post-biblical, and presumably post-destruction, use as a name of God. The man going from place to place could thus be moving from one geographic location to another, from one temple to another, from one god to another, or from any one of these three to any other. Given the centrality of the burning fortress/Temple in this midrash, from 'place' as geographic location to 'place' as Temple is an attractive option.

At first glance, the *mashal* seems straightforward enough, but a second look reveals a rich and complex text. A building in flames indicates what management consultants describe as a high stakes situation. Since the burning building is some kind of fortress, a structure usually identified as not just impregnable, but a source of protection, the stakes are raised. People who encounter burning buildings can be expected to react strongly. They might panic and cry for help, or try to discover by calling out whether or not someone is inside, they might even run for a ladder or a fire extinguisher. They are extremely unlikely to stand by asking rhetorical questions: 'Would you say that a fortress like this has no owner?' The traveller, then, exhibits extreme passivity and detachment in a context in which those qualities are neither usual nor desirable. Still more unusually, the traveller's emotions are mirrored by those of the building's owner. People do not usually remain in burning buildings if they can help it. If they come to the window, it is usually to attempt an escape or to cry for help. The owner's response to the traveller's question indicates that he is unthreatened by the fire, and here, of course, we begin to make our own move towards the *nimshal*, the interpretation. His calm confidence recalls the burning bush, aflame yet not consumed. The parallel is surely intentional; the author of the midrash is constructing a prophetic call for Abraham that mirrors the call to Moses, perhaps reinforcing the theme of (prophetic) intercession.[17]

Yet the *mashal* does far more than make the twin points that God is invulnerable and that Abraham is a prophet like Moses. The allusion to the burning bush serves simultaneously as a comparison and a contrast. A fortress is not the same as a burning bush. First, it is likely to be occupied by people other than the owner. Is the owner acting responsibly towards the other residents? On the one hand, his determination to stay in his building is reassuring; he does not abandon ship, so to speak. Yet, on the other, his insistence on staying in the building may be worth little in view of his failure to act. Could the

17. A typical case of rabbinically enhanced typology.

owner's calm detachment cause the loss of a home for his tenants, and even the loss of their lives?[18] Second, the destruction of the fortress may function as a microcosm of the universe. The place that represents security and survival, the product of humanity's attempts to protect itself from external danger, has itself been destroyed. And here we must recall the Temple, another building that served as a microcosm of the universe and whose destruction threatened chaos and cosmic disorder. To be sure, God remained inviolable, but the implications for his people were potentially catastrophic.[19]

The move from human owner of a fortress to the divine occupant of the Temple is not precisely mirrored in the midrash's own *nimshal*. According to the midrash, the castle represents the world, not the Temple, and its owner, God, its sovereign guide. Yet it is not unusual for a *nimshal* to fall short of a full interpretation, or to imply a parallel is not entirely satisfying,[20] and we must examine the *nimshal* in the light of our own observations. The obvious starting point is that the world is burning. This is a dangerous time (and here we must recall its origins in Roman Palestine). On the one hand, the comparisons to the burning bush and the Temple are in some respects reassuring. The world may be burning, but God is not threatened and will not abandon it. Yet why does he remain passive and detached? At this point we turn to the secondary biblical citation from Psalm 45. As noted above, the superficial point of the citation is a comparison between Abraham and a young woman urged to arouse the love of a king, but if we assume that the midrashic author read Psalm 45 in continuity with Psalm 44, a different value emerges. Psalm 44 laments the lowly position of Israel among the nations, and concludes (vv. 24–27) with an impassioned plea for God to remember them, presumably in order to restore them to their former glory:

> Arouse Yourself; why do you sleep, O LORD?
> Awaken, do not reject us forever!
> Why do you hide your face,
> Ignoring our affliction and distress?
> We lie prostrate in the dust;
> Our body clings to the ground.
> Arise and help us,
> Redeem us as befits Your faithfulness.

18. I am grateful to Moshe Lavee for directing me to P. Mandel, 'The Call of Abraham: A Midrash Revisited', *Prooftexts* 14 (1994), pp. 267-84. Mandel identifies the בירה (fortress) as a residential tenement building of the type found throughout the Roman world. These apartment blocks, often five or six stories high, were overcrowded and dangerous, and represented a significant fire hazard (pp. 274-75). For another description of these buildings, see also M. Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (London: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2007), pp. 42-43, 49.

19. Midrash characteristically contains barely veiled criticisms of God.

20. Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, p. 77.

The author of the midrash appears to read Psalm 45 as a response to Psalm 44. God needs someone to arouse him from sleep (Ps. 44.24), and such a person emerges in the shape of the Tyrian princess who arouses the king in Psalm 45. The midrashic author transforms the princess into Abraham, and at the same time applies Psalm 44 to his own historical time. Given the verses immediately preceding those quoted above, this reapplication is not much of a stretch:

> All this has come upon us,
> yet we have not forgotten You,
> or been false to Your covenant.
> Our hearts have not gone astray,
> nor have our feet swerved from Your path…
> If we forgot the name of our God
> and spread forth our hands to a foreign god,
> God would surely search it out,
> for he knows the secrets of the heart.
> It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long,
> that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered (Ps. 44.18-23).

These words could have been written in response to the situation confronting Jews at the time the midrash was constructed, and indeed its imagery—especially the idea of God's people as sheep to be slaughtered—may have influenced the presentation of later Jewish suffering at the hands of the nations. But what does all this imply about the rabbinic author's understanding of Abraham's call? On the one hand, it suggests that Abraham has been called to arouse God's love, and yet the parallel is not perfect. In Psalm 45, an unknown scribe addresses the young woman; in the midrash it is God himself. In the psalm, we assume that the woman was singled out for qualities she possessed—her lineage and her striking beauty. In the midrash, it is simply the traveller's question that prompts the owner of the castle to show himself at the window. There is no indication of special concern or bravery on the traveller's part; on the contrary, as we have seen, he does considerably less in the circumstances than we might expect. As with the fortress and the burning bush, the parallel may be intended to draw attention to differences as well as similarities. What we have here is not simply a passive king whose desire needs to be aroused, but two detached beings who are almost inexplicably awakened by each other. Returning to the historical context in which the midrash emerged, we see that its author must have hoped for a second Abraham to awaken God from his detachment and put out the fires of Roman persecution. Perhaps Rabbi Isaac puts himself in precisely that role when he likened God, provocatively it must be said, to a king whose desire required arousal and the owner of a burning fortress who needed to be roused to action. At any rate, the mode of intercession is verbal, and it is connected with the destruction of the Temple and

how the world can be ordered in its aftermath. But on whose behalf will intercession be made? Now the shift between Temple and world appears in a different light. The midrash has raised the possibility that the Temple preserved order for all the world and its inhabitants, not just Judah and the Jewish people.

The Sealed Vessel

The midrash that follows 'The Burning Fortress' is usually interpreted either as if unconnected with its predecessor, or as phase two of the Abraham as missionary interpretation mentioned above. Abraham recognizes that there is one God who is Lord over all, and proceeds to spread the message throughout the world:

> *And the* LORD *said to Abram*. Rabbi Berachaya[21] opened (Song of Songs 1.3), *Your fine oil is fragrant, your name is spreading*[22] *oil*. Rabbi Berachya said, What did Abraham our father resemble? A bottle[23] of balsam enclosed in a tightly sealed vessel,[24] resting in a corner so that its perfume cannot disperse. When it was moved, its perfume dispersed. Thus said the Holy One Blessed Be He to Abraham our father, move yourself from place to place and your name will become great in the world.[25]

The traditional interpretation is jarring in various ways, not least historically. While it is impossible to date these midrashim precisely, they were almost certainly written under Roman persecution, when the idea of spreading

21. Fifth generation Amora living in Israel, c. 350–400 CE.

22. The meaning of תורק שמן is uncertain. תורק is usually read as a verb (hophal impv. 3fs, ריק, 'to pour out') functioning adjectivally to modify the noun שמן (oil): 'poured out oil'. Cf. LXX λαιον κχεομενον (oil poured out) which suggests a Hebrew *Vorlage* of a passive verb functioning adjectivally. It is thus traditionally translated 'ointment/oil poured forth/poured out' (NRSV), 'finest oil' (NJPS) or 'spreading perfume' (NAB), though oil is masculine (שמן) while תורק (poured out) is 3fs. See F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), *ad loc*.

23. In *Gen. R.* 34.9 צלוחית occurs in a midrash that identifies the sweet scent of Noah's sacrifice as the scent of Abraham's burning flesh in the fiery furnace. In this obscure midrash, as interpreted by Rashi, the location of a bottle of foliatum buried in the ground becomes the site at which a king decides to build his palace. Since in midrash, kings are equated with God and their palaces with the Temple, this type of bottle seems to have cultic associations.

24. In the equivalent midrash in *Tanhuma* (Warsaw) 3.3, the bottle is in a cemetery. This may reflect the occurrence of צמיד פתיל , tightly sealed vessel, in Num. 19.15, which concerns uncleanness through contact with the dead.

25. Fifth generation Tanna living in southern Israel, c. 160–190 CE. This may refer to garments torn in mourning, esp. in view of other death-related imagery. See M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1971), *ad loc*.

God's message throughout the world was neither practical nor uppermost in the minds of their authors. If intercession is, as I have suggested, a central theme of 'The Burning Fortress', and if these three midrashim form a narrative unit, we should expect to find intercession here too, and that is indeed the case.

'The Burning Fortress' introduced the theme of intercession with its *petihta*, a description of an erotic relationship between a beautiful young princess and a human king. The *petihta* for 'The Sealed Vessel' is likewise erotic; a woman praises the man she loves. The hook on which the *petihta* hangs is drawn from part of the *mathil* that the midrash does not cite: 'I will make your name great, and it will be a blessing'. The *petihta* is a play on oil and name, which smoothes the path for the ensuing comparison of Abraham with a bottle of oil. And just as the midrash does not cite the words of the *mathil* required to make sense of the *petihta*, so it does not cite the part of the *petihta* required to unlock the full meaning of the midrash as a whole:[26]

לריח שמניך טובים שמן תורק שמך על־כן עלמות אהבוך

> Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance, Your name is like finest [poured out] oil; Therefore do maidens love you.

Although a good name can be earned in many different ways, the climax of the verse—therefore do maidens love you—establishes that the young man's reputation rests on romantic desirability. It is his capacity to arouse desire that is important, which brings us back to the theme of intercession.

'The Sealed Vessel' evokes intercession somewhat differently than does 'The Burning Fortress'. There we encountered verbal intercession; Abraham awakened the overseer with words. Here, he does not speak at all (he is a bottle of oil—how could he?) and whatever interaction occurs is physical. The *petihta* takes up and intensifies the erotic imagery that pervades all three midrashim. Oil in the context of a love relationship suggests preparation for sex, where it is used cosmetically to beautify the body through touch and scent (e.g. Est. 2.12). But the *petihta* interacts with the *mashal* in two ways. First, and most obviously, its play on oil and name introduces the *mashal*, in which Abraham is likened to a bottle of oil. Second, its (unquoted) reference to maidens (virgins) points to the midrashic author's understanding of what the bottle of oil signifies; it is a metaphor for virginity.[27] Abraham is a virgin and the words 'therefore maidens/virgins love you' describes

26. Further justification for interpreting the uncited portion of the verse may be derived from the parallels between the end of this *petihta* and the end of the *petihta* from *Gen. R.* 39.2: על־כן עלמות אהבוך, 'therefore maidens love you'; cf. על־כן עמים יהודך, 'therefore peoples praise you'.

27. Note the resonance noted above with the extended *petihta* of *Gen. R.* 39.1.

Abraham's relationship with God. *Genesis Rabbah* (Vilna) 30.10 provides strong support for the equation of sealed bottles and virgins.[28] A meditation on what it means for Noah to be righteous in his generation includes three explanatory parables, the second featuring a tightly sealed vessel, exactly as described in *Gen. R.* 39.2, whose contents smell good in a graveyard and even better outside, and a virgin (בתלה, not עלמה) whose reputation (name) is poor in a market of prostitutes and worse in decent society. For one reason and another, this particular kind of vessel was associated with virgins, leading to the juxtaposition of these two images in two apparently unrelated midrashim.[29] It may be too speculative to appeal to parallels between a woman's torso, or even the cervix and the womb, and the bottle's physical shape,[30] but the 'tightly sealed' component needs no justification. The identification of the vessel as a virgin helps resolve a puzzling feature of this midrash. A more intuitive account might have begun with a sealed vessel and ended with an open one but, curiously at first glance, the bottle is never opened, just moved around. This counter-intuitive image implies that Abraham will arouse divine compassion not just through quasi-erotic engagement—intercession in its verbal form—but by remaining a virgin, that is, refusing to sleep with the enemy, on account of his love for God. This reading suggests a definition of 'virgin' that differs from the one that has become the norm—a woman who has never had sex. It may make more sense to think here of a woman who is determinedly faithful to her actual or intended husband.[31]

The replacement of the verbal intercession of 'The Burning Fortress' with the physical intercession of 'The Sealed Vessel' is expressed both through the *petihta* (which is about oil, not words) and through resonances of cultic ritual in the language of the *mashal*. The first hint comes from the term צלוחית (tightly sealed bottle). As noted above, this could have been chosen for its sexual (or non-sexual!) associations, but its ritual associations should not be overlooked since they effect the temporary shift in the midrash from the physical to the ritual. The *Mekhilta* uses צלוחית to describe both the bottle in which the manna was stored and, more pertinent here, the bottle that contains the purification water.[32] The association with purification water

28. I am indebted to Simha Goldin, personal communication, for pointing out this juxtaposition. For detailed discussion of these themes, see S. Goldin, *The Ways of Jewish Martyrdom* (Lod: Dvir Press, 2002), especially ch. 5 [Heb.].

29. I say 'apparently unrelated' because I am unsure. Abraham and Noah do seem to be structurally similar in these midrashim and are often paired; the topic requires further attention.

30. I thank Deborah Green for cautioning me on this point.

31. I thank Simha Goldin for explaining this important distinction.

32. *Mekhilta Beshallach* 6 claims that both the manna and the sprinkling water were stored in a צלוחית.

is strengthened by the information that the vessel is 'tightly sealed', an unusual phrase that occurs in Num. 19.14-21 during the course of a discussion about contamination and purification of objects that come into contact with dead bodies. As well as introducing the purification motif, the allusion to Numbers 19 enables the midrashic author to bring death into his picture. As we shall see, the intercession/purity/death dynamic is elaborated in *Gen. R.*39.3, and is stated more explicitly in the equivalent midrash in *Tanhuma*, where the bottle of oil is in a graveyard. Perhaps the author was drawn to this set of images because it allows him to characterize Roman Palestine as a graveyard (cf. the valley of dry bones, Ezek. 37). This was plausible in the historical context, and is suggestive of the author's perception of the land when not under self-rule, that is, it is equivalent to exile or Diaspora. On another level, though, the midrash implies that although Abraham will have a close encounter with death through willingness to die for the sanctification of God's name, he will not actually die. Just as virginity connoted a state of mind rather than a physical state, so martyrdom connoted an attitude—willingness to die—not the absence of life.

Understanding the function of ritual in 'The Sealed Vessel' requires a return to 'The Burning Fortress', which alludes to the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent impossibility of offering sacrifices. As Weitzman sees it, this was a motivation for martyrdom. The priests offer themselves as sacrifices—actual or metaphorical—in place of the animal sacrifices they can no longer make. Their blood, actual or rhetorical, replaces the purification blood of the Yom Kippur sacrifices.[33] As Weitzman notes, some texts from this period point back to the destruction of the first Temple, when the priests were said to have returned the keys to God in heaven as the Temple began to burn, and even further back to the Tabernacle, when Nadab and Abihu were consumed in fire for offering strange fire (Lev. 10.1-3). Weitzman sees this as the possible beginning of a process leading to martyrdom, but does not discuss in detail how the transformation might have occurred. Two possibilities suggest themselves. First, the midrashic authors may have sought to position Abraham in a chain of 'priestly' figures who died for the Temple, though implicit in the parallel with Nadab and Abihu, for example, is the notion that the martyrs acted wrongly, or at least took responsibility for improper ritual. Second, the midrashic authors may have wished to connect Abraham not with people who die for the Temple, but with the High Priest on Yom Kippur. Reading between the lines of Leviticus 16, it seems that, rhetorically if not in actuality, each year on Yom Kippur the High Priest faced death for the sins of the people.[34] This underlying danger explains the

33. *Surviving Sacrilege*, p. 140.

34. The idea of death faced and avoided by the High Priest underlies the sublime

reference to Nadab and Abihu in Lev. 16.1, just before the instructions for what the High Priest should do in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. This reading is supported by the fire motif that permeates all these texts. Nadab and Abihu offer strange fire and, in a typical biblical measure for measure, are consumed in fire. The text does not report how the High Priest would die on Yom Kippur if this were to occur, but the mention of Nadab and Abihu in combination with the emphasis on burnt offerings makes death by fire the most likely option. If this is correct, the concept of martyrdom manifested in this midrash may represent a perceived return to a tradition that was at the very heart of the priestly cult. At Yom Kippur, the High Priest was called upon to act as if he was ready to die in the Holy of Holies, and the midrashic authors place Abraham in this conceptual tradition.[35]

Thus far in this analysis I have emphasized associations, derived primarily from Numbers 19, between the sealed vessel and purification ritual. But of course Abraham's bottle does not contain sprinkling water. אפופילסימון (*apopilsimon*) is an unusual term, used interchangeably with the more common אפרסמא (*afarsame*) and צרי (*tsuri*) to describe balsam oil.[36] According to other rabbinic texts, balsam oil had two distinctive features, both of which emerge starkly from a discussion in *b. Shabbat* about which oils are permissible for Shabbat lights. Two objections are made to balsam. First, its scent might spread (נודף, cf. Abraham's scent in *Gen. R.* 39.2) and be used. It is not clear what kind of 'use' the rabbis had in mind but, most obviously, scent is used to conceal the odour of dead bodies and to arouse erotic desire. Second, *b. Shabbat* objects to balsam on the ground of flammability. Both properties I have mentioned feature in the story it reports of a mother-in-law who hates her daughter-in-law:

> The Sabbath lamp shall not be fed with *aromatic balsam*. Why so? Rabba said: Because it *yields* a fine fragrance, it was feared lest one use it. Said Abayi[37] to him: 'Why does not the master say because it is volatile?' He means both; the balsam is prohibited both because it is volatile, and for fear lest it be used. There was a mother-in-law who hated her son's wife, and told her to perfume herself with *aromatic oil*. When the daughter-in-law had done this, she ordered her to go and light the candle. While complying with this order, she caught fire and was burned.

Yom Kippur prayer *Mareh Cohen*, which rhapsodizes mystically over the appearance of the High Priest's face as he emerges in tact from the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.

35. This does not, of course, exclude influences from external sources.

36. Z. Amar, *The Book of Incense* (Tel Aviv: Eretz, 2002), pp. 58-71 [Heb.], for the view that all three names apply to one plant, *Commiphora gileadensis* or *Commiphora opobalsamum*.

37. 278–338 CE.

The mother-in-law's initial instruction to her daughter-in-law to anoint herself with balsam oil may have been received by the younger woman as a constructive suggestion for making herself more attractive to her husband. Her second instruction, resulting in the daughter's horrific death by fire, undoes this. It is hard to know how much to read into this story, but we may be dealing with a form (not unknown) of sexual jealousy, which chimes with a biblical usage צמיד פתיל (Num.) that is picked up in *b. Sanhedrin* 64a: Baal Peor, where idol worship and the divine jealousy it provoked (cf. Exod. 20.3) are presented as the cause of the destruction of the Temple, a claim supported by graphic accounts of what it means to cleave to an idol. Even without the jealousy motif, however, the Talmudic story, especially in its original context, engages with the very themes that are at the heart of *Gen. R.* 39.1-3 as I am reading them here, namely, balsam's power to arouse through scent and the risk it carries of conflagration.

With the twin concepts of arousal and conflagration firmly in mind, we can turn to sacrifice. When 'The Sealed Vessel' speaks of the scent, ריח, of the bottle, it is usual to think in terms of something that spreads throughout the world. Yet in the Bible and beyond, scent is strongly associated with sacrifices and is indeed offered by 'priestly' texts as the *raison d'être* of sacrifice—the generation of a scent that God finds pleasing.[38] This value of sacrificial scent is evident in the description of the sacrifice offered by Noah after the flood:

> וירח יהוה את־ריח הניחח ויאמר יהוה אל־לבו לא אסף לקלל עוד את־האדמה בעבור האדם כי יצר לב האדם רע מנעריו ולא־אסף עוד להכות את־כל־חי כאשר עשיתי׃
>
> And the LORD smelled the pleasing odor and the LORD said to Himself: 'Never again will I curse the earth because of man, since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living thing as I have done' (Gen. 8.21).

And what was the pleasing odour that convinced God that he should never again destroy the earth? Shockingly, but not surprisingly in light of the foregoing analysis, *Gen. R.* 34.11 links Gen. 8.21 to Abraham, identifying the sweet savour as the smell of Abraham's burning flesh when he was thrown by Nimrod, together with Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, the three friends of Daniel, into the fiery furnace. This alludes to *Gen. R.* 38.13 on the death of Abraham's brother, Haran. According to Gen. 11.28, Haran died על־פני תרח אביו...באור כשדים, before/in front of his father in Ur Casdim. Ur Casdim is read by the rabbis as in fiery furnace on account of the wordplay with אור (*or*), fire. They infer either that his

38. See, e.g., Lev. 3.16; Num. 15.3.

death was untimely (temporally 'before' his father), that he died in odd circumstances (physically 'in front' of his father), or that Terah was in some way implicated ('because' of his father). The final option, in combination with the biblical reference to Ur, becomes the basis of the fiery furnace midrash. In what may be the best known of all midrashim, the story of Abraham in Terah's idol shop, Abraham's denunciation of idols leads Terah to report his son to Nimrod.[39] Abraham and Nimrod engage in a debate which Abraham appears to be winning when Nimrod orders that he should be thrown into the furnace. It is the scent of Abraham's flesh that God smells when Noah makes his sacrifice, persuading Him to promise never again to destroy the entire world (Gen. 8.21). It seems highly unlikely that *Gen. R.* 39.2 would use the word ריח, scent, in conjunction with an image of destruction by fire (the burning fortress) and linked to an oil known for its flammability without allusion to the fiery furnace, all the more since the furnace appears explicitly in *Gen. R.* 39.3. Did the midrashic authors intend to create a typological link via Abraham between themselves as potential martyrs and this intercessory sacrifice *par excellence* which, moreover, did not depend on the existence of the Temple?

According to *Gen. R.* 39.2, Abraham's scent would be released when the bottle was moved. The term used here for movement, מלמל, connotes both disturbance and 'exile'.[40] On the face of it, Abraham was moved from Babylon to Israel, but this would hardly count as exile for Palestinian rabbis. At a deeper level, Abraham is already leaving Canaan; exile surely refers to a move from Israel to a location outside the land. At first glance, this seems incompatible with the biblical narrative, but in fact it anticipates what is about to be reported. Since Abraham enters the land only to depart a few verses later for Egypt, an exile of kinds does begin almost immediately. In the midrash, then, God gives Abraham license for what in the Bible seems to be against his wishes, namely to return to the Diaspora. Genesis contains no divine command to go to Egypt, and later texts (Gen. 26.2; Jer. 42) caution against going there. On this reading, Abraham's return to the nations does not emerge from misunderstanding, disobedience or lack of trust, as the Bible variously implies, but was intended by God from the moment he called Abraham.

'The Sealed Vessel' draws to a close with a return to the *nimshal*. Just as a bottle of oil releases its scent only when moved, so Abraham will make God's name great only when he moves from place to place. I noted above that 'place' is multivalent and this phrase may be read geographically (from

39. The full story is told in *Gen. R.* 38.13. Nimrod, the grandson of Ham, son of Adam, is associated with empires in Gen. 10.8-12.

40. Jastrow, *ad loc*.

place to place), as a reference to the Temple (from temple to Temple), as a reference to God (from god to God), or as some combination of these. In relation to 'The Burning Fortress', I suggested that 'from place to Temple' was attractive, and fits well the events described in the midrash. Here, perhaps, we see an intriguing reversal of this: Abraham moves 'from Temple to God'. The midrash thus suggests that Abraham will sanctify or make great God's name by abandoning the burning Temple and all it entails in favour of God. In other words, we dealing in these midrashim not with anti-Christian or anti-Roman polemics, but with an anti-Temple polemic. On this reading, Abraham would mirror God, who was likewise exiled from the Temple. This blurring of identities, common in midrash, points to another kind of blurring. In the Bible, it is Abraham's name that will be made great in the world, not God's. In the midrash it is the reverse. This is achieved in part by breaking down the simple equation of name and oil in the Song of Songs *petihta*. Abraham is the oil, but it is God's name, not his, that will be magnified. This magnification of the name through a quasi-sacrificial act (the flammable oil and exile—a purification ritual that happens outside the Temple) is the structural equivalent of *kiddush hashem* the sanctification of the divine name. This reading is reinforced by the unquoted continuation of the פתיחתא: על־כן עלמות אהבוך, 'therefore young women love you'. The words עלמות אהבוך are read in *Mekhilta* on Exod. 15.3 as על מות אהבוך, 'even unto death I love you', an exegetical move that occurs in the context of a discussion of the paradigmatic martyr, Rabbi Akiba.[41] The midrash has thus made the shift from Abraham the man who arouses God through verbal intercession to Abraham the man who becomes a vehicle of ritual intercession, not as a priest, but as the sacrificial object itself, albeit in a form that does not require actual death.[42]

The Little Sister

We turn now to the final midrash in the triptych. Once again, the Song of Songs is prominent, not as the *petihta*, but as a the source of a verse that is broken down and reapplied to Abraham:

41. I am grateful to Simha Goldin for drawing my attention to this text. See D. Boyarin, *Dying for God,* p. 109, for a discussion of its role in 'the first rabbinic discourse on martyrdom', the *Mekhilta* on Exod. 15.2. On martyrdom and erotic love, see M. Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), especially pp. 14-20.

42. One might have expected this role to have been fulfilled by Isaac, who came close to reaching the stage where, without actually dying, his burning flesh could have aroused divine compassion.

> *And the Lord said to Abram* (Gen. 12.1). Rabbi Berachya opened (Song of Songs, 8.8*)*, *We have a little sister and she has no breasts*. *We have a little sister*. This is Abraham, who repaired all future generations. Bar Kappara said, [he was] like this in the sense that he mended a tear. *Little*. From a young age he stored up good deeds [commandments] and righteous acts. *And she had no breasts*. He was not suckled, he had no good deeds and righteous acts. *What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for*? [Namely], on the day that Nimrod decreed that he should be cast into the fiery furnace. *If she is a wall, we will build upon her*. If he makes words stand firm like a wall, it will be built upon. *And if she is a door, we will enclose her tightly*. If he is poor in good deeds and righteous acts, *we will enclose her tightly with cedar panels*. Just as this engraving[43] is only temporary, so I will protect him only temporarily. He [Abraham] said to him, Lord of Worlds, *I am a wall*, I have made my words stand firm. *And My breasts are like towers*. This signifies Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. *In his eyes I was as one who finds favour*. He who enters in peace [whole] goes out in peace.

The original Song of Songs verse is difficult in its own terms:

> We have a little sister, Whose breasts are not yet formed. What shall we do for our little sister When she is spoken for? If she be a wall, We will build on it a silver battlement; If she be a door, We will panel it in cedar.' I am a wall, my breasts are like towers. So I became in his eyes as one who finds favour (Song of Songs, 8.8-10).

אחות לנו קטנה ושדים אין לה
ט אם־חומה היא מה־נעשה לאחתנו ביום שידבר־בה׃
נבנה עליה טירת כסף ואם־דלת היא נצור עליה לוח ארז׃ אני חומה ושדי כמגדלות
אז הייתי בעיניו כמוצאת שלום׃

The midrash is even less penetrable, but what emanates clearly from both is the image of person in the form of a building. Read in this light, the midrash brings us back to the burning fortress, destroyed in *Gen. R.* 39.1 and rebuilt in the form of a person in 39.3. It should be noted that, although cedar has strong temple building associations, the Song of Songs verse probably concerns a fortress or a palace; the shift to Temple is a rabbinic innovation. Once again, Abraham is feminine, as he was explicitly in the *petihta* of the first *mashal* and implicitly in the *petihta* and *mashal* (bottle as virgin) of the second. The regendering of Abraham has interesting implications for the rabbinic view of intercession: since intercession is equated with erotic seduction, in a culture where heterosexuality is the norm and God is male, the intercessor must be female. Furthermore, if Abraham has in some sense replaced the Temple, God's house (בית, f.) it is hardly surprising that he is conceived in feminine terms.

43. Paronomasia: the Hebrew נצור (*natsor*) 'reinforce' sounds like הצורה (*hatsorah*) 'engraving'.

The midrash opens with a word play based on the similarity between the Hebrew words for sew and sister, but what is Abraham sewing?[44] At first glance, the midrash seems to read sewing positively—Abraham will unite or unify (sew) all the people of the world, or perhaps all future generations. But this entirely positive impression is qualified by the subsequent reference to a tear. At the very least, this suggests that Abraham was repairing, not sewing, something that had been damaged or torn apart but belonged together. In view of all references to death already noted here, this may be a reference to the custom of tearing a garment in mourning, as some translations and commentaries assume. The mourning imagery is articulated more forcefully in *Midrash Tanhuma* which, though it could be supplying an element that was absent in *Gen. R.* 39.2, is plausibly making explicit what was implicit in the earlier version. The next unit for analysis concerns the size and/or age of the sister. Here for the first time in these midrashim, the concept of law is introduced—we learn that Abraham was not raised with commandments and good deeds. This is reinforced by an ingenious transformation of the *petihta* words, 'she had no breasts'. It was not that Abraham had no breasts (this notion may have pushed the rabbis a step too far), but he had no breasts to nurture him—his mother did not suckle him with commandments and good deeds. At one level, the midrash tackles a major rabbinic preoccupation—Abraham's relationship to the Sinai laws. Yet the use of the word סגל, treasure (store) indicates another concern: Abraham had no store of good deeds to fall back on when things went wrong. The situation envisaged here is precarious enough, but the stakes are raised considerably once Abraham is perceived in relation to the destroyed Temple. When Abraham encounters God, as the midrash has it, he has neither Temple to rely on nor Torah and good deeds. Who or what will intercede for him when he encounters enemies and requires divine support?

The day that Abraham requires intercession comes quickly in the midrashic scheme of things. The day when the little sister is spoken for (presumably claimed as a wife) is the day that Nimrod decrees that Abraham should be thrown into the fiery furnace. As the midrash unfolds, the role of protector is played by Abraham's 'brothers', who reinforce his words and strengthen him (presumably through their own merit). Structurally speaking, the brothers must be Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, who enter the fiery furnace with Abraham and, like him, come out alive. As many commentaries suggest, the midrash may allude here to the ten martyrs sentenced to death (in sanctification of the divine name) following the Bar Kokhba revolt (132 CE).[45] This helps explain why the three men are called by their Hebrew names, rather than Shadrach, Meshach,

44. Paronomasia: איחה 'sew' is reminiscent of אחות 'sister'.
45. E.g.,Theodor Albeck, *Bereishit Rabbah*, *ad loc*.

and Abed-nego, the names used at this point in Daniel;[46] Daniel's Hananiah recalls the Bar Kokhba martyr, Haninah ben Teradyon. Yet it seems clear that even if the midrashic author wished to allude to the Ten Martyrs, he hoped that willingness to die would obviate the need for actual death. Not only did the characters from his source story (Dan. 3) survive, but the midrash closes with an ambiguous but ultimately reassuring use of the *petihta*. A wordplay on מצא and יצא suggested by 'In his eyes I was as one who finds favour' leads to the transformation of 'He who enters in peace goes out in peace' into 'He who enters whole [an allusion to זבח שלמים] goes out whole'.

Given that the fourth person in the fiery furnace is described as having the appearance of a בר־אלהין, son of God (Dan. 3.6), and in view of the body/temple dynamic I have highlighted here, it is hard to avoid the thought of some kind of Jewish/ Christian engagement here. Yet the interaction does not appear to me to have the character of anti-Christian polemic, but rather parallel treatments of a common interest. This may be borne out by some quite extraordinary thematic overlaps between *Gen. R.* 39.1-3 and Ezekiel 36. Ezekiel 36 describes the Edomite possession of exilic Judah, but (especially in view of the Edom/Rome typology, which would have been suggestive to the rabbinic imagination) it could as easily be describing Roman Palestine as portrayed in many rabbinic texts. Ezekiel accuses the nations of taunting Israel (36.3, 6, 15) and promises that they will be disgraced as a consequence (36.7). The land will be reinhabited (36.10-12) and the time of mourning will end (36.12-15). Restoration will occur not for Israel's sake, but for the sake of God's holy name (36.21). Israel will be taken back from among the nations and purified with sprinkling water (36.25), after which God will replace its heart of stone with a heart of flesh (36.26), enabling Israel to keep all the laws. Jerusalem (not the Temple, which is not mentioned here) will then be rebuilt (36.33-36) and filled with people like sacrificial sheep (36.37-38). While I can see no specific textual evidence that the midrashic authors had in mind Ezekiel 36 when they wrote and redacted *Gen. R.* 39.1-3, the thematic coincidences between the two texts suggest that the midrashim can be placed firmly in an established line of thinking that emerged from the Bible. This is hardly surprising; the concept of prayer and intercession as alternatives to Temple ritual is hardly a rabbinic invention. What may be rabbinic is the notion that martyrdom (willingness to die) is a form of intercession, though even this has possible biblical roots in (broadly speaking) priestly texts such as Leviticus 16 and Ezekiel 24.15-33.

I have raised many questions that merit fuller consideration than I can offer; *Genesis Rabbah*'s opening treatment of the call of Abraham turned

46. This may be an anti-Babylonian polemic on the part of the Palestinian author of the midrash.

out to be far more complex, and infinitely more fascinating, than I anticipated. Yet I hope I have paid enough exegetical attention to *Gen. R.* 39.1-3 to show that the traditional reading of Abraham as founder of monotheism and purveyor of good news to the nations does not come close to doing these texts justice. What we have, I think, is not a universalist message, but an intensely particularist exploration of how, in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, God's compassion might be redirected towards Israel to end a sustained period of hostile and debilitating national persecution. Yet there is an important respect in which the message at the heart of these three midrashim may be understood universally. As I observed at the outset, midrashic authors are driven in part by a desire to reconcile biblical promises with their present circumstances. On the face of it, God's promise to Abraham that those who blessed him would be blessed and those who curse him (and his descendants) would be cursed was flatly contradicted by the experience of Jews in Roman Palestine. By reinterpreting the call of Abraham as a call for an intercessor for the nations, the author of *Gen. R.* 39.1-3 could hasten the end of Roman persecution (cursing) of Jews and herald the onset of blessing in whatever form that might take.

Abraham at Sodom and Gomorrah

I turn now to the biblical representation *par excellence* of Abraham as intercessor, Genesis 18–20.[47] As traditionally read, Abraham functions in the Mosaic model of the classical prophet, arguing with God over Israel's fate. My aim is to present an alternative reading of these texts, according to which the dynamics they establish are precisely those I have outlined in relation to the three midrashim above. Read intertextually with Ezekiel 14, Genesis 18–20 presents Abraham as a new model intercessor for the nations, more priestly than classically prophetic. Genesis 18–20 are rich and redactionally complex texts; they work on many different levels and address numerous theological questions. Ezekiel 14 is close to pure theology, and has quasi-legal status;[48] Genesis 18–20 explores its implications through narrative and, crucially, amends it.[49] The priestly/

47. For reasons I discuss in detail in *Revisions of the Night*, pp. 35-62, and outline below, Gen. 20 belongs in the unit with Gen. 18 and 19.

48. P.M. Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel* (JSOTSup, 51; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), p. 72, aptly describes this passage as 'priestly case law'.

49. Gen. 18 is often seen as a 'midrash' on Gen. 19. See, e.g., J. Blenkinsopp, 'Abraham and the Righteous of Sodom', *JJS* 33 (1982), pp. 119-32 (121-22). I see textual and theological indications that both Gen. 18 and 19 in their final form respond to Ezek. 14.

prophetic dimension of Abraham's character may have been developed in response to a theological conundrum that arose in a particular historical setting. Once God was understood as the God of all the earth and its inhabitants, and once Israelites were envisaged as co-existing peacefully alongside non-Israelites, whether in the Diaspora or in the land, the following question demanded an answer: How can non-Israelites (in contrast to Israelites) atone for their sins, and how can the land in which they live, whether Diaspora or Israel, be cleansed from the polluting effects of sin? In this chapter I shall formulate responses to these questions by reading Genesis 18–20, involving non-Israelite regions whose inhabitants have sinned and are punished via natural disaster, in the light of Ezekiel 14, involving a foreign land whose inhabitants have sinned and are punished by four disasters (sword, famine, beasts and disease),[50] and Genesis 18 (Isaac's birth announcement) and 20, involving a foreign king in the land of Canaan whose line is threatened. Needless to say, other biblical texts answer these questions differently, especially those that presuppose the cult.[51] There are, in addition, texts that address issues that are similar yet different in important ways. Jonah, for example, is a prophet who intercedes for a non-Israelite people, but the land is distant and remote, and prophetic intervention leads to repentance, which is not an option in Genesis 18–20. The location of the land in Ezekiel is not specified, and although the particular inhabitants mentioned are non-Israelite, and although Israelites are mentioned only in relation to what I read as a contrasting case, namely Jerusalem,[52] the national status of the land is not explicitly stated. This ambiguity is in keeping with Genesis 18–20, where the locations and people in question are clearly non-Israelite—Sodom and Gomorrah are in the region chosen by Lot, not Abraham (Gen. 13.10-13), and Abimelech self-identifies as a nation (20.4). Yet perhaps not surprisingly in view of their context in the patriarchal narratives, where a national identification would be anachronistic, neither Gerar nor Sodom and Gomorrah is explicitly identified as non-Israelite.

There remains one important preliminary question: Is the sin of non-Israelites an issue that these texts would plausibly address? The case for the prophetic text is strong; on almost any plausible dating, Ezekiel

50. Few commentators note the land's foreignness and its implications, but see M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1983), p. 256: '…the only passage in scripture in which trespass…is predicated of a *non-Israelite subject*' [my italics].

51. J. Milgrom, *Numbers: JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), on Num. 15.29: 'The *ger*…is equally liable as the citizen to bring the sacrifice. The implicit reason is the Holy Land will become polluted by sins committed upon it, be they ritual or ethical, whether by the citizen or the stranger.'

52. I defend this reading below.

either anticipates or describes a return to the land under Persian hegemony. The case for reading Genesis with these concerns in mind is inevitably weaker—the dating of Genesis is so much less certain. I see Genesis in its final form as a late exilic or early postexilic production that explores the possibility of peaceful co-existence with foreigners under projected Persian rule. Yet even if Genesis predominantly anti-Persian, and thus more narrowly nationalist than I allow,[53] a mechanism for dealing with non-Israelite sin within and outside the land was almost certainly required. Indeed we see this concern emerging in texts identified with this period. Given the speculative nature of the enterprise of dating of biblical texts, and since my view is hardly a minority position, I shall proceed on the assumption that Genesis 18–20 were at the very least redacted after Ezekiel 14 and develop its theology.

It is not difficult to justify reading passages of Ezekiel in relation to Genesis 18 and 19. Ezekiel is one of the few prophets to mention Abraham (33.23), and scholars comment frequently on links between Genesis 18 and Ezekiel 18, in which transgenerational punishment is precluded. Connections between Ezekiel 14.12-23 and Genesis 18 and 19 have also been made, albeit less often and in fairly general terms.[54] Nevertheless, I want to make my case clear, and thus set out below in table form the explicit verbal and thematic links I see between these texts. The precise nature of their relationship cannot be established with certainty. On one reading, Ezekiel may elaborate and explain Genesis from a shared theological perspective. This, however, seems unlikely. As I shall show, Ezekiel represents a restriction of the theology implicit in Genesis 18–20. Had Ezekiel been written with Genesis in mind, it would be more accurately be characterized as an opposing point of view. On another reading, then, Ezekiel may polemicize against Genesis; it is hard to rule this out. Alternatively, Genesis may elaborate and explain Ezekiel from a shared perspective, and this is my preferred understanding of the relationship between these texts. In other words, Genesis corrects Ezekiel sympathetically. I assume, then, that Genesis 18–19 in its final form is later than Ezekiel, and that Genesis is working through theological issues raised by Ezekiel. Some redactional difficulties in Genesis may thus be explained by the desire to forge a connection with Ezekiel, and even the particular placement of Genesis 18–19—in some respects a bizarre interruption of the narrative flow—is affected by Ezekiel.

My first table deals with vocabulary and concepts that are shared by the two texts:

53. See, e.g., M.G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000) .

54. Several commentators discuss Ezek. 14 in relation to Gen. 18–19; see, e.g., Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, p. 258, and Joyce, *Divine Initiative*, pp. 72-73.

Ezekiel 14	*Genesis 18–19*
Non-Israelite *land* (v. 13), though Israelite equivalent is a city (v. 21).	Non-Israelite cities (18.20) and God called Judge of *all the earth*.
Inhabitants sin, ארץ כי תחטא־לי (v. 13).	Inhabitants sin, וחטאתם כי כבדה מאד (18.20).
Punishment speculated, e.g., לו (v. 15).	Speculation over punishment (18.21)
Three men, שלשת האנשים (v. 14).	Three men/angels, שלשה אנשים (18.22; cf. v. 2 in 19.1 two messengers/angels, שני המלאכי).
In it (the city), בתוכה (v. 14).	In the city בתוך העיר, (18.26)
Righteousness צדקה (vv. 14, 20). Sons and daughters (vv. 16, 18, 20, 22).	Righteous צדיק (23, 24, 25, 26, 28). Sons-in-law, sons and daughters (19.12, 14 [×2], 15—the two married daughters stay with their men, 19.14).
Survivors, נותרה־בה פלטה (v. 22)	המלט, flee (vv 19.19, 20, 22), but do not in the end survive.

Almost all exegetes see individual versus collective responsibility (cf. Ezek. 18),[55] and vicarious punishment,[56] as the key theological themes of these texts. I prefer to highlight the interplay of divine justice and human intercession in relation to Israelites versus non-Israelites. One possible explanation of why this contrast is so often overlooked is grammatical. The subject shift from the generic land to Jerusalem in v. 21 is awkward, though I see **אף כי** as marking an emphatic turning point.[57] Another explanation is theological. For different reasons, differentiating responses in the Hebrew Bible to Israelite and non-Israelite sin have been of little interest to exegetes of any faith background, though they are a preoccupation of Jewish texts such as *b Avodah Zarah* 4a, b (which, fascinatingly, draws proof texts from precisely the range of texts that interest me here: Ezekiel and Genesis 18–19) and Christian texts such as Romans 4. I am grateful to Bruce Rosenstock for drawing my attention to Paul's discussion of this matter.[58]

55. Joyce, *Divine Initiative*, p. 72.

56. See N. MacDonald 'Listening to Abraham—Listening to YHWH: Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18.16-33', *CBQ* 66 (2004), pp. 25-43 (27), discussing Brueggemann *et al.* and the 'eastern bazaar'.

57. I thus combine Joyce, *Divine Initiative*, p. 73, who reads 'how much more so', and W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1* (Hermeneia: a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1979), p. 311, who reads it as emphatic.

58. Following a presentation of a short version of this paper (ISBL, Edinburgh 2006), Bruce Rosenstock suggested to me that Rom. 3 carries over a hermeneutic framework from Gen. 18, examining the nature of God as judge of the world (judge of the cosmos in Paul), and asking if Jews have any advantage over gentiles. Rom. 4

A second table reveals the extent to which intercession for non-Israelites is a shared thematic concern of these two texts. I follow Greenberg in emphasizing the 'extra-Israelite' identity of all three men mentioned by Ezekiel. Job is not obviously Israelite, Noah is pre-Israelite, and Daniel (of Ugaritic myth, not the biblical book) is almost certainly non-Israelite.[59] If Lot's national/ethnic status is at first unclear, he emerges from Genesis 19 as the father of the Moabites and Ammonites, two significant enemies of Israel. For the Genesis authors, Lot too was surely a non-Israelite, albeit one with a complex identity (not unlike the matriarchs, in some respects).

Ezekiel 14	*Genesis 18–19*
Three save only themselves (vv.14, 19, 20).	Two save the members of Lot's family (19.12, 13) who do not exclude themselves (sons-in-law/wives, v. 14, and wife, v. 26).
Righteousness saves (vv. 14, 20)	Righteousness could save (vv. 23, etc.)
Family members not saved (vv. 16, 18, 20)	Family members saved initially, apparently for Abraham's sake (19.29), but those who do not exclude themselves are excluded via their offspring (Deut. 23.4), including Lot.

Ezekiel makes it crystal clear that non-Israelites can save only themselves, and that this is achieved through their own righteousness. Genesis is much more complex; it is not easy to know in the end what its authors had in mind. Were Lot's family saved from destruction by the angels, or perhaps by Abraham? Were some saved and others not? Or, as seems to me most likely, did the entire family exclude themselves one by one through their failure to match intercession with righteousness? On this reading, Lot and his daughters were the last to rule themselves out, excluded on account of their incestuous relations. As far as Israelites are concerned, Ezekiel is less clear. Ezekiel 14.21 indicates that some descendants will be saved from destruction in the city, though not for their righteousness:

> Assuredly, thus said the Lord God: How much less should [should any escape] now that I have let loose against Jerusalem all four of my terrible punishments—the sword, famine, wild beasts and pestilence—to cut off man and beast from it.

evokes Gen 15–18 in order to argue that Abraham provides a model for both Jews and gentiles to find justification before God. Of course, he is not an intercessor, that function was taken over by Christ, as the last verse of the chapter states. Paul in ch. 11 will take up the further question of whether a remnant of the Jews will remain despite their failure to find justification through faith.

59. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, p. 257.

A third table reveals another shared concern: survival and continuity after divine punishment. Once again, Ezekiel is unambiguous. The three righteous individuals will survive, but no one else will survive on their merit, not even their children. Once again, Genesis is ambiguous. Lot's children do survive, at least in the first instance, and he even has children/grandchildren (at one fell swoop). Yet, as noted above, the children are gradually eliminated from the picture, and although Lot's descendants do survive as nations in their own right, they are permanently excluded from joining the congregation of Israel, an indication that, in the context of the Bible at least, their survival was only skin-deep.

Ezekiel 14	*Genesis 18–19*
Three men will survive	The angels survive, and Lot survives in a designated city, Zoar (19.22).
Next generation excluded (vv. 16, 18, 20)	Offspring of Lot's saved daughters are permanently excluded from Israel (Deut. 23.4)
Survivors in Jerusalem (v. 22) including sons and daughters	Gen. 18–19 is embedded in a narrative in which the next generation looks precarious (Sarah is childless in 18 then taken by Abimelech in 20), but survives

In a nutshell, the Ezekiel gap that Genesis fills is the lack of an intercessor for non-Israelites. The problem this addresses concerns how sin may be removed from the nations, a crucial matter when Israelites and non-Israelites are envisaged as living alongside each other, whether in the land or in the Diaspora. The following tables summarizes the differences between Ezekiel and Genesis 18–19 as outlined above.

Removing sin from the nations: Ezek. 14 versus Gen. 18–19

	Ezekiel 14	*Gen. 18–19*
Punishment via natural disasters	Yes	Yes
Righteous preserved	Yes	Yes
People saved on merit of others	*No*	*Yes*
Future generations included	*No*	*Yes*
Vicarious punishment	No	No
Prophetic intercessor	*Yes*	*No*

Removing sin: Israel versus the nations in Ezekiel 14 and Genesis 18–19 read intertextually

	Ezekiel 14	*Gen. 18–19*
Punishment via natural disaster	Yes	Yes
Survivors (not merit-based)	*Yes*	*No*
Righteous individuals preserved	*No*	*Yes*
Future generations preserved	Yes	Yes
Prophetic intercessor	Yes	Yes
Vicarious punishment	No	No

What emerges clearly from these tables is that the situation for non-Israelites is better in Ezekiel and Genesis read intertextually than in Ezekiel alone. In Ezekiel alone, non-righteous non-Israelites cannot be saved on the merits of others, and, in particular, righteous non-Israelites cannot preserve their descendants. The explanation for this improvement lies in the presence of the intercessor for non-Israelites, for which no provision is made in Ezekiel 14, but which Genesis 18 and 19 supplies in the figure of Abraham. The dynamic is transformed by Abraham's role, and he is established here as a prototype for prophetic intercession on behalf of the nations.

In his transformative discussion of prophetic intercession, Yochanan Muffs offers four basic mechanisms for averting or limiting divine punishment: punishment is exacted little by little (Num. 14.19); punishment is transferred (2 Sam. 12.14); God limits his own anger (Ps. 78.38; Hos. 11.9); and divine love trumps divine anger (only post-biblical examples given).[60] In narrative terms, Exodus 32–33 (Golden Calf) serves as a manual for prophetic intercession. Moses tells God: calm down (32.11); they are *Your* people (32.11); *You* brought them out of Egypt (32.11); think what the Egyptians will say (32.12); remember the patriarchs (32.13); keep *Your* promises (32.13); let the Levites kill 3000 people (32.27); kill me instead (32.32). A crucial parallel between Moses and Abraham is that both address themselves exclusively to God. Whether because it was too late in the game or because they considered it to be a waste of breath, neither attempts to change human behaviour, nor do they even hint to God that people might behave better in future. But this parallel is outweighed by a crucial difference. Moses utters not a word about divine justice, but Abraham makes divine justice the very basis of his intercession: How can a just God punish righteous people (Gen. 18.25, 20.4)? The difference may proceed from the universalist perspective

60. *Love and Joy*, pp. 9-48.

of our texts versus the highly particularist Calf narrative.[61] The comparison with Moses highlights another important feature of Abraham's intercession, namely that it owes as much to the 'priestly' model as to the prophetic. This may explain the use of ונשאתי לכל־המקום בעבורם, 'I will forgive (literally, raise [the sin of]) the whole place for their sake' (Gen. 19.26). The verb נשא is typical of priestly texts, especially Ezekiel, with the difference already noted that the nations, unlike Israel, must be righteous. The requirement for righteousness is underlined when God saves Lot and his daughters because of Abraham (Gen. 19.29), but they effectively exclude themselves through unrighteous acts (drunkenness and incest, 19.30-38).[62]

Abraham's intercession on behalf of the nations is consistent with God's promise in 12.1 that Abraham will bless (or cause to bless themselves) those who bless him and curse (or cause to curse themselves) those who curse him, which is alluded to in Gen. 18.18: 'And Abraham will become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth will bless themselves through him'. Intercession, especially of a priestly nature, is suggested by 18.22, ואברהם עודנו עמד לפני יהוה, 'And Abraham continued to stand before the LORD',[63] and is further emphasized by the placement of Gen. 18–19 between one narrative featuring a tent (Gen. 18.1, 2, 6, 9, 10, cf. perhaps the Tent of Meeting)[64] and another about intercession. Genesis 20.7 explicitly identifies Abraham as a prophet, and the text proceeds to define a prophet as one who intercedes: Abraham intercedes for Abimelech, a foreign king, following his failed intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, foreign cities. All three narratives deal with the continuation of families and lines:[65] This is highlighted by God's reference to descendants in his initial justification for telling Abraham his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah: 'For I have known him so that he can command his sons and his [dynastic] house after him…' (18.19). By contrast, Sodom and Gomorrah are wiped out. Even Lot is excluded on several counts from being a long-term survivor and, as noted above, his Moabite and Ammonite descendants are excluded permanently from the congregation of Israel (Deut. 23.4).

61. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, p. 315, makes the same contrast, but from a perspective I clearly do not share: 'By this [universal] emphasis, Ezekiel stands in clear opposition to the selfish assurances of Israel which sought to rely on the efficacy of its great men of piety'.

62. Space does not permit discussion of Noah, the righteous survivor we last see drunk and sexually compromised, but that is required.

63. MacDonald, 'Listening to Abraham', p. 27.

64. B. Doyle, ' "Knock, Knock, Knockin' on Sodom's Door" ': The Function of פתח/דלת in Genesis 18–19', *JSOT* 28 (2004), pp. 431-48.

65. Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, p. 258, cites S. Spiegel on the links between the choice of Noah, Job and Daniel in Ezek. 14 and their respective roles in saving their own offspring.

Descendants are central in Genesis 20, which bridges the announcement that Sarah's barrenness will end and the confirmation of her pregnancy. Her short stay with Abimelech could have resulted in pregnancy, jeopardising Abraham's line, but the first few verses of Genesis 21 confirm in seven different ways that Abraham is Isaac's father. Abimelech's line is correspondingly threatened. God punishes Abimelech by closing up all the wombs in his house (palace *and* dynastic house), and they are opened through intercession: 'Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave girls, so that they gave birth' (20.17). This time, the intercession is matched by Abimelech's own righteousness, demonstrated through his own claim (ignorance is a defence), and validated by God: ואבימלך לא קרב אליה ויאמר אדני הגוי גם־צדיק תהרג (20.4). The NJPS translation 'Now Abimelech had not approached her. He said, Will you slay people even though innocent?', obscures both the link to Sodom and Gomorrah and the national component. But both are strongly present: 'He said, "O LORD, will you slay a righteous nation?" ' Abimelech thus *corrects* Sodom and Gomorrah; Israelite intercession combined with non-Israelite righteousness secures non-Israelite continuity. Genesis 20 reinforces the contrast I have outlined above regarding expected standards of righteousness for non-Israelites versus Israelites. Non-Israelites must be righteous, even in the presence of an intercessor, which is why there are no survivors at Sodom and Gomorrah while Abimelech and his household (and future descendants) survive divine anger. Israelites need not be righteous, which is why Abraham survives at Gerar, despite lying about the identity of his wife, and despite his admission that their marriage is incestuous (20.12).[66] In this respect, Abraham contrasts with Lot as well as with Abimelech. The descendants of Lot's incestuous relationship with his daughters are barred permanently from the congregation of Israel, while the descendants of Abraham's incestuous relationship with Sarah (they had the same father though different mothers, a form of incest worse than Lot's for being explicitly prohibited, Lev. 18.9) are the vehicles through which God's blessing is transmitted. And what explains the opposing narrative judgments on these two men and their descendants? Lot, a non-Israelite, must be righteous in order to secure (with the help of an intercessor) continuity through survivors. Since he was not righteous (incest), his descendants are excluded. Abraham, an Israelite, does not depend on righteousness when it comes to survival, which means that his descendants can survive and even thrive despite his incestuous liaison with Sarah. The authors' interests in developing a system of theodicy that incorporates Israelites and non-Israelites may

66. For the case that Abraham is not lying and that Sarah is, in fact, his half-sister, see G.W. Hepner, 'Abraham's Incestuous Marriage with Sarah a Violation of the Holiness Code', *VT* 53 (2003), pp. 143-55.

thus explain apparent anomalies such as Abraham's claim that Sarah is in reality his sister.

Prophetic intercession for Israelites secures a numerically significant group of survivors who guarantee continuity: 'But while a *tenth* part yet remains in it, it shall turn back. It shall be ravaged like the terebinth and the oak, of which stumps are left even when they are felled. Its stump shall be a holy seed' (Isa. 6.13).[67] Israelite survivors are not typically selected for their righteousness. There are no numerically significant, long-term survivors in Sodom and Gomorrah, as is emphasized when Abraham stops at *ten* (Gen. 18.32). Lot and his daughters do not count; their descendants are excluded from the congregation of Israel, even to the *tenth* generation, for failing to be hospitable in the wilderness and because they cursed Israel (Deut. 23.4-5). And besides, Lot is not righteous;[68] the Deuteronomic ruling casts a shadow over Lot's hospitality, as does the measure for measure dimension of his daughters' sexual exploitation (Gen. 19.8 cf., 19.31,32). Finally Genesis 18 logically excludes significant survivors; had ten survived, they would have saved the whole city, and thus would not have constituted numerically significant survivors, but a mechanism for saving the whole.

The preceding discussion raises an important question: how can the righteousness of non-Israelites be quantified and measured? I need hardly say that this is a huge and complex subject that demands a great deal more space than I can devote here. It seems clear that, according to Ezekiel at least, non-Israelites are not expected to keep Israelite law, and where we find narrative evidence of their so doing, it serves mainly to discredit Israelites for their failure to keep the same laws. Evidence for this reading may be found in Ezekiel 33, where an explicitly Israelite audience (vv. 2, 7, 10, 11, 12) is told that righteousness cannot save them, neither their own, nor the righteousness of others (33.12-13). For Israelites, sin is the cause of death and repentance the only remedy (vv. 14-15), and not even the merit of Abraham can save them (v. 24). And how are righteousness and sin defined according to Ezekiel? Apparently with reference to a guide that sounds suspiciously like the Holiness Code (Lev. 18-26): 'If the wicked man restores a pledge, makes good what he has taken by robbery, follows the laws of life, and

67. In an earlier draft of this chapter, I had used the term 'remnant' in place of 'numerically significant survivors'. I am grateful to Sara Japhet for pointing out to me (personal communication, August 2006) that remnant is not the appropriate term here. Even though I can see that she is correct, I cannot find another that conveys precisely the meaning I seek.

68. T.M. Bolin, by contrast, equates Lot with Abraham in terms of hospitality, 'The Role of Exchange in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and its Implications for Reading Genesis 18–19', *JSOT* 29 (2004), pp. 37-56 (48).

does not commit iniquity, he shall live, he shall not die' (v. 15). And again in verse 25: 'You eat with the blood and raise your eyes to your fetishes, and you shed blood—yet you expect to possess the land! You have relied on your sword, you have committed abominations, you have all defiled other men's wives—yet you expect to possess the land'. The emphasis in Ezekiel 33 on the keeping and breaking of laws with reference to Israelites contrasts sharply with the complete absence of references to law in Ezekiel 14 with reference to non-Israelites. By implication, then, Israel is judged according to its capacity to live by the law, and non-Israelites are not. Ezekiel, so far as I can see, goes no further than this in quantifying the righteousness of non-Israelites, but Genesis, of course, does. To oversimplify in the interests of economy, the righteousness of non-Israelites is measured in terms of their hospitality to strangers, which may be learned from, and reinforced by, Israelite example (Abraham's hospitality to the angels cf. Gen. 18.2-8 and Gen. 18.19) but does not depend on it.[69] Oppression of strangers is hospitality's polar opposite (exemplified here by the Sodomites' demands in Gen. 19.4-11, but cf. also Amalek, Deut. 25.17-19),[70] and non-Israelites can be punished for oppressing others, just as they can be rewarded for being hospitable towards them. This, then, is another important respect in which Genesis 18–20 refines and develops the attitude outlined in Ezekiel towards non-Israelite sin.

The different place of law in determining Israelite versus non-Israelite righteousness almost certainly explains another substantive difference between what Abraham can do for non-Israelites and what prophets such as Ezekiel can do for Israel. Once Abimelech's righteousness is established, God instructs Abraham to intercede, but Abraham does not engage substantively (cf. prophets with Israel). In particular, he is not required to judge the people; God is the judge, and Abraham's task is merely (!) to influence God (18.27). Indeed, the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative may implicitly disqualify people from judging members of other nations: 'They said, this one came to live temporarily and now he acts as a judge; we will do worse with you than with them' (19.9). Prophetic intercession for Israel usually involves a warning (Isa. 6.8-10; Jer. 4.5-9; Ezek. 3.6-21), but this is conspicuously absent at Sodom and Gomorrah. God tells Abraham (memorably) what he is about to do, but Abraham does not warn God's potential victims.

69. See Bolin, 'The Role of Exchange' (especially pp. 48-49) on hospitality and justice.

70. It would be illuminating to explore this elsewhere via *b. Baba Bathra* 10b on Prov. 14.34 צדקה תרומם־גוי וחסד לאמים חטאת, 'Righteousness exalts a nation; sin is a reproach to a people', expounded in relation to Israelite/non-Israelite eschatology: 'R. Johanan b. Zakkai said to them: Just as the sin-offering makes atonement for Israel, so charity [righteousness] makes atonement for the nations'.

On Ezekiel's terms, he thus fails: 'If a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and does wrong… He shall die for his sins; the righteous deeds he did will not be remembered; and because you did not warn him, I will require a reckoning for his blood from you' (Ezek. 3.20).

Yet no reckoning is required of Abraham, it seems. The absence of judgments and warnings may be taken as reinforcement for Walzer's claim that prophecy of the usual Israelite kind is incompatible with universalism.[71] Whereas Israel has a clearly defined set of rules to which it may be held accountable, the nations have no comparable standards and are thus exempt from the cajoling attempts of outsiders to make them conform, which would be in any case be ineffectual.

Many commentators see justice as the central theme of Gen. 18–19. I have tried to show that it is rather the relationship between justice and intercession in relation to non-Israelites. Will not the judge of all the earth do justice? For Brett, 'The answer of these narratives seems to be a resounding "yes": judgment will fall only on the guilty not the innocent, and it will fall only after due process'.[72] But apart from the escape of Lot's daughters and their descendants, issues Brett goes on to discuss, there are questions about what would have happened had ten righteous people lived in Sodom and Gomorrah—the guilty would have evaded punishment for their sake—and about the inhabitants numbering between one and nine who *may* have been righteous (Abraham stops negotiating at ten, 18.32-33). Justice is a two-way process: the righteous are protected and the guilty punished. This is the message of Ezekiel 14, but Genesis 18–19 complicates that simple message; Abraham's intercession could potentially have saved the guilty from justice. Yet as the story unfolds, we see how those who are not righteous bring justice upon themselves through a process combining natural law and measure for measure. Lot's surviving daughters repay their father for (indirect) sexual exploitation, and their offspring are excluded both from joining Israel and from being blessed via Israel: 'You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live' (Deut. 23.7). Genesis 18–19, read intertextually with Ezekiel 14 and in light of Gen. 18.1-16 and Gen. 20, is one of many Genesis texts that explore the implications for non-Israelites of interaction with Israel. Shall not the Judge of all the world do justice? Yes, but doing justice for *all the world* is not as straightforward as it sounds and fascinatingly, in Genesis as in *Genesis Rabbah*, God needs the help of Abraham, not as a light to the nations, nor even as their teacher of righteousness, but to act as an intercessor on their behalf.

71. Cf. M. Walzer, 'The Prophet as Social Critic', in *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 69-94, on the essential particularism of prophecy; criticism must come from within a system and be directed towards a group with shared values.

72. Brett, *Genesis*, pp. 65-66.

Chapter 5

The Temporal Temple: Was Abraham Standing at Sinai?

To the Sunne Rising

Busie olde foole, unruly Sunne;
Why dost thou thus,
Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers seasons run?
Sawcy pedantique wretch, goe chide
Late schoole boyes, and sowre prentices,
Goe tell Court-huntsmen, that the King will ride,
Call countrey ants to harvest offices;
Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clyme,
Nor houres, dayes, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beames, so reverend, and strong
Why shouldst thou thinke?
I could eclipse and cloud them with a winke,
But that I would not lose her sight so long:
If her eyes have not blinded thine
Looke, and tomorrow late, tell mee,
Whether both the India's of spice and Myne
Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with mee.
Aske for those Kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
And thou shalt heare, All here in one bed lay.

She'is all States, and all Princes, I,
Nothing else is;
Princes doe but play us; compar'd to this,
All honor's mimique; All wealth alchimie,
Thou sunne art halfe as happy'as wee,
In that the world's contracted thus;
Thine age askes ease, and since thy duties bee
To warme the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy spheare.

John Donne

'To the Sunne Rising' is a wonderful example of how time and space can be manipulated in order to solve a practical problem.[1] John Donne wishes he could stay in bed all day with his lover and is determined to find a way. He taunts the sun for assuming that the world revolves around it and that it determines the times at which all events must occur. He claims that lovers' time is beyond solar control, and then deftly shifts arenas, from temporal to spatial, insisting that the sun can fulfil its obligation to warm the entire world by shining on his bed. (Here is a man who liked to leave the light on.) By collapsing time into space, rhetorically speaking, Donne solves his problem. His bed, *when* occupied by himself and his mistress, is a microcosm of the world. For two separate reasons, they can stay where they are. First, the sun can shine everywhere by shining in this one place, if and only if they are present in it: 'she's all states and all princes I'. Indeed, to move would be to consign the world to darkness. Second, in the absence of Donne's bed microcosm, the sun would be destined to circle endlessly in an ever more desperate attempt to shine in the right places at the right times. 'Thine age asks ease'—the sun is getting old and slowing down. This is why 'country ants' (farm labourers) and court huntsmen must get up at the crack of dawn; the sun cannot stay with them indefinitely and their business requires daylight hours. If, however, the sun could accommodate its age and no longer needed to rush around, but could easily illuminate the whole world all day and night from the comfort of one position, the lovers could dictate their own schedules. It follows from this that Donne and his mistress not only *must* stay in bed all day in order to keep the sun shining on their bed, but also that they *can* stay in bed all day since they themselves have dissolved the reason to act at appointed hours. In Donne's deft hands, time becomes a spatial entity and a temporal problem is instantly resolved.

It is hardly surprising that John Donne sought a metaphysical solution to a physical problem, but playing fast and loose with time and space is no means the exclusive preserve of metaphysical poets.[2]

1. I dedicate this chapter to my sons, Jacob and Jonah Lipton, in memory of my greatest (only?) parenting triumph, which occurred as I drove from Massachusetts to New York City with Jacob and Jonah, then 4 and 2. We had barely left home when Jacob asked the dreaded question, Are we nearly there? Assuming my husband the philosopher could deal with the damage later, I risked an abstract argument: Look, you may think we measure time like water or sand, but we don't. This journey takes three hours. If we talk, listen to music and count red cars, we'll arrive in no time. If you ask me if we're nearly there, it'll last forever. Neither Jacob nor Jonah, now 20 and 21, *ever* asked that question again, and both went on to acquire a strong interest in time, philosophical and anthropological, respectively.

2. Literature is full of examples, but I mention one that stands out: Ian McEwan's exploration of non-linear, non-uniform time in *A Child in Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987). During a car accident, time slows down to accommodate the rapidity of

> '…the use of spatial words like in and at for time expressions (e.g. in an hour, at ten o'clock) makes sense given that TIME is metaphorically conceptualized in terms of SPACE. Metaphors in the conceptual system indicate coherent and systematic relationships between concepts. The use of the same words and grammatical devices for concepts with systematic metaphorical correspondences (like TIME and SPACE) is one of the ways in which the correspondences between form and meaning in a language are 'logical' rather than arbitrary.'[3]

Even the least philosophical among us uses the language of space to speak about time, and we routinely address our shortage of time by organizing it spatially—via the marks on the face of a conventional watch, for example, or the pages of a diary. Once we have categorized and described time spatially, it is a small step to do the same in reverse: space, especially in the abstract, when real space is inaccessible, may be described temporally. And once we are accustomed to mapping a particular space temporally, we might continue to do so even when we have an alternative. This has been the case for Jews in relation to Jerusalem, as is evident when examined through the lens of Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

> I've come back to this city where names
> Are given to distances as if to human beings
> And the numbers are not of bus-routes
> But: 70 After, 1917, 500
> B.C., Forty-Eight. These are the lines
> You really travel on.[4]

In this poem from 'Songs of Jerusalem', Amichai contrasts bus-routes with historical dates to evoke synchronic and diachronic perspectives of his subject.[5] In normal cities, numbers designate the horizontal lines—bus-routes, streets and avenues—that carry residents across the surface of the city from point A to B. In Jerusalem, they designate the vertical, the

events. The hero observes the scene in minute detail: a padlock swinging from a loose flange, 'wash me please' scrawled in grime. He beams messages to his wife and daughter, shifts gears, thinks himself into the gap between the other vehicles, and hopes someone has witnessed his superb driving. The whole experience lasts *five seconds*. I thank Jacob Lipton for pointing this out to me.

3. G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), pp. 135-36.

4. These lines and other Amichai images mentioned here are drawn from 'Jerusalem 1967', in *Poems of Jerusalem and Love Poems* (trans. S. Mitchell; New York: Harper, 1988), pp. 39-63.

5. A synchronic perspective is static rather than evolutionary, concentrating on a particular moment in time. A diachronic perspective goes across time, and focuses on historical evolution.

'time-lines', that take residents ever deeper into the city's historical past. The bus-routes/date exchange is one of many devices by which Amichai evokes the presence of the past in the city in which no one can live for the moment. For Amichai, history arrives in Jerusalem in regular shipments—houses and towers are its packing materials; Jerusalem is the port city on the shore of eternity, and waving Hasidim see off the ships; Jerusalem preserves memories, but it also blots them out, creating a gulf between its residents and their own pasts; Jerusalem is, indeed, a living, breathing archaeological site, practically and conceptually:

> 'In an odd way, though Israel is a country obsessed by archaeology, Amichai's use of it as a way of conceptualizing history and self is one of the things that set him apart. "I was raised", he told the Israeli critic Chana Kronfeld, "on two different linear outlooks: the religious and the Marxist". He has in mind, first, his parents' Orthodox home in Würzburg, Germany, and the schooling they gave him there. His Marxist outlook took form after the family moved to Palestine in 1935 when Amichai was eleven, and it was fostered by the Socialist Youth Movement to which most Jewish adolescents belonged in the Palestine of the 1930s and early 1940s. Against such linearity, he suggests, the notion of archaeological stratification has given him a more complex way of conceiving experience in time—and, I would add, a way that is a sober alternative to the messianic optimism of both traditional Judaism and Marxism'.[6]

Nor is it only Jews and poets who play with time in Jerusalem. I am grateful to Julian Barnett for telling me that, contra Bob Dylan, it is *plus ça change* for Jerusalem clocks. For some, Jerusalem is a virtual city located in a country in which they continue to exist. Others yearn for a past when the reality of the city was different. Still others wait expectantly for a future and, in the meantime, discount the present. All, according to Julian, shape their spatial experience by personalizing their clocks: 'Within one kilometre of my home at the edge of Meah Shearim, there are four time zones—not just nominal zones but real ones that people live by: Julian's time (State of Israel time); Toldos Aron time (one hour behind Zionist entity state time); Rumanian patriarchate time (two hours behind); and Nakshabandi Sufi community, Mount of Olives time (half an hour ahead, on pseudo-Jordanian time)'. And Julian did not even mention the time kept by Jews throughout the Diaspora, Jerusalem Standard Time—local time plus ten minutes (i.e. late).

In this chapter I shall try to show that the biblical authors too played with space and time as a way of solving problems. In particular, I shall suggest that their flexible thinking about time and space meant that issues we identify as problems were less problematic for them, and perhaps not even

6. R. Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 122.

problematic at all. My case study is Abraham's relationship to the Sinai laws. I hope to demonstrate that an appropriately nuanced understanding of the biblical authors' various conceptions of time goes a long way towards diminishing the significance of the Abraham/Sinai dilemma. It should be clear by now that this chapter challenges the assumption made by almost all exegetes that the authors of the Hebrew Bible conceived time in strictly linear terms.[7] My own assumption is that there is no single biblical perspective of time, but that a widespread and significant conception involved the conflation of time and space, much as it was conflated by Donne and Amichai in the poems cited above.

Was Abraham Standing at Sinai?

In his important and stimulating book *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, W. Moberly takes a radical look at the relationship between Genesis and Exodus and offers a model for explaining it: Genesis is to Exodus as the Old Testament is to the New Testament.[8] Stimulated in part by Moberly, and in part by the outpouring of anxious faith writings on this subject throughout the ages, J. Levenson has written a detailed discussion of what Moberly conceives as the Genesis/Exodus dilemma, casting it as the more traditional Abraham/Sinai debate.[9] Levenson's work should be read for its excellent historical and theological overview, but here follows a summary of the problems that concern us here:

The religion of the patriarchs as described in Genesis shares almost nothing in common with post-Sinai religion as described in Exodus. Genesis has no hint of institutional religion—no temple or central shrine, no sacrificial cult, no mediating figures. What justifies the view that the religions of Genesis and Exodus are one and the same?

The people's relationship with the land in Genesis has little in common with that in Exodus. Genesis implies no national claims, no kings, no political leaders, no national constitution, and a fundamental openness to foreign

7. I am grateful to Doron Mendels (personal communication, July 2006) for helping me to see that the scholarly preoccupation with linear time may have its roots in the linear approach of the Hebrew Bible's final editors to the organisation of their material: 'First come the ancestors who then move to Egypt, and only after that comes the exodus, and the Judges come after Joshua…' As Mendels makes clear, though, 'this has nothing to do with the perception of the historical reality of the different authors, the predecessors of the editors'.

8. *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

9. 'The Conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity and Islam', in H. Najman and J.H. Newman (eds.), *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003), pp. 3-40.

powers. Genesis is the blueprint for contemporary ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel who are willing to live under any flag as long as they can live on holy ground. Exodus offers a national model—one people in its own land with its own laws. How can they be reconciled?

That Abraham lived before Sinai reflects negatively on Sinai law, which is thus time-bound. This is a major problem for Jewish interpreters, even antinomian Hasidic commentators who nevertheless acknowledge Judaism's debt to law and do not want to undermine it.[10] That Abraham lived before Sinai may undermine Abraham. How can the revered 'founder of monotheism' fail to keep the laws?

In the past, these problems were less pressing for Christians than for Jews, for whom Sinai laws remained central. Now they are more or less equally pressing for readers of all persuasions who think, as I do, that Genesis postdates Exodus.[11] If the authors and redactors of Genesis were aware of Exodus and Sinai, as many scholars now believe, they must have created intentionally a lawless Abraham. Why did they only hint once or twice, and even then obliquely (in Gen. 18.19; 26.5), at the Genesis *Jubilees* solution—the backdating of Sinai laws so that Abraham can observe *kashrut* and make sacrifices? The fundamental problem is that Abraham's failure to keep Sinai laws creates a tension between patriarchal and Mosaic religions. Does Abraham represent a golden age from which Sinai was a decline? Or was Sinai an advance on Abraham? Levenson uses Deut. 12.8-9 as a proof-text to locate a possible answer in the time-bound nature of the Sinai laws:

> You shall not act as we act here [Transjordan], every man as he pleases, because you have *not yet come* to the allotted haven that the LORD your God is giving you.

Levenson sees 'not yet come' as a sign that the Sinai laws were operative only once the Israelites had entered and settled the promised land, and thus did not apply to Abraham and the patriarchs. The weakness of this explanation for many present day Bible scholars is that it does not address the question of what the Genesis authors and redactors thought they were doing. The authors of the Deuteronomic text cited here seem unaware that the patriarchs had, according to other traditions, previously lived in the 'allotted haven'. (All seven references to Abraham in Deuteronomy—1, 6, 9 [×2], 29, 30 and 34—occur within chs. 1–11 and 27–34, the so-called exilic frame). One might argue that the terms המנוחה והנחלה ('allotted

10. S. Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), see especially pp. 138-55.

11. I see Genesis as a largely late-exilic, early postexilic composition (sixth/fifth century BCE); cf. a mainly ninth/eighth-century BCE Exodus.

haven') which do not occur in Genesis, were chosen precisely to include that early settlement, but it seems to me more likely that the seventh-century authors of Deuteronomy 12–26 did not have in mind either that Abraham kept the laws or that the land had been meaningfully settled during his time. The Deuteronomic references to the patriarchs, which I see as formulaic, harmonizing additions, refer to the 'promise' of the land, not to its settlement, or indeed any other category of residency. Since neither Exodus nor Deuteronomy 12–26 mentions that Abraham and his descendants lived in the land, or speak of a return, it is not helpful for our purposes to turn to them. Rather, we must look at Genesis and exilic/postexilic Deuteronomy. How did they cope with the tensions raised by the 'patriarchal history'? My answer to this question is the opposite of Levenson's. The Abraham/Sinai dilemma failed to disturb them, not because they saw the Sinai laws as time-bound, but because they had a complex notion of time that rendered both the Sinai laws and 'patriarchal history' as effectively timeless.

An obvious problem with this approach is that the biblical conception of time is not readily analysed.[12] Although recent scholarship has shown to be overly simplistic the dominant view that biblical time was linear, no clear-cut alternative has emerged. More to the point, those accounts that have been offered have failed quite strikingly to make an impact on textual interpretation. This may reflect general difficulties in marrying theory with exegesis, but it may also reflect a problem with time in particular. Our conception of time has far-reaching effects, but they are hard for those who are neither philosophers or anthropologists to assess. Bearing in mind these problems, I shall approach the subject via a selection of rabbinic texts that contain something close to second-order thinking about time.[13] I must emphasize that here, as elsewhere in this book, I do not assume theological or conceptual continuity between the Bible and rabbis. It will be my task to demonstrate as best I can that the rabbinic perspective on time and its organisation is in some respects similar to the Bible's, and that even where the two differ quite radically, the rabbinic texts can illuminate the Bible. It goes without saying that I see a closer relationship between the rabbinic commentaries and the biblical texts I am analysing here than between, say, John Donne or Yehuda Amichai and the biblical texts in question. Nevertheless, I would not attempt to justify my use of rabbinic material by appeal to

12. See G. Lucas, *The Archaeology of Time* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 61-94, for a survey of recent anthropological views of time in ancient societies and the difficulties they present.

13. See S. Kunin, *God's Place in the World: Sacred Space and Sacred Place in Judaism* (London: Cassell, 1998), pp. 140-44, for an anthropologically orientated discussion of the interplay of space and time in Judaism.

a special relationship. In this context, I am using the rabbis more or less as I am using Donne and Amichai—lenses through which the Bible may usefully be scrutinized.

From the rabbis, I shall move to the ancient Near East, pausing briefly over the presentation of time in Babylonian texts before trying to demonstrate that the Bible plays with time and space to address a problem that parallels the Abraham/Sinai dilemma, namely the binding nature or otherwise of the Sinai covenant upon those who were not present to witness it. This is not the place to dwell on compositional questions, but I shall note in passing that I date to the late exilic and early postexilic period the majority of texts that are my focus here. I think it likely that Genesis was written and/or redacted by writers who sought to justify life in Judah under Persian rule following the Babylonian exile by creating a non-national alternative to the national paradigm established by Exodus.[14] By conceptualizing time as space, they could offer patriarchal Canaan at once as a historical parallel *and* a geographic entity that co-existed with the Promised Land. I shall now edge towards the main biblical question by way of three quite different rabbinic texts.

Night and Day (You Are the One)

Genesis Rabbah uses the creation of the sun and the moon (Gen. 1.9-14) to highlight a complex interaction between time and space as a response to disorder and uncertainty.[15] Different categories of time are offered as alternative arenas in which the relative success of Israel versus the nations can be evaluated.

14. See Brett, *Genesis*, for an excellent discussion of the reasons for and implications of setting Genesis in this period. While agreeing more or less with Brett about dates of composition, I differ with him over authorial motivation. Brett sees Genesis as a text that resists Persian hegemony, whereas I see it as a text that shows how to survive and even thrive under foreign rule.

15. I am grateful to Barry Landy for pointing out during a meeting of Stefan Reif's Talmud shiur (Cambridge, November 2006) that the Babylonian Talmud opens with a discussion of the appropriate *time* to recite the *Shema*. The centrality of time as a subject in its own right is highlighted by the multiple temporal measuring systems that are offered, and by the fact that the question of *when* precedes any consideration of where, how and why. It is relevant to our interests here that the Talmud's first answer to the question of when the *Shema* may be recited alludes to Temple ritual: 'FROM WHAT TIME MAY ONE RECITE THE *SHEMA* IN THE EVENING? FROM THE TIME THAT THE PRIESTS ENTER [THEIR HOUSES] IN ORDER TO EAT THEIR *TERUMAH* UNTIL THE END OF THE FIRST WATCH' (*Berachot* 2a). Here are the rabbis ordering and controlling holy time while alluding to the sacred space now inaccessible to them.

R. Tanhum and R. Phinehas in R. Simon's name said:

> After calling them great, He turns and casts a slur [on one by writing] THE GREAT LIGHT…AND THE SMALL LIGHT (1.16). This is because it penetrated into its neighbour's territory. R. Phinehas said: With regard to all other sacrifices it is written, *And one he-goat for a sin-offering* [Num. 28.22; 29.5,11], whereas of the New Moon it is written, *And one he-goat for a sin offering for the* LORD (Num. 28.15). The Holy One Blessed Be He, said: 'It was I who caused it to enter its neighbour's domain'. If that [the moon] which enters *with permission* was thus disparaged by the Holy Writ, think how much more deserving of this [blame] is one who enters *without permission*!
>
> R. Levi said in the name of R. Jose b. Lai: It is only natural that the great should calculate [time] by the great [the sun], and the small by the small [the moon]. Esau [Rome] counts by the sun, which is large, and Jacob by the moon, which is small. Said R. Nahman, That is a fortunate omen. Esau counts by the sun, which is large: just as the sun rules by day but not by night, so does Esau enjoy this world but has no portion in the World to Come. Jacob counts by the moon, which is small: just as the moon rules by day and by night, so has Jacob a portion in this world *and* the World to Come. R. Nahman made another observation. R. Nahman said: As long as the light of the greater luminary functions, the light of the smaller one is not noticeable, but when the light of the greater one sets, the light of the smaller one becomes noticeable. Similarly, as long as the light of Esau prevails, the light of Jacob cannot be distinguished; but when the light of Esau sets, that of Jacob shall be distinguished, as it is written, *Arise, shine, … For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the peoples, but upon you the Lord will shine, and His glory shall be seen upon you* (Isa. 60.1ff).[16]

This midrash may be read on multiple levels and has themes and preoccupations I shall not address. The following points are relevant to this discussion: (a) Time is conceived spatially (the moon penetrates its neighbour's territory); (b) Four different conceptions of time co-exist here: calendrical (Rome has a solar calendar and Israel a lunar calendar); spiritual (this world and the world to come); historical (empires rise and fall); and eschatological time (end of days); (c) Movement between these different conceptions of time is possible, just as the moon enters the sun's domain. (d) Time is converted into space and then used to solve the problem of Rome's apparent success versus Israel's failure. In a calendrical arena, things look bad for Israel; in other temporal arenas (e.g. the world to come), the situation looks better. My sole interest here is its presentation of time. As is often the case, the interpretation hangs on the peg of an apparent inconsistency in the biblical text. Genesis 1.14 reports initially that God made two *great* lights, but almost immediately distinguishes between them, calling them a *great* light

16. *Gen. R.* 6.3.

and a *small* light. What explains this shift? The midrashic author sees the adjective 'small' as a slur, incurred by the moon because it encroached on the sun's territory. The temporal zones of day and night are conceived spatially, even to the point of being discussed in terms of territorial violations. The moon is belittled because it is visible both at night and during the day, the sun's territory, whereas the sun is visible only in the day, and never at night, the moon's territory. As I shall try to show, this discussion of time in spatial terms is not a rabbinic innovation, but a priestly one, and is already firmly incorporated into the biblical creation narrative.

The midrash then brings into play a second biblical proof text, highlighting a new irregularity. For all but one of the festivals, worshippers are instructed to 'take a kid of the flocks for a sin offering'. For *Rosh Hodesh*, the festival of the New Moon, the wording is slightly different: 'a sin offering *for the* LORD'. Why, the author wonders, are *Rosh Hodesh* sin offerings specifically 'for the LORD' while others are simply offered? The answer must (!) be that God himself has sinned and needs an offering to be made on his behalf. Since the Festival in question is *Rosh Hodesh*, God must have sinned in relation to the moon. And how did God sin in relation to the moon? By causing it to enter its neighbour's territory. The conclusion is a קל וחמר, how much more so: if the moon was considered guilty of territorial violation, despite having received divine permission to enter the sun's domain, how much more guilty should we find a party who entered another's territory without divine permission. The midrashic author has effected a seamless shift from the temporal via the spatial to the political. His underlying concern is a land that has been invaded by an occupying power—the land of Israel.

As the midrash proceeds, the relative differences between the sun and moon are reconceptualized. Whereas the sizes of moon and sun were earlier conceived as slur and praise respectively—the large size of the sun equated with its willingness to remain within its walls, and the small size of the moon with its inability to stay at home—now they are linked to the numerical size of the people whose calendars are based on their movements. Esau, Rome, has a solar calendar, while Jacob, Jews, have a lunar calendar. But now another move is made. The temporal units of day and night that were characterized initially as territory—the sun's piece of land versus the moon's, Rome versus the land of Israel—are now conceptualized as alternative worlds that are both temporal and spatial. In the first reformulation, the day is this world and the night the world to come. Rather than constituting territorial infringement, the moon's presence in both worlds is considered an advantage. It means that Israel, the moon's calculating (as in calendars) equivalent, will enjoy portions in both this world and the world to come, the afterlife. Rome, meanwhile, will have no presence in the world to come. In this way, the midrashic author demonstrates that size is not everything, that you win some and you lose some, and that moving the competition to a

new arena—the world to come instead of this world—creates a whole new ballgame. In the world to come, Rome's dominion would not endure.

Rabbi Nahman's observation about the visibility of the lights introduces another arena in which success may be measured—historical time, as calculated here by the rise and fall of political empires.[17] This time, there is no division into separate zones—this world and the world to come; the interpretative peg of the two lights is reformulated once again. Day and night fall away, and there is only one zone in which the light shed by the sun and the moon compete. While the sun is shining, the moon's light is not visible, but once the sun sets, the moon will be visible again. Israel can rest reassured. Empires rise and fall; Rome will fall, as Babylon, Assyria and Egypt fell before it, and Israel's light will once more be visible.

The midrash closes with a proof text from Isaiah that points to yet another arena in which Israel's success may be measured—the messianic time that will begin after the end of days. Messianic or eschatological time is, of course, quite distinct from the world to come, the after-life. The peg is Isaiah's reference to shining. The midrashic author envisages a time when the relative strength of Israel's light will no longer be an issue. The nations will stumble in earthly darkness and Israel will bask in the light of God's glory. For our purposes here, the important matter is the identification of four different temporal categories: calendrical time (indicated by the original verses from Genesis and Numbers evoking agricultural seasons and associated festivals); this world and the world to come (indicated by the poetic reformulation of day and night); historical time (different from calendrical time in having no connection to the seasons and being long-term); and eschatological time (a new kind of time, after the end of days).[18] These four temporal categories function as alternative arenas in which success may be measured.[19] What appears to constitute failure in one category counts

17. On the rise and fall of empires, see D. Mendels, 'The Five Empires: A Note on Propagandistic Topos', in D. Mendels, *Identity, Religion and Historiography: Studies in Hellenistic History* (JSPSup, 24; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 314-21.

18. The reference to darkness in Isaiah 60 raises the question of whether the time after the end of days is a return to the time before creation, when darkness covered the earth, or to the light of the first creation. If that were to be the case, even the most apparently linear conception of time would have a circular, if not cyclical, element.

19. This corresponds interestingly to theories of time constructed by anthropologists who wished to move away from a narrowly linear conception of time. They proposed three different ways of thinking about time—long-term, medium-term, and short-term. Long term is geological or evolutionary (the sun and the moon, whose movements are understood as fixed for all time and transcending other kinds of measurements), medium term is historical or political (in the midrash, the empires that rise and fall), and short-term is the individual life of a man (the implied reader of the midrash who wonders why his life is not successful).

as success in another.[20] So in these texts, as in the John Donne poem with which I began, time is perceived spatially and subsequently manipulated in response to a problem—how to resolve the inconsistency between God's omnipotence and declared love for Israel, on the one hand, and, on the other, Israel's dire circumstances. I turn now to a rabbinic text that uses precisely this strategy in relation to the Abraham/Sinai dilemma.

'Eruv Tavshilin *is Poetry not Prose*'[21]

Among the range of rabbinic responses to the Abraham/Sinai dilemma is the insistence that Abraham did in fact know and keep all the laws given to Moses. Several rabbinic texts that take this position specify one particular rabbinic (i.e. non-biblical) law that Abraham kept—*Eruv Tavshilin*, mixed dishes (where dishes refers to items of food, not the pots or plates). *Eruv Tavshilin* is a legal fiction enabling food to be prepared on a festival for consumption on Shabbat. Since, according to rabbinic law, food cannot be prepared on a festival for later consumption, how—without refrigeration—can a woman feed her family on Shabbat, when no food preparation can be undertaken and yet there is an obligation to honour the Sabbath with the best available food? The solution is *Eruv Tavshilin*.[22] Like *Eruv Hatzerot*, the quasi-virtual fenced enclosure that enables observant Jews to move about and carry objects in a specified public area during Shabbat, *Eruv Tavshilin* involves converting time into space. With *Eruv Hatzerot*, an item of food (the *eruv*) is distributed (mixed) among all the residents in a designated, enclosed area. By virtue of the mixing, the entire area becomes private space instead of public space, and the forms of carrying permissible in private are now permissible there. The *eruv* is not the enclosure, but the food that is mixed within it. The key point is that the mixing (distribution) of the food transforms the space, which effectively transforms the time; it is possible to act on Shabbat as if it were a weekday. With *Eruv Tavshilin*, two distinct spaces are created (food prepared before the festival and food prepared during the festival), the boundaries between them are blurred (the foods are mixed), and time is recategorized accordingly. The mixing of foods cooked on different occasions effectively transforms—for this strict purpose—festival time to non-festival time.

20. The theological pros and cons of this are clear enough. Were the rabbis offering a sop (abandon neither hope nor your religion; all will be well in the world to come) or genuine hope?

21. The Rebbe of Toldos Aron, Meah Shearim, Jerusalem. I thank Julian Barnett for asking the Rebbe on my behalf why he thinks this law is cited in this context. I expected the unexpected, but nothing quite as unsettling as this.

22. For a brief, practical description, see E. Kitov, *The Book of our Heritage: The Jewish Year and its Days of Significance*. I. *Tishrey-Shevat* (trans. N. Bulman; Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1968), pp. 42-43.

While *Eruv Tavshilin* is a good enough example of a rabbinic law that does not appear in the Bible, it is one of many, many such laws. Why was this one chosen? My answer here is that it solves a problem by turning time into space, and blurring the boundaries between different temporal periods. It is useful to look at what may be the earliest reference to *Eruv Tavshilin* in relation to Abraham, which occurs in the Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 28b:

> R. Safra said: The [afternoon] prayer of Abraham is due when the walls begin to grow dark. Joseph said: Shall we indeed learn [our laws] from Abraham?—Raba answered: A Tanna learned from Abraham and we should not learn from him! For it has been taught: And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised, this passage teaches that the whole of the [eighth] day is proper for the circumcision, but the zealots perform their religious duty as early as possible as it is said: And Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his ass…
>
> Rab said: Our father Abraham kept the whole Torah, as it is said: Because that Abraham hearkened to My voice [kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws]. R. Shimi b. Hiyya said to Rab: Say, perhaps, that this refers to the seven laws?—Surely there was also that of circumcision! Then say that it refers to the seven laws and circumcision [and not to the whole Torah]?—If that were so, why does Scripture say: 'My commandments and My laws'? Raba or R. Ashi said: Abraham, our father, kept even the law concerning the 'erub of the dishes [Eruv Tavshilin],' as it is said: 'My Torahs': one being the written Torah, the other the oral Torah.

The rabbis ask whether the correct time for afternoon prayer, traditionally linked to Isaac, can be learned from Abraham; even if he prayed it, he was not legally obliged to do so. The answer to this objection is naturally to claim that Abraham was legally obliged to pray—he kept the Torah and the oral Torah, even *Eruv Tavshilin*.

This passage makes several significant moves: (a) it creates a strong link between time (afternoon prayer), Abraham (Isaac's name should properly appear here, which in itself is noteworthy), and Sinai laws; (b) the discussion shows that time is not firmly fixed; (c) it is claimed that Abraham kept Sinai and rabbinic laws; (d) the rabbinic law that is mentioned concerns the manipulation of time and space to solve a problem (how to prepare food for a Shabbat that falls immediately after a festival). My answer to the question 'why *Eruv Tavshilin*?' is that the rabbis recognized that the solution to the underlying problem—Abraham's relationship with Sinai and therefore his suitability as a source of halakhah—is structurally similar to *Eruv Tavshilin*. In both cases, the problem can be resolved by transforming time into space and playing tricks with it. I turn now to a much-analyzed talmudic passage that does precisely this.

Moses Enrols at Rabbi Aqiba's Torah Academy

The notion that time and space were understood by rabbinic writers as being central to the Abraham/Sinai dilemma is attested by *b. Menahot* 29b, which describes a visit by Moses to the Yeshiva (academy) of Rabbi Aqiba:

> Rab Judah said in the name of Rab, At the time [lit. hour] when Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in tying crowns [scribal decorations] to the letters. Said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, Who stays Your hand?' He answered, 'There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Aqiba ben Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws'. 'Lord of the Universe', said Moses, 'show him to me'. He replied, 'Turn backwards'. Moses went and sat down at the end of eight rows [and listened to the legal discourses]. Not being able to follow their arguments, he was ill at ease. But when they came to a particular subject and the disciples said to the master, 'From what source do you know it?' and the latter replied, 'It is a law given to Moses at Sinai', he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, 'Lord of the Universe, You have a man like this and You give the Torah through me?' He replied, 'Silence! For this is what has come before me in the plan'. Then Moses said, 'Lord of the Universe, You have shown me his Torah, show me his reward'. 'Turn backwards', said He. And Moses turned round and saw them weighing out his [Aqiba's] flesh at the market-stalls. 'Lord of the Universe', cried Moses, 'such Torah, and such a reward!' 'Silence!' He replied, 'For this is what has come before Me in the plan'.[23]

Among many other interests, *b. Menahot* 29b seeks to resolve a parallel problem: how to validate the Oral Torah. Moses bridges the gap between Sinai and Rabbi Aqiba, who represents the Oral Torah in this narrative, by travelling through time and being together in a specific place. The Oral Torah is retrojected to Sinai, being physically attached by God to the Written Torah. And Moses confirms that he has not been displaced—R. Aqiba still needs him. This complex text addresses many questions, not least theodicy, but my focus here is its comment on the relationship between written (Bible) and the oral (post-biblical) law. According to rabbinic tradition, the oral law in its entirety (i.e. every interpretation that has ever and can ever be given) was anticipated by God on Mount Sinai. Unlike the Bible, though, these interpretations and commentaries were not given in written form. From what sources, then, did the rabbis derive authority for their own written (especially legal) texts? The story of Moses and Rabbi Aqiba provides a rich and fascinating answer. In the first instance, the unusual and striking image of God 'sitting' and creating a text—not merely words, but an artefact—draws attention to the scroll, a rabbinic tradition, not a

23. My translation.

biblical one—no mention of tablets here.[24] God gave *halakhah*, Jewish law as extrapolated from the Bible by the rabbis, at Sinai by means of the decorations he attached to the letters of the Torah. What might have appeared as icing on the cake became, in the hand of Rabbi Aqiba, a core ingredient.[25] But there is more to say on this matter. First, Moses is compared to Rabbi Aqiba to the detriment of the former. Moses seems to indicate that Rabbi Aqiba is, at the very least, a greater scholar than he is ('You have a man like this…'), and may even imply moral superiority; the reward he asks to see seems to be linked with something more substantial than scholarship. While it raises several general questions about theodicy, the concept of reward is germane for our discussion in that it provides a mechanism for separating the temporal zones that were effectively merged when Moses moved from one to another. Events, objects or actions cannot be evaluated according to their consequences, nor, by implication, can the past be assessed with reference to the present or the projected future. Rabbi Aqiba's greatness is by no means undermined by the circumstances in which he died, *even* if those circumstances are attributed to a divine plan as opposed to ordinary human failing on the part of the Romans. Likewise, the fact that Moses was ultimately punished and prohibited from entering the land of Israel does not undermine the Torah that was given via his hand. We cannot measure greatness by waiting to see how things turn out in future; the Torah is great because God produced it at a particular time on Mount Sinai, not because Jews like Rabbi Aqiba would later die for it.

The prominence of time in this text is highlighted by J. Rubenstein's observation about the collapse of the biblical and post-biblical periods. While rabbinic texts routinely create 'conversations' between Torah scholars whose lives were separated by hundreds of years, it is extremely unusual to find rabbis interacting with biblical figures.[26] The concept of time is thus highlighted here simply by virtue of the almost unprecedented nature of time-travel between the biblical and rabbinic worlds. Time as an abstract concept is further underscored through the process by which Moses encounters Rabbi

24. Since this is among the earliest references to what we recognize as a traditional (to this day) synagogue *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll), it is impossible to know how far back this tradition may be traced, and how widely practised it was at the time of writing. It seems likely to have been Babylonian, probably post-dating the destruction of the second temple, and perhaps the text in question is intended in part to validate the custom.

25. It must be said that the language is ambivalent here. The heaps upon heaps (*tel*) of interpretation evoke a burial mound—a valuable heritage or rotting carcasses?—casting some doubt as to whether God was hoping for all this interpretation. Yet if he did not want it, and bearing in mind that, in this text, God knows the future, why did he attach the crowns so painstakingly?

26. *Rabbinic Stories* (Classics in Western Spirituality; New York: Paulist Press, 2002), p. 215.

Aqiba. Whereas ordinary rabbinic texts that blur the boundaries between different generations of scholars make no issue of it—various teachings are simply juxtaposed as if they were formed in light of each other—our text articulates the process by which Moses meets Aqiba. Moses must turn, a physical movement, and look either 'behind' or 'into the future', depending on how we translate לאחורך, 'backwards' in the above translation.[27] By this means, he cannot simply see into the future, but is catapulted into the back row (another relative judgement—scholars sat according to status) of Rabbi Aqiba's academy. Here Moses learns that interpretation has advanced since he received the Torah on Sinai; he cannot even follow the discussion. But he also learns that interpretations are derived ultimately from 'his' Torah. So although there has been an advance, there has also been decline. The scholars have moved further and further from the fundamental teachings given at Sinai, and discussion stops only when they return to them: 'From what sources did you learn this?' 'From a law given to Moses at Sinai'. In other words, our text offers a solution to the problem of the authority of the oral Torah and its relationship with the written Torah: time travel! The rabbinic Torah, signified by the crowns, is transported back to Mount Sinai, and Moses is transported forwards to the academy of the Torah's greatest interpreter. The blurring of established temporal boundaries enables the authors of our text to blur the boundaries between written and oral Torah, taking for their own production the validation that applied originally only to the biblical model. At the same time, time is conceived spatially. Moses travels through time, but he and Aqiba share a single space—Mount Sinai. We in turn conceive spatially a revelation that occurred in time, and making it more or less impossible to focus on *when* the event occurred. The standard answer to a temporal question—*When* did Moses receive the Law?—is geographic: '*On* Mount Sinai'.

Time in the Ancient Near East

The claims I have made thus far about time and space could, of course, be said to be a rabbinic conception and irrelevant to the Bible. Before moving finally to the biblical texts, I shall make one final detour to the ancient Near East in the hope of showing that the same structures are evident there. Given my view that Genesis is primarily exilic and early postexilic, and thus so are the origins of the Abraham/Sinai problem, the Assyrian/Babylonian perspective is the most pertinent.

27. The Hebrew term is אחור, usually 'behind' or 'backwards', but it appears in contexts where future is strongly indicated. Perhaps we can make sense of it by thinking of the great men coming up behind us (paradoxically, head of us, in our future). This is consistent with philosophical approaches—it all depends how we situate ourselves. If we move and time is stationary, the future lies ahead and thus faces us. If we are stationary and time moves, the future is coming up behind us.

In an excellent short treatment of the subject, Eleanor Robson identifies a close relationship between time and cosmic order in Assyria and Babylonia c. 750–250 BCE.[28] Primordial time is chaotic and unquantified; Marduk imposes order by positioning in the sky heavenly bodies that 'define and structure the year' (p. 51). The contrast between unstructured primordial time and time governed by calendars suggests that the authors of these texts did have a conception of time in the raw. The *Epic* describes the creation of the world of the gods, in which time passes unquantified, and the hero god's destruction of the forces of chaos and evil in the form of the monstrous sea Tiamat. From her lifeless body he creates the world in which human beings are to dwell. Thus chaos is always imminent in the world, a constant counter-force to the orderliness imposed by Marduk. Like God, Marduk imposes order in the first instance by instituting a calendar, positioning the heavenly bodies in the sky and setting them in regular motion to define and structure the year:

> [Marduk] made the positions for the great gods.
> He set up the stars in constellations, their counterparts.
> He designated the year and marked out its divisions,
> Apportioned three stars each to twelve months.
> After he had patterned the days of the year,
> He fixed the position of the Pole Star to mark out their courses,
> So that none of them could go wrong or stray
> (Tablet V.1-7; cf. Dalley, 1989).[29]

Moreover, the Babylonian texts show evidence of a remarkably similar perspective on the relationship between time and space. In the *Epic*, Marduk's calendar is linked to his temple, which is also represented as a source of protection against cosmic disorder:

> The great Epic of Creation *enuma elish* ('When Above') was recited on the fourth day of the *akitu*, or equinoctial festival, held on the eleven days after the first new moon of the spring equinox at the beginning of the year. At the city of Uruk during the Seleucid period it was held at the autumnal equinox, the midpoint of the year. In Babylonia the god Marduk was both the focal point of the festival and the hero and sole audience of the epic; in Assyria it was Asshur. The equinoctial recital of the *Epic* was not only a marker of passing time; it both described an initiated 'the irruption of primordial—and hence dangerous or sacred—time into mundane time, and irruption that both threaten[ed] and enrich[ed] the cosmic order' (B. Sommer, JANES 27 2000, pp. 81-95). For on the day of the *akitu* following its performance, Marduk's temple Esangila was ritually destroyed, purified and rebuilt, symbolizing the abolition and renewal of the whole cosmic order…[30]

28. 'Scholarly Conceptions and Quantifications of Time in Assyria and Babylonia, c. 750-250 BCE', in R. Rosen (ed.), *Time and Temporality in the Ancient World* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 45-90.

29. Robson, 'Scholarly Conceptions', pp. 49-51.

30. Robson, 'Scholarly Conceptions', p. 49.

It might be argued that the themes of time and temple here constitute two entirely separate strands of thought. Although that seems to me unlikely, I am not in a position to argue my point *vis-à-vis* Babylonian texts. With regard to the Bible, however, I shall try to show that the two strands are inextricably linked in Genesis 1. It is not necessary for my purposes to demonstrate here that the author(s) of Genesis 1 had read *Enuma Elish* or other similar texts. If, as many scholars believe, the biblical creation narrative emerged in a Babylonian context, we should expect to find certain patterns common to both. Even without dwelling on compositional matters, it is hard not to read Genesis 1, with its extraordinary emphasis on order imposed by the temporal matrix of the seven-day week, in the light of the creation epics discussed by Robson. Before looking at Genesis 1, however, it is necessary to speak in more general terms about time in the Bible and, in particular, to address objections that might be raised by those scholars who doubt that the Bible has a sense of time at all.

'I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now'[31]

The conception of time is hardly a new topic for biblical scholars; O. Cullmann explored it in relation to Old and New Testaments in the 1940s,[32] and J. Barr wrote an important monograph on the subject in 1962.[33] Yet recent years have seen a resurgence of interest, inspired perhaps by the public reception of Stephen Hawking's *Brief History of Time*,[34] or by new ways of thinking about time by anthropologists and archaeologists.[35] Contributions by S. Stern,[36] M.Z. Brettler,[37] and M. Bar Ilan[38] are particularly noteworthy, and I shall return to them below. Yet biblical exegesis has remained strangely impervious

31. Bob Dylan, 'My Back Pages'. I thank my son Jonah Lipton for his inspiring application of these words to the Haggadah's instruction to 'remember the exodus as if you were in Egypt' during our Passover Seder, 2006.

32. *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (trans. F.V. Filson; London: SCM Press, 1950).

33. *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962).

34. *Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (London: Bantam Dell, 1988).

35. E.g. J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and G. Lucas, *The Archaeology of Time* (London: Routledge, 2005).

36. S. Stern, *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003).

37. 'Cyclical and Teleological Time in the Hebrew Bible', in R. Rosen (ed.), *Time and Temporality in the Ancient World* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 111-28.

38. M. Bar-Ilan, 'Time and its Types in Genesis 1', *Mo'ed—Annual for Jewish Studies*, NS 14/2 (2004), pp. 1-18 [Heb.].

to the findings of these new studies; discussions of time are rarely integrated into commentaries dealing with other aspects of the biblical text.[39] Though understandable—it is not easy to take on board second order theory of this kind—this is unfortunate. Our assumptions about time affect profoundly our interpretation of biblical texts, especially those relating to such issues as history, the future, hope, promises, punishment, ancestors and descendants.

Recent scholarship has replaced the simple linear conception of time with a more varied and complex picture. Having made the crucial point that the Bible is not monolithic on this matter, Brettler opts for an interplay of teleological and cyclical structures that might best be described as spiral.[40] M. Bar Ilan envisages four different models of time in the Bible: Natural (both linear and cyclical—day follows night); Numerological (based on seven day units, not natural); Ritual/Quality (good and bad times), and Ritual/non-numerological (astronomical/scientific).[41] R. Elior posits a spatial conception of time in her monograph on the biblical origins of some aspects of Jewish mysticism; I am not sure whether or not she traces this view back to the biblical authors themselves.[42] N. Wyatt limits conceptual discussion to two footnotes and a brief excursus, in which he mainly cautions against the pagan/cyclical v. Israel/linear dichotomy.[43] Stern set out thinking time means calendars (he had overlooked the dictum attributed to Marilyn Monroe: 'I've been on calendars but I've never been on time') and came to believe that ancient Jews had no sense of time at all (were they permanent adolescents?), just a sense of process, namely the activities that fill time. Stern's interest in time emerged from an assumption shared by him and a conference organizer that expertise on the Jewish calendar qualified him to deliver a paper on Time. From the starting point that time is simply and straightforwardly the entity that calendars organize, Stern moved to the radical position—his book's central thesis—that ancient Judaism has no concept of time, but only events and process:

> In antiquity, the world-view of Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking Jews remained completely process-related. Reality was seen as a succession of objects and events, whereas the notions of time as an entity in itself, a human resource, a continuous flow, or a structure or dimension of the created world, were simply non-existent.[44]

39. Commentaries on Qohelet may be the exceptions that proved the rule, but Qohelet's interest in time seems to me quite different from the perspective that occupies me here, and I shall set it aside for present purposes.

40. 'Cyclical and Teleological Time in the Hebrew Bible'.

41. 'Time and its Types in Genesis 1'.

42. *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (trans. D. Louvish; Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004).

43. *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Ancient Near East* (The Biblical Seminar, 85; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

44. *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism*, p. 127. For an author who has continued

It is important to emphasize that Stern is not merely claiming that Jews in the ancient world were unable to separate time from events and processes. Far more radically, he believes they were unable to conceptualize time at all. This is an engaging and provocative claim, but can we infer anything one way or another from the admittedly unnerving lack of relevant vocabulary and theoretical discussion in early Jewish texts? Unlike ancient Jews, we pepper our conversations with references to time, but it would be a mistake to infer from that a capacity to give even the most rudimentary account of its nature. If I lament that lack of time prevented me from meeting a deadline, I am not making an existential claim but indicating that the processes that occupied me were filled with other events. And even if there can be time without process, can there be process without time? I think not, and Stern's sources too, as I read them, show awareness of the complex interaction of time, events and process. Several texts spring to mind that call into question Stern's claim that the Bible does not distinguish between time and the events that occur in it. In Gen. 29.20 when Jacob served Laban in anticipation of receiving Rachel as a wife, the seven years 'seemed to him but a few days'. Stern might object that Jacob is making a relative claim about days and years, not time in the abstract, but how different is this from Einstein's observation about temporal relativity: a minute sitting on a hot stove feels like an hour, an hour with a beautiful woman feels like a minute? In Deut. 29.4-5 time passes without process:

> 'I led you through the wilderness forty years; the clothes on your back did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet; you had no bread to eat and no wine or other intoxicant to drink—that you might know that I the LORD am your God.'

As in the *Genesis Rabbah* texts I discussed above, time is used in the Bible to create an arena in which success can be measured. In Gen. 32.25-27, Jacob and a man wrestle until break of dawn: 'When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at his socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go for dawn is breaking'. It is not a fight to the death, but a temporally delineated contest that Jacob wins. Somewhat differently, the Bible creates temporal depth through such mechanisms as promises to ancestors, usually recollected in conditions less than tranquil; repeated patterns in history (God brought Israel out of Babylon as he brought them out of Egypt); and genealogies (This is the record of Adam's line—on the day God created man… When Noah had lived five hundred years, Noah begot Shem and Ham and Japheth, Gen. 5.1-32; cf. Ezra's lists of names of those who returned from

to emphasize the calendar, see S.M. James, *On Earth as in Heaven: The Restoration of Sacred Time and Sacred Space in the Book of Jubilees* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005).

exile in Babylon, Ezra 2.1-61). Finally, time helps preserve particularist identity less provocatively than space, as in Nehemiah's use of a different calendar to emphasize distinctions between Jews and non-Jews after the return from exile:

> At that time I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the sabbath, and others bringing heaps of grain and loading them onto asses, also wine, grapes, figs, and all sorts of goods, and bringing them into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. I admonished them there and then for selling provisions. Tyrians who lived there brought fish and all sorts of wares and sold them on the sabbath to the Judahites in Jerusalem. I censured the nobles of Jerusalem saying, 'What evil thing is this that you are doing, profaning the sabbath day!' (Neh. 13.15-17).

The absence of self-conscious explorations of time in the abstract is simply part and parcel of the general lack in the Bible of explicit 'second order' or theoretical thinking.[45] If I am correct, however, the biblical authors thought in remarkably sophisticated ways about time in the abstract. I turn now to three separate indications of a biblical interest in time as an abstract concept, each of which seeks, I think, to resolve a different problem connected with time and space, and each of which emanates from the exilic period. The first, and perhaps the earliest, chronologically speaking, is in Deuteronomy.

The Deuteronomic היום *(this day)*

The space/time interplay is also evident in the Deuteronomic account of the re-enactment of the Sinai covenant on the plain of Moab, and this time serves as the solution to a problem that it precisely equivalent to the Abraham/Sinai dilemma. Deut. 29.4-5 implies a physical location, but from the outset, space and time are combined. In the verses immediately before the covenant pericope, the people are threatened with dispersal among the nations, where they will find no peace or security:

> The life you shall live shall be precarious; you shall be in terror, night and day. In the morning you shall say, 'If only it were evening!', and in the evening you shall say, 'If only it were morning!'. The Lord will send you back to Egypt in galleys, by a route which I told you should you not see again. There you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but none will buy. (Deut. 28.66-68)

This passage highlights time in two ways. First, we see the all too familiar concept of wishing away time; life is so bad that people long constantly to

45. Brettler, 'Cyclical and Teleological Time in the Hebrew Bible', p. 112, follows P. Machinist in identifying Qohelet as the first biblical source of second-order thinking on the subject of time.

be somewhere other than the present ('If only this were evening!'). Second, the people are threatened with a journey that involves going back in time as well as in space, as is emphasized by the implied difference between the duration of the original journey and the return voyage. It took them forty years to get to the plain of Moab, but they will return to Egypt in ships in but a few days. The shocking disjunction draws attention to the raw temporal aspect of the wilderness wanderings; the physical location was far less important than the amount of time spent there. Indeed, the absence of real markers, spatial or temporal, gives the wilderness years a sense of time without process. The wilderness is a place where time passes and yet no changes occur—clothes do not wear out, and people do not grow thin from lack of sustenance (see Deut. 29.4-5 cited above).

Deuteronomy's most inventive temporal trick involves the use of the term היום, this day, which both telescopes time and collapses distinctions between generations.[46] Deuteronomy 29, especially the crucial verses 9-14, is rich in examples:

> You stand *this day*, all of you, before the LORD your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer, to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is concluding with you *this day*, with its sanctions; to the end that He may establish you *this day* as His people and be your God, as He promised you and as He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us *this day* before the LORD our God, and with those who are not with us here *this day*.

The five-fold repetition of 'this day' could be a biblical equivalent of the classical historical present, but is better described as a solution to a problem. The renewed covenant was intended to bind all Jews, past and present, but covenants required the presence of those who will be bound by them. Deuteronomy addresses this by insisting that all Jews were present, not in that space, but on that day. In the story of Moses and Rabbi Aqiba, time (when the revelation occurred) becomes a space (Sinai) where the relevant parties can meet. In Deuteronomy, a space, the plain of Moab, becomes a time, the day when the covenant was renewed, when all the relevant parties are present. 'This day' refers variously to the timing of the event being described, the day Moses is recalling it, or the day on which it is read by future generations. The term היום, this day, seems to me to play this role

46. See J. Goldingay, ' "Kayyôm hazzeh" "on this very day": "kayyôm" "on the very day" "ka'et" "at the very time" ', *VT* 43 (1993), pp. 112-15; and J. Geoghegan, ' "Until this day" and the Preexilic Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History', *JBL* 122 (2003), pp. 201-27.

throughout Deuteronomy. It occurs 74 times, almost always in the exilic frame, chs. 1–11 and 27–34. There are only six occurrences in chs. 12–26, the section of Deuteronomy that is firmly rooted in the land and where time is not a particular issue. There are 14 occurrences in the account of the covenant renewal, seven in each chapter. This suggests that Deuteronomy uses the strategy of concertina-ing time to resolve the problem of how generations that did not witness the covenant at Sinai or Moab can be brought under its wings.

Thus far I have focused on Deuteronomy's use of היום, this day, to encompass future generations, and they are indeed the main focus of 29.9-14 (cited directly above). But היום also encompasses previous generations, most notably the patriarchs. Just as the rabbinic scroll on Mount Sinai signals that the rabbis were there, so the allusions to the patriarchs on the plains of Moab signals that the patriarchs were present not just through the divine promises made to them, but also through their implicit association with היום, this day. They too are among those not standing on the plain of Moab that day, and yet covered by the umbrella of its covenant.

Time and the Land

The creation narrative as I read it substitutes time for space, a shift that may plausibly have occurred during the Babylonian Exile, when space was not accessible. The same shift is evident in Leviticus *vis-à-vis* Deuteronomy in relation to the festivals. The Israelite festivals were originally agricultural events in which the land was central. This is reflected in Deuteronomy, where the land remains at the very heart of the matter:

> After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days. You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son, your daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities. You shall hold a festival for the LORD your God seven days, in the place that the LORD will choose; for the LORD your God will bless you in all your crops and in all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy (Deut. 16.13-15).

Most obviously, the timing of Sukkot is linked to the agricultural event: 'after the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat'. The agricultural event is not the only factor; for example, there must be forty-nine days between Passover and Shavuot. But no actual date is given, and a system that involves counting from one festival to the next is likely to cohere more closely with the agricultural event, so that a late spring might be expected to hold up the cycle for the entire year. The celebration involves the people who will benefit from the harvest, although presumably not all who would benefit could go to Jerusalem to celebrate, and the reward for the proper celebration of festival is an agricultural blessing, extended perhaps to related enterprise (all the work

of your hands). The main obligation is joy, which is connected to fertility, human and agricultural, and yet avoids a ritual element that distracts from the festival's main focus. What does distract, at least potentially, is the insistence on celebration at a particular place; the Temple, though not mentioned, is surely intended. Yet even here the reference to the chosen place could serve to underline the spatial priorities of the Deuteronomic authors by adding a ritual element that maintains the spatial focus.

The instructions in Leviticus detailing the celebration of Sukkot represent an almost complete contrast with the Deuteronomic account:

> The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Say to the Israelite people: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the Feast of Booths to the LORD, seven days to the LORD. The first day shall be a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations; seven days you shall bring offerings by fire to the LORD. On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering by fire to the LORD; it is a solemn gathering; you shall not work at your occupations (Lev. 23.33-36).

Additional obligations, ritual and semi-ritual, are, at best, a distraction from the festival's agricultural element focus; at worst, they actively conflict with an agricultural celebration in the land of Israel. It is not easy to determine the precise nature of a 'sacred occasion' (perhaps imprecision was precisely the point), but the term points to a more formal structure than the generic 'rejoicing' advocated by Deuteronomy.[47] It is not clear how the 'offerings by fire' are related to the festival, and although sacrifices theoretically require the Temple, it is striking that the Temple is not mentioned. As far we can tell from these particular festival instructions, the sacrifices could have been performed anywhere. The insignificance of space is further underlined by the prohibition against working, which effectively strips the festival of its agricultural distinctiveness and brings it in line with other festivals. Indeed, it may even be incompatible with an actual agricultural festival. Is it plausible that 'real' farmers could suspend all activity at a busy time of year? Surely there would be business to attend to, even after the grain had reached the threshing house floor. Yet the most significant tension between the agricultural elements of the festival and its observance as recorded in Leviticus and its agricultural origins is the extraordinary emphasis on time. Time, as apart from process, is almost is completely absent in Deuteronomy. As already mentioned, the author counts from one festival to the next

47. B.A. Levine, *Leviticus: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 154: 'The Hebrew *mikra' kodesh* here rendered "sacred occasion", is a somewhat ambiguous term original to the Holiness Code. The verb *k-r-'* may mean "to proclaim" or "to summon, invite." Accordingly, one could render *mikra' kodesh* as "a sacred assembly, convocation," indicating that on an occasion so designated, the community is summoned for worship and celebration'.

and continues to focus on the agricultural event that triggered the counting (the ingathering of grain in this case). Leviticus, on the other hand, gives a specific date and does not mention anything remotely agricultural. This should trouble anyone committed to the view that the Levitical festival instructions were framed to be observed in the land. Rabbinic commentators try to resolve the tension between festival and farming by suggesting, for example, that the date specified is sufficiently late to guarantee that the harvest will definitely be ready, but it is hard to see how a fixed date can work when the crops are real, not virtual. If the crops ripened early, people would harvest them and engage in the spontaneous rejoicing suggested by Deuteronomy's שמח. If the harvest is late, the Levitical celebration would be hollow or meaningless.

This is not the place for detailed speculation about the implications for authorship and date of composition of these two competing sets of festival instructions, but we can draw some simple conclusions. Whether this chapter of Deuteronomy has a pre-exilic origin in the land or was added during the exile to bring Deuteronomy in line with Leviticus, it maintains a more or less unbreakable bond with the land of Israel. Leviticus, by contrast, minimizes the link to the land, suggesting an exilic provenance and, more than that, the possibility of long-term Diaspora. What becomes crucial for Leviticus is the celebration at a specific time. It is easy to see how powerful and evocative this would be in the Diaspora; the land remains the crucial point of contact, yet it no longer generates crops but rather a festival celebrated at exactly the same moment by Jews anywhere and everywhere. Once a possible Diaspora setting is posited, the concept of time becomes critical; there is nothing but the calendar to trigger the celebration of a harvest festival in Israel when the celebrants live in Babylon—or Breslov or Berlin or Barcelona.[48]

This discussion should properly lead to a consideration of calendars in ancient Judaism, but I cannot undertake it here. Suffice to say that there is no need to envisage elaborate calendars at this stage; dates are more likely to have been fixed according to the new moon and to have depended on sighting, as indicated by Talmudic discussions.[49] The important observation for our purposes is that both Deuteronomy and Leviticus use an agricultural festival to promote national unity, but whereas Deuteronomy achieves this by manipulating sacred space, Leviticus achieves it by converting space into time and ordering that. The time/space interplay is the priestly writers' solution to the problem of maintaining national identity and a connection to the land in the Diaspora.

48. Once again, I hope I am not influenced here by knowing that this is how Jewish festivals developed. The fact that this is what happened by no means signals that it was envisaged from the outset.

49. See, e.g., *b. Rosh HaShanah* 2a-b.

The Genesis One Creation Narrative

Not surprisingly, Shabbat inspires many discussions of time (Did God cease from work at the end of the sixth day or the beginning of the seventh?). For Stern, '…the arbitrary nature of the seven-day cycle does not relate it, *ipso facto*, to an abstract concept of "pure time". The week is primarily a socially or religiously sanctioned cycle of human activity, defined by the cyclical recurrence of the Sabbath, a day of human rest: its frame of reference, therefore, is completely process-related'.[50] Yet Shabbat is arguably as close as the Bible comes to the event-free zone envisaged by philosophers who contemplate time without change. Surely the sheer emptiness of God's seventh day of creation, as well as the recommended human imitation of it, highlights time as an entity distinct from event and process.

As well as providing the empty room (a space) in which there is time but no process, the Genesis creation narrative offers a virtual temple, mirroring the earthly temples that functioned as a microcosm of creation through which order is imposed on the otherwise chaotic universe. By controlling and regulating space within the temple, the priests in charge could affect their entire environment:

> Religious experience…does not apprehend space homogenously but, rather, makes a clear differentiation between two entirely distinct realms: sacred space and profane space. God's warning to Moses from the burning bush is a good example: 'And he said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground" ' (Exod. 3.5) … The miracle of the bush that was ablaze and yet not consumed, the divine revelation from within it, are events which attest to man's encounter with the 'sacred', the 'holy'. Contact with the 'Absolute Other' converts a previously inconsequential place in the desert landscape into a charged and significant locus, 'the centre of the world', a point of reference in amorphous space. According to Mircea Eliade, sacred space enables those who are lost or confused, desperately seeking a foothold in a chaotic and meaningless reality, to seize hold of a certain point in infinite space, and from that point to organise their life in society, as did the gods during the creation of the universe.[51]

Ordered time served as a substitute for ordered space (Temple worship) when space was inaccessible, such as during exile and following the destruction of the Temple. Genesis 1 superimposes on creation a temporal matrix that orders chaos. Shabbat is pivotal in the maintenance of created order via weekly re-enactment. The seven-day week can be envisaged as a temporal temple that functioned as a microcosm of creation (Gen. 1–2.2),

50. Stern, *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism*, p. 64.
51. A. Roitman, *Envisioning the Temple* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 2003), p. 12.

with festivals celebrated in a sacred time conceived as a holy place (Lev. 23.33-36; cf. Deut. 16.13-15). Rabbinic commentators saw allusions to the Temple in the Genesis creation narrative, albeit filtered through the lens of the Temple 'blueprint', the priestly Tabernacle.[52] According to Victor Hurowitz, these may not be resonances but rather coincidences; it was common in ancient Near Eastern creation narratives to find the cosmos constructed like a building.[53] While I generally find Hurowitz to be correct in all his interpretations, I remain unconvinced in this one case that there are no intentional echoes to Temple, or at least Tabernacle, traditions in Genesis 1. Nevertheless, two important points must be made. First, temple language in Genesis 1 may reflect the kind of thinking we find in other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts, whether or not it alludes to the Temple itself. Even if certain language and imagery is used to convey one specific idea—that the gods built the world in the way that humans build temples, for instance—it is hard to keep out other ideas that are part and parcel of that language, in this case, the idea that order in the temple could promote order in the cosmos. Second, even if temple-building allusions are present in Genesis 1, they are fairly faint, as if only in the form of a palimpsest. Several possible explanations come to mind. The narrator of Genesis 1 may have been borrowing language from the wider environment while at the same time suppressing language and imagery that evoked too strongly non-Israelite texts.[54] Alternatively, temple language may have been minimized by a Holiness Code redactor attempting to shift attention from the Temple as the focus of texts that emanated from a priestly worldview.[55] Finally, and for me most plausibly, the temple language may already have been giving way to the temporal in the biblical creation narrative. The two themes that were interwoven in Babylonian texts are now ranked in order of priority by the biblical authors. Indeed, the hint of temple language may reflect no more than the use of a particular language field to describe an abstract concept with which it was originally associated.

The interplay of time and space in Genesis 1 is evident from its opening verses:

52. See e.g. *Gen. R* 2.5: 'GOD SAW THE LIGHT THAT IT WAS GOOD (1.4). It follows that He desires the deeds of the righteous, and not the deeds of the wicked. R. Hiyya Rabbah said: From the very beginning of the world's creation the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw the Temple built, destroyed, and rebuilt. IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED [symbolises the Temple] built, as you read *That I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people* (Isa. 51.16).

53. *I Have Built You an Exalted House,* p. 242.

54. This would fit the 'anti-pagan' polemic reading of Gen. 1, which I do not find plausible.

55. Amit, *Hidden Polemics*, pp. 224-40.

> When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day (Gen. 1.1-5).

God is not creating *ex nihilo* here, but manipulating pre-existing substances that constitute chaos, תהו ובהו. The act of creation is spatial—the earth is said to be unformed, and unformed mass must be formed spatially, not temporally. But ambiguity arrives with the shift from unformed matter to darkness, for which the ordering solution is light. At the end of the day (literally), God does not banish darkness, but orders it by confining it to a temporal space delineated by light: night. The product of the first day can be understood as the first step in ordering spatial chaos through the imposition of a temporal matrix (day and night), and this is confirmed with the statement that a day constitutes a night and a day. Indeed, this temporal matrix is echoed approximately ('evening and morning' versus 'day and night') at the end of every subsequent day of creation.

The acts of creation on the second day and third days are purely spatial—the separation of bodies of water that produce the sky and the water underneath the earth (the source of wells and lakes), and the creation of vegetation. The emphasis on seed-bearing introduces a temporal component—seasons are implied, as are future generations of plants and, arguably, even some notion of eternity—but it must be said that these are secondary to the primary focus: self-regeneration. God's continued involvement in creation is not precluded, but neither is it required.

The fourth day, by contrast, introduces an explicit temporal focus:

> God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times—the days and the years; and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the heaven to shine upon the earth.' And it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth, to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that this was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day (Gen. 1.14-19).

The suggestion that separation can control chaos features in the accounts of the first, second, third, fifth and sixth days. Yet whereas on the first day the process of separation results in the creation of temporal units (day and night) which order chaos (darkness), here on the fourth day, time itself is being organized—chaotic, primaeval time is structured into days, weeks, months and years, punctuated by festivals (NJPS, 'set times'). Many commentators

have noted the unusual verb משל (NJPS, 'dominate'), which *Genesis Rabbah* reads territorially.[56] Given the possible pressure to avoid anthropomorphizing language in relation to the sun and the moon, the choice of משל gives pause for thought, and may indicate that the need or at least desire to present time spatially outweighed other considerations.

The fifth and sixth days are concerned with space and what fills it, but then the seventh day deals with time in its purest form:

> The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done (Gen. 2.1-3).

While nothing here points explicitly to a spatial reading of time, such a representation fits comfortably with the separating out of a distinct area; A.J. Heschel's well-known notion of Shabbat as an island in time or palace in time is apt. In fact, however, it may be more appropriate in the case of Genesis 1 to speak of a temporal reading of space. Sacred space in the form of the Temple was no longer accessible, and thus could no longer function to control cosmic disorder. Genesis 1 transforms space into time, incorporating into the calendar the very ordering mechanisms that were present in the Temple. Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that Genesis 1 in its role as biblical prologue reverses this process of conversion, restoring the centrality of space. The Hebrew Bible opens with an account of the creation of the world in language that combines the Temple and the temporal. It closes with the reported speech of King Cyrus of Persia: 'The LORD God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and has charged me with building Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any one of you of all his people, the LORD his God be with him and let him go up' (2 Chron. 36.23). The Temple and the land of Israel constitute here the sacred space into which sacred time—all history from the dawn of creation to the return from exile—can at once be compressed, displayed, and explored between the bookends of the Temple, anticipated (Gen. 1) and re-anticipated (2 Chron. 36).[57] The well-known talmudic story of Honi the circle drawer, retold here by C. Pearl, helps conceptualize this:

> One day Honi ha-Me'agel (the circle drawer) went walking in the hills near Jerusalem when heavy rains began to fall and he was forced to take shelter. He found a secluded cave and went in. Soon he fell into a deep sleep and he remained asleep for seventy years. During that time the first Temple

56. *Gen. R.* 6.3.

57. I thank Gershon Hepner for drawing my attention to the Temple–land inclusio created by Gen. 1.1–2.3//2 Chron. 36.22-23, and for other contributions to this chapter.

> was destroyed by the Babylonians, and the second Temple was built by those who returned from the Babylonian exile more than fifty years later. When Honi woke up, he left the cave and saw that everything had changed. Where there had once been vine-yards there were now new olive groves, and where there had been olive groves, there were now wheat fields. He could not understand what had happened and in his confusion nearly lost his way into the city and had to ask for directions. When he finally reached Jerusalem he began to ask people what had happened to change things so much… The people were not convinced with Honi's story and they refused to believe that he was Honi. But they decided to put his claim to the test. 'We have heard that whenever Honi the saint entered the Temple courtyard it immediately lit up'. Whereupon Honi made his way into the Temple and as he entered its precincts the whole area was filled with a brilliant light.[58]

Pearl reads this as a story that privileges people over the Temple:

> Honi is asleep during the destruction of the First Temple and the erection of the Second Temple. Why? Because the destruction of the one and the building of the other are unimportant. They do not guarantee the preservation of Judaism or prove the authenticity of the Jew. To achieve those goals, the Jew has to bring light to the world.'

I see the story of Honi differently. The period of time when the Temple was not standing was insignificant—literally, not worth staying awake for. Fifty years of exile passed without incident, as if in the darkness of one night. Only the light of the rebuilt Temple can illuminate Jewish history, embodied here in the form of Honi, a man who comes full circle.

'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there'[59]

So precisely how, then, does the biblical conception of time help with the question at hand—how to reconcile Abraham and Sinai? As I hope I have shown, the biblical authors played with perceptions of time and space to solve problems just such as this one. It was not their only strategy. Allusions to Sinai and Sinai law at key points in the life of Abraham (Gen. 15.17-21;[60] 18.19, 22.1-19;[61] 26.5) help close temporal and conceptual gaps. In addition, references to the patriarchal promises (Exod. 3.6, 15, 16) enable us to locate Abraham at the Burning Bush in a text preoccupied with transcending temporal limits (3.2, 13, 15). Yet neither allusions nor promises do quite enough to close the gap that worried rabbinic commentators and, since Walter Moberly's *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, should

58. *Theology in Rabbinic Stories* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), pp. 75-77.
59. L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York: Hamish Hamilton, 1953).
60. See Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, p. 181.
61. R.W.L. Moberly, 'The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah', *VT* 38 (1988), pp. 302-23.

worry Bible scholars too. Why did the biblical redactors fail to anticipate this problem? The answer comes via Isaiah 40–55, where we find something close to second-order thought on time in the context of a worldview that chimes perfectly with the outlook of Genesis. With a few exceptions, God in Isaiah 40–55 predicts the future by what has occurred in the past: 'Bear in mind what happened of old… I foretell the end from the beginning, and from the start, things that had not occurred' (46.9-10), and 'Listen to me, you who pursue justice, You who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the quarry from which you were dug. Look back to Abraham your father' (Isa. 51.1-2). Despite his inspiring Exodus rhetoric, Deutero-Isaiah's internal logic dictates that the exiles will 'return' not to *Deuteronomic* Canaan (we came, we saw, we conquered), but to the non-national paradigm of relatively peaceful co-existence with foreigners represented by *patriarchal* Canaan. In fact, it might not be putting it too strongly to say that Deutero-Isaiah and Genesis are advocating a return to patriarchal Canaan itself. As understood by these authors/redactors, patriarchal Canaan is a time in space—another country that exists simultaneously with their own, one room of many in a temporal temple. Since it was possible to travel to and from the place where they do things differently, to move from room to room, as circumstances allow and needs dictate, Abraham/Sinai was not a dilemma, but a set of overlapping possibilities and new opportunities: 'Du siehst, mein Sohn, Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit', 'You see my son, time here becomes space'.[62]

62. R. Wagner, *Parsifal*, end of Act 1.

Chapter 6

Terms of Endearment: A (Very) Fresh Look at Biblical Law

The Concept of Law

> On this simple account of the matter, which we shall later have to examine critically, there must, wherever there is a legal system, be some persons or body of persons issuing general orders backed by threats which are generally obeyed, and it must be generally believed that these threats are likely to be implemented in the event of disobedience. This person or body must be internally supreme and externally independent. If, following Austin, we call such a supreme and independent person or body of persons the sovereign, the laws of any country will be the general orders backed by threats which are issued either by the sovereign or subordinates in obedience to the sovereign.[1]

The second chapter of H.L.A. Hart's monumental contribution to jurisprudence closes with a discussion of the proposition that behind the throne of every legal system there must be a 'sovereign' issuing 'orders backed by threats'. Chapter 3 opens with a consideration of laws that do not constitute 'orders backed by threats'—laws that we keep by habit, such as driving on the left if we are English, and laws that confer power on private individuals to make contracts, or empower officials to try cases as judges or make rules as ministers.[2] It is easy to see why biblical scholars, like the legal theorists represented by Austin in Hart's discussion, have concentrated on the sovereign obedience model to the exclusion of all others. The notion of law as orders issued by a supreme and independent being who punishes the disobedient appears at first glance to fit the Bible like a glove. In this chapter I shall try to remove or at least loosen the glove, focusing on aspects of biblical law that are not merely distinct from the sovereign model, but are in tension with it. I shall argue that the 'flexibility' of the law

1. H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 25.

2. Hart is reacting to the model proposed by John Austin in *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, reprint 1954 [original 1832]]).

is demonstrated by various means, not least the many instances of central characters who break the law without obvious retribution; that God is in some sense subordinate to Torah as law; that the law survives not just in spite of, but precisely because of, the irregularities in its application; that the Bible's marked reticence about the application and enactment of the law supports the anti-authoritarian thesis developed here; and that this thesis is also supported by the unsettled character of the law that emerges from the emphasis in biblical narrative on the natural and historical consequences of breaking it, rather than on institutionally administered sanctions. Finally, I shall try to show that the notion of law as obedience to a sovereign figure, if generalized, renders it near impossible to identify and explore some of the primary values and functions of biblical law.[3] Before proceeding, I must make the obvious point that the Bible has a range of images and idioms for conveying and exploring law. Most conventionally, it offers lists of rules and regulations with their attendant punishments and rewards.[4] Most influentially, I think, the Bible equates law with God's word and explores it through narrative interactions, and these latter will my focus here. I am not suggesting that all narratives in which God addresses the human protagonist should, or even may, be read as explorations of divine law and the appropriate human response. Rather, I am claiming that narratives in which God issues a clear instruction that appears to demand obedience may usefully be read as a guide to how people should ideally respond to laws that occur in straightforwardly legal contexts, such as law codes.

Multi-functional Biblical Law

Any society whose legal code applies simultaneously to itself, the world at large and the cosmos must inevitably confront the question of how best to regulate law. How, for example, can law be prioritized and enforced without alienating, or worse decimating, the people it binds? How can we avoid the culture of intimidation in a quasi-police state where armed men patrol the streets to guard against infractions? A society in which law reigns supreme over almost every aspect of waking life, and in which death or some form of exclusion features prominently among penalties incurred, would quickly find itself with few surviving members! Two obvious options present themselves. The first is to diminish the significance of the law, or even dispense

3. I dedicate this chapter to Hyman Gross—loyal friend and stimulating conversation partner of more than two decades—and thank him for drawing my attention to the relevance of H.L.A. Hart's work to my present interests. Hyman knew how much this connection would please me; Hart made a great impression in my formative years, when I was fortunate to have opportunities to converse with him.

4. E.g. Exod. 21–23, and Deut. 21–25.

altogether with its enforcement, focusing instead on the values and ideals it was intended to promote. This represents my understanding of Christianity's response to biblical law.[5] The second option is to maintain law in its pure form whilst granting immense dispensations in its application. This I see as the Jewish approach.

Although ancient Israel was by no means unique in the ancient Near East in having a law code (indeed, some of Israel's laws had probable Near Eastern origins[6]), it is unique in presenting its laws in the context of narratives that describe their formation and application.[7] This contextualizing presentation has a dramatic impact. No other ancient Near Eastern law code includes provisions for what happens when its laws are broken, other than the statutory curses and cuttings off. Viewed in isolation, the biblical law codes are no different. But although there are no provisions within the legal codes themselves for reinstatement following major infraction, the narratives in which biblical law codes are embedded demonstrate that the laws indeed can be broken without risk of total exclusion. Unlike Hammurabi, so far as we can infer from his code, God the divine law-giver seems to be more or less infinitely flexible. The best example of God's flexibility in relation to the law occurs in the Sinai narrative itself. While Moses is on Mount Sinai collecting the Ten Commandments, the Israelites are busy building the Golden Calf. When Moses discovers that Israel has broken the crucial exclusive fidelity commandment even before he is safely down the mountain with the two tablets, he responds by breaking the tablets, literally. Yet the covenant survives. Moses returns to Mount Sinai and God gives him another set of commandments, this time allowing for a greater level of human participation—God dictates and Moses writes. The narrative in which Israel's laws are embedded thus establishes once and for all that even those who break the core commandments can expect a second chance (at least). The laws themselves are not made to adapt to human fragility—we assume that the second set of tablets contains the same commandments as the first—but the law-giver shows himself to be extremely flexible over their application.

5. I am aware that this represents an oversimplification, and that I should perhaps be speaking about Paul, not about Christianity as a whole, but I think my view is not without justification. I take this opportunity to acknowledge that polarizing discussions about love and law, some well-intentioned and others less so, have no doubt stimulated my interest in showing that biblical law and love are inextricably intertwined.

6. See, e.g., V.A. Hurowitz, 'Hammurabi in Mesopotamian Tradition', in Y. Sefati *et al.* (eds.), *'An Experienced Scribe Who Neglects Nothing': Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Jacob Klein* (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2005), pp. 497-532.

7. This reading is offered by J. Nohrnberg in *Like unto Moses: The Constituting of an Interruption* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

Although Exodus 32–34 may be the most vivid example of how narrative extends and underpins law, there is a sense in which almost all biblical narrative may be thus interpreted. The Hebrew Bible abounds with tales of righteous people who break laws with impunity. Indeed, it is hard to identify figures who do not commit minor infractions, and significant characters tend to break the laws, or at least their spirit, quite dramatically.[8] David, the king who commits adultery and then arranges for his pregnant partner's husband, a loyal officer in his own army, to die on the front-lines, is the clearest example, but there are many others. The first couple eats the forbidden fruit. Noah may be righteous in his generation, but he celebrates saving the world by getting drunk, thus creating an opportunity for his son to do something illicit with him. Lot escapes destruction at Sodom and Gomorrah, but he too falls prey to the woes of sex and alcohol. Abraham lies about his relationship with his wife, causing her to end up in the harem of a foreign king—twice! Aaron participates in the manufacture of the golden calf, and Moses loses patience with Israel over a rock and forfeits his place in the Promised Land.

There are many possible explanations for what seems to be a systematic attempt by Hebrew Bible authors to undermine their central characters. Moses' absence in the Passover *Haggadah* is traditionally related to anxiety about competition; too much emphasis on Moses might lead Jews to infer that he, rather than God, brought them out of Egypt. In fact, the fear of competition is arguably not a rabbinic invention but a theme deeply engrained in Exodus itself. Why else does God choose a reluctant leader with a speech defect and a hot temper who cannot delegate? Noah's drunkenness, Lot's incest, Abraham's readiness to compromise his wife for financial gain, and David's adultery (and worse) may thus be intended to emphasize that no human beings can compare with God, who is the only perfect role model. Or is he?

Perhaps more pertinent than anxiety over competition between people and God is the fear of tension between potential role models, human or otherwise, and the law. Even God is not idealized in the Hebrew Bible. He seems to have a hot temper and a short memory, requiring a rainbow to remind him to keep his covenant (Gen. 9.13-15); he consistently overreacts to sin, requiring prophet intercession to prevent him from destroying his own people (Exod. 32.9-14); and he systematically withholds punishment from those he loves, punishing their innocent offspring instead (2 Sam. 12.13-14; Isa. 3.5-8). The fact that a delayed reckoning, understood in its ancient Near Eastern context, may be a sign of divine mercy rather

8. Hepner, *Legal Friction*, offers a detailed account of how biblical narratives respond to biblical laws.

than favouritism or injustice,[9] does not detract from the general point. According to the Hebrew Bible, even God needs a legal code and mechanisms to help him enforce justice. Biblical narratives serve to show that Israel depends ultimately on law; even if God brought them of Egypt, thus negating their contractual obligation to Pharaoh, it is not God but Torah law that determines their welfare in the land.

Paradoxically, biblical accounts of humans who break laws and yet retain their proximity to God are indispensable in helping to keep law viable. Without a means of demonstrating the limitations of application that does not compromise the law itself, the law would ultimately be rejected or downgraded. Narrative accounts of realistically drawn characters, not positive or negative role models, were thus central to the project of maintaining and prioritizing law. This perspective on the relationship between law and narrative is diametrically opposed to what I take to be Martha Nussbaum's view of philosophy and tragedy in *The Fragility of Goodness*.[10] Nussbaum sees tragedy as demonstrating the limitations of philosophy as a universal moral system by showcasing situations it cannot address. Far from undermining law, biblical narratives use complex characters who commit infractions yet stay within the system to make the essential point that biblical law can survive application.

Finally, the notion that law was not primarily, or at least not only, practical is reinforced by the absence of narratives that describe the application of laws. A possible exception occurs in Jethro's consultation with Moses just before the Sinai revelation (Exod. 18.17-27), though this may have been an editorial afterthought, intended to address precisely the concern I raise here. Moreover, the theme of broken law runs throughout the Bible; there is no golden age, not even in prospect, and no moment when Israel looked set for a life of obedience on the land. Furthermore, given our knowledge of historical circumstances, law may be better characterized as explanatory rather than causal. For example, Deuteronomy's claim that the worship of other gods will lead to drought (Deut. 11.13-21) does not imply the existence of a carefully calibrated system of punishments and crimes in which the crime of idolatry is punished by lack of rain, but points rather to a set of causes and effects in which drought was attributed to idolatry. To give another example, dependence on the surrounding nations, or mixing with foreigners within Israel, could result in the loss of national autonomy, which might well end in exile. At the same time, the law offers a structure in which national autonomy could be promoted and which, if adhered to, could prevent assimilation and exile.

9. Muffs, *Love and Joy,* pp. 9-48.

10. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. J. Barton outlines its possible application to biblical ethics in 'Reading for Life', in J. Rogerson *et al.* (eds.), *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium* (JSOTSup, 207; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 66-76.

Thus the representation of assimilation as a crime and exile as its particular punishment had its own sociological logic, and, at the same time, may have generated respect for the law and underscored the notion of its divine source (who but God could have executed the threat of exile?).

Law and Order

Among the many complex functions of law outlined by Lawrence Rosen in his book *Law and Culture* is the ordering of the cosmos:

> …the predominant point of some legal systems may be the maintenance of cosmological sense rather than 'practical' dispute resolution. Two examples are worth noting in this regard, those of Jewish law and Tibetan law. Jewish law from the Mishnaic period… starts from the supposition that it is the human power to create categories that fulfills God's intended purpose. Reason operates by posing examples that, while they may seem so unreal as to be outlandish, actually serve to hone and enact the vital requirement that one attain purity by discerning and maintaining the proper categories into which all things should fall. Unusual examples test this capacity… It is not, of course, the situations per se that are the issue: It is that using such cases to demonstrate that the law is part of the entire process of being holy by maintaining a world in which things are true to their kind.[11]

What Rosen claims for Mishnaic law, I claim for the Bible itself. I focus on one particular way in which biblical law may be said to have ordered the world, in the broadest sense of that term, of ancient Israel. My reading turns its back on the arena of crime and punishment, telegrams and anger, that law usually inhabits. I see law instead as a vehicle for unending, interactive engagement—that is, a two-way process between people of different status, between people of equal status, and, above all, between people and God. The closest approximation of this dialogic engagement is erotic love, and its ultimate goal, theologically speaking, is intercession. As in my earlier chapters on the kingship of God and Abraham at Sodom and Gomorrah, I adopt here the definition of intercession developed by Yochanan Muffs in his seminal article, 'Who will stand in the breach?'. That is, I see intercession as the prophet's central task—standing in the breach to protect Israel from divine anger—and I see law alongside prophecy as a key vehicle of intercession in the Bible.

Law like Love

As I interpret it here, Torah law is the vehicle that preserves and regenerates God's loving relationship with Moses (Israel). Its central task is to record

11. *Law as Culture: An Invitation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 175-76.

and perpetuate the combined voices of God and Moses, and the loving engagement they reflect, so that future generations of Jews may recreate this dialogue in their own engagement, using law as an agent of intercession against God's angry attempts to annihilate them. Perhaps the most significant consequence of my understanding of law as a record of a dialogue that has the capacity to function as an agent of intercession is that it calls into question the importance of obedience in relation to law. On my reading, law does not bring order and stability to the cosmos by imposing a set of terms and conditions that Israel must keep. Rather, it reminds God that he should do nothing that might endanger, let alone terminate, his relationship with Israel. In this respect, biblical law has a close parallel in John Donne's love letters, as he characterizes them in 'The Valediction'. Donne wants to show his lover how she can 'anger destiny' when he is gone by reading the love letters they wrote to each other and reflecting on their value as a model for future lovers. The letters written by Donne and his lover are more than a gift of love and the mechanism for reciprocation; they regenerate, record and preserve for posterity the loving relationship they initiated.[12] It is important to recognize that Donne does not identify the letters as his replacement, although the substitution will occur only once he is dead. Rather, they will embody his *engagement* with his lover, and in this respect they can act on his lover's behalf in his absence, and as a model for future lovers who neither knew nor cared for Donne and his mistress, but strive like them to 'anger destiny', as destiny angers them, through their immortal love:

> Study our manuscripts, those myriads
> Of letters, which have past 'twixt thee and me,
> Thence write our annals, and in them will be
> To all whom love's subliming fire invades,
> Rule and example found;
> There the faith of any ground
> No schismatic will dare to wound,
> That sees, how love this grace to us affords,
> To make, to keep, to use, to be these his records.[13]

Needless to say, the parallel is not perfect, since in our case God is both one of the lovers whose letters are preserved, and the force of destiny that, in Donne's case, strives to annihilate immortal love. Nevertheless, this comparison helps elicit what may be the key feature of my reading, namely, the extent to which it undermines the standard equation of biblical law and God's voice in soliloquy in favour of the view that law combines the voices of God and Israel.

12. In this respect, the model I am proposing here is similar to the Torah as *ketubah* midrash in *Lam. R.* 3.21, reproduced in Chapter 3. In both cases, Jews read a text to recall the love between God and Israel.

13. From 'A Valediction: of the Book'.

I should note that, while these claims about biblical law may be radical,[14] they should not, on reflection be surprising. First, the attitude they reflect is a pragmatic necessity. Second, since Israel almost never obeys the laws, it would be strange indeed if the biblical authors offered law as a form of protection based on obedience. And third, the dialogic aspect of law fits well with the Deuteronomic perception of law as a substitute for worship following the centralization of the cult. An unintended side-effect of the proposed closing down of local shrines was that 'direct' encounters with God were reserved for those with access to Jerusalem. Deuteronomy offers the observance of law as a substitute for encounter with God via the sacrificial cult, which suggests that for the Deuteronomic author the keeping of the law is a form of worship intended for the keeper/worshipper's benefit. Cultic worship aspired to manage the world through expressions of gratitude and the removal of wrong-doing and its consequences. If law is seen as a replacement for the cult, giving those it binds a focus in the absence of a shrine or temple, it should come as no surprise that the potential for intercession is built into the very fabric of biblical law. That is, we should expect to discover upon further analysis that law substitutes for what its framers perceived as lost engagement, and that one of its functions was to serve in an intercessory role in place of what was lost.

Hearing Voices: Rabbi Eliezer and the Carob Tree

The idea that a central task of law is to maintain order in the world by preserving engagement, at all times and at any cost, between one Israelite or Jew and another and between God and Israel, is articulated with particular clarity in the much-analysed talmudic story of Rabbi Eliezer and the oven of Akhnai (*b. Baba Metzia* 59b). This narrative has been used by so many commentators, in support of so many diverse and inevitably conflicting claims, that it is practically the source of whatever validation a reader hopes to find.[15] But since the story of the Talmud's most famous dispute functions as a perfect building block for my model of law as a type of erotic engagement, I shall risk adding another voice to the chorus.

14. I am not aware of others who see the erotic potential for biblical law. David M. Carr, for example, makes no mention of this aspect of law in *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

15. I shall not offer a bibliography here, but of particular interest are D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 33-77 and, opposing Boyarin's reading, M. Fisch, *Rational Rabbis: Science and Talmudic Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 78-88. See also J. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 34-63. Rubenstein, p. 314 n. 1, lists a selection of scholarly discussions of this text.

The narrative has two distinct parts, which I shall analyse one at a time.

> …and this was the oven of 'Akhnai. Why [the oven of] 'Akhnai?—Said Rab Judah in Samuel's name: [It means] that they encompassed it with arguments as a snake, and proved it unclean. It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: 'If the *halakhah* agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place—others affirm, four hundred cubits. 'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,' they retorted. Again he said to them: 'If the *halakhah* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!' Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards—'No proof can be brought from a stream of water', they rejoined. Again he urged: 'If the *halakhah* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what have you to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honour of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honour of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them: 'If the *halakhah* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!' Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halakhah* agrees with him!' But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven.'What did he mean by this?—Said R. Jeremiah: Given that the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because you have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline. R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour?—He laughed [with joy], he replied, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.'

As usually interpreted, the Akhnai oven narrative deals with authority and legal interpretation. Rabbi Eliezer operates on the assumption that *halakhah* (Jewish law) was fixed on Mount Sinai and handed down unaltered from one generation of approved rabbis to another. Rabbi Joshua represents the opposite point of view—God gave the Torah to Israel on Mount Sinai, and *halakhah* must henceforth be debated afresh in each generation; not even God himself can intervene unilaterally to affect the halakhic process. The story is generally understood as a polemic by adherents of 'majority rule' (Joshua) versus 'tradition' (Eliezer). I shall not repeat or even attempt to summarize the many analyses that have gone before. Rather, I shall focus on an aspect of the narrative that is not generally discussed, namely, its emphasis on Torah as a blend of divine and human voices. Exegetes who treat this aspect of the narrative at all approach it historically: see here (some of) the rabbis validating their own activity and their oral Torah. As suggested by its enormous popularity among commentators, however, the significance of the story of Rabbi Eliezer and the carob tree transcends its original context. My interest is not what it has to say about the historical relationship of oral to written Torah, important as that is, but its

timeless exploration of the themes of law, intercession, and engagement with God.

The Akhnai narrative opens with a dispute—nothing remarkable there!—over whether or not a particular type of oven is pure. This, of course, is a serious issue in talmudic terms; no doubt in full awareness of where it could lead, rabbis did not simply overturn the decisions of other rabbis on matters of purity and impurity. Having brought 'all the arguments in the world' to this particular dispute, Rabbi Eliezer resorts to a different strategy for winning the debate: summoning not further argument but miracles. One by one, Rabbi Joshua disqualifies as a source of evidence the walking carob tree, the river that runs backwards, and the study house whose walls incline but do not fall. Finally, Rabbi Eliezer calls upon God himself and, in a scene reminiscent of Woody Allen's memorable encounter with Marshall McLuhan in *Annie Hall*, a voice from heaven gives its unqualified endorsement of all Rabbi Eliezer's halakhic rulings. Several observations are in order. First, Rabbi Eliezer has already made all the arguments in the world; his new strategy is not, as I have just noted, more powerful argumentation, but nor does he actually appeal to miracles. Rather, he seeks intercession, hence the verb יוכיח, which is most often associated with reproach or reproof, but also signals constructive third-party intervention, especially through argument.[16] Rabbi Eliezer requests, and receives, a divine endorsement that will guarantee victory over Rabbi Joshua and end their dispute once and for all. But Rabbi Joshua rejects the divine intervention with the words, 'The Torah is not in heaven', a near quotation of Deut. 30.12. Using the Torah (indeed, Deuteronomy, the clearest possible blend of the voices of God and Moses) against God (his own, single voice), Rabbi Joshua wins the day. The narrative conclusion underscores his victory. While all this is going on down below, Elijah passes by the heavenly throne and hears God laughing while lamenting to himself, 'My sons have defeated me, my sons have defeated me'.

Once the argument has been concluded in his favour, Rabbi Joshua excommunicates Rabbi Eliezer. At this point, the narrative focus shifts from Rabbi Joshua to Rabban Gamliel, the head of Rabbi Joshua's Academy at Yavneh, and the brother of Eliezer's wife, Ima Shalom ('Mother Peace'):

> It was said: On that day all objects which R. Eliezer had declared clean were brought and burnt in fire. Then they took a vote and excommunicated him. Said they, 'Who shall go and inform him?' 'I will go,' answered R. Akiba, 'lest an unsuitable person go and inform him, and thus destroy the whole world.' What did R. Akiba do? He donned black garments and wrapped himself in black, and sat at a distance of four cubits from him.

16. See BDB, *s.v.* יכח, which includes 'argue with', 'convince', 'correct', and 'reason with' among its definitions.

> 'Akiba,' said R. Eliezer to him, 'what has particularly happened to-day?' 'Master,' he replied, 'it appears to me that your companions hold aloof from you.' Thereupon he too rent his garments, put off his shoes, removed [his seat] and sat on the earth, whilst tears streamed from his eyes. The world was then smitten: a third of the olive crop, a third of the wheat, and a third of the barley crop. Some say, the dough in women's hands swelled up.
>
> A Tanna taught: Great was the calamity that befell that day, for everything at which R. Eliezer cast his eyes was burned up. R. Gamliel too was travelling in a ship, when a huge wave arose to drown him. 'It appears to me,' he reflected, 'that this is on account of none other but R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus.' Thereupon he arose and exclaimed, 'Sovereign of the Universe! You know full well that I have not acted for my honour, nor for the honour of my paternal house, but for yours, so that strife may not multiply in Israel!' At that the raging sea subsided.
>
> Ima Shalom was R. Eliezer's wife, and sister to R. Gamliel. From the time of this incident onwards she did not permit him to fall upon his face. Now a certain day happened to be New Moon, but she mistook a full month for a defective one. Others say, a poor man came and stood at the door, and she took out some bread to him. [On her return] she found him fallen on his face. 'Arise,' she cried out to him, 'you have slain my brother.' In the meanwhile an announcement was made from the house of Rabban Gamliel that he had died. 'How do you know it?' he questioned her. 'I have this tradition from my father's house: All gates are locked, except the gates of wounded feelings.'

Seeing Rabbi Eliezer's distress at being excommunicated, God afflicts the world with natural disasters, paralleling perhaps, as Rubenstein suggests, the three miracles that Eliezer brings as 'proof' in Part One. But the excommunication stands. Knowing that her husband's reinstatement would entail her brother Gamliel's death, Ima Shalom prevents Rabbi Eliezer from performing the particular form of intercessory prayer that would guarantee a divine response.[17] But one day she is distracted, Rabbi Eliezer performs the powerful prayer, and a shofar blast from Rabban Gamliel's house is the sign that its occupant had died.[18] Whereas Rabbi Joshua was the clear victor in Part One, Rabbi Eliezer's victory in Part Two is undermined by some distressing side-effects, and by no means turns the tables. Part Two does not

17. This too echoes Josh. 6.6, 10-11, where Joshua intercedes for Israel by means of petitionary mourning rituals. For a discussion of petitionary mourning, though without reference to this example in Joshua, see S.M. Olyan, *Biblical Mourning: Ritual and Social Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 62-96, and by prostrating himself. But God, taking the role of Ima Shalom, tells him to rise; Israel must pay for its sins.

18. Cf. perhaps Josh. 6.5, 20 (see below for a discussion of an intertextual relationship between these texts), where the sound of the shofar precedes the destruction of the Jericho.

conclude with a voice from heaven admitting defeat or proclaiming victory. Indeed God's voice is notably absent in the second narrative (even the miracles and answered prayers draw more attention to Rabbi Eliezer than to God), and the only audible sound is the shofar call announcing the death of Rabban Gamliel. Added to this, the narrative contains more than a hint that a real victory would have been represented by a different kind of intercession: the successful reconciliation by Ima Shalom (the Mother of Peace!) of her husband and her brother.

The most important explanation for the apparently conflicting conclusions of Parts One and Two lies in the precise details of the dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. Many exegetes have commented on the Akhnai Oven but, as far as I know, they are united in seeing the three miracles as arbitrary, reflecting at most the episode's naturalistic setting in a study house near a river and an orchard. As I read this text, the choice of the miracles is determined by wordplay, each alluding to an aspect of Torah study, the explicit subject of Rabbi Joshua's punchline ('it is not in heaven'). I am grateful to Gershon Hepner for supporting my intuition that wordplay plays a central role in this narrative by identifying a crucial example that I had not seen.[19] Two commonly offered interpretations of Akhnai are that it is the name of the oven's owner, or that it is derived from the Aramaic form of the Greek *echis* or *echidna*, snake. On this latter account, the oven is so called because it is made from a coil of clay and has the appearance of a snake. The Talmud itself appears to allude to a snake when it reports R. Yehudah's claim in the name of R. Samuel that 'they surrounded it with words like a snake, and declared it impure'. According to Hepner, however, Akhnai alludes to Joshua 7, in which Achan (cf. Akhnai) violates the *herem* at Jericho and Joshua (cf., R. Joshua) is required by God to burn by fire Achan and all that he owns. Hepner's reading of Akhnai is consistent with the Talmud's own parsing of the term 'they encircled him with words'. At first glance the verb 'encircle', הקיפוּ, seems simply to apply to the snake, but it also represents a second allusion to Joshua 6, where the same verb describes the encircling of the city of Jericho (v. 3). Read in this light, the talmudic narrative condemns R. Eliezer from the outset. In declaring the oven ritually pure, Eliezer is equated with Achan, who risked bringing calamity on all Israel (Josh. 6.18) by taking for himself three objects (cf. Eliezer's three miracles), namely silver shekels and a gold wedge that had been designated for the LORD (6.18), and a Shinar mantle that should have remained in the city and been burned. For violating the *herem* by clinging to a mantle he should have burned, Achan is himself burned. Rabbi Eliezer is not burned, but his opponents do the next best thing, excommunicating him (cf. herem) and *burning* all those objects that he had declared ritually

19. Personal communication.

pure. In other contexts—the Elijah and Elisha narrative in 2 Kings 2, for example—a mantle, אדרת, signals the transmission of authority from one generation to the next.[20] By equating R. Eliezer with Achan, who takes a mantle that God had designated for the *herem*, the talmudic author is, at the very least, undermining R. Eliezer's claim to be an heir to Sinai tradition. Indeed, since the mantle stolen by Achan had been designated not for another wearer, but for total destruction, the talmudic author may intend to undermine the concept of inherited authority altogether, as is suggested by other elements of this narrative. As well as denigrating R. Eliezer through the association with Achan, the talmudic author elevates R. Joshua, the man in whose honour walls refuse to fall, by comparing him to the biblical Joshua, on whose authority walls fall down, and who is the rightful heir of Moses.

I turn now to the 'miracles' themselves, all of which involve word plays relating to some form of Torah study. First, the word חרוב (*harov*), carob tree, is an anagram of Horeb, Deuteronomy's name for Sinai.[21] This reading is reinforced by the traditional image of the Torah as a tree ('it is a tree of life for those who grasp it'),[22] and by the associations of the verb עקר, to uproot, which the Talmud applies to mountains in connection with a certain approach to scholarship. Indeed, in the context of a discussion precisely equivalent to this one, *b. Berachot* 64b contrasts an עוקר הרים, literally, 'uprooter of mountains' (a scholar skilled in dialectic), with a 'Sinai', a scholar, such as R. Eliezer,[23] who has a comprehensive overview of tradition.[24] Since the

20. Elijah, a figure traditionally identified by the rabbis as a source of explication for legal disputes that cannot be resolved, provides in our narrative the information about God's response to this event ('my sons have defeated me').

21. I thank Gershon Hepner for this suggestion.

22. Prov. 3.18, of wisdom but understood as Torah already in *m. Pirkei Avot* 6.7.

23. I thank Menachem Fisch (personal communication) for pointing out to me that R. Eliezer is an exemplary 'Sinai', never leaking even a drop of tradition from his lined cistern.

24. This concerns the rivalry between R. Joseph and Rabbah in 309 CE over precisely this issue (who should be head of the Academy): 'R. Abin the Levite said: Whoever tries to force his [good] fortune will be dogged by [ill] fortune, and whoever forgoes his [good] fortune will postpone his [ill] fortune. This we can illustrate from the case of Rabbah and R. Joseph. For R. Joseph was "Sinai" and Rabbah was "an uprooter of mountains". The time came when they were required [to be head of the Academy]. They [the collegiates] sent there [to Palestine] to ask, As between "Sinai" and an "uprooter of mountains" ' which should have the preference? They sent answer: Sinai, because all require the owner of wheat. Nevertheless, R. Joseph would not accept the post, because the astrologers had told him that he would be head for only two years. Rabbah thereupon remained head for twenty-two years, and R. Joseph after him for two years and a half. During all the time that Rabbah was head, R. Joseph did not so much as summon a cupper to come to his house.'

Talmud's concern does not seem to be the strict designation of these terms to R. Eliezer and R. Joshua respectively, but rather to make a structural point, their exact significance need not concern us here. Suffice to say that the 'uprooter of mountains' is traditionally set up in opposition to the 'Sinai', from which we can infer that, far from securing the Sinai tradition, the author of the narrative takes R. Eliezer to be undermining it. The second miracle likewise contains a wordplay concerning Torah. The term אמת המים (*amat ha'mayim*), literally a specified length of water, may be read in unpointed Hebrew as two separate words, אמת (*emet*) and המים (*ha'mayim*), both of which signify Torah in the Talmud. The notion of Torah as truth, אמת, is axiomatic in Jewish tradition, and *b. Berachot* 8b equates them explicitly: אמת זו תורה, truth this is Torah. And as for water, what, as the Talmud itself asks repeatedly, is water if not Torah?[25] The third miracle needs no unpacking; the study house whose walls incline whilst yet maintaining respect for all those within is simply the place where Torah is interpreted and where no interpretation can be suppressed.[26] In each case, something strongly identified with Torah intervenes with the aim that one Rabbi's point of view will trump the point of view of another Rabbi. In each case, the intervention is rejected; Torah (not, as usually understood, miracles) cannot be used in this way. This is made explicit with the final intervention—the voice from heaven that mistakenly thinks it is Torah! Rabbi Joshua rejects this hubristic assertion with his reminder, based on a prooftext from Deuteronomy, that the Torah is not in heaven.

Precisely what Rabbi Joshua finds unacceptable in the notion of Torah from heaven is clarified by a glance at the verbs used in connection with

25. See, e.g., *b. Avodah Zarah* 5b commenting on Isa. 55.1, and *b. Baba Kama* 7a, 17a. The term אמת המים also occurs in *b. Ta'anit* 5b–6a as one of a concentrated group of Torah images: '[R. Nahman] said: Pray Master, bless me. He replied: Let me tell you a parable. To what may this be compared? To a man who was journeying in the desert. He was hungry, weary and thirsty and he came upon a tree whose fruits were sweet, whose shade was pleasant, and which had stream of water flowing beneath it. He ate from its fruits, drank from the water, and rested under its shade. When he was about to continue his journey, he said: Tree, oh Tree, with what shall I bless you? Shall I say to you, "May your"? They are sweet already. [Shall I ask] that your shade be pleasant? It is already pleasant. [Shall I ask] that a stream of water may flow beneath you? A stream of water flows already beneath you! Therefore [I say], "May it be [God's] will that all the shoots taken from you are like you". So also with you. With what shall I bless you? With Torah? You already possess Torah. With riches? You have riches already. With children? You have children already. Therefore [I say], "May it be [God's] will that your offspring be like you".' Strictly speaking, R. Nahman's נמשל (*nimshal*) interprets the channel of water as children, but there is no need to read the equations so rigidly, especially since water is not elsewhere to my knowledge identified with offspring.

26. An allusion may be intended to Josh. 6.5, which predicts the collapse of Jericho's city wall once the troops have completed seven circuits on the seventh day.

each miraculous intervention. In order to move from its place (מקום, a rabbinic name for God), the carob tree must be uprooted. In addition to my comments above on the verb עקר, uproot, I note also its highly negative association with barrenness. In the context of the implicit debate over 'chain of tradition' (Rabbi Eliezer) versus 'interpretation afresh' (Rabbi Joshua), it implies that Rabbi Eliezer is both disassociating Torah from God and depriving it of descendants, namely, the sages in each generation who will keep it alive by debating it afresh. The verb חזר has a range of meanings, but in this context it indicates that the Torah/channel of water does not merely change direction, but twists back awkwardly on itself, running perversely against the grain. Significantly, perhaps, the water (Torah in talmudic language, as noted above) now flows *behind* the disputing scholars, as if beyond their reach.[27] Most telling is the verb used in relation to walls of the Torah/study house, הטה (incline or lean). As well as signalling an undesirable motion for walls, the verb alludes directly to the Exodus 23.2 prooftext used by Rabbi Jeremiah: 'After the majority you shall incline'. Talmudic rabbis routinely remove Torah verses from their original context and use them as required for their own needs. In its original context, the Exodus verse seems (it is a difficult to be sure) to object to 'leaning':

לא־תהיה אחרי־רבים לרעת ולא־תענה על־רב לנטת אחרי רבים להטת

> You shall not side with the multitude [majority] to do wrong; you shall not give perverse testimony in a dispute to pervert the course of justice.

That is, Exodus rejects the application of pressure by a powerful disputant to guarantee victory over his fellow. Rabbi Jeremiah transforms Exod. 23.2 in three ways: he removes the negative—the 'you shall not…' of Exodus becomes the Talmud's 'you shall…'; he renders the ambiguous term רבים (the more powerful group, not necessarily democratically determined) as a democratic majority; and he privileges the verb's constructive meaning (incline towards, in the sense of being influenced by or drawn towards) over its negative meaning (lean on, in the sense of pressure or coerce). The Akhnai narrative thus asserts that Torah, the implied 'one' addressed by Rabbi Joshua, must incline towards the rabbinic majority, *not* lean on it to secure a particular outcome. And by his own example, he shows that leaning towards, or being drawn towards (a more accurate account of the process involved here) may even entail being quoted out of context and having its original plain meaning reversed. The test of whether or not Torah has been used appropriately is not whether or not it settles an argument, but whether or not a discussion can

27. To continue with the Joshua resonances, the water that runs behind (אחור) them recalls the Valley of Achor (עכור), the site of Israel's calamity (עכר) and the place where Joshua stones Achan and burns the proscribed objects he took from Jericho (Josh. 7.24-26).

continue. Rabbi Eliezer's application of Torah, had it been successful, would have ended the dispute once and for all: Rabbi Eliezer is *always* correct and there is nothing to be gained by arguing with him. Torah as used by the other rabbis—and it is worth noting that there are three opponents of Rabbi Eliezer in this story, a halakhic majority—simply constitutes a stage in the ongoing halakhic process. Even God's twice-repeated, 'My sons have defeated me', is not the signal that he is bowing out, but merely that he accepts a limited role in the discussion. The three rabbis, led by Rabbi Joshua, have prevented God from privileging his voice over theirs to foreclose the debate, and God acknowledges that they were correct to do so.

Not surprisingly, the themes I have highlighted in this talmudic narrative emerge most clearly in the Bible in Deuteronomy. Reading Deuteronomy in light of the Akhnai Oven reveals a crucial dimension of the biblical text that can easily be overlooked. In Deuteronomy, it is emphatically not the case that Torah (probably Deuteronomy itself) is synonymous with the word/voice of God. Torah is rather a blend of two voices—the voice God and the voice of Moses—and their respective utterances. Deuteronomy records and preserves the engagement of these two voices in a form that Israel can repeat, emulate, and use for its own future benefit as a vehicle of intercession.

Rabbi Hayim Vital's Dream and Moses as Torah

In my brief discussion of Donne's 'Valediction', I noted that the true role of the love letters is revealed only once one of the lovers has died. When that occurs, their letters replace not the departed lover, but the engagement the lovers can no longer have. This template fits Deuteronomy almost perfectly, as I shall try now to show by reading it through the lens of a mediaeval Jewish mystical text, the dream of Hayim Vital:

> Rabbi Hayim Vital once dreamed that it was the custom of Israel to bring the body of Moses into the synagogue once a year on Shavuot[28] to commemorate the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Now the day of the festival had arrived, and the body of Moses was brought into the synagogue at Safed. It took many men to carry the body into the synagogue, for it was at least ten ells long. Then the body, wrapped in a white robe, was placed on a very long table that had been prepared in advance. But as soon as the body of Moses was stretched out on the long table, it became transformed into a scroll of the Torah that was opened to its full length, from the first words to the last. And in the dream they began to read the words of the Torah, starting with creation, and they continued until they reached the last words,

28. This detail in Howard Schwartz's rendition has no basis in the original, where the events described in the dream are reported to have taken place either on *Hoshana Rabbah* or on *Simchat Torah*.

> *in the sight of all Israel* (Deut. 34.12). All this time the rabbi of Safed sat at the head of the table, and Hayim Vital sat at the foot. And in the dream it occurred to Hayim Vital that while the rabbi of Safed sat closest to the account of creation, he was closest to that of the death of Moses. And when the scroll of the Torah had been completely read, the rabbi said, 'The time has come to bring the garments to clothe the body of Moses.' And at that moment the scroll of the Torah became the body of Moses once again, and they clothed it and set a girdle around it. That is when Hayim Vital awoke, and for hours afterward it seemed to him as if the soul of Moses was present in that very room.[29]

As interpreted in Hayim Vital's dream, the Law is not given directly on Mount Sinai, but enters the synagogue in the form of the body of Moses. On this account, what God gave Israel in the first instance was not a book, but a man. This complex text functions on several different levels, at least one of them arising from possible messianic aspirations attributed to Hayim Vital. It is worth noting the connection between the transformation of body into text and the intercessory element introduced to the text through these messianic aspirations. In his dream, the giving of the Law is mediated through Moses even more vividly and concretely than in Deuteronomy itself, and this enables Moses, and hence the Torah scroll into which he is transformed, to function more effectively as an intercessor.

The process I have described in Hayim Vital's dream plays out in slow motion in the Bible itself. In Deuteronomy, the flesh and blood Exodus Moses slowly metamorphoses not into his own voice, but into a recorded dialogue with God; throughout Deuteronomy, it is barely possible to ascertain whether Moses or God is speaking—it changes within the course of a single pericope—and whether they are addressing individuals or the collective Israel. Examples of the less 'human' presentation of Moses in Deuteronomy as compared to Exodus are legion. Exodus attributes to Moses characteristics such as impatience and a quick temper, whereas for Deuteronomy Moses is more or less infallible. His inability to delegate, resolved by an intervention from Jethro in Exodus, is not mentioned in Deuteronomy, and the golden calf episode, which reflects primarily on Aaron but from which no one emerges well, is barely acknowledged. In these ways, Deuteronomy replaces the cult of personality (cf. Deut. 13.2-7) with the absolute authority of written law, a process which is completed with the death of Moses, when his continued presence is symbolized by a Torah scroll that preserves neither his solitary voice nor God's, but the deep intertwining of the two.

29. This abridged version is from H. Schwartz, *Gabriel's Palace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 100. For a full translation of the Hebrew text, see M.M. Faierstein, *Jewish Mystical Autobiographies: Book of Visions and Book of Secrets* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), pp. 106-108.

Deuteronomy 31 reports God's final speech to Moses:

> The LORD said to Moses: You are soon to lie with your fathers. This people will thereupon go astray after the alien gods in their midst, in the land they are about to enter; they will forsake Me and break My covenant that I made with them. Then my anger will flare up against them, and I will abandon them and hide my countenance from them. They shall be ready prey; and many evils and troubles shall befall them. And they shall say on that day, 'Surely it is because our God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us.' Yet I will keep My countenance hidden on that day, because of all the evil they have done in turning to other gods. Therefore, write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this poem may be My witness against the people of Israel. When I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey that I promised on oath to their fathers, and they eat their fill and grow fat and turn to other gods and serve them, spurning me and breaking my covenant, and the many evils and troubles befall them—then this poem shall confront them as a witness, since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring. For I know what plans they are devising even now, before I bring them into the land that I promised on oath. That day, Moses wrote down this poem and gave it to the Israelites (Deut. 31.16-22).

The word NJPS translates here as 'poem' is השירה, for which 'the song' is both the more familiar and the preferable translation. Unlike a poem, which may be read silently or internally, a 'song' is incomplete without performance. Even the notion of a song in the heart, or running through the mind, is best understood as the recollection or re-enactment of a performance; in these instances, we do not sing the songs ourselves, but replay our own singing or the singing of others. Moreover, the interplay of words and music, text and performance, mirrors the very two-way engagement that the song preserves and intends to stimulate. Second, the Hebrew למען תהיה־לי השירה הזאת לעד בבני ישראל (31.19) is not well served by 'in order that this poem may be My witness against the people of Israel', and the same applies to וצרות וענתה השירה הזאת לפניו לעד (31.21), 'this poem shall confront them as a witness'. The main problem in each case is presented by the prepositions. NJPS renders the ב, *bet*, in בבני as 'against', but 'with' or 'amongst, seems more plausible. And what does לי mean? Does God seek a witness for his benefit or a witness to his presence or activity? The context, to which we now turn, provides some answers to these questions.[30]

30. J.H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadephia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), explains 'witness against' with reference to the covenant. When Israel fails to keep its terms and conditions, and is punished as a consequence, God will be able to show that they had been warned. I find this unsatisfying, not least because it fails to explain why Moses was told to 'put it in their mouths' (make them memorize it)?

In the passage cited above, God tells Moses that he will soon die, whereupon the people will turn to alien gods and break their covenant with God. A flaring up of divine anger will ensue, and God will turn away from his people. Clearly, God's predictions are causally connected to Moses' death, but precisely how? One answer is that Moses had previously performed two related functions; he kept the people's attention on God and God's attention on the people. Without Moses, the people will turn to other gods, as they did according to Exodus when Moses went up Mount Sinai, and God will turn away from them, as he did during the Babylonian Exile. On this reading, Moses is playing the role of prophet as described by Yochanan Muffs in 'Who Will Stand in the Breach?' First and foremost, he is an intercessor, a divine anger manager. Since God's predictions are desirable neither for Israel nor God, God intends to replace Moses as best he can. It is the ספר תורה (*Sefer Torah*), the scroll of the law, that will stand in for Moses when he has gone, as is indicated by the continuation of the above passage, where Moses responds to God's instructions. No doubt some of what follows may be attributed to the text's composite nature, but, as I hope to show, the conjunction of Song and Torah serves a crucial function in the text in its final form.

Whereas God instructed Moses to record the words of a song, in line with Deut. 32.1-43, Moses speaks to the people about the Torah. Both Song and Torah feature in the following pericope (Deut. 31.24-30):

> When Moses had put down in writing the words of this Teaching to the very end, Moses charged the Levites who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD, saying: Take this book of Teaching and place it beside the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD your God, and let it remain there as a witness against you. Well I know how defiant and stiffnecked you are: even now, while I am still alive in your midst, you have been defiant toward the LORD; how much more, then, when I am dead! Gather to me all the elders of your tribes and your officials, that I may speak all these words to them and that I may call heaven and earth to witness against them. For I know that, when I am dead, you will act wickedly and turn away from the path that I enjoined upon you, and that in time to come misfortune will befall you for having done evil in the sight of the LORD and vexed Him by your deeds. Then Moses recited the words of this poem to the very end, in the hearing of the whole congregation of Israel.

The conflation of Song and Torah, the subject of major exegetical conflicts, has important consequences. Let us imagine two separate texts, one about the song, where people have to learn the words, and another about the Torah, where, unusually, neither content or performance is emphasized. To be sure, Moses promises to 'speak all these words' to the people but, in contrast to some other Deuteronomic texts, there is no suggestion that they need to absorb their content, repeat them back, transmit them to others, or live according to them. It is emphatically not the case that the Israelites

will be persuaded by the words of the Torah to keep the laws. On the contrary, neither God nor Moses doubts that they will soon be distracted by other gods. So what is the point of all these words? As translated by NJPS, this passage describes the anger of God and Moses towards Israel, and the threat of a witness against them. This passage answers the question: Who will intercede for Israel once Moses has gone? Not, then, who will bear witness *against* Israel, but who will bear witness *among them*. The answer is the Torah, not because it will remind the people of their obligations, but because it will remind God of his loving relationship with Israel, conducted in its most intense form with Moses.

To see precisely what it is that God is being reminded of, we must return to the song. By conflating the song and the Torah, Deut. 31 in its final form goes a step further than the *Shema*, making it clear that we are dealing with something more complex than a visible sign, akin to the rainbow or the blood on the doorposts. In this context, the words of Torah will be effective through literal performance—not by being obeyed, or even necessarily by being understood or accepted, but simply through recitation. And on this reading at least, they owe their effectiveness to their capacity to reproduce for God—anywhere and at any time—his dialogic engagement with Moses. Hidden in a box, inaccessible to the future generations who might use them, Donne's love letters could not fulfil their function. Likewise, Deuteronomy's Torah cannot be hidden in a box (Deut. 31.26, ושמתם אתו מצד ארון', place it *beside* the Ark'), but must be seen, learned and performed. This is revealed by a complex piece of textual redaction (Deut. 31-32) that blends the law with a song for recitation.

Eros and Law

Deuteronomy, the law book of law books, promotes and sustains a relationship between God and Israel that is best characterized as erotic; law is its intimate grammar. Torah will serve as an amulet—a vehicle of intercession—for all Israel, just as the *Shema*, will function on individual gates and doorposts in Deut. 6.4-9. What Deuteronomy 31 clarifies in, or perhaps adds to, the narratively earlier text is the information that God himself is the present danger. The Torah and *Shema* serve similarly to the rainbow (Gen. 9.15) or the blood on the doorposts (Exod. 12.13), all signs to remind God that he should refrain from utter destruction. This explains why the Torah is next to the Ark, not in it; it is there to serve as a visible reminder to God. This representation and re-enactment of intercession is the beginning of Jewish liturgy. The liturgical interest in preserving and regenerating the engagement between God and Israel is manifest in many Jewish prayers, but the role of law is especially clear in אהבת עולם (*Ahavat Olam*), Eternal Love, the blessing that introduces the *Shema* in the daily evening service:

> With Everlasting Love you have loved your people, the House of Israel. You have taught us Torah and commandments, laws and judgements. Therefore, Lord our God, we will speak of your laws when we lie down and when we rise up, rejoicing in the words of your Torah and your commandments for ever and ever. For they are our life and the measure of our days; we will meditate on them day and night. May you never take your love away from us.

Here, already, the mood intensified and the erotic component of the engagement emerges quite clearly. God provides a matrix that Israel can impose upon the world and which will shape every thought and action of his people, from the moment they wake up in the morning until they fall asleep. This template, identified as a gift symbolising God's love, enables Israel to contemplate him in every waking hour, and thus reciprocate; it is the lens through which every action and event can be examined and interpreted. Who can fail to recognize this account of 'true love'?

The prayer אהבת עולם, with its references to lying down and rising up, is clearly engaging with the first paragraph of the *Shema* (Deut. 6.4-9), as one would indeed expect given its place in Jewish liturgy. The connection between this rabbinic prayer and its biblical context foregrounds a crucial question about how the authors of both texts understood love between people and God:

> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign upon your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The *Shema* intensifies the sense of engagement by being strikingly self-referential; not merely a law that commands certain acts of observance, it commands the observer to reaffirm constantly, to himself and/or others, that he is indeed observing the laws.[31] Influenced in part, perhaps, by the problem of determining how love can be commanded, many scholars have argued that love is not to be understood as an emotion here, but as a semi-legal obligation derived from a specific relationship.[32] This is a plausible reading; we cannot assume that ancient writers experienced emotions in the way that we do. Yet it is hard to avoid the thought that such an understanding of love arises from the view of Deuteronomy as a secularizing document

31. This excellent point was made by my husband, Peter Lipton, during a sermon at Beth Shalom Reform Synagogue, Cambridge, 2007.

32. J.W. McKay, 'Man's Love for God in Deuteronomy and the Father/Teacher–Son/Pupil Relationship', *VT* 22 (1972), pp. 426-35. See p. 426 n. 1 for a selection of those who hold this opinion.

that removes many spheres of life (eating meat, for example) from Temple control. Far from being a force for secularization, Deuteronomy as I read it extends the sphere of divine influence to every corner of human existence. Erotic love, where a declaration is insufficient while constant demonstrations are positively enhancing (or am I conforming to gender stereotypes now?), is the model for achieving this end. Finally, support for an erotic reading of the *Shema* might be adduced from its traditional third paragraph in Jewish liturgy, Num. 15.37-40. Worshippers are urged to contemplate the fringes on their garments so that they do not 'follow their hearts and their eyes' and turn to lust, but rather 'remember and perform' the commandments so they can be holy to God. Since what is inappropriate here is expressed as lust (literally, whoring), it seems plausible that what the author has in mind in relation to the commandments involves an appropriate form of erotic engagement.

I turn now to an excellent example outside Deuteronomy of Torah/law conceived as a vehicle for erotic engagement: Psalm 119. The provenance of this collection of 175 alphabetically ordered meditations on law and love is uncertain, but its language, imagery and concerns suggest a fifth- or fourth-century BCE date. The absence of specific references to Jerusalem may indicate a Diaspora setting, although its author may have neglected to mention Jerusalem because he saw a future with Torah not Temple, or because, living in Jerusalem, he took it for granted; Psalm 137, the Bible's most powerful tribute to Jerusalem, almost certainly originated in exile. Between the lines of Psalm 119 lie tantalizing glimpses of a biography: a pious youth ('How can a young man keep his way pure?', v. 9) in search of rigorous instruction ('Blessed are you O LORD, train me in your ways', v. 12), but lacking appropriate teaching ('I have gained more insight than all my teachers', v. 99), and perhaps a little arrogant ('I have gained more understanding than my elders', v. 100). The young man's peers may have mocked him for his piety ('The insolent have dug pits for me, flouting your teaching', v. 85), and the authorities harassed him for his zeal ('Princes have persecuted me without reason', v. 161), though we may well wonder whether their hostility was provoked by certain born-again tendencies ('Before I was humbled, I went astray, but now I keep your word', v. 67). But his commitment is now beyond question ('I am resolved to follow your laws to the utmost forever', v. 112). The law is a source of strength ('support me as you promised so I may live', v. 116) and of joy (Your decrees are my eternal heritage, my heart's delight', v. 111).

For the author of Psalm 119, law is at once the sign of God's love and the mechanism for reciprocation: 'I open my mouth wide, I pant, longing for your commandments. Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your rule with those who love your name' (vv. 131–32). Especially given the textual feminization of the speaker—inevitable or at least likely when God is the

erotic partner—his open-mouthed invitation is itself a form of reciprocation.[33] The young man uses law to train his mind, not in legal matters, but to acquire an intense form of attention: 'Happy are those who observe his decrees, who turn to him wholeheartedly' (v. 2). Reciprocation occurs through memory and being reminded. The study and application of law, when lying down and when rising up, creates a lens through which every thought and deed is refracted, and is at the same time a sign of the beloved in his absence: 'I remember your name at night, O LORD, and obey your teaching' (v. 55).

Somewhat less passively, law is the means by which the partners affect each other. It is striking—and crucial in this respect—that the psalm speaks both of *learning* the law, and of being *taught* it: 'I have not departed from your rules, for You have instructed me. How pleasing is Your word to my palate, sweeter than honey' (vv. 102, 103). Teaching, at least in its ideal form, is dynamic. As well as delivering information, teachers react to students and revise their lesson plans accordingly. A loving relationship does not leave one partner fixed and unaffected by the other. For the psalmist, then, law is the sign of God's love, training him to love God more deeply: 'O how I love Your law, it is my study all day long' (v. 97). But it also his means of affecting God, and here lies the key. The verses of Psalm 119 that are not expressions of love and longing articulate fear and anxiety. As the psalm progresses, both emotions intensify, and the psalm draws towards a close with 'May my plea reach you, O LORD; grant me understanding according to Your word. May my petition come before You; save me in accordance with your promise' (vv. 169–70). The psalmist's ability to engage God through an intense language of desire is fundamental to his hope of gaining divine protection at times of need.

Obedience and Eros

Thus far I have suggested that law records and preserves engagement between God and Israel, and that it affects God, by which I mean that law performs an intercessory function. Law's crucial function is to keep engagement alive, and this is where a significant difficulty arises in terms of our usual thinking about biblical law. For almost all Bible scholars, especially Christian exegetes, the ideal response to biblical law is obedience; one way or another, obedience is at the heart of any legal enterprise. Yet, as we have seen, it has scant role to play in either the *Shema* or Psalm 119 and indeed, to go one step further, it is fundamentally incompatible with engagement. To obey a law is to foreclose engagement, in some cases because obedience

33. I have examined elsewhere the gendering of intercession in some biblical and many rabbinic texts (Association of Jewish Studies Annual Conference, Toronto, 2007).

leaves no further scope for engagement—the action is complete—and in others because obedience ends thoughtful engagement and, most importantly, the capacity to affect the other party. Following orders merely reinforces the person who issued them; it is *resisting* an order that can potentially affect and change the issuer.

The notion that obedience may not be the intended response to biblical law is supported by the surprising difficulty of locating a verb in biblical Hebrew that means unambiguously 'to obey'. The English terms 'obey' and 'obedience' relate to Hebrew terms that may sometimes evoke obedience, but are arguably far from the rigid meaning often ascribed to them. The idiom most often equated with obedience is שמע בקול (*shema be'qol*) literally 'hear the voice'. While listening to or even hearing someone may entail doing what he says, it is just as often a request for empathy, understanding, or simple engagement. Even in the texts most strongly associated with obedience—Deuteronomy's highly conditional legal material, for example—the term can be interpreted at least as plausibly without reference to obedience. Similarly, while 'obey' may be among the meanings of שמר (*shamar*), this translation by no means conveys the full range, and the notion of engagement is present at least as often (as in 'keep' the sabbath day, where 'obey' is far too narrow to do justice to the concepts and activities involved).

A glance at a text in which hearing and divine voices feature prominently highlights the problem. In Genesis 3, God tells Adam not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but Adam eats from the tree nevertheless, and is banished from the garden as a consequence. It is generally assumed that Adam's crime was disobedience, but two textual details point to a different interpretation. What led to Adam's expulsion was not his initial disobedience in eating the fruit, but his subsequent failure to engage with God. First, the narrative that begins with the prohibition against eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and ends with expulsion from the garden is centrally concerned with voices.

> They heard the sound [lit. voice] of the LORD God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. The LORD God called out to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?' He replied, 'I heard the sound [lit. your voice] of You in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid. Then He asked, 'Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?' The man said, 'The woman you put at my side—she gave me of the tree, and I ate' (Gen. 3.8-12).

The two-fold occurrence of שמע and קול here are significant. As usually understood, they would connote obedience, but that seems implausible here. Although there is no obvious Hebrew alternative for 'sound', the word קול is redundant in this context; it would have been sufficient to state that Adam heard God. The use of קול signifies not a divine instruction, then,

but God's presence in the garden. More generally, it is hard to reconcile the notion that Adam's obedience to God is the narrative theme with the exchanges between Adam and Eve and Eve and the snake. First, Eve eats the fruit not because she is responding to a command issued by the snake, but because she has been engaged by the snake. Likewise, Adam has not been commanded by Eve to eat, but drawn by her into her conspiracy with the snake. Secondly, as commentators are fond of noting, God's response to Adam invites engagement. He does not address Adam with an accusation, or a question relating directly to his crime, but rather with an open question—Where are you?—giving Adam room to respond as he sees fit. God's question cries out for engagement, but Adam responds by hiding, adding insult to injury with his confirmation that he has ignored God while listening to other voices (Eve's and, indirectly, the snake's). The final straw is not, in fact, eating the fruit—the eaten fruit ends with Adam and Eve's awareness of their nakedness—but God's realization that Adam will not engage with him. The couple's awareness of their nakedness had various possible outcomes, but it leads to a rejection of God through concealment (the hiding of bodies). God gave them a second chance to hear him, but once again Adam hid—his whole body this time—and refused to engage.

The person missing from the final installment of this narrative is Eve. She engaged with the snake and then with Adam, but did not enter into the negotiations with God. One possible explanation for her absence emerges from a superficial comparison of the roles of Eve and Sarah in Genesis 3 and Genesis 22. Both narratives open with a command that should properly involve a man and a woman (husband and wife, mother and father), but which in fact excludes the woman. In each narrative, the man jeopardizes his future descendants by refusing to engage with God—Adam because, while still childless, he disobeys a command that clearly concerns the engendering of desire and fruitfulness, and Abraham because he obeys a command endangering offspring he already has—and in each narrative the woman is barred from an engagement which represents the ideal human response to divine commands of any kind, but particularly of this nature.

Before moving to Genesis 22, my focus for the remainder of this chapter, I want to draw attention to another text that, in some respects, belongs in this discussion—the Exodus Sinai narrative. Exodus 19.1–20.23 abounds with commandments, voices (from the 'voice' of the shofar to the voices of God and Moses; see especially 19.19) and barely concealed sexuality (the theophany begins with the instruction that Moses should not go near a woman, 19.15, and it ends with a prohibition against 'revealing nakedness' on the altar steps, Exod. 20.23; cf. Lev. 18.6-19). What prevents me from considering Sinai in detail here (other than constraints of space and time) is that my interest now is the presence or absence of female figures in texts dealing with responses to the law, and what we can infer from that about the

appropriate human response to divine commands. I do not think the role of women is a pressing concern for the authors of the Sinai narrative. Having said that, though, I cannot resist noting that the authors of *Exodus Rabbah* felt otherwise. Not only do they put women up at the front of the Sinai narrative, but they relate their presence directly to Genesis 3 and the temptation of Eve. *Exodus Rabbah* interprets the parallelism in Exod. 19.3 ('say to the house of Jacob and declare to the sons of Israel') as evidence that both men and women were present at Sinai—'house' signifies for them women and 'sons' signify men.[34] And why, according to the midrashic author, does God mention women before men? He is correcting his disastrous error in the Garden of Eden, when he issued a commandment to Adam alone that should have been addressed both to Adam and to Eve. Had Eve received direct instruction about the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the rabbis reason, she would not have made the mistake of eating its fruit.

Disobedience and the Akedah

In the final section of this chapter, I want to explore more fully the topic I have introduced here, namely Abraham's proper response to the divine command issued in Gen. 22.2, and the significance of Sarah as a voice that may reasonably be understood as a challenge—implicit or explicit—to the divine command. In what follows, I shall attempt to read Genesis 22 as a polemic *against* obedience to God's word. My support for this reading will be two-fold. On the one hand, I shall look at the interplay in this text of the language and imagery of hearing and seeing, and on the other, I shall suggest that Sarah's absence in Genesis 22 signals an absence of intercession in the form of engagement. While this latter interpretation cannot be derived from Genesis 22 read alone, it can, I think, be inferred from an inner-biblical intertext, Numbers 22. I shall explore this intertext via rabbinic commentaries that are clearly aware of parallels between Abraham and Balaam, and seem to me to be sensitive in addition to their implications for intercession and engagement.

I have several reasons for concluding my discussion of obedience and the law with this particular text. First, Abraham's faithful obedience is traditionally seen as at the very heart of Genesis 22, and from the earliest times exegetes have focused on his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son in response to a command from God. Second, Genesis 22 is surely the Bible's most sophisticated exploration of the theme of obedience. And third, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son is not merely an example of a standard exchange between a divine ruler and his human subject, but may be said in some respects to involve all future readers, whether as aspiring

34. *Exod. R.* 28.2.

Abrahams or as symbolic descendants on whose behalf he acted. It is, indeed, the best biblical example of the 'sovereign' model of law discussed by Hart in the extract from *The Concept of Law* with which I opened this chapter.

Perhaps the chief indication that Genesis 22 in its final form questions obedience as an appropriate response to a divine command is the narrative's problematic outcome; an account that opens with an order and ends with narrowly averted human sacrifice is surely a poor advertisement for obedience. The story's superficially happy ending has distracted many readers from this sobering conclusion, but others have refused to be deflected from the significance of Abraham's obedience when taken to its logical conclusion. Here, in the most powerful example I know, is Wilfred Owen showing where this kind of thinking can lead:

> So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
> And took the fire with him, and a knife.
> And as they sojourned both of them together,
> Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
> behold the preparations, fire and iron,
> But where is the lamb for this burnt-offering?
> Then Abram bound the youth with belt and straps,
> And builded parapets and trenches there,
> And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
> When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
> Saying, lay not thy hand upon the lad,
> Neither do anything to him. Behold,
> A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
> offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
> But the old man would not do so, but slew his son,
> And half the seed of Europe, one by one.[35]

The biblical Abraham, unlike Owen's 1914–18 reincarnation, listened to the angel, but the poem drives home a point that most readers work hard to overlook: following orders is an indispensable cog in the machinery of war, as is the willingness of old men to let young men die on their command. The fact that God's original instructions, unamended by the angel, would have led to the death of Isaac and the possible termination of Abraham's line—he had already banished Ishmael on instructions from Sarah confirmed by God—can be taken as a sign that Genesis 22 is at the very least ambivalent about obedience. Indeed, there is a sense in which the outcome of Genesis 22 is negative on any reading. Although Isaac does not die, his relationship with his father is damaged beyond repair; Isaac and Abraham return separately from Moriah and no further interaction between them is reported. The text neglects even to mention that Abraham unbound Isaac from the altar. The lack of subsequent

35. 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young'.

engagement between Abraham and Isaac is underlined by the events directly following, and I shall return later to this important subject.

The tradition of revering Abraham for his obedience begins with God's promise to Isaac that he will be blessed and increased on account of his father's merit:

> I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs—inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me [lit. heard my voice] and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws and My teachings (Gen. 26.4-5).

This promise alludes directly to God's earlier promise to Abraham in Genesis 22: 'because you have obeyed my command [lit. heard my voice]' (Gen. 22.18). If שמע בקול is translated 'obey' in this context, as in NJPS above, the logic of the allusion is hard to comprehend. Can the author or redactor really have intended God to tell Isaac that he would be blessed *because* his father was willing to bind him on an altar and hold a knife to his throat? The Genesis 26 allusion to Genesis 22 is, I think, more readily comprehensible if שמע בקול is translated not as 'obey' but as 'engage'. On this reading, rather than reminding Isaac that his father was willing to kill him, God is reassuring Isaac; despite appearances to the contrary (the knife at the throat) Abraham had in fact attempted to intercede on his behalf. But where is the textual evidence for this? The evidence, I believe, comes in the form of the ram. Abraham began by following God's instructions without discussion, but he followed his own initiative when he sacrificed the ram instead of Isaac. To be sure, in the text in its final form, Abraham sacrifices the ram only after an angelic intervention telling Abraham not to lay a hand on his son, but nevertheless his action represents an effort to safeguard Isaac (God has changed his mind once, why not again?), along with his typological descendants, whose fathers may henceforth offer animal sacrifice instead of their sons.

It is possible in addition that the promise that Abraham's descendants will be blessed along with all the nations of the world because he heard God's voice (22.17,18) alludes to Abraham's sacrifice of the ram as well as, or even instead of, his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. There are several reasons for favouring this reading. The reference point is verse 16, 'By myself I swear, declares the LORD: Because you have done this matter, הדבר הזה, and have not withheld your son, your favoured one…'. The interpretation hinges upon whether two separate actions (this matter *and* not withholding Isaac) are mentioned here, or only one (this matter, *namely* not withholding Isaac). In the former case, 'this matter' must refer either to the sacrifice or to the naming of the mountain, or perhaps to a combination of the two. Of these options, it seems to me most likely that הדבר הזה (this matter) refers exclusively to the sacrifice of the ram and the engagement with God that it

represents. From a grammatical point of view, the transition from the positive 'because you have done this' to the negative 'you did not withhold' is jarring if the same object is intended in each clause. If, on the other hand, a change of object is intended, the grammatical shift signals this. From a theological point of view, the association of הבדר הזה with the sacrifice of the ram fills an awkward gap. As noted above, Abraham sacrificed the ram on his own initiative and not according to a divine instruction. On the assumption that הבדר הזה is the sacrifice, the text indicates God's approval through the promise of blessings that is subsequently attached to it. If, however, הבדר הזה refers to the non-withholding of Isaac, Genesis 22 contains no sign that God approved of Abraham's sacrifice of the ram. Finally, the allusion to this verse in a speech to Isaac is more plausible from a psychological point of view if הבדר הזה is understood to refer to the sacrifice of the ram, and thus falls under the umbrella of שמעת בקולי. Rather than commending Abraham for his obedience, namely his willingness to kill Isaac, this verse is commending him for his eventual willingness to engage, manifested by his identification of the ram as an acceptable substitute for Isaac. Yet even if Abraham's sacrifice of the ram—the one act he has *not* been commanded to perform—is indeed an action that goes some way to redeeming him, the overall picture remains negative. I have mentioned in passing the long-term damage to the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, and now I want to examine further the extent to which the text marginalizes Abraham once he leaves Moriah.

The Significance of Sarah

Genesis Rabbah links Sarah's death with Isaac's near-sacrifice:

> And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah. Whence did he come? R. Levi said: He came from Terah's funeral to that of Sarah? Said R. Jose to him: But Terah's burial preceded Sarah's by that of two years? In fact he came from Mount Moriah (Sarah having died of grief. Therefore the account of Isaac's binding comes close to the passage, And the life of Sarah was etc.) (*Gen. Rabbah* 58.5).

On this rabbinic reading, Sarah died of a broken heart, excluded from a drama in which she should have been at centre stage. Similar interpretations feature in many feminist analyses. Phyllis Trible makes the general point in 'The Sacrifice of Sarah',[36] and it is central in Carol Delaney's *Abraham on Trial*,[37] which draws parallels between Sarah and 'Mrs Christo', a woman in

36. 'The Sacrifice of Sarah', in J.M. Soskice and D. Lipton (eds.), *Feminism and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 144-54.

37. C. Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

1990s California condemned to near-silence both by her husband as he set out to kill their young daughter, and by the court who tried him. While plausible and challenging in many respects, the focus on the marginalization of Sarah helps eclipse another case of narrative marginalization that may be more significant—the marginalization of Abraham. As I interpret these texts, Sarah's absence at Mount Moriah reflects positively on Sarah and negatively upon the events that occurred there, while Abraham's gradual exclusion after Moriah reflects negatively both on Abraham and upon the events that occurred. Isaac comforts himself for Sarah's death by finding a wife whom he immediately installs in her tent. *Genesis Rabbah* constructs its own elaborate edifice on Sarah's 'tent', but it stays close to the spirit of its biblical source:

> *And Isaac brought her into his mother's tent.* You find that as long as Sarah lived, a cloud hung over her tent; when she died, that cloud disappeared, but when Rebekah came it returned. As long as Sarah lived her doors were wide open; when she died that liberality ceased; but when Rebekah came, that open-handedness returned. As long as Sarah lived there was blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath; when she died these ceased, but when Rebekah came, they returned. And so when he saw her following in his mother's footsteps, separating her challah in cleanness and handling her dough in cleanness, straightaway, *And Isaac brought her into his mother's tent* (50.16).

As any woman with a mother-in-law, however beloved, will see at once, this is a hymn to Sarah, not Rebekah. A young wife, taken by her husband to live in the residence recently vacated by his dead mother, finds herself entertaining, baking bread, and even shopping for long-burning candles *à la mama*. Who has more power—the newly-wedded wife, or the now forever perfect dead mother? While Rebekah may comfort Isaac for Sarah's death, she by no means displaces Sarah. As I shall now show, Rebekah does, however, displace Abraham.

Genesis 22 does not end with Isaac's release from the altar, as might have been anticipated. Instead, we find a genealogy listing eight sons of Abraham's brother, Nahor. Only the youngest is taken up by the text: 'And Bethuel gave birth to Rebekah'. The reference to Rebekah has a striking impact; Rebekah, and to a lesser extent Bethuel, stand out as the only figures of interest in an otherwise unmemorable list. The pair resurfaces in Genesis 24, where Abraham commissions his servant to go and find a wife for Isaac:

> And Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, 'Put your hand on my thigh and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth,

> that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughter of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac.' And the servant said to him, 'What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?' Abraham answered him, 'On no account must you take my son back there!' (24.1-6)

Although Rebekah is secured ultimately as a result of a deal between the servant and God, the servant cites Abraham twice in his request for divine assistance:

> O LORD, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham (24.12).

It is important that Abraham remains at the forefront of the narrative here. His presence serves to highlight his imminent exit from the stage, and the test devised by the servant to identify a wife for Isaac helps to speed his departure. Surely it was calculated to identify a woman with the attribute that exemplified her future father-in-law—hospitality:

> Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please lower your jar that I may drink', and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels'—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know you have dealt graciously with my master (24.13-14).

The servant's test leads him to a woman so hospitable that she takes care of animals as well as humans, and the parallels with Abraham become even more evident once she materializes:

> He had scarcely finished speaking, when Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, the son of Milchah the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with a jar on her shoulder. The maiden was very beautiful, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. The servant ran toward her and said, 'Please let me sip a little water from your jar'. 'Drink, my Lord', she said, and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink. When she had let him drink his fill, she said, 'I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking.' Quickly emptying her jar into the trough, she ran back to the well to draw and she drew for all his camels (24.15-20).

As well as possessing precisely that form of hospitality that Abraham exhibited towards the angels who announced Isaac's birth (Gen. 18.2-8), Rebekah is a member of Abraham's own family. And the connection between the two is sealed when Bethuel and Laban bestow upon Rebekah a blessing that is near-identical to God's blessing of Abraham after he has sacrificed the ram:

> And they blessed Rebekah and they said to her, Our sister you should live for a thousand generations and your offspring should possess/inherit the gates of those who hate them (24.60).

God promised Abraham that his descendants would possess the gates of their enemies, and now comes a blessing for Rebekah that, taken at face value, indicates that Abraham's blessing will be transmitted through her.

But here is the question. Should the servant's success in finding Isaac a wife with an uncanny resemblance to his master be read, according to the narrative's own logic, as a negative or a positive comment on Abraham? As Phyllis Trible sees it, Abraham's detachment from the world represents a spiritual ideal, necessary before he can achieve an appropriate relationship with God.[38] On this reading, Abraham's removal from the text would be positive. As I see it, though, both Abraham and Isaac are diminished by the events at Moriah, and the final evidence of this may be inferred from the precise terms of the announcement of Abraham's death (25.7-11), which is preceded by a list of Abraham's wives/concubines and their respective offspring:

> Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan begot Sheba and Dedan. The descendants of Dedan were the Asshurim, the Letushim, and the Leummim. The descendants of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Enoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were descendants of Keturah. Abraham willed all that he had to Isaac; but to Abraham's sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East (Gen. 25.1-6).

The names of Abraham's sons with Keturah are, for the most part, shockingly unfamiliar, and even familiar names such as Midian are not ones we generally associate with Abraham. Keturah herself, like Abel, vanishes like 'incense'. Ishmael is not mentioned at all, although he has his own genealogy a few verses later, and nor is Hagar; both Ishmael and Hagar are arguably downgraded by their appearance on a longer list of mothers and sons expelled for the benefit of Isaac. Although Sarah is not named or implied on this list, she is prominent in the verses that ensue: Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham in the cave of Machpelah, 'together with Sarah his wife'. Abraham, then, has twelve children, most of whom even knowledgeable readers struggle to name. Only one son counts, and he is distinguished by being his mother's only child.[39]

Sarah's focal position in the big picture of Genesis highlights both Abraham's surprising transience and, the subject to which I now turn, her absence in Genesis 22. What would Sarah have done had she been present? We can only speculate, and many have—attempting to situate Sarah in the vicinity of Mount Moriah and guess her response. The best piece of

38. 'The Sacrifice of Sarah', pp. 151-52.

39. Cf. Bathsheba, whose only son succeeds David, the father of several other children (1 Kgs 1.28-30).

revisionism I know on this topic is the Dublin mystery play's 'Sacrifice of Isaac', which has the matriarch participate centrally in the lead-up to Moriah and in its aftermath. I quote it at length in part to give a sense of its wonderful humour, but mainly because it seems to me so entirely convincing. Hearing Abraham's plans, Sarah expresses concern—at once humorously and poignantly—that Isaac might fall off his horse and get his clothes dirty:

> Then, sithe ye wol haue forthe my childe,
> Goode, loke that his horse be not so wilde,
> & sirs, wayte on hym, that he be not defilde
> With neither cley nor fen.

Abraham brushes her off and sets out with Isaac for Mount Moriah. Once there, he shares his plan with Isaac, who assumes he has offended his father and wonders if Sarah was in the picture:

> Alas, what have I displesid this lord of blisse,
> that I shal be martyred in this mysse?
> But, gentil fader, wot my modre of this,
> that I shall be dede?

Abraham confirms that she was not:

> She? mary, son, christ forbede!
> Nay, to tell her it is no nede:
> for whan that euer she knoweth this dede,
> She wol ete affter but litel brede.

Isaac agrees that Sarah would have come too had she suspected what lay in store:

> In feithe, for my moder I dare well say,
> And had she wist of this aray,
> I had not riden out from her this day,
> But she had riden also.

Claiming he had no choice in the matter, Abraham begs Isaac not to infer that Sarah loved him more than Abraham did:

> Yea, son, god must be serued ay,
> Thi modre may not haue her wille all way.
> I loue the as wele as she dothe, in fay,
> & yit this dede must be do.

They return together to the maternal home. Hearing what has transpired, Sarah is almost, but not quite, lost for words:

> Alas, all then had gone to wrake;
> Wold ye haue slayne my sone Isaac?
> Nay, than al my joy had me forsake!
> Alas, where was your mynde?

The Dublin Mystery Play creates a vivid reconstruction of how Sarah might have responded to her son's near-sacrifice. Given her intense level of activity in events surrounding the conception, birth, and upbringing of Isaac, this does not seem entirely fanciful. Genesis itself contains ample evidence that Sarah would have resisted God's command to sacrifice her son.

The circumstances of Isaac's conception are the first indication that Sarah would not have taken lying down God's command to kill Isaac. Sarah was barren from the outset (11.30), which explains why Abraham responds sceptically to the promise of descendants (12.2): 'What can you give me seeing that I am childless?' (15.2). Yet while Abraham makes no effort to acquire an heir, Sarah is all action, convincing her husband to take her Egyptian maid, as a concubine so that she may be 'built up' through Hagar (16.2). Abraham follows her advice (literally 'hears her voice') and Hagar soon gives birth to Abraham's first-born, Ishmael. Even before Ishmael's birth, Sarah feels inadequate in comparison with Hagar (Gen. 16.5), highlighting the price she has paid in her quest for a child. Once Isaac is born and weaned, Sarah can no longer tolerate Ishmael's presence (perhaps he really does threaten Isaac), and she orders Abraham to cast him out, along with Hagar, lest he diminish Isaac's inheritance. Abraham is distressed—Ishmael is his son too—but God tells him to do what Sarah says (lit. hear her voice, 21.11-12); he has already promised that Abraham's line will continue through Isaac, not Ishmael (Gen. 17.21). Once again, Sarah has taken matters into her own hands and, once again, God's intentions turn out to coincide with her desires. While none of this establishes beyond doubt that she would have been similarly active if confronted with the command at Moriah, it is hard to imagine that she would not have resisted at all. God urges Abraham on two separate occasions to listen to Sarah's voice, once when she asks him to take Hagar as a concubine (16.2), and again when she wants him to banish Ishmael and Hagar (21.12). This renders all the more audible Sarah's (enforced) silence at Mount Moriah. Surely Sarah's was the voice to which Abraham should have attended. I turn now to another biblical narrative which both amplifies Sarah's silence, and guides the reader of Genesis 22 as to how that silence might ideally have been filled.

A Biblical Intertext

Rabbinic commentators already link the story of the non-Israelite prophet Balaam and his speaking ass to the near-sacrifice of Isaac,[40] and their connection is justified by many parallels, structural and linguistic, that are present in the biblical texts themselves. Both Abraham and Balaam get up in the morning, saddle an ass at the beginning of a divinely commanded or

40. See especially *Num. R.* 20.10-15.

endorsed journey, set out with two servant boys and a load-bearing animal, and encounter an angel who reverses God's original instructions. The number three features prominently in both narratives, both describe how a man sees something significant that was there all the time, both culminate in blessings for Abraham's descendants, and both chart a movement from hearing to seeing. Building on Y. Zakovitch's notion of the reflection story,[41] a literary device in which, say, one narrative mirrors another with the aim of comparing their two protagonists to the disadvantage of one of them, J. Safren suggests that Numbers 22 intentionally reflects Genesis 22 in an attempt to discredit Balaam in relation to Abraham.[42] It is easy to see why Safren reaches this conclusion. As a non-Israelite who receives prophecies from God, Balaam was a problematic figure for the rabbis. Rabbinic texts rarely mention his name without a disparaging adjective (usually Balaam the evil), their profound discomfort is often traced back to the Bible itself. It seems to me more likely that rabbinic commentaries are so hostile to Balaam precisely because the Bible is not sufficiently negative for their taste. At any rate, the desire to denigrate Balaam is surely inadequate as an explanation for the painstakingly constructed web of structural and verbal connections that links these two narratives. My explanation is the opposite of Safren's: the story of Balaam's ass (not present in account of Balaam found in Deir Allah) was inserted into the Balaam narrative to reflect negatively on Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, and, more particularly, to raise questions about whether obedience is an appropriate response to a voice from heaven, even when it is safe to assume it is indeed a divine command.

My reading has some advantages over Safren's. First, the parallels between the two texts outlined above are precisely that—parallels. If we are going to draw opposite conclusions about the two figures involved, we must identify a textual justification for contrasting where we might just as easily compare. A reading in which Abraham should be construed positively while Balaam should be construed negatively might, for example, be signalled by a final narrative twist in which one figure acts differently, or where one is explicitly or implicitly praised while the other is condemned. It is hard to come up with such a signal in Genesis 22 or Numbers 22; the parallels appear to remain stable throughout. In each case, a man looked set to follow a course of action that was detrimental for Israel (the sacrifice of the son through whom the line would continue, and the cursing of the entire people). In each case, God seems to have desired (Abraham, 22.2) or at least condoned (Balaam, 22.20) the action in question, and in each case, the situation changes in Israel's favour after an animal has been killed (the ram) or harmed (the ass

41. 'Reflection Story: Another Dimension of the Evaluations of Characters in Biblical Narrative', *Tarbiz* 54 (1985), pp. 165-76 [Heb.].

42. 'Balaam and Abraham', *VT* 38 (1988), pp. 105-28.

which, significantly, perhaps, is killed in rabbinic expansions of the story such as *Numbers Rabbah* 20.14). Finally, both central figures bring blessings to Israel. Given these strong similarities, what aspect of the biblical texts entitles us to differentiate between Abraham and Balaam?

The two biblical narratives share in addition a theological movement that encourages a similar assessment of their characters. Both texts focus intensively on the language and imagery of hearing and seeing, and in both cases what is heard is ultimately qualified or at least supplemented by what is seen. Both Abraham and Balaam respond passively to instructions they have heard. In Abraham's case, there is no suggestion that he saw God, but Balaam's experience is less easily quantifiable. The use of the verb 'to come' may suggest a visual component to his night-time encounters with God, and his final blessing to Israel moves between the oral and the visual in a way that suggests they were simultaneous throughout ('Word of Balaam son of Beor, Word of the man whose eye is true, Word of him who hears God's speech, Who beholds visions from the Almighty', 24.3-4). Against this, vision is not mentioned in the blessings that precede the ass episode, when it is explicitly reported that God opened Balaam's eyes. Perhaps the text should be read progressively—the man who hears without seeing becomes the man whose eyes are opened. The fact that the verb גלה, reveal, occurs in both the ass narrative (22.31) and in the final blessing (24.4) increases the probability that the vision component in 24.1-5 is new. There is, moreover, a more comprehensive narrative shift from hearing to seeing. Balak asks Balaam three times to curse Israel. On the first two occasions, Balaam consults God and tells Balak that he can utter only those words that God has put into his mouth. On the third occasion, Balaam responds differently. He does not *hear* God's words but rather *sees* both that God wants him to bless Israel, and, more importantly, that Israel is good and merits blessing. When Balaam subsequently blesses Israel—'How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings O Israel' (24.5)—he is not merely repeating words that God put in his mouth. Rather, he has seen for himself that blessing Israel is the appropriate thing to do. According to the narrative's own logic, God prefers prophets who report what they infer from their own observations over those who adhere slavishly to divine commands. Since even an ass can speak if God puts words in its mouth, what respect should be accorded to a prophet who simply rehearses what he has been told?

A View from the Talmud

Alongside the many similarities between Genesis 22 and Numbers 22 is at least one important difference: the gender of the ass, which is male (חמר) in Genesis 22 and female (אתן) in Numbers 22. The regendering of the ass may be a key to understanding what is really at issue. Since the female ass

is one of only two speaking animals in the Bible (along with the snake), and because Hebrew is a gendered language and feminine verbs are relatively unusual in the Bible, the gender of the ass makes a strong impression, but what does it signify. I suggest that the gender of Balaam's ass sharpens the reader's focus on what is missing in Genesis 22, namely Sarah's voice challenging the divine command and interceding on behalf of her son. It seems to me that, though by no means its central focus, *b. Avodah Zarah* 4a-b contains the tantalising suggestion that intercession, represented here by the female ass, lies at the heart of Numbers 22, and the talmudic authors had in mind Sarah's absence in Genesis 22 when they were busy presenting Balaam's ass, as opposed to Balaam, as a model of intercession.

Numbers 22 is cited by *b. Avodah Zarah* in the context of a discussion of Jews, gentiles and theodicy: who will be punished, why and when, and what can prevent or divert punishment? The rabbis notice a discrepancy between Ezek. 21.8, which reports that righteous and evil alike will be punished, and Gen. 18.26, where God says that he will not punish the righteous along with the wicked. This inconsistency is resolved by the claim that even the most righteous men in Ezekiel, the elders who sit in front of the Temple and know the law from א to ת (*aleph* to *tav*) are not fully righteous because they failed to 'protest':

> Said R. Aba b. Kahana: What is the meaning of the verse, That be far from You to act in this way, to slay the righteous with the wicked? Abraham said: 'Sovereign of the Universe, it is a desecration to act in this way.' Yet does not God act in this way? Is it not written, And I will cut off from you the righteous and the wicked? That refers to one who is not thoroughly righteous. But not to one who is wholly righteous? Is it not written, And begin [the slaughter] with my sanctuary, which, R. Joseph learned, should not be read 'my sanctuary' but 'my sanctified ones', namely the men who fulfilled the Torah from Aleph to Tav? There, too, since it was in their power to protest and they did not protest, לא מיחו ולמחות, they are not regarded as thoroughly righteous.

Some translations imply that Ezekiel's righteous men fail to protest against the wickedness of others, but the broader context, a discussion of divine anger and its management, suggests that they fail rather to intercede. Unlike Abraham at Sodom and Gomorrah, Ezekiel's elders do not try to convince God to limit or redirect his anger and act justly towards the righteous. This reading is supported by the ensuing discussion, which turns to the question of who can stand before God, that is, stand up to God and turn away his anger. How often, it asks, is God angry, and for how long? God is angry every day, is the reply, but only for a moment. And who knows precisely when that moment will occur? The wicked Balaam!

> No creature could ever precisely fix this moment, except Balaam the wicked, of whom it is written who knew the knowledge [the mind] of the Most High.

Not surprisingly, the suggestion that Balaam knew the mind of God provokes rabbinic anxiety, and the text moves quickly to qualify it. How could Balaam have known the mind of God? He did not even know the mind of his donkey. Numbers 22 contains ample evidence of this last claim: Balaam repeatedly fails to see why his ass is swerving from side to side, and he overlooks entirely her past unswerving loyalty to him. Yet the rabbis overlook these obvious features of the biblical text and construct instead a complex argument between Balaam and the ass, in which she eventually forces him to confront an aspect of their relationship that he would have preferred to overlook:

> Is that possible [that he knew the mind of God]? He did not know the mind of his animal, how could he have known the mind of the Most High! What is meant by the words 'he did not know the mind of his animal'? At the time when he was seen riding on his ass, they said to him, 'Why do you not ride on a horse?' And he replied, 'I consigned mine to the meadow. Whereupon the ass said, 'Am I not your ass?' Just for carrying burdens', he interrupted. 'Upon whom you have ridden,' she continued. 'Only casually,' he interrupted again. 'Ever since I was yours,' she interrupted again. 'What is more [she added], I have carried you by day and have been your companion [performed as a wife] by night' (for the word 'I was accustomed' [ההסכן הסכנתי], used here, is analogous to the word 'let her be his companion' [סוכנת] used elsewhere [of Abishag in 1 Kgs 1.4].)

For the Talmud, in contrast to the Bible, it is not the ass's clear sightedness or even her loyalty that wins the day, but her superior powers of argument. Read in this light, 'knowing the mind of God' has two distinct meanings. The first, explicit in the Talmudic text, is the knowledge of precisely when God is angry. The second, only implicit, but closely related to the first, assumes that to know a mind is to possess the power to overcome it in argument. The ass knows Balaam's mind and can thus persuade, convince or overwhelm him in argument—indeed, she can literally change his mind. Balaam, however, does not know the mind of his ass and therefore cannot change it. On the assumption that the ass's special strengths were chosen for the express purpose of highlighting Balaam's particular weaknesses, we can see at once what Balaam's fatal flaw was believed by the rabbis to be. He could not intercede (argue with God) on behalf of others, and was thus incapable of performing the central task of prophecy. Balaam's failure to intercede for Israel is highlighted by God's need to restrain his *own* anger—a true prophet would have done it for him:

> What, then, is the meaning of *He knew the knowledge of the Most High*?—He knew the exact hour when the Holy One, blessed be He, is angry. This, indeed, is what the Prophet is alluding to when he says, O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam son of Beor answered him from Shittim to Gilgal; that you may know the righteousness of the Lord. Said R. Eleazar: The Holy One, blessed be He, said

> to Israel, O my people, see how many righteous acts I did for you, in that I abstained from anger all those days, for had I been in anger, none would have remained or been spared of Israel's enemies (i.e. Israel).[43] This, too, is what Balaam refers to when he says, How can I curse, seeing that God does not curse, and how can I be wrathful, seeing that the Lord has not been wrathful?

This re-reading raises a question. If the point of the talmudic exchange is not, as usually suggested, to damage Balaam's reputation by accusing him of bestiality,[44] but rather to demonstrate the limits of his power to intercede, why highlight—still more than the Bible does—the ass's gender? One possible answer may be found in the talmudic insistence that Balaam's ass is his wife (explicit in the Hebrew, אישות). A structural comparison of Genesis 22 and Numbers 22 makes it clear that Abraham and Balaam are equivalents. At first glance it appears that the asses, male and female, should also be equivalents, but a second glance reveals that the feminization of the ass and the introduction of her voice makes Balaam's ass into the structural equivalent of a figure present only by her absence in Genesis 22: Sarah. I suggest that the Bible introduced the figure of the ass in Numbers 22 to highlight what Sarah would have done at Mount Moriah had she been present, namely, interceded for her son.[45] Although *b. Avodah Zarah* makes no explicit mention of Abraham or Genesis 22, the juxtaposition of this text with a reference to Abraham's negotiations at Sodom and Gomorrah show that not merely did its authors have Abraham in mind, but they had in mind particularly the subject of Abraham's intercession. This is also suggested by structural similarities between the talmudic dialogue involving Balaam and his ass and the dialogue involving God and Abraham in *b. Sanhedrin* 29b. This dialogue, often associated with Rashi, takes the occurrence of נא in Gen. 22.2 as its point of departure for a midrashic expansion of God's command that Abraham should sacrifice Isaac:

> [God said] 'Take your son'. He [Abraham] said to Him, 'I have two sons'. He [God] said to him, 'Your only one'. He said to Him, 'This one is the only son of his mother, and that one is the only son of his mother.' He said to him, 'Whom you love.' He said to Him, 'I love them both.' He said to him, 'Isaac'.

43. 'Israel's enemies' means 'Israel' in this context.

44. See *Num. R.* 20.14, which cites Lev. 20.16 on women who lie with animals, and claims that God deprived animals of speech to prevent them from seducing people as the ass seduced Balaam.

45. Another biblical text that may serve a similar purpose is 2 Kgs 4.8-37, in which the wealthy Shunammite, a formerly barren woman married to an old man, rides a she-ass to a mountain to ask Elisha to revive her dead son. It is easy to see why midrashic texts link the Shunammite with Sarah, especially in view of 2 Kgs 3.27, in which the king of Moab offers his first-born son as a burnt offering.

Both midrashic expansions create a dialogue based on a combination of biblical citations (God/Balaam) and rabbinic responses (Abraham/the ass), and in both cases the rabbinic responses represent resistance to the original speaker.

Why, asks *b. Sanhedrin* 89b, does God circumlocute in Gen. 22.2, rather than simply demand, 'take Isaac'? The answers are highly pertinent to our present concerns. First, it establishes beyond doubt that Abraham heard God correctly (the general context is a discussion about the fate of prophets who report words they have not heard—they are slain by heaven). And second, it provides what Genesis 22 otherwise lacks: an attempt by Abraham to resist God's command or at the very least to stall. The implications of this are extraordinary. In Genesis 22, as many rabbinic commentaries note, Abraham does not resist the command to sacrifice his beloved son, despite his fierce advocacy on behalf of the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. Likewise, in Numbers 22, the 'prophet' Balaam does not resist orders, but follows exactly what he is last told to do, whether by the king of Moab or by God. In the biblical narrative, the female ass contrasts with Balaam, twisting and turning to avoid the messenger of God who is blocking her path, and she proceeds to argue logically and effectively with Balaam when he confronts her. The Talmud expands the argument between the ass and Balaam in the context of diverting or redirecting divine anger. The message is clear. Although things turned out well in the end, with Balaam recognizing that Israel deserved blessings, he should have engaged more actively from the outset—resistance is a prophet's proper response to God. Bearing this in mind, the parallels between Genesis 22 and Numbers 22, especially as interpreted by the rabbis, yield a different message: Abraham should have engaged with God at Moriah as he did at Sodom and Gomorrah. Obedience was not the desired response to a divine command.

Summing Up

Biblical law is often equated with the voice of God. In this chapter, I have tried to show that law in the Bible, especially in Deuteronomy and texts that share its essential worldview, may be better understood as the combined voices of God and Israel. As I conceive it, biblical law reflects, represents and requires engagement. Obedience to law, is not merely unimportant, but may be negative, at least where it forecloses engagement. On this reading, which I do not for one moment take to be the only way of thinking about biblical law, law functions above all as a mechanism of intercession, generating engagement with God on Israel's behalf. In its most intense and effective form, this intercessory engagement between God and Israel over law is quasi-erotic, as is indicated in some biblical (Ps. 119) and rabbinic texts where engagement involves a woman or a 'feminized' man. Examples

of such texts may be found in the midrashic parable on the death of Moses, which represents him as the wife of a king who preserves the life of their son by helping the king control his anger, and in the two midrashim on Gen. 12.1 that represent Abraham as the princess of Tyre and our 'little sister who has no breasts' from the Song of Songs.[46]

With all this in mind, I have argued that even Genesis 22, the biblical text identified above all with obedience, may be a polemic against it. Had the story remained a one-way conversation—God speaking and Abraham responding—it could only have ended badly with the death of Isaac. Abraham was required to argue, as he did at Sodom and Gomorrah, or to offer something else instead (substitution is after all the absolute essence of sacrifice), which is precisely what he does. Omri Boehm reads the angelic interventions in Genesis 22 as later additions that mask Abraham's disobedience.[47] In what Boehm envisages as an earlier version of the narrative in which there were no angels, Abraham's sacrifice of the ram would have been directly contrary to his unamended instruction to offer up Isaac. Without commenting here on compositional and redactional questions raised by Boehm, I shall note that the angelic interventions can be read quite differently. Rather than masking Abraham's obedience, they may be seen as textual indicators that what Abraham eventually did was what God wanted all along. That is, Genesis 22 promotes not obedience but a gradually intensifying engagement culminating in the identification of something that could be offered in place of God's original request. Without the angels, this claim would be controversial. With the angels, there can be no question that God did not in fact want what he said he wanted!

I need hardly say that many writers have wrestled with ethical issues raised by God's apparently inflexible demand for obedience in Genesis 22, but I cite just one—legal theorist, Ronald Dworkin:

> Imagine yourself in the position of Abraham holding a knife over the breast of his son, Isaac. Suppose you believe you have an absolute religious duty to obey your God, no matter what, and also an absolute moral duty not to injure your own child, no matter what, and you conceive these duties as independent in their source. Your theology insists both that God's authority in no way stems from the morality of his command and that morality's authority in no way stems from God's command. So long as you hold these convictions, you will be certain that you cannot avoid doing wrong. You

46. I am grateful to members of the London Forum in Jewish Antiquity, and especially to its convenor, Moshe Lavee, for their generous and helpful responses to an exploratory paper on gendered intercession in rabbinic texts (December 2006) that emerged from the analyses presented here. A fuller version was presented at the Association of Jewish Studies, Toronto, 2007.

47. 'The Binding of Isaac: An Inner-Biblical Polemic on the Question of "Disobeying" a Manifestly Illegal Order', *VT* 52 (2002), pp. 1-12.

> are, as it were, subject to two sovereigns—God and morality—and in the tragic difficulty that, at least as you understand the situation, the command of each counts as nothing in the eyes of the other. You must choose, and each choice is a final and terrible disloyalty.[48]

I do not delude myself that my interpretation of Genesis 22 would, or should, reassure Dworkin and those who share his concerns, but I do think that it bears directly on his paradox of the two sovereigns, God and morality. As I have read this biblical text, a choice is not required. Human engagement over divine commands will inevitably involve an appeal to moral values acquired independently, not to mention such aspects of human experience as emotional attachment, and indeed the intention from the outset was that law, as packaged and delivered to Israel, would demand such engagement.

In *The Concept of Law*, H.L.A. Hart sought to complicate traditional discussions of law by showing that the notion of a supreme being issuing orders backed by threats is not a helpful model for thinking about all kinds of law. For reasons quite different from Hart's, I have wanted to complicate that notion in relation to biblical law. This is partly because it fails to account for a great deal of biblical law of the cosmic ordering type, but mainly because it fails to do justice to even those texts that appear to conform to the traditional model. Biblical law, like Balaam's ass as the rabbis recreate her, is a complex beast, but it seems to me to function as a mechanism for intercession that works both by offering a vehicle through which intercession can take place, and by preserving examples of intercession that were effective in former times. These examples can serve as a model of how law can function as a vehicle for intercession, effective for its capacity to demonstrate to God that his relationship with Israel is and always has been dialogic, based on engagement and drawing on enduring love.

48. *Justice in Robes* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 110-11.

Chapter 7

The Furnace of Desire: Forging Identities in Foreign Bedrooms

'She's all States and all Princes I'[1]

Thou hast committed—
Fornication: but that was in another country,
And besides, the wench is dead.[2]

Bedroom Politics

With Ruth the exception that proves the rule, foreign women in the Bible are represented by later interpreters as harlots and seductresses.[3] (Ruth is a seductress too, but for the sake of heaven, or at least for the sake of her mother-in-law, one or the other of which puts her above most criticism.) The textual reality is less straightforward. Biblical narratives that appear to be negative about foreign women are usually more nuanced than received tradition allows and, in some cases, their much-discussed hostility to foreign women may not reflect their authors' views at all, but rather the wishful thinking of censorious later readers. My interest in this chapter will be divided between two different texts that offer different but complementary perspectives on foreign women. I shall move to Genesis 39, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, via a text that constitutes a socio-historical backdrop of sorts to the narrative encounters between Israelite men and foreign women (and, in the case of Genesis 34, between an Israelite woman and a foreign man): Ezra 9–10.

The book of Ezra has been the source of a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years, almost all of it hostile. Ezra himself, or his literary alter-ego, has been accused of a range of humanitarian crimes and misdemeanours,

1. John Donne, 'The Sunne Rising'.
2. Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, but known to many as T.S. Eliot's epigraph to 'Portrait of a Lady'.
3. This chapter is dedicated to Ron Pirson, University of Tilburg, Netherlands, a fine young scholar who was tragically unable to fulfil his potential. May his memory be for a blessing.

from low-grade xenophobia,[4] through witch hunts,[5] to ethnic cleansing, arising in the main from his indisputably fierce opposition to marriage between the returning exiles and the daughters of the people of the land.[6] A good index of the mounting hostility towards Ezra among contemporary Bible scholars is the prevalence in English translations and commentaries of the language of expulsion.[7] This implies that Ezra hoped to drive foreign women from the land, so they would stop polluting it with their uncleanness. A good example may be found in Harold Washington's sensitive treatment of the subject:

> A key to this problem lies in the peculiarly gendered vocabulary that denotes, on the one hand, the community's holiness ('the holy seed'; Ezra 9.2); and on the other, the threatening contaminant ('[menstrual] impurity'; Ezra 9.11). The former is an unmistakably male emblem of purity; the latter a specifically female pollution. This language therefore unavoidably positions women as signifiers of the stranger within. The female body represents, in Kristeva's terms, the abject, that which must be expelled.[8]

This is not the place for the detailed close reading required to support in full the alternative reading that I am about to propose. I hope, though, that the following observations will make the general point that, although Ezra is unambiguously opposed to marriages between Israelite men and foreign women (which, admittedly, some modern readers may regard as a form of racism in itself), he is not opposed to foreign women in and of themselves, does not consider them to be a contaminant, almost certainly does not propose expulsion as a solution to the problem, and cannot be accused of ethnic cleansing.[9]

4. M. Douglas, *Jacob's Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 72.

5. D. Janzen, *Witch-Hunts, Purity and Social Boundaries: The Expulsion of the Foreign Women in Ezra 9–10* (Sheffield: JSOTSup, 350; Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

6. T. Cohn Eskenazi makes the important point that the intermarriage prohibitions at 10.11 are 'Ezra's only direct commands in the book', *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra and Nehemiah* (Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series, 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 69.

7. P.R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration: A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century* (Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1968), pp. 261-62, claims that the women had to be expelled 'for the preservation of the life and faith of the community'. J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (London: SCM Press, 1988), p. 179, assumes that expulsion was intended but that it was called off suddenly.

8. 'Israel's Holy Seed and the Foreign Women of Ezra–Nehemiah: A Kristevan Reading', *Biblical Interpretation*, 11 (2003), pp. 427-37.

9. My reading is consistent in some respects with that proposed by Yonina Dor in *Were the Foreign Women Really Expelled? The Question of Separation at the Time of the Restoration to Zion* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2006) [Heb.]. Dor doubts, as I

Before I can proceed, an important point of clarification is in order. I am instinctively inclined to agree with Sara Japhet that Ezra's foreign wives are most unlikely to be foreign.[10] Rather, the foreign women represent for Ezra the Judeans who did not go into exile, and whom Ezra wants to disenfranchise. This perception should have a profound effect on all discussions of racism in Ezra. The use of a racial label as a term of abuse is qualitatively different depending on whether or not the person to whom it is attached is actually a member of the racial group in question. It is one thing for a non-Jew to use the term 'Jew' to insult a second non-Jew who is behaving in a way that the non-Jewish speaker identifies as stereotypically Jewish. It is quite another matter when a non-Jew uses the term 'Jew' in an abusive way towards someone who *is* Jewish. And it would be different yet again if a Jew were to apply that terminology to someone who is Jewish. As with ethnically-based jokes, context is all. Yet there is another sense in which an ethnic label, once used disparagingly, takes on a life of its own, and to embark on a nuanced analysis of its object is to miss the point. Regardless of how he considered the actual status of these women, Ezra described them using a word that unambiguously evoked foreignness. Moreover, 'foreign' was not just a label for Ezra, a cheap shot at a third party. He advocated that the women should be treated in every way as if they were foreign, which influenced no doubt the way that 'real' foreigners were treated, both in the Judah of his own times, and subsequently by other readers of the Bible. That leads me to my final point on this matter. Whatever messages Ezra meant to convey about the foreignness or otherwise of these women, the history of interpretation has used him as a starting-point for evaluating biblical attitudes towards foreigners, which, in some respects, is fair enough. For this, and the other reasons mentioned just above, it makes sense in the context of my project here to proceed as if Ezra's wives really were foreign, even though I doubt that was the case.

My reading of Ezra will be based primarily on two intertexts, Deut. 24.1-4, which is sometimes cited in connection with Ezra 9–10, but has not to my knowledge been discussed in detail in this context, and passages from Genesis 6–9 that I have not seen mentioned at all in relation to Ezra's intermarriage prohibition. This intertextual approach calls for a comment on my theory of composition for the texts involved. As will be clear below,

do, that the expulsion occurred in actuality, and suggests, as I do, that Ezra's intended response was ritual, but we differ in the role we see for divorce (which I do think occurred, at least according to Ezra), and in the texts outside Ezra to which we appeal (Dor does not make connections to the Genesis flood narrative).

10. S. Japhet, 'People and Land in the Restoration Period', in G. Strecker (ed.), *Das Land Israel in biblischer Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), pp. 103-25. See also L.L. Grabbe, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 196.

it seems most likely to me that Ezra knew Deut. 24.1-4 in more or less the form in which we have it, but I keep an open mind on whether or not the authors of the relevant passages of Genesis allude to Deuteronomy. Some of the resonances I identify between Ezra and Genesis 6–9 seem best explained by assuming that Ezra knew Genesis and shaped his narrative with the intention of evoking it. I take this to be the case when details that stand out in Ezra as eccentric or esoteric correspond closely to elements of Genesis. When, on the other hand, components of the flood narrative that have long troubled commentators turn out to have close parallels, or sometimes to be mirrored exactly, in Ezra, it seems most plausible that Genesis was redacted by Ezra or his 'school', or by editors who had Ezra in mind. As for Gen. 6.1-4, the pericope that sparked this analysis for me, I cannot comment on its origins, but think that its final form and placement in Genesis reflects Ezra, not vice versa. It may be worth noting before moving on that, if evidence from Nehemiah 9 is deemed admissible, we should perhaps be cautious about assuming that Ezra knew the flood narrative as part of the Torah. Nehemiah's Scroll of the Teaching seems to pass smoothly from an allusion to some sort of creation narrative—'You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, the highest heavens, and all their host, the earth and everything upon it…' (Neh. 9.6)—to the call of Abraham: 'You are the LORD God who chose Abram…' (v. 7). Does this suggest that Noah was still a work in progress?

To return now to Ezra, I hope to demonstrate that Ezra does not base his objections to foreign women on any quality or characteristic they possess other than their foreignness. In particular, they are not perceived as immoral or unethical.[11] Provided they do not marry Israelite men, or tempt Israelite men to marry them, foreign women are of no interest to Ezra, and, crucially in view of the language of expulsion, their presence in the land is not in itself negative. This is a good moment to mention another component of this analysis that requires massive attention, and which I cannot address adequately here: purity versus impurity, and holiness versus that which is profane. As will become clear, I depart quite radically from recent discussions in three main areas. First, though I find Klawans to be extremely helpful on this general topic, I think the concept of 'moral' sin and its potential to defile is misleading and unhelpful with regard to Ezra.[12] (I make no claims about other biblical texts.) Second, I think that discussions of holiness in this context have paid insufficient attention to the importance

11. This point is emphasized by G.F. Davies, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), p. 58: no blame is attached to the foreign wives and they are not perceived as sinful.

12. J. Klawans, *Sin and Impurity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 43-46.

of separation. The key is the keeping apart of categories that do not properly belong together, rather than the assignation of a particular status to either category. In this respect, both the dietary laws and the incest laws are of central importance, and it is regrettable that Klawans, for example, made the decision to set the dietary laws aside in this discussion. Third, I hope to show that in Ezra, as in most other biblical texts, holiness is understood to have the power to transform what is profane, not vice versa.[13] This third point of departure has, I think, major implications for understanding Ezra's attitude towards foreign wives, and it will be my focus here. Needless to say, there is a vast scholarly literature on this subject. I propose to engage only with scholarship that helps me to develop my own argument. The alternative points of view will be familiar enough to most readers.

Were Ezra's Foreign Wives Expelled?

I turn now to the subject of expulsion. When the subject of foreign women is first aired, Ezra speaks not of expulsion, but of separation: 'So now, give a thank offering to the LORD, God of your fathers, and do his will, and separate, והבדלו, yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women' (10.11). Although expulsion can legitimately be described as a form of separation, it is unlikely to be the form of separation intended here. The verb 'to separate' applies both to the peoples of the land and to the women, implying that both will share the same, or at least a comparable, fate. Partly for the sake of simplicity, partly because their perspectives differ from each other on this matter, and partly because the commentaries that provoked my reading here tend to focus on Ezra, I have chosen to set Nehemiah aside in the present discussion. It is worth noting in passing, however, that the same verb occurs in Neh. 13.3: 'When they heard the Teaching, they separated all the alien admixture from Israel, בל־ערב מישראל. In this case, no expulsion occurs, but rather a symbolic separation; Israelites are required to stop working on the sabbath (Neh. 13.15) and foreign traders are required to stay outside the city walls on the sabbath to keep it holy (Neh. 13.20-22). In view of this descriptive definition of separation in Nehemiah; since there is no discussion in Ezra, either aspirational or in hindsight, of expelling the peoples of the land; and since Ezra seems to link the fate of the peoples of the land and the foreign women, what explains the oft-repeated assertion that the foreign wives were expelled? The textual evidence for expulsion is based on the use of the verb יצא in 10.19: 'They gave their word to expel

13. Almost all scholarly treatments have assumed the opposite. For an excellent study of this subject whose conclusions are opposite to mine, see C.E. Hayes, *Gentile Impurity and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 29.

their wives and, acknowledging their guilt, offered a ram from the flock to expiate it'. Even assuming for the moment that יצא is appropriately rendered 'expel' in this context, there is nevertheless a problem; the expulsion of the women is never reported. The absence of a dramatic denouement is especially odd in view of the spectacle that introduces this episode—'While Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the House of God, a very great crowd of Israelites gathered about him…' (10.1). In view of Ezra's histrionics in front of the Temple, is it really likely that the vague promise of action at some future date, combined with the immediate sacrifice of a ram, was seen as a satisfactory resolution to the intermarriage problem?

As David Clines reads it, and I follow him here, there was never an instruction to expel, but rather a command to divorce.[14] The plausibility of this reading depends, I think, in part on Ezra's use of the verb יצא, which first occurs in connection with the women in Ezra 10.3:

> Now then, let us make a covenant with our God to expel all these women and those who have been born to them, in accordance with the bidding of the LORD and all who are concerned over the commandment of our God, and let the teaching [Torah] be obeyed'.

According to this verse, there had been a prior commandment to 'expel' the women, and their 'expulsion' would thus be according to the Torah. As is often noted, Ezra's primary citations of biblical law on the subject of intermarriage are drawn from Deuteronomy.[15] Indeed, the prohibition of intermarriage that immediately precedes the command to 'expel' echoes Deut. 7.3: 'You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons'. Yet in Deuteronomy, the peoples of the land are not expelled, but rather exterminated (notionally, at least): 'you must doom them to destruction' (7.2) . What, then, is the source of Ezra's command to 'expel' the foreign women? Michael Fishbane points to Deut. 23.1-7:

> No man shall marry his father's former wife, so as to remove his father's garment. No one whose testes are crushed or whose member is cut off shall be admitted to the congregation of the LORD. No one misbegotten shall be admitted into the congregation of the LORD; none of his descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall be admitted into the congregation of the LORD. No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the LORD; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because

14. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (New Century Bible; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 124.

15. *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 113.

> they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you.— But the LORD your god refused to heed Balaam; instead, the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the LORD your God loves you.—You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live.

This makes sense in many respects, not least for the thematic and semantic echoes of this text in Ezra 9.1-4, 10-12. Yet Deut. 23.1-9 is not entirely satisfactory, partly because Ezra's intermarriage prohibition extends beyond the peoples mentioned in Deut. 23.1-9—the Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites and Egyptians, but primarily because this pericope deals with admission to the congregation, not expulsion from it. Fishbane has an answer to both these objections. Since the former objection is not germane to my argument here, I will not dwell on Fishbane's solution to it, but I will, however, quote in full his response to the latter objection, which is central to the present discussion:

> Accordingly, the mechanism for prohibiting intermarriage with the Ammonites, Moabites, etc. was an exegetical extension of the law in Deut. 7.1-3 effected by means of an adaptation and interpolation of features from Deut. 23.4-9. Notably, the textual blend appears in both Ezra 9.1 and 9.11-12. By means of this new association, the contents of Deut. 23.4-9 were *reinterpreted with respect to intermarriage*, and the subsequent legal move—expulsion—follows quite logically: people who were legally barred from admission to the 'congregation of YHWH', but had somehow gained access, were to be expelled.[16]

Fishbane's reading is, of course, ingenious beyond measure, both as quoted here above and as he develops it, but some problems remain. Most obviously, (a) even if one accepts all the manoeuvres his reading requires, none of these particular Deuteronomic texts contains an explicit instruction to expel foreigners of any persuasion (unless one counts the instruction to kill them in Deut. 7.2, which, as far as I can tell, Ezra neither cites nor even creatively transforms), and (b) no expulsion is reported in Ezra. As Fishbane himself observes, 'the text breaks off , ominously (v. 44), for it is not at all clear that the foreign wives of those listed were actually evicted from the community—as the faithful had sworn to do (in 10.3-5)'.[17]

Recourse to Deut. 24.1-4, an option not considered by Fishbane, as the legal source of Ezra's 'eviction' order offers a solution to some of the problems unresolved by Fishbane's analysis. On this reading, Ezra was not telling people who had married foreign women to *expel* them according to

16. *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 117.

17. *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 124. See also Blenkinsopp, *Ezra*, p. 179, who envisages that Ezra offended community leaders who had taken foreign wives, and thus called off his planned expulsion.

instructions they had received elsewhere, but rather to *divorce* them according to the terms and conditions set out elsewhere, namely in the Bible's only divorce legislation, Deut. 24.1-4:

> A man takes a wife and possesses her. She fails to please him because he finds something obnoxious about her, and he writes her a bill of divorcement, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house; she leaves his household and becomes the wife of another man; then this latter man rejects her, writes her a bill of divorcement, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house; or the man who has married her last dies. Then the first husband who divorced her shall not take her to wife again, since she has been defiled— for that would be abhorrent to the LORD. You must not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a heritage.

D-I-V-O-R-C-E

There are several reasons for taking seriously the notion that Ezra is alluding to this text when he commands the returning exiles to 'send forth' their foreign wives, not least that, *pace* Fishbane, divorce is a more obvious response than expulsion to a marriage deemed inappropriate. Since Clines assumes that Ezra has in mind divorce but does not engage in detailed textual analysis on this issue, and since few other commentators have pursued it at all,[18] I shall begin by outlining the textual justification for thinking that Ezra has in mind divorce on the Deuteronomic model, and then move to a consideration of the implications of this intertextual reading. First, although the verb primarily associated with divorce is שלח, send, not יצא, go forth, Deuteronomy uses both verbs, pairing the husband's act of sending away with his wife's act of leaving: 'he…sends her away from his house; she leaves his house' (24.1-2). If Ezra had in mind Deuteronomy 24, his intended destination for the foreign wives was not another country, but only another household. Second, the sending and leaving in Deuteronomy is preceded by the giving of a document, the bill of divorcement. Incorporating the idea of bill of divorce into Ezra would help explain a number of difficulties there, textual and otherwise. Ezra's command to separate from foreign women (10.11) is followed by a jarring request from the people to be allowed time to deal with the matter.

> 'We must surely do just as you say. However, so many people are involved, and it is the rainy season; it is not possible to remain out in the open, nor is this the work of a day or two, because we have transgressed extensively in this matter. Let our officers remain on behalf of the entire congregation, and all our townspeople who have brought home foreign women shall

18. For example, Ezra 9–10 is not considered by D. Instone-Brewer in his comprehensive treatment of this subject, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

> appear before them at scheduled times, together with the elders and judges of each town, in order to avert the burning anger of our God from us on this account' (Ezra 10.12-14).

Reading Ezra in light of Deuteronomy 24, the need for time and officials to deal with the matter suggests a legal element, similar perhaps to a procedural identification of the woman's 'fault'—foreignness in this case—and the writing of the bill of divorce (is this why the rain posed a problem—the ink would run?). This theory is supported by the subsequent report of the execution of the people's proposal:

> The returning exiles did so. Ezra the priest and the men who were the chiefs of the ancestral clans—all listed by name—sequestered themselves on the first day of the tenth month to study the matter. By the end of the first day of the first month they were done with all the men who had brought home foreign women… They gave their word to expel their wives… (10.16-19).

The Hebrew לדרוש הדבר in v. 16, translated here 'to study the matter', but more accurately 'to *seek* the matter', may correspond to Deut. 24.1 'for he has found [the opposite of seek above] an obnoxious thing, דבר, in her' or, more literally, 'he has *found* the nakedness of the *matter*, דבר'. The phrase ויתנו ידם להוציא נשיהם (Ezra 10.19) translated here 'they gave their word', but more literally, 'and they *gave their hand* to expel their wives', may correspond to Deut. 24.1: 'and he writes her a bill of divorcement, *hands [it] to her* [lit. gives into her hand], and sends her away from his house'. The fact that these words are repeated letter for letter in Deut. 24.2 with regard to the second husband suggests that they constitute a formula. Of particular interest is the absence in both Deut. 24.1 and 2 of the anticipated object pronoun 'it' in relation to the bill of divorce: 'gave into her hand' versus the expected 'gave *it* into her hand'. This omission is especially surprising in a description of a legal or even quasi-legal procedure, where the handing over of the document was a key stage in effecting divorce, and where we might expect precision of language to be of paramount importance. The omission seems to be reflected in Ezra 10.19, which is usually read idiomatically to cope with a grammatical difficulty posed by the absence of the pronoun. The Hebrew reads as follows: ויתנו ידם להוציא נשיהם. NJPS translates this 'and they pledged themselves [literally, "gave their hand"] to expel their wives'. According to NJPS, then, Ezra 10.19 reflects the men's commitment to expel their wives *at some future time*, yet, as noted above, the time never comes. Read in light of Deut. 24.2, the giving of hands is not a commitment to expel, but an allusion to the divorce formula, specifically the handing over of the bill of separation. This addresses the difficulty noted above in relation to the NJPS translation: the men make a commitment, but when do they deliver? On my reading, the symbolic action of handing over the bill of divorce is not a prelude to or an announcement of a future event, but is

the event itself. Just as saying 'I do' constitutes a marriage, a speech-act as it were, so handing over the bill of separation *is* divorce, and no further discussion is required. The deed has been done; the men who had taken foreign wives were commanded to divorce them and Ezra 10.12-19 reports that they did just that. There is nothing else to report, and hence no ominous silence over the execution of Ezra's orders.

The final suggestion of a link with Deuteronomy 24 comes in Ezra 9.11, where Ezra addresses God about the sins the exiles have committed by taking foreign wives:

> '…we have forsaken Your commandments, which You gave us through Your servants the prophets when You said, "The land that you are about to possess is a land unclean, נדה, through the uncleanness, בנדת, of the peoples of the land, through their abhorrent practices, בתועבתיהם, with which they, in their impurity, בטמאתם, have filled it, מפה אל־פה, from one end to the other [lit. from mouth to mouth]. Now then do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or let their daughters marry your sons"' (Ezra 9.10-12).

Read quickly and in isolation (and preferably in translation), Ezra 9.11 may reasonably be understood to be claiming that the peoples of the land are inherently unclean and that they polluted the land as a consequence of their uncleanness. A closer look suggests that the people's uncleanness is temporary, rather than permanent a state of being,[19] and that it was caused by the 'abhorrent practices, בתועבתיהם, they carried out 'in their impurity', בטמאתם. This terminology is, to say the least, fluid, and what exactly constitutes an abomination differs from one biblical passage to another. In order to identify these particular abhorrent practices, and thus to gain a clearer sense of what Ezra has in mind, we should turn to Ezra's most likely intertext. On the one hand, the concept of נדה (*niddah*) in relation to the land seems most likely to be derived from the Holiness Code. Yet since Ezra alludes to Deuteronomy in verse 12, where he cites the intermarriage prohibition in Deut. 7.3, and since I have identified other allusions to Deut. 24.1-4, the Deuteronomic divorce law is arguably the text that Ezra has in mind when he uses the abomination terminology. The Deuteronomic divorce law concludes by explaining why a man cannot remarry a woman who married someone else after he had divorced her. Following a marriage to a second man, whether it ends in another divorce or in death, a woman is permanently unavailable to her first husband '…since she has been defiled, הטמאה—for that would be abhorrent, תועבה, to the LORD. You must not bring sin upon the land the LORD God is giving you as a heritage (24.4)'. According to Deuteronomy, then, the woman is not inherently unclean, nor

19. נדה is associated primarily with menstrual impurity, a temporary uncleanness, and would not apply to an unclean animal, which is permanently off-limits.

does this have any connection to whatever obnoxious thing, ערות דבר, made her husband divorce her in the first place. This is strictly legal and procedural—a woman's second marriage has put her off-limits, or 'disqualified' her, as NJPS puts it so well,[20] for her first husband. What creates the abomination is not anything inherently negative in either of the two parties, both of whom could take other marriage partners if they wished, but their inappropriate union.

If all this is correct, we are dealing with a ruling that, though harsh, is far removed from ethnic cleansing. Ezra does not recommend that women be removed from the land to prevent its defilement, but rather advocates the termination through a legal process of a union that is deemed inappropriate and thus defiling. This is not a racist slur; as we have seen, the land would be defiled in precisely the same way by the remarriage of an Israelite man to a woman he had divorced and who had remarried another man in the meantime (Deut. 24.1-3). Although, in Ezra's case, it is the woman's foreignness, ערב, that would constitute the 'nakedness of the matter', ערות דבר, that is, the grounds for divorce in the first place, it is not her foreignness that defiles the land, but rather her inappropriate marriage to an Israelite man. If her marriage to an Israelite is ended by divorce, the foreign woman will no longer defile the land.

Although Clines sees an allusion in Ezra to Deuteronomy's divorce law, he does not take the view that this calls for a more generous assessment of Ezra. First, Clines suspects that the lengthy bureaucratic procedures may have been a kind of cover up, intended to give a façade of respectability to a brutal demand. I, on the other hand, see no reason to be sceptical and, on the contrary, I think Ezra's procedures may correspond to elements of the Deuteronomic divorce law, suggesting that the divorces were legal, even if inhumane by modern standards. Second, Clines does not share my view that interpreting expulsion as divorce demands a reassessment of the status of the foreign women in Ezra. He sees in ערות דבר a reference to some sort of indecency or uncleanness, so that divorces would be granted to Jewish men on the basis of a ritual uncleanness in their foreign wives.[21] According to some rabbinic sources ערות דבר must be understood as adultery. Yet it seems unlikely that Deuteronomy would offer a single, specific cause for divorce.[22] More plausibly, the term is intentionally ambiguous, enabling a husband to divorce his wife for a variety of reasons, and avoiding as far as possible the problem of couples chained hopelessly in failed

20. NJPS, footnote to Deut. 24.4.

21. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 127. See also J.M. Myers, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 151.

22. The likelihood of this was the subject of a rabbinic dispute. The majority opinion favoured the more flexible and permissive reading of divorce law.

marriages. While ערות דבר refers unambiguously to a flaw of some kind in a woman rather than in a man, the flaws that, according to the Bible, a woman was most likely to have (refusal to have sex, for example) are not necessarily types of uncleanness, neither ritual nor moral. To be sure, the term ערות דבר occurs in Deut. 23.15 in relation to nocturnal emission or human excrement, or both, but the logic of Deut. 24.1-4 requires a different interpretation. The Deuteronomic woman would become 'unclean', or better 'disqualified', only in the context of a prohibited marriage, and only in relation to a particular man—her first husband. Ezra's allusion to Deuteronomy's divorce, with its implication that it was the inappropriate liaison that defiled, is consistent with the notion that ערות דבר evokes one or more of the prohibited, 'incestuous' relationships listed in Leviticus 18. But it is crucial to acknowledge that if the liaison ended, so did the uncleanness. Had this not been the case, divorce would not have addressed Ezra's problem. Expulsion from the land would have been required, not just as a recommendation, but as an activity that at least some Jews, if not all, carried out. So while enforced mass divorce is hardly a humane activity by our standards, it is not based on an assumption that foreign women are unclean or inferior, or even that they might entice men to foreign worship (this aspect of Deuteronomy does not feature in Ezra). Foreign women are simply off-limits for Israelite men, as the twice-married Israelite woman is off-limits for her first husband. I emphasize this point because it is extraordinarily rare to find a commentator on Ezra who does not claim that its attitude to the foreign wives presupposes either ritual impurity or moral uncleanness caused by idolatry or sexual impropriety.

Mixed Marriages, Mixed Messages

Yet there is a respect in which this claim—that foreign women are not inherently unclean or immoral, but are simply off-limits to Israelite men—begs a question. Why precisely are they off-limits? Deuteronomy has an obvious response to that question—they entice Israelite men to worship their gods (Deut. 7.4). Since Ezra does not appeal to this justification, we must return to the text in order to locate the source of his problem:

> When this was over, the officers approached me, saying, 'The people of Israel and the priests and Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the land whose abhorrent practices are like those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. They have taken their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy seed has become intermingled with the peoples of the land; and it is the officers and prefects who have taken the lead in this trespass (Ezra 9.1-2).

As Fishbane points out, Ezra brings together two separate pericopes that are juxtaposed in Deuteronomy, the prohibition of intermarriage (7.3) and the assertion of Israel's status as a holy people (7.6-8). According to Fishbane, and to Christine Hayes in her detailed treatment of the subject, the problem is pollution of some kind; Israel's holy seed will be rendered profane (Hayes)[23] or sullied (Fishbane)[24] by being mixed with the seed of foreign women.[25] For a number of reasons that I shall now explore, I think that the opposite is true. Israel's seed will not be adversely affected by contact or mixing with the seed of the peoples, but rather the people's seed will be made holy, or at least in some way strengthened, by contact or mixing with Israel's seed. Some scholars have seen Ezra's ethnocentrism as incompatible with what they interpret as priestly inclusivism in Lev. 16.29-30, for example, which mentions the resident alien in connection with Day of Atonement ritual.[26] It is important to keep in mind, however, that Leviticus 16 deals with the *purification* of that which is made impure by sin. It is therefore concerned with temporary states (purity and impurity) that can be altered by time or process, and, not surprisingly, these are not a basis for ethnocentrism. Ezra's objection to intermarriage is not based in the first instance on impurity; that could have been reversed, and could indeed have been prevented altogether by avoiding 'abominations' (Ezra 9.11). His objection is based rather on the mixing of holy and profane, the outcome of which is a new category, not immutable, but much less fluid than the states identified with purity and impurity. This category, as I shall try to show, *is* a basis for ethnocentrism.[27]

23. *Gentile Impurity*, p. 129: 'Through intermarriage the holy seed of Israel became intermingled with unconsecrated or profane seed. Thus intermarriage profanes (transforms from sacred to common) that which God has consecrated to himself.'

24. *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 120.

25. Janzen, *Witch Hunts*, p. 11, makes this point in more value-laden terms: 'Foreign peoples are impure, and mixture with them on the part of Israel is illegitimate—but the significance of that seems to have escaped scholarship'.

26. M. Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), and *Jacob's Tears,* pp. 63-87.

27. I am in tension here with the views of M. Douglas, *Jacob's Tears*, and, following her, M.G. Brett, 'Exile and Ethnic Conflict', in *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (The Bible in the Modern World, 16; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008). If I understand them correctly, they envisage a priestly inclusivism based on the language of purity and impurity; foreigners do not defile by virtue of being foreigners, but, like Israelites, by sinning. They see Ezra's position on intermarriage as polemicizing against this priestly openness, but they may not have taken account of the fact that Ezra's objection is rooted not primarily in foreign *impurity* (the priestly concern, see, e.g., M. Douglas, *In the Wilderness*, p. 38, on purity and political control), but in foreign profaneness—a completely different matter. My reading, if correct, explains why 'conversion' is not a straightforward option for Ezra. He is

As observed above, Ezra does not appeal to Deuteronomy's rationale for prohibiting intermarriage, namely, that Israelites will be led astray and enticed to worship other gods. In Ezra 9.1-2, this justification is replaced by the reference to holy seed, but Ezra 9.12 offers a different rationale:

> Now then, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or let their daughters marry your sons; do nothing for their well-being or advantage, then you will be strong and enjoy the bounty of the land and bequeath it to your children forever.

This rationale, an echo of Deut. 23.7, is plausibly interpreted as an economic justification for the prohibition of intermarriage, as is suggested by the close parallel with the words of Hamor, father of Shechem, in Gen. 34.9:

> Intermarry with us: give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves: You will dwell among us, and the land will be open for you; settle, move about, and acquire holdings in it.

According to Hamor, intermarriage with the peoples of the land is the way to acquire land, while according to Ezra, *avoiding* intermarriage is the way to acquire land. Yet whereas the Dinah narrative dwells at length on the practical mechanisms by which means the land would be acquired, Ezra says only that provided the Israelites resist intermarriage, they will be strong, eat the bounty of the land, and bequeath it to their children forever (9.12). Although it does not necessary follow that strength conferred by resistance to intermarriage is the structural opposite of weakness derived from intermarriage, another intertext suggests that this may be what Ezra had in mind. In what follows I shall try to show that Ezra assumed that Israelite seed given to foreign women would strengthen the women and their offspring, with the consequence that Israel's hold on the land would be weakened. In other words, the mixing of holy and profane seed does not weaken the holy seed, but strengthens the profane seed. I am grateful to my colleague Edward Adams for drawing my attention to a fascinating parallel with 1 Cor. 7.12-14, where Paul seems to have the same basic understanding of the relationship between the holy and the profane in the context of a marriage:

already wrestling with a crux that has remained for Jews to this day: Who is a Jew? Is Jewishness a national, an ethnic, or a religious category? I think it is fair to say that the priestly authors cited by Douglas refrained from biting that bullet by focusing on the mutable categories of purity and impurity in connection with non-Israelites. But they were merely postponing a problem that, paradoxically, emerged from another aspect of their own worldview, namely that peoples are genealogical constructs, not, as Deuteronomic texts would have it, historical constructs. On the racial-biological implications of 'holy seed', and attempts to soften them with reference to religious purity, see Yonina Dor, 'The Composition of the Episode of the Foreign Women in Ezra ix–x', *VT* 53 (2003), pp. 26-47 (31).

> To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

An obvious Hebrew Bible prooftext to test the proposition that holy seed is not made profane by contact with profane seed is Lev. 21.13-15, the law concerning suitable marriage partners for the High Priest:

> He may marry only a woman who is a virgin. A widow, or a divorced woman, or one who is degraded by harlotry—such he may not marry. Only a virgin of his own kin, עמיו, may he take to wife—that he may not profane his offspring among his kin, for I the LORD have sanctified him.

At first glance, this text seems to argue in the opposite direction, suggesting that holy seed can indeed be made profane through contact or mixing with profane seed. On closer inspection, however, the pericope turns out to be making a very different point. First, the common denominator in the Leviticus passage is that all the women in question will, in the normal course of things, have had sex with other men—the widow and the divorced woman with their former husbands, and the harlot with any number of partners. What would thus profane the priest's offspring is the introduction into a hereditary system of 'descendants' who were in fact the sons of non-priests. In other words, it was not the status of their mothers as such that would profane the offspring of a marriage between a widow, say, and a priest, but the status of their fathers.[28] This law is concerned with the possibility of 'priests' whose mothers had been impregnated by other men, whose fathers were thus not priests at all, and who were therefore invalid heirs to the priestly line. It is consistent with my reading that Ezekiel's reiteration of Leviticus 21 allows priests to marry the widows of other priests (Ezek. 44.22); the offspring of the union would be legitimate members of the priestly line regardless of which man was the actual father. Of course, Ezekiel's modification does not take into account that the widow might have been impregnated by a man other than her recently dead husband. But, justifiably or otherwise, Ezekiel may have imagined a widow less likely than a divorcee to have sex outside marriage, and at any rate not significantly more likely to have extra-marital sex than a woman married to a

28. This is contra B.A. Levine, *Leviticus: JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 141, who claims that the divorcee was prohibited because she must have behaved immorally. As Levine reads the divorce law in Deut. 24.1, serious sexual misconduct was the only basis for divorce. As I have explained above, I disagree with this reading of Deut. 24.1.

living priest is to commit adultery. The second indication that Lev. 21.13-14 is not primarily concerned about the status of the mother is that foreign women or women with any form of impurity are not excluded from its list of women prohibited to the High Priest. Third, although the final instruction to the High Priest specifies a virgin from his own kin or people, עמיו, it seems most likely that עמיו in this context refers to other members of the priestly class, not to Israelites in general.[29] Fourth, the rules for priests in other contexts—death and mourning, for example—do not correspond to the rules for ordinary Israelites, and it is extremely difficult to know how best to extrapolate from them and, more importantly, how to evaluate inner-biblical interpretation of these verses. The case immediately preceding this one, for example, which concerns contact with a dead body, suggests that the priest's situation is emphatically different from, and even diametrically opposed to, that of ordinary Israelites; he is defiled by contact with a dead body, and they are not, just as he is prohibited from marrying divorced women and widows, but they are not. Fifth and last, aside from its reference to 'holy' and 'seed', and despite the explicit inclusion of priests and Levites at the beginning of the pericope, neither Ezra 9.1-4 nor any other Ezra text on this theme, resonates with the language of the levitical rules pertaining to the marriage of the High Priest. It is hard to believe either that Ezra had them in mind, or that these levitical rulings were in any way intended to address Ezra's central issue—intermarriage. This is borne out by a glance at the parallel text in Deuteronomy 14.1-2, where the priestly mourning laws are reapplied to all Israel, in the context of a recapitulation of many other 'priestly' laws,[30] and yet the subject of intermarriage is not raised.

Mixed Marriages

A much more helpful intertext than either Leviticus 21 or Deuteronomy 14 on the subject of intermarriage and its implications for holiness is the notoriously elusive Gen. 6.1-4:

> When men began to increase on earth and daughters of men were born to them, the sons of gods saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from among those that pleased them. The LORD said, 'My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years'. It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared on the earth—when the sons of gods cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown . (Gen. 6.1-4)[31]

29. For this opinion, see Levine, *Leviticus*, p. 145.

30. See Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 121-23.

31. For parallels with the Gilgamesh Epic and other ancient Near Eastern background, see N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New

Although the terms 'holy' and 'seed' do not occur in this pericope, there are several reasons to connect it with Ezra. Significant, though incidental to my argument here, is that 'this text [Gen. 6.1-4] evokes an impression of alluding to something well known to the readers, but not recorded in the text.'[32] As this chapter progresses, I shall make a proposal about the text alluded to, but in the meantime my own starting point is that the Genesis sons of gods are conceptually equivalent to Ezra's holy seed, while the daughters of men are equivalent to the foreign wives. Bearing this in mind, the outcome of the Genesis cohabitation is highly significant. First, it is reported that once these unions have occurred, God henceforth limits the human lifespan to one hundred and twenty years. With Gen. 5.4-32 as our guide, we must assume that prior to the mixed unions, human beings had lived for much longer than one hundred and twenty years, and perhaps these people are best understood as the progeny of mixed divine-human unions that were deemed acceptable before the flood. Mark Brett puts it well: 'The implication [of Gen. 6.3] is that divine-human hybrids are unacceptable: there has to be a clearer difference between the divine realm and the human realm. This text marks, then, the transition from the extraordinarily long lives mentioned in the genealogy of Genesis 5 to the more realistic life-spans after the flood. The people who lived before the flood are, however, not explicitly spoken of as partly divine; 6.1-4 is the fragmentary exception.'[33] Yet we cannot be sure that the sole interest of Gen. 6.1-4 is length of life. Inferring from Gen. 3.22, the progeny of the mixed unions were in some sense god-like, and here in Gen. 6.3, as in 3.22, that is equated with immortality. Difficult as it is to parse, Gen. 6.3 seems to set in opposition eternal life, לעלם, on the one hand, and one hundred and twenty years on the other. This is not only an explanation for how people stopped living so long, though it does serve that purpose, but it is also an account of how people acquired (through mixed unions) and lost (following a divine decree) the god-like status that was expressed above all in terms of immortality.[34]

York: Schocken Books, 1966), pp. 37-62, and G*enesis: JPS Torah Commentary*, pp. 44-51. I cannot see how the mythological background of these texts pertains to my analysis here, but further thought is required.

32. H.S. Kvanvig, 'The Watcher Story and Genesis: An Intertextual Reading', *SJOT* 18 (2004), pp. 163-83 (171). See also H.S. Kvanvig, 'Gen 6,1-4 as an Antediluvian Event', *SJOT* 16 (2002), pp. 79-112 (81-92).

33. *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 41.

34. This emphasis in Genesis on immortality in a text immediately preceding the flood makes sense in view of the Gilgamesh Epic, where immortality and deluge are likewise thematically intertwined. See Brett, *Genesis*, pp. 41-42 for a discussion of this, as well as Sarna, *Genesis*, pp. 47-50.

The offspring of the unions between the sons of gods and the daughters of men are reported in Gen. 6.4 to be גברים, mighty men or warriors. Since God has already dealt with the issue of immortality by limiting the human life-span to one hundred and twenty years, we must assume that it is the quality of the offspring implied by גברים, at least in the biblical narrative in its present form, that provokes God to bring on the flood. Exegetes have long noted that the positioning of Genesis 6.1-4 immediately before the flood means that it functions as an alternative or supplementary explanation for why God needed to flood the world. In addition to the problem of the violence that filled the earth (Gen. 6.11-12), the sons of gods have cohabited with daughters of men to produce a super-race of mighty men possessed of (until God addressed it) the attribute of immortality. By means of the flood, God removed both the violence (6.13) and all traces of these quasi-immortal people (6.7) and started afresh. Here, then, is a biblical text where the offspring of a union involving males identified with divinity, the sons of gods, and females that are manifestly human, the daughters of men, produces offspring that, even if they are not divine, have the primary attribute of divinity, immortality. Further, the narrative in its present form suggests that the progeny of this union will seize or fill the land, hence the need for a flood to remove them from it.

Based on this model, the structural equivalent of holy seed (the sons of gods) are not made profane by contact with profane seed (the daughters of men), but rather profane seed acquires holiness by contact with holy seed. But is it appropriate to use the mysterious story of the sons of gods and the daughters of men to illuminate a difficult text in the book of Ezra? In the analysis that follows I will try to show that what I have identified thus far as a conceptual parallel that might serve for present-day readers as an interpretative tool was already present in the minds of the authors and/or redactors of both certain passages of Genesis 6-8, and Ezra 9–10.

Genesis 6.3 has long challenged commentators: 'The LORD said, "my spirit will not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh, בשגם הוא בשר; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years. On this reading, ש (*she*) is an abbreviated form of אשר (*asher*), 'that' or 'which', as is common in post-biblical Hebrew, but rare in the Bible, and גם (*gam*) means 'also'. It seems better read as a shortened form of בשגגם (*bishgagam*), their unintentional sin. Two reasons for this come to mind in Genesis itself. First, Genesis 3.22-24 presents the limiting of the human life-span as a response to a crime. Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God punishes them for this in various ways, and then takes the additional step of preventing them from acquiring immortality from the tree of life by driving them out of the garden. In Gen. 6.1-4, human beings almost achieve immortality *accidentally* (it is important to note that the men take the women, and not vice versa!) through another route—not

by eating from the tree of life, but by cohabiting with the sons of gods. God deals with this sin by limiting the lifespan of future human beings, and by wiping out the people who had already achieved immortality. The second reason for reading בשגם as a reference to the unintentional crime of acquiring immortality by cohabiting with the sons of gods may be found in the flood narrative in Genesis 7–8.

Monsoon Weddings: Ezra's Foreign Wives and Noah's Flood

Many commentators have addressed the difficulty of dealing with the different textual strands of the Noah story, and I shall not rehearse the arguments here more than is required to make my point about Ezra. The narrative that follows immediately from the story of the union of divine and human beings clearly addresses the primary explanation for the flood—violence and lawlessness. Throughout chs. 6, the terms used to evoke the flood are מבול, deluge, and מים, water. The sources of the water are mentioned for the first time in Genesis 7: ממטיר (v. 4), the fountains of the deep, the floodgates of the sky (v. 11) and גשם, rain (v. 12). This latter term for rain intensifies the sense in which the flood is a response to the divine/human cohabitation in Gen. 6.1-4—גשם is a part-anagram of the difficult word בשגם. The link between the flood and the mixed marriages is reinforced by the striking use of the verb גבר, swelled, in relation to the waters (Gen. 7.18, 19, 20 and 24), corresponding to the description in Gen. 6.4 of the progeny of the mixed unions as גברים, mighty men. The waters of the flood do not merely blot out all existence (7.22-23), but target specifically the divine or semi-divine beings produced by the union of the sons of gods and daughters of men.

Given the physical juxtaposition of Genesis 6.1-4 and the flood narrative and their thematic connection (crime and punishment), it is hardly surprising that they are linked verbally too. But how are they linked to Ezra 9–10? The basic structural parallel has already been noted—both textual units deal with a prohibited union involving holy males and non-holy females—but the verbal connections are as striking as they are unexpected. First, as mentioned in passing above, Ezra 9 reports a delaying tactic that is almost unique in the Bible: inclement weather. Ezra tells the people to gather to deal with the problem of the foreign wives, and they complain that the people are too numerous and there is too much rain: אבל העם רב והעת גשמים. That the rain was exceptionally heavy was made clear in Ezra 10.9, where it is linked to a specific date:

> All the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled in Jerusalem in three days; it was the ninth month, the twentieth of the month. All the people sat in the square of the House of God, trembling on account of the event and because of the rains.

The rains link Ezra to Genesis 6.1, which begins with the announcement that humans had begun to increase, לרב on the face of the earth and uses בשגם with reference both to their punishment (limited life-span), and to the flood narrative, where the only term that appears for rain is גשם (7.12; 8.2). A further possible link arises from an odd detail in Ezra 9.2, which reports that not only has the intermingling of seed taken place, but that 'the officers and prefects', השרים והסגנים have taken the lead in this trespass. Jeremiah 51.56-57 links officers and prefects to warriors, גברים: 'For a ravager is coming on Babylon, her warriors, גבוריה, shall be captured, their bows shall be snapped. For the Lord is a God of requital, He deals retribution. I will make her officials, שריה, and wise men drunk. Her governors and prefects, וסגניה, and warriors, וגבוריה…'. If officers and prefects were closely associated with warriors, as Jeremiah suggests, it is possible that Ezra 9.2 mentions them precisely to evoke Gen. 6.4, where the offspring of the union between the sons of gods and daughters of men are described as גברים, mighty men.

We seem to be dealing with a web of texts redacted in light of each other. The rain, גשם, in Ezra may be intended to evoke the Genesis flood, where perhaps the term גשם was added to highlight the intertextual connection. The plausibility of this latter suggestion is increased by the fact that גשם is arguably superfluous in Genesis. When the story commences, deluge and generic water are sufficient explanation for the need to build an ark, and an elaboration is already offered in the form of the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of heaven (7.11). Rain, גשם, is not required, and neither is it entirely compatible with the more generic deluge or the more poetic fountains and floodgates mentioned in v. 11. An even more striking connection between the flood narrative and Ezra is created by the use of dates. Commentators, from rabbinical to source critical, have wrestled with the competing systems of chronology in the flood narrative. How can we reconcile the various competing mechanisms for dating the flood and measuring its length? I will not rehearse all the difficulties or the solutions that have been offered, but will focus instead on the five dates in Genesis 8 that appear to be within the same chronological system, that is, calculated by dates, not by numbers of days. Skinner sets them out as follows in his commentary:[35]

1.	Commencement of the flood	600th year, 2nd month, 17th day
2.	Climax (resting of ark)	600th year, 7th month, 17th day
3.	Mountains tops visible	600th year, 10th month, 1st day
4.	Waters dried up	601st year, 1st month, 1st day
5.	Earth dry	601st year, 2nd month, 27th day

For several reasons, Skinner's numbers 3 and 4 are out of place. First, 1, 2 and 5 form a complete unit on their own: the flood begins, it reaches a

35. *Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), pp. 167-68.

climax, the flood ends. Second. 1, 2 and 5 all involve combinations of the numbers two, ten and seven (second month, ten plus seventh day; seventh month, ten plus seventh day; second month, two times ten plus seventh day). Third, 3 and 4 add nothing obvious to the narrative; on the contrary, they confuse matters. Fourth, 3 and 4 use units of ones and tens (tenth month, first day and first months, first day), not twos and sevens. An explanation for the presence of 3 and 4 may be found in Ezra 10.16, 17. The excuse about the rainy season having been offered in Ezra 10.13, the procedures for expulsion or, as I prefer it, divorce, commence:

> Ezra the priest and the men who were the chiefs of the ancestral clans—all listed by name—sequestered themselves on *the first day of the tenth month* to study the matter. By *the first day of the first month* they were done with all the men who had brought home foreign women.

The dates are identical to those that we have found to be at best confusing and at worst superfluous in Genesis 8.[36] Since their function is unclear in both texts, we can reasonably ask if they were added either to draw attention to textual parallels or, perhaps, to signal a conceptual link between the events they describe—the mass divorces and the flood.[37]

A still more surprising link between Ezra and the flood narrative emerges from another feature of the Noah story that commentators have identified as confusing or redundant. As with the schema of dates given above, in which three was complete and sufficient, a narrative unit involving three expeditions by a single bird would have been sufficient to explain how Noah knew that he could leave the ark. What then explains the confusing presence of the raven? A glance at Noah narrative in the light of Ezra 9–10 reveals a possible answer.

> At the end of forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; it went to and fro until the waters had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove to see whether the waters had decreased from the surface of the ground. But the dove could not find a resting place for its foot, and returned to him to the ark, for there was water all over the earth. So putting out his hand, he took it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days and again sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came back to him towards evening, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf. Then Noah knew that the waters had decreased on the earth. He waited still another seven days and sent the dove forth; and it did not return to him any more (Gen. 8.6-12).

36. The first day of the first month is also the date given for the erection of the Tabernacle (Exod. 40.10) and the beginning of the journey to Babylon (Ezra 7.19).

37. H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), p. 23, comments that these and similar details 'are clearly not based on the edict but…have no other apparent origin than historical memory'. I am proposing what I see as a more plausible alternative.

The Hebrew ערב (*orev*), raven, has the same root letters as the word ערב (*erev*), mixed. The verbal form of this term is used in Ezra 9.2 to describe the mixing of holy seed with the peoples of the land:

> They have taken their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy seed became intermingled, והתערבו (*ve'hitarvu*) with the peoples of the land.[38]

It seems possible, then, that a component of the flood narrative that described a man sending away a bird served as a peg on which to a redactor could hang an additional reference to Ezra's concerns, the sending forth of the foreign women. This would explain why the raven is not merely sent, וישלח, as is the dove, but goes to and fro, ויצא יצוא ושוב; these verbs echo those used in Ezra 9–10 in connection with the foreign wives.

The combination of verbs used with reference to the raven is interesting for another reason. I noted above in my analysis of the relationship between Ezra 9–11 and Deut. 24.1-4 that although Ezra does not use the verb most strongly associated with divorce, שלח, to send, he does use the word **יצא**, to send forth, which is the verb of female action that is paired in the Deuteronomic divorce law with the verb of male action: 'And he sent her, ושלחה, from his house…and she went, ויצאה, from his house' (24.1,2). The other significant verbs that appear in Deut. 24.1-4 are **מצא**, to *find* fault with (v. 1); נתן, he *gave* into her hand (vv. 1, 3), לקח, *take* a wife (vv. 1, 3, 4), and שוב, to *take* her *back* (v. 4). Noah's actions with the raven, and the raven's response, mirror precisely the actions of the male and female in Deut. 24.1-4, and with one exception, all the other significant verbs occur during the course of the narrative unit: the raven goes to and fro, ושוב (v. 7) and the dove does not return (v. 12); the dove does not find, **מצא**, a resting place (v. 9); Noah puts forth his hand and takes her, ויקחה (9). The exception is נתן, give, which occurs in Deut. 24.1 in relation to the handing over (ונתן בידה, lit. 'and he gave in her hand') of the divorce document. Perhaps it is not surprising that in Genesis 8, the verb that appears in relation to hand is שלח: 'and he sent forth his hand and took her' (v. 9); a bill of divorce is not easily accommodated in a story about a bird (though it is tempting to see a nod towards the bill of separation in the reference to the dove's torn olive leaf!).

I can see that these connections, especially the ones to divorce as described in Deuteronomy, will seem far-fetched to some readers. I see even more clearly that mentioning that some of them appear in only slightly altered guises in rabbinic commentaries on Noah will not help my case. Nevertheless, I cannot resist pointing out that the marital resonances I have identified

38. The term appears again in Neh. 13.3. 'When they heard the Teaching, they separated all the *alien admixture* (ערב) from Israel'.

in Gen. 8.6-12 seem to have been obvious to the authors of *b. Sanhedrin* 108b, who associate Noah's raven with various sexual misdemeanours:

> And he sent forth a raven. Resh Lakish said: The raven gave Noah a triumphant retort. It said to him, 'Your master hates me and you hate me. Your Master hates me—[since He commanded] seven [pairs to be taken] of the clean [creatures], but only two of the unclean. You hate me since you leave the species of which there are seven, and send one of which there are only two. Should the angel of heat or of cold smite me, would not the world be short of one kind? Or perhaps you desire my mate? "You evil one!" he exclaimed; "even that which is [usually] permitted me has [now] been forbidden: how much more so that which is [always] forbidden me!" And whence do we know that they were forbidden? From the verse, "And you shall enter into the ark, you, and thy sons, and your wife, and the wives of your sons with you," while whilst further on it is written, "Go forth from the ark, you, and your wife, and your sons and your son's wives with you." On this R. Johanan observed: "From this we deduce that cohabitation had been forbidden." Our Rabbis taught: Three copulated in the ark, and they were all punished—the dog, the raven, and Ham. The dog was doomed to be tied, the raven spits [its seed into his mate's mouth], and Ham was smitten in his skin.

Not only does the talmudic raven accuse Noah of wanting to mate with her, but she accuses him of wanting to mate with her on the ark where, according to R. Johanan, copulation of all forms was prohibited. Finally, the raven is accused by the rabbis of copulating on the ark, presumably with her own mate, since her punishment is to *spit seed into his mouth*.[39]

Several other suggestive verbal links between Genesis 6.1-4; 8 and Ezra 9–10 are worth mentioning. Ezra 9.4 contains the unusual piece of information that Ezra sat desolate until the evening offering, למנחת הערב. Verse 5 continues:

> And at the time of the evening offering, ובמנחת הערב, I ended my self-affliction, still in my torn garment and robe, and got down on my knees and spread out my hands, כפי, to the LORD my God and said…

As well as hinting at Noah's name, מנחת הערב may allude to Gen. 8.9, 'But the dove could not find a resting place, מנוח, for its foot, especially since

39. I shall not elaborate here, but the reference in *b. Sanhedrin* 108b reflects another biblical intertextual web on the same theme. It mentions three who copulated on the ark: the dog, the raven and Ham. Ham was punished by skin-affliction, a reference to his Cushite lineage (dark skin). This recalls Miriam's attack in Num. 12 on Moses' Cushite (black) wife, Zipporah (fem. bird), whom Moses is mysteriously said to have sent away in Exod. 18.2. Coincidentally, I assume, the talmudic punishment for the raven, spitting (רק) corresponds to God's difficult words to Moses about Miriam following her punishment for criticising the Cushite wife: 'If her father spat (ירק ירק) in her face, would she not be shut out of the camp for seven days?' (Num. 12.14).

it is evening time, לעת ערב, when the dove does eventually return with the torn olive leaf. The Hebrew for foot here is the slightly unusual רגלה־ לכף, sole [palm] of her foot, which is perhaps alluded to in Ezra 9.5 above, when Ezra spreads out his palms, בפי, in intercession. More important than these, however, are wordplays involving the word מעל (*ma'al*), the term that describes the sin of intermarriage in Ezra 9.2, and a word that Ezra himself subjects to an instant wordplay in 9.3:[40]

> They have taken their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy seed has become intermingled with the peoples of the land; and it is the officers and prefects who have taken the lead in this trespass, במעל הזה. When I heard this, I rent my garment and robe, ומעילי… (Ezra 9.2-3).

The fact that it would have been sufficient for Ezra to tear his garments, בגדים, draws attention to the seemingly superfluous robe, מעיל, which is not superfluous at all; it represents Ezra's measure for measure ritual response to the trespass. Since מעל is a key concept in Ezra, and since we have just seen Ezra playing with the word מעל, we should not be surprised to find similar wordplays in Genesis that allude to Ezra. Thus although the mixed union of sons of gods and daughters of men is not identified in Genesis as a מעל, the immediate punishment involves the word לעלם, an anagram of מעל: 'The LORD said, my breath shall not abide in man forever, לעלם' (v. 3). A second מעל wordplay involves the term מעל, 'from upon', which occurs in Gen. 6.7 in relation to the second stage of the punishment: 'The LORD said, "I will blot out from upon, מעל, the face of the earth the men whom I created'. The blotting out God has in mind is achieved by means of the water that covers the earth, which is of course mentioned many times throughout this narrative unit, but only seven times in conjunction with the term מעל (Gen. 7.4, 17; 8.3, 7, 8, 11, 13).

Intertextual Implications

What, then, is the overarching significance of what appears to be a high density of intertextuality between Ezra 9–10, Deuteronomy 24 and Genesis 6–8? Above all, it highlights the negativity of intermarriage since, if this analysis is correct, it is the cause of the flood, alongside violence and lawlessness. Yet it points to a rationale for the prohibition against intermarriage that is quite different, and less negative, than is usually supposed. Rather than polluting or rendering impure the holy seed of Israel, as commentators usually suppose, the profane seed will be made holy by being mixed, and

40. I am grateful to Gershon Hepner for drawing my attention to the *ma'al / le'olam* wordplay.

the progeny will be strengthened as a result. And what is the downside of this for Ezra? That Israel will lose its control over the land. This is why Ezra insists that resisting intermarriage will lead to perpetual security in the land, rather than to religious fidelity, as one might have expected based on the Deuteronomic prooftext (Deut. 7.3-4), which identifies intermarriage with the worship of other gods:

> Now then, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or let their daughters marry your sons; do nothing for their well-being or advantage, then you will be strong and enjoy the bounty of the land and bequeath it to your children forever (Ezra 9.12).

The language of Ezra's prohibition suggests that intermarriage will advantage the peoples of the land, and implies that the benefit will take the form of a stronger claim on the land. This is consistent with my reading of Ezra 9.2 in light of Genesis 6–9, with its implication that the progeny of mixed unions involving divine ('holy') males and human ('non-holy') women will be in some sense equivalent to the quasi-divine גברים, mighty men, who will fill the earth with lawlessness (which should perhaps be read as a way of saying that they would fill the land with their own law). It is also consistent with a strand of the flood narrative that makes uncomfortable reading for those who wish to emphasize its universality:

> God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth. The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky—everything with which the earth is astir—and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand' (Gen. 9.1-2).

As Brett has observed, the closing blessings given to Noah and his sons evoke images of Deuteronomic-like conquest (see especially Deut. 11.23-25), with promises of fruitfulness and filling the earth that were offered widely in Gen. 1.22 now limited to Noah and his sons.[41] I began by suggesting that Ezra did not deserve the charges of ethnic cleansing that have been levelled against him by some recent scholars, but ended by attributing to Ezra a position that, if not racist, is deeply nationalistic. I hope, however, to have shown that Ezra neither rejects foreign women as dangerous seductresses who will tempt Israelite men to worship alien gods, nor calls for their expulsion, nor even implies that they will pollute or defile the holy seed of Israel. Ezra seems rather to fear that whatever advantages he imputes to Israel's holy seed will be transmitted to non-Israelites via foreign wives, thus jeopardizing Israel's holdings in the land and undermining Ezra's long-term goals for the Judeans whose fragile identities have barely survived exile in Babylon.[42]

41. *Genesis*, pp. 43-44.

42. Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile. Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), p. 84,

Deuteronomic versus Priestly Views of Intermarriage

One more aspect of Ezra's intermarriage prohibition requires consideration. As many commentators make clear, Ezra appeals both to 'priestly' texts, specifically the Holiness Code, and to Deuteronomistic texts, and it is worth attending now to the implications of this for Ezra's intermarriage prohibition, and to what we might learn from Ezra about the perspectives on intermarriage of his source texts. To oversimplify for the sake of clarity, several important differences are evident between Deuteronomic and priestly views on this matter. First, the aspects of marriage emphasized in priestly texts pertain mainly to sexuality, fertility, and family purity. The legal and contractual aspect of marriage, not of great interest to the priestly writer, are of central interest to the Deuteronomist, who in turn has little time for sexuality, fertility and family purity. Second, priestly texts have no laws and prohibitions relating to divorce. Instead, they have rituals that will, as my son, Jacob, put it so well when I asked for his help with this, either preserve the marriage or destroy it in the attempt. Deuteronomy, on the other hand, does have a divorce law, but it has no rituals comparable to סוטה (*sotah*), the law of the jealous husband (Num. 5), which is in fact far more likely to preserve a marriage than to destroy it. Third, and related to my second point, priestly authors view marriage as an eternal bond that cannot be broken. The Deuteronomic authors, on the other hand, see divorce as a ready option, at least for men, without stigma. Fourth, these differences reflect their authors' radically different perspectives on the origins of marriage.

The starting point for priestly writers is that eligible partners must be drawn from within a single kind or group. This is only what we should expect from the authors of Genesis 1, where species of animals were created to remain distinct. Even when they live alongside each other, sometimes in close proximity, as in the laboratory conditions of the Ark, there is no suggestion that they interbreed. On the contrary, the sense in which animals might be inappropriately mixed is not through sex, but in a cooking pot or in the stomach of the person eating them. Likewise, people were created in national/ethnic groups, within which we might assume that they were intended to breed. Not all relationships within a given group are deemed acceptable, and the priestly authors pay great attention to the unacceptable subsets within the acceptable whole. Yet the appropriateness or otherwise of relationships that extend beyond the boundaries of the group are not even considered—they are quite

describes a similar anxiety, and its rhetorical response, in relation to the intermarriage of Hutu and Tutsi in Burundi: 'Hutu men were tempted to marry Tutsi women for social advancement, but they were warned that intermarriage leads first to 'servitude and entrapment into ever harder work', and ultimately to death through the "adulteration of categories" '.

literally beyond the pale. Crucially, if counter-intuitively, incest—that is, inappropriate relationships within a set—does not threaten a marriage, but merely defiles one of the partners and, at worst, produces a child whose father is not its mother's husband (critical for priests, as we have seen, but presumably not for other Israelites). Intermarriage, on the other hand, involves sex with someone outside the defined borders of the set, and thus threatens not just the marriage, but the entire system. Whereas incest constitutes breaking the rules while continuing to play the game, intermarriage represents walking off the playing field and embarking on a completely different sport. The priestly authors regulate forms of mixing, such as food categories, that, though undesirable, may be accommodated within the system, while ignoring completely those forms of mixing, such as inbreeding, that threaten to undermine the system altogether.

This raises the question put to me by Mark Brett: Why does the Holiness Code not prohibit intermarriage? My underlying answer is that intermarriage was impossibly threatening to the priestly writers and they responded by ignoring it. If this sounds implausible, there are interesting modern parallels. The Orthodox rabbinate in Israel has, officially at least, been meticulous in dealing with matters of conversion and Jewish status, especially as they pertain to marriage and the right of return. Yet in the case of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, the rabbinate faced an intractable problem. The number of people involved was too great, their lineages too complex, their 'documentation' too limited, and their co-operation too uncertain to make possible a systematic solution. In Israel today, Russian Jews, for many of whom Jewish status cannot be demonstrated, routinely marry halakhic-Jewish Israelis, and are buried in Jewish cemeteries, all under the auspices of an Orthodox rabbinate that flexes its muscles instead over symbolic cases involving small numbers of people with an investment in their system and something to lose. In the priestly writings, these symbolic cases are represented by incest, a relatively unthreatening problem in the big scheme of things, and one that, unlike intermarriage, could be 'fixed' within the system.

Another issue on which Deuteronomy's perspective is quite different from that of the priestly authors is the origins of the peoples or nations. For the Deuteronomic writers, nations are not part of the fabric of creation, but are artificial human constructs that come and go and, even when they stay, are fluid and open to transformation. Whereas priestly texts emphasize the inherent, ethnic aspect of nationality—Moab is an enemy because it was founded on an incestuous relationship—Deuteronomy emphasizes qualities that are neither inevitable nor inbuilt, but based on the memory of an arbitrary event. Thus in Deuteronomic texts, Moab is an enemy because it once failed to behave well towards Israel in the wilderness, not because, as in priestly texts, it is the product of bad breeding. For this reason, perhaps, incest is not a cause for particular concern for Deuteronomic authors; it is

memory that transmits national identity, not inherited traits. Intermarriage, on the other hand, which could result in a new, or radically reconstructed nations or empires, looms large in Deuteronomic thought as a threat to Israelite identity.

These different perspectives on national identity are mirrored precisely in their authors' attitudes towards the land. The priestly authors assume a permanent, unbreakable relationship between God and the land; temporary periods of exile aside, they assume that the people of Israel will always inhabit the land, and God will always govern it. The Deuteronomistic authors assume a highly conditional relationship between God, Israel and the land. Other nations occupied the land before Israel came there, and other nations may occupy it in future, and in the meantime Israel may transform itself beyond recognition and become 'as if' another nation. For Deuteronomy, as a man could divorce his wife, so God could cut himself off from Israel—land and people. And as a woman could transform herself from eligible to ineligible by marrying another man, even if he subsequently divorced her or died, thus disqualifying herself for her first husband, so Israel could transform itself by worshipping other gods, with all that entails, thus disqualifying itself for God. Defining God's relationship with Israel as a Deuteronomic marriage admits the possibility of divorce, while intermarriage, conceptually similar to marriage to other gods, admits the possibility of disqualification from remarriage to God. Defining God's relationship with Israel as a priestly marriage guarantees permanency, and means that marital breakdown of any kind, represented by inappropriate sexual relations, of which adultery is conceptually one, can be corrected by means of an appropriate ritual, or though a ritualized natural or political event such as famine or exile.[43]

43. See again Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, p. 3. I was stunned by how closely her account of the differences between Hutus living in refugee camps in Burundi versus those who lived in towns corresponds to my understanding of the differences between biblical advocates of national versus non-national paradigms: The Hutus who lived in camps 'were continually engaged in an impassioned reconstruction of their history as "a people"… The camp refugees saw themselves as a nation in exile, and defined exile, in turn, as a moral trajectory of trials and tribulations that would ultimately empower them to reclaim (or create anew) their "homeland" in Burundi. In contrast, the town refugees had not constructed such a categorically distinct, collective identity. Rather than defining themselves collectively as "the Hutu refugees" [or even just "the Hutu"], they tended to seek ways of assimilating and of inhabiting multiple, shifting identities—identities derived or "borrowed" from the social context of the township… The opposition between the historical-national thought of the camp refugees and the cosmopolitan ways of the town refugees made it possible to discern how the social, imaginative processes of constructing nationness and identity can come to be influenced by the local, everyday circumstances of life in exile, and how the spatial, social isolation of refugees can figure in this process'.

The fundamental differences of outlook between Deuteronomic and priestly texts highlighted above may help to answer the perplexing question of why the priestly texts have no prohibition against intermarriage while Ezra, closer in some respects to a priestly ideology, does. Though they strive to exercise control over marital relationships in specific areas such as sexuality and fertility, priestly authors do not legislate in any area that would end a marriage altogether. Thus adultery is not presented as a cause for divorce, but rather as an issue that must be 'managed' by a jealous husband; even if a married woman is found guilty of adultery—and this was unlikely to occur unless the bitter waters were on some occasions poisoned—then the outcome was physical, not legal. Numbers 5, for example, makes no mention of divorce, though it is clearly dealing with adultery. Related to this, priestly texts do not refer to a category of marriage such as intermarriage that would threaten an existing or potential marriage. As noted above, this reflects God's relationship with the land and its inhabitants according to the priestly worldview. Exile functions in priestly texts as a ritual to deal with infidelity (suspected adultery), but since divorce is never mentioned, there is no threat of complete termination. In Deuteronomic texts, on the other hand, God could potentially divorce Israel and take a new wife, which is why Deutero-Isaiah specifies that God has not divorced Israel (Isa. 50.1).

For Deuteronomic authors, then, both marriage and Israel's relationship with the land are highly conditional and can be ended at any time, by the male partner or by God. Remarriage is possible, provided the female partner does not take another spouse after the divorce (this does not include adultery within a marriage, had that already occurred). Divorce need not be the absolute end of the relationship, provided the female partner responds appropriately. The bottom line is that marriage is a legal institution that can be regulated and terminated through laws. For priestly authors, both marriage and God's relationship with Israel and the land is unconditional. Hosea 3 is a good example of this general perspective. Although Hosea is not 'priestly' as such, its concerns in the first three chapters are precisely those of the priestly worldview—land, fertility, children, festivals. The suspension of marital activities in ch. 3 is a mechanism for repairing a marriage damaged by adultery, and the eternal marriage covenant in 2.21 ('And I will espouse you forever…') is preceded in v. 20 by a parallel covenant with the land articulated in language with strong priestly overtones: 'On that day, I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; I will also banish bow, sword and war from the land. Thus I will let them lie down in safety'. Hosea's eternal marriage/covenant is often read as a new development, the phoenix that arises from the ashes of the near-failed union between God, Israel and the land. Yet it may plausibly be read as a renewal of vows, the emphatic restatement of what was intended from the

outset—a permanent and everlasting union. In other words, for Hosea in its final form, marriage is far from conditional and possibly transient, and we are dealing in chapters two and three merely with the process by which the flaws are revealed and healed.

How can all this be brought to bear upon Ezra? Despite his obvious priestly associations, Ezra's model, both for marriage and for land, is rooted in the Deuteronomic worldview. This means that his solution to marital problems is not ritual, or a ritualized political or natural event, but legal—mass divorce. And yet, having said that, Ezra does go a step towards reconciling the two, and this occurs through the intertextual relationship he creates with the Genesis flood narrative. Divorce as Ezra construes it, is not simply a legal solution to the legal problem posed by an inappropriate marriage, but restores order in a quasi-priestly way, much as the flood restored the intended order of creation. If this is so, far from being less hospitable to foreigners than the priestly texts, as Ezra is often accused of being, he uses the Deuteronomic divorce model to be more hospitable. Now there is no need for expulsion of foreigners from the land, or mass destruction; legal correction will suffice. Moreover, one might see it as a sign of Ezra's underlying universalism and his commitment to facing up to some practical problems that Leviticus ducks that he strives to find a solution to the unexploded time-bomb represented by intermarriage in other priestly texts.

Finally on the subject of Ezra, and to return briefly to Ruth, with whom I began, it is possible to see Ezra more sympathetically if these two texts are read intertextually. It has long been fashionable to see the book of Ruth as a polemic against Ezra.[44] Ruth tells the story of a woman of surpassing virtue who became the grandmother of Israel's greatest king, and yet who would have been excluded on the basis of Ezra's programme of enforced divorce. I read Ruth rather as a polemic *supporting* Ezra, making viable his hard-line attitude towards foreign women by offering guidelines for their safe inclusion if certain conditions are met. Women who abandon their parents, their people, their gods and, ideally though not necessarily their land, and follow Israelite laws down to the last detail are deemed to be safe. In defence of my reading, I suggest that the relationship it assumes between law and narrative is the norm in biblical literature. As I shall discuss in more detail just below, biblical laws are essentially clear-cut and aspirational, while the narratives are complex and address the messy reality. On this model, Ezra sets out his aspiration—that all Israelite men divorce their foreign wives. Ruth, without compromising Ezra's hard-line position, demonstrates how certain women, in specific situations, can be safe. The second clause is the crucial one. Ruth, however virtuous, was far from 'safe' in Moab, as indicated by the fact that her first husband died there prematurely and without an heir.

44. See, e.g., Myers, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 84.

If Ruth is the paradigm of the safe wife, Delilah is the blueprint for a dangerous liaison. She is the girl who maintains her national and family links, and privileges her parents, people, gods and laws over Israel's, especially at times of war. According to the history of interpretation, Delilah is the foreign *femme fatale par excellence*, who remains, along with her husband, among her own people, and thus jeopardizes her husband's personal security. I cannot resist noting in passing that even Delilah is not all that later interpreters claim. She undertakes a vitally important military operation on a strictly professional basis, hence the generous salary, follows instructions to the letter, achieves her goal by wifely nagging, failing even to remove her clothes as far as we know, and enlists an accomplice to do the final deed (had she developed maternal feelings for the infantile Samson?). The history of interpretation polarizes foreign women and Israelite men to produce cartoon-like cautionary tales of little interest in the real world. It reduces Ezra to a proto-fascist, cleansing the land of unclean women. The Bible itself, on the other hand, treats these relationships as complex microcosms through which such issues as identity, ethnicity, nationality, loyalty, and inheritance may be explored, and which offer no easy answers. And on that note, I turn to Genesis 39, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, the foreign seductress who is perhaps least easily brought in from the pale.

Longing in *Egypt*

That Joseph, along with Esther, is a model assimilator is highlighted by many commentators and interpreters, from the authors of *Genesis Rabbah* to Aaron Wildavsky in his important book on this subject,[45] but few render the Egyptian Joseph as graphically as Thomas Mann in his epic novel *Joseph and his Brothers*:

> We know that by the age of twenty-seven the Egyptian Joseph, removed to this land of death for ten years now, had become an inveterate Egyptian—in the civil if not spiritual sense—and for the last three of them had been clad in a very Egyptian bodily garment, so that Joseph was now protected and informed by Egyptian stuff; we also know that, although always keeping an inner distance, he had conformed and become Egypt's child, sharing in Egypt's year, celebrating its freakish customs and the feats of its idols in an amiable, worldly fashion and no little irony, confident that the man who had brought his calf to this field would close one eye.[46]

45. *Assimilation versus Separation: Joseph the Administrator and the Politics of Religion in Ancient Israel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993).

46. T. Mann, *Joseph and his Brothers* (trans. J.E. Woods; London: Everyman, 2005), pp. 1016-1017.

Until this point in the novel, Joseph has retained his inner-Israelite core, as Mann is at pains to emphasize, but on New Year's Day, in the house of his master Potiphar, Joseph enters Egypt in spirit if not in deed, and allows Egypt to enter him:

> 'And me?' the voice called out from its twilit chamber. 'Since you are looking after everything else in the house, do you not want to look after me, Osarsiph, and have you not heard that I remained alone behind, alone and suffering? Cross the threshold, come to me.' 'I would gladly do so,' said Joseph, 'would gladly cross the threshold to visit you mistress, if several details in the reception room were not in total disarray and did not demand my immediate attention.' But the voice rang out: 'Step in here to me. Your mistress commands it.' And Joseph *crossed the threshold* into her room.[47]

Genesis 39 is generally read as a simple moral parable: the foreign seductress tempts the righteous Israelite, but righteousness prevails. Readers of my preceding chapter, not to mention anyone who has registered the title of this book, will not be surprised to hear that I see a more complex narrative. Far from being a straightforward opposition of good versus evil manifested in the triumph over adultery, Genesis 39 raises complex questions about society and identity. How far can Joseph assimilate into Egypt without ceasing to become an Israelite? How high can Joseph climb in Egypt without compromising his Israelite values? Can an Israelite (Hebrew) be at the same time an Egyptian? Is Diaspora living viable in the long-term? These questions are crucial components of the drama, a drama that comes to a head in Genesis 39. Along with Dinah and Shechem, Samson and Delilah, David and Bathsheba, and Ruth and Boaz, to name but a few, it falls under an umbrella we might term 'international relations in biblical bedrooms'.

The Downside of Reading for Role Models

Before proceeding to the biblical text, I want to make some preliminary comments about why commentators have for so long oversimplified the message of Genesis 39 and other narratives of the same genre, and why I find these simple readings unhelpful and indefensible. The first part of this equation concerns the Bible's use by faith communities. The story of Joseph and Potiphar, as traditionally read, sends a simple moral message with which few would argue: Avoid adultery, young man, especially with foreign women. This advice is both plausible in its own terms, and compatible with prohibitions and warnings in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20.1-14) and Prov. 6.32-35: 'He who commits adultery is devoid of sense; only one who would destroy himself does such a thing'. In short, there seems to be no good reason to question it, and even exegetes working beyond the borders

47. Mann, *Joseph and his Brothers*, p. 1023.

of faith communities have rarely done so. Against this conclusion, though, stand several other considerations that must be taken into account, starting with the suitability of biblical narrative as a vehicle for simple moral teachings such as this one.

Biblical narrative, by virtue of its characteristic styles and techniques, is unlikely to produce characters or situations that serve as simple role models, or even to produce exemplary or counter-exemplary texts.[48] This conclusion is at the very least implicit in the countless literary-aesthetic analyses of biblical narrative that have appeared in recent years,[49] but for its most succinct, and arguably most powerful, explication, we must go back to the mid-Twentieth Century, to Erich Auerbach's magisterial treatment of reality in Homer and the Hebrew Bible.[50] Two crucial contrasts emerge in 'Odysseus' Scar', the first chapter of Auerbach's *Mimesis*. First, Homer reveals where the Bible conceals. In Homer, '…nothing must remain hidden or unexpressed. With the utmost fullness, with an orderliness that even passion does not disturb, Homer's personages vent their inmost hearts in speech; what they do not say to others, they speak in their own minds, so that the reader is informed of it'.[51] In the Hebrew Bible, on the other hand, speech does not serve 'to manifest, to externalize thoughts—on the contrary it serves to indicate thoughts that remain unexpressed'.[52] The Hebrew Bible simply withholds the evidence—memories, desires, associations, motivations—required to sum up its characters. Second, Homeric characters, fixed from birth, contrast sharply with Hebrew Bible characters who develop:

> Herein lies the reason why the great figures of the Old Testament are so much more fully developed, so much more fraught with their biographical past, so much more distinct as individuals than the Homeric heroes. Achilles and Odysseus are splendidly described in many well-ordered words, epithets cling to them, their emotions are constantly displayed in their words and deeds—but they have no development and their life-histories are clearly set forth once and for all… But what a road, what a fate, lie between the Jacob who cheated his father and the old man whose favorite son has been torn to pieces by a wild beast![53]

48. R.G. Bowman, in W.P. Brown (ed.), *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 73-97.

49. See especially R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

50. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. W. Trask; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953).

51. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 6.

52. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 11.

53. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 17.

The narrator's determination to withhold from readers all but a tantalizing glimpse of the internal lives of his characters, whilst at the same time urging them to accompany his characters on each step of their tortuous life journeys, discourages objective assessment. We do not know enough to 'sum up' a character—any more than we ever know enough about flesh and blood humans to sum them up—nor do we feel sufficiently detached to do so.

While Hebrew Bible narratives are rarely, if ever, exemplary, they are often heavily typological. Here I have in mind Michael Fishbane's definition of typology as the identification of certain 'persons, events or places as the prototype, pattern or figure of historical persons, events or places that follow it in time'.[54] While acknowledging that typology is associated primarily with post-biblical exegesis, Jewish and Christian, Fishbane makes a strong case for inner-biblical typology. Especially pertinent is his discussion of the use in some prophetic texts of the figure of Jacob. Thus in Hosea 12 'the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau, as well as other instances of Jacob's deceptions and deeds, form the basis of a trenchant diatribe against latter-day Israel'.[55] Similarly, Jeremiah 9.3-5 adapts key terms from the Jacob Cycle, Gen. 25.11–34.22, to 'stress that the new Israel is like the old—filled with mendacity and duplicity in interpersonal relationships… For him [Jeremiah], the misdeeds and deceptions of the past are renewed in the misdeeds of Jacob's descendants.[56] As Fishbane makes clear, we are dealing not merely with a rhetorical trope, but with an attempt to understand the very nature of Israel.[57] 'The nation is not just like its ancestor, says Hosea, but is its ancestor in fact—in name and in deed'.[58] This being the case, it is easy to see why the figures from which typologies are drawn cannot be simple 'types'. To be sure, the examples cited here use Jacob to explain Israel's faults, but a convincing typological identification of Israel the nation with Jacob/Israel the patriarch would require the inclusion of positive as well as negative elements. This is, indeed, what we find. In an example that, for our purposes, speaks for itself, Malachi explains how God manifests his love for postexilic Israel: '"Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob and hated Esau" (1.2)'. Though less explicit than Malachi, Deutero-Isaiah likewise uses the figure of Jacob positively in his prophecies to the Babylonian exiles. Meira Polliack offers a detailed analysis of this theme in her article 'Deutero-Isaiah's Typological

54. *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 350.

55. *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 376.

56. *Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 378-79.

57. Post-biblical Judaism's commitment to typology may be connected with its lack of interest in recording history. See Y.H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

58. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 378.

Use of Jacob in the Portrayal of Israel's National Renewal'.[59] Working from the other end, I have explored in my own work the extent to which Jacob's dreams in Genesis may have functioned to enrich the Jacob typology, offering a model of hope and validation for the exiles in Babylon.[60] Thus the patriarch banished from home (with cause!) and condemned to servitude under a non-Israelite nevertheless returns to supplant the innocent but not straightforwardly deserving brother who stayed at home. Likewise the Babylonian exiles, whose theological understanding of the exile required a measure of self-blame, were banished and condemned to servitude, but would nonetheless return to reclaim their rightful superiority over their Jewish siblings—about 90% of the pre-exilic population, hence the need for validation—who had remained in Judah. For this inner-biblical typology, not to mention post-biblical Jewish typology, to function effectively, Jacob cannot be reduced to a two-dimensional 'type'. Rather, his character must be sufficiently complex to reflect the self-image of Jews, whether in Babylon or in Roman Palestine, who look to Jacob both for an explanation for what went wrong in the past and for an indication that the future will be better.[61] Judaism's commitment to Jacob's significance beyond himself precludes a narrow character assessment, let alone a final judgement. And although I have focussed here on the character of Jacob, I believe my comments apply more generally.

Joseph and Potiphar's Wife: A Case Study

In a paper on feminist biblical exegesis delivered at a meeting of the International Society for Biblical Literature (ISBL), Cambridge, July 2003, Yael Shemesh of Bar Ilan University made the important and worthwhile observation that being a card-carrying feminist should not entail condoning the behavior of all women, no matter how egregious. Potiphar's wife, she said, was a woman whose immoral behavior could not be excused. This was my cue to come to Mrs Potiphar's defense with the reading I shall now

59. M. Polliack, in H.G. Reventlow and Y. Hoffman (eds.), *Creation in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (JSOTSup, 319; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 72-110.

60. *Revisions of the Night*, pp. 104-14.

61. See, e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* 22.8 on Jacob's removal of the stone from the well in order to water Rachel's sheep. On one interpretation, the well is the Sanhedrin, the three flocks the three rows of scholars who sat before the court, the water the Halakhah (Jewish law) that poured forth from it, and the stone the great convener who assisted in court deliberations. On another interpretation, the well is the synagogue, the three flocks the men called to chant from the sacred scroll, the water words of Torah disseminated to the congregation, and the stone distraction, the ever-present enemy of study and prayer.

expound. Soon after completing the first draft of this chapter, I learned that I was not alone in wanting to defend Mrs Potiphar; a few weeks later, Ron Pirson of Tilburg University published a more or less identical interpretation of Potiphar's physical condition and Mrs Potiphar's relationship to Joseph in the Sc*andinavian Journal of the Old Testament*.[62] Our interaction over that coincidence led Ron to invite me to participate in a three-year session on Genesis 18–19 he was about to propose to the ISBL. On the day the proposal was accepted, Ron was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer and he died a few months later. The ISBL session went ahead in Ron's memory, and this chapter too is dedicated to a fine and inventive scholar who was only just beginning to make his mark on the field.

In biblical terms, three possible crimes could have put Mrs Potiphar beyond redemption. First, she tempted Joseph to commit adultery (Gen. 39.7, 10, 12, cf. Exod. 20.13); second, had she successfully seduced Joseph, she herself would have been an adulteress, not because the man she sleeps with is married to someone else, but by virtue of sleeping with a man who is an adulterer by virtue of sleeping with her (Lev. 20.10);[63] and third, had she successfully tempted Joseph, she would have provoked her husband's jealousy, thus meriting the shame-inducing ordeal of the bitter waters (Num. 5.11-31).[64] On the standard reading of the chapter, Potiphar's wife is guilty on all three counts, but I shall try to show that only the first of these three accusations can plausibly be brought to bear, and that even this may be unreasonable in the circumstances. I hope to demonstrate that Potiphar's wife was acting according to narrative and cultural expectations, as perceived by the narrator, when she asked Joseph to sleep with her. Indeed, far from making her husband jealous, she may have been following his unreported instructions in an attempt to secure the continuity of his line.[65]

62. 'The Twofold Message of Potiphar's Wife', *SJOT* 18 (2004), pp. 248-59. I am grateful to Gershon Hepner for commenting on that first draft, for drawing my attention a few weeks later to Ron Pirson's article, and for writing to tell Ron about my parallel interests and thus initiating a fruitful and significant exchange between myself and Ron.

63. According to BDB, citing Lev. 20.10 and Ezek. 16.38, 23.45, only priestly texts classify women as adulterers (p. 610).

64. It is common to identify the crime of the סוטה as adultery or sexual infidelity but, as the text makes clear, male jealousy is the real issue: 'This is the law of jealousy…' (Num. 5.29).

65. When the long-suffering wife of the Emperor of Japan finally gave birth to a baby boy, the BBC commented that the Japanese throne has been less secure in recent years—Emperors can no longer take concubines. One might add that, at the same time, media attention, our demand for personal information about public figures, and advanced medical testing have made it impossible for the Emperor, and others in his position, to commission another man to impregnate a wife or concubine on his behalf. But who comments on this?

Several factors justify the suggestion that Genesis 39 is concerned with the continuity of Potiphar's line. The continuity of a man's line, and his wife's determined efforts to secure it, are explicit themes of Genesis 38. Many theories have been generated to explain the inclusion of the story of Judah and Tamar in what is otherwise an unusually holistic piece of biblical narrative that is not unreasonably labelled a 'novella', and to those we can add the possibility that a redactor had in mind an explicit parallel between Potiphar and Er and Potiphar's wife and Tamar when he interjected this story between the introduction of Potiphar in Gen. 37.36, 'The Midianites, meanwhile, sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward', and the story's continuation in 39.1, 'When Joseph was taken down to Egypt; a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there'. Had the redactor perceived no link between Er and Potiphar, an interjection between 37.35, '…and his (Joseph's) father wept for him', and 37.36, 'The Midianites, meanwhile…', would have been smoother. This connection does not exclude other explanations for the inclusion of the story of Judah and Tamar in the Joseph narrative. It merely offers a justification for the exact placement of the contents of Genesis 38, namely that the thematic and structural parallels created the peg upon which the redactor could hang Judah and Tamar, and suggests that, given this placement, it is appropriate to read ch. 39 through the lens of the chapter that precedes it. It is worth noting that both chapters open with a verse recording that the main male protagonists, Judah and Joseph, respectively, 'went down'. Numerous similarities and differences have been sketched between these two figures on the basis of this structural parallel. To these I add that both men are seduced, successfully in Judah's case and unsuccessfully in Joseph's, by a woman for the purpose of continuing her husband's line or, to put it another way, in order to have a child. Moreover, in both cases, the woman appears at first glance to be acting in a sexually inappropriate way—Tamar by disguising herself as a prostitute and Potiphar's wife by giving the appearance of being driven solely by lust. In Tamar's case, that impression is false—she is not acting inappropriately, but getting her due and guaranteeing her husband's line. It does not follow that the same will be true of Potiphar's wife, but we should not rule it out.[66] Ron Pirson identifies one more parallel: both narratives feature *coitus interruptus*—compare Onan in Gen. 38.9 with Joseph in Gen. 39.17.[67]

66. *Genesis Rabbah* condones Potiphar's wife for quite a different reason: R. Samuel ben Nahman said: In order to bring the stories of Tamar and Potiphar's wife into proximity, thus teaching that as the former was actuated by a pure motive, so was the latter. For R. Joshua ben Levi said: She [Potiphar's wife] saw by her astrological arts that she was to produce a child by him [Joseph], but she did not know whether it was to be from her or her daughter (Gen. R. 85.2).

67. 'The Twofold Message of Potiphar's Wife', p. 257.

The second factor that indicates that Genesis 39 deals with continuity of line is semantic. In the above translation, I followed convention in rendering סריס פרעה as 'Pharaoh's courtier', but 'eunuch' is the primary definition. While acknowledging reasons many translators must have for preferring courtier, it seems reasonable to suggest that, at the very least, 'eunuch' can be read at a secondary level in this text, that is, readers were expected to take the hint, even if 'courtier' was intended as the plain sense meaning.[68] The unusual number of designations attached to Potiphar—his name, of course, together with סריס פרעה, courtier and/or eunuch, שר הטבחים, 'chief steward', and איש מצרי, Egyptian man—may also argue for a more loaded reading of סריס פרעה, Pharaoh's eunuch, than would have been justified had this been his only label. Context might also be offered as a rationale for selecting between 'courtier' and 'eunuch' or 'courtier' and 'courtier/eunuch', and I shall try to show that, in this case, context does justify the more complex meaning.[69] Finally, although it by no means settles the matter, the Septuagint's choice of a term that unambiguously signifies 'eunuch' may be brought to bear as, at the very least, an early interpretation of the Hebrew Bible Genesis 39.

Third, Genesis 37 contains a convoluted account of the selling of Joseph into servitude in Egypt. His brothers intend to sell him to the Ishmaelites (v. 27) .[70] In the event, the Midianites sell him to the Ishmaelites (v. 28) and yet nevertheless manage to retain ownership and sell him a second time to Potiphar in Egypt (v. 36).[71] Significantly, for our purposes, Joseph is much sold, מכר, in ch. 37 (vv. 27, 28, 36), but not once bought. The first reference to a purchase comes in 39.1:

> ויוסף הורד מצרימה ויקנהו פוטיפר סריס פרעה שר הטבחים איש מצרי
> מיד הישמעאלים אשר הורדהו שמה׃

> 'When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there'. The shift from sale to purchase may reflect the narrator's shifting attention; for the time being, at least, Potiphar is the end

68. H. Tadmor, 'Was the Biblical "sarîs" a Eunuch?', in Z. Zevit *et al.* (eds.), *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honour of Jonas C. Greenfield* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 317-25.

69. I am conscious of a certain circularity here. I am using the narrative context to help define the meaning of סריס (courtier/eunuch?) and the meaning of סריס to help interpret the narrative in which it occurs. It will be for the reader to decide whether or not this is justified.

70. See E.L. Greenstein, 'An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph', in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, II (ed. K. Gros Louis; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), pp. 114-25. for the best account I know of this confusion.

71. I am grateful to Ron Pirson for correcting my mistaken assumption that Joseph's brothers also sold him. See Pirson, *The Lord of the Dreams*, pp. 73-79.

> of the chain. But the new verb also provides an opportunity to introduce a central theme of this text.

The word קנה, purchase, resonates both with קנה, to create or procreate, as in Eve's creation of a male child with God's help, Gen. 4.1, and **קנא**, jealousy, associated both with suspected marital infidelity, Num. 5.11-31, and with Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37.11). Through this triple word-play, the narrator offers a précis of the plot: Potiphar buys (קנה) Joseph, already an object of jealousy (**קנא**) who will procreate (קנה) with his wife, thus arousing his jealousy (**קנא**). That Potiphar engineered this himself is no protection against jealousy, as we see from the comparable experience of Sarah and Hagar (Gen. 16.1-6).

One of the three labels attached to Potiphar in addition to his name is 'Egyptian man', **איש מצרי**. In v. 2, Joseph is described as 'a successful' man, **איש מצליח**, in the house of his master 'the Egyptian', המצרי, not 'the Egyptian man', **איש מצרי**, this time. It is worth noting that Joseph is similarly described as successful in prison, but there in 39.23 מצליח, successful, is used without the **איש**, man, that accompanies it here in v. 2. In other words, once Potiphar has purchased Joseph, he ceases to be the man of the house, and Joseph takes on that role. While **איש מצרי** may be rendered 'a certain Egyptian', as NJPS does here, the two-fold use of 'man', once in relation to someone called a 'eunuch', even if he is not actually castrated, and once in relation to a beautiful boy with whom the eunuch's wife wants to have sex, must surely be read as a *double entendre*. This reading is reinforced by one of several differences between the report of her encounter with Joseph that Mrs Potiphar delivers to her servants, and her account to her husband. To her servants, she says 'Look, he brought us a Hebrew man (**איש עברי**) to dally with us', Gen. 39.14. When speaking to her husband, however, she calls Joseph a 'Hebrew slave', העבד עברי, Gen. 39.17. Was she protecting her husband's dignity by designating Joseph according to his role, not his gender? Or was she already beginning the process that would end with Joseph's expulsion from her house? Or, reading quite differently now, was the narrator signalling that Potiphar's arrangements were more or less above board by highlighting the parallels to Exod. 21.4? This law falls under the general rubric of regulations applying to someone who buys, קנה (Exod. 21.2; cf. Gen. 39.1) a Hebrew slave, העבד עברי (Exod. 21.2; cf. Gen. 39.17):

> If his master gave him a woman, and she has borne him children, the woman and her children shall belong to the master, and he shall leave [**ויצא**, cf. Gen. 39.12] alone (Exod. 21.4).

There is nothing in the phrasing here to indicate that the owner had no children of his own, but, whether or not this was its intention, the Exodus law offers a mechanism for a childless man to acquire an heir. The children

of slaves who impregnate women given to them by their owners while in their service become, along with their mother, the property of the owner. We cannot assume that the woman he gave to his slave was his own wife, but nor can we rule that out. I am grateful to James Patrick for drawing my attention to the following passage, not an exact parallel, but with enough similarities to merit serious consideration, in 1 Chron. 2.33-36:

> These were the descendants of Jerahmeel. Sheshan had no sons; only daughters; Sheshan had an Egyptian slave whose name was Jarha. So Sheshan gave his daughter in marriage to Jarha his slave; and she bore him Attai. Attai begot Nathan…

We cannot infer from this that Sheshan would have given his slave to his wife had he not had a daughter, but nevertheless it indicates that mechanisms involving foreign slaves existed to cope with the lack of a suitable heir. The use of slaves is not surprising—it diminished the likelihood of competition over inheritance and lineage—and it should be noted that the Bible's two clear-cut cases of slaves used for procreation, Jarha and Hagar, are both Egyptian. There would be a certain poetic, indeed biblical, justice if Joseph, a Hebrew slave, was used for the same purpose by his Egyptian owner.[72]

To return now to Genesis 39, a second *double entendre* may be intended in relation to בית, house, which is certainly a euphemism for 'woman' in rabbinic texts,[73] and arguably already in the Bible. Three relevant definitions are offered by Jastrow—body, wife, and pudenda/intercourse. Brown, Driver, Briggs is not explicit, but does list body (2c), receptacle (3), and family (5), each of which points in the right general direction.[74] This meaning of בית in the Bible may be attested by 2 Sam. 11.8, in which David tells Uriah, 'Go down to your house and bathe your feet', by which he may mean, Go to your wife and have sex.[75] This reading of 'house' may also be attested by Ezek. 24.15-23, in which the death of the prophet's wife, the delight of his eyes, is equated with the destruction of the Temple (בית) the delight of God's eyes. The building language used in connection with the first woman, but not the first man, may also reflect the equation of women and houses in Gen. 2.22: 'The LORD God *built* the *side* (cf. Ezek. 41.5) into a woman'.[76]

72. It is curious that the best-known examples of women who safeguard the continuity of a threatened line are drawn from nations that are excluded, permanently or temporarily, from the congregation of Israel: Hagar the Egyptian (cf. Deut. 23.8-9), Ruth the Moabite (cf. Deut. 23.4-7) and Tamar the probable Canaanite (Deut. 7.1-6).

73. Jastrow, *ad loc*. 4 (body), 5 (wife) and 6 (pudenda, intercourse).

74. BDB, *ad loc*.

75. Foot is a euphemism for phallus in many rabbinic and biblical texts.

76. This reading, present in *Gen. R.*, *ad loc*. and *b. Berachot* 61a, is discussed at length by E. Levinas in *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 161-77.

With Joseph around, then, Potiphar is neither master over his house or of his wife. The particular language used to describe the way in which Potiphar's household flourishes once he has put Joseph in charge is non-specific, but evokes a general sense of increase that would usually include fertility: 'the blessing of the LORD was on everything he owned, in the house and outside'. The possibly euphemistic use of 'house' in verse 2 suggests that it may be used euphemistically, though ironically, again in v. 5: 'the LORD blessed his house for Joseph's sake…so that the blessing of the LORD was on everything he owned, in the house and outside'. If God has blessed Potiphar's 'house' through Joseph—in a structural reversal of Genesis 20.18, where God curses Abimelech's house by closing the wombs of all the women therein—where are the many offspring we might have expected to hear mentioned?

Verse 6 opens with the unexpected verb ויעזב, abandoned. Both the chief steward (39.22, 40.4) and Pharaoh (41.41) give, נתן, authority and responsibility to Joseph, but Potiphar 'abandons' into Joseph's hands 'everything he has'. Possible explanations for the choice of this verb come in the continuation of verse 6, and later in the chapter. Genesis 39.6b reports that, with Joseph in charge, Potiphar 'did not know anything except the bread he ate'. Once again, the repetitions that are a hall-mark of this narrative—Joseph finds himself being handed the metaphorical keys to the city no fewer than three times—facilitate an exercise in compare and contrast. The chief jailer does not 'see', ראה, anything that is in Joseph's hands (39.23), while Pharaoh uses a different term altogether: 'only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you' (41.40). It seems likely that ידע is used in 39.6 for its sexual associations, compare most obviously 'Adam knew his wife' in Gen. 4.1. This reading is supported by narrator's choice of the one area over which Potiphar retains control: his food, לחם. Food, לחם, too has the potential for *double entendre* in Biblical Hebrew, as is evident in Prov. 9.17: 'Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten furtively is tasty. He does not know that the shades are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol'. Needless to say, confusion between different types of appetites occurs in many cultures. Indeed, Joseph seems to recognize the inherent ambiguity when he misrepresents Potiphar to his wife. According to the narrator, Potiphar relinquishes control of everything except his food. As Joseph tells it to Mrs Potiphar, the domain in which Potiphar continues to exercise control is not his food, but his wife (v. 9). Final support from verse 6 for a sexual reading of Potiphar's abdication of responsibility for his wife comes from the grammatically seamless, yet thematically jarring, shift from the food that Potiphar continues to eat to Joseph: 'he [Potiphar] paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate. Now Joseph was well-built and handsome'. It is hard not to conclude that, by indulging his appetite for food and abandoning his house, including his wife, into the care of an attractive young man, Potiphar had it coming to him.

No wonder, then, that Potiphar's wife raises her eyes and sets her sights on Joseph: ותשא אשת־אדניו את־עיניה אל־יוסף. Elsewhere, this idiom draws attention to an object that is already present, but whose significance has not hitherto been clear.[77] The best example is the ram in Genesis 22, present all along, we must assume, but suddenly transformed into a suitable sacrifice. When the narrator has Mrs Potiphar raise her eyes immediately following his reference to Joseph's beauty, he implies that her interest in Joseph was inevitable—the Titanic on collision course with her ice-berg. Is the sheer inevitability of it all—indifferent husband, bored wife stuck at home, ancient equivalent of the drop-dead gorgeous tennis coach—the beginning of a ploy to disarm Mrs Potiphar's critics?

I used the word 'seduce' in relation to Mrs Potiphar's verbal encounter with Joseph, but it is hardly apt; this is no sultry *voulez-vous coucher*![78] The brisk imperative שכבה עמי, literally 'lie with me', but I prefer the more idiomatic 'sleep with me', can be read several ways. First, it could reflect her position of authority; the mistress of the house can expect her servants to satisfy her desires. Second, she is not playing with Joseph, but putting her cards on the table; she wants to sleep with him and tells him that in no uncertain terms. But should either of these factors improve her in our eyes? On one contemporary (to us) reading, the first factor could make her behavior seem still less acceptable; not only is this sexual harassment—the boss oppresses a worker with the implied threat of job loss—but it also raises racial and political issues—a member of elite ruling majority oppresses an ethnic minority refugee. On the other side of the coin, we might ask about Joseph's role in this affair. His beauty makes him an object of temptation, and we can hardly blame him for that, but the surrounding narrative indicates that Joseph was not only beautiful, he was vain—that special coat—and arrogant—he happily vaunted his superiority to his brothers. Did he lead Mrs Potiphar on? Is the abandoned wife of a eunuch, infatuated with her husband's charismatic and much younger right hand man, really in a stronger position in the household than the right hand man himself? The outcome suggests that she is. Joseph loses his job and gets thrown into jail on her say so. But what of Mrs Potiphar? Did she spend the rest of her life in the prison of a childless, sexless, perhaps even loveless, marriage, doomed to regret the rash words that removed the object of her desire and perhaps affection? Or did Potiphar abandon her soon after these events, in favour of a woman better equipped with the skills of seduction required to continue

77. S.C. Reif, 'A Root to Look Up: A Study of the Hebrew *ns' 'yn'*, in J.A. Emerton (ed.), *Congress Volume Salamanca, 1983* (VTSup, 36; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), pp. 230-44.

78. Contra H.A. McKay, 'Confronting Redundancy as Middle Manager and Wife: The Feisty Woman of Genesis 39', in *The Social World of the Hebrew Bible* (Semeia, 87; Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 1999), pp. 215-31 (218).

his line? As with Sarah, the elderly barren wife, compared with Hagar, the fertile concubine, it is not easy to decide who has the upper hand.

Genesis is replete with men and women trading partners and hopping beds. Men sleep with their wives' servants (Abraham with Hagar, Jacob with Bilhah and Zilpah) without apparent narrative condemnation, and they put their wives at the disposal of other men for material gain: Abraham makes Sarah available to Pharaoh in Genesis 12.10 and to Abimelech in Genesis 20, and Isaac does the same with Rebekah in Genesis 26. Women share their husbands with their sisters (Rachel and Leah), maneuver men into their beds (Tamar with Judah in Gen. 38, and perhaps Dinah with Shechem in Gen. 34), and show no signs of resistance when they are maneuvered into the beds of other men (Sarah with Pharaoh and Abimelech). Where does Potiphar's wife fit into this complex picture? Should we classify her alongside Abraham, a married man sleeping with a servant for the sake of getting a child? Or is she more like Sarah, a married woman sleeping with a foreign king, perhaps also to get a child?[79] Or is she like Tamar, tricking Judah into sex? Or is she more like Judah, looking for casual sex in the absence of a long-term partner, out of this world in Judah's case, and out of action in Potiphar's? Or must we look further afield, narratively speaking? Is Mrs Potiphar an equivalent of David, bored on a long, hot afternoon and in hot pursuit of the first warm body that catches his eye? Or does she rather belong with Bathsheba, apparently unable to resist temptation when it arises? Thus is the complexity of evaluating sexual behavior in the Hebrew Bible. Our search for appropriate precedents and role models is muddled by the vast and complex range of available options, in narrative, if not in legal and prescriptive texts.

Yet Mrs Potiphar does have a close structural parallel in Genesis: Sarah. As well as giving Sarah to Pharaoh and Abimelech, perhaps in the hope that she might get pregnant, Abraham seems to have contemplated using his servant Eliezer as an ancient equivalent of a surrogate father. Genesis 15.2-4 reports an exchange between God and Abram about childlessness: 'And Abram said, "O LORD God, what can you give me, seeing that I shall die childless, and the one in charge of my household [lit. the son of my house] is Dammesek Eliezer!" Abram said further, "Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir." The word of the LORD came to him in reply, "That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue shall be your heir,

79. Sarah was barren before going to Egypt (11.30), and Gen. 21.1-7 arguably protests too much over Abraham's paternity of Isaac (implying, perhaps, a prior expectation that Sarah could have been impregnated by a foreign king). See J.C. Exum, 'Who's Afraid of the Endangered Ancestress?', in J.C. Exum and D.J.A. Clines (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 143; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 91-124.

ירשך." ' The standard reading of this text posits a structural equivalence between Eliezer and the son Abram hopes to have. Yet what is at issue here is not so much inheritance as possession. Abram fears that, because he has no seed, זרע, not בן , his house boy will possess his house, thus usurping him as the link with future inhabitants of the land he will possess, ירש (v. 7). When God assures him that the product of his own loins will take possession, he confirms that a surrogate father will not be required. And if this seems far-fetched, is it any less implausible than the opening of Genesis 16 in which, having established that Abraham will be a natural father, Sarah engineers her 'building up' via her own servant? Both Genesis 15 and 39 may plausibly deal with the desperate attempts, quickly arrested in Abram's case and aborted in Potiphar's, of two men to continue their lines.

Those who scan Hebrew Bible texts for behavioral role models are usually concerned either with the Bible's internal codes of conduct—legal material—or with principles they believe to have emerged from those ancient codes. Yet can we be sure that the narrator judges Potiphar's wife according to Israel's standards and not Egypt's? The reference to Egypt in Lev. 18.3 implies different codes of sexual conduct were envisaged there. Is Mrs Potiphar simply conforming to Egyptian expectations by seducing Joseph, and thus not to be condemned at all in her own country? Or does reading this smack of twenty-first century liberal relativism? For reasons other than my liberality, I think it most likely that the author of Genesis 39 was evaluating Potiphar's wife on her own terms. An important underlying theme of the Joseph narrative is the clash of cultures; we look on as Joseph not merely survives, but thrives in an alien land. But at what cost? As we know from many, perhaps even most, other biblical texts, co-existence carries with it the threat of assimilation and loss of identity, and this anxiety—a central preoccupation of the Hebrew Bible—is crystallized in the encounter between Israelite and non-Israelite sexual partners.[80] Genesis 39 contributes to the biblical exploration of the risks (as presented in Deuteronomy) and rewards (as reflected in Esther) of assimilation precisely because Mrs Potiphar's values are *not* the same as Joseph's. The narrative simply fails if she is governed by the same laws that govern him (v. 9).

Mrs Potiphar's response to Joseph's claim that he cannot sin against God is an important factor in the reader's assessment of her character (v. 9). Far from backing off politely—no political correctness here—she pursues him with even more intensity, day after day, יום יום. But is this really so reprehensible? First, we cannot be sure that Joseph was sincere. The justification he offers alongside sin for rejecting Mrs Potiphar's advances—your husband withheld you from me (v. 9)—is not technically true; Potiphar withheld only the bread that he ate (v. 6). Should this discrepancy call into question

80. The 'Wife-Sister' texts in Genesis 12, 20 and 26 are parade examples.

the sincerity of Joseph's appeal to God? Or should we assume that in fact Joseph understood that Potiphar meant 'woman' when he said 'bread', and therefore declare him sincere? And even if Joseph is sincere, what should we make of it as far as Mrs Potiphar is concerned? From one perspective—that of the ethnic or religious minority—the narrator invites condemnation. But was the narrator resigned to the fact that ethnic and religious majorities tend towards a 'When in Rome' world-view. Many Anglo-Jewish school-children must sing hymns or learn to live with the disapproving glances of teachers who regard their refusal as a rejection of English values and culture. Their Anglo-Jewish parents must learn to choose between asking their children to stand out at school—not an insignificant request, as all parents know—and allowing them to compromise their religious identities. Did the narrator recognize the 'When in Rome' syndrome? Did he refrain from judging or condemning either side because his real interest was in representing what happens, or might happen, when cultures meet? And if he was judging anyone, is it not more likely to have been Joseph than Potiphar's wife? The particular kind of success Joseph has with his masters, and their wives, requires a dangerous willingness to mix with mainstream culture. Was the narrator using Joseph as a parade example of the risks of getting on in the world?[81]

The seduction scene itself requires very careful reading. Joseph enters Mrs Potiphar's house (not her husband's!) to do his work when no one else is around: 'And on one such a day, he came into the house to do his work, and there was no man from among the men of the house…'.

The term אין איש, no man, may even be a technical term meaning 'no witness', cf. Exod. 2.12. The comparative preposition כהיום, one such day, links this verse with the preceding one: 'Every day, she pressed him to sleep with her, and thus it was on this day'. In other words, Joseph had no reason to be taken off-guard. Indeed, the double meanings we have already observed for 'house' and for the verb to 'come' raise a question about what kind of work he came to do when he came to her house, ויבא הביתה. Significantly, perhaps, this is not, עבדה, service, but מלאכה, the work of creation. Had Mrs Potiphar arranged that the house would be empty? And why did Joseph stay when he saw that the house was empty? In a nice scene from the Hollywood film *Spanglish*, the beautiful Mexican maid and the too-good-for-his-self-absorbed wife Jewish-American man of the house—the chef of a three star restaurant—admit that they avoided being in the same room once they realized that they were falling in love. Why, we might ask, did Joseph put himself in temptation's way?[82]

81. See Shani Berrin's comments on the ambiguity of 'distinction' in the Passover Haggdah, cited in the first Chapter of this book.

82. Mrs Potiphar's inability to resist Joseph is the theme of a dark and complex

Verse 12 opens 'She caught hold of him by his garment and said, "Lie with me". But he left his garment in her hand and fled and went outside'. Had Joseph been unprepared for Mrs Potiphar, we might envisage a forceful physical encounter; he enters the house, she grabs his coat, he breaks away and flees. Since, however, he almost certainly is prepared, and may even have decided that this is the day he will give in, the climax of her nagging, comparable to Samson's revelation of the secret of his strength when Delilah has finally worn him down. Joseph voluntarily falls into the arms of Potiphar's wife, she removes his jacket, but he comes to his senses, pulls away, leaving his jacket in her hands, and flees. As noted above, Pirson makes a clever connection here with Onan's *coitus interruptus* in Gen. 38.9. As to what caused or constituted the interruption, it is hard to say. In the narrator's version, Joseph simply leaves his coat in Mrs Potiphar's hands and flees outside. Only then does she 'call', as in 'summon', not necessarily 'cry', to her servants. The absence of an explanation for what made Joseph change his mind created a valuable opportunity for later commentators; according to some midrashim and the Quran, he saw his father's face and thought better. In Mrs Potiphar's first account, Joseph fled when he heard her cry out in a great voice. For Pirson, this is not the cry of a rape victim, but a cry of ecstasy—as some women do in movies; Joseph fled because he feared discovery.[83] Yet this would entail that Joseph was unaware of Potiphar's intentions for him, which seems unlikely. As we shall see, the other servants were almost certainly in the know. I find it more plausible that Joseph fled because he could no longer keep all the balls in the air. He had raised false expectations, been derelict in his duties, and had humiliated his mistress and master into the bargain.

It is worth pausing for a moment over the garment that Joseph leaves with Potiphar's wife. The Joseph novella is full of mirror images and repetitions

story discussed by J. Kugel, 'Joseph's Beauty', *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretative Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 66-93. It appears in *Midrash Tanhuma VaYeshev 5* [cf. a near-identical text in *Qu'ran, Surah Yusuf* 31]: *'* Said the rabbis of blessed memory: On one occasion the Egyptian women gathered and went to behold Joseph's beauty. What did Potiphar's wife do? She took citrons [אתרוגים] and gave them to each of them and gave each a knife and then called to Joseph and stood him before them. When they beheld how handsome Joseph was, they cut their hands. She said to them: If you do thus after one moment, I who see him every moment, am I not all the more so [justified in being smitten]? And day after day she sought to entice him with words, but he overcame his desires. How do we know this? *And after these things, the wife of his master set her eyes upon Joseph (Gen. 39.7).*' See also S. Goldman, *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Islamic Folklore* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), especially ch. 2, 'The Spurned Woman'.

83. 'The Twofold Message of Potiphar's Wife', p. 257.

and, although the Hebrew noun is different (בגד versus כתנת), it is hard to avoid connecting the garment that Joseph abandons in the hands of Mrs Potiphar with the special coat his father gives him (37.3). Both get him into trouble—the coat provokes the jealousy of his brothers while it seems to be the abandoned garment that provokes Mrs Potiphar's summons to her servants—and both are used as evidence against him—Mrs Potiphar's accusation of rape and the brothers' claim that he is dead. The verb עזב, abandoned, suggests a further parallel, this time within the chapter. Potiphar abandons his house, including his wife, in Joseph's hands, expecting Joseph to take full responsibility for them, and now Joseph has abandoned his coat in Mrs Potiphar's hands. Clothing features prominently in this narrative, usually to indicate status. His special coat distinguishes Joseph from his brothers (37.3), Joseph changes clothes when he is rushed from the prison to Pharaoh's palace (41.14), and Pharaoh dresses Joseph in robes of fine linen when he appoints him as viceroy of all Egypt (41.42). The coat indicates Joseph's role in the household, as conferred upon him (lit. *abandoned* in his *hands*) by Potiphar. When Joseph *abandons* his coat in the *hands* of Potiphar's wife, he abandons his responsibilities. This is what Mrs Potiphar is telling her husband when she shows him the coat: 'Honey, the maid has quit'!

Far from running away because he fears discovery, Joseph flees because he has finally reached the point where he cannot be a loyal servant to two masters. And here he exemplifies the dilemma of Diaspora existence, much as I presented it in my first chapter in relation to God and the Exodus Pharaoh. Whose laws should he follow, God's or the laws of the land? Which authority should he recognize, the human king or the divine king of kings? How far will God support his endeavours in a strange land? The encounter between Joseph and Mrs Potiphar represents a working through of these questions. This may explain the use of the two verbs וינס ויצא, and he fled and went out. Sarna sees these reflecting the two stages of Joseph's escape; he rushes abruptly, וינס, from the room but resumes a normal gait, ויצא, once outside 'in order not to attract attention'.[84] Alternatively, perhaps וינס applies especially to Joseph's abdication of office, while ויצא alludes to the event to which this narrative serves as a literary prelude, the exodus from Egypt, יציאת מצרים. In another of those not-quite-repetitions that characterize this narrative (Joseph's two dreams, the Midianites and the Ishmaelites, twice in prison, two missions to Egypt by the brothers, two accusations of dishonesty, to name but a few), the narrator interprets the episode from Mrs Potiphar's perspective: 'When she saw that he had left it in her hand and fled outside…'. She sees Joseph give up his job when he abandons his garment of office and flees, but she does not at this point see

84. *Genesis*, p. 274.

the significance of his metaphorical flight from Egypt, or at least from those aspects of Egypt raised by his encounter with her.

Mrs Potiphar's report to her servants is revealing: 'Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us!' As all commentators note, the word for dally, מצחק, is polysemic even by Hebrew standards. Although it can mean mock (Ishmael of Isaac in Gen. 21.9), laugh (Sarah in Gen. 21.6), or dance (Samson in Judg. 16.25), it has sexual overtones (almost certainly Judg. 16.25 as before, but more clearly it describes what Isaac does to Rebekah when Abimelech realizes they cannot be brother and sister in Gen. 26.8). What exactly was Mrs Potiphar claiming, or implying, that her husband had brought Joseph to do? She seems to be saying that he had been brought to the house to have sex, a reading borne out by the continuation of the verse: 'This one came to lie with me; but I screamed out loud'. Commentators other than Pirson, who understands מצחק as I do, read this as Mrs Potiphar's false accusation against Joseph, but this entails separating 'lie with me' from 'dally'. The most natural reading of Mrs Potiphar's statement (all one sentence, not two, as NJPS makes it) is that Joseph was brought to have sex, ראו הביא לנו איש עברי לצחק בנו, and came to her house on the day in question for that very purpose: בא אלי לשכב עמי.[85] And it is at this point that Mrs Potiphar does something that seems wrong by any standards—she lies to her husband, not about what happened, but about the order in which events occurred: 'But I screamed out loud. And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside' (39.18). What explains the inconsistency between what she says to her servants and what she tells her husband? One explanation is that she is accusing Joseph of rape; 'the scream was regarded as evidence of resistance to attempted rape and, hence, was a sign of innocence'.[86] Alternatively, when she claims to have cried out loud, she refers not to her summons to her servants but to her cry of ecstasy. This reading is supported by her subsequent words to her husband. The Hebrew כי־הרימתי קולי, 'And I raised up my voice', may, as Pirson points out, have the happy connotations of orgasm or its anticipation. But this cry of ecstasy was not reported by the narrator (v. 12), and it seems more likely that Mrs Potiphar has conflated a perhaps exaggerated sense of her response to Joseph's embrace with the cry to her servants, in order to cover her own embarrassment.[87] On the one hand, she had been rejected and her impulse was to share her outrage. The differences between her report to her servants

85. Pirson, 'The Twofold Message of Potiphar's Wife', p. 252.

86. Sarna, *Genesis*, alluding to Deut. 22.24, 27.

87. Pirson, 'The Twofold Message of Potiphar's Wife', pp. 254-55, thinks the cry functions on two levels: when speaking to her husband, it is a cry of ecstasy; when speaking to her servants, it is a cry for help.

and the account she gives her husband might be read as a sign of her insincerity. More plausibly, they show a woman attempting to enlist much-needed moral and emotional support. She thus addresses the men of the house as if she were one of them, while at the same time distancing herself from her husband ('Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us')—the 'common enemy' strategy for winning friends. Not surprisingly, though, she stops short of a public admission that, so unattractive was she to Joseph, that he was willing to destroy his career to avoid sleeping with her. Her cry is thus intentionally ambiguous, hovering uncertainly—perhaps in her own mind as well as in her public presentation—between agony and ecstasy. Mrs Potiphar is not an evil beast after all; she is only human.

Potiphar's wife does not mention her servants when her husband finally comes home from the office, but her story is the same in spirit, if not precise content, and likewise suggests an attempt to enlist her husband's support, in part through empathy: 'The Hebrew slave came to me, whom you brought for us to dally with me…'. As mentioned above, Joseph is no longer a man, but a slave and, perhaps to spare Potiphar's feelings, she omits the phrase 'lie with me', לשכב עמי, preferring the more ambiguous 'came to me', בא אלי, less graphic, but used elsewhere to denote sex.[88] Interestingly, she does not avoid the sexually loaded verb מצחק when speaking to her husband, even emphasizing the connection with herself when she switches the accompanying pronoun from plural (v. 14) to singular (v. 17). A woman telling her husband that one of his employees had attempted to rape her would hardly use a playful term like this, even in one of its innocent incarnations. All this may suggests that Mrs Potiphar was unembarrassed about sex with Joseph—her husband really had intended him to sleep with her. It was not sex but the absence of sex that embarrassed her.

Several factors explain Potiphar's decision to throw Joseph into prison, albeit one under his own jurisdiction (40.3). As traditionally construed, he was responding to what he took to be an accusation of rape, but this seems unlikely, not least because the punishment does not match the crime, according to either Egyptian or Israelite law. Alternatively, he could have been defending his wife's honour, or at least saving her feelings, by removing the offending servant from her sight. More likely, though, his response was as emotionally complex as his wife's. First, Joseph's presence in the house is no longer required; he had failed in an area of particular concern to Potiphar, namely the generation of an heir. Second, the arrangement Potiphar had intended to make cannot have been without delicacy for him, publicly recognized eunuch or not. In rejecting his wife, Joseph had rejected and humiliated Potiphar, who would now have to go to the trouble of finding another suitable man to sire his

88. Pirson, 'The Twofold Message of Potiphar's Wife', p. 257, notes that the phrase occurs in an obvious sexual context in Gen. 38.18, of Judah and Tamar.

child. Third, it seems likely that Potiphar himself had formed an attachment to Joseph; he had entrusted his immediate household and, as I read it, his future house (cf. בית דוד, House of David) into Joseph's hands, and felt let down. Finally, Joseph had rejected Potiphar's authority. The final cut occurred when he abandoned his coat in the hands of Mrs Potiphar but, if the clash of cultures and the difficulties inherent in trying to serve two masters are, indeed, prevailing themes of this text, Potiphar must have sensed the conflict from the outset. Expelling Joseph to the 'Round House' was Potiphar's attempt to mark his own boundaries, just as Joseph had drawn his when he refused to sleep with Mrs Potiphar.[89]

I began with a quotation from a new translation of Thomas Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers*: 'And Joseph *crossed the threshold* [my italics] into her room'. Several important recent studies of the formation of Jewish identity in the Graeco-Roman period focus on boundaries and borderlines; almost without exception, they make the point that these boundaries are fluid and much-crossed.[90] Genesis 39 as I read it makes the same point. Some biblical texts—Deuteronomy, most obviously—aspire to life in an Israelite vacuum, free from temptation and contamination by external sources. Genesis has a different perspective—foreigners and 'Israelites', or their antecedents, live alongside each other in more or less peaceful co-existence. The Joseph novella tests the Genesis limits and, in literature as so often in life, the borders are crossed and boundaries blurred in the bedroom. Joseph survived some aspects of this trial in tact—he remained faithful to God and preserved his own values. Yet Egypt was by no means an unqualified success. Joseph lost his position in the Potiphar household, and although he quickly managed to rise to even greater heights, the second time around he was unable to resist the Egyptian woman—named Asenath the daughter of Poti-phera in what must be a nod of some sort towards the earlier story—who came with the territory. On the day that Pharaoh appointed Joseph as Viceroy over all Egypt, he also changed Joseph's name (to *Zaphenath-paneah*, which, as I have noted, sounds both sounds Egyptian and like the Hebrew for 'hidden face'[91]) and gave him an Egyptian wife, the daughter

89. Pirson makes the interesting suggestion that this is less a prison than a domain outside the immediate household. It seems to me, however, that the prison in Egypt parallels Joseph's descent into the pit in Canaan, just as the abandoned garment mirrored the special coat. Indeed, Joseph himself draws this parallel when he recounts his history to the butler and the baker: 'For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should put me in the dungeon (lit. "pit", cf. Gen. 37.24)'.

90. Notably, D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2004).

91. Cf. Esther, whose name sounds both like a Persian goddess and the Hebrew word for hidden, סתר.

of a priest to boot. Although Joseph's resists Mrs Potiphar and therefore adultery, and is rewarded for that by being designated in Jewish tradition as יוסף הצדיק, Joseph the righteous, he fails the ultimate test, which is to resist assimilation. In this sense, the Joseph novella takes the essentially pro-co-existence Genesis narrative to its unacceptable extreme, and, in the Pentateuch as we have it, the intervention of Moses is required to reverse the damage that Joseph has done.

The advent of feminist, ideological, and post-colonial biblical scholarship, combined with a widespread cross-disciplinary interest in identity formation, not to mention events in the Middle East, have all drawn attention to biblical texts dealing with foreign women. I hope I have shown, though, that there is a great deal more to be said about the intersection between identity politics and sexual politics. A good place to start is with a rejection of the cartoon image of foreign, female temptresses in favour of a more nuanced portrayal of women who could indeed compromise Israelite identity, but in ways that are both unexpected and far more complex than is usually supposed, and certainly not by being tediously stereotypical *femmes fatales*.

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