





MAKING MEANING OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN  
IN ANCIENT CHRISTIAN SACRED LITERATURE

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Sexual violence against women appears in many genres of literature sacred to ancient Christianity, from foundational myths in Genesis through apocalyptic symbolism in the Revelation, and on into the martyr stories used liturgically by the church. These passages have damaged women, men, church, and society when taken as normative or prescriptive passages about human behavior. Recontextualizing sexual violence against women as a literary trope allows us to consider its symbolic meaning in the text, while resisting that presumption that male domination and sexual violence are part of God's plan for the church.

This project involved analyzing selected passages featuring sexual violence against women, classifying the stories by genre, and considering the purpose of sexual violence in each text. Modern scholarship was considered along with analysis of the stories and comparison within and among the genres.

Although each genre uses sexual violence against women differently, its meaning remains fairly consistent for a given genre. In the foundational myths of Genesis, rape serves an etiological or ethnological purpose, establishing relationships between tribes. Rape stories in Judges and 2 Samuel play off earlier use of sexual violence, but deploy it to advance political messages. In prophetic and apocalyptic literature, political entities are represented as women and threatened with sexual violence. In one variation (known as the marriage metaphor), Israel is depicted as the wayward wife of God whose downfall is the result of being unfaithful. In another version, a foreign city is feminized and raped. The virgin birth story uses symbols and wording

taken from Greek romantic rape scenes, which use sexual violence to depict a great man as having a divine origin. In ascetic literature, sexual violence serves to de-sex the woman in order to make her holy. In accounts of martyrdom, persecutors use sexual violence to defeminize the woman prior to her death. In the ascetic *bios*, the woman is a living martyr who must de-sex herself through transvestitism, lifelong seclusion, or suicide—often with sexual violence as an added incentive to be more masculine than feminine.

Recognizing the symbolism in these literary tropes is valuable to everyone who reads, studies, teaches, or meditates on these passages. Sexual violence in sacred literature subjects real, living women to danger when its presence in the text is misunderstood. Liturgy and Bible study pull ancient attitudes about sexual violence into the present, legitimizing its presence and reinforcing damaging ideas about victims of sexual violence. Understanding the purpose of its presence in a particular text not only helps us interpret the text more accurately, but also helps mitigate this danger by placing literary violence back into a literary context.

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## Introduction

Sexual violence against women appears in many genres of sacred literature. The violence does more than supply interesting subtext or historical veracity; its presence in the text is essential to the message, and serves as a medium to signal the reader how to interpret the text. This thesis examines passages that include sexual violence against women, beginning with stories from Hebrew scripture, then New Testament scripture, and finally noncanonical martyr and *bios* stories of the first few centuries. While the meaning of sexual violence against women varies from one genre to another, its meaning within a single genre remains surprisingly uniform.

Experts from many fields claim that sexual violence against women is always about male dominance and power. While that meaning is almost undisputed in real life, this paper focuses on literature rather than life. Literary meaning is created by the author (or, some would argue, it is created between the author and the reader at the time of reading). In literature sacred to ancient Christians, sexual violence against women is predicated on male dominance, but its message is rarely to challenge or reinforce male dominance. Rather, male dominance is merely a background assumption that makes sexual violence against women believable. While the stories highlighted in this thesis function on multiple levels, I am focusing on sexual violence against women as a literary trope, and considering its meaning within each genre.

This thesis will contribute to understanding sexual violence against women as a literary device rather than a social reality. It will allow those who study these passages to think beyond questions regarding male dominance, justice, and ethics (important as those issues are), to consider sexual violence against women as a literary trope and an interpretive signal in revealing the agenda of the author. The broad time frame from Genesis through the fifth century CE allows for the literary analysis of many genres; however, these genres are not wholly separate since the

authors of later genres were familiar with and borrowing from earlier writings. Thus, the selections allow for a history-of-religion approach which seeks the origin and history of the symbol and compares its meaning and function in one text with its meaning and function in other texts<sup>1</sup>, as well as literary analysis within the genre.

The first difficulty faced in any discussion of sexual violence, is determining how to define it. Certain stories leap to mind when one considers sexual violence in the biblical record—perhaps the rape of Dinah and the rape of Bathsheba. Even those three stories contain enough ambiguity that some scholars have called Dinah’s story a romance,<sup>2</sup> or suggested that Bathsheba was a manipulative woman who orchestrated her rise to Queen Mother.<sup>3</sup>

To discuss sexual violence in the literature, we must decide which sexual acts are violent, and we must decide which violent acts are sexual. For example, consider the defenestration of the Jezebel. The accusation of “whoredoms” (2 Kings 9.22) sexualize the violence against her, even though she dies by falling to the pavement. The window, which appears almost exclusively in stories about women, is a sexual symbol representing female genitalia. The woman in the window is a common literary symbol linked to fertility cults and the practice of temple prostitution.<sup>4</sup> Pushing the woman out the window simultaneously depicts the destruction of an idol and the murder of a temple prostitute, while evoking the image of forcible rape.

Another ambiguous story is the death of Jephthah’s daughter, who walks out of the house at the wrong time and becomes a sacrificial victim to fulfill her father’s careless vow (Judges 11.30-40). The means of violence is not sexual (Jephthah does not rape or sexually violate his

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<sup>1</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, “Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 121.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 75-77.

<sup>3</sup> Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 117.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

daughter), but the object is, as evidenced by her request. She does not ask for time to mourn her death or her too-short life; she asks for time to mourn her virginity. Is her death an act of sexual violence?

What do we do with the threatened stoning of the adulteress brought to Jesus? Is that sexual violence? What about the ripping open of pregnant wombs? When women are punished it is with rape, beatings, public stripping, and humiliation.<sup>5</sup> In sacred literature, women are depicted as sexual, in a way that men are not, so that nearly every act of violence against a female is on some level an act of sexual violence.

This study will focus on selected acts of sexual violence that are more obvious than Jezebel's defenestration or the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter. Part 1 covers sexual violence against women in Hebrew scripture.<sup>6</sup> Chapter 1 considers stories of sexual violence in Hebrew scripture, and explores how the statutes offered in Exodus and Deuteronomy apply. Chapter 2 explores the marriage metaphor deployed in prophetic writings by Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Part 2 turns to early Christian literature. Chapter 3 considers sexual violence in the gospel and apocalypse genres of the New Testament. Chapter 4 analyzes sexual violence against women in ascetic literature. Finally, a broad overview of the genres considers how sexual violence against women serves as a literary trope within each genre. Although the genres are linked because of the cumulative nature of sacred Christian literature, the meaning of sexual violence as a symbol shifts as the reader moves from one genre to another. Understanding the purpose of sexual violence in each genre will enable readers to unlock the meaning of its presence in a particular text, even as we resist the presumptions and inherent subjection it embodies.

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<sup>5</sup> Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>6</sup> All scripture quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

## Part 1: Sexual Violence against Women in the Old Testament

### Chapter 1

#### *Stories from the Old Testament*

The patriarchal stories in Genesis resist historical analysis, because they are not written as history but as foundational myths in the form of legends. The distinguishing characteristic of legend is oral composition, whereas history relies on written form.<sup>1</sup> Legend tends to focus on personal spheres of interest to explain how things came to be the way they are.<sup>2</sup>

Violence against women is introduced into the biblical record through foundational myths, including the original foundational myth of primeval history, the creation story itself. Genesis actually contains two creation narratives.<sup>3</sup> The first narrative, Genesis 1.1-2.4a, provides a solemn, orderly creation kin to the Mesopotamian creation account *Enuma Elish*.<sup>4</sup> In this story, male and female are created together to govern creation (1.26-28), asserting the elemental equality of the sexes.<sup>5</sup> Together, male and female are created in God's image. Talmudic sages read into this a single person with two faces.<sup>6</sup>

The second narrative differs drastically, especially in that male and female are not presented as equals created in the image of God. This text gives the male priority, deriving the woman from his "rib" or side (Gen 2.21-22). Chapter 3 adds a new character, the serpent, who contradicts God's commands. The woman eats the fruit God has commanded them not to eat and

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2004), 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>3</sup> However, Phyllis Trible argues for the integrity of the two tales structurally, using an envelope structure or *inclusio* to present humanity as one creature (1.27), divided in two (2.22) then reunited and made one flesh again (2.24), celebrating human sexuality as a return to primordial unity. Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," in *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 41, (1973), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003), 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>6</sup> Aschkenasy, 124.

gives some to the man, who has been standing there all along. Because they have eaten the fruit, the humans are cast out of the garden and told they will not live forever—a consequence God had warned them would occur. But God adds a gender twist to these consequences: The woman will bear children with increased pain or toil, the man will work the ground with increased pain or toil, and man will rule over the woman. Thus, the first sin results in male dominance.

The sexual overtones of the story can hardly be missed. Serpents often symbolize sexuality, and the woman is deceived or beguiled by this serpent. Fruit is the organ of sexual reproduction. After eating the fruit, they become ashamed of their nakedness. As soon as the pair leaves the garden, we are told for the first time that “Adam knew his wife” (4.1), a biblical idiom for sexual intercourse.<sup>7</sup> Male domination now characterizes the relationship. The offspring of this unequal union are doomed to discord—such violent discord that one son kills the other.

Throughout the ages many readers, including teachers and theologians, have misunderstood this story as a defense of male domination rather than a foundational myth or etiology imagining the origin of male domination.<sup>8</sup> “The fall” (a phrase found nowhere in Genesis) has been used to justify the subjugation of women to men, as well as constricting and silencing women. However, the purpose of the story is not to define the ideal relationship of husbands and wives, but to offer an explanation for existing problems faced by the readers: pain in childbirth, male domination, and the difficulty of eking out a living from the ground. This passage is explanatory, rather than normative or descriptive.<sup>9</sup> In fact, it sets up the symbol of sexual domination as a trope for the introduction of discord into the created order. This is further played out when the couple’s eldest son murders their younger son. Throughout Genesis, sexual

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<sup>7</sup> John J. Collins, 69.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

violence signals discord between tribes. Consider the stories of sexual violence perpetrated against Hagar, the daughters of Lot, and Dinah.

*Gen 16.1-2*

<sup>1</sup>Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, <sup>2</sup> and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

In a single sentence, the story of Hagar depicts three types of oppression: nationality, sex, and class.<sup>10</sup> As an Egyptian slave-girl, she has no right of consent to any activity, including sexual intercourse, demanded by her mistress. Nor is she asked for consent. She is human chattel, a victim of rape and sexual slavery. Sarai's attitude is revealing. She considers Hagar an instrument, not a person. Thus, when Sarai devises her plan get a son (literally be "built up") from her maidservant, she does not even use the woman's name.<sup>11</sup>

*Gen 16.3*

<sup>3</sup>So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife.

Calling her Abram's wife seems to mitigate the violence somewhat, as opposed to merely saying he fathers a child on his wife's slave-girl. However, the narrative never again refers to her as Abram's wife.

*Gen 16.4-6*

<sup>4</sup>He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.<sup>5</sup> Then Sarai said to Abram,

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<sup>10</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 10-11. Rebecca Wright notes that "built up" is a play on words, as it can also literally mean "sonned." Wright, March 2013.

“May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!”<sup>6</sup> But Abram said to Sarai, “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

Although Sarai has given Hagar to Abram as a wife (16.3), Abram reduces her status back to that of his wife’s Sarai’s slave with his words to Sarai, “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please” (16.6).

*Gen 16.7-10*

<sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. <sup>8</sup> And he said, “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” <sup>9</sup> The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.” <sup>10</sup> The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.”

Even God seems to sanction Hagar’s mistreatment, sending her back into abusive hands.<sup>12</sup> “Return to your mistress,” God’s messenger says, “and submit to her.” The angel then explains why she should return to the abusive couple: Her offspring will be so many they cannot be counted. In other words, this is not about Hagar. God (like Sarai) views her as an instrument to be used in the production of a child. God speaks as if the beatings she must endure are unimportant in light of that task.

*Gen 16.11-12*

<sup>11</sup> And the angel of the LORD said to her,  
“Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;  
you shall call him Ishmael,  
for the LORD has given heed to your affliction.  
<sup>12</sup> He shall be a wild ass of a man,  
with his hand against everyone,

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<sup>12</sup> Phyllis Tribble translates this phrase “Return to your mistress and suffer affliction under her hand,” connecting it with Abram’s statement “Look now, your maid is in your hand” in 16.6 and the reference to Ishmael’s hand in 16.12b. Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 17.

and everyone's hand against<sup>13</sup> him;  
and he shall live at odds with all his kin.”

God's description of Ishmael in this passage (a wild ass of a man, against everyone) jars the reader. If God wants to console Hagar and encourage her to return to her mistress and continue the pregnancy within that household, these words hardly seem the way to do it. Although English translations invariably use the word “against” or “fight” in verse 12, some scholars argue the phrases are more appropriately translated “His-hand with-all And-hand-of-all-with-him,” and that he will live alongside (not at odds with) his kin.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the epithet “wild ass of a man” can be interpreted positively; a wild ass is independent and untamed, which may have sounded wonderful to an abused slave. The narrative itself never includes enmity between Isaac and Ishmael. In fact, the two brothers carry out the burial of their father Abraham together (Gen 25.9).<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the Christian tradition has interpreted this passage negatively (and denigrating to Hagar's offspring) since the first century CE, when Paul used the story as an allegory for Judaism and Christianity. In Galatians 4.21-31, he casts Judaism as Ishmael, the older son who was born into slavery. By contrast, Christianity is Sarah's child of the promise. By characterizing Judaism as the offspring of law rather than promise and as slave rather than free, Paul encourages gentiles to embrace Christianity without conforming to Jewish law, especially circumcision. In using the story this way, Paul takes up Sarah's theme, stripping Ishmael of his birthright because his mother was a slave. “Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman” (Gal 4.30b). His association of Judaism with Ishmael is striking, since the original story associates Judaism with

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<sup>13</sup> Hebrew texts contain no word that should be translated “against, and “at odds” could be translated “near” or “beside.” Rebecca Wright, in discussion with the author, March 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Wright, in discussion with the author, Jan 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Isaac and makes Ishmael his own nation. The association of Hagar with Mount Sinai and the law is without parallel.<sup>16</sup>

Paul's allegorical use of the story shows how easily the passage lent itself to a disparaging ethnological interpretation, long before English translators added "against" to Gen 16.12. Paul's negative opinion of Ishmael likely preceded his embrace of Christianity. His reference to Ishmael persecuting Isaac may stem from a midrashic reading of Ishmael's teasing Isaac in Gen 21.9.<sup>17</sup> Although the original text offers a pun (Ishmael is "Isaacing" with Isaac<sup>18</sup>), the Jewish haggadah suggests a more sinister intent, perhaps even intent to murder.<sup>19</sup>

*Genesis 21.1-3, 8-10*

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised.<sup>2</sup> Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.<sup>3</sup> Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.

<sup>8</sup>The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.<sup>9</sup> But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.<sup>10</sup> So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."

Genesis 21 provides the rest of Hagar's story. Having produced a child of their own, the couple now goes by Abraham and Sarah. Note that Hagar's status has continued to fall, from Abram's wife (16.3) to "your slave-girl" (16.6) and now "this slave-woman" (21.10). Sarai uses language that not only dismisses Hagar as a person with a name, but also distances herself from responsibility to and for Hagar.

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 317 NEW TESTAMENT.

<sup>17</sup> Shaye Cohen, "Commentary on the Letter of Paul to the Galatians," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 341.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, March 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 249-250.

*Genesis 21.11-14*

<sup>11</sup> The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. <sup>12</sup> But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. <sup>13</sup> As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” <sup>14</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

Abraham’s distress stems only from his concern for Ishmael. Even God seems to forget that Hagar is Abraham’s wife and Sarah’s handmaid, instead referring to her as “your [Abraham’s] slave woman” (21.12) and “the slave woman” (21.13). Only the narrator gives Hagar the honor of her own name. Although God had earlier told Hagar to return and submit to Sarai, now God tells Abraham to obey Sarah and cast out the slave woman. Abraham provides the woman and her child only a skin of water and some bread, and sends them into the wilderness where, without divine intervention, they will surely die. That stark reality is mitigated by God’s assurance that the child will not die but will become a great nation. No such assurance is given regarding the survival of young Hagar, but Abraham apparently does not ask or care.

*Genesis 21.15-21*

<sup>15</sup> When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup> Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. <sup>17</sup> And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. <sup>18</sup> Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” <sup>19</sup> Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. <sup>20</sup> God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. <sup>21</sup> He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

In summary, Genesis 16 and 21 present Abraham and Sarah as shameless abusers of her Egyptian handmaid.<sup>20</sup> The narrator refers to Hagar by name eight times in the two chapters; Abraham and Sarah refer to her only by her position as a slave. Likewise, God addresses Hagar by name in both theophanies, but calls her a slave when speaking to Abraham.

Phyllis Trible includes Hagar's story in her list of "texts of terror," recognizing her as a victim who is preyed upon, used, abused,<sup>21</sup> and eventually tossed out to die. Hagar's story demonstrates how patriarchy causes conflict between women. In the nineteenth century, female interpreters began pushing back against this story and repurposing it to promote a feminist agenda of equality and respect for women in every age and station of life. For example, Josephine Butler, a Victorian social activist, reappropriated the story as a critique of Hagar's oppression.<sup>22</sup>

Feminist readings often characterize the story as revealing women's struggle to be recognized as fully human in oppressive situations.<sup>23</sup> While these echoes surely resonate from the multivalent tale, Cheryl Exum notes, "Nobody asks the question, why do Hagar and Ishmael have to be cast out in the first place?" Exum suggests we should interrogate the motives of the author, both conscious and unconscious, to note how the characters serve the ideology of the authors.<sup>24</sup> She says the compassionate treatment of Hagar at the end of the story only serves to patch up God's reputation, while still asserting that Isaac's descendants alone will be God's

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<sup>20</sup> Amanda Benckhuysen, "Reading Hagar's Story from the Margins: Family Resemblances between Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Female Interpreters," in *Strangely Familiar: Protofeminist Interpretations of Patriarchal Biblical Texts*, ed. Nancy Calvert-Koyzis and Heather Weir (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 17.

<sup>21</sup> Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Benckhuysen, 18.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Cheryl Exum, "Trusting in the God of their Fathers," in *Strangely Familiar: Protofeminist Interpretations of Patriarchal Biblical Texts*, ed. Nancy Calvert-Koyzis and Heather Weir (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 53.

chosen people.<sup>25</sup> Although God promises to also make Ishmael great, he says “it is through Isaac that your offspring will be named” (Gen 21.12). While Abraham thinks of Ishmael as “his son” (Gen 21.11), God refers to him as “the boy” and “the son of the slave woman” (Gen 21.12,13).

If Abraham’s theophany justifies his rejection of Ishmael, the theophanies in Gen 16.7-14 and 21.15-20 work from the other direction, playing down the abuse of Hagar by making God her caretaker.<sup>26</sup> Abraham and Sarah have abused a young girl through rape and forced pregnancy, then sent her and the child into the desert to die. Yet the theophanies let the esteemed couple off the hook by asserting that their actions are part of God’s plan and that the abuse victims were in no real danger.

Hagar’s story provides fodder for discussion of women’s oppression, for what Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza has called “imaginative identification,” and for understanding early class systems and privilege in the Abrahamic culture.<sup>27</sup> However, the author is not interested in women’s equality. Hagar’s story has little to do with women and how they should be treated; it is about the Ishmaelites and how they should be treated. The purpose of sexual violence in this story is etiological. It establishes the “other,” in this case the Ishmaelites. It is a foundational myth providing a backstory to explain why both kinship and enmity are at play in the relationship between the Israelites and the Ishmaelites. The details only dress up the main point: in Hebrew foundational myths, sexual violence against a woman often indicates her descendants will be enemies of Israel. Thus the author uses Hagar, much as Abraham and Sarah use her.

While most scholars have focused on the expulsion of Hagar into the wilderness, her victimization lies primarily in Abram’s rape of the girl, at Sarai’s command. The narrator explicitly calls the act a marriage rather than a rape. Still, he explicitly notes throughout the two

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>27</sup> Benckhuysen, 18.

chapters that Hagar has not, in fact, been treated as Abram's wife, but remains in a state of slavery. Rather than elevating her to the status of wife, the rape reduces her from Sarai's handmaid to "the slave woman."<sup>28</sup> The rape of Hagar is attested in how the narrator uses it to fulfill the narrative; like other instances of sexual violence against women in Genesis, the rape of Hagar supplies a foundational myth to explain hostility between Israel and another entity, in this case the descendants of Ishmael.

At the same time Abraham is raping a slave girl in his tents, his nephew Lot offers his own young daughters as rape victims to protect men from sexual violence.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Genesis 19.1-11*

**19** The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. <sup>2</sup> He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." <sup>3</sup> But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. <sup>4</sup> But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; <sup>5</sup> and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." <sup>6</sup> Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, <sup>7</sup> and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. <sup>8</sup> Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." <sup>9</sup> But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. <sup>10</sup> But the men inside reached out their hands and

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<sup>28</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Some scholars (c.f. Wright, March 2013) question the sexual nature of the men of the city's intent against the angels, suggesting that the threat was more physical than sexual, and therefore the story should not be used as a polemic against homosexuality. While the word translated "know" can be used as a euphemism for sex, it is not a common euphemism, and more often has a literal connotation. In this thesis, I am adhering to the common interpretation of a sexual threat against the angels, because it fits the thematic echo of the story. Men (angels) are sexually threatened, girls are sexually threatened by men including their own father, and the final poetic justice involves those same girls using sexual violence against the father who threatened them. Such an interpretation need not ascribe homosexual prejudice to the story; the theme is not homosexuality (and certainly not consensual homosexual activity), but sexual violence.

brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door.<sup>11</sup> And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

In the Lot story, as in the Hagar story, men do not afford women sexual agency. While the men are protected from sexual violation (“I beg you my brothers, do not act so wickedly”), virgin daughters are the property of their father. Sexual access is his to use as he will in securing a prosperous marriage or selling them as concubines. In this case, Lot extends that access, offering his daughters’ bodies to appease a city-wide rape crew. The angels intervene to protect the girls—a cue from the narrator that perhaps Lot’s behavior was not acceptable even in such a harshly patriarchal culture.

*Genesis 19.24-38*

<sup>24</sup> Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven; <sup>25</sup> and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. <sup>26</sup> But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

<sup>27</sup> Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD; <sup>28</sup> and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace.

<sup>29</sup> So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.

<sup>30</sup> Now Lot went up out of Zoar and settled in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; so he lived in a cave with his two daughters. <sup>31</sup> And the firstborn said to the younger, “Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the world.<sup>32</sup> Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father.” <sup>33</sup> So they made their father drink wine that night; and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. <sup>34</sup> On the next day, the firstborn said to the younger, “Look, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father.” <sup>35</sup> So they made their father drink wine that night also; and the younger rose, and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. <sup>36</sup> Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. <sup>37</sup> The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day. <sup>38</sup> The younger

also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites to this day.

In a story that begins and ends with sexual violence, Lot's daughters change from sexual objects to sexual agents. In some sense they are playing out what has been taught to them in Sodom, by seeing themselves as mere vessels or bodies to serve the needs of men or mankind. When they see the destruction of Sodom, they believe they are left alone in the earth like Noah's progeny, and take upon themselves the repopulation of the world. Whereas their father had offered their bodies to service men, they now offer themselves to serve mankind. Their actions may also be viewed less nobly, as a streak of revenge against the man who would have thrown them out to be raped; now they rape him, though with artifice and intoxication rather than the violence of a crowd.

As a symbol, the violence in the story of Lot's daughters serves both ethnological and etymological functions, offering explanations for the origin of two tribes and the names of those tribes.<sup>30</sup> Teresa Hornsby notes that "The stories of children who are born out of illicit unions, incestuous relationships, or adulterous affairs are sometimes told to denigrate people. For example, the author of this passage is saying that the Moabites and Ammonites are incestuous bastards."<sup>31</sup>

The story of Dinah found in Genesis 34 offers another example of sexual violence against women as an explanation for discord between tribes. Although no pregnancy results within the biblical narrative, the violent sex act itself triggers tribal warfare and ongoing conflict.

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<sup>30</sup> John J. Collins, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Teresa Hornsby, *Sex Texts from the Bible: Selections Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2007), 102.

*Genesis 34.1-7*

Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the region.<sup>2</sup> When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force.<sup>3</sup> And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her.<sup>4</sup> So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, “Get me this girl to be my wife.”<sup>5</sup> Now Jacob heard that Shechem had defiled his daughter Dinah; but his sons were with his cattle in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came.<sup>6</sup> And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him,<sup>7</sup> just as the sons of Jacob came in from the field. When they heard of it, the men were indignant and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done.

Dinah is silent in the text. When modern readers assume her consent, they are basing this assumption on Shechem’s feelings, not Dinah’s. Teresa Hornsby, for example begins by offering her own translation of the Gen 34.1-3. “Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had conceived by Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land, and when Schechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he took her and lay with her and humiliated her. And his soul was drawn to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, he loved the young girl and he spoke tenderly [from his heart] to her.”<sup>32</sup> Although Hornsby and NRSV both use the word “tenderly,” no word in the Hebrew text should be translated this way. The phrase “from the heart” does not denote tender emotion, but reason or cunning, since the heart was believed to be the origin of thought.<sup>33</sup>

Leaning on this faulty interpretation of “from the heart,” Hornsby then writes, “If this is a narrative of a rape, it is an odd one. Since we have nothing from Dinah to judge, we only know what the narrator tells us, that the prince saw her, he took her, and he lay with her. Both verbs, *took* and *lay*, are biblical euphemisms for sex, though they do not typically mean rape, which

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>33</sup> Wright, Jan 2013.

would be ‘took with force.’”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Hornsby leaves out the third verb in the sequence: He *took* her and *lay* with her and *humiliated* her. How does one read consent into humiliation? This is Hornsby’s own translation, making the oversight all the more remarkable. The NRSV translates the phrase “he seized her and lay with her by force,” the footnote adding “raped her.”<sup>35</sup>

Hornsby seems a bit confused about rape itself when she writes, “The lines between consensual sex, reluctant sex, and rape can be fuzzy to everyone but the woman (and often, at the time of sex, the woman herself may not be clear).”<sup>36</sup> Hornsby is not alone in reducing the crime against Dinah to date rape, gray rape, or a Romeo-and-Juliet affair. Many scholars have made the same suggestion. Listing a few of them, Adele Berlin adds her own voice to theirs, writing, “I agree that whatever took place, it was not rape in the modern sense. Early feminist readings distorted the picture by placing too much emphasis on Dinah and on the sexual nature of the crime. I view Dinah much as I view Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11—a feminine character necessary to a plot whose action is motivated by a sexual act, but not an important character in her own right nor the focus of the story’s significance. I am therefore not troubled by her ‘silence.’”<sup>37</sup>

Jewish scholars have vigorously defended Dinah’s honor, both in ancient Midrash and in modern times. Michael Segal notes that the narrator explicitly mentions Shechem’s taking Dinah by force.<sup>38</sup> While Genesis refers to Dinah as a maiden and a girl, Jub 30.2 combines the two terms, indicating she was a small girl. Her age is often supposed as twelve years old because her case so closely fits the Deuteronomic law pertaining to a maiden (for which twelve is the

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<sup>34</sup> Hornsby, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Coogan, 58 HEBREW BIBLE.

<sup>36</sup> Hornsby, 140.

<sup>37</sup> Adele Berlin, “Literary Approaches to Biblical Literature: General Observations and a Case Study of Genesis 34,” in *The Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarships* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 70.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Segal, “Rewriting the Story of Dinah and Schechem: The Literary Development of Jubilees 30,” in *The Hebrew Bible in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. N. David et al. (2012), 341.

youngest age);<sup>39</sup> however, Segal uses Jubilees to calculate her age as only nine years old.<sup>40</sup>

Midrashic writings have closely examined the “cause” of Dinah’s rape, sometimes claiming Shechem wanted the wealth of Jewish intermarriage, at other points blaming Dinah for being too outgoing like her mother (she literally “went out” in 34.1), or blaming Jacob for locking her in a trunk to keep Esau from seeing her (a subplot not found in Genesis). What these writings do not do is minimize Shechem’s act of sexual violation against Dinah.

The modern struggle to de-rape this passage lies in the locus of consent. No one in the text cares about Dinah’s consent, unless perhaps it is Shechem, after the fact. Her father and brothers make no effort to find out how the girl feels. The narrator gives her no voice at all. In some sense Dinah is raped—robbed of sexual agency—by every character in the text and by the narrator himself.

#### *Genesis 34.8-26*

<sup>8</sup> But Hamor spoke with them, saying, “The heart of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. <sup>9</sup> Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. <sup>10</sup> You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it.” <sup>11</sup> Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, “Let me find favor with you, and whatever you say to me I will give. <sup>12</sup> Put the marriage present and gift as high as you like, and I will give whatever you ask me; only give me the girl to be my wife.”

<sup>13</sup> The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. <sup>14</sup> They said to them, “We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. <sup>15</sup> Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be circumcised. <sup>16</sup> Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live among you and become one people. <sup>17</sup> But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and be gone.”

<sup>18</sup> Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor’s son Shechem. <sup>19</sup> And the young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob’s daughter. Now he was the most honored of all his family. <sup>20</sup> So Hamor and his son Shechem

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 342.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 344.

came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city, saying, <sup>21</sup>“These people are friendly with us; let them live in the land and trade in it, for the land is large enough for them; let us take their daughters in marriage, and let us give them our daughters. <sup>22</sup>Only on this condition will they agree to live among us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised. <sup>23</sup>Will not their livestock, their property, and all their animals be ours? Only let us agree with them, and they will live among us.”<sup>24</sup> And all who went out of the city gate heeded Hamor and his son Shechem; and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city.

<sup>25</sup>On the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males. <sup>26</sup>They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem’s house, and went away.

If Dinah consented to the activity and upcoming marriage, why does she not protest her lover’s murder?<sup>41</sup> The rabbis, while not denying the act of forcible rape, claimed that Dinah refused to leave Shechem’s house because “when a woman is intimate with an uncircumcised person she finds it hard to tear herself away.”<sup>42</sup> It is also possible that Dinah may have wanted to stay, even after being raped, because it was better to be a princess than a ruined woman in the care of cruel brothers. The narrator has already informed us that Shechem spoke to her “from his heart,” which may simply mean “persuasively.” If Dinah did prefer to stay (an assumption we cannot make because of her silence), this does not lessen the fact of Shechem’s rape.<sup>43</sup>

Nothing can be assumed from Dinah’s silence, except that she has been silenced by the narrator. It is unlikely that she is just a passive young woman, given her introduction as an outgoing person who wanted to see things and meet people.<sup>44</sup> Her silence is explicit. Every man in the story speaks: Dinah’s father, her brothers, her rapist, the father of her rapist, and even the community.<sup>45</sup> Dinah’s silence is a textual fact, not a textual element; we cannot attribute her

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<sup>41</sup> Aschkenasy, 47.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 47.

silence to trauma because the narrator does not do so. Instead, we must attribute her silence solely to the author's intent.<sup>46</sup>

*Genesis 34.27-31*

<sup>27</sup> And the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled. <sup>28</sup> They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. <sup>29</sup> All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and made their prey. <sup>30</sup> Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household." <sup>31</sup> But they said, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?"

Here in the denouement, we are at last given the purpose of this story of sexual violence: it explains the ill will the Canaanites and the Perizzites bear against Israel. The author hinted at this meaning by giving the prince in the story the same name as the city, Shechem. While Berlin is correct in asserting that the text is not really about Dinah, the rape of Dinah is important as an interpretive signal; when women are raped in Hebrew scripture, bad things happen. In the other Genesis rape texts, the rape results in the founding of a new people or tribe who became enemies of Israel. This passage uses the rape of Dinah in a similar way, precisely because she does not produce offspring or a new tribe. The rape of Dinah is used to discourage intermarriage, and perhaps also as a way to malign northern Israel. The Hebrew verb *t-imme* (to defile) is used for the sexual violation of married or betrothed women; it is only used for a virgin in the case of Dinah, for whom it is said three times. Alexander Rofe suggests this reflects the postexilic notion that the gentiles are impure because of idolatry, prohibiting intermarriage and intercourse with them as in Ezra 9, 11-12.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>47</sup> Rofé, 375.

In the legendary stories of Genesis, sexual violence against women is an etiological, ethnological, and sometimes etymological literary device. It provides backstory to current or past conflict by deriving the origin of the conflict (or the tribe itself) from an act of sexual violence. Hagar's story explains the origin of the Ishmaelites and Midianites and sets the stage for future conflict. The story of Lot's daughters uses the trope of sexual violence (including the threat against the angels, the threat against the virgin daughters, and the girls' rape of their father) to establish the ethnology and etymology of the Moabites and Ammonites. The story of Dinah functions in a similar manner, establishing dissimilarity and prohibition of intermarriage between Israel and the non-monotheistic peoples of the region of Shechem.

Hebrew scripture addresses rape from a legal aspect, but only in a very limited way. The concern of the passages is patriarchal, mostly treating women as the property of men. Rape is therefore a crime in which one man uses or steals another man's property. Sexual slavery is permitted, since it can be ordered in a way that does not infringe on other Hebrew men's property rights. The law does afford women some measure of economic justice, in recognition of their lack of sexual agency.

Exodus 21.1-23.19 contains a legal corpus that may predate the Decalogue.<sup>48</sup> Slavery emerges as the very first legal concern. While the Israelites had not conceived of a free society without slavery, their history as escaped slaves creates a strong drive to mitigate some of the injustices of the system. The first consideration is for male Hebrew slaves, whose enslavement is to be limited to six years. The treatment of female Hebrew slaves is markedly different; they are the master's property and are not released even if one of them has been given as a wife to the male Hebrew slave being released (21.4).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Brueggemann, 61.

<sup>49</sup> In Deut 15.12-18 the six-year limit is expanded to apply to female as well as male slaves J. J. Collins, 165.

Sex slaves, however, are different. Exodus 21.7-11 devotes four verses to the treatment of female sex slaves:

<sup>7</sup> When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. <sup>8</sup> If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt unfairly with her. <sup>9</sup> If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. <sup>10</sup> If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife. <sup>11</sup> And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out without debt, without payment of money.

This passage implies that sexual activity alters the relationship from purely economic to familial. If the master gives the slave to his son, she is a wife and a daughter rather than a slave. If the master himself uses her sexually, he must treat her as his wife rather than a slave. A female sex slave can never be sold, because through sexual activity she has become a wife rather than a slave. She cannot be sold back into slavery, nor can she be rejected, neglected, or demoted in favor of another woman. The passage also offers a remedy for a woman thus wronged; if her master/husband transgresses the law, she is to walk away a free woman. Strictly interpreted, the law makes sexual slavery obsolete by redefining rather than criminalizing it; however, the practice of keeping women as sex slaves or concubines continued, as demonstrated by the presence of concubines throughout Hebrew scripture.

Although the law was written long after the setting of the Hagar story, the compilation and editing of the Torah was hardly linear. The editors may have had the law in mind while penning her story; likewise, her story would not have been far from their consciousness as they set down the law. The application of the law to her story demonstrates how Abraham and Sarah fall short of these values. Although Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as a wife, the two continued to treat her as a slave—and as Sarai's slave, not Abram's. They failed to provide for her needs and

in fact sent her into the desert without adequate provisions. Even if Abraham and Sarah are excused from the law because it has not yet been written, surely God knows the law? Yet, as a character in the story, God encourages and justifies the abuse of Hagar and Ishmael.

The book of Deuteronomy considers the rights of a special class of female sex slaves: those who have been abducted in battle rather than sold from one Hebrew family to another. Within the literary setting, the situation is hypothetical. It acknowledges Israel's transition from an enslaved people to a dominant people who expect to be defeating other tribes in battle and enslaving others.

*Deuteronomy 21.10-14*

<sup>10</sup> When you go out to war against your enemies, and the LORD your God hands them over to you and you take them captive, <sup>11</sup> suppose you see among the captives a beautiful woman whom you desire and want to marry, <sup>12</sup> and so you bring her home to your house: she shall shave her head, pare her nails, <sup>13</sup> discard her captive's garb, and shall remain in your house a full month, mourning for her father and mother; after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife.<sup>14</sup> But if you are not satisfied with her, you shall let her go free and not sell her for money. You must not treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her.

The commentary to the 2007 NRSV notes that the law recognizes that the female slave is “dishonored” (violated) by having sex with her master.<sup>50</sup> However, ancient Hebrews may have considered it an elevation of status more than a dishonor, when a slave is taken to her master's bed and thus made a wife. While the captive woman is afforded no sexual agency, the sexual nature of the relationship determines that she must be allowed time to mourn and to make the transition. Further, her new status as a wife makes her a free woman rather than a slave, and that freedom is irrevocable. Once having taken her to his bed, the man has no right to sell her, nor to continue treating her as a slave.

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<sup>50</sup> Coogan, 279 HEBREW BIBLE.

In the next chapter of Deuteronomy, the law addresses the rape of married or betrothed women (a capital crime) and the rape of virgins (a civil matter). Although both passages appear as part of a larger narrative, the passages are instructional rather than narrative, and provide a basis for reading other passages about sexual violence against women.

#### Deuteronomy 22.23-24

<sup>23</sup> If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, <sup>24</sup> you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

This passage stands in contrast to a similar passage in Exodus 22.16-17, in which the virgin is not betrothed and the matter is civil rather than criminal. While the Exodus passage refers to only seduction, the passage in Deuteronomy seeks to differentiate between rape and seduction. Now the woman is assumed to have some sexual agency, which will be expressed in the form of crying for help. A woman who does not cry for help is assumed to be complicit in the sexual act, and must be stoned along with the man for committing adultery against her betrothed husband.

Although consensual sex between a man and an engaged woman is treated as adultery, the very next point of law demands that nonconsensual sex be punished as criminal assault rather than as a sex crime.<sup>51</sup> This distinction reappears in the rape of Bathsheba, which Nathan analogizes as murder rather than adultery, by suggesting in the parable that the rape robbed Uriah, but slew Bathsheba.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Coogan, 281 HEBREW BIBLE.

<sup>52</sup> See the end of this chapter for analysis of the rape of Bathsheba.

### Deuteronomy 22.25-27

<sup>25</sup> But if the man meets the engaged woman in the open country, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. <sup>26</sup> You shall do nothing to the young woman; the young woman has not committed an offense punishable by death, because this case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbor. <sup>27</sup> Since he found her in the open country, the engaged woman may have cried for help, but there was no one to rescue her.

Here the author adds the words “seizes her” to the passage to indicate rape rather than consensual sex as implied above. The addition of “seize” bolsters the argument that Dinah, who was also seized, is a victim of rape rather than a willing participant in a doomed love affair. The law gives the benefit of the doubt to the woman; if she has sex in a place where no one would have been able to rescue her, then her screaming or lack thereof is irrelevant. The rape of Dinah occurs in elision; it happens off-stage and the reader is told rather than shown. Thus we cannot know whether the act occurs in the city or in the open country. Certainly it does not occur within her father’s camp, where help can be reasonably expected. However, as a virgin, Dinah does not fall under the jurisdiction of that portion of the law. Her situation is addressed in the passage that immediate follows.

### *Deuteronomy 22.28-29*

<sup>28</sup> If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, <sup>29</sup> the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.

This passage seems to capture Dinah’s situation more closely. She is a virgin, Shechem seizes her and lies with her, and then he confesses to the act. He offers to pay her father more

than the bride price and take her as his wife. Whereas the corresponding passage in Exodus (22.16-17) refers to consensual sex, the addition of “seizes her” implies forced rape.<sup>53</sup>

Casting legal codes back onto the legends of Genesis may seem to be an anachronistic exercise; however, the compilation of the Torah was hardly linear, and the influence between the various books seems to travel in both directions.<sup>54</sup> These verses may certainly be applied to the stories that follow, where men violate laws and mores established prior to the setting of the narrative. The legal codes provide a key for understanding what will happen in individual cases of sexual violence. Although the codes allow some level of sexual violence against women, disaster strikes when the codes are violated.

As in the foundational myths, historical annals use sexual violence against women as a harbinger of bad relations and tragedy. The purpose of sexual violence against women in historical annals is more apologetic than etiological. Sexual violence not only explains why things are the way they are, but also why things should be the way they are. Rather than establishing order, these stories use sexual violence against women to unravel established relationships and ultimately argue for a particular political position.

In Judges, the rape and mutilation of an unnamed “concubine” leads to war against the tribe of Benjamin, nearly annihilating the tribe and leading to further violence against women. The point of the story is that monarchy is needed to bring order to the tribes. The author may be making a dig at King Saul, who was a Benjamite, suggesting the piece is an apology for the Davidic monarchy.

Ironically, rape is both the argument for installing David and the argument for his downfall. The story of Bathsheba uses sexual violence as the harbinger of the fall of the house of

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<sup>53</sup> Coogan, 281 HEBREW BIBLE.

<sup>54</sup> Wright, March 2013.

David, foreshadowing the rape of David's daughter Tamar by his son Amnon. The rape of Tamar leads to discord between Amnon and his brother Absalom, and contributes to Absalom's disdain for his father David, eventually culminating in Absalom's rape of David's concubines. In these stories, sexual violence against women is depicted as a perversion with echoing repercussions in which rape begets rape. The narrative use of rape neither condemns nor endorses male domination, which is simply assumed. Rather, sexual violence against women is a symbol of the misuse of power and a signal to the reader that new leadership is needed. Abuse of power leads to chaos and destruction, but ultimately points to the author's favored leader as the answer.

*Judges 19.1-3*

**19** In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. <sup>2</sup> But his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months. <sup>3</sup> Then her husband set out after her, to speak tenderly to her and bring her back.

The opening of the story prepares the reader for one kind of story, but delivers something entirely different. As in the case of Shechem, the NRSV interprets the phrase translated "from the heart" as "tenderly," when it may connote persuasion or manipulation rather than loving emotion. In any case, the narrative never relates this "from the heart" talk the Levite has with his concubine, but instead focuses on his interaction with this father-in-law. The long introduction, mostly omitted here to preserve space, raises several questions about the relationship between the man and the woman in the story. A man with a concubine does not generally have a "father-in-law" (19.3) which implies marriage. The Levite is called her "husband" in verse 3. Further, the narrative implies the father-in-law is wealthy while the Levite is poor, inviting the reader to ask why a wealthy man would sell his daughter to a poor Levite as a sex slave? In any case,

the Levite eventually overcomes the extreme hospitality of his father-in-law and begins the journey home with his concubine.

*Judges 19.15-21*

<sup>15</sup> They turned aside there, to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. He went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took them in to spend the night. <sup>16</sup> Then at evening there was an old man coming from his work in the field. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was residing in Gibeah. (The people of the place were Benjaminites.) <sup>17</sup> When the old man looked up and saw the wayfarer in the open square of the city, he said, "Where are you going and where do you come from?" <sup>18</sup> He answered him, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah; and I am going to my home. <sup>19</sup> Nobody has offered to take me in. <sup>19</sup> We your servants have straw and fodder for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and the woman and the young man along with us. We need nothing more." <sup>20</sup> The old man said, "Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square." <sup>21</sup> So he brought him into his house, and fed the donkeys; they washed their feet, and ate and drank.

The scene in Gibeah has many recalls the story of Lot. Frequent use of the word *house* or *home* underscores the theme of hospitality.<sup>55</sup> Like the angels who visit Sodom, the traveling party plans to sleep in the city square. An old man takes them in, just as Lot takes in the angels. Prophetically, the text says "so he brought him [not them] into the house." Although they all enter the house, the man has entered safety and the woman has not.<sup>56</sup>

*Judges 19.22-24*

<sup>22</sup> While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him." <sup>23</sup> And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. <sup>24</sup> Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing."

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<sup>55</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 65.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

The concubine is no safer in the old man's house than Lot's daughters were in his house. The old man not only suggests the crowd rape the women (both the concubine and his virgin daughter) as an alternative to the men; he actually proposes to bring them out, becoming procurer instead of protector.<sup>57</sup> Just as he sought to protect the men with two negative commands ("do not act so wickedly," and "do not do this vile thing"), now he uses two positive imperatives to imperil the two women: "Ravish them, and do to them the good in your eyes" (19.24 RSV).<sup>58</sup>

While the NRSV says "intercourse" in verse 23, the Hebrew again uses the word literally translated "know." The same arguments regarding the interpretation of homosexual rape should be noted here as in the Lot story. Here the narrator adds "do not do this vile thing," strengthening the sexual connotation of the threatened violence. It is rape, not homosexuality, he calls vile. He does not suggest a normal activity in place of a vile activity; he only offers a different victim so the vile act will not be done "against this man" (22.24), since "this man is my guest" (22.23).

The host's position is that men should get what they want, and men are not to be violated.<sup>59</sup> But is this the position of the narrator?

*Judges 19.25-26*

<sup>25</sup> But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. <sup>26</sup> As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light.

In the Sodom and Benjamite stories, the male host never offers himself; he always offers girls.<sup>60</sup> In both cases, the mob rejects the offer. In the Lot story, the angel then intervenes with

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Tribble's translation. Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 72.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

blindness; in this story, the traveler seizes his concubine and shoves her out to the men. This story element highlights the men's willingness—eagerness, even—to let women suffer in their stead, revealing that the men inside the house are as treacherous as those outside. It also sets up irony, since the reader knows something (the Levite's complicity in his concubine's rape), that is not known by other characters later in the story.

As in the Dinah story, the rape occurs in the elision, in some other setting rather than in the foreground.<sup>61</sup> Returning to the foreground after the all-night gang rape, the concubine throws herself down at the door. She grasps the threshold, a symbol of her liminal existence both within and without the protections of this (or any) home, and a testimony against the twisted hospitality practiced by the old man of Gibeah.

#### Judges 19.27-28

<sup>27</sup> In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold.<sup>28</sup> "Get up," he said to her, "we are going." But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey; and the man set out for his home.

The Levite is not looking for his victimized concubine; he sees her only as he walking out to go on his way. He offers no help or comfort, but rather gives her an order. She does not answer. The Greek Bible adds "for she was dead," making the men of Benjamin murderers as well as masochistic rapists.<sup>62</sup> The Hebrew text remains silent, leaving her condition ambiguous.

#### *Judges 19.29-30*

<sup>29</sup> When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. <sup>30</sup> Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, "Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, 'Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>61</sup> Aschkenasy, 74.

<sup>62</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 77.

Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.””

Back at home, four verbs in rapid succession describe his actions. Tribble translates them took, seized, cut, and sent.<sup>63</sup> Each of these verbs is significant. Took: “He took the knife”—not a knife but *the* knife, just as Abraham took *the* knife to slay his son Isaac. The silence of the Hebrew texts leaves open the question of whether the Levite murders his concubine, or “merely” dismembers her dead body. Seized: “and he seized his concubine.”<sup>64</sup> This is the same word used earlier in the story when he seized her and pushed her out the door to the rapists.<sup>65</sup> Cut: “He cut her limb by limb, into twelve pieces.” Sent: “and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel.”<sup>66</sup>

The second elision in the narrative is the moment of death; we do not know when she dies. She is alive at the threshold, dead after mutilated, but we are not told when she gasps her last breath.<sup>67</sup> This elision conceals a more important one; the man’s failure to discover why she does not respond.<sup>68</sup> The reader is not surprised by her silence; she has been silent for the entire tale. It is her lack of action—her lack of obedience—rather than her lack of speech that is notable.<sup>69</sup>

The concubine in this story is the Levite’s “property, object, tool, and literary device.”<sup>70</sup> He sends chunks of her severed body to each of the twelve tribes, where they are displayed with the Levite’s terrible refrain of indictment “Has such a thing ever happened . . . ?” In Hebrew, the verbal forms and the object are all feminine gender so that it is not so much a “thing” seen as a

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 76, 80.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>67</sup> Aschkenasy, 74.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 80.

woman.<sup>71</sup> The Levite uses the stark visual image of the severed woman to evoke emotion and gain an audience. Rather than smashing a pot like Ezekiel, walking around naked like Isaiah, or wearing a yoke like Jeremiah, this unnamed Levite advertises his cause on the body parts of a dismembered woman.

#### Judges 20.3-7

<sup>3</sup> (Now the Benjaminites heard that the people of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) And the Israelites said, “Tell us, how did this criminal act come about?” <sup>4</sup> The Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered, “I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night. <sup>5</sup> The lords of Gibeah rose up against me, and surrounded the house at night. They intended to kill me, and they raped my concubine until she died. <sup>6</sup> Then I took my concubine and cut her into pieces, and sent her throughout the whole extent of Israel’s territory; for they have committed a vile outrage in Israel. <sup>7</sup> So now, you Israelites, all of you, give your advice and counsel here.”

At this point in the story, the dissident voice of the narrator becomes clear. When the Levite is brought before the congregation at Mizpah to explain the gruesome message, he retells the story in a way that conceals his own callous actions. He omits his complicity in the rape and specifies that she had been murdered before he dismembered her. This is the narrative the people of Israel accept and act on. Belief in this story is the fulcrum on which the rest of the narrative turns. But the storyteller has already planted the irony by telling us the true backstory, complete with the Levite’s collaboration of the rape/murder. The Levite is not a victim but a perpetrator.

The Levite’s speech elicits the desired response: All Israel wants revenge against the tribe of Benjamin. The men are offended by the act of violence against the Levite in the rape of his concubine, but not by his act of mutilating her body. As Phyllis Tribble writes, “Outrage erupts at

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 81.

the harm to a man through his property but ignores the violence done against the woman herself.”<sup>72</sup>

*Judges 20.8-11*

<sup>8</sup> All the people got up as one, saying, “We will not any of us go to our tents, nor will any of us return to our houses. <sup>9</sup> But now this is what we will do to Gibeah: we will go up against it by lot. <sup>10</sup> We will take ten men of a hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thousand, and a thousand of ten thousand, to bring provisions for the troops, who are going to repay Gibeah of Benjamin for all the disgrace that they have done in Israel.” <sup>11</sup> So all the men of Israel gathered against the city, united as one.

When the tribe of Benjamin refuses to give up the wicked men of Gibeah, a great battle ensues, nearly destroying the entire tribe. The rest of chapter 20 offers a fast-paced action sequence in which eleven tribes do battle against the brave warriors of the tribe of Benjamin. Twenty-five thousand Benjamites are slain in battle; six hundred Benjamite warriors flee. The Israelites then turn on the city of Gibeah, destroying everything and everyone that remains. They kill every human and every animal, then set the city on fire. The vengeance of the Israelites against the city of Gibeah leads them to do the very things they had condemned. Their response demonstrates that they are avenging the Levite, not the concubine. Their concern is not that a woman has been raped, killed, and mutilated, but that her husband/owner has been deprived of his property. In revenge, they deprive the Benjamite men of their property (including thousands of women and children) as well as their lives.

Vengeance creates more problems than it solves. Two oaths have been made in the process of mustering this army: That no man from one of the eleven tribes will give his daughter to marry a Benjamite, and that anyone who did not join the battle against Benjamin will be put to death. These two oaths work together to create the next wave of violence. Down to just six

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 82.

hundred male survivors, the tribe of Benjamin is teetering on utter annihilation. Israel does not want to lose a tribe. Since no one from Jabesh-Gilead had joined the battle, Israel sends twelve thousand soldiers to slay every man, woman and child in Jabesh-Gilead, preserving only virgin girls. They capture four hundred virgin girls and hand them over to the tribe of Benjamin (21.8-13). However, this does not suffice; two hundred males were still without the use of a woman. Israel still might lose the tribe. How can they find Jewish women to give the Benjamite men, without anyone breaking their oath? Abduction is the answer. They scheme with the Benjamites to kidnap virgin girls traveling to a yearly festival in Shiloh. The men hide in the vineyards, kidnap two hundred young women and carry them home. When the girls' fathers or brothers seek justice, the tribal elders tell them to "be generous and allow us to have them; because we did not capture in battle a wife for each man. But neither did you incur guilt by giving your daughters to them" (21.22-23).

The irony of this story is that in condemning an act of violence against one woman, the Israelites extend the sexual violence to six hundred virgins. Further, they kill every single woman who belongs to the tribe of Benjamin. Clearly, the impetus of the battle is not to condemn an act of violence against a woman, but to avenge an act of economic injustice against a man. Throughout this story, women are treated as property, so that justice is achieved by destroying the property of the property-destroyer.

Nevertheless, the reader is not intended to read this story as prescriptive or normative; not a single action of any man in the story is held up as exemplary. The editor of the book of Judges opens the story with "In those days, when there was no king in Israel" (19.1), and closes it by noting "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (21.25). This phrase "in their own eyes" echoes the words of the host to the mob, "Do to

them [the virgin daughter and the concubine] the good in your own eyes” (19.24).<sup>73</sup> The purpose of this horrific tale is revealed in this preface and conclusion: Israel must have a king in order to preserve the twelve tribes. Without a king, Israelite men will do what is right in their own eyes. The result of individualistic morality is disastrous, nearly annihilating one of the tribes and ironically causing men to promote rape and murder as a way to uphold individual moral stances taken as a response to rape and murder. The message, then, is that men (and councils of men) cannot be trusted to do what is right. The editor uses the story to promote monarchy.

The previous use of sexual violence as a means of denigrating a tribe may also be at play here, since Saul, the first king, is from the tribe of Benjamin. The editor may be undercutting Saul to endorse the Davidic monarchy.<sup>74</sup> The story promotes monarchy over democracy by claiming that without a king chaos and anarchy will reign, but combines the feature of using sexual violence to defame the Benjaminites (and by extension, King Saul, who was a Benjamite). The city of Jabesh-Gilead also had ties to King Saul and is denigrated in the story by their refusal to join the battle.<sup>75</sup>

Violence begets violence. Because one woman has been murdered, the violence is extended to thousands of men, women, and little children slaughtered in the battle against Benjamin and the battle against Jabesh-Gilead.<sup>76</sup> Because one woman has been raped, at least six hundred virgins are raped by Benjamites. The story paints the tribe of Judah (King David’s people) in a better light than the tribe of Benjamin (King Saul’s people).<sup>77</sup> The main characters

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>75</sup> Coogan, 389 HEBREW BIBLE.

<sup>76</sup> Aschkenasy, 76.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

have no proper names, but their tribal affiliations are emphasized. Clearly the story wants to say something about tribes, not individuals.<sup>78</sup>

The storyteller provides a “true story” in the background of the “official story,” essentially speaking with two voices.<sup>79</sup> The collective voice in the official story treats the friendly father, the bereaved Levite, and the old man of Gibeon as the protagonists, while implicating the Benjamites for cruelty, perversion, and murder. The woman’s role is neutral, though her action of leaving the patriarchal home initiates the path to doom, much like Dinah’s departure from her father’s encampment.<sup>80</sup>

The dissident voice is fainter but comes through as nuance and marked silence. Without remarking upon it, the narrator exposes patriarchy as an unbalanced system in which male safety, male voices, male desires, male honor, and male pride take priority over the safety and the very life of women. Even a virgin child cannot expect her own father to protect her, in her own home.<sup>81</sup> The narrator skillfully depicts the woman’s vulnerability, and her silence is so marked that it cannot be attributed merely to the author’s preoccupation with the men in the story. Rather, the storyteller is telling a story in the silences—a story that is sympathetic to women. He shows us how insensitively the Levite treats “his” woman. The Levite tosses her out for other men to rape and torture, not even disturbing his sleep to check for her return. He orders her around as she lies bruised and bloody at the threshold. He hacks her into pieces without even making certain she is dead. These details are revealed to the reader, but not to the congregation of Israel. The Levite lies to the council, denying his own complicity to the crime in order to incite greater violence—and this violence is visited on the women and children so

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 77.

disproportionally that the other tribes try to restore balance by killing even more men, women, and children, and by legitimizing the abduction, rape, and forced marriage of six hundred virgins.

In the two voices of this text, two very different agendas arise. The Levite is the narrator of the official story, whereby eleven tribes punish one tribe for a terrible crime, then forgive that tribe and seek to restore balance. But the narrator of the overall story reveals a different agenda, one that seeks to make the silence and the objectification of the concubine explicit. The story works as an apology for monarchy and an indictment of consensus decision-making (as the congregation does, indeed, make some terrible choices), but it is hardly seamless as an argument for a Davidic dynasty over/against the rule of Saul.

This argument—that the story denigrates Benjamin—rests on accepting the official story of the council rather than the dissident voice of the narrator. The narrator is, in fact, more sympathetic to Benjamin, twice calling the Benjamite warriors courageous fighters (20.44, 46). Only the men of the town of Gibeah are depicted as evil rapists, while the other Benjamites fight for family loyalty, a value shared all the tribes. The narrator blames the other eleven tribes for the inordinate destruction of Gibeah and for nearly annihilating the tribe of Benjamin.

As for the individuals in the story, the narrator makes the Levite more a villain than a hero by subtly pointing out his duplicity in the repetition of the story, and not-so-subtly implicating him in the rape and possibly the murder of his own concubine. The marital references may also be elements of this dissident voice, reflecting the law that a man cannot treat a woman he is having sex with as a slave (Exodus 21, see earlier analysis). The narrator also implicates the old man (who is from Ephraim, not Benjamin) in the concubine's rape and murder. The Ephraimite even endangers his own virgin daughter, who escapes being raped by the men of Gibeah only to die at the hands of the Israelites avenging the Levite.

A pro-monarchy agenda is evident, but an anti-Benjamite agenda is difficult to support. Further, the story can only lend support to the reign of David if composed during his lifetime, considering that sexual violence frames his own downfall.

The rape of Tamar and the rape of David's concubines both serve a narrative function: They punish David for the rape of Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah.<sup>82</sup> Amnon's rape of Tamar echoes David's rape of Bathsheba, while Amnon's murder of Absalom echoes David's murder of Uriah and fulfills the promise that "the sword shall never depart from your house" (2 Sam 12.10).<sup>83</sup>

Cheryl Exum suggests subjecting God to the same critical analysis used on other characters in this story, rather than treating God as privileged beyond reproof.<sup>84</sup> She says this type of character critique reveals the agenda of the author: To condemn David's violation of Uriah, not Bathsheba.<sup>85</sup> Rape serves as a signal of unraveling in these stories, not because a woman has been injured, but because a man has been injured. God seeks retribution against the man (David) who caused the injury to another man (Uriah), by repaying David in kind. That reprisal involves the rape of David's women: first his daughter, then his concubines. These stories provide little solace for women. They do not establish any precedent regarding the sacredness of a woman's body, but rather reaffirm the patriarchal ideal of women belonging to fathers and husbands.

The saga begins when King David, walking around on his rooftop, sees a beautiful woman bathing. In some religious traditions, the name Bathsheba is almost synonymous with adultery. Yet, Bathsheba is not a name (it merely means the daughter of Sheba, pointing to her

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<sup>82</sup> Exum, *Trusting in the God of their Fathers*, 54.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> However, Nathan's parable treats Bathsheba as a victim of violence, perhaps reflecting a different point of view from a different author.

place within the patriarchal family structure<sup>86</sup>), and the biblical narrative depicts Bathsheba as a victim of rape, not an adulteress.

### *2 Samuel 11.1-5*

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful.<sup>3</sup> David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite."<sup>4</sup> So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house.<sup>5</sup> The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

Cheryl Exum describes Bathsheba's rape as semiotic; that is, it is not so much told in the story as perpetuated by it.<sup>87</sup> We are not told whether she knows why she is summoned. We do not know whether she goes willingly, seduces or is seduced, resists, or regrets. By leaving out the female perspective, the author makes Bathsheba vulnerable not only to the men in the story, but to the story itself. "By denying her subjectivity, the narrator violates the character he created. By portraying Bathsheba in an ambiguous light, the narrator leaves her vulnerable, not simply to assault by David but also to misappropriation by those who came after him to spy on the bathing beauty and offer their versions of, or commentary on, the story. In particular, the withholding of Bathsheba's point of view leaves her open to the charge of seduction."<sup>88</sup>

Bathsheba's behavior is ambiguous because she is objectified by the story. The narrative depicts her as a thing to be coveted and taken, not a person with a soul and a voice. We are not

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<sup>86</sup> Wright, March 2013.

<sup>87</sup> Cheryl Exum, "Bathsheba Plotted, Shot, and Painted," *JSOT Sup* 215 (1996), 22.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

told that she resisted, and readers have been jumping to conclusions ever since. Exum places responsibility for this ambiguity not on the woman but on the narrator who chose to depict Bathsheba bathing while a man watched. Noting the sentence about bathing to resolve ritual impurity (from menses), Exum suggests this is a scene of a man watching a woman touching herself.<sup>89</sup> David asks who the woman is and is given an immediate response – indicating he is not the only one spying on her.<sup>90</sup> The presence of a naked woman touching herself while men watch, is for Exum a suggestion of complicity, or at least ambiguity, that is left unmitigated due to the woman’s silence.<sup>91</sup>

Bathsheba’s silence leaves her open to the charge of complicity in the cover-up, as well. Unable to convince Uriah to have sex with his wife in time to claim paternity, David arranges to have him die in battle. Did Bathsheba conspire to seduce a king, have her husband killed, and become Queen of Israel? Nehama Aschkenasy writes, “Our first impression of Bathsheba is that of a passive female, surrendering easily to the king,<sup>92</sup> subject to the laws of her feminine cycle, and having no control whatsoever over either,”<sup>93</sup> but later asserts that Bathsheba may have masterminded her own fate, since she always comes out the victor of every encounter with David.<sup>94</sup> Whenever Bathsheba appears to be naïve, Aschkenasy says she is actually moving to a position of greater power. For example, when she appears unaware that she is being spied upon, she is actually manipulating David to impregnate her, since she is married to a soldier who is always gone and is too pious to impregnate her when he does come home. Likewise, when she

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 23. The note about menses sets up the circumstances for the tension in the plot: Since Uriah’s wife had a period while he was away at war, the child cannot be his. However, it does also create the image Exum notes, both for those watching and for the reader/listener, who becomes complicit in the voyeurism.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>92</sup> Aschkenasy fails to note that David sent at least three men to get Bathsheba. The author uses the plural, not the dual, indicating he expected resistance. Wright, March 2013. Bathsheba was not merely summoned but, arguably, arrested.

<sup>93</sup> Aschkenasy, 109.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 113.

appears to be putting herself at risk by announcing her pregnancy to King David, she is actually putting pressure on him and as a result, she becomes queen.<sup>95</sup>

The narrator's choices do leave Bathsheba vulnerable to the charge of complicity, but again the reader (or hearer) is privy to a dissident voice.

### *2 Samuel 11.26-12.19*

<sup>26</sup> When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. <sup>27</sup> When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD, **12** <sup>1</sup> and the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. <sup>2</sup> The rich man had very many flocks and herds; <sup>3</sup> but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. <sup>4</sup> Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." <sup>5</sup> Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; <sup>6</sup> he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." <sup>7</sup> Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; <sup>8</sup> I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. <sup>9</sup> Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.

It is Nathan's parable that reveals Bathsheba's situation, if not her viewpoint. Though Nathan's metaphor exonerates Bathsheba of all wrongdoing. No one would suggest the ewe lamb in the story was complicit in its own slaughter, or that it paraded itself in front of the rich man hoping to be eaten. Although the image of the ewe lamb depicts the woman as chattel, it

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 117.

does express the victimization of Bathsheba. Using the logic of Deuteronomy (“this case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbor” Deut 22.26), Nathan condemns David and exonerates Bathsheba. His metaphor portrays David’s unmitigated abuse of power and denies any possibility that Bathsheba benefited from the taking.

This function is significant, because the legendary hero of the story tends to charm his way out judgment. Like Joab, readers and even scholars are easily persuaded not to let “this thing” be evil in their eyes. Some cover-up attempts are subtle; the NRSV and the NIV soften the acquisitional aspect of 11:4 by saying that David sends messengers “to get her.”<sup>96</sup> The root word is actually *קָח*, “take”. They do not get her; they take her. Other attempts are more overt; the chronicler presents an idealized story of David that omits this episode entirely.<sup>97</sup>

The parable is the turning-point for all the action in the story. Parables seek to alter the thinking of the hearer by means of an unexpected plot twist. The tension between expected and actual events gives the parable its power, setting up the reader with certain expectations (e.g., The rich man has a visitor, so he will slaughter one of his many sheep), then delivering the unexpected (He instead slaughters the poor man’s beloved pet). Juridical parables are often employed by prophets speaking to power, because they disguise the real life situation and lead the unsuspecting hearer to pass judgment on himself.<sup>98</sup> Through this deceit, the juridical parable is able to “overcome man’s own closeness to himself, enabling him to judge himself with the same yardstick that he applies to others.”<sup>99</sup>

## *2 Samuel 6.10-12*

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<sup>96</sup> Bruce C. Birch, "1 & 2 Samuel," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 1289.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 1288.

<sup>98</sup> Uriel Simon, “The Poor Man’s Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable,” *Biblica* 48, (1967), 220-221.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>10</sup> Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. <sup>11</sup> Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. <sup>12</sup> For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.”

In canonical context the tale reaches both backward and forward. It serves to affirm Samuel’s prophetic authority and to explain future events in the history of Israel. Earlier in the narrative, the people of Israel demanded a king rather than the plurality of judges Samuel had appointed as leaders. Samuel acquiesced to their demands, but with the ominous warning that “he will take your sons . . . he will take your daughters . . . he will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves” (1 Sam 8:11-17). In the Bathsheba cycle, David behaves exactly as Samuel predicted. He takes Eliam’s daughter although she is married. He takes Uriah and sends him to his death in battle. In the parable, Nathan depicts him taking a poor man’s only lamb. The author displays a degree of subtlety in not making these parallels between 1 Sam 8 and 2 Sam 11-12 explicit.

The future implications are not so subtle. After convicting David through the parable, Nathan declares that God will punish him in like manner. Since he has secretly taken the wife of another man and committed adultery with her, God will take David’s wives and give them to “your neighbor,” from “within your own house,” who “shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun” (12:11). David’s punishment is eye-for-eye, even if the magnitude seems to be increased. The severity is justified by David’s abundance. David has unwittingly agreed to this judgment by declaring that the rich man should repay the poor man “fourfold” (12:6).

The sexual violation of Bathsheba foreshadows and explains the rape of Tamar and the rape of David’s concubines as divine retribution. It serves as a theological preface to Absalom’s

rebellion, and thus may have been inserted later into what is essentially an archival report of David's Aramaen-Ammonite wars.<sup>100</sup>

### *2 Samuel 13.1-2*

Some time passed. David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her.<sup>2</sup> Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her.

"Some time passed" (Literally, "And it came to pass after this") references the Bathsheba cycle.<sup>101</sup> She is introduced in relation to Absalom, Amnon and David, foreshadowing Absalom's later importance to the plot. The next sentence reads literally "To Absalom, son of David, a sister beautiful, with the name Tamar, and desired her Amnon, son of David."<sup>102</sup>

### *2 Samuel 3-4*

<sup>3</sup>But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. <sup>4</sup>He said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister."<sup>5</sup>

Amnon places Absalom, rather than the girl's aforementioned virginity, as the obstacle preventing him from obtaining his desire.<sup>103</sup>

### *2 Samuel 5-6*

Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill; and when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" <sup>6</sup>So Amnon lay down, and pretended to be ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand."<sup>7</sup> Then

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<sup>100</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel*, vol. 9, *Anchor Bible Commentary Series*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 276.

<sup>101</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 37.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

David sent home to Tamar, saying, “Go to your brother Amnon’s house, and prepare food for him.”

Amnon refers to Tamar directly as “my sister” when he makes his request to King David in 13.6b. Thus David says to Tamar “Go to your brother Amnon’s house,” the fraternal language seeming to indicate security.<sup>104</sup> However, in the next scene he calls her “my sister” when demanding that she lie with him.

<sup>8</sup> So Tamar went to her brother Amnon’s house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. <sup>9</sup> Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat. Amnon said, “Send out everyone from me.” So everyone went out from him. <sup>10</sup> Then Amnon said to Tamar, “Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand.” So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. <sup>11</sup> But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, “Come, lie with me, my sister.” <sup>12</sup> She answered him, “No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! <sup>13</sup> As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you.” <sup>14</sup> But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her.<sup>105</sup>

Tamar’s initial objection echoes the language of Lot to the men of Sodom, and the old man in Gibeah to the Benjamites who wanted to rape his male guest. The first victim allowed to raise her voice against sexual violence, Tamar appropriates masculine language about Israel and wickedness to put her brother’s intended sexual against her on the same level as sexual assault against a man. Getting nowhere with this argument, she tries another approach, reminding him how the crime would affect each of them, victim and perpetrator. Her third argument is for patience rather than chastity. It may also be an appeal to the king’s authority.

None of Tamar’s objections prevail, and Amnon rapes her. This passage avoids all ambiguity. Here we are confronted with a villain who plots a premeditated rape, and a victim

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>105</sup> NRSV translators have added “with.” In the Hebrew, the force is particular strong by the omission of a preposition, so that “he forced her and lay her.” Wright, Jan 2013.

who clearly objects, argues, and physically resists. His “love” for her also reflects backward onto motivations of Shechem, whom so many readers want to exonerate because of his love for Dinah. As this passage makes clear, love does not negate rape in biblical literature.

*2 Samuel 13.15-19*

<sup>15</sup> Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her. Amnon said to her, “Get out!” <sup>16</sup> But she said to him, “No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me.” But he would not listen to her. <sup>17</sup> He called the young man who served him and said, “Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her.” <sup>18</sup> (Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.) So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her. <sup>19</sup> But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went.

Tamar may be appealing to the provision in Deut 22.28-29 that men who seize virgins and have sex with them must marry them.

*2 Samuel 13.20-22*

<sup>20</sup> Her brother Absalom said to her, “Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart.” So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom’s house. <sup>21</sup> When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn. <sup>22</sup> But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar.

These narrative notes tie the Tamar story to the hatred, treason, and rape that follow. The rape of Tamar establishes why Absalom hates Amnon, and also sets Absalom up to despise his father for not responding appropriately (or at all) to the rape. The rape *topos* functions as connective tissue for the larger narrative, tracing bad blood between men and the judgment of God to this repeated crime. Several chapters later, after Absalom kills Amnon, rebels against his father rule, and takes the castle, rape seems to be the only thing to do.

*2 Samuel 16.20-22*

<sup>20</sup> Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, “Give us your counsel; what shall we do?” <sup>21</sup> Ahithophel said to Absalom, “Go in to your father’s concubines, the ones he has left to look after the house; and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened.” <sup>22</sup> So they pitched a tent for Absalom upon the roof; and Absalom went in to his father’s concubines in the sight of all Israel.

In contrast to Bathsheba’s silence and Tamar’s desperate objections, this story gives its victims no faces, no voices, no names. The implication of the story is that Absalom has wronged David, not the women. Indeed, what women? The text not only robs the women of sexual agency but also of all identity and humanity. They are not treated as women, but as objects. This is the magnified consequence of David’s “taking” a sweet little lamb. A culture of rape prevails and human beings are reduced to mere objects that a man can go in to, just as he goes into a tent.

The whole story serves as a poignant commentary on violence begetting violence, or on the misuse of male power, or on the way a culture of rape objectifies women and robs them of their voice and identity. However, those elements of the story derive more from the author’s literary skill at depicting reality than from the author’s intended message.

The intended message of the narrative is far more political than sociological. Just as the author of Judges uses sexual violence to condemn tribal councils in favor of monarchy, the author of the Davidic rape saga uses sexual violence to explain the downfall of David and the eventual rise of Solomon.<sup>106</sup> The narrative moves cleanly through each of the sons in David’s lineage to explain exactly why David was succeeded by Solomon rather than Amnon or Absalom.

As in the legends or foundational myths of Genesis, sexual violence against women in historical annals serves as a harbinger of increased tragedy that spirals out of control. As a

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<sup>106</sup> Brueggemann, 140.

literary device, the purpose of sexual violence in these stories is more apologetic than etiological. The author uses instances of sexual violence to shock the reader into a visceral response that agrees with his position.

## Chapter 2

### *Early Prophetic Oracle: The Marriage Metaphor*

The prophets use sexual violence differently from the writers of historical annals and legends. Rather than using the horror of sexual abuse as a crime to condemn the perpetrator and denigrate the offspring of rape, the prophets assume it is the norm for husbands to sexually abuse unfaithful wives.<sup>1</sup> Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel depict the nation's relationship with God as a marriage. God is justified in stripping, starving, and wounding the nation, just as a man in ancient times would be considered justified for doing the same to an unfaithful wife. In the legends and historical annals, rape is committed against another man's daughter, sister, wife, or concubine; in these stories, sexual violence is sometimes committed against one's own spouse.

The prophets were interested in the political fate of Israel, the history of Israel's relationship with God, and how to account for Israel's demise as a nation.<sup>2</sup> They use metaphor because this is the only way one can speak of God.<sup>3</sup> Using the cultural codes and common social mores about marriage to explain divine-human relationships predates the prophets; this mythological thinking was common in the Ancient Near East, where capital cities were often considered the wives of patron gods.<sup>4</sup> The prophets found the marriage metaphor particularly poignant for the covenant between a monotheistic God and a nation. In the wake of the nation's destruction, they blamed its downfall on the violation of the marriage covenant with God.

Hebrew marriage was a fitting metaphor for the divine/human relationship, precisely because of the unidirectional quality of marriage understood by that culture. The Hebrew has no

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<sup>1</sup> Hornsby, 148.

<sup>2</sup> Weems, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in Prophetic Books*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Weems, 7.

word for marriage; rather a man “rules over” a woman, or “takes” a woman.<sup>5</sup> A husband might take more than one wife, but being a faithful wife required total loyalty to a single man.

God-as-father was also a common metaphor because a father may have many children but a child only has one father, even if there are several mothers in the household. What makes the marriage metaphor more effective for the prophet’s purposes than the fatherhood metaphor is the aspect of sexual jealousy. The raw emotions of jealousy and shame permeate the metaphors, so that in the ancient mind the abuse of the husband against the wife is entirely justified.

In the Old Testament, a woman is more likely than a man to break the marriage contract, precisely because the rules of adultery vary between the sexes. A married woman commits adultery if she sleeps with any other man, while a married man commits adultery only if he sleeps with a married woman. He is free to have sex with unmarried women, visit prostitutes, and even take another wife without violating the marriage covenant.<sup>6</sup> Thus, ancient Hebrew marriage was a useful metaphor to describe the sort of total devotion required by monotheism.

The prophets use this metaphor to explain Israel’s destruction, downfall, or exile, while still maintaining that God is sovereign. Essentially, they attempt to solve the theodicy problem (If God is all powerful, why do bad things happen to good people?) by depicting Israel as a cheating wife deserving of God’s punishment. Hosea’s eighth-century commentary casts the nation’s downfall as the destruction of an unfaithful and incorrigible wife. In Jeremiah, the Jewish nation is depicted as a wayward wife destined to become a prostitute. Ezekiel spends two full chapters on the sordid demise of a once-beautiful woman, contrasting her past fame to her current sexual degradation.<sup>7</sup> The prophets use various metaphors (promiscuous wife, brazen

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<sup>5</sup> Baumann, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Weems, 2.

whore, mutilated paramour) to arouse feelings of disgust, contempt, fear, and shame in the intended audience.<sup>8</sup>

Hosea may be the primal text for prophetic marriage imagery.<sup>9</sup> The prophet draws a parallel between the land and the woman/wife as a way to denounce unfaithful behavior of both.<sup>10</sup> The story opens with the earthly marriage of the prophet Hosea to the prostitute Gomer, creating a living analogy of God's relationship with Israel.<sup>11</sup> The prophecies then serve double-duty, attached as they are to both a real woman and the national of Israel symbolized as a woman.

*Hosea 2.1-3*

Say to your brother, Ammi, and to your sister, Ruhamah.

<sup>2</sup>Plead with your mother, plead—  
for she is not my wife,  
and I am not her husband—  
that she put away her whoring from her face,  
and her adultery from between her breasts,  
<sup>3</sup>or I will strip her naked  
and expose her as in the day she was born,  
and make her like a wilderness,  
and turn her into a parched land,  
and kill her with thirst.

The first line corresponds to the children's names, Lo-Ammi ("not my people") and Lo-Ruhamah ("not pitied). Removing the prefix, the children are now "my people" and "pitied."<sup>12</sup> The stripping of the woman corresponds with the threatened stripping of the land, resulting in withered crops and resultant hunger.<sup>13</sup> The next few stanzas indicate God does not truly plan to

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Baumann, 85.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>12</sup> Coogan, 1280 HEBREW BIBLE.

<sup>13</sup> Baumann, 95.

kill his wife, but rather to stop her from going after her lovers and make her see that he is the one providing for her, not them.

Hosea 2.4-9

<sup>4</sup> Upon her children also I will have no pity,  
because they are children of whoredom.  
<sup>5</sup> For their mother has played the whore;  
she who conceived them has acted shamefully.  
For she said, "I will go after my lovers;  
they give me my bread and my water,  
my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink."  
<sup>6</sup> Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns;  
and I will build a wall against her,  
so that she cannot find her paths.  
<sup>7</sup> She shall pursue her lovers,  
but not overtake them;  
and she shall seek them,  
but shall not find them.  
Then she shall say, "I will go  
and return to my first husband,  
for it was better with me than now."  
<sup>8</sup> She did not know  
that it was I who gave her  
the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and who lavished upon her silver  
and gold that they used for Baal.  
<sup>9</sup> Therefore I will take back  
my grain in its time,  
and my wine in its season;  
and I will take away my wool and my flax,  
which were to cover her nakedness.

In this construct, the purpose of economic and agricultural problems is to drive Israel back to God. However, the prophetic utterance soon turns violent.

Hosea 2.10-13

<sup>10</sup> Now I will uncover her shame  
in the sight of her lovers,  
and no one shall rescue her out of my hand.  
<sup>11</sup> I will put an end to all her mirth,

her festivals, her new moons, her sabbaths,  
 and all her appointed festivals.  
<sup>12</sup> I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees,  
 of which she said,  
 “These are my pay,  
 which my lovers have given me.”  
 I will make them a forest,  
 and the wild animals shall devour them.  
<sup>13</sup> I will punish her for the festival days of the Baals,  
 when she offered incense to them  
 and decked herself with her ring and jewelry,  
 and went after her lovers,  
 and forgot me, says the LORD.  
<sup>14</sup> Therefore, I will now allure her,  
 and bring her into the wilderness,  
 and speak tenderly to her.  
<sup>15</sup> From there I will give her her vineyards,  
 and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.  
 There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,  
 as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

Hosea likens Samaria to an unfaithful wife who chases after lovers until her husband is forced to intervene. First, he strips her naked, barricades her in, and prevents her from getting to them. Next, he threatens to humiliate and kill her. In 14-15 and on to 23, he stops imagining his wife’s death and instead switches to language of reconciliation.<sup>14</sup> The conciliatory language seeks to balance the hateful emotions.<sup>15</sup> Sexual violence in Hosea 2 connects punishment with reconciliation and highlights God’s will to rescue his marriage by all possible means.<sup>16</sup> Divine punishment of the symbolic woman cleanses the woman (land) so that reconciliation may follow. At the end of the book, the metaphor shifts from marital to paternal, imaging a universe that is friendly to Israel.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Weems, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Baumann, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 223.

The prophet Jeremiah also leans heavily on the theme of domestic violence. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, brief images of female sexuality, marriage, and promiscuity appear.<sup>18</sup> These images figure Jerusalem's destruction, but promise restoration. The wounded Zion abandoned by her lovers will be healed (30.12-17). God and Israel will renew their covenant based on mutuality and trust (31), since the former covenant has been virtually annulled by the unfaithful wife's behavior.<sup>19</sup>

In Jeremiah 2.1-3, Jerusalem is a new bride in love,<sup>20</sup> which could be sarcastic, since the biblical record never depicts Jerusalem as faithful. Jeremiah 13.20-27 predicts her coming humiliation like a woman who has her skirts pulled over her head and her genitals exposed to public view.<sup>21</sup>

*Jeremiah 13.20-22*

<sup>20</sup> Lift up your eyes and see  
those who come from the north.  
Where is the flock that was given you,  
your beautiful flock?  
<sup>21</sup> What will you say when they set as head over you  
those whom you have trained  
to be your allies?  
Will not pangs take hold of you,  
like those of a woman in labor?  
<sup>22</sup> And if you say in your heart,  
“Why have these things come upon me?”  
it is for the greatness of your iniquity  
that your skirts are lifted up,  
and you are violated.

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<sup>18</sup> Weems, 93-94.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>20</sup> Baumann, 192. Sharon Moughtin-Mumby denies that Jeremiah 2 opens with a marriage metaphor, noting that the figurative bride has forgotten her sashes and her ornaments, not her fiancé or bridegroom. Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91.

<sup>21</sup> Weems, 12.

Note that in verse 22, sexual violence is described in a passive manner, with no perpetrators named.

*Jeremiah 13.23-27*

<sup>23</sup> Can Ethiopians change their skin  
or leopards their spots?  
Then also you can do good  
who are accustomed to do evil.  
<sup>24</sup> I will scatter you like chaff  
driven by the wind from the desert.  
<sup>25</sup> This is your lot,  
the portion I have measured out to you, says the LORD,  
because you have forgotten me  
and trusted in lies.  
<sup>26</sup> I myself will lift up your skirts over your face,  
and your shame will be seen.  
<sup>27</sup> I have seen your abominations,  
your adulteries and neighings, your shameless prostitutions  
on the hills of the countryside.  
Woe to you, O Jerusalem!  
How long will it be  
before you are made clean?

The violence moves from passive phrasing in which the perpetrator is unnamed (13.22),<sup>22</sup> to an explicit threat God will lift her skirts over her face and expose her shame (or genitals).<sup>23</sup> The subject is not only named but emphasized with the words “I myself.” The depiction of the woman, with her skirts pulled over her face, violates the woman and also renders her faceless.<sup>24</sup>

Attributing the violence to the woman’s adulteries, “neighings,” and infamous whoring upon hills and in fields, the prophet recalls images from earlier oracles, especially the depiction of the woman as a cow-camel and a wild female ass in heat (Jer 2.23-25), suggesting sexual

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<sup>22</sup> Angela Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah: A Feminist-Literary Reading* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 104.

<sup>23</sup> Baumann, 120-121.

<sup>24</sup> Bauer, 106.

insatiability has as the cause of rape.<sup>25</sup> Female sexual activity and desire are equated with the people's abominations. The poem closes by proclaiming Jerusalem permanently unclean.<sup>26</sup>

Jeremiah's marriage metaphor was likely shaped in reference to the imagery in Hosea.<sup>27</sup> Now we have two women, Judah and Israel, both wed to God but engaging in such promiscuous behavior that he considers divorce.<sup>28</sup> Although males are the primary sinners in concrete terms, guilt belongs to the metaphorical "women" Israel/Judah/Jerusalem. Suffering is expressed in images of women's life experience, both metaphorically through sexual violence, and actually through the mourning of widows and mothers of starving children.<sup>29</sup>

Jeremiah ties adultery with idol worship using the deuteronomic formula "playing the whore under every green tree and on every high hill" (13.27).<sup>30</sup> In 13.20-27, sexual violence is depicted as a divine punishment for breaking the covenant, not merely an unfortunate natural result of sin.<sup>31</sup> This theology answers the question Israelites must have asked themselves about God's seeming absence or lack of power to save them from political ruin and personal harm; it was not that God was unable to save them from their enemies, but rather that God was using their enemies to punish them for being faithless.

The metaphor of the nation or city as a battered, cheating wife grows even more violent in the prophecy of Ezekiel. Chapters 16 and 23 depict Jerusalem as a beloved wife who has gone astray despite her husband's indulgences, and therefore is subject to her illicit lovers' most violent impulses.<sup>32</sup> Exploiting the fear, shame, guilt, contempt, and prejudice bound up in sexual

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>27</sup> Baumann, 223.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 130-131, 133.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>31</sup> Weems, 123.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

violence, the author uses these themes to lavishly detail the city's destruction.<sup>33</sup> In this prophetic utterance, the jealous husband exacts his punishment through public humiliation, gang rape, mutilation, cutting off his wife's nose, and slaughtering her children.<sup>34</sup> The prophet concentrates on justifying the wife's demise rather than upholding hope and reconciliation.<sup>35</sup>

The context of the marriage passages is always one of judgment.<sup>36</sup> It is very clear that God's wife in Ezekiel is Jerusalem.<sup>37</sup> In verse 44 and again in chapter 23, Jerusalem's sisters Samaria and Sodom are addressed. Ezekiel is the only prophetic book in which Sodom is considered a sister.<sup>38</sup> Ezekiel 16 speaks to the woman, while Ezekiel 23 speaks primarily about her to a third party.<sup>39</sup>

#### *Ezekiel 16.1-7*

**16** The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup>Mortal, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, <sup>3</sup>and say, Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite. <sup>4</sup>As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths. <sup>5</sup>No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; but you were thrown out in the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.

<sup>6</sup>I passed by you, and saw you flailing about in your blood. As you lay in your blood, I said to you, "Live!" <sup>7</sup>and grow up like a plant of the field." You grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare.

Ezekiel asserts that the wife was nothing when the husband found her; she was a naked orphan he had to clean up and raise.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>35</sup> Weems, 97.

<sup>36</sup> Baumann, 135.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 139.

*Ezekiel 16.8*

<sup>8</sup> I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine.

This verse depicts the girl's puberty. The prophet depicts a sexual relationship with the euphemism of the cloak, seen also in Ruth's request to Boaz, "spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin" (Ruth 3.9). However, the author conveys a relationship far beyond conquest, where the destitute orphan is not merely cared for and wed to her benefactor, but is treated with great honor. That motif is continued in the next verses (Ezek 16.9-14), to set up the surprising plot twist of the woman's haughtiness. Verses 15-34 describe how the woman gives away the precious jewels, clothing, and food her husband has lovingly bestowed upon her, lavishing these things on her lovers. Finally she commits the most horrid crime imaginable: child sacrifice. Forgetting who wiped away her blood and gave her these things, including the beloved children, she becomes utterly debased and commits her adulteries publicly, setting herself up on a platform.

This woman, who owed everything to her husband, disrespected him, cheated on him, and sacrificed her children to idols. Therefore, readers are told, the husband is the true victim in this scenario. The husband is justified when he executes terrible judgment.

*Ezekiel 16.35-37*

<sup>35</sup> Therefore, O whore, hear the word of the LORD: <sup>36</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD, Because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your whoring with your lovers, and because of all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, <sup>37</sup> therefore, I will gather all your lovers, with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated;

I will gather them against you from all around, and will uncover your nakedness to them, so that they may see all your nakedness.

In this passage, as in Jeremiah, the husband's first violent act employs the adulterous woman's lovers as her co-abusers. The punishment must fit the crime. Exposing her nakedness to her lovers seems redundant if they are her lovers; but, the passage implies greater violence than mere nakedness. She is not merely being robbed of a cloak but stripped and humiliated at the least, and quite possibly raped. The prophet goes on to provide some of the details of the stripping.

*Ezekiel 16.38-43a*

<sup>38</sup> I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring blood upon you in wrath and jealousy. <sup>39</sup> I will deliver you into their hands, and they shall throw down your platform and break down your lofty places; they shall strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful objects and leave you naked and bare. <sup>40</sup> They shall bring up a mob against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords. <sup>41</sup> They shall burn your houses and execute judgments on you in the sight of many women; I will stop you from playing the whore, and you shall also make no more payments. <sup>42</sup> So I will satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy shall turn away from you; I will be calm, and will be angry no longer. <sup>43</sup> Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things; therefore, I have returned your deeds upon your head, says the Lord GOD.

Here the images become a little more concrete. The violence exacted by her lovers, named as the Egyptians, Philistines, Assyrians, and Chaldea in verses 26-29, sounds more like war than rape, with burning houses and bloody swords. Note that the purpose of the violence is to satisfy God's fury and turn away God's jealousy (v. 42). However, the cessation of God's anger and jealousy does not signify reconciliation. Rather, after giving his wife to her lovers to be raped and tortured,<sup>40</sup> God is satisfied because of the harshness of the violent judgment. This is not a story, like the others, of

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<sup>40</sup> Weems, 97.

love triumphing over betrayal; this is the story of power triumphing over rebellion. The message is that the woman got what she deserved, restoring God's power and control, and Israel's obedience.<sup>41</sup>

#### Ezekiel 16.59-63

<sup>59</sup> Yes, thus says the Lord GOD: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath, breaking the covenant; <sup>60</sup> yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. <sup>61</sup> Then you will remember your ways, and be ashamed when I take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and give them to you as daughters, but not on account of my covenant with you. <sup>62</sup> I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, <sup>63</sup> in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord GOD.

As noted above, the judgment against Jerusalem is concluded because it is sufficient, not because Jerusalem repents. Rather, Jerusalem's repentance follows God's decision to reestablish the covenant, and is based on God's faithfulness (I will remember my covenant, v. 60) rather than Jerusalem's behavior.

In Ezekiel 23, the prophet tells a slightly different story relying on the same metaphor. In this prophetic tale, a man (symbolizing God) rescues two sisters from child prostitution and marries them both. The girls miss the old ways and commit adultery with reckless abandon. The husband responds by giving the first one up to her lovers, who abuse, rape, torture, and kill her and her children. The younger sister proves even worse, and the description of her lovers' abuse is gory: They cut off her nose and ears, kill her with the sword, and burn her with fire. Although it is the lovers who carry out the punishment, the second metaphor makes it very clear that they are carrying out the will of the husband (God.)

#### Ezekiel 23.1-4

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 98.

**23** The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup> Mortal, there were two women, the daughters of one mother; <sup>3</sup> they played the whore in Egypt; they played the whore in their youth; their breasts were caressed there, and their virgin bosoms were fondled. <sup>4</sup> Oholah was the name of the elder and Oholibah the name of her sister. They became mine, and they bore sons and daughters. As for their names, Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem.

In these four verses, Ezekiel sets up the metaphor so that there is no confusion who the oracle addresses. He describes the origins of the girls as child prostitutes, and names them as Samaria and Jerusalem. Next, he very succinctly narrates the older daughter's sin and judgment, as backstory to the younger daughter's narrative.

#### Ezekiel 23.5-10

<sup>5</sup> Oholah played the whore while she was mine; she lusted after her lovers the Assyrians, warriors<sup>[a]</sup><sup>6</sup> clothed in blue, governors and commanders, all of them handsome young men, mounted horsemen. <sup>7</sup> She bestowed her favors upon them, the choicest men of Assyria all of them; and she defiled herself with all the idols of everyone for whom she lusted. <sup>8</sup> She did not give up her whorings that she had practiced since Egypt; for in her youth men had lain with her and fondled her virgin bosom and poured out their lust upon her. <sup>9</sup> Therefore I delivered her into the hands of her lovers, into the hands of the Assyrians, for whom she lusted. <sup>10</sup> These uncovered her nakedness; they seized her sons and her daughters; and they killed her with the sword. Judgment was executed upon her, and she became a byword among women.

Oholah's story is offered without outrage or sympathy. She sinned, her husband handed her over, and her lovers executed judgment. The account is so dispassionate, the narrator God/husband even refers to "her" rather than "our" sons and daughters. Contrast this condensed statement with the judgment against Oholibah, to whom the prophecy is addressed:

#### Ezekiel 23.11-21

<sup>11</sup> Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet she was more corrupt than she in her lusting and in her whorings, which were worse than those of her sister. <sup>12</sup> She lusted after the Assyrians, governors and commanders, warriors<sup>[b]</sup> clothed in full armor, mounted horsemen, all of them handsome young men. <sup>13</sup> And I saw that she was defiled; they both took the same way. <sup>14</sup> But she carried her whorings further; she

saw male figures carved on the wall, images of the Chaldeans portrayed in vermilion,<sup>15</sup> with belts around their waists, with flowing turbans on their heads, all of them looking like officers—a picture of Babylonians whose native land was Chaldea.<sup>16</sup> When she saw them she lusted after them, and sent messengers to them in Chaldea.<sup>17</sup> And the Babylonians came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their lust; and after she defiled herself with them, she turned from them in disgust.<sup>18</sup> When she carried on her whorings so openly and flaunted her nakedness, I turned in disgust from her, as I had turned from her sister.<sup>19</sup> Yet she increased her whorings, remembering the days of her youth, when she played the whore in the land of Egypt<sup>20</sup> and lusted after her paramours there, whose members were like those of donkeys, and whose emission was like that of stallions.<sup>21</sup> Thus you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when the Egyptians fondled your bosom and caressed your young breasts.

Note how the narrator transitions in verse 21 from addressing the woman in the third person “she,” to the second person “you.” This technique heightens emotion, and allows for a more accusatory tone as the prophet shames Oholibah with her memories of childhood sexual molestation. In the next verse, the narration also changes, with God as the husband using a first person voice to rail against Oholibah in the second person. The author has suddenly and forcefully shifted from telling a story about someone else, to directly accusing the reader (hearer) in the voice of God. The tale is no longer about him and her; it is about me and you. Although the two girls were named up front, the experience to the male Israelite listening to the prophet’s speech would have been jarring, as a metaphorical tale about girls suddenly turned personal and accusatory.

#### Ezekiel 23.22-31

<sup>22</sup>Therefore, O Oholibah, thus says the Lord GOD: I will rouse against you your lovers from whom you turned in disgust, and I will bring them against you from every side: <sup>23</sup>the Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, Pekod and Shoa and Koa, and all the Assyrians with them, handsome young men, governors and commanders all of them, officers and warriors, all of them riding on horses. <sup>24</sup>They shall come against you from the north with chariots and wagons and a host of peoples; they shall set themselves against you on every side with buckler, shield, and helmet, and I will commit the judgment to them, and they shall judge you according to their ordinances. <sup>25</sup>I will direct my indignation

against you, in order that they may deal with you in fury. They shall cut off your nose and your ears, and your survivors shall fall by the sword. They shall seize your sons and your daughters, and your survivors shall be devoured by fire. <sup>26</sup> They shall also strip you of your clothes and take away your fine jewels. <sup>27</sup> So I will put an end to your lewdness and your whoring brought from the land of Egypt; you shall not long for them, or remember Egypt any more. <sup>28</sup> For thus says the Lord GOD: I will deliver you into the hands of those whom you hate, into the hands of those from whom you turned in disgust; <sup>29</sup> and they shall deal with you in hatred, and take away all the fruit of your labor, and leave you naked and bare, and the nakedness of your whorings shall be exposed. Your lewdness and your whorings <sup>30</sup> have brought this upon you, because you played the whore with the nations, and polluted yourself with their idols. <sup>31</sup> You have gone the way of your sister; therefore I will give her cup into your hand.

Seven times in nine verses, the prophet makes it clear that the sexual abuse of Oholibah is the explicit will of her husband (Ezek 23.22-30). The metaphor teaches that the nation's suffering under foreign powers is the explicit will of God. Israel is not suffering because God is weak, but because God is strong. Jerusalem's destruction is the result of God's power, not God's impotence against these greater empires. The message, then, spurs Israelites to continue worshiping and trusting in God, and to blame themselves (and their past leaders) rather than God for their current status of suffering.

Jerusalem's guilt includes joining with foreign powers such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon/Chaldea, worshiping their gods, and sacrificing sons and daughters. God's bond with Jerusalem is symbolized not in a mythical-indissoluble tie, but in the image of adoption and marriage, making divorce (permanent dissolution) the logical consequence for her damnable behavior.<sup>42</sup>

While Jeremiah imagines the woman's abuse as cleansing her and making reconciliation possible, God's actions in Ezekiel do not make the woman clean again. Julie Galambush suggests God's destruction of the woman Jerusalem may be grounded in the very femininity of

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<sup>42</sup> Baumann, 143.

the metaphor; that is, the marriage represents a marriage of Holy and unclean, and God must preside over his wife's death in order to vindicate his name and, more importantly, prevent any future defilement the city's feminine persona represents.<sup>43</sup>

Ezekiel brings the prophetic marriage imagery to a climax. It ends the marriage imagery because it ends the woman Jerusalem herself. The pre-exilic marriage formula warning the people as wife of God had a positive purpose to shock and disturb the people into repentance from idol worship. In Ezekiel the harlotry language refers to a different sin: alliances with foreign powers rather than trust in God alone. The target audience is not individuals making worship choices, but powerful leaders making political choices. Since the text was written after the fall of Jerusalem, it seeks not to warn or reform, but to explain. Ezekiel's imagery seeks to demonstrate God's righteousness in a situation where the people felt utterly abandoned by God.<sup>44</sup> Ezekiel is not trying to shape behavior in order to avert disaster; he is trying to shape attitudes about destruction that has already occurred. In short, he is trying to rehabilitate the image of God.

In evaluating the shocking violence against women found in the prophetic texts of Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, one must remember that the prophets were poets, drawing on poetic imagery to change people's hearts. At the center of their figurative language is the poetic imagination of Israel as God's beloved wife. In the wilderness, Israel had covenanted with God to be faithful, but Israel's political and social behavior was promiscuous, shameless, and idolatrous.<sup>45</sup> The basis of the metaphor is that God's obligations have been fulfilled, but Israel has violated the covenant. In the metaphors, the rejected husband constantly reminds his wife that he has done his part to feed, clothe and protect her (Hos 2.9, Ezek 16.1-8), while elaborating

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>45</sup> Weems, 13.

on the wife's failures and infidelities: her lies (Hos 2.5,12), her sexually lewd behavior (Ezek 16.15-22), and her adulteries (Jer 3.3, 10; 4.30; Ezek 16.33-34).<sup>46</sup> The clear message is that the wife deserves harsh punishment. Thus, the purpose of the marriage metaphor is to justify violence against the subordinate partner and exonerate the dominate partner from the charge of injustice.<sup>47</sup>

All theology is problem-solving, and the problem the prophets were most often trying to solve was the classic theodicy question applied to Israel: Why do bad things happen to God's people? If Israel was God's chosen, why had the people of Israel been defeated in battle, or carried into exile? The prophets answer by asserting that it is Israel, not God, who has broken covenant. To ancient minds, the seriousness of Israel's offenses, made more disgusting by the unfaithful wife metaphors, make God a long-enduring victim instead of a capricious despot.<sup>48</sup>

The image of the unfaithful wife punished by her husband upholds monotheism while defending God's omnipotence. Israel was not defeated because God was unable to stand against his enemies, nor because God failed to honor the covenant. The exile or other misfortune is not something that happened in spite of Israel's relationship with God, but because of it. By imagining God as the vengeful husband of a wayward woman, the prophets assert monotheism, reaffirm the covenant, and exonerate God of any blame for Israel's predicament.

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<sup>46</sup> Weems, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 20.

## Part 2: Sexual Violence against Women in Early Christian Literature

### Chapter 3

#### *New Testament Narrative*

Given the prominence of sexual violence against women in the Hebrew scripture, the apparent absence of the motif in the Gospels is notable. In fact, sexual violence against women tends to be veiled by our assumptions about the New Testament and interpretation of it. In the Gospels (especially Luke) and the Revelation of John, sexual violence against women is a fairly prominent image, but it often goes unidentified. In Revelation, sexual violence flies beneath our radar because it is perpetrated against a character to whom readers are not sympathetic. In the Gospels, quite the opposite phenomenon occurs; Christians do not see sexual violence in a story they have been taught to view as non-sexual and non-violent.

The church spends a tremendous amount of liturgical effort depicting the virgin birth as a beautiful act of submission to God. The *Magnificat* has a place among the canticles frequently employed in the Liturgy of the Hours. No song or homily contemplates the sexual violence of the virgin birth.

The story of the virgin birth is not present in Mark, who hints that Jesus has a reputation as an illegitimate child by having his critics call him the “son of Mary” rather than Joseph (Mark 6.1-6). Mark depicts Jesus receiving the Holy Spirit and being adopted as God’s son when John baptizes him in the Jordan (Mark 1.9-11). Neither does the virgin birth appear in the Q material found in both Matthew and Luke. Rather, Matthew and Luke each added their own birth narrative, independently asserting that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. The youth and status of Jesus’ mother, in contrast to that of the creator of the universe, raises the question of consent.

Matthew does not address the issue of Mary's consent; he is more concerned with the consent of Joseph. Like Luke, Matthew traces the lineage of Jesus through Joseph rather than Mary, despite his claim that Joseph is not the child's father. In Matthew's version, Mary is neither asked nor informed. Rather she is simply "found to be with child of the Holy Spirit." Joseph is informed, after the fact, that he should marry the woman and parent the child. Matthew offers no insight into Mary's thoughts or feelings.<sup>1</sup>

Luke, by contrast, seems very concerned about Mary's consent, but he imbues her with no agency whatsoever. She does not choose her role; God chooses it. The power differential between a young teenage girl and the God of the universe (or even the angelic being who brings her the message) is immeasurable. Mary acknowledges this when she refers to herself as the Lord's servant or handmaid, placing herself in a position not unlike that of Hagar. She is powerless, but chooses to rejoice in the pregnancy at least by the time she visits Elizabeth three months later (Luke 1.35-59). Does her acceptance exonerate the Holy Spirit from the act of rape? Or does it only make Luke a rape apologist?

*Luke 1.26-38*

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1.18-25.

God.”<sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

From a literary perspective, the annunciation is a romantic rape scene. Romantic rape scenes legitimize the sexual exploitation of a woman (often by a god in Greek literature or some kind of a lord in later fiction) by rendering it acceptable to the woman.<sup>2</sup> Romantic rape has been defined as sexual penetration where some form of coercion is employed, and the coercion is depicted as consent, even though the power differential makes consent questionable.<sup>3</sup> Ancient Greek ideas of rape extended beyond physical violence. In *Politics*, Aristotle refers to *ὑβρις*, sometimes translated “outrage” since the modern use of “hubris” has taken on a more casual and positive meaning. Aristotle names two forms of *ὑβρις* that a leader should especially avoid: violent bodily punishments and the *ὑβρις* of the young. He urges a ruler to “indulge in the society of the young for reasons of passion, not because he has the power,”<sup>4</sup> recognizing the context of power inequity and age difference with or without threat of violence.<sup>5</sup>

Betsy Bauman-Martin identifies four elements in the narrative that point to a romantic rape interpretation for Luke’s annunciation: Mary’s emphatic virginity, the danger highlighted by the angel’s admonition “Do not be afraid,” Mary’s statement that she is God’s servant or handmaid, and her words “let it be unto me.”<sup>6</sup>

Mary’s emphatic virginity sets the scene for impregnation by a god. Female virginity is a common theme in ancient prophecy, because virginity as a status is not only pure, but also liminal.<sup>7</sup> Mary’s betrothal status indicates she is sexually mature, but we are explicitly told she is

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<sup>2</sup> Betsy J. Bauman-Martin, “Mary and the Marquise: Reading the Annunciation in the Romantic Rape Tradition,” in *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur’an as Literature and Culture*, ed. Roberta Serman Sabbath, 217-232 (2009), 222.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, vol. 21, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944), 1315a.

<sup>5</sup> Bauman-Martin, 225.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

still a virgin. This places her in a liminal category that makes her eligible for divine impregnation, and also provides a human father to help raise the child.

The danger inherent in Mary's pregnancy also points to romantic rape. Bauman-Martin connects that danger with the angel's words "Do not be afraid,"<sup>8</sup> but this may be a stretch. These words constitute standard theophany/angelophany language, appearing in the experiences of Abraham (Gen 15.1), Hagar (Gen 21.17), Isaac (Gen 26.24), and twice to Mary and Mary Magdalene at the tomb (Mt 28.5, 10). To question this linguistic question is not to deny that Mary is endangered by the divine conception, and even the annunciation itself. Like other women in romantic rape stories, Mary is very young and is "come upon" while alone, making her situation inherently dangerous. In her house or bedroom, she is overtaken by a powerful male who threatens her virginity.<sup>9</sup> The angel announces that her betrothed husband's role will be subverted by God, endangering her virginal status, her upcoming marriage, her value in a patriarchal society, and even her life.

Mary's description of herself as the handmaid or servant of the Lord expresses a sense of powerlessness appropriate to a vessel rather than a person with moral agency.<sup>10</sup> She acknowledges the extreme power differential between the monotheistic creator of the universe and a teenage girl—an inequity that renders her unable to provide or deny meaningful consent. Furthermore, female slavery carries a connotation of sexual abuse everywhere in every context, precisely because sexual slavery was inherent in the condition of female slavery.<sup>11</sup> Her consent is never actually requested, nor does the angel in any way suggest that Mary has a choice in how,

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<sup>9</sup> The personal pronouns Luke uses for the angel are masculine. Bauman-Martin, 223.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

or whether, this impregnation will occur. Mary's acceptance of the situation functions more as a rape apology than an act of consent.

The church has relied heavily on the moral agency that seems to be expressed in Mary's words, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1.38b). However, nothing in the text indicates the angel wants or needs such permission.<sup>12</sup> The annunciation is an announcement, not an invitation. The angel uses the future indicative to tell Mary "You *will* conceive . . . you will bear . . . you will call."<sup>13</sup> While the first two items in that list may be predictions, the third item is clearly an order. When Mary gives her reply, prefaced by the comment that she is a slave, she is expressing powerlessness rather than consent.

By modern standards, Mary is not capable to meaningful consent. Social scientists recognize four elements necessary to consent: Each partner must know to what he or she is consenting, must intend to consent, must communicate consent, and must have a background of free choice.<sup>14</sup> In Mary's case, the first element is somewhat compromised by her virginity. Luke takes care of the second and third elements by putting words of acquiescence in Mary's mouth—but compromises those words with the admission of slave status, acknowledging that against the God of the universe, no one truly has free choice.

In the annunciation, Luke uses assumptions, language, and archetypes common to the romantic rape trope.<sup>15</sup> Persuasion and trickery, rather than outright physical force, often characterize romantic rape. Livy describes the Sabine women as consenting,<sup>16</sup> although the Roman men kidnapped them at a festival and afterward persuaded them to accept marriage. Zeus

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

used trickery rather than force to get in the virgin Callisto's bed,<sup>17</sup> disguising himself as the goddess Artemis whom Callisto worshiped. Likewise, Luke offers a story of forcible conception without forcible violence. Mary Daly calls it "religious rapism," finding in the annunciation and *Magnificat* a depiction of the rape of a terrified young girl's mind, spirit, and will, which made physical rape unnecessary.<sup>18</sup>

In Greek literature, male gods initiate brief sexual encounters with virgin girls, involving the element of persuasion rather than physical force. The offspring of such encounters are always remarkable in strength, intelligence, or both.<sup>19</sup> The impregnation may not involve coitus or physical force.

Prominent examples of divinely conceived men include Alexander the Great and Augustus. Alexander's mother was a new bride. According to Plutarch, she heard a peal of thunder and a lightning bolt fell upon her womb. Her husband later peered through the crack of the door and saw a serpent sleeping with his wife. After that he was afraid to approach her for sex. An oracle told him to sacrifice to Zeus, and warned that he would someday lose sight in the eye with which he had peered through the crack of the door.<sup>20</sup>

Augustus was conceived at the temple of Apollo. Augustus's mother Atia claimed that a snake had approached her while she slept at the temple. Afterward she purified herself as if from sex with her husband. She dreamed that her womb was carried up to heaven and spread over earth and sky. Her husband Octavius dreamed the radiance of the sun shone from her womb,<sup>21</sup> much like Joseph dreaming that an angel told him to wed Mary since her pregnancy was divine

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<sup>17</sup> Bauman-Martin, 225.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Lefkowitz, *Women in Greek Myth* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 2007), 56-57.

<sup>20</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. 3, trans. Aubrey Stewart and George Long (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), 301.

<sup>21</sup> David R. Cartlidge and David L. Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 132-133.

(Matt 1.20). Augustus was considered the son of Apollo, but like Jesus he was still accepted and raised by an earthly father.

Pythagoras and Plato were both rumored to be sons of Apollo as well.<sup>22</sup> These two stories contain no snake; in fact, the ancient writer Iamblichus specifies that the conception of Pythagoras did not involve sexual intercourse between Apollo and the philosopher's mother, but rather reflected the origin of the child's soul.<sup>23</sup>

The birth of Herakles is particularly instructive. In this story, Zeus wishes to have sex with the mortal woman Alkmene (who is also his great-granddaughter), in order to conceive a child who will be great. Her morality prevents her from straying from her husband, so Zeus disguises himself as her husband. Diodorus Siculus writes, "Because he wished to make the intercourse legitimate, and he did not wish to take Alkmene by force, nor could he ever hope to seduce her because of her self-control, therefore, he chose deceit. By this means he tricked Alkmene: he became like Amphitryon (her husband) in every way."<sup>24</sup>

A recurrent motif in romantic rape literature is the elision of the violent scene.<sup>25</sup> In order to reclaim the physical, material bodies of women used as literary tropes, the reader must practice the conscious act of reading violence and sexuality back into the text.<sup>26</sup> The time lapse between the annunciation and the visit to Elizabeth allows the rape to occur outside the narrative, so that we read Mary's acknowledgement that she is God's slave, and immediately find her traveling to the Judean hill country, pregnant with God's baby.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Cartlidge and Dungan, 129, 134.

<sup>23</sup> Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*, trans. Thomas Taylor (London: J. M. Watkins, 1818), 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> Cartlidge and Dungan, 136.

<sup>25</sup> Bauman-Martin, 229. Elision is not restricted to romantic rape; as noted in chapter 1, elision also marks the rape of Dinah and to some extent the rape of the Levite's concubine. Rape often occurs "off stage."

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> By contrast, Elizabeth's pregnancy is affected on-stage, with the statement "his wife Elizabeth conceived" (Luke 1.24), demonstrating how the writer included a more consensual sexual encounter even without describing it.

Encounters between gods and mortal women are not only brief and singular, they are also followed by suffering and neglect.<sup>28</sup> The god tells the woman what her child will become, a fate fraught with danger and pain as well as heroism, then leaves her to face the consequences. Through the angel Gabriel, Luke's God pulls a similar trick. Gabriel delivers a short oracle including the child's name and a few cryptic sentences about his destiny, but leaves the girl to deal with the consequences on her own. Nor does the angel reappear until the climax of the story when, like many other immortal fathers, God steps in to save his son from ultimate destruction.

Sexual violence against women in the Gospel of Luke bears much in common with its occurrence in Genesis. Although Luke belongs to a much later and different genre with heavy Greek influence, it also demonstrates literary dependence on Hebrew scripture. The message of Luke is also similar to that of Genesis; both texts consist of quasi-historical narrative that serves as a foundational myth for a religion. Given these connections, it is no surprise that the trope of sexual violence is used in a similar, but updated way.

Sexual violation against the Virgin Mary serves as a foundational myth for Christianity, claiming a divine origin for its main prophet, Jesus. Matthew and Luke add the virgin birth narrative to their gospels to exalt Jesus with a divine birth like Alexander the Great, Augustus and other leaders. If normal rape denigrates the offspring, divine rape elevates the offspring to divine status. Thus, the violation of the virgin in the Gospels serves a function similar to the sexual violence in the foundational myths of Genesis. Just as the gospel writers appropriate Jewish theology to construct Christian theology, so they appropriate and combine Jewish and Greek foundational myths, literary forms, and cosmology to communicate that theology.

The Revelation of John brings sexual violence against a symbolic woman from the prophetic genre to the apocalyptic genre, even giving the woman a name from Old Testament

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<sup>28</sup> Lefkowitz, 62.

prophecy. The woman in this depiction represents a foreign political entity, so the marriage metaphor is not used. Instead, God exacts violence against a foreign entity.

This motif was introduced by the exilic prophets, developed by Isaiah, and culminated hundreds of years later in Revelation's whore of Babylon. In Ezekiel, the land of Ammon is depicted first female in 25.3-4 then male from 6 onward. Tyre (26.27) and Sidon (28.22) are depicted as feminine, while Moab (25.8-11) and Egypt (29) are depicted in male terms. Depicting a city as a woman allows the prophet to threaten the city with rape. The metaphor of the foreign city as a woman to be raped is the inverse of the tribal rape narrative seen in the foundational myths. Rather than denigrating a tribe by depicting its origin via rape, this trope threatens vengeance against a nation by depicting its capital city as a woman and raping her. In the foundational myths, a tribe is misbegotten from rape. In this metaphor, a people is destroyed via symbolic rape.

Isaiah occasionally depicts violence against actual women, for example the prisoners of war in 20.4, but most Isaian depictions of sexual violence are against metaphorical women. The most prominent is Isaiah 47, in which the metaphorical woman Babylon is threatened with sexual violence. In Deutero-Isaiah, "daughter Babylon" is developed as a contrast figure for "daughter Zion."<sup>29</sup> She is ordered to strip, her nakedness is uncovered, and her shame is seen. The specter of rape threatens Babylon as early as 13.16, but in 47 it is made manifest, with God initiating the rape (47.3).<sup>30</sup>

*Isaiah 47.1-6*

**47** Come down and sit in the dust,  
virgin daughter Babylon!  
Sit on the ground without a throne,

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<sup>29</sup> Baumann, 192.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 195.

daughter Chaldea!  
 For you shall no more be called  
 tender and delicate.  
<sup>2</sup> Take the millstones and grind meal,  
 remove your veil,  
 strip off your robe, uncover your legs,  
 pass through the rivers.  
<sup>3</sup> Your nakedness shall be uncovered,  
 and your shame shall be seen.  
 I will take vengeance,  
 and I will spare no one.  
<sup>4</sup> Our Redeemer—the LORD of hosts is his name—  
 is the Holy One of Israel.  
<sup>5</sup> Sit in silence, and go into darkness,  
 daughter Chaldea!  
 For you shall no more be called  
 the mistress of kingdoms.  
<sup>6</sup> I was angry with my people,  
 I profaned my heritage;  
 I gave them into your hand,  
 you showed them no mercy;  
 on the aged you made your yoke  
 exceedingly heavy.

In Isaiah 47 opens with the description of a mourning ritual. Israel is beloved and the other “daughters” are facing punishment. Described variously as virgins, wives, and mothers, Babylon and Chaldea are judged for their treatment of Israel. In Ezekiel, Babylon and Chaldea are named as two of the sisters’ lovers and are complicit in the girls’ violation and death. In Isaiah, both have been transgendered to female in order to receive a similar fate, precisely because they went too far as executioners of God’s judgment.

In this pattern, enemies do sexual violence rather than husbands.<sup>31</sup> Included in this line of interpretation is the motif of God (as enemy) raping a female personification of a foreign power, e.g. Babylon in Isaiah 47 and Ninevah in Nahum.<sup>32</sup> Isaiah does not rely on direct marital violence but imagines sexual violence occurring outside a husband’s protection. Still, sexual

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<sup>31</sup> However, as noted in the previous chapter, the prophet makes it plain that the sexual violence is orchestrated and desired by God as the woman’s punishment.

<sup>32</sup> Baumann, 225.

violence symbolizes defeat and humiliation, whether perpetrated by foreign powers against God's abandoned wife or perpetrated by God against foreign powers.

The Revelation of John uses a similar motif of divinely-appointed sexual violence against a foreign power symbolized as a woman. The whore of Babylon, representing a city, an empire, and the epitome of sinfulness, is subjected to extreme violence when she is ruined (raped?), left naked, eaten, and burnt with fire. Note that these acts are not carried out by God, but by the beast and the ten horns, who hate God. The function of sexual violence against women in this genre is similar to its use in prophetic literature. The whore of Babylon serves as a foil for the sexually (spiritually) pure bride of Christ, also depicted as a woman clothed with the sun. Sexual violence is the inevitable result of the whore's promiscuity, whereas the bride is rewarded with marriage and legitimacy. This story is not about sexual violence against women; rather, well-known cultural symbols are used to convey a message that has little to do with women.

#### *Revelation 17.1-18*

**17** Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters,<sup>2</sup> with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk."<sup>3</sup> So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.<sup>4</sup> The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication;<sup>5</sup> and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations."<sup>6</sup> And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly amazed.<sup>7</sup> But the angel said to me, "Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her."<sup>8</sup> The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.<sup>9</sup> "This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on

which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings, <sup>10</sup> of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while. <sup>11</sup> As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. <sup>12</sup> And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. <sup>13</sup> These are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast; <sup>14</sup> they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”<sup>15</sup> And he said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. <sup>16</sup> And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. <sup>17</sup> For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. <sup>18</sup> The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.”

The beast and the horns undertake four actions against the whore: hating her, stripping her naked, devouring her flesh, and burning her with fire. The first three actions assume she is a person, not a city.<sup>33</sup>

The depiction of Babylon recalls the Isaian Babylon and the depiction of Nineveh in Nahum 3.1-7, both of whom are shamed via stripping. Nahum introduces the city then compares her to a whore, while Isaiah introduces the city and woman simultaneously. Revelation introduces the whore in chapter 17 and later identifies her with a city in chapter 18.<sup>34</sup> Before the shift, the word translated “woman” is used five times and “whore” is used four times. After the shift in chapter 18, “woman” is absent and “whore” only appears once at the end.<sup>35</sup> The word “city” (polis) is used for the first time in 17.18. Before this point, the reader is only confronted with a woman, not a city.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Caroline Vander Stichele, “Re-memembering the Whore,” in *Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 107.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

The name “Babylon the Great” is a *chiffre*, a mystery, because the great whore and Babylon the Great both refer to a third party never actually named.<sup>37</sup> Babylon is not a fictional name like Oholah and Oholibah; it is an existing name used as a codeword for some other entity, probably Rome. Like Rome, Babylon was a foreign colonial empire that destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. The author of the Revelation envisions Rome falling as Babylon fell.<sup>38</sup>

Recurring elements in Nahum, Ezekiel, and Revelation include nakedness, devastation, and burning.<sup>39</sup> Revelation adds a revolting new element to the city/woman metaphor: the devouring of the city/woman’s flesh. This element has intertextual connections to Elijah’s prediction that dogs would devour Jezebel in 1 Kings 21.23. The author may be recasting a contemporary prophet (possibly a female prophet) as Jezebel in Rev 2 and 17-18.<sup>40</sup> Jezebel will be “thrown onto a bed” (Rev 2.22), implying rape.

### Revelation 19.1-3

**19** After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying,

“Hallelujah!  
Salvation and glory and power to our God,  
<sup>2</sup> for his judgments are true and just;  
he has judged the great whore  
who corrupted the earth with her fornication,  
and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”<sup>[g]</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Once more they said,

“Hallelujah!  
The smoke goes up from her forever and ever.”

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 113.

Caroline Vander Stichele asks whether gender is essential to the metaphor? “Is it accidental that a city is represented as a woman? Could Babylon just as well have been represented as a male character?”<sup>41</sup> She says no; in a patriarchal culture, the comparison of an enemy to a woman is a means of ridiculing and denigrating the enemy and also asserting one’s own masculine superiority.<sup>42</sup> The metaphor also presumes and affirms analogy between military invasion and sexual invasion (rape).<sup>43</sup> When divine punishment is presented as sexual assault, “The shock value of these biblical texts derives from the feminine positioning of men, not from horror at violence against women. Indeed, the scandal of the prophetic sexual threat against men is generated by the cultural appropriateness of raping women. The prophetic metaphor therefore co-opts and suppresses women’s experience of sexual violence.”<sup>44</sup>

Babylon is depicted as a whore, not just a woman. The word is not merely descriptive but implies moral judgment.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, “She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication” (14.8), as if she is more culpable than the nations who join her.

The author also presents her as drunk on the blood of the saints (17.6). This image reflects back on Jeremiah’s depiction of Babylon as “a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, and so the nations went mad” (Jer 51.7). The cup ties into Babylon’s punishment; after feeding the nations the saints’ blood, her own flesh is eaten (7.16). At first blush, these scenes of cannibalism seems to be included for violent shock value, or perhaps to contrast the Torah’s proscription of drinking blood.<sup>46</sup> However, these images were not likely to shock an audience that symbolically consumed the flesh and blood of Jesus on

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 118.

a regular basis. Instead, they create a kind of anti-Eucharist<sup>47</sup> in which the whore first devours others, then gets her comeuppance when her own flesh is consumed. Vander Stichele writes, “Her fate is a gory foreplay to the great supper of Rev. 19.17 even as it has echoes of the Last Supper. But while the body of Christ takes on salvific meaning, the body of the whore does not.”<sup>48</sup>

Babylon serves as a foil for the New Jerusalem. Whereas the bride is obedient and rewarded with marriage, the whore is rewarded with destruction. Rev 12 describes the bride as a woman clothed with the sun, before whom stands a dragon ready to devour her infant child as she births it; this is also a sexually violent image. The symbols are drawn from mythological traditions found in ancient Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome.<sup>49</sup> Her crown is the zodiac, suggesting she is a cosmic queen (a goddess such as Isis).<sup>50</sup> In Egyptian temple inscriptions, Isis was called the female sun, the second sun, and the mistress of heaven.<sup>51</sup> In a late second century CE novel, Isis is addressed as “Queen of Heaven.”<sup>52</sup> Her clothing is like the night sky. In Egyptian mythology, Isis revives her brother/husband Osiris after he is killed by his brother Set who wants to be king; she then conceives a child with Osiris who kills Set and becomes king. The birth of Apollo is similar, with Python (a huge dragon) seeking to destroy him at birth because of an oracle that Apollo would kill Python. The North Wind and Poseidon conspire to protect Apollo’s mother Leto by hiding her on an island and covering her with waves. This is the version of the story by Callimachus, an Alexandrian poet; other versions are different but similar.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>49</sup> Coogan, 435 NEW TESTAMENT.

<sup>50</sup> A. Y. Collins, “Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation,” 121.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 121-122.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 122-123.

Adela Collins identifies the combat myth at operation in Revelation. The combat myth, common to ancient Near East and Greco-roman world, follows a basic pattern: A pair (husband and wife, brother and sister, or mother and son) are attacked by a dragon or monster who wants to prevent or facilitate a coup. The champion dies and the dragon reigns. The champion is recovered by his wife, sister, mother, or son. The battle is renewed and the champion wins, restoring or confirming order. Collins says the woman most likely represents the Heavenly Israel, portrayed as God's spouse and the mother of the messiah and believers.<sup>54</sup> Note that sexual violence against the woman clothed with the sun is threatened (the serpent is ready to devour the baby that emerges from between her legs), but not consummated. In ancient literature, a sexual threat does not carry the same symbolism as actual sexual violation. A threat that is thwarted intensifies a woman's claim to purity. The trope of thwarted rape is covered in more depth below, as it became more prominent in ascetic literature.

In apocalyptic and prophetic literature, sexual violence symbolizes military conquest. The rape of Babylon depicts the city's downfall and utter destruction, described in anti-Eucharistic language. By contrast, the woman clothed by the sun is threatened with sexual violence but is protected, assuring believers of their ultimate victory over the forces of darkness. While the marriage metaphor in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekial uses sexual violence to depict Israel's punishment for breaking covenant with God, Isaiah and Revelation use sexual violence to subdue an oppressor. Both metaphors rely on the symbol of rape as utter submission and humiliation. Both metaphors depict rape as a means for achieving justice.

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<sup>54</sup> A. Y. Collins, "Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation," 124.

## Chapter 4

### *Ascetic Literature*

Sexual violence against women is veiled to modern readers of Luke, and reduced to symbol in Revelation, but ascetic literature brings it front and center to express attitudes toward femininity. Here, finally, violence against women is actually about women. It is featured prominently in both martyrologies and *bioi*, conveying the same message with slightly different means. In martyrologies, enemies of Christianity perpetrate sexual violence against women, but God uses the violence to defeminize the women. In *bioi*, the women both react against sexual violence and perpetrate it against themselves; it becomes both the incentive for defeminization and the means of defeminization. In both cases, the purpose of defeminization is to make the ascetic woman more holy.

In ascetic literature, the conflict between a female saint and the authorities often begins with resistance to forced marriage, and manifests in sexual violence. In some stories, the torture culminates in the amputation of the martyr's breasts. Anahid and Febronia are just two examples of ascetic martyrs subjected to sexual torture. Perpetua stands as a counter-example. She is a wife and mother rather than a virgin; therefore, she dies with her sexuality intact. By contrast, the women who lose their breasts are beautiful celibate virgins who refuse offers of marriage. They survive the amputation and may even respond passively or positively to the loss of their breasts, before being killed some other way. The graphic nature of the depictions invites questions about the latent misogyny of the authors themselves; however, the couching of gruesome descriptions with hagiographic language demonstrates veneration, not hatred. Just as the tortures are intentionally dehumanizing (making the martyr less human but more divine), so the amputation

makes the virgin less female and therefore more holy. This de-sexing of the woman is offset by her presentation as the bride of Christ.

Anahid was martyred relatively late, ca. 446-448 CE, during the Persian (Zoroastrian) persecution. The story of her arrest and trial includes literary tropes common to ascetic martyrologies: refusal to flee the impending arrest, a demand to marry followed by sexual violence that does not include rape, the bride motif, and finally the glorious and miraculous death of the martyr. The author sets up the tension for the story by giving a motive for her arrest by “the notables of the region:” they had heard talk of her beautiful appearance and high intelligence, and the considerable fortune she inherited from her parents. When the girl is brought to them, they proclaim, “This is indeed Anahid the mistress, more beautiful and desirable than any other woman!”<sup>1</sup>

The chief Magian offers to marry her, or give her to his son, promising, “I too will honor you above all my sons and daughters, making you mistress in charge of everything in my household.”<sup>2</sup> Anahid refuses his offer on the premise that she is already betrothed to Christ. She verbally discounts his deities through a smart treatise on their origins, pitting sexual reproduction against androgyny to claim his gods are only human.

The chief responds by having his men beat her face until all her teeth fall out and her eyes swell shut. “Her body was drenched with blood, which ran from her mouth and cheeks—it was as though she was swimming in it.”<sup>3</sup> He orders her trussed up like a dog and left in prison with no food or water until this god she had trusted in shows up to rescue her.

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, ed. and trans., *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 89.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

After this, Anahid is stripped. The text notes that she is still trussed up like a dog, this time adding the detail “with her head between her knees.”<sup>4</sup> She is put on a caning frame, and beaten by eight men until her flesh is cut to the bone in every direction. The narrator offers a telling description of the way the men whip her “even more assiduously than farmers hack at uncultivated ground to soften it.”<sup>5</sup> This phrase recognizes the ascetic view of martyrdom as a preparation for glory.

The metaphor of farmers hacking at uncultivated ground is foreshadowed in Anahid’s own self-description at her arrest, “a sinful lamb ready to be sacrificed.”<sup>6</sup> Christians had appropriated the Jewish symbol of the sacrificial lamb to describe their understanding of the salvific nature of the crucifixion of Jesus. Anahid turns the symbol on its head by identifying herself with the lamb—a lamb that is sinful rather than spotless—and envisioning her martyrdom as a sacrifice that will lead to holiness. In the two images of the ground and the lamb, Anahid’s persecutors become God’s unwitting servants, making her holy through acts of violence. Anahid tells the chief, “You did indeed please me with the banquet yesterday, and today I thank you for all your trouble.”<sup>7</sup>

At this point the violence becomes distinctly sexual. The chief orders men to tie a thin thread of cobbler’s string in a hangman’s noose around each of Anahid’s breasts. Anahid cries out in prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, receive my spirit—not because I am suffering at the hands of those who cause me pain, but lest they stop at letting me come to you.”<sup>8</sup> Two men pull at each thread until each of her breasts is hanging from her body by a single sinew.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Anahid takes a severed breast in each hand and presents them to the Magian, saying, “Seeing that you very much wanted them, O Magian, here they are, do with them whatever takes your fancy. If I have other limbs you would like, give the order and I will cut them off and put them in front of you. I will not hold back anything I have from your banquet.”<sup>9</sup> In these three sentences, Anahid both addresses and reframes the sexual violence. First she acknowledges the sexual nature of the violence by noting that the Magian wanted her breasts (a reference to his attempt at forced marriage), but immediately she reduces them to “limbs,” denying their import *to her* as sexual organs. Offering up her entire body and even offering to do the cutting and presenting herself, she accepts complicity in the mutilation of her physical body. Yet, as she returns to the banquet motif, she calls it “your banquet,”<sup>10</sup> suggesting that she is the meal and the chief is the host. When the chief takes the bait and denies that he is a dog (to eat human flesh), she says he is a dog who guards the gates of Gehenna. Immediately he has her tied up “doglike,” continuing a subtle play on words that seems to ask who is the dog.

Next they break all the bones of Anahid’s body, strip her completely naked again, stretch her out on the mountainside between four stakes, and smear her body with honey. The narrator tells us twice that the motive of her persecutors, at this point, is to deter people from admiring her and following her religion.<sup>11</sup> Four hundred men guard her body, but they are unable to prevent what happens next. A miraculously enormous swarm of wasps appears to shroud her body without harming her, so that the crowd cannot approach to see her in her debased condition. Anahid prays for her followers and the place of her death. As she is conveyed to her tomb, the wasps provide a protective shield.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 96.

Sexual violence in the story of Anahid contributes to the general aim of purifying her for death. Before her arrest she is chaste, but her beauty and femininity are weaknesses that make her vulnerable to the evil desires of men. Her progression toward holiness is evident in the nouns used to describe her throughout the story. Initially she is called a “chaste girl.”<sup>12</sup> Before the chief Magian, she becomes a “holy woman.”<sup>13</sup> By the end of the story, she is called “the pure woman”<sup>14</sup> and finally “the martyr.”<sup>15</sup>

The martyrdom of Febronia is both older and newer than the martyrdom of Anahid. Febronia is reputed to have been martyred under Diocletian (284-305), but belongs to the later hagiographical genre of the “epic passion,” and the text likely has no historical value.<sup>16</sup> It contains many anachronisms, including a flourishing convent of cenobites at a time when cenobitic monasticism was unheard of North Mesopotamia. The earliest historical reference to the cult of Febronia dates to 563, when a Syrian monk builds his sister a convent in Febronia’s name, not in Nisibis but across the Tigris in Marga.<sup>17</sup> The earliest record we have for a church and convent in the name of St. Febronia in Nisibis dates to the eighth century.<sup>18</sup>

The narrator describes a convent of fifty nuns in Nisibis. The deaconess Byrene runs the convent, and has raised two young women, Prokla and Febronia. Nothing is said of Prokla’s appearance, but Febronia is so gorgeous no one can stop staring at her.<sup>19</sup> In ascetic literature, a woman’s beauty is a sign of trouble. Byrene recognizes the problem of the girl’s beauty and orders Febronia to eat only every other day, half as often as the other nuns. Febronia joins this

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 98. However, these titles are not absolute, occasionally reverting from “woman” back to “girl” or trading “holy” for “wise,” especially to contrast the chief whom she calls “a silly and senseless man.” Ibid., 93.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 154-155.

effort to subdue her too-beautiful body by sleeping on a stool and throwing herself down on the ground.<sup>20</sup> She is completely secluded, devoted to prayer and the Bible, and has never seen a man's face.

Like Anahid, Febronia is aware of the coming arrest. She determines to stand firm as the other nuns flee, so that the narrator describes "the convent thus stripped of sisters."<sup>21</sup> Among those few who remain are her mistress Byrene, and Byrene's second in authority Thomais. When Byrene is weeping, Thomais tells Febronia, "It is because you are young and beautiful that she is tormented and full of grief."<sup>22</sup> Through this device, the author again presents Febronia's youthful beauty (a representation of her femininity) as the central problem to be solved. She expounds "the tyrants will quickly put us death as we are both old women; but they will grab you, seeing that you are young and beautiful, and they will upset you with their advances and words of seducement."<sup>23</sup> Febronia is admonished not to listen no matter what they promise her, "For nothing is more honorable and choice before God than virginity: great is the reward that it will receive. Virginity's Bridegroom is immortal and he grants immortality to those who love him."<sup>24</sup>

In Byrene's last instructions to Febronia, she says, "Let it be good news I hear of you. Let someone tell me, 'Febronia has yielded up her soul in the tortures'; let someone announce to me that 'Febronia has met her end and is reckoned amongst the martyrs of Christ.'"<sup>25</sup> As in the case of Anahid, good and bad are reversed so that to perish is to survive, and to live is to utterly perish. Febronia responds by telling Byrene, "In a woman's body I will manifest a man's valiant conviction."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 159-160.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 163.

When Febronia comes before Selenos and Lysimachos (uncle and nephew who have recently taken over the city and begun to seize Christians), Selenos stops Lysimachos's interrogation of the girl to propose that she re-enter the patriarchal system as the daughter of Selenos and the wife of Lysimachos. Febronia, like Anahid, replies that she already has a bridegroom and cannot be coaxed with riches or frightened with threats into joining herself with a mortal man.

As in the Anahid story, the judge immediately goes from coaxing to inhumanly angry. He has her stripped and makes her stand half naked in front of the crowd. Febronia's response to the stripping is to deny the import of female nudity. "Listen, judge," she says, "even if you should have me stripped completely naked, I would not think anything of this nakedness, for there is but one Creator of males and of females."<sup>27</sup> She uses stock martyrology metaphors to describe herself as an athlete entering a contest: they all fight naked. Although it is Selenos who has had her stripped naked, Febronia defends his action as if she herself had willed it. In fact, throughout the exchange she batters Selenos verbally (as Anahid battered the chief Magian) and takes the upper hand, as if insisting that she is in the one in control of her torture while the "stupid and imperceptive man"<sup>28</sup> Selenos is unwittingly being used to carry out her will. She repeatedly tells him what she expects: tortures and fire. Angered, he gives her what she demands.

Four soldiers stretch Febronia's body over a fire, while four more soldiers beat her with rods until her flesh is torn from her back and her intestines burnt. When Febronia survives and continues verbally sparring with Selenos, he begins to use her metaphors, asking "How have you fared in the first bout of the fight?"<sup>29</sup> Her response is practically a challenge, so he orders the soldiers to stretch her on a plank and comb her flanks with iron nails, "then apply fire until you

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 165,

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 167.

burn her very bones.”<sup>30</sup> A doctor pulls out seven of her teeth, until she is fainting from the blood lost.

When Selenos again asks her to relent, he does not mention marriage or the contest, but resorts to what could just as easily be a line out of an earlier, non-ascetic martyrdom: “Will you obey the judiciary now? Will you acknowledge the gods?”

Febronia curses Selenos, saying he is holding up her journey to her betrothed. She orders him, “Hurry up and remove me from the mire of this body, for my lover is watching and waiting for me.”<sup>31</sup>

Selenos replies that he will not hurry, but “destroy your body little by little in the fire and with the sword.”<sup>32</sup> Again, he seems unaware that this is exactly what Febronia wants, the literal mortification of her flesh. He says, “You have got nothing to gain by this,”<sup>33</sup> but in fact the martyr feels she has much to gain, not only in dying but in extreme suffering and torture.

In addition to bodily suffering and physical torture, Febronia is also subjected to sexual torture designed to rid her of sexuality. Selenos orders the surgeon to cut off Febronia’s breasts and throw them upon the ground. As the first one is severed, she asks God to look upon her affliction. Fire is then applied to her bloody chest. Later he orders her hands and one foot cut off; she volunteers the other foot, not unlike Anahid offering the Magian chief all her limbs after he severs her breasts. Her actions, like Anahid’s words, reflect the virgin martyr’s renunciation of her sexuality and her unspoken claim that breasts are limbs like any other. Finally, he has her beheaded.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

The denouement of the story is the return of her remains to the convent. This section contains some very touching moments, in which Byrene cries, “What fingers will handle your books?” At the time for the service of the Ninth Hour, she calls for Febronia and says, “Where are you, Febronia my daughter, my little daughter, rise up, little child, rise up, come.” Thomais adds, “My sister Febronia, you have never disobeyed the word of our lady abbess, why do you not listen now?”<sup>34</sup> At her burial, they take pains to replace all of her limbs exactly. It is unclear whether her breasts are included in the reconstruction of limbs, since they were not explicitly listed in the limbs gathered up, as were her head, feet, and hands.<sup>35</sup> However, her teeth are also not listed, and it is evident they were also retained when, at the end of the story, the bishops hold up a tooth before a crowd and it heals all the blind, sick, and lame.

The stories of Anahid and Febronia share many characteristic features, including the severing of their breasts. Anahid seems content with the loss of her breasts, and uses her voice to convey a lack of passion about them, equating them with her other limbs. Febronia’s account also progresses to the motif of further dismemberment, equating her breasts with limbs. Both stories display a dramatic irony in that the persecutors do not understand they are God’s instruments in achieving exactly what the martyrs want. The authors of epic passions express suffering as a necessary component of the rite of initiation. Since reward for these martyrs is entrance into the very bridal chamber of Christ, the suffering required to reach this level is tremendous.<sup>36</sup>

*The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (hereafter the *Passio*) stands in contrast to the martyrologies reviewed above, in that it takes place in North Africa and features a married mother. It is also much earlier than the other stories both in setting and composition, and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 171, 173.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 152.

generally considered more historical.<sup>37</sup> As a sort of *Urtext* for the genre of Christian martyrdom, the *Passio* sets up the minimum standards for the genre, centered around the claim “I am a Christian” and the subsequent execution. The martyrologies studied above belong to a more distinct sub-genre of ascetic martyrdom.<sup>38</sup> As such, we can compare the *Passio* to the stories of Anahid and Febronia to test the claim that sexual violence against women in ascetic martyrologies is a literary trope to cleanse female martyrs of their femininity. The *Passio* should be different.

The *Passio* is preserved in both Latin and Greek, and owes its preservation to liturgical use.<sup>39</sup> The earliest account is Latin, written in three parts attributed to Perpetua, Saturus, and an editor.<sup>40</sup> However, these accounts do not fall within the genre we call autobiography, which did not properly exist in ancient times. Thomas Heffernan writes that first-person narration serves to “seduce the reader into being a co-constructor of a narrative, projecting into the text’s dynamic silences our unwitting assumptions in order to resolve its aporias.”<sup>41</sup> He identifies a number of

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<sup>37</sup> Jan M. Bremmer and Marco Formisano, “Perpetua’s Passions: A Brief Introduction,” in *Perpetua’s Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Marco Formisano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2. However, Ross Kraemer finds the historicity and the authorship of the *Passio* suspect. She notes the editor’s preface of the story with references to Acts 2.17-18. The verse is presented as commentary on the passion and an apology for visions, dreams, and prophecies. Kraemer suggests the *Passio* is structured around the framework of the verse, so that the visions are constructed to fit the prophecy. Ross S. Kraemer, “When is a Text About a Woman a Text About a Woman? The Case of Aseneth and Perpetua,” in *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 168.

<sup>38</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the *Passio* has no ascetic qualities, but rather that its early dating and more historical basis set it outside the margins of the classic ascetic martyrdom story, which is normally written long after the martyr’s death and imbued with symbols and values that describe the context in which the story was written more accurately than the setting in which it occurred.

<sup>39</sup> Vibia Perpetua, “The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity,” in *Perpetua’s Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Marco Formisano, trans. John Farrell and Craig Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>40</sup> Candida R. Moss, “Martyrdom, Motherhood, and Family in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,” in *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions*, ed. Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway and James A. Kelhoffer, 2010), 190. Ross Kraemer points out that writing in another’s name was common. Colossians and 2 Thessalonians, letters of Paul now believed pseudonymous, assure the reader they are written by Paul’s own hand, just as the editor of the *Passio* belabors his claim that “From this point on the entire narrative of her martyrdom is her own, just as she left it written out by her own hand according to her intention” (R. S. Kraemer 2008), 167-168.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

narrative forms within the text, including prison narrative, *hypomnema*, oral reportage, and epistolary tradition.<sup>42</sup>

Tertullian, a contemporary, wrote about Perpetua's inspiring death. He referred to the *Passio* in his treatise *On the Soul*, providing a *terminus ante quem* ca. 207 CE.<sup>43</sup> He may have also written letters to Perpetua and her fellow confessors while they were in prison awaiting execution.<sup>44</sup> The story has a location (Carthage) and timeframe (the occasion of the birthday of Caesar Greta) which anchor it so specifically in history that we can assign Vibia Perpetua a reasonably accurate date of death: May 7 in the year 203.<sup>45</sup>

The *Passio* features two women, Perpetua and her maid Felicity, as well as some other minor characters. The oldest manuscripts lists the names of men first, even though their stories occupy very little of the narrative. Although many surviving manuscripts are Greek, the original text was Latin, setting it apart from Anahid and Febronia in language as well as genre.<sup>46</sup> While the stories of Anahid and Febronia provide a later, more developed glimpse at the depiction of the body of the female martyr, the issues are so new in the *Passio* that one can observe the early struggle to reconcile femininity with Christianity.

The *Passio* addresses gender concerns from two distinct points of view: that of the narrator and that of Perpetua herself. Both provide narratives of her martyrdom: Perpetua has a vision about it before the event, and the narrator describes the actual event. The two contests are represented in very different ways, especially as regards gender. In Perpetua's vision, she is a

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<sup>42</sup> Heffernan, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom* (New Haven and London: Yale, 2012), 130.

<sup>44</sup> Bremmer and Formisano, 545.

<sup>45</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 105.

<sup>46</sup> Bremmer and Formisano, 3.

mighty warrior (X.9-13),<sup>47</sup> but in the editor's narrative she is a bride of Christ (XVIII.2).<sup>48</sup> In her vision, she is stripped naked and becomes male (X.7). In the editor's version, when she is stripped naked she is so delicately female that the crowd demands she be dressed (XX.2-3). In her vision, she is unashamed of her nudity or her body. Handsome men rub her down with oil like an athlete before a contest (X.7). But in the editor's depiction, Perpetua is more worried about her modesty than her pain and keeps her body covered even as she is beaten and tortured (XX.4). In her vision, Perpetua punches, kicks, headlocks, and stomps on the head of a huge male fighter (X.10-11). In the editor's story of the arena, she is thrown by a female cow, specifically because the devil had designed to mimic her sex (XX.1). In her story, she remains clear-headed, whereas the editor has her delirious or in ecstasy (XX.8-9). In her version, the crowd screams and assistants sing to her (X.12) but in his version it is Perpetua who engages in the more feminine expressions of singing and screaming (XVIII.7, XXI.9). In her dream, she fights off her executioner, overthrows him, and steps on his head (X.11-13). In the editor's retelling of the contest, she makes no attempt to harm her executioner, but instead guides his sword to her throat (XXI.9).

In direct contrast to the ascetic hagiographies of Anahid and Febronia, Perpetua's femininity is preserved rather than disregarded. Although Perpetua is a wife and a breastfeeding mother—in that sense the epitome of femininity—even the narrator does not overplay his hand in describing her beauty as do the authors of Febronia's and Anahid's martyrdoms. Nor is her sexuality a point of contention in her martyrdom, as it is with the ascetic female martyrs. Rather, the central conflict revolves around the original martyr question "Are you a Christian?" and the

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<sup>47</sup> Unless otherwise noted, reference numbers and direct quotes from the *Passio* are taken from Thomas Heffernan's English translation. Heffernan, 125-135.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Farrell and Craig Williams, trans. "The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity," in *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano, 2012), 21. By contrast, Heffernan translates the description "a wife of Christ and a darling of God." Heffernan, 133.

demand to perform a sacrifice.<sup>49</sup> Even though she is already married, her father's argument against her martyrdom is that she consider her father, mother, brothers, and infant son—not her husband.<sup>50</sup>

In this text, sexual violence is more subtle. In the beginning the women are stripped naked, but quickly clothed again (XX.2-3). Rather than the usual wild beasts, Perpetua and Felicity are paired with a mad cow as way to mock their sex. Since cows are a symbol of maternity, this choice also highlights their status as mothers and their perceived rejection of their offspring.<sup>51</sup>

When Perpetua is tossed by the cow, she quickly arranges her clothes for the sake of modesty. While this is undoubtedly a message about gender, it is not the same message as the stripping seen in the hagiography of Anahid and Febronia, or the stripping of the women in the prophecy genre. Rather, this mini-scene is a literary trope of its own, observed in *Hecuba* by Euripides, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and again in *Fasti*. In the *Passio*, Perpetua trumps the other heroines by not only straightening her clothing, but even asking for a hairpin to straighten her hair (XX.5).<sup>52</sup> This trope serves to comment on the femininity of the protagonist, contrasting the scenes in Anahid and Febronia where stripping dehumanizes and defeminizes the victim.

The key to understanding sexual violence against women in martyr literature is to look not at the motivations of the persecutors (who are only being used as tools by God and/or by the martyr herself), but to look at the motivations of the writers. While Perpetua and her editor wrestle with her gender, they do not seek to eradicate it. She lives and dies as a noblewoman--

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>50</sup> The absence of any reference to a husband has raised the question that she could be a widow. If so, it is remarkable that this information is left out of the story, and that she is called a mother rather than a widow. Farrell and Williams, trans., 16.

<sup>51</sup> Heffernan, 339.

<sup>52</sup> Heffernan argues that this gesture is not meant to indicate femininity or vanity, but rather as a non-verbal display of courage; thus the editor notes her motive, "for it was not right for a martyr to suffer with disheveled hair, since it might appear that she was grieving in her moment of glory" (XX.5).

maternal, modest, and unashamedly female. The transgender moment in her vision relates to her view of herself as an athlete, and she knows no female athletes to serve as role models. Perpetua envisions herself as powerful as any man, and she trusts the Spirit to see her through the contest.

Like Anahid and Febronia, Perpetua views martyrdom as a direct path to heaven and she steels herself for the challenge. She does not, however, frame the upcoming tortures as a cleansing or purification in the same way they do. The tortures are not sexually oriented, since her problem is not sexual.<sup>53</sup> Nor does she stand stalwartly as a soldier or surgeon slowly hacks off her breasts and limbs, becoming more pure as she goes. She is active both in fighting and in ending her own life. Although Perpetua is tortured horribly, neither fire nor blade is directed at her breasts, genitals, or face. Her femininity is not assaulted because her femininity does not offend the author.

Sebastian Brock notes that the gruesome depictions of torture in martyr stories serve a purpose. The hagiographer interprets the life of the saint through the lens of the crucifixion, so what is depicted is not merely the execution of a saint, but an all-out battle of good and evil. The survival of acts that should kill show the saint to be beyond human. Likewise, the persecutors go beyond ordinary human cruelty, to represent pure evil.<sup>54</sup> The created order (wild beasts, fire, etc.) refuses to participate in the death of the holy one, so the persecutors are forced to kill her directly with an ax or sword, as if to make it plain that such killing is an entirely human act.<sup>55</sup>

In later ascetic martyr literature, sexual violence serves to divest the female martyr of her femininity. Sexual mutilation, including the amputation of breasts and the disfiguring of the martyr's face, make the virgin less female, less desirable, and therefore more holy. The sexual

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<sup>53</sup> This is not to say that Perpetua could not have been celibate. Heffernan points out that the early Christian church in Carthage was sexually encratic and encouraged abstinence even among married members. Heffernan, 175. However, the central conflict is not sexuality, as it is in the martyrologies of Anahid and Febronia.

<sup>54</sup> Brock and Harvey, 17.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

mutilation of the female martyr belongs to the concerns of fifth and sixth century ascetics. Although the trope is often cast back onto the early martyrs in hagiography written centuries later, it does not appear in historically early martyr stories like the *Passio*. Later martyrdoms pick up themes from *the Passio* or from the martyr culture itself, such as the depiction of martyrdom as an athletic contest and the metaphor of the female martyr as the bride of Christ. De-sexing the female martyr through sexual violence seems to contradict her presentation as bride of Christ. This contradiction may suggest a layers of tradition, with ascetic writers adding sexual mutilation to oral legends about martyrs. Alternately, the older elements may have been picked up from the *Passio* and other old martyr stories as new stories were written.

Historically, the ascetic is successor to the martyr.<sup>56</sup> Martyr literature permeated the Christian culture, not only in regions where Christians were being arrested, tortured, and killed, but throughout Christendom. All those who heard the accounts were effected, such that Candida Moss suggests considering them “embodied subjects presented with constructions of the body.”<sup>57</sup>

The literary tradition is even more complex. In the literary world, the setting of a story is often much earlier than the time of its writing. Martyr texts may bear explicit marks of purported authenticity (such as the claim that Febronia’s story was written by her colleague Thomias) while expressing the concerns of a different (later) era. Febronia’s story is set in the age of the martyrs, but she is probably the offspring of the minds of later ascetics; she is their successor, not vice-versa.

The same culture that produced ascetic martyrologies also produced hagiography that falls into the *bios* genre. In ascetic *bioi*, sexual violence against women serves the same eventual purpose it serves in the martyr stories, but the women are not de-sexed by others; they de-sex

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<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Virginité and its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity,” in *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 76.

<sup>57</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 166.

themselves through androgynous or transvestite behavior, extreme asceticism, or complete seclusion.

In ascetic literature, sexual violence takes two forms: “The sexual abuse and/or mutilation of women as a means of torture in the martyr accounts, and the annihilation of sexual identity in the stories of the ‘transvestite motif’—Pelagia and Anastasia, for example—where the women do not simply deny their gender or render themselves genderless but destroy their identity as women and take on that of men. In either instance, the texts describe the actions with disturbingly graphic detail. This is not a matter of insinuation.”<sup>58</sup>

Instead than dying holy deaths, these women live holy lives after figuratively cutting off their sexuality. Often sexual violence is the impetus for the de-sexing. Alternately, an ascetic woman may commit suicide or “die of remorse” if a man attempts to rape or seduce her; in this case she hopes to desexualize herself by death. If even death will not stop the perpetrator, then God will intervene. These stories support the contention that the purpose of sexual violence in ascetic literature is to cleanse the woman of her feminine sexuality in order to make her holy.

Ancient Christians found evidence for these ideas in scripture. Ambrose wrote that through celibacy, the Virgin Mary became the perfect man of Ephesians 4.13. Writing in Latin, he used the masculine term for man, depicting Mary’s shift from woman to perfect man, not to perfect woman or to perfect human.<sup>59</sup> He said Mary “dispenses with her worldly label, with the sex of her body” and becomes the perfect man of Ephesians 4.13.<sup>60</sup> The church fathers taught that women who renounced their sexuality were elevated above ordinary women who were

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<sup>58</sup> Brock and Harvey, 24.

<sup>59</sup> Ambrose, *Traité sur l'Évangile de saint Luc*, vol. 2, in *Sources Chrétiennes*, trans. Gabriel Tissot (Paris: Cerf, 1958), 209. Jim Dunkly provided translation from Latin to English.

<sup>60</sup> Laurie Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity: A Topical Survey of Its Life, Beliefs & Practices* (Intervarsity Press, 2011), 185.

subject to husbands and birth pains. In fact, these ascetic women were so far removed from femininity, some of the church fathers thought they should be considered a third sex.<sup>61</sup>

The *Acts of Thecla* (*AT*) tells the story of a young woman named Thecla who faced down lions and bears, testified in the theater, rebuked governors, and traveled dangerous terrain with healing in her hands. She was hailed as a martyr, even though multiple executions failed to kill her. After decades of ministry, she eventually departed this life only by her own volition.

At the beginning of the story, she quietly refuses to marry her betrothed, or to respond to the attentions of any man, instead following the Apostle Paul. Paul is less enthusiastic. He refuses to baptize Thecla, citing her beauty as a reason for increased temptation. Her beauty and her resistance to marriage land her in the arena—not once, but twice in two different cities. Eventually, she baptizes herself and then discards her femininity through transvestitism.

In Iconium, Thecla is condemned to be burned (at her mother's request) for refusing to marry. Miraculously, the fire does not touch her and is soon snuffed out by a supernatural rainstorm. Her persecutors free her in amazement, and she journeys to Antioch following Paul.

In Antioch, the themes of forced marriage and female chastity are repeated, this time with the twist of sexual violence. Thecla is stalked by a man named Alexander who, like Thamyras, is an important man of the city. When Paul refuses to sell her and Thecla rebuffs Alexander's advances, Alexander grabs her in the street. Thecla tears his coat and pulls off his crown, publicly humiliating this important man.

For defending herself against this assault, Thecla is hauled to the theater, where she faces a series of trials in which the feminine triumphs over the masculine, protecting her chastity. She is accused by a spurned suitor and condemned by a male governor, but sheltered by a visiting queen who takes her home for the night to protect her chastity from jailhouse rape. She is

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<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Ann Clark, *Women in the Early Church*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983), 17.

attacked by male beasts, but protected by a lioness. When more animals are sent in, female audience members protect her with flower petals and strong perfumes. At last she is bound between two bulls, but when their genitals are burned with hot irons, the ropes burn and it is like she was never bound. Thecla's supporters are all female, from Queen Tryphaena to the lioness. Likewise, those who molest and threaten her are males, including the lion and the bulls.

The sexual nature of her torture (nudity, threatened rape, attempting to split her apart by her legs) does not de-sex her directly, but leads her to defeminize herself. Just as Thecla acts autonomously in refusing marriage, following Paul, and even performing her own baptism, so she is autonomous in shedding femininity to become more holy and avoid further sexual violence.

Thecla only finds reprieve from the struggle against sexual violence by stripping herself of sexuality, which is itself a kind of sexual violence. She cuts her hair and wears men's clothes, because this is the only way to travel safely. As she becomes more and more holy, she becomes less and less feminine. Like other female transvestites, Thecla is able to do heroic things when she puts on male garb.<sup>62</sup>

Transvestitism is a common theme in Hellenistic literature, and in early Christian literature featuring women. In the Acts of Thomas, Mygdonia cuts off her hair. In the Acts of Philip, Charitine puts on men's clothing in order to follow the apostle. The *bios* of the desert mother Syncletica tells that she cut off her hair in the presence of a priest as a sign of her renunciation of the world,<sup>63</sup> whereas for Thecla transvestitism (including short hair) is way to protect herself from rape. Some texts express the idea that the negation of femininity is so complete, the body manifests the spirit's renunciation. Of Hilaria, a woman who lived under

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<sup>62</sup> Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 15.

<sup>63</sup> Castelli, 85.

false pretenses as a monk and a eunuch, it is written “Her breasts were not like the breasts of other women. On account of her ascetic practices they were withered; and she was not subjected to the illness<sup>64</sup> of women, for God had ordained it that way.” Withered breasts “like dead leaves” symbolize both femininity and its renunciation.<sup>65</sup>

Ascetic women were said to demonstrate the stoic virtue of ἀνδρεία, a word for courage or fortitude based on the word ἀνερ (male).<sup>66</sup> Macrina the Younger was a fourth-century nun who instructed many in the way of holiness, including her brothers Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Peter of Sebaste, who became bishops and theologians. Macrina was said to become an angel in human flesh,<sup>67</sup> but note that she became a male angel. In the opening of her *bios*, her brother wrote, “A woman is the starting-point of the narrative, if indeed a woman; for I do not know if it is proper to name her who is above nature out of [the terms] of nature.”<sup>68</sup> Likewise, John Chrysostom said of Olympias, “Don’t say ‘woman’ but ‘what a man!’ because this is a man, despite her physical appearance.”<sup>69</sup>

While the original Thecla defeminizes herself by dressing like a man, later features in the Thecla tradition employ symbolic seclusion as a means of defeminization, pointing to the cenobetic tradition. In her old age, Thecla faces the same threat that landed her in the arena in Antioch as a teenager. Local physicians, threatened by her healing clinic, hire rogues to rape her. Thecla escapes into the mountain, miraculously entombing herself in stone.<sup>70</sup> The entombment serves as a metaphor for Thecla’s lifestyle. In order to be holy, Thecla must protect her chastity

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<sup>64</sup> The Coptic word translated “illness” here is derived from the Greek *πάθος*, which has a range of meanings including suffering, condition, or emotion, as well as illness. In this particular case, it may refer to menstruation. Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 244.

<sup>65</sup> Castelli, 85.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 83, 86.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>70</sup> Davis, 44.

not only from lust but also from rape. Rape is avoided by transvestitism and, ultimately, complete seclusion.

As a literary work, the *Acts of Thecla* serves as a bridge between the genres of ascetic epic martyrdom and ascetic *bios*. Although Thecla is tortured and martyred, she survives and lives as an itinerant preacher. Ascetic *bioi* borrow the same motifs and tropes that characterize ascetic epic martyrologies, but with slightly shifted meanings. While sexual violence against women in martyr literature represents a stripping of the feminine, in the *bios* it becomes the reason femininity must be stripped, rather than the means. The women are autonomous and do the stripping themselves through transvestitism or seclusion.

Rape is never completed against martyrs, since that would spoil the heavenly bride trope, but characters in a *bios* can survive and somewhat recover from rape or other sexual activity. The story of *Mary, the Niece of Abraham of Qidun* offers a glimpse into ascetic attitudes toward virginal rape victims. Abraham was a mid-fourth century hermit, otherwise attested by the great Syriac theologian and poet St. Ephrem.<sup>71</sup> Although the work was written originally in Syriac, it makes use of Greek and Latin literary techniques.<sup>72</sup>

Taken in by her uncle as a 7-year-old orphan, Mary lived in the outer part of Abraham's house and communicated with him only through a window, taking care of his creaturely needs while he devoted himself to prayer. He prayed for her continually, and she emulated his lifestyle so that for twenty years she was "like a chaste lamb, like a spotless dove."<sup>73</sup> Then Satan decided to ensnare her, through the lust of a certain monk who visited Abraham. Seeing Mary, the monk wanted "to get hold of her and sleep with her."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Brock and Harvey, 27.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

“For a whole year he treacherously lay in wait for her, until he succeeded in softening her firm resolve, and the girl eventually opened the door of the house where she lived as a recluse and came out to see him. He assaulted her with his blandishments, bespattering her with the mud of his lust.”<sup>75</sup>

Does the story suggest consensual sex or rape? After a year of persuasion, the young man convinced her to open the door and come outside. This is the only act the narrator attributes to the girl in the entire encounter; the rest of the action verbs belong to the man. The author tells us that he “assaulted her with blandishments,”<sup>76</sup> a paradoxical phrase if there ever was one.

Blandishments denote gentle persuasion through flattering speech, but assault suggests force.

Mary’s response to the situation is equally ambiguous:

Once this sinful episode had taken place, stupefaction seized hold of her mind: she tore off the garment she was wearing, beat her face and breasts in grief, and said to herself, “I am now as good as dead: I have lost all the days of my life; my ascetic labors, my abstinence, my tears are all wasted, for I have rebelled against God and slain my soul; and upon my holy uncle I have imposed bitter grief. I have wrapped myself in shame by becoming a laughingstock to the Enemy, Satan. Why should I continue to live, now that I have become so wretched? Alas, what will happen to me? Alas, what have I done! Alas, what will happen to me? Alas, how did I fall? How did my mind and senses become so darkened without my realizing it? How my downfall occurred, I was unaware; how I became corrupted, I do not know.”<sup>77</sup>

She blames herself for the sexual act, as many rape victims do, and speaks not of desire or lust as her downfall but rather an inability to see the downfall coming. Her panic speaks of one preyed upon, surprised, and overtaken, not one who consensually participates in an act. Also note that Mary never considers continuing the relationship and never mentions marriage. This may be due to her extreme asceticism, in which marriage and fornication are equally sinful, or it may indicate she did not consent despite the blandishments.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Although we are told little of the actual encounter, the set-up and the aftermath indicate the act was not consensual. The ambiguity suggests that, to the author, consent is irrelevant. The author seems to agree with Mary that having been the subject of a sexual encounter is sinful, whether or not the woman consented.

Abraham first learns of the trouble through a dream; he envisions a snake swallowing a dove and returning to its lair.<sup>78</sup> Again, this is an image of aggression and murder, not passionate intimacy. Mary has been previously described as a dove, and in the dream the dove is devoured not by any choice it makes, but by the predatory snake that commits the crime and slinks away. In the second dream, the snake submits to Abraham, who slits open its belly and retrieves the dove unharmed. Applying the dream to the rest of the story, it is not the young man from whom Abraham must rescue Mary, so clearly the snake does not represent the young man. Rather, he rescues her from the world of male/female sexual relations. Thus, the snake represents sexuality.

Two days pass, and somehow become two years, before Abraham understands what has happened and goes after Mary, who has “established herself in a low tavern.”<sup>79</sup> When next the two meet, Mary is dressed as a prostitute and Abraham is disguised as a soldier. He pretends he wants to use her sexual services, letting her sit in his lap and kiss his neck. In the bedroom, he joins her on the bed, pulls off his helmet as if to kiss her and reveals himself. Mary doubts her ability to repent, but Abraham tells her “I have taken upon myself your wrongdoing; God will require this sin at my hands.”<sup>80</sup>

Upon Mary’s return, Abraham puts her in the inner part of the house and takes the outer part for himself. She spends her time in prayers and vigil, “dressed in sackcloth and humility.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

For the rest of her life (another fifteen years), Mary weeps and repents. The narrator closes the story by stating, “In this way she completed her life. She left the world having made a good end, being reconciled with God.”<sup>82</sup>

Sexual violence in this story serves the plot by moving Mary from the outer area of the house (which may represent God’s kingdom or holiness or merely the ascetic lifestyle), into the world where she is bespattered with sin. While the author could have had her venture forth out of curiosity or for some evil purpose, he intentionally retains her innocence and naivety. This is important because it is her innocence that compels her to respond to the assault as she does, with both bewilderment and extreme shame. As in other stories in the ascetic *bios* genre, sexual violence is a motive for de-sexing oneself. Mary accomplishes this not by cutting her hair and cross-dressing, but by utterly withdrawing from the world. In trading places with Abraham, she becomes concealed in the inner part of the house, with Abraham to protect her in the outer part of the house. This physical movement signifies a movement to more extreme asceticism.

Hermitage is certainly not limited to women, but in women’s stories the theme of sexual violence is often the driving force behind the seclusion. The *bios* of Abba Daniel of Sketis includes the story of a noblewoman named Anastasia flees into the desert to escape being forced into the palace harem. She lives in seclusion in a cave, visited only by a single monk who knows her true story. She pretends to be a eunuch and goes by the name Anastasios. At her death, she asks the monk and his helper not to change her clothes so as not to reveal her secret, but they decide to put a nicer garment on top of her clothes. In this process, the younger monk realizes that the eunuch is actually a woman. He asks his mentor about it on the way home, and learns her whole story.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 142-149.

Syria also provides us with another harlot-to-ascetic story in the Life of Pelagia of Antioch. This story omits the theme of sexual violence because Pelagia does not, like Mary, begin as a model ascetic. She is a wealthy prostitute at the beginning, and the story casts her not as victim but victor over men, in conjunction with the devil. Like Mary, Pelagia can only be reconciled by a life of utter seclusion. Like Anastasia, she converts her name to the masculine form (Pelagios) and lives as a eunuch. As in the case of Anastasia, it is a young monk (Jacob) who tells us the story, noting that he was sent to visit a monk and thought he was speaking with a man the entire time. Although Jacob has met Pelagia personally before her conversion, he does not recognize her now “because she had lost those good looks I used to know; her astounding beauty had all faded away, her laughing and bright face that I had known had become ugly, her pretty eyes had become hollow and cavernous as the result of much fasting and the keeping of vigils. The joints of her holy bones, all fleshless, were visible beneath her skin through emaciation brought on by ascetic practices. Indeed the whole complexion of her body was coarse and dark like sackcloth, as the result of her strenuous penance.”<sup>84</sup>

Ascetics invented multiple ways to defeminize a woman. In martyr literature, the amputation of breasts purifies the martyr before her entrance to heaven, but in the post-martyr era, the ascetic woman needed to accomplish the task on her own. Sexuality might be renounced through transvestitism, lifelong seclusion, or extreme asceticism itself. As the story of Pelagia demonstrates, asceticism could be so severe that it not only cleansed the ascetic woman of passions and sinful tendencies, but even of femininity itself.

If seclusion, cross-dressing, and severe asceticism failed to protect a woman from sexual violence, she had one final recourse: suicide. Eusebius of Emesa shares in *Homilia 6* the tale of another Pelagia, a virgin who kills herself rather than be raped. He also speaks of Bernice and

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 60.

Prosdoce, who preferred suicide to rape. To Eusebius, the true horror of rape was not the violence, betrayal, or pain experienced by the woman, but that it made the woman's body damaged goods, unfit for the heavenly bridegroom.<sup>85</sup> The Church Fathers concurred, but also strongly condemned suicide. Thus a debate ensued: Were virgins justified in committing suicide to avoid rape? To John Chrysostom, the virgins' suicides were sacrificial and therefore not a sin. Ambrose likewise argued that their faith suppressed their crime, putting these words in the mouth of Pelagia, "God is not offended by a remedy against evil, and faith permits the act."<sup>86</sup> Augustine disagreed, arguing that threatened rape did not justify suicide, because "the sin of others does not stain."<sup>87</sup>

This motif of suicide to avoid rape is also a bridge between the two genres of the ascetic *bios* and the martyrdom. The virgin is not martyred via murder, but we have already seen that a praiseworthy quality in a martyr is being in control of her own martyrdom. Pelagia's leap from the rooftop is not materially different from Febronia's demand for tortures and fire rather than forced marriage. The message in either case is that the ascetic woman must choose virginity over life itself.

Consider Thecla. She invites her own death on several occasions, not only by refusing to marry but in the act of leaping into a barrel of flesh-eating seals in order to baptize herself. At the end of her life, threatened by rape, she miraculously walks into the side of the cave and is enclosed in stone. Is she dead or alive? The same could be asked of Mary niece of Abraham, secluded all those years in the inner house with only a slot through which to receive food, or Pelagia/Pelagios, in a cell with no window or door handle, so emaciated that she hardly looks

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<sup>85</sup> Castelli, 95.

<sup>86</sup> Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 194.

<sup>87</sup> Castelli, 95.

like a human, much less a woman. Whether by seclusion, death, or taking on masculinity, all these women reject their own femininity in order to attain holiness. “The feminine has no place in this virginal order; it is explicitly banished, along with passion, materiality and the body itself.”<sup>88</sup> Virginité abstracted a price, because it not only required not only celibacy, but also a renunciation of female identity and self.<sup>89</sup> It was not enough for the ascetic woman to abstain from sex; she also had to stop being feminine.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 96.

## Conclusion

A broad overview of the genres of sacred Christian literature demonstrates how sexual violence against women serves as a literary trope within each genre. Although the genres are linked because of the cumulative nature of sacred Christian literature, the meaning of sexual violence as a symbol shifts as the reader moves from one genre to another.

In the stories of the Old Testament, sexual violence against women serves as an etiological symbol. In Genesis, it often denigrates a tribe of people by attributing their origin to rape. The rape of Dinah differs in that no offspring are produced, making a statement against a particular people and the very idea of intermarriage between Hebrews and non-Hebrews. The laws pertaining to sexual violence in Exodus and Deuteronomy establish some level of protection for some women, while revealing the tension between two views of rape: rape as the stealing of another man's property, and rape as a violent crime against a woman. Although not all women are protected by the law, the rape stories in Genesis involve instances in which the law is broken.

The rape stories in Judges and 2 Samuel are used to advance political messages. The rape of the concubine (and the 600 rapes that follow) testify against leadership by judges and councils. These rapes may also serve to denigrate the tribe of Benjamin and, by association, King Saul, by associating the offspring of that tribe with gang rape and abduction. In turn, the rapes of Bathsheba, Tamar, and the concubines of David serve as the main plot of a succession story explaining why David's crown was passed to Solomon rather than his first-born son Amnon or his second-born son Absalom. These stories go beyond etiology. They do not merely state why a certain man came to power; they argue that his reign is preferable and inevitable by denigrating competitors (including ideologies, such as council leadership).

In prophetic literature, symbolic women represent political entities to be humiliated or destroyed through sexual violence. The marriage metaphor pictures God's relationship with Israel as a marriage in which Israel has been unfaithful. God then engages in sexual violence (directly or indirectly) as a means of punishing Israel. By imagining God as the husband of a wayward woman, the prophets assert monotheism, reaffirm the covenant, and exonerate God of any blame for Israel's predicament.

In the New Testament, violence against women is found primarily in the gospels and the Revelation of John. The gospel birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are so sanitized, and Mary's consent is so formally vocalized in Luke's gospel, that most modern readers do not recognize violence in the tale. Analysis of the annunciation and comparison to similar works reveal a trope known as the romantic rape scene. Drawn from Greek literature, this trope seeks to elevate the status of Jesus by giving him a divine origin. In the Revelation of John, the symbol of sexual violence against a foreign woman is drawn from Old Testament prophecies to symbolize military defeat and political annihilation. As in the marriage metaphor, the symbol of rape is used to describe or threaten the entity's downfall.

Sexual violence against women in ascetic literature serves to de-sex the woman in order to make her holy. In epic martyrologies, defeminization is accomplished directly through sexual violence by the persecutors against the martyr; however, it fulfills the will of God and of the martyr. In ascetic *bioi*, women respond to the threat of sexual violence by de-sexing themselves. This may be accomplished through transvestitism, hair cutting, taking on a male name and persona, extreme asceticism, seclusion, or suicide.

Recognizing the symbolism in these literary tropes allows the reader to understand the author's intent when writing about sexual violence against women. These texts are dangerous

(especially when found in scripture), precisely because they are often understood as normative. The use of scripture in modern liturgy and Bible study pulls ancient understandings of women and sexuality into the modern era and reinforces outdated ideas about Christian femininity, marital violence, sexual agency, rape as humiliation, and the subjugation of wives to husbands. Understanding the purpose of sexual violence in each genre enables readers to unlock its the meaning in the text, even as we resist the presumptions and inherent subjection it reinforces.

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