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How Does the Biblical Literature Treat Vulnerable Women?

Texts of Vulnerability, Continuity, and Hope

A DISSERTATION

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Joshua ben Perahiah and Nittai the Arbelite received [the oral tradition] from them. Joshua ben Perahiah used to say: ‘appoint for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a companion and judge all humans with the scale weighted in their favor.’ Pirkei Avot 1:6

I would like to thank my many teachers on this journey of knowledge and enchantment with Judaism. My teachers at Haifa University-Israel, where I studied for my M.A in Jewish Thought and History, my beloved teachers at the Academy for Jewish Religion-CA, where I received my Rabbinic education, and my esteemed and thought-provoking teachers at Hebrew Union College.

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I am also thankful to my mother and husband, who supported me along the way, and special thanks to my mother-in-law, Marsha Michael, who read my manuscript and corrected my English to improve it (English is my second language, and I’m also dyslectic).

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my teachers Dr. Rabbi Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Dr. Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Z"l). Through her classes, Dr. Tamara Eskenazi taught me to read biblical literature with love, see the importance of women in biblical texts, and concentrate on bringing good into the world. Dr. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, through her books, has opened my eyes to the intricacy and challenges of the biblical text yet taught me to appreciate its sophistication and multi-levels of interpretation.

I also want to dedicate this dissertation to my best friend and companion to the rabbinic journey, Rabbi Corinne Copnick, who, through her life experiences, was a trailblazer and source of inspiration to me, her family, community members, and many generations of come. Rabbi Copnick was my loyal companion in writing this dissertation. She read, corrected, countered, and shared her insights with me. I am truly blessed for her friendship.

Last, I wish to apply the advice of our sages to judge all humans with the scale weighted in their favor (Pirkei Avot 1:6) to the way I read and interpret biblical literature. This paper explores the question do the biblical writings, as we know them today, reflect the intent and means to protect females in biblical times? I will try to answer this question grounding my response in biblical criticism.

ABSTRACT

Biblical narratives and laws are sacred texts in three major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Thus, throughout generations, they have influenced and shaped the behavior, cultural understanding, civic, and religious laws for millions of people across the globe and throughout millennia. Because of its vast influence, it is important to ask: “did the biblical literature protect women?”

In this paper, I chose to follow the life cycle of a “biblical woman” from birth to maturity and explore the different situations in which she was vulnerable. I am interested in probing the question: Did the biblical literature protect the “biblical woman,” and how so?

The following chapters will examine biblical narratives, laws, and rituals, looking for means for protecting women in vulnerable situations. This is an interdisciplinary investigation using a feminist, socio-historical, critical approach. The methods for such exploration will be literary analysis, social theory of the Israelite culture, and a comparison to neighboring cultures in the ancient Near East.

Research questions:

At the end of my exploration, I wish to find answers to the following questions:

1. Were there deliberate strategies to protect females in vulnerable situations?
2. What were the strategies used in the biblical literature to protect vulnerable females?
3. Which of the strategies was most often used and why?

4. Which strategy was implied to which circumstance? Is there a connection, correlation, or conclusion to draw?
5. In which circumstance were females *not* protected? Why?
6. Who were the audiences? Whom did these strategies target?
7. Did the different ages of the females imply different vulnerabilities and stakes?
8. Did the difference in social status imply different vulnerabilities and thus require different strategies?
9. Different historical times (and if so, what has changed?)
10. Which of the strategies were most effective? Effective to their time? Had a lasting effect?
11. How would we know that?
12. Compared to ancient Near East sources, what (other or additional) strategies of protecting females were used? Conversely, what strategies were *not* used and why?
13. In which stages of life were females most vulnerable and needed the most protection?
14. What can we infer from the narratives and laws about the environments where females most needed protection?
15. Were there different protections for females based on their social-economic/ethnic status?
16. Is there a theme developed throughout the biblical narratives? ? Is there a progression of protection?
17. How does the theme of protecting females in vulnerable situations throughout their life, fits into the larger narrative of biblical literature? Is it consistent?

It is important to note that the purpose of this work is to examine the biblical literature as is, without relying on later interpretations that were created in different times and had different agendas. I will read the biblical literature in its original language, Hebrew, and use the English translation of the JPS Hebrew- English TANAKH, *The Torah A Women's Commentary*, and English Standard Version (ESV) of *Accordance* software.

Also, as some critics may say, it is not my intention to make the biblical literature “look good.” In each chapter, I try to give a detailed picture based on sociological and literary criticism done by esteemed biblical scholars and my understanding. Basing my work on a phenomenological method, I aim to describe, understand, and interpret the meanings of each situation through lenses that look to see where the biblical literature did protect the vulnerable.

My work is rooted in feminist scholarship yet, takes a different approach from the renowned works of the second wave of feminist writers such as Ester Fuchs, Judith Plaskow, Renita Weens, Elza Tamez, and Mieke Bal, who pointed out the androcentric (male-centered) nature of the biblical text and the repression of women. In contrary to them, I do not see biblical literature as oppressive to women. A vast contemporary scholarship and a nuanced exploration of law, ritual, and narratives will reveal a supportive, more positive picture. This work is a continuum of feminist biblical exploration, based on the diversity of discourse within the feminist movement.¹

¹ More on the discourse within the feminist movement see Elizabeth Evans, “Critical Waves: Exploring Feminist Identity, Discourse, and Praxis in Western Feminism” *Social Movement Studies*, Vol.14, No. 4, (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2015):396-409. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2014.964199>

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ABBREVIATIONS

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
1-2 Sam	1-2 Samuel
1-2 Kgs	1-2 Kings
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Ezek	Ezekiel
Dan	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Zeph	Zephaniah
Zech	Zechariah
Ruth	Ruth

The World in Times of the Creation of Biblical Literature

In their eye-opening book *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE*, Anthropologists Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin help us better understand the social construct of the ancient world. In the introduction to their book, they point out the differences between modern readers and biblical society and instruct the reader to be aware of biases and pre-constructed notions when reading biblical texts. Here is a summary of their points:²

According to Matthews and Benjamin, the world in which the biblical narratives circulated, twelve centuries before the common era, was much different from the world we, the modern readers, live and comprehend. Hence, few basic principles the readers ought to be mindful of when trying to understand ancient texts:

1. The world in which the biblical literature was created is three thousand years older than ours; our life experiences and value systems have changed throughout time. We do not live in a patriarchal society, nor is slavery part of our economic system. We live in a world where literacy and access to information are mostly available.
2. The biblical literature was developed in the Eastern Mediterranean cultures such as Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine, Asia Minor, and Egypt, while the Western

² Victor Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social Worlds of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE* (Michigan, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), Introduction xiii-xxiii.

civilizations, which influenced our understanding of the world today, were developed in ancient Greece and Rome (and later Europe), which had different political and social structures.

3. The world of the biblical society was mainly agricultural; agricultural society is synchronized with nature, dependent on rain, views its natural resources as limited, dependent on the deity, and would go to great lengths to ensure the fertility of the land. We, on the other hand, live in an industrial society that is desynchronized from nature's cycles and hold different attitudes toward resources and fertility.
4. Today we live in an individualized world; we value privacy and freedom to do what we wish. Biblical society was constructed by households, villages, and tribes. There was no concept of the individual without a connection to a clan and lineage. Thus individual's behavior was influenced by the household's needs and affected them as well. Values of the honor and shame of the household were strong factors determining one's behavior.³
5. Today we value history as a science that was developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (Yet, as we know it today, history was written and

³ See also Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve; Ancient Israelite Woman in Context*, (Oxford University Press, 2013), 118-119. And Victor Matthews, "Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Legal Situations in The Hebrew Bible," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Matthews H. Victor, Levinson M. Bernard, Frymer-Kensky Tikva, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 97-112.

interpreted by those who wrote it and is hardly accurate as presented). Biblical texts should not be read as history. Biblical texts were formed, orally transmitted, and edited throughout millennia before they were canonized.⁴ Biblical storytellers tried to understand, interpret, and influence the world in which they lived. Thus, the writers during biblical times were less interested in reporting on “what had happened” and more in responding to the question of “what does it mean for us.”

For the reasons listed above, Mathews and Benjamin advise us against the temptation to project our worldview and social constructs on the biblical text.⁵

⁴ Marc Zvi Brettler, “The Canonization of biblical literature” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adel Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, (Jewish Publication Society, TANAKH translation, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2072-2077.

⁵ See also Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 118. Meyers quotes an influential article “Archaeology and the Study of Gender” published by the archeologists Conkey and Spector, in which they stressed the importance to recognize the “intellectual obstacles” involved in reconstructing the characteristics of social life in the past and projecting modern worldview on biblical times. M Conkey and J.D. and Spector, “Archaeology and the Study of Gender,” *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, vol. 7 ed. M. Schiffer: 1-38. (NY: Academic Press 1984), 5.

Ancient Israel

To better appreciate the meaning of biblical laws, rituals, and narratives, we need to understand the physical and political conditions of the people who lived in those times.

“Biblical times” range between 1250 BCE to 333 BCE and are divided into four historical categories: (1250-1000 BCE) early Israel, (1000-587 BCE) monarchy to exile, (587-537 BCE) Babylonian exile, and 547-333 BCE post-exile.⁶

This chapter focuses on ancient Israel and refers to the period between 1250-587 BCE. These dates range from the beginning of settlements in the land of Canaan around 1250 BCE to the exile from the land around 585 BCE. Scholars also refer to this time as the “Iron Age period.” “Iron Age” is an archaeological term referring to 1200 BCE and 586 BCE, representing the gradual shift from Bronze to Iron for creating tools.⁷ The archeological findings refer to the time when the Israelites inhabited the land of Canaan (also referred to as “Israel”).

The archeologist, Carol Meyers in her book *Rediscovering Eve*, draws a picture of the lived experience in the land of Israel in biblical times based on Israel’s geography,

⁶ Mathews and Benjamin, *Social World*, Preface, viiii. For more detailed information see “Timeline” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 2106-2108.

⁷ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 15. Also, in-depth scholarship on the development of smelting Iron and making tools in the Iron Age in the land of Israel see Naama Yahalom-Mack, "The History of Iron in Ancient Israel" *TheTorah.com* (2021). <https://thetorah.com/article/the-history-of-iron-in-ancient-israel>

archeologic findings, and the biblical narrative.⁸ She describes the geographic area of Canaan as 150 miles of hilly terrain with a harsh landscape and scarce water sources. The land stretched from the headwaters of the Jordan River in the north (Dan) to the northern Negev in the south (Beersheba), on the highlands west of the Jordan River. Meyers gives a very detailed picture of the ancient environment:

Water -the amount of rainfall varied greatly year by year and in location throughout the land. The average was 8-12 inches per year. The rainy season was 5-6 months with sporadic rains, and droughts were common. The survival of settlements was dependent directly on a sufficient supply of water year around. Systems of wells and cisterns (underground shafts collecting surface rain runoffs) were dug to supply water. Digging and maintaining wells, water canals, and water tanks was labor-intensive and expensive. These systems were found mainly in the largest archeological sites.

Land- agriculture depended on the terrain and the soil quality, which varied much throughout the land. Much of the Israelite territory was hilly with narrow valleys.

⁸ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 38 -58. Also see Oded Borowski, "What Was Life like in Biblical Times?" *TheTorah.com* (2019). <https://thetorah.com/article/what-was-life-like-in-biblical-times>

Terracing the steep and rocky hills maximized the agricultural potential of the highlands. Yet this type of cultivation only allowed for “subsistence farming” -a small-scale production, suffice only for their family consumption. Most Israelite households were independent, small-scale farmers.

Food- Israelite food consisted mostly of grain, wine, and olive oil. Barley and lentils were less common; even less common were the fruits mentioned in biblical literature, such as figs, dates, and pomegranates. Consumption of meat was special and expensive; meat was eaten mostly at festal events.

Political system- For about two hundred years (1250-1047 BCE), the political system was based on decentralized, local villages and tribes (“The Judges” era). The centralized United Monarchy of Israel, dated between 1047-930 BCE, reigning Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. Later the monarchy split into the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judea (930-722 BCE).

Economic system- throughout the Iron Age, Israel’s population was mostly rural and agricultural, based on small-scale farming and domestic animals.

Demographics - Archeologic findings from 1200-1000 BCE (the period associated with the beginning of the Israelites settlement) indicate about 300 small settlements, most of them smaller than an acre. These were tiny villages, most with several dozen dwellings, housed fewer than several hundred people. All were agricultural settlements.

The second half of the Iron Age (1000-586 BCE) was characterized by an increased population and the establishment of the monarchy. Larger settlements with

fortified walls appeared alongside the small, isolated farmhouses. In addition, several larger settlements like Jerusalem, Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer appear to be regional administrative or military centers. These centers had urban features such as denser population (a proximally average of 1,700 people) and communal structures. Nevertheless, most of the town's economy was still based on the agricultural produce produced in the villages, collection of taxes, and small commerce.

*Matthews and Benjamin note that roughly between 1000-800 BCE, the population in the hillside of Samaria, Galilee, Beersheba, and the northern parts of the country expanded to 80,000 people, and more than 100 new villages were founded.⁹

These new settlers fled from the coastal areas where the trade routes were, and the economy was based on commerce. Commerce in ancient times was based on political allegiances and military strength. To achieve this, there was a need for centralized governing and soldiers to protect the routes, control the population, and expand the territory. Slaves for free labor to produce the goods for consumption and commerce, and high taxes to pay for the military and the monarch's living. This was an effective but brutal system, which the hillside settlers tried to avoid.

Therefore, as Matthews and Benjamin explain, the economy [and social ideology] of the hillside Israelites was not based on commerce or slaves but an agricultural

⁹ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 3-5.

subsistence economy. As we can see from the many references in biblical literature, the early Israelites, whose mindset influenced the writings in biblical literature, were displeased with monarchy, taxes, slavery, and wars.

Women in Ancient Israel

In her book *Rediscovering Eve- Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Carol Meyers distinguishes between “Israelite woman” and the “biblical woman.” She brings to our attention that the women we meet in the biblical narratives were only a fragment of the whole garment of the Israelite population.

Meyers reminds us that the biblical authors were not concerned with the everyday experience of ordinary people, rather with national and theological concerns. Even when dealing with individuals, they usually addressed monarchs and their family members or heads of households. Further, the biblical literature originated and reflected the urban setting of Jerusalem, whereas most Israelites lived in small villages in a rural agrarian society.

Furthermore, the women we meet through the biblical narratives were either in a position of power due to the prominence of their father or spouse or victims of horrendous deeds. Thus, according to Meyers, the biblical narratives about women cannot accurately represent the lived experience of the ancient Israelite woman. “It would be to

succumb to the Everest fallacy--an error in logic in which the visible extreme and the invisible normal are assumed to be the same.”¹⁰

Nevertheless, we can learn about the world of the Israelite women during biblical times. Meyers notes that the Hebrew noun *isha* means both a “woman” and “a wife.” This signifies that a woman’s identity was related to her material status and her husband’s household in biblical society.¹¹ Marriage was the norm for both men and women, a merger of two households aimed to provide a workforce in an agrarian society, produce offspring and thus assure genealogical continuity and ownership of land. (Widows and divorcees could find themselves disconnected from a household, with no economic, physical, or familial support).¹²

Because land, property, and genealogy transferred through the male line, men wanted to make sure that they were the fathers of the children who would inherit their household and the land. Thus, Israel’s society put a high value on virginity before marriage and looked harshly upon a woman’s expression of sexuality outside of marital relations.

¹⁰ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 3.

¹¹ Carol Meyers, “Women in Ancient Israel-an Overview,” Introduction to *The Torah A Woman’s Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, (NY: Women of Reform Judaism, The Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 2008), xli-xlvi.

¹² See in-depth discussion in chapters on widowhood and divorce.

One of the woman's most important roles and responsibilities was to be a mother; bear children, raise, educate and socialize them. Since children were important, polygyny (many wives) was accepted but not the norm. If a woman could not bear children, the husband could take a second wife, a slave-girl, or a concubine to produce an heir. Usually, a typical Israelite family would be monogamous and consist of two parents and three to four children.¹³

There was interdependence between households and within the household to sustain an agricultural environment, with men, women, and children working in agriculture and the house. Family life was task-oriented. Women bore the main responsibilities for maintaining the household, educational and religious needs of the family; Women participated in growing and harvesting grains, tending orchards and vineyards, cultivating vegetable gardens, and caring for domestic animals. They also contributed to the household economy in food-producing, ceramic pots making, and textile production jobs, which they did in a multi-household setting.

Women developed their social networks, gained, shared information, and taught each other potions and folk remedies. In a multigenerational household, older women

¹³ See detailed discussion in Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 22-31; Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 136; and Kristine Henriksen Garroway, "Gendering, Engendering, and Educating the Growing Child," in *Growing Up in Ancient Israel; Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts*, (SBL Press. Atlanta. 2018), 45-47, 137-138.

See also chapters on pregnancy and barrenness.

would serve as the house managers, instructing the younger generations and slaves in women's tasks and appropriate behavior.

Women participated in the communal religious cultic celebrations, yet, more importantly, they oversaw the religious life of the household. They maintained relations with God (gods) through daily practices (such as bread making) and other religious activities, mainly related to childbearing and the protection of the household. Thus, one can say that in a world where religion was part of daily life, women were the priests of their households.

Women also occupied professions outside the household such as midwives, minor temple servants, divination, musicians at celebrations and funerals, drummers, singers and dancers, prophets, "judges" at dispute resolutions, "wise-women," and experts in mourning rituals.¹⁴

As Meyers concludes, women in biblical times had a significant contribution to sustaining the household and its economy. Based on the many tasks and responsibilities women had, Meyers stresses that it would be folly to refer to the Israelite women as "only wives and mothers."

¹⁴ For detailed discussion with examples see Meyers, *Women in Ancient Israel*, xlvii-xlviii and *Rediscovering Eve*, 103, 127-179. See also discussion on midwives in the chapter about birth-giving.

Furthermore, women had power, influence, and control in multiple areas of responsibility, both in the domestic and the public sphere. Thus, it calls into question the (mistaken) assumption that ancient Israel was a completely patriarchal society and that women were dominated by men.¹⁵ Meyers suggests that the term “patriarchy” is not appropriate for the household-based agrarian society and recommends the use of the term “heterarchy”¹⁶ to indicate simultaneous power structures that interact with one another.¹⁷

¹⁵ Meyers, *Women in Ancient Israel*, xlv, xlviii.

¹⁶ Heterarchy- “a form of management or rule in which any unit can govern or be governed by others, depending on circumstances, and, hence, no one unit dominates the rest.” For a detailed explanation see Encyclopedia Britannica online:
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/heterarchy>

¹⁷ For an extensive discussion on the flaws of the “patriarchy model” see Carol Meyers, “Gender and the Heterarchy Alternative for Re-Modeling Ancient Israel,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Susanne Scholz (NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 443-459. And Claudia Setzer, “Feminist Interpretation of biblical literature” in *The Oxford Handbook of biblical literature in America*, ed. Paul C. Gutjahr (Oxford University Press 2018), 10.

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<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190258849.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190258849-e-42>

Literary Use of Biblical Texts

In her book, *Rediscovering Eve- Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Carol Meyers stress that although many biblical narratives read as “history,” they are not historical records. Instead, they are multi-layered texts to convey key ideas.

The biblical authors were concerned with communicating and recording their beliefs and understandings about the formation and national events of the Israelite people. Transmitting ideology, critique, or perspective was more important than providing accurate information.¹⁸

For example, narratives depicting sexual abuse towards women in Judges 19-21,2 Samuel 13, Genesis 34, and the story of Jephthah’s daughter (Judged 11-12), were not necessarily, affirming “facts” but used a *literary device* to call attention to serious flaws in the character of leadership or society.¹⁹ On the positive side, the Book of Ruth was

¹⁸ For thought-provoking examples see:

Marvin A. Sweeney, "Israel’s History as a Family Narrative" *TheTorah.com* (2015). <https://thetorah.com/article/israels-history-as-a-family-narrative>

Carl S. Ehrlich, "The Exodus Story as Jewish Mnemohistory" *TheTorah.com* (2015). <https://thetorah.com/article/the-exodus-story-as-jewish-mnemohistory>

Amit Kula, "Abraham, Smasher of Idols, and the Question of the Torah's Historicity" *TheTorah.com* (2014). <https://thetorah.com/article/abraham-smasher-of-idols-and-the-question-of-the-torahs-historicity>

¹⁹ For an in-depth discussion see chapters on child sacrifice and virginity.

influential in shaping Israel's monarchy genealogy and is, till today, influential for transmitting social values.²⁰

Many tales and other genres circulated orally for hundreds of years and perhaps were widely known before being collected and edited to what we call "biblical literature." Meyers asks us to pay close attention to some considerations when reading biblical literature; what she calls "the critical features of biblical authorship": gender, social position, the geographic location of those who wrote, collected, and edited much of the narratives.²¹

Meyers also reminds us that in ancient times, except for professional scribes and select members of religious, political, and mercantile elites, most people were illiterate. This brings her to the conclusion that the biblical literature was produced by, and maybe for, a tiny segment of society. This minority consisted of social elites and priests, all of them were men. In no way did this group represent the experiences of females, children, families, the poor, rural, and illiterate population. Further, given the gender and social position of the biblical authors, Meyers suggests that the addressed audiences were mostly the male heads of households.

²⁰ See Pamela Barmash, "Achieving Justice Through Narrative" *TheTorah.com* (2016). <https://thetorah.com/article/book-of-ruth-achieving-justice-through-narrative>

²¹ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 18-21.

Furthermore, the geographic location in which the biblical authors operated was mainly limited to Jerusalem. The priestly leadership was associated with the scribes who put the circulating narratives in writing. The priestly point of view was shaped by the temple, royal palaces, and urban life. By the late eighth century BCE, Jerusalem became a vibrant and affluent urban center, much different in wealth, family size, work, and worship patterns from the rural agricultural settlements and fortified towns in which most people lived.

Storytelling and the “Source Theory”

Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin, in their book *Social world of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE*, explore the different social roles in the Biblical world. One of the roles was the institution of the storytellers as the monarch’s public relations under the premise of “State Education.”²² Originally, storytellers developed and circulated stories orally based on their observations of Israel’s common experience and the monarchs’ agenda. Their reflections slowly formed an archive of narratives, recorded rituals, and law. With time, sophisticated literary elements were added to draw the audience’s attention and interest.

The “official storytellers,” the royal scribes assembled stories and put them in writing already between 700-600 BCE when King Josiah listened to a scroll read to him by his scribe Shaphan who “found” the Book of Deuteronomy (2 Kings 22). Gradually,

²² Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 237-252.

throughout centuries of political and historical events, the scribes merged early narratives, representing different social worldviews and political agendas. Today modern biblical scholars trace these narratives to their respective sources. Matthews and Benjamin explain the evolution of “Source Theory:”²³

According to Matthews and Benjamin, the Israelites who pioneered the country hillside in Samaria (1200-1000 BCE) lived in small, agricultural villages, believed in autonomic village culture with less power to monarchs, no army, no taxes, and no slaves. Their stories and metaphors were based on agricultural life. They referred to God as Elohim, God of creation; therefore, scholars identify them as “Elohists story” or the “E” sources.

The urban dwellers of Jerusalem (1000-900 BCE) believed in the necessity of a centralized governing, a strong army, and therefore taxes and slaves. Their stories endorsed Kings David and Salomon and glorified Israel as an empire including Northern Israel, Moab, Ammon, Edom, and Syria. They referred to God as YHWH and thus identified by scholars as the “Yahwist’s story” or the “J” source.²⁴ Matthews and Benjamin note that the “Yahwist story” appeared when the cities and states which made

²³ “Source Theory” is also known as “Documentary Hypothesis” or “Source Criticism.” For a review of the origins, development, influence, and flaw of this method of biblical criticism see: (Adapted by) Adelle Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, “The Modern Study of biblical literature” in Jewish Study Bible, 2085-2086

²⁴ “J” is abbreviated from the German word “Jahve.”

up the Israelite United Kingdom began to declare independence. In this political climate of emerging “local nationalism” and separatism, the stories promised military security and economic support to those loyal to the monarchy.²⁵

The “Deuteronomic story,” referred to as the “D” source, was developed in Judea (700-600 BCE) and named after the book of Deuteronomy. By that time, the Israelite empire downsized to the state of Judea and was entangled in a political power struggle between Egypt and Babylonia. The Deuteronomistic story tried to uphold the Israelite social institutions and called for Judea’s political isolation from its neighbors.

The “Priests’ story” or the “P” source was developed in Babylon (600-400 BCE). After the Babylonian exile in 587 BCE, the Israelite people who survived the horrific events of the conquest of Judea and the exile to Babylon were desperate to understand what had happened to them, why did it happen, and how to continue. Therefore, the priests who were previously part of the state’s official storytellers’ guild re-told old stories and traditions to reassure the Israelites of God’s forever care for them. Also, they aspired to create a moral and just society worthy of returning to Judea. Thus, they ascribed rituals of purification, laws protecting the most vulnerable in society, together with calendars to remember and reiterate the previous life in Judea.

²⁵ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 247-249.

Stories from all sources were collected, edited, and redacted for six hundred years to make up the biblical literature as we know it today. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all preserved different performances and modifications of the circulating stories. Today these stories are presented in writing and identified as The Word of God, Biblical literature, *Tanach*, or Scripture.”²⁶

Biblical Narrative

This, I am convinced, was at the heart of the authors’ intentions: the Hebrew writers manifestly took delight in the artful limning of these lifelike characters and actions, and so they created an unexhausted source of delight for hundred generations of readers. But the pleasure of imaginative play is deeply interfused with a sense of great spiritual urgency.²⁷

Robert Alter states that biblical narratives are “performative” rather than descriptive or “historical accounts.” They provoke our emotions and, at times, even call us to action. Sometimes biblical narratives are subversive and used as a safe way to criticize the dominant patterns of thought and institutions.²⁸

David Gunn and Danna Nolen Fewell, in their book *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, suggest we approach biblical narratives as modern novels and short stories;

²⁶ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 246.

²⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, INC 1981), 189.

²⁸ David Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative In the Hebrew Bible*, (NY: Oxford Bible Series, Oxford University Press, 1993), 1.

relating to human values, emotions, actions, and theology, instead of attempting to read these stories as holy scripture or a history book. This will allow for the literary examination, leading to engagement with the text, deeper understanding, and relation with our world.²⁹

Understanding Biblical Narrative:

Robert Alter in his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative* reminds us that the text we have today is not a product of a single hand or a single moment in time. He further suggests that the montage of viewpoints arranged in sequence wanted to embrace the abiding complexity of the Israelites as a nation throughout time: “textual patchwork... may prove upon further scrutiny to be a purposeful pattern.”³⁰

According to Alter, reading biblical text should be with the understanding that *narrative* implies *theology* since God is entrained in human affairs and dependent on the acts of individual men and women. As God’s creation and the subject of care, humans benefit or suffer the consequences of their actions. God wishes to instruct humans and particularly the Israelite society, about the way to behave in God’s world.

Like all other writing, biblical literature is a product of the cultures in which it was created. Today, most scholars recognize that the social world of ancient Israel, with

³⁰ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 9.

³⁰ Alter, *The Art*, 133.

its politics, religious agendas, gender, ethnicity, and class differentiation, is ingrained in the Biblical stories.³¹ Thus we should look at the biblical narratives as a fusion of theological, moral, and historiosophical vision with literary art.

Moreover, biblical literature is a “purposeful documentary montage” that must be perceived as a unity of many compositions through the artistry of its final redactor. To convey these sophisticated messages, the biblical author and redactor used elaborate literary devices to create what Alter calls “prose fiction.”³²

To fully understand the depths of meanings and the complexities of the moral, theological, and historiosophical messages, we need to understand the literary devices and how they operate in the narrative, how small pieces of text become the foundations of an intricate homiletical structure.³³

Method of the Exegesis

“A text conveys everything through language... You are looking at WHAT the text says by attention to How it says it.”³⁴

³¹ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 193.

³² Alter, *The Art*, 22, 24, 27, 33. That is to say: reading biblical narrative *as* prose fiction.

³³ Alter, *The Art*, 11

³⁴ This exegesis method is based on Tamara Cohn Eskenazi Exegesis Guidelines 2019 handout (unpublished paper) and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 20-22, 188-189.

Translation It is preferable to read the biblical literature in its original language- Hebrew and at times, Aramaic. When reading the biblical literature in English, it is important to examine textual difficulties/ alternative interpretations, divergent in translation.

Genre: Identify the genre and compare it to similar texts if needed. (examples of genres: prose fiction, polemic narrative, a cautionary tale, ancestral lineage, law, poem, wisdom teaching, ritual).

Structure: Examine how the passage is connected to the chapter and the general unit. Identify the different units of the chapter and the relationship between them.

What is the ratio between the units? What is emphasized by the structure?

Literary Devices:

Language: The Hebrew language is an integral and dynamic component of the narrative; it is part of the literary clues of the story. Pay attention to names, special imagery, vocabulary that stands out, the semantic range of specific words or terms, nuances in the text like different syntax or gender, inclusion or omitting of a specific letter.

Plot: Pay attention to the flow of the plot. What actions are elaborated while others just mentioned? It is important to pay attention to recurrence, parallels, and analogy or reversal of actions or events in other plots or the chapters surrounding the plot. One plot may be used as commentary or foil to other plots.

Characters: God as a character: does God active in the plot or just mentioned? Human characters: the assumption that although human characters act as free agents of free will, the acts they perform ultimately fall into the realm of God's design.

Narrative setting: Where and when the narrative takes place? Pay attention to elements of fixed convention and the variations between each representation.³⁵ Are there drastic shifts in time or place? Why?

Characters: What are the motives of the characters to act? What are we told about each character by the narrator? What are we *not* told? What are the particular identifications of the characters noted? What is their purpose?

Protagonist versus a Hero: The protagonist is the leading character or one of the major characters in the narrative, a hero is "the good" character who is idealized for his/her actions or qualities.

Dialogue vs. description: what are the patterns of the dialogue? (short vs. long, simple vs. elaborate, balanced vs. asymmetrical), why is the dialogue introduced at specific points in the narrative? Are the characters both speak the same length? What is the

³⁵ Alter, *The Art*, 5. Examples of fixed convention may be: the birth of a hero to his barren mother, encounter with the future betrothed at the well, the epiphany in the field, initiatory trial, danger in the desert or liminal space, use of a well or water.

purpose of the specific words/imagery/ tone/syntax assigned to characters? (Enhancing drama or contrast, revealing character or motives, affirming relationship with God).³⁶

Narration: What are the breaks in narration, and what is introduced in the middle of narration? Are there links between events or other narratives?

Dramatic irony: What is revealed to the audience? What is the intent of dramatic irony in the plot?

Repetition and parallels: Are there significant variations in the verbal formulas? Are the repetitions used as commentary or emphasis?

Ring composition: One unit is part of a larger unit and is also used to interpret and make the larger section.

Concatenation (a chain) : A chain of events related to the other links to the greater narrative. What can we learn from this chain of events?

Leitwort: A play on a verb or theme through repetition in the scene (for example, the play on the words “go” and “return” in the story of Ruth).

Motif: an image, action, or object that recurs through a particular narrative and helps frame and connect the scenes (for example, water in the Moses stories).

³⁶ Alter, *The Art*, 182. As a rule, Alter suggests, whenever narrative event in biblical literature is important, the writer will convey it mainly through dialogue.

Theme: A recurring pattern that is part of the value-system of the narrative (it could be moral, psychological, legal, political, or theological (for example, obedience versus rebellion in the Wilderness stories).

Type scene: A recurring specific theme that unites different narratives (for example- betrothal by the well).

Setting- Context

Literary setting: How this narrative operates in the larger context of the general plot? Explore the connections to the chapters before and after. What meaning can be derived from the connections and the place of the narrative in biblical literature?

Historical setting: Historically, what was the reality in which the text was written? Who authored the text? Who was the intended audience? Do we have clues of reduction/ alteration of the text?

Sociological setting: Why was the text important enough to be preserved? Where in the life of the Israelite community would such text be necessary? What socio-economic group benefits from this narrative? Who in the community would be interested in preserving it? Why?

Two important remarks:

These literary clues of reading the biblical narrative will help us derive deeper meaning from the text. Yet it is important to remember that meaning-making is in the eye of the

beholder. We, as humans, cannot let go of our internal biases, social, racial, and gender constructions that inform our worldview and understanding of the text.

To better understand the world of the biblical literature and the lived reality of the Israelites, it will be important to examine the literary and archeological evidence found in Israel, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.

Feminist Biblical Scholarship

“We thereby seek to rediscover and elaborate wo/men’s subjectivity and agency within religious histories and contemporary communities.”³⁷

The concern of this paper is the treatment of females in ancient Israel. I am able to write this paper thanks to the many scholars who pioneered methods of reading and interpreting biblical literature. I am the beneficiary of two millennia of biblical interpretation by women, trailblazing feminist scholarship, and political work. I hope to continue the long line of biblical studies and contribute to the field.³⁸

In this chapter, I wish to chart the development of feminist methods of biblical exegesis and pay tribute to its pioneers. I am thankful for the momentous work these incredible scholars, theologians, and laywomen did by advancing the field of women's studies and women's rights.

³⁷ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Between Movement and Academy”, an introduction to *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, ed. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, vol.9.1 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature,2014),14. As part of “Bible and Women: An Encyclopedia of Exegesis and Cultural History,” ed. Jorunn Oakland, Irmtraud Fischer, Mercedes Navarro, and Adriana Valerio,(Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature,2014).

<https://www.amazon.com/Feminist-Biblical-Studies-Twentieth-Century-ebook/dp/B00VU9MFEO?asin=B00VU9MFEO&revisionId=&format=2&depth=1>

³⁸ Joy A. Schroeder in her article “Retrieving the History of Women Biblical Interpreters” notes that women interpreted the biblical texts early on as the late antiquity period (150-550 CE). For a detailed overview of the history of biblical interpretation by women see Joy A. Schroeder “Retrieving the History of Women Biblical Interpreters,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminists Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, 462-478.

This chapter is based on the profound works of Carol Meyers and her groundbreaking book *Rediscovering Eve*, Ilana Pardes and her eye-opening book *Countertraditions in biblical literature*, and the very detailed survey of feminist biblical scholarship done by Alice Ogden Bellis in *Women in Scripture*.³⁹

Carol Meyers states that feminism is about identifying and ending the injustices, inequalities, and indignities experienced by women in all areas of life. Throughout millennia, biblical literature affected Jewish, Christian, and Islamic readers in religion, household, family life, social status, and community involvement.⁴⁰ Therefore, it is important to read, reflect and analyze the biblical narratives with sensitivity to issues of women's lived experience and societal roles.

Although we have evidence of feminist studies early on from the European Middle Ages, Feminist critical reading of the biblical literature has developed since the

³⁹ Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*;1-37.

Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in biblical literature; A Feminist Approach*, (London England: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts,1992),13-38.

Alice Ogden Bellis, "Feminist Biblical Scholarship," in *Women in Scripture A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*. ed. Carol Meyers,(Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company/UK: Cambridge,2000), 24-31.

⁴⁰ In this paper all references to biblical literature mean –the "Hebrew Bible" also known as TANAKH or the "Old Testament."

beginning of the nineteenth century and took on expediently in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century.⁴¹

From the outset, there was no one monolithic approach to analyzing biblical literature. Two approaches dominated research and informed our understanding: historical criticism and literary criticism. Applying both methods to a biblical text reveals that these texts were created and circulated in a very different social milieu. This requires us to accept ancient texts on their terms. This is called “culturally cured literary reading.”⁴²

“Historic criticism” means examining texts in regard to their social, economic, and political context. This interdisciplinary method looks at relevant archeological findings, sociohistorical data, comparative literature, and social science models and theories.

“Literary criticism” means analyzing literary features of texts, such as dialogue, literary context, repetition of words or themes, type scenes, and so on, to identify and critique the ideologies embedded in them.

The Development of Feminist Scholarship and Methodology of Reading the biblical literature

⁴¹ Susanne Scholz, “The Historic Journey of Feminist Hebrew Bible Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, introduction xxvi-xxxi.

⁴² Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 9.

The roots of feminist biblical interpretation lie in the European Enlightenment and the Abolition movement in the United States, which later influenced the establishment of the Suffragette movement.⁴³ Opponents of woman's suffrage used the biblical literature (especially the creation and the garden of Eden narratives; Genesis 2:21-3:24) as a "text proof" that women were secondary to men, seductive, foolish, and could not be trusted.

One of the first feminist interpreters of the biblical literature was Judith Sargent Murray (1751-1820), an activist for women's voting rights, equal access to education, and the right to control their earnings.⁴⁴ She published in 1790 *On the Equality of Sexes*, a liberal analysis of the biblical literature that opposed the "text proof" of the traditional notion of men's superiority over women. Murray also argued the spiritual and intellectual equality of women to men.⁴⁵

Abolitionist and suffragette Lucy Stone (1818-1893) used biblical interpretations to advocate for women's suffrage. Stone was determined to learn to read the biblical literature in its original language. She argued that scripture, when properly translated,

⁴³ Suffragette- an activist women's organization in the early 20th century who fought for women's right to vote in public elections <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suffragette>. Alice Ogden Bellis gives an example of the Grike sisters who were abolitionists and were drawn to the women's rights movement as a result of men's opposition to their outspoken views. Bellis, "Feminist Biblical Scholarship," in *Women in Scripture*, 24.

⁴⁴ For detailed information on Judith Sargent Murray see Wikipedia <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/judith-sargent-murray>

⁴⁵ For more information see Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Equality_of_the_Sexes

will support women's rights. In 1843 she enrolled at Oberlin, the first American college to admit women, to study Hebrew and Greek.

Black women such as Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, and Anna Julia Cooper joined the struggle for women's rights after the emancipation of slavery (January 1, 1863) and the end of the Civil War. They, too, used biblical interpretations to support pro-women arguments.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) was one of the most prominent suffragettes and the first Women's Rights convention organizer in 1848. Stanton edited the first edition of *The Woman's Bible*- which was the forebear of feminist biblical criticism. Her approach used historical criticism, which became influential in the American academy by the 1880s. Stanton called for critical examination of biblical literature's role in the degradation of women in Western culture.⁴⁶

Anna Ely Rhoads became the first member of the Society of The biblical literature (SBL) in 1894, yet only in the second decade of the twentieth- century did women began to publish academic articles. In 1900 Dr. Katherine Bushnell, a medical missionary in China, published *God's Word to Women: One Hundred Bible Studies on Women's Place in the Divine Economy* (London: Women's Correspondence Bible Class). In 1926 the Reverend Lee Anna Starr, a Methodist minister wrote *The biblical literature*

⁴⁶ Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 15. Also, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Cady_Stanton

Status of Women (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1926). Both authors advocated that biblical literature--properly translated and interpreted, supported women's full humanity.

In 1955 Edith Deen, a Texas newspaper columnist published *All the Women of the biblical literature* (New York: Harper and Row). The first alphabetical order of the named women in biblical literature, chronological order of the unnamed women, and a detailed treatment of major female characters. This was the first attempt to include all the women in biblical literature. Until today Deen's work is considered classic.

The second wave of feminist biblical scholarship emerged in the mid-twentieth century as an offshoot of the Civil Rights movement. In 1963 Betty Friedman published *The Feminine Mystique* (New York; Norton), credited with sparking the second wave of feminism. The book challenged the widely shared belief of the 1950s that "fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother."⁴⁷

In 1964 Margaret Crook, a professor of Religion at Smith College, published *Women and Religion* (Boston: Beacon), which called for equal participation of women and men in rethinking ideas about God and religion. In 1967 Elise Culver, a lay church professional, wrote *Women in the World of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday), calling for biblical scholars to research woman's status and roles in biblical literature.

⁴⁷ For detailed information see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Feminine_Mystique

In 1974 *Religion and Sexism* (New York: Simon and Schuster) was published. The book was edited by the Roman Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, who is referred to as the mother of “feminist theology” and “ecofeminist theology.”⁴⁸ The book is a collection of essays showing that the biblical literature contained both positive and negative attitudes towards women.

The second wave of feminist scholarship aimed to strip the biblical literature of its sexist interpretations. It brought to attention that the biblical literature was written from an androcentric perspective (written by males, to a male audience, and from a male perspective), which brought into question the authority of the biblical literature in modern times.

In 1968, the former Roman Catholic Mary Daly wrote *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper and Row), rejecting biblical literature’s authority.

On the other hand, “reformists” scholars tried to resolve the tension between the feminist conventions and the authority of the biblical literature by declaring that the biblical literature was “God’s inspired word.” For them, the biblical literature was descriptive rather than prescriptive: just because it was written in the biblical literature did not mean that it had authority, God was neither male nor female, the roles of feminine

⁴⁸ For detailed information see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosemary_Radford_Ruether

heroes such as Miriam, Ester, Ruth, and Deborah, were in the forefront and other narratives about females were given attention.

Simone De Beauvoir, a novelist, and philosopher wrote the thought-provoking and controversial book *The Second Sex* in 1949 (Editions Gallimard, Paris), a foundational text on philosophy, feminism, and women's studies. The main thesis of *The Second Sex* revolves around the idea that women were degraded and oppressed by men through being perceived as man's "Other." Simone De Beauvoir argued that woman "is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other."⁴⁹

Kate Millett (1934-2017), a writer, educator, artist, and activist, wrote *Sexual Politics* in 1970 (Colombia University Press). The book was considered to be "the first book of academic feminist literary criticism."⁵⁰ The Journalist Liza Featherstone attributes the realization of legal abortion, professional equality for women, and sexual freedom in part to Millett's work.⁵¹

⁴⁹ For detailed information see Simone De Beauvoir:
<https://iep.utm.edu/beauvoir/#:~:text=Beauvoir's%20emphasis%20on%20the%20fact,be%20altered%20to%20encourage%20this.>

⁵⁰ P. T. Clough (1994). *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol 35 no 3, page 473 The Hybrid Criticism of Patriarchy: Rereading Kate Millett's "Sexual Politics." A footnote in an article about "Sexual Politics": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_Politics

⁵¹ Kate Millett: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kate_Millett

Phyllis Trible (1932-), a feminist biblical scholar, was among the first to apply literary theory to reading biblical literature. The scholar Ilana Pardes notes that “Trible’s depatriarchalizing of biblical criticism has been her most significant contribution to feminist criticism of biblical literature.”⁵² Trible highlighted that both genders represented God’s images and summed women’s status:

Woman is no weak, dainty, ephemeral creature. No opposite sex, no second sex, no derived sex—in short, no ‘Adam’s rib.’ Instead, [the] woman is the culmination of creation, fulfilling humanity in sexuality. Equal in creation with the man, she is, at this point [Genesis 2:23] elevated in emphasis by the design of the story. (p.102).⁵³

The third wave of feminist criticism focused on female texts, stressed individual experiences from around the globe, the intersectionality of race, age, class, and ethnicity when reading the biblical texts, and opposition to the oppression of all kinds.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1938-), a New Testament scholar and a feminist theologian at Harvard Divinity School, is also a co-founder and co-editor of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* and co-editor of the feminist issues of *Concilium*. Schussler Fiorenza was elected the first woman president of the Society of Biblical Literature and served on the boards of major biblical journals and societies.⁵⁴

⁵² Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 21.

⁵³ Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 24.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Schusser Fiorenza: <https://hds.harvard.edu/people/elisabeth-sch%C3%BCssler-fiorenza>

Fiorenza shifted the authority of the biblical text to the interpretive community. She developed a hermeneutical style of historical interpretation, ethical and theological evaluation, and reconstruction. Fiorenza also emphasized the importance of reading the biblical literature beyond gender to address a wide range of oppressions such as racism, classism, sexual orientation, and colonialism.

Ester Fuchs (1950-), a professor of Public Affairs and Political Science at Columbia University. Fuchs explored the social and political construction of the biblical narrative. In her interpretation of biblical literature, she aimed to “examine the political implications of supposedly innocuous poetic constructions.” Fuchs focuses mainly on:

The repressive androcentric aspects of biblical poetics, offering ‘a theoretical articulation of biblical sexual politics, or ways by which the biblical narrative universalizes and legislates its male-centered epistemology.’⁵⁵

In the eighties, more ethnic and national scholars entered the field of biblical interpretation and brought new perspectives. Black feminists (“Womanists”) have raised the topic of the ethnicity of the Biblical characters as part of their interpretation and seeing their reflection in the biblical stories. The question of loyalty to gender (women’s issues) versus ethnicity also rose with Black feminists and Jewish feminists alike.

⁵⁵ Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 25.

Hispanic Feminists (“*Feministas*” or “*Mujeristas*”) also read the biblical literature in the context of their conflict between Hispanic (*machoistic*) heritage and gender issues.⁵⁶

The African American Hebrew Bible scholar and ordained minister Renita Weems (1954-) advocates for African American women to read the biblical literature to uncover the voice of the oppressed.⁵⁷ Her important work *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Fortress Press Minneapolis, 1995), draw on the methodologies of literary criticism, gender criticism, and sociological and ideological analyses. Weems points to the violence associated with biblical imagery, violence acceptable within the prophets’ cultural assumptions about marriage, and all too often considered acceptable even in twentieth-century America.⁵⁸

Elza Tamez (1950-), a Mexican liberation theologian and biblical scholar, through her books *Bible of the Oppressed* (Wipit Stock Publishers, Eugene Oregon, 1978-79), *The Amnesty of Grace-Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective* (Wipit Stock Publishers, Eugene Oregon, 1993), and *Struggles for Power in Early Christianity: A Study of the First Letter of Timothy* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2007)

⁵⁶ Ogden “Feminist Biblical Scholarship,” in *Women in Scripture*, 28.

⁵⁷ Renita Weems: <https://chapel.howard.edu/speaker-schedule/speaker-profiles/rev-dr-renita-j-weems>

⁵⁸ Renita Weems: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renita_J._Weems

brought new perspectives to the field of feminist theology and contextual biblical criticism.⁵⁹

Asian feminists such as Chung Hyun Kyung (1956-), a South Korean Presbyterian Feminist interpret the biblical literature through the context of Western colonialization and ecofeminism.^{60, 61}

Mieke Bal (1946-) a Dutch cultural theorist, video artist, and professor emerita in Literary Theory at the University of Amsterdam. Throughout her books, *Lethal Love Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (French Edition 1987), *Murder and Difference* (French Edition 1988), and *Death and Dissymmetry the Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism, 1988), she based her critique of the biblical literature on literary theory, feministic approach, psychoanalysis, and semiotics (the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation).⁶²

These diverse perspectives built on and corresponded with each other throughout the generations. Some scholars relate to the vast scholarship as the different “waves” of

⁵⁹ Elza Tamez https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elsa_T%C3%A1mez

⁶⁰ Chung Hyun Kyung: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chung_Hyun_Kyung

⁶¹ Ecofeminism: Ecofeminist theory asserts a feminist perspective that calls for an egalitarian, collaborative society in which there is no one dominant group. For more information see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecofeminism>

⁶² For more information Mieke Bal: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mieke_Bal

feminist scholarship; some critique the metaphor of “waves,” its implications, and effects.⁶³

Claudia Setzer, in her article *Feminist Interpretation of biblical literature*, simplifies the different approaches to interpreting biblical literature:

Feminist biblical interpretation is divided and split into two trends: first, the excavating of women’s lives and personhood and, second, the examination of the “ideology of woman” in ancient texts. Those in the first school of “excavators” argue that women’s roles and realities show considerable complexity as the search for hidden examples of power and agency renders visible ancient Israelite women as essential to the ancient economy.

The second scholarly approach looks at assumptions about women that pervade the texts, or how women are constructed. Because this second group is interested in the un-degrading values about women as subordinate and marginal in the text, they often reject the results of the first group.⁶⁴

I see myself as part of the first group, the “excavators” who dig through the biblical texts, historic, and social scholarship to find examples that empower and give agency to

⁶³ For a detailed discussion on the origins, development, prominent thought leaders, and the complexity and debate about the waves of feminist scholarship, see Elizabeth Evans & Prudence Chamberlain, (2015) “Critical Waves: Exploring Feminist Identity, Discourse and Praxis in Western Feminism” in *Social Movement Studies*, 14:4, 396-409, DOI:10.1080/14742837.2014.964199

⁶⁴ Claudia Setzer, “Feminist Interpretation of biblical literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of biblical literature in America*, ed. Paul C. Gutjahr, (Oxford University Press 2018), 6. Online Publication, Nov 2017, <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190258849.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190258849-e-42>

women. In my eyes, the biblical female was vulnerable, no doubt, yet not a victim of patriarchy.

Further, in the introduction to the anthology *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, Elizabeth Fiorenza notes that feminist scholars used the theories of gender, intersectionality, and kyriarchy (hierarchical system of domination), to understand the second-class status of women in religion and its sacred texts. She also claims that in many religious traditions, men and masculinity are associated with the divine, whereas women and femininity are seen as “immanent, impure, profane, evil and/or sinful.”⁶⁵

I do not associate with these claims in my reading of the Hebrew Bible. To my understanding, and as we will see through engagement with the biblical texts, women in the biblical literature were not “second class,” and much of their lot depended on their social-economic environment. I agree with Carol Meyers, who called for change from relating to the biblical world as “patriarchy” (implying male dominance) to a more broad and nuanced definition of “Heterarchy.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Between Movement and Academy: Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century,” Introduction in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, edited by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, vol.9.1, 1-17 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014),14.

⁶⁶ See a detailed discussion in Carol Meyers, “Gender and the Heterarchy Alternative for Re-Modeling Ancient Israel,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Susanne Scholz (NY: Oxford University Press,2021),443-459.

Furthermore, as a female practitioner of the Jewish faith, I have never felt that my religion relates to women as sinful or sexual creatures. Contrary to Fiorenza's claim, women in Judaism represent fertility and life rather than sin and death. I wish to read the biblical literature following my faith tradition, which for the most part, respects woman's agency and social position in the family and society and stresses hope and survival during vulnerable situations.

I claim that biblical law, rituals, and texts reflect that biblical society was, more often than not, concerned with the protection of females. Societies protect that is important to them. Females in ancient Israel and biblical times were an essential factor in the survival and continuity of the Israelite nation.

Pregnancy and Birth Giving

Pregnancy

John Otwell, in his book *And Sara Laughed*, states, “Group survival must have been the primary issue facing the Israelites most of the time. The child-bearers, those who replenished the strength of the family, may be presumed to have had an importance in ancient Israel nearly inconceivable to those of us living in an age facing overpopulation. Preoccupation with survival, therefore, is the context out of which one important part of the record of the statute of women in the Old Testament was written.”⁶⁷

To emphasize the importance of childbearing, Otwell gives the example of the law in Deuteronomy 24:5: “When a man is newlywed, he shall not go out with the army or be liable for any other public duty. He shall be free at home one year to be happy with his wife whom he has taken.” Although the conquest was considered a “holy war,” the importance of having children took precedence over it; men would be excused from duty until they had an opportunity to impregnate their wives.

Becoming pregnant and delivering a child was considered a blessing from God and a sign of God’s active participation in the conception and the birth process “opening

⁶⁷ John Otwell H, *And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Women in the Old Testament*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 49-50.
On the importance of children in the ancient Near East see chapter on barrenness.

of the womb.” (This may explain the practice of many parents to name their children with names including God’s name, acknowledging God’s part in the child’s life).⁶⁸

Otwell states that although the family’s name and progeny were transmitted through the father, the Divine presence and activity, which guaranteed the progeny, resided in the woman. “Her fecundity was the most crucial and clearest proof of God’s presence in the midst of the people. The birth of children was a testimony to God’s continued care for the people.”⁶⁹

God had the ultimate authority on “opening” or “closing” the womb of a woman, as we will see in the chapter on barrenness. As the biblical narratives indicate, all the barren women eventually bore children and continued their legacy.

God’s part in bringing new life into the world had such importance that the prophets used it metaphorically to stress new beginnings on a national level. The prophet Isaiah declared that God’s sign of restoration would be a young woman conceiving and bearing a son, naming him *Immanuel* (עִמָּנוּ-אל), which in Hebrew means “God is with us” (Isa 7:14). Thus national resurrection is framed as pregnancy and delivering a newborn baby.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ On naming the child with God’s name see further discussion under Labor-Ritual, 65.

⁶⁹ Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed*, 61.

⁷⁰ See elaborate explanation on this theme in the chapter on barrenness.

God as a Mother or a Midwife

Although we tend to think of God as male, biblical references of God as the creator and mother of all creatures are prevalent; on a personal level, the psalmist declares: “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works” (Psa 139:13-14). God is also the creator of the universe as God explains to Job in chapter 38: “Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth from the womb?” (ve 8), “Out of whose womb came the ice? The gray frost of the sky, who has given birth to it?” (Job 38:8, 29).

One of God’s names is *El Shaddai*- (אל שדי) in Hebrew “God of breasts,” the nourishing and protecting God.⁷¹ The palmists play with the metaphor of “*El- Shaddai*” and stress God’s presence in the conception, labor, and throughout infancy: “Yet you are who drew me from the womb, you made me secure at my mother’s breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother’s womb, you have been my God” (Ps 22:10-11).

God is also the mother who gave birth to Israel: “But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus says YHWH who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you” (Isa 44:1). Carol Meyers notes that God is the God of

⁷¹ Other interpretations of the name Shaddai include “omnipotent” (Latin), “highest (Syriac), Lord God All-powerful (Greek). Kristine Garraway notes that the most popular scholarly consensus is that the name comes from the Akkadian root “shadu” to mean “a mountain” and the name would originally have meant “the one of the mountain”, or “the rock.” Kristine Garraway, a note in private communication, May 21, 2021.

mercy and compassion. The adjective “compassionate” (רחום) derives from the noun *rechem* (רחם) which means a “womb” in Hebrew. Meyers explains: “Divine compassion thus evokes uteral imagery -- of God having powerful maternal love for Israel.”⁷²

At times, God is also portrayed as a *midwife* of the Israelite nation: “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth” (Deut 32:18).⁷³ After the Babylonian conquest in the sixth century BCE, Isaiah promises in the name of God an easy delivery of new life to the returning nation; “Before she was in labor she gave birth; before her pain came upon her, she delivered a son.” (Isa 66:7).

God as the mother and creator of all life, conditioned Israel’s fertility on following God’s instructions; if they would follow God’s commandments, God will grant fertility to humans and animals alike: “There shall not be male or female barren among you or your livestock” (Deut 7:14).

Human Pregnancy and Giving Birth

Carol Meyers in her book *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, gives an eye-opening description of the lived reality of the Israelite family. She notes that the Israelite family in the Iron Age had to maintain a delicate balance between having enough

⁷² Carol Meyers, “Female Images of God in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Women in Scripture*, 525-528.

⁷³ The term “The Rock” could be a reference to the midwives’ birthing rocks, and as such the midwives themselves were referred to as “the rock.” See Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 71.

children for agricultural labor yet not too many to feed. This balance was threatened when too few children survived or a year where the harvest yielded an insufficient crop.⁷⁴

In contrast to the impression presented in our ancestors' narratives of a large family- one with multiple wives, concubines, and many children (Gen-29 -30), biblical and archeological evidence suggest the ideal nucleus family consisted of two parents and three surviving children.⁷⁵

Meyers suggests that a woman had to have up to eight pregnancies to reach the optimal number of children to sustain the family (three surviving children per family).⁷⁶ Also, archeological and anthropological data suggest that the average life span of women in the Iron Age was between 20-30 years, suggesting pregnancies took place at a very young age, significantly increasing pregnancy risk for the mother.⁷⁷

The combination of multiple teen pregnancies, labor complications, long lactation periods, and malnutrition meant exhaustion of the body and greater mortality rates for women. Even when pregnancy and delivery progressed smoothly, mothers and their newborns were particularly vulnerable to diseases that were often fatal.

⁷⁴ Meyers, Rediscovering Eve,110.

⁷⁵ Meyers, Rediscovering Eve,109.

⁷⁶ Meyers, Rediscovering Eve,110.

⁷⁷ Meyers, Rediscovering Eve,100. Even today, in Latin America pregnant girls under the age of sixteen are three or four times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their twenties.

The ancient Near East society was concerned with the survival of the woman giving birth and the baby. Yet, the concept of pathogens and hygiene did not exist. A popular folk understanding associated labor and postpartum (after labor) complications to the realm of demons lurking for an opportunity to snatch the child or the mother.⁷⁸

In this regard, it is remarkable to examine Leviticus' law and ritual associated with the successful delivery of a child. In general, Leviticus' rituals aimed to redirect the belief in demons to the worship of God while satisfying the Israelites' psychological need for protection. Leviticus teaches that if one controls impurities and follows God's law – the community and the person would be safe.⁷⁹

In our case, law and ritual acknowledge the powerful play of life and death forces and facilitates privacy and protection for the mother and infant.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1999), 18.

⁷⁹ Douglas, *Leviticus*, 9-10.

⁸⁰ For the theological and national perspective on motherhood see the introduction to the chapter on barrenness.

Narrative

Genesis 1 describes God as the divine creator of all creatures. God created man and woman in the divine image and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:27-28.), shifting responsibilities of reproduction to God’s creatures. Eve, the first woman, was endowed with the power to create life, the role, and the responsibility to be “mother of all living” (Gen 3:20).⁸¹

The painful process of labor and the fearful reality of life and death is acknowledged at the outset of the biblical narrative: “I will surely multiply your anguish and pregnancies. In toil, you shall bring forth children”(Gen 3:16).⁸² This reality was further developed by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, who drew on the similarities of blood, physical pain, anguish, and the threshold of life and death to profess a national reality.

The semantic range of the term “*yoleda*” a woman in labor, points to existential fear, equivalent only to war. Using “body politics,” labor, is a battle for life and death.

⁸¹For a review of leading voices in feminist interpretations of the narrative about Eve see for example:

Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, second edition (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007),37-56; Ilana Pardes, “Creation According to Eve,” in *Countertraditions*,13-38; and Carol Meyers, “Eve,” in *Women in Scripture*, 79-82.

⁸² Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 1, 91. And Tamara Cohn Eskenazi in *The Torah*, 16, comment on verse 16.

The metaphor of a woman in labor emphasized panic, lack of control over the situation, and vulnerability.

“Therefore, shall all hands be feeble, and every heart of man shall melt: and they shall be dismayed; pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman in labor they shall look in amazement one at another; their faces shall *be* faces of flame” (Isaiah 13:7-8).⁸³

The “fear of labor” *chil*, (חיל) also references the kings and nations of Babylonia (Is13:8, Jer.50:43), Egypt (Isa 21:3), Damascus (Jer 49:24), Ephraim (Hos 13.13), Samaria (Hos14:1), and Zion (Jer 4:31, 6:24, 30:6, Mic 4:9,10) signify that in times of war the fear of God is universal. This also indicates that life and death are in the hands of God.

On the other hand, the subsequent narratives of Genesis reinforce the convention that God is a partner in conception, for example, Sara (Gen:20,21), Rebecca (Gen 25), Lea, and Racheal (Gen 29,30).⁸⁴ During pregnancy, God is concerned with the fetus; we find references to God’s presence in Isaiah 44:2 “Thus says YHWH who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you,” Jeremiah 1:5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you,” and in Psalms139:13-16 “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.”

Unfortunately (and in contrast to neighboring ancient Near East gods and goddesses), we lack narratives affirming God’s much-needed presence during women’s

⁸³ For a complete semantic range of the term *yoleda*- a woman in labor see Appendix 1.

⁸⁴ See also the chapter on barrenness.

labor.⁸⁵ The only reference we have to God's presence during labor is Isaiah 66:7-8, in which God reassures easy labor to Zion. The passage refers to the national rebirth of Israel and asks rhetorically, "who have heard such a thing? Who has seen such thing?" (As painless and easy labor).

The biblical literature also lacks descriptions of rituals during birth-giving, making labor *seem* like a casual event, devoid of God's presence or authorship. The obvious question to ask is, "why is that?" One interpretation of God's "missing in action" could be that, as Carol Meyers states, "having successful pregnancies and viable newborns was fraught with difficulties; maternal and infant mortality rates were high."⁸⁶ Thus, perhaps the biblical writers wanted to disassociate God from unsuccessful pregnancies and child or mother deaths. God's missing in the narratives and ritual of birthing calls for an interpretive process.

Tikva Frymer, in her book *Motherprayer: The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion*, shares her search for God during complications in pregnancy and alludes to the reasons Judaism and Christianity lack spiritual dimensions to childbearing.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Compare to Rituals in the Ancient Near East in this chapter.

⁸⁶ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 153.

⁸⁷ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer: The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion*, (New York: Riverhead Books 1995), Introduction xi-xxvi.

She offers feminist, religious hermeneutics of interpreting biblical passages and weaving them in a way that reflects God's involvement in the pregnancy and labor process.

One example would be interpreting Psalms 20 and 121 as relating to a woman in labor; reassuring her that God is going to answer her and keep her safe. "On your day of trouble, YHWH answers, the name of Jacob defends. God sends your help from the Holy place, your support from Zion."⁸⁸ Another example reflects the partnership between God and the woman during the pain and anguish of labor.⁸⁹

The Roaring

It is the time of roaring	
I roar in my distress,	(Ps.38.9)
I roar all day,	(Ps.32.3)
And my roars seem far from redemption	(Ps.22.2)
God roars,	
Like a lion roaring in strength,	(Hosea 11:10)
Coming in battle,	(Amos 3:8 Isa 5:29)
Doing divine wonders.	(Job 37:4-5)
Whenever God is, God roars.	
God roars from the skies, God's holy battalion	(Jer 25:30)
God roars from Zion, gives voice from Jerusalem.	(Amos 1:2)
Today God roars through me, God's dwelling seat.	
God roars through me, who have become like Jerusalem.	
The sound of God's voice shakes the earth.	
May this roaring be near to redemption.	

⁸⁸ Frymer, *Motherprayer*, 180-182.

⁸⁹ Frymer, *Motherprayer*, 194-195. For another example of partnership between God and the woman, see poem 230-231.

Frymer's blessed work offers Jewish spiritual resources grounded in biblical authorship to awaiting, pregnant, and in-labor women.

As to biblical narrative, surprisingly, the biblical literature does not record the process of a successful birth-giving (which is never to be taken for granted, more so, in biblical times). The few narratives we do have, are dramatic and focus on the death of the mother or the child: Rachel's death during the childbirth of Benjamin (Gen 35), the midwives, Shifra and Puah instructed to kill the newborn baby boys in Egypt (Exod. 1), and Eli's daughter-in-law who died in childbirth, after hearing about the national calamity and the death of her husband and father-in-law (1 Sam. 4:19-22).

What are we to understand from these narratives? What message do we ought to receive? Further inquiry is due:

Genesis 35:16-19 And 1 Samuel 4:19-22

There are striking similarities between Gen 35:16-19, Rachel's death due to complications at childbirth, and 1 Sam 4:19-22, Eli's daughter-in-law's death at premature childbirth: the number of verses dedicated to the narrative (only four verses each), the words of encouragement of the midwives, surviving boy, mother naming the child before she dies, and the unattractive name that spells out sad reality.

From a literary perspective, these narratives echo each other. Yet it is not quite clear what the biblical narrator was trying to point out. It could be that these dire

narratives represent the vulnerable situation of the Israelites during their wandering and wartimes.

Women giving birth represent the continuity of the nation; when the biblical authors tell us twice about a woman's death during labor, they are making a significant point. Perhaps the detailed description of the death of Eli's daughter-in-law was the embodiment of the political situation: "She said, 'The glory is departed from Israel; for the ark of God is taken'" (1 Sam 4:22). Rachel's death on the road also represents the frail condition of the Jacobian tribe as they were wandering through the land.

Yet, there is another point to make: in both cases, the mother died, yet the child survived. This is to signal the continuation of the next generation, despite the tragic events. Rachel's son, Benjamin, turned out to be the tribe from which the kingdom of Israel emerged.

Third, perhaps the authors wanted to stress the message of keeping oaths at all costs, both human and divine. As God fulfilled the oath to punish, God will fulfill the promise of blessing: "God said to him, 'I am *El Shadai*, be fertile and increase; A nation and an assembly of nations will descend from you, and kings will come out of your loins. The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and to your offspring, I will give the land'" (Gen 35:11-12). This blessing was stated just before Rachel's death to reassure the readers that God's repeated promise of offspring and land to Abraham,

Hagar, Jacob, and by extension, to the Israelite people will be fulfilled, despite the vulnerable conditions in which they were.⁹⁰

To conclude, the biblical narratives stress both God's involvement in pregnancy and the anguish and risks of labor. The narratives which begin with vulnerability and hardship in Genesis 3:16 culminate with fulfilling the prophecy of offspring. Isaiah 66:8 echoes Gen 3:16 yet in a positive inclination: with God's help, "Zion labored and at once bore her children." God will deliver Jerusalem and will make sure she has plenty of milk to suck from the breast of *El Shaddai*. "You should be carried on shoulders and dandled upon knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." (Isa 66:12-13).⁹¹

Law/Ritual

Leviticus 12:1-8

"YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 'Speak to the people of Israel, saying, when a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be ritually impure for seven days. As at the time of her menstruation infirmity, she shall be ritually impure. And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall remain in the state of blood purification for thirty-three days. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. She shall be ritually impure for two weeks if she bears a female child, as in her menstruation. And she shall remain in the state of blood purification for sixty-six days.'

⁹⁰ See for example Gen 12:2, Gen 15:5, Gen 16:10-11, Gen 22:15-17, Gen 28:13-15, Ex 3:8, Ex 23:26.

⁹¹ For detailed interpretation of this verse and the reliance on God see Garroway, *Growing Up*, 95-96.

The duration of state of impurity after birthing a **son** Lev. 12:2-4:

12:2 – The parturient is in a state of impurity for seven days and then ritual immersion in water.⁹² 12:3- Circumcision to the baby boy on the eighth day.⁹³

12:4 Mother remains in a state of ritual impurity for another thirty-three days, which means no access to the Sancta (sacred domains).

12:6 On completion of the purification period, the mother brings to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering (*Olah*) and a pigeon or a turtledove for a purgation offering (*Chatat*). The priest will offer them before God and Thus she shall be purified.

The duration of state of impurity after birthing a **daughter** Lev. 12:5”

12:5 State of ritual impurity for two weeks followed by ritual immersion.

The mother remains ritually impure for another sixty-six days.⁹⁴

12:6 On completion of the purification period the mother brings to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering

⁹² Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Continental Commentary). (Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2004), 24. Milgram explains that although ritual immersion is nowhere stated for the parturient or menstruant woman, as all statements regarding the duration of impurity automatically apply, ritual immersion in water (*mikveh*) is implied.

⁹³ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 24. This verse serves as “editorial parenthesis” that interprets the rite for the mother, see also Eskenazi, (Ed.), *The Torah A Women’s Commentary*, 640 note 3.

⁹⁴ The reason for the longer state of ritual impurity after a birth of a baby girl is unclear, perhaps to allow more time for the girl to bond with her mother. For more, see the chapter on baby girl.

(*Olah*) and a pigeon or a turtledove for a purgation offering (*Chatat*). The priest will offer them before God and Thus she shall be purified.

The possible reasons for the different durations of the state of ritual impurity regarding birthing a boy or a girl will be discussed in the next chapter: Baby Girl.⁹⁵

It is important to note that according to leading biblical scholars such as Jacob Milgram, Tamara Chon Eskenazi, Mary Douglas, and many more, this passage means only *ritual impurity* and not, as previously translated and referred to a woman after giving birth, as “unclean” (JPS) or “defiled.”⁹⁶ What was the reason for this period of ritual impurity after giving birth? What were the meaning and implications of being ritually impure? And why the difference in the duration of the isolation was based on the gender of the child?

⁹⁵ For an additional review of ancient interpretations to the reasons for the difference in duration of ritual impurity when birthing a male or female see Zev Farber, “Postpartum Impurity: Why Is the Duration Double for a Girl?” in TheTorah.com (2020) <https://www.thetorah.com/article/postpartum-impurity-why-is-the-duration-double-for-a-girl>

Zvi Novick, "Mother and Child: Postpartum Defilement and Circumcision" TheTorah.com (2014). <https://thetorah.com/article/mother-and-child-postpartum-defilement-and-circumcision>

I disagree with the author’s use of the term “defilement” regarding women giving birth. This is an appalling and anachronistic term that perpetuated the segregation of women in some religious circles. I also strongly disagree with the examples the authors of these articles chose to bring forth.

⁹⁶ A very good review of the concept of ritual purity in biblical literature, its history, common assumptions, and misleading myths, see Jonathan Klawans, *Jewish Study Bible*, 2041-2047.

Kristine Garroway, in her book *Growing Up in Ancient Israel*, mentions that many ancient societies believed that a woman in labor was in danger to attract demons. It was common among Israel's neighbors to quarantine women pre- and post-labor as means of protection.⁹⁷ Israel's monotheism denounced demons and demonic power and changed the meaning of rituals.

In Leviticus, there are no pre-labor restrictions. The law considers the parturient *ritually impure* for the length of forty days if she gave birth to a boy, and eighty for birthing a girl, followed by a purification ritual. Garroway suggests that the difference in the length of the mother's seclusion was, in fact, a gendering ritual of announcing the gender of the child to the community.⁹⁸

Mary Douglas, in her book, *Leviticus as Literature*, stresses that a woman's impurity was strictly ritual, only affecting contact with the tabernacle. She also suggests that, as in the case of impure animals, their inherent impurity protected them from human predation. Thus, by analogy, declaring the woman "impure" served as *means of protection* from *other* forces (alluding to demons).⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Kristine Henriksen Garroway, *Growing Up in Ancient Israel*, (Atlanta: SBL Press 2018), 86.

⁹⁸ Kristine Henriksen Garroway, "Gendering a Child with Ritual", in *TheTorah.com* (2019) <https://www.thetorah.com/article/gendering-a-child-with-ritual>

⁹⁹ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 182

This state of temporary ritual impurity precludes the woman from accessing the sanctuary and sanctified objects such as tithes, sacrificed animals, and other food donations to the sanctuary.¹⁰⁰ Later, Deuteronomy 12:15 modified this restriction by asserting that the impure and the pure alike may eat meat. This modification enabled postpartum (after labor) and menstruating women to partake in meat-eating and thus regain strength.

Another way to look at this passage is to consider the whole sequence of events as a ritual, rather than a restrictive law. The definition of a ritual is:

That ordered sequence of stylized social behavior that may be distinguished from ordinary interaction by its alerting qualities which enable it to focus the attention of its audiences... onto itself and cause them to perceive it as a special event, performed at a special place and/or time, for a special occasion and /or with a special message.¹⁰¹

Gerald Klingbeil suggests not to undermine the power and significance of a ritual in biblical theology [even though we, the modern readers, may not fully understand its meaning]. He points out the “intriguing triangle between ritual, ritual texts, and biblical theology,” explaining the ritual connection between action (ritual), human emotion or

¹⁰⁰ Elaine Goodfriend, in *The Torah*, eds. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press. 2008), 640 note 4.

¹⁰¹ Gerald Klingbeil, “Ritual Theology in/and Biblical Theology” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ritual and Worship in the Hebrew Bible*, Ed. Samuel Balentine, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 489-504.

reflection, and human-divine engagement. Klingbeil also prompts us to think in terms of “what triggers the ritual and what does it seek to accomplish.”¹⁰²

Examining this passage from a ritual theology perspective allows for a more empowering perspective. The woman is at the center of the ritual; she is the only one who fully participates in the ritual that allows her to acknowledge the life-giving event, physically heal, mentally collect herself, and give thanks for the successful completion of the life-changing event that she underwent through.

Also, by creating a ritual that has to do with “re-entering” into the realm of the sacred and presenting a thanksgiving offering, a connection with the divine was re-established and re-inforced (a spiritual/religious outcome).

Furthermore, the text refers to the woman both as *niddah* and *dava*. The use of the term *dvota* (דבּוּתָה) could be understood as “her infirmity” acknowledging the woman’s physical fragile condition. The concept of *niddah* (נִידָה) menstruation, restricts the woman only from the Sancta and forbids sexual relationship (Lev 15:14).¹⁰³ This, too, can be understood as a physical (and ritual) protection for women after labor.

¹⁰² Klingbeil, “Ritual Theology,” 490-491.

¹⁰³ See chapter on transformation into maidenhood (menstruant).

Ritual

Protective Rituals at Home

Although the biblical literature does not elaborate on rituals of birth-giving (only post-partum), archeological evidence suggests that such rituals were practiced in the realm of household religious activities, mostly by women.¹⁰⁴ One of the functions was to protect women during and after child birthing from demons.¹⁰⁵ Mesopotamian cultures refer to malevolent female demons *Lamashtu* and *Lilith*, which believed to prey upon birth-giving or nursing women and their infants. Isaiah's reference to Lilith indicates that the Israelites also feared her (Isa 34:14).

Demons were believed to operate in the dark; therefore, protective rituals used light to expose or frighten them. The light was in form of oil lamps or shiny jewelry that reflects light. Amulets were widely used, especially known amulets of *Bes*, the Egyptian guardian of the newborns, eye symbol (*wedjat*) protecting from "the evil eye" and inscriptions of God's promise from Exodus 23:26: "No woman in your land shall miscarry or be barren. I will let you enjoy the full count of your days."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Carol Meyers- "Ritual Experts: Women in Israelite Households" in *"The Land That I Will Show You" Recent Archaeological & Historical Studies of Ancient Israel Conference*, online, NYU, Center for Ancient Studies, 10.26.2020; Commented on the recent discoveries found in *Tel el Tsafi* (believed to be ancient Gat), Jerusalem.

¹⁰⁵ For a detailed discussion on means of protecting infants from malevolent demons see Garroway, *Growing Up*, 124-136.

¹⁰⁶ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 154-156.

Isaiah 3:20 refers to the use of such amulets by women. “The headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets.” Figurines of Anath, Qudushu, Asarte, and Ishtar-Inanna meant to invoke divine protection were also found in archeological research.¹⁰⁷

Post-labor rituals include offering prayers and blessing of gratitude by the woman herself, like Hannah’s prayer (2 Samuel 1-10) or the household/countrywomen (Ruth 4:14), together with sacrifices of gratitude offerings.¹⁰⁸

Name giving, usually by the mother, was one of the theophoric (protective) rites. The child was named with a combination of the divine name for protection and aspiration (for example see the names of Leah and Rachel’s children Gen. 29-30). About one-quarter of the known 1600+ personal names found on Iron Age inscriptions allude to the birth process.¹⁰⁹

Feasts celebrating the birth of a child were probably held as part of birth rituals such as circumcision on the eighth day of a boy’s life, name-giving, and ritual sacrifices of purification and gratitude. In *Leviticus as Literature*, Douglas suggests that, like

¹⁰⁷ Garroway, *Growing Up*, 114-122.

¹⁰⁸ For a detailed survey of such rituals in the ancient Near East and the difference in Leviticus, see Yitzhak Feder, “A Sin Offering for Birth Anxiety” in *TheTorah.com* (2016). <https://www.thetorah.com/article/a-sin-offering-for-birth-anxiety>

¹⁰⁹ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 158.

circumcision, atonement, and reparations sacrifices were thought to have a prophylactic effect, protecting the vulnerable mother and child.¹¹⁰

Protective Rituals at the Sanctuary

Ritual for the New Mother Lev. 12:6 -8

“And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a purgation offering. And the Priest shall offer it before YHWH and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a purgation offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.”

The requirement for the woman to bring *Olah* (burnt offering) and *Chatat* (purgation offering) sacrifices is the same regardless of the gender of her child. *Olah* and *Chatat* sacrifices were considered both as purgation and thanksgiving offerings.¹¹¹

Considering multiple pregnancies and the stress to feed the family, Leviticus suggests relief for those who could not afford to bring a lamb as a sacrifice, to a more affordable option of doves and pigeons.

¹¹⁰ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 182.

¹¹¹ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 165 and Eskenazi, (Ed.), *The Torah A Women's Commentary*, 641 note 6.

Jacob Milgram, in his book *Leviticus-A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, explains: “In biblical literature, the source of menstruation taboo lies in a deep commitment to life and its perpetuation.”¹¹² The priestly authors of Leviticus ascribed power to blood as a source of life (Lev. 17:11). The natural blood flow after giving birth (lochia blood) was considered a powerful agent that required both separations from the sanctuary and purification rituals for those who encountered it (Lev 15:19-30).¹¹³ Notwithstanding its symbolic power, and in contrast, the loss of blood was seen as a loss of vitality which made the parturient women vulnerable and needed for protection.¹¹⁴

Ancient Near East

The Babylonian *Atrahasis Epic* ascribed the process of birth-giving to a deity and was ritualized. “Adhering to a ritual not only gives the event a religious significance but also provides the participants with a routinized, process-oriented set of instructions. Order can be calming in the chaos of a child-birth.”¹¹⁵

¹¹² Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 122.

¹¹³ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 123. Menstrual blood and semen were the only bodily emissions that were considered ritually polluting the sanctuary, even from afar, and therefore required isolation and in some cases purification rituals. (Lev 15).

¹¹⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 123. In ancient worldview, any vaginal blood (postpartum or menstrual blood) was perceived as attracting demonic forces thus requiring isolation of the menstruant. Israel’s monotheism denounced and exorcised demons and demonic power and changed the meaning of the ritual.

¹¹⁵ Garroway, *Growing Up*, 50.

In *Atra-hasis Epic*, the birth goddess *Nintu* is involved in the pregnancy from the very beginning and expectantly counts the months of pregnancy with the mother. The goddess herself is seen as a midwife and creator:¹¹⁶

The birth goddess were assembled,
And Nintu (sat) counting the months.
(At the) designated (moment) the tenth was summoned.
The tenth month arrived
And the elapse of the period opened the womb.
With a beaming joyful face
She performed the midwifery.
She grinded her loins as she pronounces the blessing
She drew a pattern in the meal and placed the brick,
“I have created, my hands have made it.”
Let the midwife rejoice in the house of the wet nurse.
Where the pregnant woman gives birth
And the mother of the baby serves herself,
Let the brick be in place for nine days,
That Nintu, the birth goddess, may be honored.

Although not comparing equal sources, we have a glimpse into different theological approaches: YHWH emphasizes keeping promises, mostly on a national level. God is less involved in the personal, birth-giving process. The biblical literature acknowledges the powerful, painful, fearful, and at times dangerous struggle to bring life into being. On the other hand, *Atra-hasis Epic* portrays the birth-giving process as a joyous and blessed

¹¹⁶ Wilfred Lambert and Allan Millard, *Atra-hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1969), 63-65. In Garraway, *Growing Up*, 50 footnote 3.

occasion. No mention of pain or anguish, the parturient woman can serve herself (i.e., not in a state of infirmity). From pregnancy to birth, the woman is supported by the goddess in the form of midwives.

The Egyptian “birthing kit” consisted of decorated bricks, wands, and rods. Images of gods and animals were perceived to be embodied with apotropaic (protective) power. Archaeologists uncovered Egyptian birth brick in South Abydos from the Thirteenth Dynasty (1650-1600 BCE) dedicated to the goddess of childbirth- Hathor. Also found were spells requesting her presence “Rejoicing, rejoicing in heaven, birth-giving is accelerated. Come to me Hathor my lady in my pavilion, in my happy hour.”¹¹⁷

Decorated wands from the same period picturing the Egyptian deities *Bes*, the protector of the newborn child, and *Taweret* - the protector of women at childbirth were also found.¹¹⁸ Wands with inscriptions and a blessing for the protection of the mother and the child were made for the Egyptian elite, probably used also for post-birth rituals. There is evidence of mixed worship of YHWH, Asherah, Bes, and Beset to harness the international, regional, and local deities to boost the apotropaic powers.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Garroway, *Growing Up*, 116-118 see footnotes 19, 22, and 23.

¹¹⁸ Garroway, *Growing Up*, 119.

¹¹⁹ Garroway, *Growing Up*, 122.

Midwives

Midwifery was among the earliest and most omnipresent specialized woman's professions in human society. The presence of a healthcare specialist during birth-giving was probably a routine in Israelite and pre-Israelite societies, especially amongst the socio-economic elites (Gen 35:17; Gen 38:28). Midwifery was a highly respected profession with the status of holy women. Passing on clinical knowledge, delivery techniques, medications, and prayers from generation to generation required a long-term apprenticeship.¹²⁰

Victor Mathews and Don Benjamin, in their book, *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE*, look at social structures and functions in ancient Israel. They describe the role of the midwives as facilitators of life. Midwives monitored the menstruation flow of women, calculated the days, and determined the time for the couple to mate. They prepared the room where the couple would meet, exorcising any "being" who might prevent conception, with music and chants, and summoned all members of the divine assembly required for fertility.¹²¹ They arranged the furniture and the food in the room.

Midwives certified the pregnancy and accompanied the pregnant woman until and after birth, caring for her and ensuring she was well-nourished and prepared for labor.

¹²⁰ Carol Meyers "Midwife" in *Women In Scripture*, 182. And Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 173.

¹²¹ Mathews and Benjamin, "The Midwife" in *Social World*, 68-69.

When the time came, the midwives again prepared the room, purging out all unwanted human and divine beings, arranged the birthing rock, played drum music as sympathetic magic, connecting the child to the universe's rhythm, as the pace of respiration and heartbeat. Assisting the woman in labor with techniques, medications, and chanting prayers.

When the baby was born, they placed the newborn on the ground, to connect with “Mother Earth.”¹²² Once the parent (the mother or the father) had spoken of the child, naming him/ her, the midwives rinsed off the placenta with salt water to clean and sterilize the child, then they would gently massage the body with oil, to protect the tender skin from drying.

With the child safely born and legally claimed or adopted, the midwives continued to serve as pediatricians and nurses, teaching the mothers how to take care of the newborns and themselves.

Summary

Biblical narratives stress that God is the mother of all creation, yet God is also Israel's national midwife, the one who brought the Israelites into being.

¹²² Matthews and Benjamin, “The Midwife” in *Social World*, 72.

From a literary perspective, childbearing signaled that life and death are in the hands of God and that promises will be fulfilled. To emphasize, law and rituals underscore the enormity of the event. The powerful moment is also a vulnerable one. To guard the mother and her baby, protective practices were adopted, including separation from the Sancta (and therefore from crowds), avoiding sexual relations, purification rituals, and thanksgiving and purgation sacrifices (blood for blood). These procedures enabled women to physically heal and provided for gradual transition back to normal life in the household and society.

Across the ancient Near East, childbearing and birth-giving were an occasion that needed protection and appeasement of gods. Multiple archeological findings suggest the widespread use of protective amulets and rituals. Also, they show evidence of mixed worship of YHWH, Asherah, Bes, and Beset to harness the international, regional, and local deities to boost the apotropaic powers.

Feasts celebrating the birth of a child were held as part of birth rituals such as circumcision, name-giving, and sacrifices of purification and gratitude. Most of these rituals were practiced in the realm of household religious activities, mostly by women.

Midwives were considered facilitators of life. Midwifery was a highly respected profession with the status of holy women. Passing on clinical knowledge, delivery techniques, medications, and prayers from generation to generation required a long-term apprenticeship.

Baby Girl

In the agrarian society of the Iron Age, both genders were welcomed members of the community. However, in ancient societies, boys were more desirable than girls since they carried on the family name, took care of the elderly parents, and inherited the family's estate.

Inadequate nutrition and prevalent diseases suggest infant mortality for both genders was about 50 percent within the first five years of a child's life, with the first year bearing the highest risk.¹²³ Yet for some reason, boys were at a higher risk. Kristine Garroway suggests that 50-60 percent of all 'sudden infant death syndrome' were among males.¹²⁴

The combination of these factors may explain the desire for male babies on the account of female newborns. In dire circumstances, such as drought, poverty, or war, there was a real possibility that female babies would be deprived of breastfeeding in order for the mother to conceive again, hopefully with a male baby.¹²⁵

123 Meyers, Carol, *Rediscovering Eve*, 99.

124 Garroway, *Growing Up in Ancient Israel*, 125+ see foot note 147.

125 Kristine Henriksen Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 53. Also foot note 136.

Law

Leviticus 12:1- 5¹²⁶

Considering the agricultural context, medical-historical background, and the very few narratives we have regarding female infants, the law in Leviticus 12:1-5 appears to be of even more significance: When birthing a girl, a woman became ritually impure for eighty days, whereas when delivering a boy, her ritual impurity lasted for only forty days. The obvious question is, what mandated such a difference? The book of Leviticus does not provide an answer. Garroway suggests that Leviticus 12:1-5 could be understood as legislation trying to prevent female-infant neglect. By mandating that the mother and her baby girl remain longer under a protective environment to establish proper bonding, sustained lactation, and overall protection for the girl.¹²⁷

Narrative

Unfortunately, the biblical authors were not interested in narratives about the births of female babies. The number of male baby births mentioned in the biblical literature vs. female births mentioned is 59 to 4!¹²⁸ Further, 52 out of the 59 male births, the babies

¹²⁶ See detailed discussion in the previous chapter.

¹²⁷ Garroway, *Growing Up in Ancient Israel*, 36 +footnote 34 there, 84. See also pg.99 for the difference in duration of breastfeeding of girls vs. boys.

¹²⁸ For a complete list of the semantic range of the word *Vateled* (gave birth) see Appendix Two.

were mentioned by name. Yet only three female babies were mentioned at all. (Dinah, in Genesis 30:21, *Lo-Ruhamah* (No Mercy) in Hosea.1:6, and Achsah in 1Chronicles 2:49).

We have narratives of circumcision as an example of the rite of passage for bringing the baby boy into the covenant with God and the Israelite extended family (also seen as an apotropaic rite), yet no explicit ritual or narrative welcoming a baby girl.¹²⁹ In the few narratives, baby girls were mentioned, it was not in their favor: In Exodus 1:15-17, Pharaoh allowed the girls to live while insisted all baby boys would be killed. This demonstrates how very little Pharaoh perceived the threat of Israelite women to his kingdom and how immaterial baby girls were.

The mentioning of the birth of Dinah, Lea's only daughter (Gen 30:21), appears after a long and elaborate narrative of childbearing and naming *all* the boys in the Jacobian family, with references connecting each one of them to God. The biblical narrator mentioned Dinah as a side remark, in third person reference, with no naming by Lea or Jacob, or references to her birth story, status within the family, and relation to God. (Even though Dinah was the daughter of the legitimate wife, yet as a girl, her familial status was lower than that of the children of the slave servants, Bilhah and Zilpah).¹³⁰

¹²⁹ See foot note 104. Garroway interprets the duration of the mother's ritual impurity as a gendering ritual of welcoming a baby girl.

¹³⁰ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Dinah Affair" in *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002),179.

Hosea's naming of his daughter *Lo-Ruhamah* serves as a literary device in his prophecy against the Kingdom of Israel: "She conceived again and bore a daughter. And YHWH said to him, "Call her name *No Mercy*, for I will no longer have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all" (Hos 1:6).

Last, the only positive birth and naming story of a girl is in 1 Chronicle 2:49. A girl by the name Achsah, the daughter of Caleb Ben-Jephunneh. The meaning of her name is uncertain; it may mean anklet. Later Achsah appears in narratives regarding inheritance of the land (Josh 15, Judg. 1).¹³¹

What was unique in these four baby girls that only their births were mentioned in biblical literature? There is no definitive answer; however, if examined closely, their birth stories spread throughout the historical sequence of the Israelite story. Each of the baby girls represents a historical period and embodies the situation of the nation. Dinah represents the Jacobian family struggling for stability and honor among the neighboring nations, the unnamed Israelites baby girls born in Egypt represent the oppressive situation of the Israelites (Yet they survived, foreshadowing the Israelite nation), Achsah represents the conquest and inhabitation of the land, and *Lo Ruhamah* (No Mercy), represents God's wrath on the Israelites (the Assyrian exile), Yet also consolation and hope for the Israelite future: "And I will sow her for myself in the land. And I will have

¹³¹ More on Achsah see chapter on matchmaking--"Fathers Obtaining Future Husbands."

mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, ‘You are my people,’ and he shall say, ‘You are my God’” (Hos 2:25).

Ritual

Ezekiel 16 is a devastating prophecy on Israel. Ezekiel used the woman’s life cycle as a metaphor for the city of Jerusalem.¹³² In his prophecy, Ezekiel laid out God’s caring actions towards Jerusalem as a foundling baby girl and later a young maiden. Ezekiel stressed God’s covenant with the beautiful young woman, yet she turned out to be His disappointment because of her betrayal.

Only after God’s punishment will God renew the covenant with Jerusalem.

Although extremely troubling and unpleasant, this prophecy gives us insights into ancient and biblical practices of care for babies.¹³³ One can stretch and use this text to say that metaphorically, Jerusalem is God’s baby girl, and God is an active partner in protecting His baby girl.

¹³² In ancient times major cities were addressed poetically with feminine metaphors. These metaphors will play a significant role in understanding the vulnerable situation of Israel as a nation, and the promise of its survival, as we will further see in this paper. For in depth discussion see for example: Susan Ackerman “Azubah/Forsaken, Jerusalem” and “Beulah/Married Jerusalem” in *Women in Scripture*, 514-515; Ackerman, “Woman Jerusalem/ Zion in Isaiah” in *Women in Scripture*, 544-545; Sandra L Gravett, “Female Images for Nations in Ezekiel,” in *Women in Scripture*, 523-524 and Gravett, “Ohalah, Woman of Samaria” in *Women in Scripture*, 536-538 and Carey A Moore, “Jerusalem/ Zion as a Widow and Mother” in *Women in Scripture*, 530-531.

¹³³ See in depth discussion on ancient Near Eastern practices in Garroway, *Growing Up*, 58-66.

Ezekiel 16:1-11

“Again the word of YHWH came to me: ‘Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, and say, thus says YHWH to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.

And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling clothes.

No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born.

And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’

Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil.

I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk.

And I adorned you with ornaments and put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck.”

As we can see from the text, caring for babies includes washing, rubbing with salt, anointing with oil, and wrapping in swaddling clothes. Garroway notes that such actions were not only practical and antiseptic but also, describe the parent’s legal claim on the

infant and initiating them into the family.¹³⁴ Meyers considers these practices as *apotropaic*, meant to keep away the infant from the harmful spirits we mentioned in the chapter discussing birth.¹³⁵

The scent of the oil and salt repels demons; dressing up with shiny jewelry may confuse or distract the evil spirits. Oil lamps were used both for practical and protective reasons as well.¹³⁶ Garroway adds the use of protective eye charms as discovered in dwellings in Jericho, Gezer, Gerar, and Beersheba and figurines of guard dogs found in Mesopotamia.¹³⁷

Ancient Near East Rituals

Henny Marsman, in her book *Woman in Ugarit and Israel*, states that in Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures, although girls were welcomed members of society, boys were preferred.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Garroway, *Growing Up*, 65-66.

¹³⁵ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 154.

For extensive information on practices warding evil spirits from infants, see Garroway, *Growing Up*, 111-136.

¹³⁶ Meyers, lecture "Ritual Experts: Women in Israelite Households," and *Rediscovering Eve*, 154-156.

¹³⁷ Garroway, *Growing Up*, 126-130.

¹³⁸ Hennie J. Marsman, *Woman in Ugarit and Israel; Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East*, (Leiden- Boston: Brill, 2003), 253.

Regarding the protection of babies (of both gender), these cultures feared nighttime which, in their belief, was prone to demons' attacks or the bad chance of waking up the ancestors' spirits protecting the house. Guarding the sleeping chambers of the family and the newborn baby was of utmost importance. In addition to the measures mentioned above, we find the use of noisemakers to drive off evil spirits, lullabies to quiet the baby from crying and thus attracting unwanted attention or waking up the gods. Spells and potions made of garlic, honey, fish, and onion were found in Egyptian Papyrus (Berlin 3027).¹³⁹

Summary

The lack of biblical narratives about the birth of female babies does not necessarily mean that female baby were not important. It is reasonable to assume that the biblical authors were not interested in the early stages of a child's life unless they were very important to the national story, like Moses or Saul, Dinah or Achsah. However, as we will see in the following chapters, the women whose births were mentioned played a significant role in the nation's evolution.¹⁴⁰ Further, to protect female babies in general, the biblical literature provides legislation and ritual to allow them and their mothers an extended bonding time.

¹³⁹ Garroway, *Growing Up*, 133.

¹⁴⁰ See chapters on maidenhood, marriage, (matchmaking) and inheritance.

Child/A Girl

Child Sacrifice

Sacrifice comes from Latin to mean “make sacred,” directly related to cultic, religious activity, and sanctification. However, the term “sacrifice” has come to mean *ritual*

killing. Beate Pongratz-Leisten, in her article “Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East,” notes:

Killing, rather than being considered as complete annihilation, serves either transformative, reordering, or reintegrative purposes when occurring in a ritually controlled environment, a concept alien to the Western world.¹⁴¹

Such killing had several purposes: communicate with deities, appease angry gods, or means of *quid pro quo* when pleading for an important result. Most ritual killings were of animals, Yet at times, humans were sacrificed too.

Ritual killing was not to be taken lightly. Human sacrifice was considered an extreme measure to be used only in communal crises. Such sacrifice would be made in times of drought or war. The notion was to offer “a life- for a life” or as the scapegoat to

¹⁴¹ Beate Pongratz-Leisten, “Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East” in *Sacred Killing: The Archaeology of Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Ann Porter and Glenn Schwartz; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012),292. Cited in Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*,178 see footnote 2 there.

bear the whole community's sins (and the punishment).¹⁴² Ritual killing was meant to dispel evil and restore order. Kristine Garroway, in her book *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, explains:

By ritually killing objects and legitimizing the killing as commissioned by the divine realm, two things happen: social order is maintained and any nagging social pressures are relived.¹⁴³

Concerning human sacrifice, Garroway adds that because the person chosen to be sacrificed represented the person who made the sacrifice, the two needed to be closely associated. On the other hand, the victim must be marginalized enough that the killing would not invoke revenge actions.

The ideal victims for sacrifice were individuals of the lower social class and without prominent legal status – children fit the bill. As minors, they had not yet reached the age of legal autonomy, nor were they fully engendered as members of society. Also, children were under the full authority of their parents and too weak to resist. Moreover, ethnographic studies from the ancient Near East show that young children were considered valuable to the gods and good liaisons between the deity and humans.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² In Jewish law such practice was outlawed and transformed from human sacrifice to animals. See Leviticus 16- scapegoat ritual.

¹⁴³ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 179.

¹⁴⁴ Ethnographic- relating to the scientific description of peoples and cultures with their customs, habits, and mutual differences. (Oxford Languages online).

Garroway estimates the age of a child offered would be between birth and prepuberty. As to gender, both female and male children were considered for offering, but when sacrificed during communal distress or as the fulfillment of a vow, male children were held in higher regard.¹⁴⁵

Historians trace the practice of child sacrifice to the Canaanite Bronze Age (3500-1200 BCE) as part of Molech worship.¹⁴⁶ The historian Mark Smith suggests that child sacrifice was practiced for a time by the Israelites as well, hence the reason for the law in Leviticus 20:2:5 expressly forbidding sacrifices to Molech. Yet no archeological evidence of burnt bones has been found in the Gai Ben-Hinnom Valley, where the Hebrew Bible locates *Tophet*- the site where child sacrifices allegedly took place.¹⁴⁷

This chapter will examine the development of laws to forbid child sacrifice, the use of narrative as a sophisticated critique against such practice, and a ritual to remind society of the tragedy involved in killing children. All designed to prevent child sacrifice.

¹⁴⁵ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 194, 197.

¹⁴⁶ For elaborate archeological finding and tracing it to Molech practice, see Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 205-206.

¹⁴⁷ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 183-185. Also, footnote 25.

Law

Some scholars note that the development of laws concerning the firstborn supports the claim that the Israelites indeed practiced child sacrifice.¹⁴⁸ The evolution of laws shows how biblical legislators aimed to limit and modify these practices.¹⁴⁹ There is a progression from the commandment in Exodus 13:2 “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the *first to open the womb* among the people of Israel, both of human and of the beast, is mine” including both male and female, to Exodus 22:28-29, limiting the consecration only to *male* firstborn. The term “*bechor banecha*” the first male of your sons, is specified.

Later, the consecration of the first male child was substituted with a lamb sacrifice, and the child was redeemed (Ex. 34:19-20). The last stage of modification and elimination of *any* sacrifice was in the book of Numbers, stating that the Levites become the substitution for the Israelite firstborn male, consecrated to God’s service: “Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine” (Num. 3:12).

¹⁴⁸ S. Ackerman, M. Smith, S. Nidditch, Keel, and David Bosworth to name a few. In Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 183, footnote 24 lists the scholars and academic works which support the claim that child sacrifice was practiced in ancient Israel.

¹⁴⁹ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 185.

In the same chapter, a monetary fee of five shekels per head was set to redeem the first-born male of the Israelites, given to Aaron and the priests. (Num 3:46-48).

Garroway underscores that “by giving the money to a person and not directly to YHWH, the dedication of the firstborn is removed one step further from YHWH and its origins in child sacrifice.”¹⁵⁰

Once a system of substitution was put in place, no child sacrifice should be practiced. To emphasize the severity of the prohibition, God’s name was invoked. The biblical authors stated specifically that it would be an abomination to YHWH’s name (Lev. 18:21).

Henceforth, legislative prohibitions against child sacrifice are continuously repeated, with harsh consequences of personal death for any violation. “You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am YHWH” (Lev. 18:21), and “Say to the people of Israel, any one of the people of Israel or the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones” (Lev. 20:2). These prohibitions are reinforced in Deuteronomy 12:30-31 and 18:10 “There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering.”

¹⁵⁰ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 186.

As we can infer from the many repetitions of the prohibitions, child sacrifice was once associated with YHWH's worship but firmly disconnected and disassociated from YHWH's worship over time. It becomes associated with foreign practices, which are forbidden. Violation of this order will have disastrous consequences.

Narrative

Biblical narratives describe four types of child sacrifice: sacrifice as a result of a test, as with Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22), a vow, as the daughter of Jephthah (Judges 11), sacrifice during extreme pressure of war, as when the king of Moab sacrificed his son (2 Kings 3:26-27), and sacrifice as ritual practice, worshiping of Molech, Baal and the Ancestors cult (Lev. 18:21, 20:2, 1 Kings 11:7, 2 Kings 23:10, Jer.32:35). The numerous references to, and prohibitions against child sacrifice, may imply such practice by the Israelites. Yet biblical literary scholars believe that the narratives were *polemic*, fictional tales to teach ideological and theological principles.

The binding of Isaac (Gen.22), set at the beginning of the biblical narrative of the formation of the Israelite people, is an example of implied polemic, which later intensifies and gets explicit. The text unequivocally states that God does not want Abraham to kill his son (Gen. 22:12).

Furthermore, the narratives in Judges 11 (Jephthah's daughter), 2 Kings 16:3 (King Ahaz sacrificed his son through fire), and 2 Kings 21:6 (King Manasseh sacrificed

his son through fire) serve as a stark warning against Child sacrifice, with a punishment of destruction, death, and exile.¹⁵¹

The narrative in Judges 11 is the only text in the biblical literature referring explicitly to female child sacrifice. Although it seems that Jephthah's daughter is the subject of the story, she is merely an object, both in the text and as a literary device. (She does not even have a name in the story). The story is about Jephthah, the father who had the ultimate authority, warning the listeners against careless vows and child sacrifice.

Tikva Frymer, in her article "Father-right Awry: Jephthah and His Daughter," notes that "The horror with which biblical authors react to child sacrifice is the very reason this story is included in the book of Judges, which explains no other rituals. The story has a profoundly disquieting effect."¹⁵²

Judges 10-12 Jephthah's Daughter

Structure:

10:1-5 Succession of "judges" in the land of Gilead.

10:6-9 -The Israelites returned to worshipping gods of the nations around them. God's wrath and punishment; 18 years of war with Philistines and the Ammonites. The Ammonites crossed the Jordan River to wage war. The Israelites were in great distress.

¹⁵¹ Judges 10,11,12- (state of chaos and violence, the need for a ruler or a king). 1 Kings 11 (collapse of the United Kingdom). 2 Kings 17:17 (the fall of the Northern Kingdom). 2 Kings 21:6,11-25 (exile of the Judeans).

¹⁵² Tikva Frymer, "Father-right Awry: Jephthah and His Daughter" in *Reading the Women of the Bible*,102-117.

10:10-16 -Notwithstanding cries of repentance, God was unmoved. Nonetheless, the Israelites stopped local gods worship and worshiped YHWH solely. God had mercy on the Israelites.

11:1-3 - Introduction to Jephthah the Gileadite: explicitly stressing that his mother was a prostitute and his brothers banished him from inheritance. Jephthah ran away and gathered a group of bandits around him.

11:4-11 -Negotiation between the elders of Gilead and Jephthah to lead them in the battle against the Ammonites. Jephthah agrees and becomes both the military and diplomatic leader.

11:12 –28 Negotiation between Jephthah and the king of Ammonites over the rights to the land. Reiterating the conquest and invoking God’s historic role in leading the Israelites to victory over the nations and inhabiting the land.

11:29: Jephthah advances to war against the Ammonites.

11:30-31 Jephthah negotiates with God for victory and vows to sacrifice “whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites.”¹⁵³

11:32-34- God delivers Jephthah a great military victory over the Ammonites. Yet when Jephthah arrives home, to his great tragedy, his daughter, his only child, approaches him with timbrel and dance. Jephthah cries and mourns, Yet admits that he cannot retract his vow to God. 11:36- His daughter affirms that the vow (her sacrifice) cannot be broken.

11:37-38 The daughter asks her father to let her go for two months to the mountains with her girlfriends to bewail her maidenhood, which he allows, and so she does.

11:39 When she returns, her father “does as he had vowed.”

11:40 (So it became) There is an ancient custom in Israel that the maidens of Israel go out to chant for the daughter of Jephthah the Giladite each year.

12:1-6 A ruthless civil war between the tribe of Ephraim and the people of Gilead, with 42,000 deaths.

¹⁵³ Tikva Frymer notes that the literary theme of vows which led to tragedies was familiar in the ancient Near East. “Father-right Awry: Jephthah and His Daughter” in *Reading the Women of Biblical literature*, 107.

Literary Analysis

Literary analysis reveals that this is **prose fiction**, a cautionary tale. The name Jephthah (meaning “opening” in Hebrew) appears 21 times in 34 verses, sometimes twice in a sentence; this is very unusual, and therefore we can infer that the name itself serves as a literary device to ingrain the story and its harsh consequences into our collective memory. Moreover, after the plot's turning point (Jud. 11:34), Jephthah is not mentioned by name anymore and is referred to as “he.”

The semantic range of the root *p,t, ch* refers to a tent's or a house's entrance. Another reference is to Genesis 4:7 “sin is crouching at the door, its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.” Thus, the name Jephthah itself embodies the warning against the sin and its harsh punishment and cautions the audience that such catastrophe is at “our doors.” The many repetitions of Jephthah's name ingrain the warning in our memory.

Another play on words is the use of the term “to open one's mouth” – Jephthah (the one who *opened* his mouth), brought misery to his life and death to his daughter with his own words (as his daughter affirms 11:36).¹⁵⁴ Here is a sophisticated play on words

¹⁵⁴ Tikva Frymer, “Father-right Awry”, in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 109.

that emphasizes irony. The use of irony as a literary technique is a call for the listeners to exercise moral judgment.¹⁵⁵

The irony that “Opening the mouth” refers to justice and righteousness in Proverbs 31 “Speak up for the dumb, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy” (Prov.31:8-9) and “She opened her mouth with wisdom, her tongue with kindly teaching.” (Prov.31: 26).

Furthermore, Frymer notes the irony that the judge and master of speech and negotiation (as we can see from the lengthy dialogues in chapter 11:4-28) could not open his mouth to speak for the rights of the most innocent and unfortunate- his own daughter. As for Jephthah’s daughter, her direct speech to her father in verses 36-37 associates with reference to female speech in Proverbs 31:26, either as another irony, or to portray her as righteous and wise.

The other name mentioned excessively is the name of God (12 times in 36 verses), mostly invoked by Jephthah. It is important to note that contrary to judges like Debora, Ehud, Barak, Gideon, and others (Jud 3:9, 15, 4:4,6, 6:11), Jephthah was not appointed by God to serve as a leader but by the elders of Gilead. Thus, it was important for him to connect with God to establish his legitimacy, at all costs. Yet, nowhere in the

¹⁵⁵ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture- An Agrarian Reading of Biblical Literature*, (New York: Cambridge University Press 2009),62.

text do we have God's direct response to Jephthah. This is an important literary contrast and theological statement. God did not agree to Jephthah's vow.

Furthermore, the narrator takes pains to blacken Jephthah's reputation in the introduction: from the outset, we are told Jephthah is a son of a prostitute, which means his father went astray from covenantal marriage. Prostitution could also be read as a metaphor for the conduct of the Israelites worshiping other gods. "They went astray (*Zanu*) after other gods and bowed down to them" (Jud 2:17). The consequences of worshiping other gods are the general theme of the book of Judges. This is also mentioned in the introduction to our story in 10:6-9. The biblical narrator sets the trajectory of the tragedy from the beginning: worshiping foreign gods and following their unsought practices (such as child sacrifice) will lead to calamity, both nationally and personally.

Continuing the theme of disastrous consequences both on the personal and national level, in a chapter that underscores the inheritance of the land for 17 verses (Jud.11:12-28), we are told that Jephthah's brothers deny him of inheritance. Jephthah's denied inheritance could be read as a strong statement; Jephthah represents careless vows and child sacrifice; the symbolic meaning is that no such thing will continue in the land. We must eradicate such practice! Indeed, Jephthah's punishment is the worse envisioned

in the biblical literature *Karet*- being cut off, no children to continue one's family name, and no land.¹⁵⁶

The combination of Jephthah's name, references to his mother's occupation, and his brothers' deeds can be interpreted to say ["look what happens when 'all is open'"] (*yeptach*) with no boundaries of speech and action. The biblical audience has a *triple* warning at the outset of the chapter.

As the narrative unfolds, dialogues and negotiations dominate the chapters. Yet when it comes to Jephthah's sacrificing his daughter and only child, there is complete compliance, no negotiating with God.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, Jephthah is presented as a great orator and negotiator with all who are in a higher status than him (the elders, Ammonite king, and even God). Yet when addressing his daughter- he is speechless in verses 36-37 ("and *she* said..." "and *she* said").

The literary and theological message is conveyed through **silence**. There are no words to address such a horrific deed. The narrator himself could not utter the words to describe Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter, stating only "he did to her as he had vowed" (11:39).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Tikva Frymer, "Father-right Awry", in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 108.

¹⁵⁷ This is a biblical reference to Abraham negotiating with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18. Yet failing to negotiate over his own son's life in Genesis 22.

¹⁵⁸ Jonathan Magonet suggests that Jephthah's daughter was not sacrificed. He interprets "was given to God" as to become a nun; her sacrifice was the sacrifice of her

The book of Judges underscores the theme of war and violence, as a consequence of angering God by worshiping foreign deities. Child sacrifice was part of Baal and Molech's practice. In this context, Jephthah's sacrificing his child, is followed by God's anger and punishment in the form of horrific civil war in following chapter (Jud.12). The message is flashed out again: ["if you do this – you will get that"]. The narrative spins Jephthah's *quid pro quo* vow, God's answer is: ["if you sacrifice your child- you will get bloodshed between brothers."]

To conclude: Jephthah's daughter, like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or the American *West Side Story*, is a tragic tale that remains in our communal psyche. The stories of Isaac and Jephthah's daughter were meant as a sharp critique of the societies to which they related. The theological message is clear: God opposes child sacrifice. The sociological critique is clear, apathy to violence against children will perpetuate an even more vicious cycle of violence.¹⁵⁹

motherhood. Jonathan Magonet, "Did Jephthah Actually Kill His Daughter?" TheTorah.com (2015). <https://thetorah.com/article/did-jephthah-actually-kill-his-daughter> especially footnote 12.

¹⁵⁹ For feminist interpretations see Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes, Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 113-117. And Esther Fuchs, "Jephthah's Daughter: A Feminist Postcolonial Approach" in *Feminist Theory and biblical literature*, (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016), 71-94.

Ritual

Jeremiah's vigorous polemics against child sacrifice describe the horrible scenes of children being burned by fire as ritual practices to foreign deities as Baal and Molech: "And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind" (Jer. 7:31). Jeremiah emphasized that YHWH did not ask for child sacrifices or even conceive of such a deed. He reminded his audience that this grave sin would cause the *triple* punishment: war, famine, and fatal epidemic. "Now therefore thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, concerning this city of which you say, it is given into the hand of the king of Babylon by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence" (Jer. 32:36).

The place associated with child sacrifice is *Gay ben Hinnom*, on the outskirts of the biblical walled Jerusalem. As noted earlier, no archeological evidence of such practice was found.

The Ritual of Annual Commemoration

"That the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gilalite four days in the year" (Jud 11:40).

Carol Meyers notes that declaring an annual festival around a human character, rather than a divine deed or seasonal event, is an unusual occasion in biblical literature.

Prescribing an annual commemoration and making it last four days is a powerful message in biblical literature. Such an event cannot be ignored, which assures its message will not be forgotten. As the daughters of Israel gather, the story of Jephthah's daughter is re-told

annually and ingrained in the collective memory. This is an excellent example of how the ritual of gathering, singing, and storytelling ensures the passing of the message that child sacrifice is forbidden and will result in disaster throughout the generations.

In contrast, Peggy L. Day, in her book *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, argues that “the story of Jephthah’s daughter functioned as an etiology of this annual rite.”¹⁶⁰ She refers to the annual festival of “the daughters of Israel” as a life cycle ritual and rite of passage from childhood to physical maturity- womanhood.¹⁶¹ This ceremony laments and acknowledges the “death” of one stage to enter the other. “The story of Jephthah’s daughter should be understood to represent the adolescent phase of female development, and it is important to realize that adolescent morality (of Jephthah’s daughter) must be abandoned along the road to full maturity.”¹⁶²

Ancient Near East

Literature found in the Eastern Mediterranean describes kings who sacrificed their beloved children in times of emergencies. One story is about a Phoenician king sacrificing to the god Kronos; the other is about Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon,

¹⁶⁰ Etiology- attribution of the cause or reason for something, often expressed in terms of historical or mythical explanation.

¹⁶¹ Peggy, Day L. “From the Child Is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah’s Daughter” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*. Edited by Day L. Peggy, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1989),58.

¹⁶² Day, *Gender and Difference*,66-67.

in the play *Iphigenia in Aulis* (Greece, fifth century BCE). Excavations of child burial grounds at Punic Carthage found inscriptions of *Indr*, translated “as a vow,” yet other inscriptions at the site indicate that at least in a third of the cases, animals were sacrificed instead of children.¹⁶³

The use of animal surrogates is also recorded in inscriptions from *Ngaous 3 stele* from Algeria. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the sacrifice of one’s child was considered to carry great importance and was practiced only in emergencies involving communal distress.¹⁶⁴

Summary:

The laws prohibiting child sacrifice are unequivocal.¹⁶⁵ The biblical authors stressed this repeatedly, utilizing the most sacred Israelite codes of conduct and worship (Leviticus 18, 20 and Deuteronomy 12,18). The story of Jephthah's daughter came to pass as an educational tool to strike horror to strengthen the message, and “illustrate” what would happen if such practice were to take place.

¹⁶³ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 110-111.

¹⁶⁴ Elizabeth C. LaRocca-Pitts, “Daughter (or Son or Child) Passed through Fire, Burned, or Sacrificed” in *Women In Scripture*, 225.

¹⁶⁵ For an extensive overview: Eve Levavi Feinstein, "Giving Your Firstborn Son to God" *TheTorah.com* (2016). <https://thetorah.com/article/giving-your-firstborn-son-to-god> ; Samuel Z. Glaser, "Biblical and Greek Ambivalence Towards Child Sacrifice" *TheTorah.com* (2016). <https://thetorah.com/article/biblical-and-greek-ambivalence-towards-child-sacrifice>

The literary trope of violence against women as a predictor of calamity was used to signal that child sacrifice will result in personal and national disaster.¹⁶⁶ The folk tale genre was an effective tool to reach and influence all members of society, not just those who were literate or of the law. Instituting an annual commemoration event transmitted the message even further, not only throughout the country and all members of society but throughout the generations as well.

¹⁶⁶ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 116.

Transition into Maidenhood

Menstruant

Since ancient times menstruation has marked the transition of a girl into a maiden.

Maidens were married off as soon as they began menstruant, approximately at the age of 14. Once married, they began their reproductive cycles. Menstruating meant loss of vaginal blood, pain, discomfort, and fatigue. Women were in a vulnerable position as far as household activities, and marital relations were concerned. To add to that, in ancient Israelite society, menstruation had a religious component of ritual impurity.

In biblical literature, blood is associated with life and therefore considered holy. In ancient times vaginal blood was understood as a powerful representative of impurity since it was perceived to be the nexus of life and death. Because of its significance, vaginal blood was guarded by taboos and restrictions.¹⁶⁷

In contrast to Israel's surrounding cultures, who believed menstruant blood was associated with demonic forces and, therefore, quarantined and isolated the menstruant,

¹⁶⁷ Taboo is an implicit prohibition on something (usually against an utterance or behavior) based on a cultural sense that it is excessively repulsive or, perhaps, too sacred for ordinary people. Such prohibitions are present in virtually all societies. (Google dictionary).

the priestly code of Leviticus 15 steers away from the notions of evil and relates to menstruation as a temporary physical condition which implies minimal limitations.¹⁶⁸

Law

The law in Leviticus 15:19-30 considers menstruants to be in a temporary physical condition with implications on the state of ritual impurity. The text does not ascribe guilt or wrongdoing, nor any restrictions or limitations on the menstruant. Yet based on the law in Lev. 12:4, in which the postpartum woman in the state of niddah was forbidden to enter the sanctuary or touch consecrated items, some understood that in this case as well, the niddah as a regular menstruant was restricted from the Sancta.

To put things in perspective, in the Iron Age era, most Israelites lived in a rural agricultural environment far from the Temple in Jerusalem or local sanctuaries; therefore, it is questionable if the separation from the Sancta had any practical meaning.

Furthermore, according to Carol Meyers:

“Virtually all the household religious activities of the Israelite women interacted with their other maintenance activities. An important reason for this is that most religious acts were involved food, and women performed most food preparing tasks.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ For another view see Elaine Goodfriend, *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*, 637-638.

¹⁶⁹ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 150.

Since feeding the family and the multiple tasks required for food preparation cannot be stopped for the period of menstruation, it makes sense to read Leviticus 15:19-24 literally as is, without reading into it the restriction from the Sancta.¹⁷⁰

The passage has two parts: the first (verses 19-24), regarding normal menstruation in which the woman is considered pure after seven days, with no ritual of purification required. The menstruant is not separated from her household, nor is she forbidden from performing work or participating in any social function. The practical implications of ritual impurity relate to *objects beneath* the woman, such as a chair or a bed, and other members of her household who might have come in contact with her or the objects but *do not* reflect on the woman herself.¹⁷¹

Men are addressed specifically, warning that having sexual conduct with a menstruant woman will transmit her impurity to them and result in their impurity for seven days as well. Later, in Leviticus 20:18, men are warned again that one who engages in sexual relations with a menstruant will be cut off from his people.

¹⁷⁰ Isaac Sassoon claims that only after the Babylonian exile, (late in the evolution of the biblical records), the Zoroastrian religion influenced the priestly writers with a more stringent attitude towards the menstruant, thus the understanding that the Sancta should be avoided. See the part “The Late (Exilic) Appearance of the Term “*Niddah*” in Isaac S. D. Sassoon, "The Purification of a Niddah: When Silence Matters" *TheTorah.com* (2014). <https://thetorah.com/article/the-purification-of-a-niddah-when-silence-matters>

¹⁷¹ Goodfriend, *The Torah*, 669, commentary to verse 20.

The second passage, Leviticus 15:25-30, considers the untimely or longer than the usual abnormal discharge of blood (this might be due to a miscarriage or some other medical issue).

The same practical implications as above apply with two additions: she will wait seven days following the day her discharge stopped to be considered pure, and on the eighth day, she should bring two turtledoves or two pigeons to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting for the priest to offer *Chatat* (purgation) and *Olah* (burnt offering) sacrifices to atone for her impurity before God.

Narrative

In Genesis 31:19-35, Rachel steals her father's household idols (*teraphim*) as they leave Paddan -Aram on their way to Canaan. When her father, Laban, meets up with Jacob's convoy and looks for his valuable possessions, Rachel hides them underneath the camel's cushion and sits on them, stating to her father that she is menstruant, knowing that her father would not look for them or touch anything underneath her. As a menstruant, Rachel was protected by the taboo of contact, even from her father (Gen.31:35).

It is interesting to note the literary location of this story, which implies physical and religious transition. This narrative appears just after Jacob and his family left Paddan, yet have not arrived in Canaan. In the previous verses (3, 13), God talks to Jacob and directs him to leave Paddan and return to him and the land of Canaan. "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred." (Gen 31:13).

The text sophisticatedly notes the transition from one *bet-av* to another *bet-av* in the transition between verses 18-19: “And he [Jacob] drove his livestock... to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan” to “Meanwhile Laban had gone to shear his sheep..” *Bet av* symbolizes more than just a household; it also represents the family’s genealogy and, in our case, the family’s religious practices.

The text locates the narrative in the liminal religious and physical space between Aram and Canaan. It could be that the biblical narrator played off Levitical (and other cultures) understanding that whatever underneath a menstruant is defiled. To the audience of ancient times (versed in the cultural and religious practices of the menstruant woman), Rachel essentially stated that she had defiled the idols.

There is also a theological transition on the physical crossroad between Aram and Canaan, from household idols (now desecrated, to be discarded), to the belief in a monotheistic god YHWH as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹⁷²

Ritual

A contemporary reading of the biblical literature suggests new interpretations which inspire us to look at the term “*niddah*” relating to the menstruant in a new way. The prophet Zechariah addresses the daughters of Zion specifically stating:

¹⁷² See also Janice Nunnally-Cox, *Foremothers: Women of biblical literature*, (San Francisco: Harper& Row Publishers, 1981),19.

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your King comes to you... As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.” (Zech. 9:9-11).

גַּם־אֶת בְּדָם־בְּרִיתְךָ שְׁלַחְתִּי אֶסְרִילָךְ מִבּוֹר אֵין מַיִם בּוֹ:

Elyse Goldstein makes a connection between the term *dam britech* (דם בריתך) literally, “the covenant of your blood,” addressed to the daughters of Zion to the biological phenomena of menstruation. She sees menstruation blood as women’s covenantal blood. “For women to have *brit* (covenant) inscribed in our flesh as an “everlasting covenant” (Gen 17:19); not just once, at eight days old, but every single month.”¹⁷³ According to Goldstein, every time a woman is menstruant, it is a ritual of reaffirming the covenant with God.

Textual comparison between Leviticus 19:25-30 the case of abnormal bleeding, with Ezekiel’s instructions to the priest who encountered a dead body (Ezekiel 44:25-26) reveals similarities in ritual and duration.

“A priest must not defile himself by going near a dead person. However, for a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, a brother, or an unmarried sister, he may do so, and after he is cleansed, he must count off seven days for himself. And on the day he goes into the sanctuary, into the inner court, to minister in the sanctuary, he must present his sin offering, declares the YHWH.

¹⁷³ Elyse Goldstein, “Contemporary Reflection,” *The Torah*, 675.

Both the priest and the bleeding women found themselves in an abnormal situation which has to do with ritual impurity due to contact with death (a dead body of a close relative for the priest vs. unfertilized egg/ miscarriage or endometrial tissue for the woman). Both must undergo a purification period of seven days after becoming pure, followed by a requirement to bring *chatat* (purgation) sacrifice with no wrongdoing ascribed to them.¹⁷⁴

The priest is concerned with the *Mishkan* and intends to minister the inner chamber (the holiest part); the woman ministers her body; her inner chamber is the womb. The similarities are striking. Building on Mary Douglas' elaborate system of analogies, we can propose the following analogy:¹⁷⁵ Woman's uterus is like the inner part of the *Mishkan*. This is the "Holy of Holies", a place where God's presence is. This place is the source of life and therefore needs protection and rituals of purification.

These non-accidental parallels expose deep meaning: the woman is the priestess of her body. She is the guardian of Her Temple. What was considered "impure" transpires to be holy. This interpretation fits well with the laws and rituals regarding birth-giving, and as Carol Meyers explained in the introduction, the woman was in charge of the religious practices in the household; thus, it is reasonable to perceive her as the "priestess in her temple."

¹⁷⁴ Leviticus 12:6- The woman who gives birth to a male or female child also has to bring *Chatat* and *Olah* offering.

¹⁷⁵ Douglas, *Leviticus*, 79,176, 188.

Ancient Near East

In the Ancient Near East, menstruation which indicated sexual maturity, was an important rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. To describe someone who is marriageable or nubile, Akkadian used the word *muštenû*, meaning ‘changed.’¹⁷⁶ Jacob Milgrom notes that across primitive cultures, blood had powerful status.

Menstruants were considered both having potent agency, attracting dangerous spirits, and impure. Their impurity extended to objects they touched, such as eating and cooking utensils, weapons, food, and even footpaths. Failure to contain and separate the menstruant from everyday life may result in crop failure, disease, military defeat, and other calamities. Because of the perceived grave consequences, menstruants were isolated for their period to protect the household.¹⁷⁷

The archives of Mari reveal that menstruating women had to leave the palace and live elsewhere for five or six days because ‘the gods were strong in the palace.’ (This phrase could recall that the palace had originally been a temple). Furthermore, we learn that women were not allowed to work on temple constructions lest they menstruate and pollute the building. Records from the Ur III period (2094-2047_{BCE}) calculating how

¹⁷⁶ Marten Stol, *Women in The Ancient Near East*, Edited by Translated by Helen and Mervyn Richardson. Boston/Berlin: 2016. Walter de Gruyter Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614512639> , p.12.

¹⁷⁷ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 14.

many days women worked include ‘days of sitting,’ allowing for an absence of six days per month.¹⁷⁸

Summary

It is important to bear in mind that because of malnutrition, multiple pregnancies at a young age, and the long duration of lactation, menstruation was less frequent than today. Moreover, considering the practical impact of the law (which applies to *objects beneath* the woman) and not to the woman herself, the only practical and meaningful (with long-lasting impact in the Jewish tradition) is the prohibition on the sexual relationship during the menstruant period, for seven days (and longer in certain cases Lev:15-30).

In contrast to other cultures’ practices, the law in Leviticus is very progressive; the menstruant is not isolated or forbidden from participation in household life.

Contemporary cross textual reading established new and favorable ways to consider the menstruant. Elyse Goldstein’s reading of Zechariah 9:9-11 suggests considering the menstruant blood as a sign of women’s covenant with God - *dam brit*. Cross textual reading of Ezekiel 44:25 suggests a woman in a condition of niddah is like a priestess of her temple -tending to its most holy part- the womb.

¹⁷⁸ Stol, *Women in The Ancient Near East*, 460, 461.

Maidenhood

Virginity

In biblical Hebrew, the term *Betula* means a young maiden of marriageable age, but not necessarily a virgin.¹⁷⁹ To specify virginity, the biblical literature added “who has not known a man” or “a man did not know her,” as was referred to Jephthah’s daughter (Jud. 11:39) and Rebecca (Gen.24:16). The term's ambiguity derives from the norm and cultural expectation that maidens were, indeed, virgins.

Marital laws and societal status indicated that virginity was a desirable value directly affecting a family’s prestige. Virginity was valued monetarily in the concept of *Mohar-betulut* as we will further discuss the laws in Exodus 22:15-16 and Deuteronomy 22:28-29. Thus, girls were expected to be chaste and “pure” until after marriage.

In an agrarian society, the land was inherited through paternity; therefore, it was important to ensure the fatherhood of the offspring. This may explain the harsh laws against adultery in Deuteronomy 22:22 (which calls for both parties' death penalty) and the importance of virginity.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, in ancient times the father or the husband

¹⁷⁹ Hilary Lipka, *The Torah*, 726.

¹⁸⁰ For another perspective see Cynthia Edenburg, "Deuteronomy's Uncompromising Demand for Women's Sexual Fidelity" *TheTorah.com* (2014).
<https://thetorah.com/article/deuteronomys-uncompromising-demand-for-womens-sexual-fidelity>

had control over women's sexuality. A girl's body belonged to her father until she was married.

Garroway states, "A daughter's virginity was of most importance, it was perhaps the defining characteristic of her childhood."¹⁸¹ Therefore, a maiden of marriageable age would be protected by a chaperone and not leave the household by herself. Tikva Frymer adds that the protection of virginity became the demonstrable reason for the head of the households' "right" to control their women; "control and chastity are intimately related."¹⁸²

Mary Douglas states that in Mediterranean cultures, a woman's honor (the virtue of virginity) must be protected at all costs. The father and the brothers must avenge and restore the family's honor by killing the violator. Otherwise, the whole extended family would be "contaminated" with shame and social devaluation. They would not be able to conduct their business on equal terms; their daughters would not be able to marry into

See also the introduction to the chapter on adultery.

¹⁸¹ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 168. See footnote 37 for extensive discussion on the bride price.

¹⁸² For extensive probing for the reasons for maiden's chastity, see Tikva Frymer Kensky, "Virginity in biblical literature," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible And The Ancient Near East*, Ed. Matthews H. Victor, Levinson M. Bernard, Frymer-Kensky Tikva, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 80-85.

families with good societal standing, and so on.¹⁸³ Hence, protecting the girl's virginity was a family and societal affair.

¹⁸³ Douglas, *Leviticus*, 146-147.

Law

Exodus 22:15-17

“If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride price for her and make her his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride price for virgins.”

Mohar: Largely understood as a “bride’s price” or betrothal gift, it refers to the transfer of valuables from the groom’s family to the bride’s family. This was done perhaps to compensate for the loss of working hands in the bride’s family or, as a reflection of the bride’s family status or the bride herself.¹⁸⁴

Tracy Lemos argues that biblical betrothal gifting patterns reflect the change in social structures. She claims that ancient Israel, from Iron I to the Babylonian exile, was based on an agricultural economy and kinship structures. Therefore, the *mohar* was an arrangement between the groom’s and the bride’s family. Yet, the gifting of mohar shifted its importance to gifting a dowry by the bride’s family in the post-exilic period, which was marked by social hierarchies, reflected in dowry-giving societies.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Garroway: “Marriage and Bride-Price in biblical literature” in Kristine Henriksen Garroway, “Bride-Price: The Story of Jacob’s Marriage to Rachel and Leah” *TheTorah.com* (2020). <https://thetorah.com/article/bride-price-the-story-of-jacobs-marriage-to-rachel-and-leah>

Also, see Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

¹⁸⁵ Tracy M. Lemos, “Marriage Gifts and Social Change in Ancient Palestine: 1200 BCE to 200 CE.” (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), PP. xii + 296. Book review

Carol Meyers argues that *mohar* is a betrothal gift to help strengthen good relations between the families and provide security for the woman, rather than a price for the groom to purchase the bride.¹⁸⁶ Tamara Eskenazi rejects the notion of a “bride price” as a transaction between the families and suggests that the betrothal gift provided by the groom’s family and the dowry provided by the bride’s family aim to establish and solidify alliances between the families and mutual aid during economic difficulties.¹⁸⁷

As the reasons stated above suggest, there was a high social value for the bride to be a virgin. Virginity was appreciated (priced) under “*mohar betulot*” to differentiate from (a regular) *mohar* paid for a widow or divorcee (which had a lesser value). Aiming to protect a girl’s “market value” and deter those who might take advantage of young girls (for sex with no intentions of commitment or to devalue their bride price), biblical law constituted that the seducer must marry the girl with full rights. However, if her father refused to give his daughter to a man who went against social norms, devalued the honor of his daughter, and sidestepped his parental authority, the violator still had to pay

by Naomi Steinberg, in Book Reviews / Biblical Interpretation 19 (2011), 525-527, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2011. DOI: 10.1163/156851510X541549

¹⁸⁶ Eskenazi, *The Torah*, 437.

¹⁸⁷ Eskenazi, *The Torah*, Introduction xlii.

him compensation per the customary bride price for virgins. (In other words, the violator had to pay the price, but he still did not get the girl).¹⁸⁸

Tikva Frymer, in her article “Virginity in the Bible,” suggests that this law prevented maidens from circumventing their father’s authority and prevented men from “grabbing” wives without considering other men's rights. She also notes that when many women died in childbirth and polygamy was permitted in the Iron Age, most non-virgin maidens could find husbands, but their families would not get the higher price of *mohar betulut*.¹⁸⁹

Eckart Otto suggests that the father was entitled to deny the marriage of his daughter to prevent the automatization of marriage by prey and kidnapping girls.¹⁹⁰ The passage is the nexus of property and compensation laws (Ex.21:1 - 22:14) and proper social and religious conduct (Ex.22:17 - 23:9). Thus, protecting a maiden’s virginity was understood to be both an appropriate social norm, as well as protecting the family’s property.

In Leviticus 19:29, the code of holiness and ethical conduct, the most important code of laws, the father is warned not to trade on his daughter’s sexuality even if she was his

¹⁸⁸ See note 198 and “The Historical Context of the Rape Laws” in Zev Farber, “Marrying Your Daughter to Her Rapist” *TheTorah.com* (2014). <https://thetorah.com/article/marrying-your-daughter-to-her-rapist>

¹⁸⁹Frymer, “Virginity in the Bible,” in *Gender and Law*, 80, 92.

¹⁹⁰ Eckart Otto, “False Weights in the Scales of Biblical Justice? Different Views of Women from Patriarchy to Religious Equality in the Book of Deuteronomy,” in *Gender and Law*, 133.

legal property. “Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, lest the land falls into prostitution and the land become full of depravity.” The biblical authors wanted to emphasize that such conduct not only devalues the girl and her family but also decreases the level of holiness of the land and will result in catastrophe.

Deuteronomy 22:28-29

“If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife because he has violated her. He may not divorce her all his days.”

To protect the father’s and the future husband's rights to a woman’s sexuality, the deterrent factor was very high. The offender was obligated to marry the girl and pay the full betrothal gift for virgins, a non-negotiable price of fifty shekels of silver. In addition, the offender had no option of divorcing her in the future. The law assumed force on the man’s part since voluntary sex on the maiden’s part would leave her vulnerable to claims of unchastity by her future husband and might result in her death (Deut.22:20-21).

The law aimed to protect the girl and her family in both scenarios, forcible and voluntary sex.¹⁹¹ Permanent marriage, with no option of divorce, protected the girl who

¹⁹¹ For detailed explanation of the situation see *The Torah*, 1174.

See also Eve Levavi Feinstein, "The Rape of the Unbetrothed Virgin in Torah and Assyrian Law" *TheTorah.com* (2013). <https://thetorah.com/article/the-rape-of-the-unbetrothed-virgin-in-torah-and-assyrian-law>

might otherwise find it very difficult to re-remarry after a history of sexual promiscuousness.

Deuteronomy 22:23-27

“If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor, because he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.”

Once engaged, the maiden was under the same marital laws as a married woman, even if she still lived in her father’s household. To eradicate adultery, sex with a betrothed maiden was a capital offense punishable by death for both parties.

Biblical law aimed to protect both the victim and society through differentiation between locations as reflecting opportunities to seek help. If the sexual encounter occurred in town, the assumption was that the maiden could have called for help if she wanted to. Thus, consent and mutuality in adultery were presumed, and the death penalty was equally administrated.

If the encounter occurred in the rural area (in the field), then the assumption was that the maiden could not get help, even if she cried out, and therefore, she was not

guilty. (In both cases, the predator was punished by death). Considering that most Israelite settlements in the Iron Era were in rural areas, in most, if not all cases, the maiden would be presumed an innocent victim.

Ritual and Custom

Deuteronomy 22: 13-21

“If any man takes a wife and goes into her and then hates her, and accuses her of misconduct and brings a bad name upon her, saying, ‘I took this woman, and when I came near her, I did not find in her evidence of virginity,’ then the father of the young woman and her mother shall take and bring out the evidence of her virginity to the elders of the city in the gate. And the father of the young woman shall say to the elders, ‘I gave my daughter to this man to marry, and he hates her; and behold, he has accused her of misconduct, saying, “I did not find in your daughter evidence of virginity.” And yet this is the evidence of my daughter’s virginity.’ And they shall spread the cloak before the elders of the city. Then the elders of that city shall take the man and whip him, and they shall fine him a hundred shekels³ of silver and give them to the father of the young woman because he has brought a bad name upon a virgin⁴ of Israel. And she shall be his wife. “He may not divorce her all his days. But if the thing is true, that evidence of virginity was not found in the young woman, then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father’s house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones because she has done an outrageous thing in Israel by whoring in her father’s house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

“The Ritual of Examination”

In a case when a husband wanted to get out of his marriage without incurring a financial loss, such as the bride gift he paid, dowry, divorce money, or future support for the wife, he accused and defamed his wife for not being a virgin on their wedding night. Since this became a public affair, the woman’s family would bring out the sheets used on the wedding night before the town's elders. If these allegations were proven to be false, the

town elders would flog the man and fine him one hundred shekels of silvers (double the amount of *mohar betulut*), and he would never be able to divorce his wife. On the other hand, if the allegations were proven to be correct, then the elders of the town would stone the woman to death.

Tikva Frymer notes that the manifestation of bloody sheets from the wedding night was common in many cultures in the Ancient Near East. Yet, the biblical law had a radical twist to protect the girl and her family.¹⁹² In other cultures, the groom's parents take the sheets immediately after the wedding night and display them publicly. However, in biblical literature, the bride's parents hold the sheets and display them *only* after a claim was made against their daughter and, by extension themselves, for breach of contract.

It is clear that it is in the parents' best interest to protect the girl themselves and maintain the family's honor. Also, it is easy enough to stain some sheets with blood secretly inside the house. Thus, the ritual of the bloody sheets "proves" the virginity of the accused woman, whether she was a virgin or not.

The high fine (double the amount of the original *mohar* was paid), public humiliation, and the fact that the man would not be able to divorce his wife and must

¹⁹² Frymer, "Virginity in the Bible," in *Gender and Law*, 95.

support her for life would deter a man from attempting to get out of marriage by false claims and ruining the woman's reputation by slanderous talk.

In his article, "Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Legal Situations in the Hebrew Bible," Victor Matthews relates to the social and economic relationships between households in the village and society as a whole. He notes that the honor and legal rights of inheritance of the woman and her children were protected against slanderous or unjustified claims for divorce. The instruction in this text is designed to maintain social standards of conduct and prevent (economic) fraud on the part of either the husband or the bride's father.¹⁹³

Otto notes that a woman charged with premarital unchastity had to leave her house without any financial compensation.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, he argues that the public trial was a crucial improvement for women because they became legal subjects of their own, not dependent on their husbands' decisions.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Victor Matthews, "Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Legal Situations in the Hebrew Bible," in *Gender and Law*, 111.

¹⁹⁴ Otto, "Fales Weights", in *Gender and Law*, 135.

¹⁹⁵ Otto, "Fales Weights," 137.

Narrative

Mohar

The biblical literature mentions *mohar* negotiations only twice, in Genesis 34:12 and 1 Samuel 18:25-27. In Genesis 34, Hamor pleads to Jacob's family: "Ask me for as great a bride price and gift as you will, and I will give whatever you say to me. Only give me the young woman to be my wife." And in the case of Saul and David in 1 Samuel 18: "Then Saul said, 'Thus shall you say to David, the king desires no bride price except a hundred foreskins of the Philistines, that he may be avenged of the king's enemies.' Now Saul thought to make David fall by the hand of the Philistines."

Interestingly, both narratives which use the term *mohar* are associated with deceit towards the groom. Yet as we know from other biblical narratives of engagement, gifts or labor were part of the transaction without using the term *mohar* or negotiation, perhaps because these engagements stayed in the family and were part of the kinship system.¹⁹⁶

During Rebecca's engagement in Genesis 24, Abraham's servant showered her family with gifts. "And the servant brought out jewelry of silver and gold, and garments,

¹⁹⁶ See more in the section "Fathers Obtaining Future Husbands"

and gave them to Rebecca. He also gave to her brother and her mother costly ornaments” (Gen 24:52).

For Rachel and Leah, Jacob labored seven years for each bride: “Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, ‘I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.’” (Gen.29:18). After Jacob discovered he was given the Leah instead of Rachel deceitfully and complained to Laban, Laban answered: “Complete the week of this one, and I will give you the other also, in return for serving me another seven years.” (Gen.29:27) so Jacob labored for another seven years.¹⁹⁷

Genesis 34 Protecting Dinah’s Family Honor

According to Tikva Frymer, the narrative in Genesis 34 belongs to the genre of prose fiction and the sub-genre of cautionary tales, which involve violence against women.¹⁹⁸ This is yet another link in a chain of narratives consistently building and strengthening the message that violence against *one* woman will cause dire consequences to the whole community.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Garroway: “Marriage and Bride-Price in biblical literature” in Kristine Henriksen Garroway, "Bride-Price: The Story of Jacob’s Marriage to Rachel and Leah" *TheTorah.com* (2020). <https://thetorah.com/article/bride-price-the-story-of-jacobs-marriage-to-rachel-and-leah>

¹⁹⁸ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002). Introduction xviii-xix.

¹⁹⁹ For example see 2 Samuel 13 (Tamar’s rape by Amnon), Judges 11, (Jephthah’s daughter), Judges 19-20 (the rape of the Levite’s concubine).

Although some modern feminist interpretations read the narrative of Genesis 34 as something else rather than rape,²⁰⁰ most biblical translations understand that Dinah, Jacob's daughter, was raped and "such thing will not be tolerated in Israel" (Gen 34:7).²⁰¹

From the laws in Deuteronomy 22, we know that the biblical literature presumed forceful intercourse on a girl rather than assuming and accusing her of promiscuous behavior, resulting in her social devaluation and humiliation or even death (according to the laws in Deut. 22:20-21). Reflecting the laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy, Dinah's rape was a cautionary tale that operated on two levels: The first was a clear message of warning against the abuse of Israelite girls, using a measure for measure retaliation: what was done to Dinah and her family, would be done (triple) to Shechem and his town. The second message was protecting the ancestral lineage.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ See for example Lyn. M Bechtel "What If Dinah Is Not Raped? (Genesis 34)" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no.62 (1994). P. 32; Alison L. Joseph "Understanding Genesis 34:2 Inna" *Vetus Testamentum* 66.4 (2016): 663-668. Brill.com/vt. See footnote 1. For an extensive list of references; Frymer, "Virginity in biblical literature," in *Gender and Law*, 87; for additional bibliography see Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 168, footnote 34.

²⁰¹ Sandie Gravett notes that the word "rape" does not appear in the biblical text, nor was the concept of rape as it is in contemporary understanding. Rape in biblical understanding was a "stealing of sexual property" that belonged to the *father* or the *husband* of the woman. Sandie Gravett "Reading 'Rape' in the Hebrew Bible: A Consideration of Language" (New York: The Continuum Publishing Group, 2004), 280 (ISSN 0309-0892).

²⁰² For third way of interpretation see "Ancient Ideas about Bodily Autonomy" in Shawna Dolansky, "The Debasement of Dinah" *TheTorah.com* (2015). <https://thetorah.com/article/the-debasement-of-dinah>

The first message is exemplified through the structure of the narrative, dialogues, and *Leitwörter*.²⁰³ The structure reflects the revenge as it unfolds in an escalating number of verses: Dinah's suffering and family's domain (7 verses v.1-7), negotiation between the families (9 verses v.8-17), Shechem's suffering, and the town's domain (11 verses v.18-29). The dialogues convey the message of reciprocity, yet it is Dinah's brothers who have the last word in the plot. Also, the repetition of the premise of intermarriage between the families appears three times with slight variations. Were it to appear twice, suggested by Hamor (v.9-10) and responded to by the brothers (v.16), we could assume mutual relations; however, the third time reveals the potential of abuse and disproportionate power and social relations "Will not their livestock, their property, and all their beasts be ours? Only let us agree with them, and they will dwell with us." (v.23).

The use of *Leitwörter*, a repetition of specific words or sentences as a way of developing the story, underscores the message of "measure against the measure." As Dinah went out to see the daughters of the land, she was seen by Shechem. The term יצא "went out" appears three times: at the beginning of the plot regarding Dinah, in the middle, regarding Hamor (v. 6), and at the end regarding Shimon and Levi leaving the town after the killing of Shechem and his father (v.26). The corresponding verb "יצא" alludes to the dramatic development of the plot.

²⁰³ *Leitwörter* -a literary device of repetition of specific words or sentences, with slight variations of meaning, as a way of developing the moral or theme of the story.

The same literary motif is used with the term *טמא* (contaminated) it appears as Jacob hears what happened to Dinah (v.5), the deceitful negotiation of Shimon and Levi (v.13), and the punishment of the whole town as responsible for Dinah's rape and humiliation. The brothers plundered the town (v.s27) as Shechem plundered Dinah's body and virginity. The verbs "to give" and "to take" drive the plot forward, signaling a negotiation pattern. Within that, the *Leitwörter* *לקח* flips the plot: from Shechem taking Dinah forcefully or deceitfully (v. 2) to asking his father to take her legally as his wife (v.4), to the brothers warning "to take Dinah back" (v.17), later taking their weapons, killing Shechem and Hamor (v.26), and taking Dinah back. This pattern completes the circle of violence and retribution and strengthens the message that taking a girl's virginity will result in taking the offender's life.

Why did Shimon and Levi, Dinah's maternal brothers, act so violently against the town of Shechem and its inhabitants? (Gen.34:25-29). Tikva Frymer in her essay "The Dinah Affair," explains that in a patriarchal society protecting the girl's virginity is the prerogative and duty of the men of the family. "Real Men" have the strength and cunning to protect their women. The fact that Shechem had sex with Dinah meant that he had dishonored all the *men* in her family.²⁰⁴ To restore the men's honor, there must be retaliation in a double or triple measure. The psychological strategy and the deterrent

²⁰⁴ See also Matthews and Benjamin regarding the social implications of an assault, page 193-195.

effect behind such a violent response: “If people know that we will violently avenge wrongs that are done to us, then they will hesitate to attack us.”²⁰⁵

Garroway adds that once the brothers killed Shechem, the family lost the high bride price he would have paid for her. Taking the flocks, wealth, children, and wives of the town not only created a devastating and humiliating effect on the town but also served to collect what the bride price would have been, many times more.²⁰⁶ Through the acts of Shimon and Levi, the biblical narrative both restores to Dinah her family’s honor and collects the bride price due to her.

The biblical message is clear: **dishonoring a woman is a serious wrong frequently resulting in the offender's death.** Violence against a woman will bring personal and societal calamity. Mary Anne Bader, in her book *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible, A Multi-Methodological Study of Genesis 34 and 2 Samuel 13*, researched the appearance of the terms *anah* and *nevalah*, (ענה, נבלה).²⁰⁷ Eight out of thirteen times, when the term *anah* ענה appears in the biblical literature in reference to sexual offenses, the perpetrators are killed. *Nevalah* means a heinous offense with grave consequences. When the terms, *nevalah*+*anah* (נבלה+ענה) appear together that means a capital offense that affects the fabric of the society. When these terms appear together five out seven

²⁰⁵ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 185, 196.

²⁰⁶ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 171.

²⁰⁷ Mary Anna Bader *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible- Multi methodological Study of Genesis 34 and Samuel 13* Studies in Biblical Literature Vol. 87 (Peter Land publication N.Y 2006).

times, these terms appear together they spell death to the offender.²⁰⁸ In addition, the text about Tamar's rape by her brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13) signals that the death penalty for the violator would be the same for Israelites and foreigners, royalty, and commoners.²⁰⁹

It is interesting to note that God is mentioned at the end of the previous chapter (Gen.33:20) when Jacob calls the place "*El-Elohei Israel*" and at the beginning of the next chapter (Gen.35:1) when God commands Jacob to go to Bethel and rid his household from alien gods. Yet God is not mentioned in Chapter 34, as we would expect the Eternal to be Dinah's avenger. Maybe the subtle message is that in such matters, do not wait for God. Men must take the protection of their women into their own hands.

Furthermore, it is a communal responsibility to ensure that "such a thing will not happen in Israel." It is society's responsibility to maintain the dignity of its women and prevent the abuse or rape of women. This is why the whole town of Shechem was punished (Gen.34: 27), since they too were responsible for maintaining the social order and failed to do so.

The second biblical message is about protecting the purity of the Abrahamic lineage: Frymer observes that the genre of "tales of virgins" signifies concerns about

²⁰⁸ Bader, *Sexual Violation*, 174-176.

²⁰⁹ See elaborate discussion in the chapter on incest.

marriage, intermarriage, ethnicity, and boundaries with non-Israelites. “These boundary issues play a significant role in the development of national identity; the permeability of boundaries to maternal parents determines the ethnic character of the group.”²¹⁰

Dinah’s marriage with Shechem would determine the ethnic genealogy of her descendants (Jacobs’ family and the Israelites in later generations). She could not marry Shechem regardless of his willingness to pay any bride price because he was a Canaanite. Garroway notes that from an economic standpoint if Dinah were to marry Shechem, her brothers would lose her portion of the family inheritance to an outsider.²¹¹

Lyn. M. Bechtel elaborates on this message in her article “What If Dinah Is Not Raped?”²¹² Referring to the term *tameh* (טמא) which is mentioned three times by the narrator, she interprets this sexual intercourse as “polluted” because Dinah was tainted with “outside stuff.” Shechem is uncircumcised, an impure outsider. This is considered *nevalah* “that is not done” because it violates the ideals and customs of the tribal group. Sexual intercourse is only acceptable if it follows the community's customs and is done properly *within* the group. “For the Jacobines, the suggestion of bringing these impure

²¹⁰ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, Introduction xix.

²¹¹ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 169.

²¹² Lyn. M Bechtel, “What If Dinah Is Not Raped? (Genesis 34),” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no.62 (1994). P. 32

outsiders into the group through circumcision is as much of a violation of community ideals as Dinah's marrying an outsider."²¹³

Ancient Near East

All Ancient Near East societies shared the same regard for virginity. In Sumerian, the word *kisikil* means both "a young woman" and "a virgin." The literal meaning of *kisikil* is something like "the pure one," later, the word "good" was often added as well. When a girl reached the time of her sexual maturity and was ready to be given in marriage, a ritual was performed by her father; he set her on the knee of the god Assur and "seized his foot."²¹⁴

According to the laws of Ešnunna, a girl could not marry without the permission of her family. "If a man 'took' a man's daughter without having first asked her father and mother, and neither provided a reception (*kirru*) nor drew up any contractual agreement with her father and mother, even if she has already lived for a year in his house, she is not his wife."²¹⁵

Assyrian law and cultural mythology signify the proper protocol for mating. (This is exemplified in the stories regarding the god Dumuzi approaching the goddess Inanna

²¹³ Bechtel, "What If Dinah Is Not Raped?", 32-33.

²¹⁴ Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, Ibid., 17.

²¹⁵ Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 75.

and the copulating of Enlil and Ninlil). A man or his father must approach the parents of the maiden, especially her mother. If such a thing is not done, as in the story of Enlil and Ninlil, a court of fifty gods decrees that “the sex offender will leave the town.” Sex with an unmarried maiden without requesting her hand from her parents is too dangerous for the social order to allow him to live in the town.²¹⁶

The term *mohar*, which refers to ‘bride price’ or marriage gift, appears in Ugarit, Hebrew, and Arabic and means “to be obtained by marriage.”²¹⁷ *Mohar* could be given as money or in goods. Old Akkadian texts specify the goods: sheep, silver, clothing, oil, malt, wool, dried fish, and sandals. In the Old Babylonian period, care was taken to balance the financial contribution of the two families (i.e., balance the dowry given by the bride’s family and mohar given by the groom’s).

The “custom payment” was about five or ten shekels; a young girl would cost five shekels, a woman ten to fifteen, and an adopted child five to seven shekels. The price would also depend on the woman’s status. In the Aramaic marriage contracts, ten shekels were paid for a virgin and five shekels for a divorced woman.²¹⁸ Stol compares the bride price to a cost of a slave girl (yet stressing that a bride is not like a slave girl), pointing

²¹⁶ Frymer, “Virginity in the Bible” in *Gender and Law*, 88.

²¹⁷ There is a lengthy debate between scholars if “bride price” was indeed a commercial “sale” or a gift to the bride herself. See Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 129-134.

²¹⁸ Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 121.

out that in the times of Hammurabi, when the price of slaves rose, bride prices went up to twenty and thirty shekels.²¹⁹

The rise of Islam brought universal development in which the bride would get at least half of her *mohar*. The Qur'an states clearly: "Give the woman the bride price as a gift" (Qur. 4:4). The Akkadian expression for this was "to fasten the bride price into the hem," which means into the hem of the woman's inner garments.²²⁰ The money would be her private capital, hidden from access. Her *mohar* was kept in reserve for emergencies such as the death or disappearance of her husband. It was a large enough sum guaranteed to support her.

Later, the laws of Ugarit, Nuzi, Alalakh (Syria), and Middle Assyrian stipulate that the bride price was the wife's property.²²¹ In the Neo-Babylonian period, the price paid was not mentioned anymore, and the dowry became the central theme in the marriage arrangements among the rich.

Dowry was the daughter's gift from her father, which she would then pass on to her children. (In Sumerian and Old Babylonian texts, it is called *šusumma* or *nudunnû*, a

²¹⁹ Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 117.

²²⁰ Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 124.

²²¹ Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 126.

gift, and in Middle Assyrian and Hammurabi laws, the legal term is “present”).²²² The dowry usually consisted of household goods such as furniture, textiles, and jewelry. Yet, in wealthy families, fields, houses, and slaves would be given to the bride. The dowry in the Neo-Babylonian period was often paid in installments, with the last installment paid on the first child's birth (the process could last for years). Since there were cases of misuse and loss of the dowry by the husband, in the Neo-Babylonian period, a part of the dowry called “the basket” (*quppu*) was set aside for the woman alone. It was a quantity of silver, or sometimes gold.

Summary

The law and ritual in Deuteronomy 22:13-21 (the public trial of a man who accused his wife of unchastity) aimed to prevent abuse of marital laws and protect women from unjust divorce. Furthermore, as Victor Matthews argues, the public trial was a crucial judicial improvement for women because they consequently became legal subjects of their own, not dependent on their husbands' decisions.

The Biblical narrative in Genesis 34 belongs to the genre of prose-fiction and sub-genre of cautionary tales, which builds and strengthens the message that violence against even *one* woman will cause dire consequences to the whole community. Dinah's rape was a cautionary tale that operated on two levels: The first was a clear message of

²²² Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 134

warning against the abuse of Israelite girls, using a measure for measure retaliation. This message stressed that taking a girl's virginity will result in taking the offender's life. Though Shimon and Levi's actions were excessive, the biblical narrative both restores honor to Dinah's family and collects the bride price due to her.

Both in Dinah's and Tamar's case, the biblical message is clear: violence against a woman will bring personal and societal calamity.²²³ The death penalty for the violator would be the same for Israelites and foreigners, royalty and commoners alike. Furthermore, it is a communal responsibility to ensure that "such a thing will not happen in Israel."

²²³ For detailed exploration of the narrative about Tamar (2 Samuel 13) see chapter on incest.

Matchmaking

Marriage

In agrarian societies, marriage was a union between families designed to provide offspring and thus ensure generational continuity and ownership of land.²²⁴ Girls were married off between the ages of 14 and 20 and men between 26 and 32. (Ancient Greek and Roman sources show this was also the case further west around the Mediterranean Sea).²²⁵

Carol Meyers notes that a typical Israelite family unit (*beit av*) consisted of a senior couple, unmarried offspring, and married sons with their wives and children. Families were generally patrilocal, which means the groom “took” the bride to move in with his family²²⁶, Yet as in the case of Jacob and Moses, both stayed at their wives’ household for several years. Most marriages in Ancient Israel were monogamous, yet the biblical literature records polycrotic marriages (when a woman is barren, she can give her servant to her husband to have children, as was the case of Sara and Hagar in Genesis 16), or in rare cases and extremely wealthy families, polygyny, (where a husband had more than one wife, as was the case of Leah and Rachel in Genesis 29-30).

²²⁴ Eskenazi, *The Torah*, introduction xli.

²²⁵ Stol, *Women in The Ancient Near East*, 66, footnote 23 and 24.

²²⁶ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 111.

Meyers observes that in biblical literature, the words for the “bride” *kalla* (כלה) and “groom” *hatan* (חתן) appear together, but never about specific persons. They are metaphors used to indicate joy and continuation of the community, or lack of it.²²⁷ As the prophet Jeremiah declares in his consolation prophecy:

“Thus says the YHWH: In this place of which you say, ‘It is a waste without man or beast,’ in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the YHWH: “Give thanks to the YHWH of hosts, for the YHWH is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the YHWH.” (Jeremiah 33:10-11).²²⁸

The biblical literature lacks the term “wedding” or mentioning of a religious ceremony. Nor do we have laws and regulations regarding marriages (except for repeated prohibitions against marrying people from other nations, based on the concern of worshiping other gods). Weddings were a social occasion of feast and merriment based on an (oral) agreement between the two heads of the households. In cases of elite families or when property was involved, a marriage contract (*Ketubah*) was issued.²²⁹

In ancient Israel, as was the custom in the ancient Near East, parents selected spouses for their children (both male and female). Since marriage was an agreement

²²⁷ Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, 324.

²²⁸ Mostly Jeremiah used the metaphor of brides and grooms to signal the lack of joy and continuation of the Israelite community as in Jer. 2:32, 7:34, 25:10.

²²⁹ Meyers, *Eve*, 159.

between families for agrarian and economic reasons (and at times, the family's survival), the children had very little room for negotiation regarding the future spouse or the terms of their marriage. On special occasions, when the biblical literature wanted to emphasize a specific person (or a specific match) to imply divine involvement, the genre of "meeting at the well" was invoked.

Matchmaking at the Well

In ancient Israel, drawing water for the household was one of the maiden's tasks. The water source (mostly a well) was an excellent place for young men to meet young women, get acquainted, and court.²³⁰ Yet romantic as it sounds, the well was not always the safest place for young women. The cultural awareness that a well or a field (and in European tales, woods), might be a precarious place, gave birth to a genre of "betrothal meeting" tales in which the hero saves or helps the future spouse. 'The well' as a type scene was a familiar genre in ancient times and probably originated in pre-biblical folklore. "The well" type scene is a recognizable narrative in the Hebrew Bible (Rebecca, Rachel, Zipporah, Ruth).

As a literary device it is used to signal the emergence of a hero and foreshadow his or her actions. This type scene has distinct features: the hero is a foreigner, somebody

²³⁰ Robert Alter observes that the well, as a source of life, is a symbol of fertility, and a female symbol. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (New York: Basic Books, INC. 1981), 52.

is in a disadvantaged position, the hero meets the future spouse at the well while taking action for the betterment of others (which signals character and foretells future actions), drawing of the water symbolize the bond (male-female, host-guest, benefactor-benefited, the stranger and the girl), announcing of the meeting, the hero meets the spouse's family, there is a meal. Each of the following narratives has a playful variation of this genre, yet all signal the emergence of the hero and God's providence:

In **Genesis 24**, Abraham's servant was the foreigner and it was Rebecca, through her actions of generosity and kindness, who emerged as the hero of the story.²³¹ This narrative set the convention for the rest of "the well" stories. Later, in Genesis 29, Rebecca's son Jacob continued the theme of meeting at the well.

Jacob, the hero of the story, drew water from the well for Rachel, but he had an obstacle to overcome: the well was blocked by a large rock. Robert Alter, in his book *The Art of The Biblical Narrative*, observes that Jacob, a wrestler as his second name suggests,²³² took his faith in both hands and had to work hard for his goals. "If the well of the betrothal scene is in general associated with woman and fertility, it is particularly appropriate that this one should be blocked by an obstacle, for Jacob will obtain the

²³¹ This scene establishes Rebecca as an active and resourceful person, as a literary contrast to her passive husband, Isaac.

²³² Jacob's second name is *Israel* as it is said in Gen. 32:29: "Then he said, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.'"

Gen. 32:29: וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי אִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אָנָשִׁים וַתִּוָּכַל:

woman he wants only through great labor, against resistance, and even then, God will, in the relevant biblical idiom “shut up her womb” for years.”²³³

The next encounter at the well is in **Exodus 2:15-22**, where Moses, who fled from Pharaoh to the land of Midian, rescued the daughters of the Midianite priest from bullying by the other shepherds. This is a literary characterization of Moses and a clue to his future role as a national rescuer. Adler adds that the element of drawing water from the well had special significance in Moses’ life and future career.²³⁴

Last is a playful spin on the familiar type of scene, Boaz’ and Ruth’s encounter in the field (the Book of Ruth). Ruth was a foreigner and in a disadvantaged position. Boaz was the one who made sure she was safe and had enough water and food. “Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping and go after them. I have commanded the young men not to touch you. And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn” (Ruth 2:9).

Alter writes “in this elliptical version the author has rotated the betrothal type scene 180 degrees on the axis of gender and geography.” The meeting scene was in the field, and young men were the ones drawing the water. Instead of detailing Ruth’s genealogy, the narrator alluded to Abraham in verse 11, yet all the other elements of

²³³ Alter, *The Art*, 55.

²³⁴ For a detailed explanation of Moses’s connection to the theme of water, see Alter, *The Art*, 57.

“meeting at the well” scene, such as a meal and telling the news, were familiar to the audience. Alter stresses the importance of the use of this specific type scene:

“It is not merely a way of formally recognizing a particular kind of narrative moment; it is also a means of attaching that moment to a larger pattern of historical and theological meaning.”²³⁵

The biblical author constructed the book of Ruth to connect to the matriarch Rebecca. In both narratives, the women are the heroes of this type scene and God’s providence is at play. Both narratives use the root *h.k.r* (chance or luck), which indicates God is directing the fate of both heroines. In Genesis 24:12 Abraham’s servant asks God “please bring me luck today” and in Ruth 2:3 “as luck would have it, it was the piece of land belonging to Boaz.” Both narratives acknowledge God is acting in the scene and bless God’s kindness: “Blessed is YHWH, God of my master Abraham, whose faithful kindness has not deserted my master; as for me, YHWH led me straight to my master’s brother’s house” (Gen 24:27), and “And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed by YHWH, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” (Ruth 2:20).²³⁶ Both Rebecca and Ruth have agency and act with care towards others.

The purpose of the repetition of the ‘meeting at the well’ type scene was “to reproduce in a narrative the recurrent rhythm of divinely appointed destiny in Israelite history. In this fashion, the alignment of Ruth’s story with the Pentateuchal betrothal type

²³⁵ Alter, *The Art*, 60.

²³⁶ Yaira Amit, *The Torah*, 122.

scene becomes an initiation of her as foreshadowing the progenitrix of the divinely chosen house of David.”²³⁷

“Meeting at the well” narratives signal that it is God who operates behind the scenes sending the rescuers and matchmakers. Furthermore, though a single person, each of these individuals affects the continuation of the nation and plays an important role in ensuring the fulfillment of God’s promise: Rebecca’s well scene in Genesis 24 is right after Isaac’s Akedah narrative (Gen. 22) and the announcement of the death of Sara in Genesis 23, Isaac is in a precarious situation, Rebecca ensures Isaac’s continuation;

Rachel’s well scene in Genesis 29 is right after Jacob’s stealing the birthright and fleeing from Esau and God’s promise to Jacob about protection and continuation of his seed (Gen.27-28); Moses meets Zipporah immediately as he flees Egypt from Pharaoh (Exodus 2:11-15). Later, Zipporah saves Moses by circumcising her son (Exodus 4:24-26); Ruth meets Boaz after her husband, Elimelech, and male in-laws have died, and there is no continuation of her husband’s seed (Ruth 1).

Each time there is a danger of continuance, the well is symbolized as a source of life, and a “chosen” woman appears.²³⁸ The chosen woman matches the chosen man in God’s plan for the Israelites.

²³⁷ Alter, *The Art*, 60.

²³⁸ See also Exodus 2, Moses was saved by women, next to the water.

Moreover, the sequence of the stories (Rebecca, Rachel, Zipporah, and Ruth) creates a connective tissue between the generations. The sequence also marks the journey of the people of Israel. Rebecca and Rachel journey from Haran-Aram to Canaan, Zipporah represents the period in Egypt, and Ruth completes the cycle by coming back to the land.²³⁹ (This could be an important message to the audience for generations to come since, through most of Jewish history, the people of Israel were in exile (metaphorical Egypt), longing to return to the land).

Another thread in this biblical sequence is the blessing of Ruth which echoes the blessing for Rebecca at her marriage and connects her to Rachel and Leah: “May YHWH makes the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem.” (Ruth 4:11).

Fathers Obtaining Future Husbands.

The biblical literature records at least three narratives of fathers actively involved in choosing husbands for their daughters: Laban obtaining Jacob for Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29:19), Caleb Ben Jephunneh obtaining a husband for his daughter Achsah (Judg. 1:12-15), and King Saul obtaining a husband for his daughter Michal (1 Samuel 18:17-27). In

²³⁹ Ruth 1:22 has unusual and ambiguous syntax that could be understood as *Ruth returned* to the land: “Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.”

all three narratives, the fathers benefited financially or politically from the husband-to-be, and in two out of three narratives, the fathers used deceit, which manifested in a very high bride's price.

Though some modern scholars critique the fathers, I tend to read the text differently:²⁴⁰ In Leah's case, the text states explicitly that "Leah had weak eyes" (Gen.29:17). Although we do not know what this term meant in biblical times, we can safely assume it was some disorder or disability, which probably impugned Leah's chances of finding a groom. Her father, Laban, was responsible for marrying her; here, he had a chance to match her with a hardworking man who also belonged to his clan. This would ensure her dowry would stay in the family as he rightfully stated: "Better that I give her to you than I should give her to an outsider." (Gen. 29:19). As for Rachel, the younger of the two and probably too young to be married off, Laban "bought her time" to grow and mature. As a father, he tried to do the right thing for both of his daughters.

²⁴⁰ Tikva Frymer claims "Caleb's vow seems autocratic and unfair. Aschah is treated like a spoil of war, bestowed upon the conqueror as a battle trophy." Frymer, "Daddy's Daughters" in *Reading The Women of the Bible*, 100.

Tsila Ratner evokes associations with Jephthah and Agamemnon, who sacrificed their daughters to advance their war ends. Tsila Ratner (Abramowitz), "Playing Fathers' Games," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 2004. 3 (2): 147–61.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1472588042000225820>

The story of Achsah appears twice: in Joshua 15:13-19 and Judges 1:12-15 (text which appears twice implies an important message). The father is Caleb Ben Jephunneh, one of the most distinguished leaders of his generation. Not only was he a mighty warrior, but also one of the faithful spies and the only one from the desert generation who was granted entry to the land of Israel, together with Joshua Ben-Noon. (Not even Moses was granted entry to the promised land). The town of Hebron was assigned to him as recognition for his loyalty to God and Moses (Josh14:13-15). As a military leader, Caleb announced that he would give his daughter Achsah²⁴¹ as a wife to the one who would conquer the town of *Kiryat Sepher* (Josh. 15:16).²⁴²

This would have served two purposes: one was as an incentive for the warriors, the second, ensuring that his daughter would marry the bravest, cleverest, capable man possible since conquering a town requires all these skills.²⁴³ From the father's perspective, this would be the ultimate test of ability for the husband-to-be. Othniel Ben Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother captured the town and married Achsah. From this point, the narrative focused on Achsah, and she is the one who has the most speaking parts in the plot.

²⁴¹ Achsah-- the meaning of the name may be "jewel", as in Isaiah 3:18. "In that day the YHWH will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents."

²⁴² From the previous introduction of Caleb as an honorable man and the name of his daughter, "Jewel," as the jewel of her family (the only daughter after 12 sons), we assume positive meaning and actions to follow.

²⁴³ This echoes the literary genre where the male hero needs to fight villains, overcome obstacles, and win, in order to marry the girl (usually a princess, which Achsah was).

Achsah, Caleb's only daughter, one of 12 brothers (1 Chron. 2:42-51), negotiated a desirable property with water springs for herself as a dowry. This is a significant point since, in an agrarian and patriarchal society, the land is passed down through the male line. Achsah had 12 older brothers who were entitled to the land. In addition, as a married woman, she would have had Othniel's property.²⁴⁴ Yet by focusing on Achsah's negotiations, the biblical literature makes a remarkable point--a woman can negotiate her dowry and inherit the land(!)²⁴⁵

Neria Kline in his article "חברון ודביר והמעבר לתקופת השופטים" (Hebron and Devir And The Transformation To The Judges Period) observes similarities between the couples Achsah and Othniel to Rebecca and Isaac:²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Also see the chapter on inheritance.

²⁴⁵ This is a biblical precedent since the Zelophehad's daughters had to negotiate with Moses for the right to inherit land when there were no brothers or male kinsman. In this case, Achsah gets prime piece of land although she has 12 brothers who fought for the land.

²⁴⁶ Neria Kline, "חברון ודביר מעבר לתקופת השופטים", Herzog Academy online. <http://www.hatanakh.com/articles>.
<http://www.hatanakh.com/articles/%D7%97%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%95%D7%93%D7%91%D7%99%D7%A8-%D7%95%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%A2%D7%91%D7%A8-%D7%9C%D7%AA%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%98%D7%99%D7%9D>

Achsah falling off the donkey (Judg. 1:14) echoes Rebecca falling off the camel (Gen.24:64), Achsah, asking her father for a blessing, echoes the scene in Genesis 24:60 where Rebecca's family blesses her before she leaves Haran. "O sister may you grow into thousands of myriads, may your offspring seize the gates of their foes." (The reference fits perfectly with the narrative of conquering the land as we read in Josh. 15:13-17).

Both Achsah and Rebecca negotiated the terms of their leaving the father's household (Judg. 1:15 and Gen. 24:55-58). Mentioning of wells, land, and blessing of children creates a strong connotation to Isaac, who also dwelled in the Negeb and dug wells (Gen 26-27). The location of Achsah's scene on the outskirts of Hebron is not accidental either, since Hebron is the place of the ancestral burial place (*Machpelah cave*). By linking the narratives, the biblical author signals that Achsah is like Rebecca, both praised for taking the initiative and being assertive maidens. Both used their agency to act.

On the national level, as Isaac and Rebecca succeeded Abraham and Sara, so Achsah and Othniel succeeded Caleb and the desert generation. (Kline suggests that this is the reason the narrative appears twice, once in Joshua, 14, 15 during the quest, and the second time, in Judges 1, once the people settled).²⁴⁷

Furthermore, by using "hyperlinked" texts, the biblical authors signal that Achsah, the new generation in the land, is the fulfillment of the blessing to Rebecca

²⁴⁷ Neriah Kline, "חברון ודביר מעבר לתקופת השופטים"

(mentioned above), and God's blessing and promise to Isaac: "Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; I will assign all these lands to you and your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham." (Gen.26:3).

The last and the most challenging narrative is King Saul offering his daughter to the one who would defeat Goliath. It wasn't uncommon for kings to marry off their daughters for political gains, and the reasons stated above:²⁴⁸

"And the men of Israel said, 'Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely, he has come up to defy Israel. And the king will enrich the man who kills him with great riches and will give him his daughter and make his father's house free in Israel.'" (1 Sam. 17:25).

As the biblical narrative put it, David killed Goliath with the help of God (1Sam. 17:45, 47). Later, Saul intentionally offered to marry his daughter Merab to David, however, with a sinister intention:

"Then Saul said to David, 'Here is my elder daughter Merab. I will give her to you for a wife. Only be valiant for me and fight the YHWH's battles.' For Saul thought, 'Let not my hand be against him, but let the hand of the Philistines be against him'" (1Sam.18:17).

David refused to marry Merab, and she was given to Adriel the Mehoiathite. The narrative continues with the statement that Michal, Saul's youngest daughter, loved David (1 Sam. 18:20). Saul capitalized on and manipulated Michal's love to offer her to David as well, repeating the baleful intention: "Saul thought, 'Let me give her to him,

²⁴⁸ See Caleb's reasoning for offering his only daughter Achsah to the one who would conquer *Kiryat Sepher*.

that she may be a snare for him and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him.’ Saul said to David a second time ‘You shall now be my son-in-law’” (1 Sam.18:21).

The narrative repeats three times the father’s malicious intentions and the theme of deceit appears again regarding the very high bride price: Then Saul said, “Thus shall you say to David, ‘The king desires no bride price except a hundred foreskins of the Philistines, that he may be avenged of the king’s enemies’ Now Saul thought to make David fall by the hand of the Philistines” (1 Sam. 18:25).

Why would a father offer his daughter to someone whom he wants dead? What is the role of Michal in the plot? Why does the text stipulate twice that Michal loved David? What is the reason for stressing that Michal will be the one who will bring David’s demise?

As in previous narratives, when a father marries off his daughter, it is a succession of the legal rights over the woman and sometimes land or other valuables. Michal is the symbol of the national succession of reign from Saul to David. As the narrative sets it, there is an interplay of her title: she is referred to as “Saul’s daughter” (1 Sam. 18:28) and later as “David’s wife” (1 Sam. 19:11), and thus she is the legitimate and “official” link for the crown. Later the theme of the succession of kings repeats in 2 Samuel:

“And David returned to bless his household. But Michal, the daughter of Saul, came out to meet David and said, ‘How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants’ female servants, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!’ And David said to Michal, ‘It was before YHWH, who chose me above your father and above all his house, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of YHWH—and I will celebrate before the YHWH’” (2 Sam. 6:20-21).

Here is an observation: in each generation where there was an important succession, the tales of fathers giving their daughters appear. Leah and Rachel signify the succession of the matriarchs, Achsah represents the succession from the desert generation to conquest and settling the land, and Michal embodies the succession of kings from Saul to David.

The daughters are the biblical links and the markers of succession.

Deceit by the fathers done by Laban and Saul (both demanding unrealistic bride price), could be understood as a literary device to grab the audience's attention, raise alertness, and signal that something important will happen.²⁴⁹

To conclude, after examining “meeting at the well” and “obtaining a husband” narratives, the maidens mentioned above are no longer perceived as vulnerable damsels but as powerful players in the saga of the Israelite people.

Ancient Near East

Marten Stol reminds us that the information the research cites is based on documents, poetry, and art, which mostly represent the wealthy elite or unusual circumstances that required a written record. Such circumstances could be protecting financial interests, the position of the first wife, or the inheritance rights of certain children.²⁵⁰ For the most,

²⁴⁹ Deceit is a literary device to signal something important is about to happen. See also Jacob's stealing the birthright (Gen.27) and Dinah's brothers avenging Dinah's rape (Gen. 34).

²⁵⁰ Stol, *Women in Ancient Near East*, 67.

betrothal agreements were done orally by the parents of both parties, mostly the fathers or the brothers. The time between the betrothal and the actual marriage could vary from a few months to a couple of years.

The betrothal ceremony included paying the bride price and anointing the woman with olive oil. Anointing symbolized a purification rite in preparation for a change of status to a “wife.” Anointing could be done by a messenger if the groom’s family lived far away. Ointments were mentioned in letters sent by the kingdoms of Mitanni and Babylonia to the Pharaoh. After promising to give the Pharaoh a woman to marry, they asked him to send a messenger to ‘pour oil on her head (*qaqqadu*).’²⁵¹ The ceremonies concluded by drinking a toast.

Wedding celebrations in Babylonia, Ancient Near East, and Greece lasted between a few days to a month. The ceremonies included rituals as bathing the bride, pouring oil and laying a crown on her head, marriage procession, veiling, showering with small items, and a *kirru*, ‘reception’ for the guests (which included bread, beer, and a sheep), a sheep was offered by the groom’s family to redeem the bride.²⁵²

The first sexual encounter between the bride and the groom had great importance, and as such, much was written about it in ancient mythology. During the Assyrian sacred marriage of the god Nabû and the goddess Tašmetu, the statues of the two gods stayed in

²⁵¹ Stol, *Women in Ancient Near East*, 80.

²⁵² Stol, *Women in Ancient Near East*, 100.

a bedroom for six days, from day 5 to day 10. Similarly, for the Babylonian marriage of Nabû and Nanaya, the statues stayed from day 11 to day 17 in the first month.²⁵³

In Sumerian marriage, the groom would appear with wedding gifts at the door of the bride's house and ask to be admitted. The bride, who had already bathed, dressed, and adorned herself, would open the door for him. Her opening the door was the symbolic action which made the marriage valid. After that, the bride and groom would each be escorted to the bride's room, where intercourse would take place. On the following morning, the bridal couple would preside at a rich banquet.²⁵⁴ The married couple had a special tent (or a room), which was guarded by the Best Man, at the compound of the marriage ceremonies for their union. The Best Man was also in charge of the bride's chastity and protecting her from demons and strangers.

Summary

Marriage as a union between families to ensure succession played a significant role both in ancient Israel's reality and as a literary motif in biblical narratives. The "meeting at the well" type scene indicated God's providence, "choosing" the right spouse for the biblical hero. The newly matched couple played an essential role in the fulfillment of God's promise and continuation of the nation.

²⁵³ For more examples, Stol, *Women in Ancient Near East*, 95.

²⁵⁴ Stol, *Women in Ancient Near East*, 93-94

To signal important successions, narratives of fathers marrying off their daughters appear; Laban marrying Leah and Rachel to Jacob signified succession of the matriarchs; Caleb Ben Jephunneh giving his daughter, Achsah, to the one who would conquer the town of *Kiryat Sepher* represented the succession of the desert generation to conquest and settling the land; Michal, the daughter of King Saul, wedded to David, marked the succession of reigns.

As literary heroines, these daughters are the biblical links between generations and markers of succession and continuation. From this perspective, these maidens are no longer perceived as vulnerable damsels but rather as powerful players in the saga of the Israelite people.

Barrenness

The ancient Israelite community was preoccupied with its survival and continuity.

Because of the high mortality rate due to war, famine, and disease, there was a constant need to replenish the family lines. Also, in an agrarian society, children were part of the economic workforce and thus crucial to the family's survival. Continuation of lineage, both in name and legacy, together with the economic aspect of passing on inheritance, were also important. In a patriarchal society, children, and sons, in particular, were to carry on the mantle.

From a national perspective, this concern was economic (working hands), political (soldiers), and theological (passing on the covenant to the next generation). Deuteronomy 6:6-7 expresses this concern: “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children...” For these reasons, children were invaluable.

As givers of life, women had the important task of keeping and replenishing the physical and economic strength of the family. Childbearing was the prime objective of women. In his book *And Sarah Laughed*, John Otwell states, “Childbearing was a social function in ancient Israel, and fecundity, barrenness, and loss of children were of urgent concern to men, women, and the nation.” He adds that having children was of such

importance that it became the norm by which divine reward was measured.²⁵⁵ It also became the yardstick by which women were measured by society and themselves.

Otwell concludes that because the Israelites saw all life as God's direct intervention, **the woman was perceived as the center of divine activity.** Understanding childbearing as a sacred act of God within the woman's body may clarify the commandment in Leviticus 12, in which the woman was commanded to isolate herself for at least thirty days (sixty days if she bore a daughter), offer a thanksgiving offering, and a ritual of purification after giving birth. Offerings, isolation, and purification were associated with priests or individuals who came in contact with God.²⁵⁶

Childbearing had both theological and national importance and was understood as an integral part of God's care for Israel. "Motherhood thus was not only a biological and sociological function. It was a sacred act of great magnitude which only the woman could perform."²⁵⁷

Theologically, God was the ultimate authority of fertility, as the name *Shadai* (breasts in Hebrew) means. This message was expressed by Jacob's blessing to his son

²⁵⁵ John H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed, The Status of Women in The Old Testament*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 50.

²⁵⁶ For a detailed exploration of the ritual of purification see the chapter on birth-giving-ritual.

²⁵⁷ John H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed*, 66.

Joseph: “By the God of your father who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above... blessings of the breasts and the womb” (Gen 49:25).

Ancient Israelites attributed conception and pregnancy to divine blessing. YHWH blessed the Israelites in Exodus 23 “No woman in your land shall miscarry or be barren; I will fulfill the number of your days” (Ex. 23:26). Yet, the blessing of fertility came with a warning against following the customs of other nations and worshipping other gods. YHWH alone controlled fertility and the land. Later, Deuteronomy 7 went a step further, conditioning fertility on the observance of YHWH’s commands:

And if you obey these rules and keep them, YHWH your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers. He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples. There shall not be male or female barren among you or your livestock (Deut. 7:12-14).

Thus, the lack of fertility (both of males and females) alluded to a lack of blessing for the household and was regarded as God’s disapproval. This bears with it theological and moral judgment, a false interpretation that impacted generations to come.

Ester Fuchs, in her book *Sexual Politics in The Biblical Narrative*, writes: “Barrenness thus becomes a moral as well as a physiological liability. The interpretation of a son’s birth as a form of divine reward entails stigmatization of barrenness as an

expression of moral inferiority.”²⁵⁸ This false interpretation caused and still causes considerable anguish to generations of women, as well as a judgment by society.

Another, more uplifting way to read biblical stories about barren women is to look for the underlying messages of hope and fulfillment of God’s promises. Moreover, we usually read each story on its own or in isolation. Yet when read in sequence, as the intertextual references point us to do, a greater theme unfolds with national implications. From this perspective, the barren woman is no longer “at fault” for her barrenness, but on the contrary, she is an important vehicle for the annunciation of the birth of a hero and salvation by God.

God’s ability to intervene in a woman’s body and “open the womb” is tied to God’s “remembering,” “hearing,” and “seeing” the afflicted mother (and metaphorically, the nation, as in Isaiah 54). This important theological message is built up through the seven narratives of “the barren women” type scene as explored in the following narratives.

Narrative

Robert Alter in his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative* alerts us to pay attention to variations of the same event in different narratives and characters. “As a rule, when we

²⁵⁸ Ester Fuchs, “Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman,” *Journal for the Study of The Old Testament* Supplement Series 310, (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 2003), 63.

can detect two versions of a single event, it is safe to assume that the writer has effected a montage of sources, and the question we might ask is *why* he should have done this.”²⁵⁹ Paying close attention to the “barren-woman” narratives, we should look for clues as to how these narratives complement each other, their role in the structure of the biblical narrative, and the theological message they convey.

Ester Fuchs in her book *Sexual Politics in The Biblical Narrative*, states: “By repeatedly presenting women as barren, by emphasizing that birth is an extraordinary event, and by insisting that maternity is determined by an agency external to the mother-figure, the annunciation type scene offers, again and again, a patriarchal interpretation of motherhood.”²⁶⁰

I disagree! I believe the biblical authors were not interested in the aspects of motherhood *per-se*, but to convey a greater, much more sophisticated message through the “barren woman-promised son” type scene. This type of scene was created as a literary construction to enhance and mark the birth of an important figure in the national narrative. Moreover, the intertextual connections between the narratives weave a tapestry of the Israelite’s history, with a strong message of survival and continuation.

²⁵⁹ Alter, *The Art*, 181.

²⁶⁰ Ester Fuchs, “Sexual Politics in The Biblical Narrative,” 48.

Sarah - Genesis 11, 16, 18, 21

Our first encounter with Sarah is in Genesis 11:30; the only information the biblical author shared about Sarah was that she was barren. This was to set the basic premise of the “barren woman” type scene. In Genesis 16, Sarah took Hagar, her slave-maid, as a surrogate womb to give birth to Ishmael.²⁶¹ In Genesis 18, when Abraham received a visit from three angels, he offered them a meal, and they announced to him that Sarah would be pregnant with a son of her own.

Sarah was a passive character in the encounter; all she could do was laugh to herself in disbelief. “So, Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I am withered, and my YHWH is old, shall I have pleasure?’ YHWH said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’” (Gen.18:12-13). Genesis 21 announced that God *pakad* פָּקַד (was present, remembered) Sarah, and as was said, Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham.

This is the basic structure of the “barren woman” type scene which leads to the annunciation of the birth of a special child. The child, in this case, was Isaac, the second patriarch in the Israelite’s identity narrative.

²⁶¹ More about Hagar and her importance see chapter on slavery.

Rebekah – Genesis 25

Genesis 25:21 reports that Rebekah, too, was barren. It was Isaac who prayed to God on her behalf; God responded to Isaac's plea, and Rebekah conceived. Yet again, Rebekah was passive, but after she conceived, she took matters into her own hands and went to inquire of God, and God answered her. Consequently, Rebekah gave birth to Jacob and Esau. Jacob thus became the third patriarch in the national narrative.

Leah and Rachel were Jacob's wives; although Rachel was the beloved one, Leah was the fertile one.

Leah - Genesis 29

Genesis 29 informs us that it was God who "opened" Leah's womb (Gen. 29:31). In the double competition between the sisters, both for Jacob's heart and contribution of children to the household, it was Leah who bore children. For each child Leah bore, she named him to convey God's relationship with herself: Reuven "God had *seen* my misery;" Shimon -- "God had *heard* that I am unloved;" Yehuda -- I will *thank* God" (Gen. 29:32-35).

Later, when Leah, too, had trouble conceiving, she also relied on her maidservant to bear children for her. Gad and Asher were added to the Jacobine household and received names invoking God (Gen. 30:9-12). God continued to '*hear*' Leah and '*give*' her children, thus Issachar-- "God has rewarded me," Zebulun-- "God had made me fertile," and Dinah were born (Gen.30: 17-21).

Rachel- Genesis 30

Consumed by agony and jealousy, Rachel demanded Jacob “to give her sons” (Gen 30:1). Jacob, in return, reiterated the biblical message that it was God who gave children, saying: “Am I in place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” Rachel turned to her servant Bilhah to bear children for her. Rachel named the sons born to her servant (Dan and Naftali) as her own, saying, “God has vindicated me; indeed He had heard my plea and given me a son.” (Gen. 30:6).

The third step in the efforts to bear children involved the use of the mandrakes (an aphrodisiacal plant believed to help with conception). Since each woman wanted what the other had, Rachel traded a night with Jacob for Leah’s Mandrakes.²⁶² Then, “God *remembered* Rachel, and God *heard* her and opened her womb” (Gen.30:22). This is a key element: both to announce Joseph's birth and stress the message that God hears and remembers (as was stated before by Leah).

The sons born to Leah and Rachel represent the twelve tribes of the Israelite nation. These children would later settle in Egypt, become “B’nai-Israel,” the people of Israel, fall into hardship and danger of annihilation, yet God will deliver them out of slavery in Egypt.

²⁶² Leah’s trading of the mandrakes reminds the reader of Esau’s trading of the birthright for a lentil stew. Both the mandrakes and the birthright are symbols of the continuation of the lineage.

The Mother of Samson - Judges 13

Samson's mother is presented to us as a nameless, barren woman. (her *role* in the plot was important, not her name or personality).²⁶³ God's angel appeared to her and told her that she was pregnant with a son. This son would be a *nazir*-- dedicated to God; therefore, she should avoid wine and ritually impure foods. The prophecy about the promised child involved a special assignment for him. As the one dedicated to God from birth, he would be the first to deliver Israel from the Philistines after forty years of affliction (Judg. 13:5).

The angel of God appeared before the woman twice, repeated the annunciation "you shall conceive and bear a son" three times (Judg. 13: 3,5,7), and instructed both the woman and her husband, Manoah, to avoid wine and ritually impure foods three times (Judg.13: 4,7,14). These literary clues point to the importance of the annunciation and the special role of the born son.

Manoah, like Abraham, offered a meal to the angel, but the angel refused, so Manoah prepared the meal offering to God. In the world of biblical literature, offering a meal to a stranger was the basis of hospitality, which created a code of reciprocity among the ancient settlements. Victor Matthews adds a theological perspective, which fits beautifully in the text as a play on the theme of reciprocity, "As hosts they did for others

²⁶³ See Zvi Brettler's conclusion in; Marc Zvi Brettler, "Who Was Samson's Real Father?" *TheTorah.com* (2017). <https://thetorah.com/article/who-was-samsons-real-father>

what their divine patron was doing for them.”²⁶⁴ The chapter ends with the announcement of the birth of a special son to God: “And the woman bore a son and named him Samson. And the young man grew, and YHWH blessed him. And the spirit of YHWH began to stir in him...” (Judg. 13:24-25).

Samson's name has the same root of *hearing* (שמע), a recurring theme in the “barren woman” type scene. Yet the story in Judges is also significant on a national level; this time, God heard the people of Israel and was personally involved in the “birth” of their judge and rescuer, who led the Israelites for twenty years (Judg. 15:20).

One cannot ignore the thematical references to the birth of Isaac in Genesis 18: the visit of the angels, offering of a meal, and a repeated promise of a son. Both sons were dedicated to God.²⁶⁵ This time the dedication to God was deliberately different. The biblical authors made it clear that dedication to God does not mean child sacrifice, as was understood in Isaac’s case (Genesis 22) and Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11). This time the biblical text specifies the role of the child as God’s messenger – to deliver the Israelites from the yoke of the Philistines.

²⁶⁴ Victor Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, “The Host and the Stranger” in *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 82-83.

²⁶⁵ In contrast to my interpretation of the narratives, Sudan Ackerman reviews the barren woman type scenes and notes “I would again insist that all the barren women stories reflect one theme. The God who fills a woman’s womb has the right to demand, in some fashion, the life that comes forth from it.” Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (NY: Doubleday Publishing Company, 1998), 193.

Hannah - 1 Samuel 1-2

The narrative about Hannah and the birth of her son, Samuel, is the culmination of the “barren woman” narratives when read as a sequence. In the pattern of Rachel and Leah, Hannah was the loved wife, yet she was barren and desperately longed for a child. In this case, the biblical author goes to great lengths to stress the starkness of Hannah’s situation. The chapter begins with a long genealogy of her husband, Elkanah, and continues with a detailed description of the scene at the temple in Shiloh, where Elkanah gave presents to both his wives.²⁶⁶

The phrase “But to Hannah, he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though YHWH had closed her womb,” is a literary mirror of the verse in Genesis 29:3: “When YHWH saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.” Hannah is referenced to Rachel; both were the loved wives and bore the “important” sons. (Also, Samson was from the tribe of Ephraim, which was related to Rachel. Thus, she would be the grandmother of Ephraim, Joseph’s son).

The authors added some family drama to make the story more intriguing, telling us that her rival, Peninnah, would taunt her that God had closed her womb (once again,

²⁶⁶ Garroway relates to this narrative and expands on fertility rituals in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East. Kristine Henriksen Garroway, "Turning to God When a Fertility Ritual Fails" *TheTorah.com* (2015). <https://thetorah.com/article/turning-to-god-when-a-fertility-ritual-fails>

references to Leah - Rachel relationships). In addition, Hannah's conversation with her husband, Elkanah, is once again a literary mirror to Rachel's conversation with her husband, Jacob, regarding the need to have sons. (Genesis 30:1-2).

These intertextual connections make the "literary stitches" connecting Hannah and her son to the narratives of the birth of the Israelite nation. These literary clues tell the audience that something important is about to happen: Hannah's son would be as important as Rachel's and Leah's sons to the national narrative.

The scene of Hannah's prayer at the temple was elaborated to stress the holiness of the coming child. Hannah vowed to God: "And she vowed a vow and said, 'O God of hosts, if you will look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to YHWH all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.'" (1 Sam.1:11).

It was Hannah "who made a deal with God" and dedicated her son to the service of God. There is an evolution of the concept of dedicating a child to God. The sophisticated intertextual references to Jephthah's making a deal with God to dedicate "whoever comes first out of his house" (Judges 11), and later the dedication of Samson to God as a *nazir* (Judges 13), expand and clarify the "good norm" of dedicating a child to God.

The repetition of the term "and a razor shall never touch his head" connects Samuel with Samson, a person God blessed from birth and God's spirit was with him.

The phonetic sound “Samuel-Samson” (שמואל - שמשון) also has the effect of linkage between the two heroes.

Hannah, as the protagonist of the story, is an active figure.²⁶⁷ She is a fully developed literary character and the climax of the advancement of the previous narratives: Sarah was passive and in disbelief; she gave her servant, Hagar, to Abraham as a surrogate womb. Rebekah relied on her husband to pray to God for her. Rachel and Leah both used the surrogate wombs of their maids, and Rachel asked others to take action on her behalf (she asked Jacob to give her sons and asked Leah to give her the Mandrakes).

Samson’s mother had a personal encounter with the angel of God, and the annunciation of her son was made directly to her twice (!). Then as a pregnant woman, she had to avoid wine and certain foods as preparation for the child who would be dedicated to God. Samson’s mother, though she did not have a name, was an active figure in the birth of her son.

In contrast, Hannah did not rely on her husband to pray for her, nor used surrogate wombs. Instead, she actively (and passionately) approached God in the temple, pleading and vowing to dedicate her child to God. And indeed, God has *remembered* her; she conceived and bore a son.

²⁶⁷ Protagonist is a literary term relating to the main character of the plot.

She named him “Samuel,” saying, “I have asked YHWH for him” (1 Sam. 1:19-20). The name Samuel (שמואל) is a phonological repetition of the verb *shama* – to hear, which serves as a reminder that God *heard* Hannah. Also, the sound of the name Hannah (חנה) is like *Annah*, (ענה) which in Hebrew means “answered” (Hannah, in Hebrew, means grace, favor).

The story's climax and the “barren woman” sequence occurred when Hannah brought her son to the temple. Her powerful words to the High Priest, Eli, were the theme of the narrative – a statement affirming that God heard, remembered, and answered her prayers. “And she said, ‘Oh, my YHWH! As you live, my YHWH, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to YHWH. For this child, I prayed, and YHWH has granted me my petition that I made to him’” (1 Sam. 1: 26-27).

Samuel later succeeded the High Priest Eli and became the priest who anointed the first king of Israel, Saul, in chapter 10. Tikva Frymer, in her article “Oracles of Saul,” notes a play on the verb *sha-al* to mean both a request and a loan from God. Tikva Frymer reads the Hebrew *hu-sa-ul*, to read –“he is Saul,” as foreshadowing the kingship of Saul. She explains: “Hannah’s request for a son and God’s granting of it foreshadow the way the people request a king and God grants their request; the play on Saul’s name intimates the one who will be given in request.”²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ Tikva Frymer, “Oracles of Saul” in *Reading the Woman of the Bible*, 307.

Frymer adds that not only did Hannah foretell the kingship of Saul, but she also proclaimed it.²⁶⁹ In a sophisticated build-up of the “annunciation” type scene, the reader understands that God is involved in creating “the announced.” Thus Hannah’s thanksgiving song is also an “annunciation” of the first king of Israel: “YHWH will judge the ends of the earth; He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed” (1 Samuel 2:10).

Thus, according to Frymer, Hannah, the climax of the “barren woman” type scene, has two roles: First, to be the mother of a promised son, Samuel. Second, on a national level, she is ‘announcing’ the next promised son to be delivered by God - King Saul. Hannah’s narrative also serves as a literary bridge to understanding the “barren woman” type scene as a national metaphor.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Frymer, *Reading the Woman of the Bible*, 307.

²⁷⁰ See Marc Zvi Brettler, "A Women’s Voice in the Psalter: A New Understanding of Psalm 113" *TheTorah.com* (2019). <https://thetorah.com/article/a-womens-voice-in-the-psalter-a-new-understanding-of-psalm-113>

The Shunammite Woman – 2 Kings 4

A wealthy woman from the village of Shunem generously created for the prophet Elisha a place to stay when he visited her village. In return, the prophet, endowed with God's power, proclaimed that she would bear a son within a year.

This narrative reflects Sarah's story in Genesis 18: a visit by God's messenger, the offering of hospitality, the annunciation of a child, disbelief by the woman, mentioning that her husband is an older man, and indeed, God delivered, and the child was born. Later, when the child grew, he fell ill and faced a sudden near-death experience. The prophet Elisha prayed to God for him and performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the child. The child was resurrected to life: "The child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes" (2 Kings 4:35).

This narrative is usually read as part of the "Elisha miracle stories" genre. Yet when read as part of the "barren woman" narratives, which allude to an important promise and its fulfillment, another layer to the story is revealed. Also, when following the textual references to Sarah, the mother of the nation, and Hagar and Ishmael, still more layers are revealed.

I suggest reading the stories about the Shunammite woman giving birth and the miraculous salvation of her promised son as metaphors for a national narrative. These metaphors reinforce the convention that God protects the Israelite nation during turbulent times. The biblical authors planted literary clues for us to understand this "personal" story as a national story: First, the national context of the son's birth story, both in the previous

and following chapters, is war, famine, and migration (see 2 Kings 8). Israel was in a strenuous relation with its neighbors, and its survival was at stake.

Second, both the Shunammite woman and her son are nameless, which may mean they represent something greater than their own story; they are archetypes. Third, the name Elisha (אלישע) in Hebrew implies *Eli-ysha* (אלי-ישע) “My God will bring salvation” which has a national tone to it.

Fourth, when the Shunammite woman was asked by Elisha what was her wish, she answered, “I live among my people” (2 Kings 4:14), indicating that whatever happened to her would happen to her people (the Israelites).

Last, when her child was at risk of dying, God, through Elisha, saved the son. The phrase “...and the boy opened his eyes” echoed Hagar’s opening her eyes to see the well which saved her and her son, Ishmael. Later, Ishmael became a great nation. There is a parallel here: “opening the eyes” represents rescue, while “a son” may represent a nation. The “promised son” in this story represents the Israelite nation. The message implies: as God saved the “promised child,” God will save the nation.

Isaiah 54 - Israel as a Nation

In a beautiful consolation prophecy, Isaiah described the future of Israel as a nation. The use of the “barren woman” type scene became a fleshed-out metaphor for Israel. The

convention meticulously built in the previous narratives reaffirmed God's promise to the Israelites would be fulfilled.²⁷¹

“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! ‘For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married,’ says YHWH” (Isa. 54:1).

God promised the “barren woman” that her children would be numerous, her offspring would dispossess nations and re-habit desolate towns (Isa 54:3). Since God is always a partner in the conception of the “barren woman,” all her children would be the children of God and live in peace. “All your children shall be taught by YHWH, and great shall be the peace of your children” (Isaiah 54:13).

Intermediate Summary

Reading the narratives regarding barren women in sequence reveals a “build-up” of a theme. The theme holds a great promise for the Israelite people, as bearing a child means continuation. The narratives begin with Sarah, the mother of Isaac, and the matriarch of the Israelite nation continues with Rebekah, the mother of Jacob, one of the patriarchs.

²⁷¹ See previous note; Zvi Bretler's claims that during postexilic times Psalm 113, which echoed Hannah's prayer and served as a psalm of personal thanksgiving recited by a barren woman after giving birth, was transformed to a national dimension to be understood as Israel's redemption.

The elaborate narrative regarding Leah and Rachel tells us that God was an active partner in the birth of *all* the Israelite tribes. Adding to the theme, the mother of Samson gave birth to a hero who saved Israel from the Philistines and was active for twenty years in the time of the Judges. Then, Hannah gave birth to Samuel, the priest who announced the Kingdom of Saul and David. Adding to the sequence, the woman from Shunem gave birth to a son during the turbulent times of the Kings, and last, Isaiah used the well-established type scene of the “barren woman,” whom God heard and answered her pleas, as a metaphor for a national consolation to the people of Israel.

Moreover, all the “promised sons” faced real danger to their lives. Yet, all were saved by God: The binding of Isaac (Gen 22), Jacob running for his life to Haran (Gen 28), Joseph, Rachel’s son, being thrown into a pit and later sold to slavery in Egypt (Gen 37) – All these sons thus foreshadowing the future of the rest of the Israelite tribes and the Israelite nation (Gen. 47 and Num1). In addition, Samson faced real danger fighting the Philistines (Judg.14-16), Samuel represented the war between the kingdom of Saul and David, and last, the son of the Shunammite woman (as representing Israel) faced a near-death experience.

All these narratives reiterate that God’s promise of protection was repeated and fulfilled throughout the Israelite’s biblical history. “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Genesis 28:15).

Ancient Near East

The role of a woman in the ancient world was to bear and raise children. When that did not happen, the household's social structure was disrupted. Moreover, infertility in the ancient world was also an economic misfortune since children were part of the family's economic base, and the wife's dowry, together with the "bride worth," was due in full *only* after the birth of the first child.²⁷²

Kristin Garroway, in her book *Growing Up in Ancient Israel*, notes that in a world where children were valued in multiple ways (economic, workforce, and the perpetrators of the cult of the ancestors), barrenness was looked upon as a disability or a curse. In the ancient world, women without children were socially stigmatized and had no financial security. The stigma surrounding barrenness was due to the departure from social norms, which meant a woman's place was in the home, bearing and raising children, thus contributing to the household's economy and survival.²⁷³

The Laws of Hammurabi allow the repudiation of a childless wife. "If a man intends to divorce his first-ranking wife who did not bear him children, he shall give her

²⁷² Kristine Garroway, *Infertility in the Ancient World*, Hebrew Union College, HUC Connect Series, March 9, 2021. <http://huc.edu/huc-connect/online-learning-archive>
<https://vimeo.com/528453081>

²⁷³ Garroway, *Growing Up in Ancient Israel*, 28-29.

silver as much as her bride price and restore to her the dowry that she brought from her father's house, and he shall divorce her (§ 138).”²⁷⁴

Ancient Near East texts refer to male and female infertility and prescribe different methods and potions to help. Methods include using aphrodisiacal plants (such as mandrake), sympathetic magic (a hollow rock with a pebble inside, a small figurine to resemble a small child), inserting pessary with potions, fumigation of the vagina, and more.²⁷⁵ Adoption (mostly of sons), taking a second wife, and a ‘surrogate womb’ of a slave girl or a concubine were also common.

Male infertility was compared to weak performance “on the battlefield” and other military references.²⁷⁶ Infertility also had national and political influences. The fear of a male's infertility was used as a curse on a vassal who dared to break a treaty or a vow “to have salt sown upon him,” meaning he would be dried out and become infertile.²⁷⁷

Mesopotamians believed in the goddesses of fertility *Inanna* and *Ishtar*, and the Ugaritic and Canaanites worshiped *El* and *Asherah* as sources of fertility. Baal was the god of rain and thus controlled the fertility of vegetation. The ancestor gods (*teraphim*)

²⁷⁴ Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 163.

²⁷⁵ See elaborate discussion on ancient means to cure infertility in Garroway, *Growing Up*, 31-33.

²⁷⁶ Interestingly, in both ancient and modern Hebrew the word for weaponry is “*klay zien*” (כלי-זין) which reference to male genethliac.

²⁷⁷ Garroway, *Growing Up*, 30.

granted fertility to the family, and other gods were worshiped to invoke the blessing of fertility.

Hennie Marsman, in her book *Women in Ugarit and Israel, their Social and Religious Position In The Context of The Ancient Near East*, mentions that the Israelite concept of YHWH/ El as the God who gives the blessing of offspring was a direct continuation of the Canaanite traditions about El. She adds, “YHWH was regarded as the Father and Mother of his people; Thus, he could be compared to a child-bearing woman.”²⁷⁸

Summary

Bearing children in the ancient world had not only a personal and familial impact but also social, national, and theological aspects. Theologically, children were considered a gift from God. In the case of infertility, the stress on the woman and her family to produce a child led to different methods:

As mentioned in both biblical and ancient Near East sources, families used many avenues to ensure a child: prayer as direct communication with God, the ‘surrogate womb’ of a slave-girl, medical herbs, and potions. Vows to God and adoption were also part of the means to ensure the continuation of the family.

²⁷⁸ Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in The Context Of The Ancient Near East*, (Leiden-Boston: Brill Publishing, 2003), 226-227.

The importance of bearing children was so immense that narratives regarding barren women who gave birth due to God's intervention were developed. These stories are called the "barren woman" type scene by literary scholars. These types of scenes involve a visit by angels, direct communication with God, annunciation of the promised child by God, and a unique destiny of the child.

These narratives, read together, point to the important theme of continuity in the face of vulnerability, both of the mother and the child. The direct message which flows throughout the narratives is that God hears, remembers and, acts. God is involved in every detail of the child's life, from conception to deliverance.

There is also a national message which is fleshed out through these narratives. Sarah, the mother of the Israelite nation, was barren; God was with her and helped her to conceive a nation. The following narratives in the sequence cover the birth of the tribes of Israel, the period of the judges, and the kings until the Babylonian Exile. This sequence "proves" to the audience that God was there throughout the history of the Israelites, from conception to exile and restoration.

Moreover, as was demonstrated by this collection of narratives, if Israel as a nation is metaphorically the "barren woman" (as in Isaiah 54) at times, then, regardless of Israel's fragility and vulnerability, there is always redemption by God and continuity of the nation.

Adultery

Ancient Israel's (agrarian) society was dependent on close familial ties within the tribe. These ties constituted a strong emphasis on the transaction of land within the tribal territory. In addition, the social structure of the Israelite society depended on the stability of the family. Thus marriage was considered an “eternal bond” (*Brit-Olam*) to last for a lifetime. Perhaps for that reason, we have very few references to divorce in the biblical literature and no laws regarding or regulating divorce.²⁷⁹

In general, in ancient times, the main reason for divorce was adultery yet, we have a ritual designed to soothe and disarm the husband's jealousy and allegations of his wife's adultery, to keep the family unit intact, and protect the wife.

Law

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

“When a man takes a wife and marries her if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house” (Deut 24:1).

²⁷⁹ As we saw in the chapter on maidenhood, the laws that dealt with divorce (Deut 22:13-29), did not, in fact, allow for divorce. However, there were cases when a husband could divorce his wife (see Deut 24:1). In most cases, when small sums of money or property were involved, divorce, like marriage or adoption was done orally.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 refers to a specific prohibition against re-marrying a wife after divorcing her and her marriage to another man. Adele Berlin and Diana Lipton suggest that this prohibition possibly was meant to deter quick divorce, promiscuity, and prevent paternity issues.²⁸⁰

Eckart Otto claims that the man's title to his ex-wife was restricted not to preserve the patriarchal family but rather to limit the divorce of women and at the same time "to give women the dignity of being legal subjects of their own, independent of titles and the decisions of men."²⁸¹

The cause for divorce in Deuteronomy 24 was not specified; "*ervat davar* (עֲרֵבָה) דָּבָר could mean "anything unseemly" or "indecent." In ancient times, most divorces were initiated by men due to unfaithfulness or adultery.²⁸² (Yet marriage contracts from the fifth-century BCE in the Jewish community of Elephantine showed that women, too, could initiate the divorce).²⁸³

²⁸⁰ Adele Berlin, Diana Lipton, *The Torah*, 1185.

²⁸¹ Eckart Otto, "False Weights in the Scales of Biblical Justice? Different Views of Women from Patriarchy to Religious Equality in the Book of Deuteronomy." In *Gender and Law*, 138.

²⁸² Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 190-191. Marsman argues that in contrast to Mesopotamian laws, Israelite women did not have the right to initiate divorce against their husbands. More so, it would be difficult and even dangerous because of the threat of adultery.

²⁸³ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *The Torah*, 1179.

The prophets used the theme of adultery and divorce to warn the Israelite community against worshipping other Gods, especially Baal. The prophet Jeremiah related to the verse in Deuteronomy 24, using the analogy of the faithless wife in his prophecy to Israel: “If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man’s wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers, and would you return to me? So declares YHWH” (Jer 3:1).

The theme of divorce was relatable to the (male) audience, and its harsh consequences were understood as almost a social taboo.²⁸⁴ Thus, the use of divorce as a metaphor was a powerful “threat,” which the prophets Hosea and Isaiah implied (relating the “divorce” as the break of the covenant between God and the people of Israel or Zion/Jerusalem). “Thus says YHWH: ‘Where is your mother’s certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions, your mother was sent away” (Isa 50:1).

Carol Meyers explains the importance of fidelity and the harshness of laws against adultery: “With the household's land being not only its life but also its identity, maintaining it within the household patrilineage was highly valued, making it critical that

²⁸⁴ Till today, in many cultures, divorce is frowned upon, considered a social taboo, or completely forbidden.

the man's offspring were his own. Thus concerns over inheritance were the background of many sex regulations."²⁸⁵

Victor Matthews, in his article "Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Legal Situations in the Hebrew Bible," claims that the laws and teaching relating to sexual matters are not only concerned with the sexual relationship of individuals and couples but also with the social and economic relationship between the households in the village. Thus, the risks of adultery are far beyond domestic matters: "Promiscuity in the world of the biblical literature is not simply a lack of sexual discretion, but a symptom of the risks that the household is taking with its land and children."²⁸⁶

Thus the importance of protecting the honor of the women (wives, sisters, and daughters) was tied to sexual purity and reflected on the ability to protect the other members of the household.²⁸⁷ Adultery thus posed a serious threat to the family's stability, economy, and societal norms. It was considered an offense on the husband's property,²⁸⁸ God's moral law of conduct, and the purity of the land.

²⁸⁵ Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 200.

²⁸⁶ Victor H. Matthews, "Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Legal Situations in the Hebrew Bible," in *Gender in Law*, 97, 104.

²⁸⁷ See also Mary Douglas in the chapter on maidenhood.

²⁸⁸ See Sandie Gravett p.116 footnote 202.

Such was the threat that capital punishment for both parties was instituted: “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Lev 20:10). This law is part of the Holiness Code of the book of Leviticus, which tells us about its importance. The term ‘*mot- yumat*’ (מות-יומת) emphasizes the death penalty, which implies no leniency in punishment.²⁸⁹

Deuteronomy 22:22 repeats the death penalty for both the man and the woman and adds the moral justification: “So you shall purge the evil from Israel.” Hennie Marsman notes that this is consistent with the Deuteronomic convention that the whole Israelite community is responsible for assuring God’s blessings by obeying and enforcing obedience to God’s laws.

Cynthia Edenburg, in her article “Deuteronomy's Uncompromising Demand for Women's Sexual Fidelity,” notes that the Deuteronomic authors linked religious apostasy and sexual misconduct. She claims that the demand for fidelity is both marital and political *metaphors*. She concludes that the harsh laws in Deuteronomy 22 “are thus symbolic and ideal, and we cannot be sure how the Deuteronomists would have dealt with the actual cases outlined here.”²⁹⁰ (Deuteronomy 22:23-29 addresses scenarios of

²⁸⁹ The combination of absolute infinitive and a verb in Hebrew grammar, ‘*mot- yumat*’ (מות-יומת) is used as a linguistic device for emphasis.

²⁹⁰ See Cynthia Edenburg’s conclusion in “Deuteronomy's Uncompromising Demand for Women's Sexual Fidelity” *TheTorah.com* (2014).
<https://thetorah.com/article/deuteronomys-uncompromising-demand-for-womens-sexual-fidelity>

sexual relations with a betrothed maiden, which was developed in the chapter on Maidenhood).

The death penalty for both the man and the woman required two eyewitnesses (Deu17:6). However, when there were no witnesses, just the husband's suspicion, the ritual of the "bitter water" or the "revealing water" resolved the issue by religious-ritual means.²⁹¹

Law/ Ritual

Numbers 5:11-24

Numbers specified a case where a husband had unsubstantiated suspicions towards his wife for being an adulteress, yet there were no witnesses nor proof. In such a case, the man brought his wife in front of the priest together with a small offering: "an offering of jealousy, a meal-offering of remembrance which recalls wrongdoing" (Num 5:15). The priest mixed holy water with earth from the sanctuary and presented the woman "for a trial" before God.

²⁹¹ Tikva Frymer -Kensky in her article "The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah" has a detailed discussion on the meaning of the term "*meararim and marim*," (מי המרים) she concludes with coining the term "waters of instruction", "waters of revelation" (revealing the guilt or innocence of the suspected woman). "The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah (Numbers V 11-31)" in *Woman in the Hebrew Bible*, Edited by Alice Bach, Routledge, NY, and London, 1999), 463-474.

The priest then adjured the wife: if she were innocent, the “revealing water” would do her no harm, yet if indeed she transgressed and committed adultery, the “revealing water” would make her thigh sag and her belly distend. The woman said “amen” to the oath and drank the “revealing water.”

The priest performed the ritual of the guilt offering and brought the woman in front of the altar. The woman drank the “revealing water” again; “then, if she has defiled herself and has broken faith with her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away, and the woman shall become a curse among her people. But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be free and shall conceive children” (Num 5:27-28).

The chapter ends with a statement “this is the law in a case of jealousy.”²⁹² It is noteworthy that the biblical literature relates to this law as “case of jealousy” and not “a case of adultery” (!) as a later rabbinic tradition did, calling it a case of *Sotah*.

It is also important to note that according to this chapter, even if the woman was found guilty during the trial, she was not put to death (!) “the wife shall become a curse among her people” (Num 5:27). There is a scholarly debate whether this ritual substituted the law in Leviticus 10:20, which ascribed death for both parties guilty of adultery, or

²⁹² Tamara Cohen Eskenazi observes that there was no procedure for the man who was the necessary suspect of adultery, along with the woman. *The Torah*, 821.

was this just the verification of adultery.²⁹³ On the other hand, if she is proven innocent, the text ascribes that the woman will conceive and bear a child, signifying God's approval and blessing.

Jacob Milgrom, in his article "The Case of the Suspected Adulteress, Numbers 5:11-31 Redaction and Meaning," examined the meaning of the structure and many repetitions found in this legal case; he concluded: "as the text repeats with staccato emphasis -- that the community and, especially, the overwrought husband may not give way to their passion to lynch her. Indeed, even if proven guilty by the ordeal, they may not put her to death. God has provided that the punishment be built into the ordeal, and there is no need for human mediation."²⁹⁴

Victor Matthews notes that this trial by ordeal is a unique biblical example of a complex solution to a serious problem involving women's lives, marital relations, and communal order.²⁹⁵ The solution involved a ritual done by a priest, invoking holiness, a legal construct of law, medical knowledge, and a magical/ mythical procedure. The ordeal was a judicial institution designed to resolve conflicts between households that

²⁹³ Rhona Burnette Bletsch, "Woman Accused of Unfaithfulness" in *Women in Scripture*, 216-217. And Tamara Cohn Eshkenazi, *The Torah*, 822.

²⁹⁴ Jacob Milgrom "The Case of the Suspected Adulteress, Numbers 5:11-31 Redaction and Meaning," in *Woman in the Hebrew Bible*, 480.

²⁹⁵ See also a similar case of the husband suspecting that his wife was not a virgin and a public trial in Deuteronomy 22:13-21 as was discussed in the chapter on virginity.

could not be resolved by the elders of the village and to re-establish harmony in the family and the village.²⁹⁶

According to Matthews, the “revealing water” ritual was intended to appease and soothe the husband’s anxiety, expunge guilt and mistrust, and protect the (innocent) woman’s life, well-being, and reputation in the community. All that while, the ritual attempted to maintain the religious and societal prohibition against adultery.

The very detailed and repetitive wording carefully and deliberately avoided using the technical terms for an adulteress woman, *noefet* (נוֹאֲפֶת) or *sotah* (סוֹטָה), averting doubt and suspicion in the audience’s mind. Milgrom adds that the “glaring omission of the term *na’ap* [concerning the adulteress woman] is, then, but another indication that her punishment lies outside the human court.”²⁹⁷

As to the details of the “trial by ordeal,” Milgrom compares the case of the suspected adulteress to the case of the suspected man who cursed God. Both are offenses against God, and both have no witnesses. Thus without witnesses, the woman’s case is transferred to the divine jurisdiction; “apprehended adultery remains punishable only by God, and there is no need or warrant for human mediation.”²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Matthews, “Honor and Shame,” in *Gender in Law*, 104.

²⁹⁷ Jacob Milgrom “The Case of the Suspected Adulteress,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 480.

²⁹⁸ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 293.

The appearance before God, a holy mixture of water, the oath, and the gravitas of the priest's presence and the altar were sufficient triggers for the woman to confess her wrongdoing if indeed there was any. The mixture of the holy water and earth from the altar, while its medical properties are not clear, its symbolism is: If the woman were pure, her body would not reject the pure water; however, if she were impure, her body would reject it.

Kristine Garroway explains that “the water of bitterness” may act like modern-day miscarriage drugs such as *Misoprostol* and *Cytotec*; the latter has a bitter taste and causes “bleeding, cramping, swelling, and finally the evacuation of the womb.” Thus, the miscarriage not only proved the adulterous affair but, more importantly, from the husband’s and the societal perspective, it would also terminate the illegitimate child.²⁹⁹ Yet, if there were no pregnancy, the water would be innocuous. Thus not only was no harm done to the woman physically, but also she would be acquitted from guilt or suspicion.

Rhona Burnette Bletsch, in her article “Woman Accused of Unfaithfulness,” concludes: “Thus, while landing a tongue-in-cheek dignity to male paranoia, the law ultimately provides an almost transparent charade to pacify the distraught husband.” She adds that the trial terms ensured the fertility, health, and reputation of the suspected woman. Remarkably, “[e]ven though the husband is given a forum for voicing his

²⁹⁹ Kristine Garroway, *Growing Up*, 38-39.

suspensions, the law reveals a willingness to accept a woman's word in matters of adultery in the absence of contrary evidence."³⁰⁰

Furthermore, the scholar H.C. Brichto suggests that the public ritual was designed to protect the woman since the husband would think twice if he wanted to jeopardize his household's honor in a shameful public drama; "it required the husband to 'put up or shut up.'"³⁰¹ Victor Matthews adds that the community is thus restrained from male action towards the suspected woman since her punishment will come from God. Jack Sasson adds that the woman is presumed innocent and is given an opportunity to vindicate herself.³⁰²

Jerusalem as the Adulterous Wife

The prophets Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, and Nahum used the type scene of "adulteress wife" relating to Jerusalem as the wife of God. Among the many harsh prophecies of God's revenge (including graphic descriptions of death and humiliation to Jerusalem and its inhabitants), they all repeat the theme of exposing the wife's nakedness as a public humiliation.³⁰³ "Behold, I am against you, declares YHWH the God of hosts, and will lift

³⁰⁰ Bletsch, "Woman Accused" in *Women in Scripture*, 217.

³⁰¹ H.C Brichto, "The Case of the SOTA" p. 67 as was cited in Victor H. Matthews, "Honor and Shame," in *Gender in Law*, 107.

³⁰² Jack Sasson "Numbers 5 and the 'Waters of Judgment'" in *Woman in the Hebrew Bible*, 484.

³⁰³ Jeremiah 13:26-27, Hosea 2:5, Ezek 16:37, Ezek 23:25

up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame” (Nahum 3:5).

Hennie Marsman suggests that perhaps a ritual of public stripping preceded a divorce of an adulteress woman. She adds that in the neighboring civilizations, cutting off the nose and the ears of an adulteress woman was also practiced (such practice is mentioned in Ezekiel 23:25). However, no other ancient-world scholars mentioned the existence of such practice of public humiliation or scarring an adulteress wife, instead of the death penalty or “trial by ordeal” for such a serious sin across cultures.

It is important to note that humiliation, divorce, and even the great suffering of Jerusalem, the unfaithful wife, do not have the finality of the death penalty. And indeed, all these prophets include in their horrific and unforgiving prophecies the restoration of the relationship between God and his wife Jerusalem (Zion). “For YHWH comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of YHWH; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song” (Isaiah 51:3).

Hosea 1-3

Phyllis Bird, in her article “To Play the Harlot,” attests that Hosea’s harsh words were not aimed towards women but rather towards his male audience. The sexual metaphor and marital life scene were rhetorical devices to get his audience’s attention and agreement

and then “flip” the scenario on them. (“flipping” of meaning was a common rhetorical practice of prophets). She concludes: ³⁰⁴

The metaphorical use of *znh* (זִנְיָה) invokes two familiar and linguistically identified images of dishonor in the Israelite culture, the common prostitute and the promiscuous daughter or a wife. As a sexual metaphor, it points to the sexual nature of the activity it represents. Its female orientation does not single out women for condemnation; it is used rather as a rhetorical device to expose men’s sin. By appealing to the common stereotypes and interests of a primarily male audience, Hosea turns their accusation against them. It is easy for the patriarchal society to see the guilt of a “fallen woman;” Hosea says, “You (male Israel) are that woman!”

Mary Joan Winn Leith, in her article “Verse and Reverse the Transformation of the Woman, Israel, in Hosea 1-3,” considers the creation of Israel, people of God, as a “mythic journey that conforms closely to the pattern of rite of passage.”³⁰⁵ As such, the symbolism of death and rebirth plays out, in which the “[T]he novice dies to his profane, non-regenerate life to be reborn to a new, sanctified existence....”³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ Phyllis Bird in her article “To Play the Harlot,” in *Gender Difference in Ancient Israel*, Peggy L. Day Ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 89.

³⁰⁵ Mary Joan Winn Leith “Verse and Reverse the Transformation of the Woman, Israel, in Hosea 1-3” in *Gender Difference*, 95.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

Framing the narrative in Hosea 1-2 in this socio-anthropological understanding makes sense, provides a good explanation to the unfolding of the narrative, and above all, provides new hope for the rebirth of the people of Israel, the new covenant with God:

And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know YHWH (Hosea 2:18-20).

Ancient Near East

In Mesopotamia, Nuzi, and Neo- Babylonian civilizations, almost exclusively, only husbands had the right to dissolve marriages and divorce their wives. Adultery or financial misconduct were the main reasons for divorce.³⁰⁷ (In Mesopotamia, infertility of the woman or a serious illness were not grounds for divorce).

If the wife expressed a wish for divorce, she would be suspected of adultery. If not validated by the authorities of her town, she would be thrown into the river and suffer death by drowning (as was the punishment for adultery). However, if the wife were without fault and could prove to the authorities that her husband was disparaging her, she could leave and take her dowry with her.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷ For extensive documentation and discussion on divorce see Marten Stol, "Divorce," *Women in the Ancient Near East*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 209-233. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614512639-011>

³⁰⁸ Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 175.

In Egypt, however, women too had the right to dissolve marriages based on the husband's infidelity. Yet infertility of the woman, or not bearing sons, was a major cause for divorce, next to infidelity and "disliking the woman."³⁰⁹

In the Egyptian divorce contracts, the wife had the right to one-third of the mutual property together with her dowry. The party who initiated the divorce (the husband or the wife) would pay a certain sum to the other party as compensation for the dissolution of a contract.³¹⁰

Marsman adds that if the charges of adultery were determined beyond doubt, the wrongdoers could receive capital punishment. (For the man, it was a question of whether he knew the woman was married; for the woman, it was a question of consent, did she come to his house or meet the man in a tavern, for example). However, the sentence could be converted into a less severe punishment, such as mutilation (cutting off the woman's nose and the castration of the man) and public humiliation by being paraded (perhaps naked) in the city. Sometimes ransom was paid by the families to avoid capital punishment.³¹¹

³⁰⁹ Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 176.

³¹⁰ Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 178-179.

³¹¹ Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 174, see there footnote 30, disputing the existence of this practice.

The code of Hammurabi (LH 131 and 132) regarded cases in which the wife was accused of adultery, yet there were no witnesses. When it was a private matter between the husband and the wife, she had to swear “in the name of god.” (Using the name of a god falsely was a grave and serious matter; god would punish her). Sometimes she had to pledge her loyalty to her husband in a public ceremony.

Mathews explains that in more serious cases, when the woman was condemned publicly by others as an adulteress, but without evidence, more stringent measures were required to lift the veil of suspicions and shame. The River Ordeal was performed: the woman would be thrown into the river; if she survived, she was pronounced innocent by divine judgment and would return to her status and husband. (The earliest evidence of such ordeal dates to 2460 BCE).

According to Middle Assyrian laws, her accusers then would pay fines (to her husband) or undergo physical punishment.³¹² Yet, according to Egyptian rules, the accusing husband would pay compensation to his wife. Matthew notes that the laws for restitution were created to prevent the use of slander as a means to damage a person’s or a household’s reputation. Thus, reputation had not only social importance but also financial implications.

³¹² Matthews, “Honor and Shame”, in *Gender and Law*, 106-107.

Summary

It is important to note again that adultery in ancient times was considered a grave offense against the family structure, the well-being of the community, and God. For such an offense, capital punishment for both the man and the woman was ascribed. Yet when there were no two eyewitnesses to the adultery, the community could not proceed with the punishment, and the unresolved accusations “hung in the air,” disturbing marital relationships and even endangering the wife due to her husband’s jealousy.

Although some modern feminist scholars consider the trial of the “revealing water” misogynistic, demonstrating the vulnerability of the woman and the privileged position of men in Israelite society,³¹³ others, including myself, believe that in reality, at that time, the ritual protected the woman from her husband’s (or other members in the community) unsubstantiated suspicions.³¹⁴

This law and ritual protected women's lives, who otherwise would be stoned to death as adulterous, without disrupting the family unit and the social order in the community. The need for a long and detailed procedure, a combination of law and ritual,

³¹³ *The Torah*, 281, and Alice Bach, *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 462.

³¹⁴ See also Hanna Liss, "The Sotah Ritual: Permitting a Jealous Husband to Remain with His Wife" *TheTorah.com* (2019). <https://thetorah.com/article/the-sotah-ritual-permitting-a-jealous-husband-to-remain-with-his-wife>

speaks of its importance to ensure life will not be harmed, yet adultery will be “wiped off the land.”

Last, it is important to appreciate that the biblical authors presumed the woman innocent, avoiding such judgmental terms as *noefet* or *sotah*, and allowed her to prove her innocence via the trial by ordeal. Further, the biblical literature states that if she is innocent, she will conceive. Thus, from a vulnerable, near-death situation, the woman has a chance to be blessed with a child and continue her life and the family's legacy, which was considered the highest blessing and approval by God.

Incest

Sexuality, as means of reproduction, was an important component of the family unit and thus needed to be guarded and monitored.^{315,316} Tikva Frymer, in her article “Sexual politics in the Hebrew Bible,” claims that the biblical laws regarding sexual behavior “seek to control sexual behavior by delineating the proper parameters of sexual activity- those relationships and time in which it is possible. Sexual behavior was not free.”³¹⁷

Frymer notes that in the biblical mindset, issues such as adultery, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality are not private affairs in the family realm but rather have an impact on the national well-being and the purity of the land, and consequently on the ability of the Israelites to inhabit the land. The law in Leviticus 20:22 is very explicit: “You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out.”

To attest to the importance that the Israelite society placed on proper sexual conduct, we should note the location of the laws regulating sexual behavior. *Parashat*

³¹⁵ The Levirate law (Deut. 25:5-6) is an example of the importance biblical society put on the rights of reproduction and continuity of the family line. **It is the only time** a brother-in-law is allowed to have sex with the wife of a deceased brother. This law will be discussed thoroughly in the chapter on widowhood.

³¹⁶ For different perspectives to why incest was forbidden see Marty Lockshin, "Why the Torah Prohibits Incest" *TheTorah.com* (2017). <https://thetorah.com/article/why-the-torah-prohibits-incest>

³¹⁷ Tikva Frymer-Kensky “Sexual politics in the Hebrew Bible” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, Edited by Alice Bach (Routledge, NY and London, 1999), 295.

Kedoshim, or the “Code of Holiness” chapters 18-20 of the book of Leviticus, is in the center and most important part of the book.

Further, based on Jacob Milgrom’s profound understanding of this section of laws,³¹⁸ I would like to suggest that the laws in the Code of Holiness were created to protect the vulnerable people in society, those who could not fend for themselves. Women (and young males) were most often among the vulnerable members of the extended household under the legal authority of the dominant males. They needed laws with God’s authority to protect them from the physical and legal power of the men in the household. The Laws in Leviticus 18 and 20 do just that. These laws were later reiterated in Deuteronomy 27:20-23, during the renewal of the covenant between the Israelites and God, just before entering the land, with severe punishments detailed in the following chapter for greater emphasis.

Law

Leviticus 18 and 20

Leviticus 18: 6 states categorically, “None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am YHWH.” Then, to clarify and avoid any misunderstanding and, therefore, mistreatment of women in the household, the chapter is

³¹⁸ Jacob Milgram, *Leviticus*, 175-259.

dedicated to articulating the laws of proper conduct. Chapter 20 follows and specifies the severe punishments of such transgression.

The laws in Leviticus 18: 6-18 articulate that *all* female family members, including stepdaughters, stepsisters, and in-laws, to the third generation of granddaughters, are off-limits. The term “to uncover her nakedness” is a euphemism for illicit sexual relationships, including biological and marital relatives.

Jacob Milgrom based his observation on Maimonides’ “Guide to the Perplexed” who examined these laws and inferred that these laws protect the defenseless unmarried woman (a maiden, divorced, or widow) from the male members of her resident clan. Further, he cites J.R Ziskind, “The Missing Daughter in Leviticus xviii” who states:³¹⁹

Women could no longer be handed around to other men in the family as wives and concubines...The rules forbidding a man to marry a woman and then to marry or make a concubine of her mother, daughter, or sister prevented the unseemliness of a man moving from one member of a woman’s family to another. And thus ended an abuse in the practice of polygamy (Lev 18:17-18).

However, as some biblical scholars noted, there is no explicit prohibition of incest relations between a father and his daughter. Some scholars state that the daughter is included under the meta law of Leviticus 18:6, regarding (that the daughter is) his “own

³¹⁹ J.R Ziskind, “The Missing Daughter in Leviticus xviii” *Vetus Testamentum* 46:125-130 (1996) cited in Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 196.

flesh” (שאר בשרו), others argue that the law in 18:17 addressing all daughters and granddaughters, covers her situation.³²⁰

Another point of view is that the daughter's virginity was extremely valuable to the family's honor and as a financial asset; the father will lose the daughter's bride price if she were found not to be a virgin.³²¹ Last, based on the widespread taboo of the father-daughter relationship, Madeline Gay suggests that a scribe's error could account for the unintentional omission of the daughter in the prohibition.³²²

Some scholars found it troubling that these laws address women only as subjects “not to be uncovered” and not as equal sexual partners.³²³ I read these laws as addressing the male members of the household, trying to protect the vulnerable women from their reach. (this is why the laws are formulated in the male singular). Marc Zvi Brettler examines the repetition of the laws in Deuteronomy 27 and concludes that the audience is the male community.³²⁴

³²⁰ S. Tamar Kamionkowski, “Another View on parashat Acharie Mot” in *The Torah*, 694. A detailed discussion in Eve Levavi Feinstein, “Does the Torah Prohibit Father–Daughter Incest?” *TheTorah.com* (2019). <https://thetorah.com/article/does-the-torah-prohibit-father-daughter-incest>

³²¹ See further discussion in Matthews and Benjamin, “The Virgin” in *The Social World of Ancient Israel*, 176-186. And discussion on virginity p.108.

³²² Madeline Gay McClenney-Sadler, “Women in Incest Regulations” in *Women in Scripture*, 206-208.

³²³ Rachel Havelock, “Acharei Mot” in *The Torah*, 689.

³²⁴ Marc Zvi Brettler, “Women in Covenant Curses” in *Women in Scripture*, 235.

Leviticus 20:11-22 repeats the list of incest taboos and adds the death penalty to each one of them. The term *mot yomat* (מות יומת) puts double emphasis on the death penalty. In ancient times capital punishment was carried out by stoning. Tamar Kamionkowski notes that the laws were organized by the severity of their punishment.³²⁵ Some of the incest punishments include punishment of *karet*, discontinuation of their lineage, which was considered the harshest punishment.

Narrative

2 Samuel 13

The biblical storytellers wanted to underscore the distractive consequences of both incest and rape on the national level. The narrative in 2 Samuel 13 focuses our attention on the rape of Princess Tamar, the daughter of King David, and its dire consequences.

Tamar was the subject of the lust of her half-brother, Amnon. Pretending to be ill, he tricked Tamar into coming to his house and cook for him. While Tamar was unsuspectingly cooking, Amnon sent the servants out of the room, grabbed her physically, and asked her to sleep with him. Tamar resisted verbally, trying to negotiate with Amnon “No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do

³²⁵ Tamar Kamionkowski, in “K’doshim” in *The Torah*, 712.

not do this outrageous thing” (2 Sam 13:12). Yet Amnon did not listen to her; he overpowered her, violated, and lay with her.

Disgusted by his actions, Amnon rejected Tamar and sent her out of his house. In her great distress and agony, Tamar put ashes on her head, tore her royal robe, and laid her hands on her head, crying out loud (2 Sam 13:19) as these were mourning and lamentations customs. (In ancient times, putting the hands on the head was considered a declaration that the victim was innocent and did not commit adultery).³²⁶

Her maternal brother, Absalom, took her in, soothed her pain, yet ordered her to stay quiet since Amnon was her brother. Thus, obedient and helpless Tamar sat desolate in Absalom’s house all the rest of her days. When her father, King David, heard of what had occurred, he was angry yet did not approach or rebuke Amnon. Absalom, in his anger, did not utter a word with Amnon. Further, he waited for an opportunity to avenge his sister’s rape and dishonor.

Such an opportunity presented itself two years later, at the time of flock shearing and feasting. Absalom convinced David to send his brother Amnon with him (a mirror of Amnon convincing David to order Tamar to come to his house and cook for him).³²⁷ While Amnon was drinking, Absalom ordered his servants to kill him, and so they did.

³²⁶ Tikva Frymer, “Trauma and Tragedy: The Betrayal of Tamar,” in *Reading the Woman of the Bible*, 165

³²⁷ Ibid.

The story ends with a statement of Jonadab, Amnon's friend and advisor: "For by the command of Absalom this has been determined, from the day he [Amnon] violated his sister Tamar" (2 Sam 13:32). Thus Tamar's honor was avenged, Amnon, the heir to the Davidic Kingdom, was dead, and Absalom ran for his life from the fear of David's revenge. Nasty bloodshed in the Davidic dynasty had begun.

Marry Bader, in her book *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, finds parallels between the stories of Dina and Tamar.³²⁸ In her methodological study, she shows that in eight of the fourteen instances the verb *anah* (ענה) reference sexual offense. When the term *nevalah* (נבלה) was linked to it, it described a *heinous offense*, violating or dishonoring a woman. Such an assault was considered a capital offense because it attacked the basic norms of society. Capital offense was treated with capital punishment-death to the offender.³²⁹

She notes that the affront against both Dinah and Tamar was so grave that their maternal brothers took it upon themselves to avenge those who committed a sexual violation

³²⁸ Marry Anna Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible; A Multi Methodological Study of Genesis 34 and 2 Samuel 13*, Studies in Biblical Literature Vol. 87, (NY: Peter Lang, 2006).

³²⁹ See discussion on rape in the story of Dinah in the chapter on maidenhood. See there Sandie Gravett, "Reading 'Rape' in the Hebrew Bible: A Consideration of Language," The Continuum Publishing Group, NY. 2004. (ISSN 0309-0892).

against their sister. She also wonders about the lack of action of the fathers of the victims, Jacob and David, as they were responsible for protecting their maiden daughters.³³⁰

Bader reads the biblical deliberate silence as a critique on the father's leadership: "their aptitude at managing their own families is called into question."³³¹ Jacob is one of the nation's patriarchs. King David is the monarch of United Israel. But as a leader who cannot control and protect his household, his national leadership is at stake.

Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin claim that in the world of biblical literature, sexual activity, and more so, sexual violence, was not as much a personal activity but rather an expression of the political power of the household. Thus, sexual relationships were a matrix of measure of the honor or shame of the households to which the women belonged and the physical and political power of the head of the household to control and protect the women in his domain.

Rape thus was considered a political challenge to the father of the household.³³² To be considered as a hostile claim on the household's leadership and resources (versus a regular rape crime), the aggressor should be a "son" or a prince, and the rape must take place in the context of some fertility activity (such as harvesting, sheep-shearing, eating,

³³⁰ See "Protecting Dinah and the Family's Honor" p.118-122.

³³¹ Ibid., 178.

³³² Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*,178.

and menstruating). This was done to signal a challenge and expose the lack of ability of the head of the household to protect and supply food and children to his household.³³³

Some examples of such type scene were Dinah's rape in Gen 34³³⁴, the attack of the Benjaminite tribe in Judges 21:17-23, David taking of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 1, and Amnon and Tamar 2 Samuel 13. Mathews cites the biblical scholars Gilmore and Gunn, who note that the story of Amnon and Tamar is modeled on the story of David and Bathsheba. As David challenged the authority of Uriah as the head of his household by sleeping (rape/ questionable consent) with Bathsheba, so did Amnon by sexually assaulting Tamar.³³⁵

Matthews and Benjamin claim that Amnon used sexual violence towards Tamar as a political bid to take control over the household of his rival Absalom, and by extension, King David. They note that Food plays a literary as well as a political role in the story.³³⁶ "Tamar and the bread are samples of the children and the land which the household of Absalom contribute to the state. By asking her to prepare his bread for him, Amnon invites Tamar to commit Absalom's resources to his campaign to become

³³³ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 179-181, 118-122.

³³⁵ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 182.

³³⁶ The theme of food preparation and baking bread is repeated in 7(!) consecutive verses 5-11, sometimes, twice in a verse. This by all literary means, is significant.

monarch in David's place... By eating and having intercourse together, Amnon and Tamar will ratify an alliance between their households against David."³³⁷

Additionally, as Matthews and Benjamin explain, in the biblical world, women were the embodiment of household honor and success. Tamar, as the King's virgin daughter, was the embodiment of the kingdom. The narrative foreshadows in a sophisticated way that damaging her honor would harm and disrupt the stability of the Davidic kingdom. To put it more strongly, the rape of the princess foreshadows catastrophe to the nation.³³⁸

Tamar tries to convince Amnon, "No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this outrageous thing" (2 Sam 13:12). And indeed, incest and rape "should not be done in Israel." Such outrageous crimes are punishable by death and discontinuity of the lineage (*Karet* punishment). "If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people. He has uncovered his sister's nakedness, and he shall bear his iniquity" (Lev 20:17).

One can suspect that the biblical authors used the scene of incest and rape to signal the demise and discontinuation of the Davidic Dynasty.

³³⁷ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 183.

³³⁸ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 185.

Mathews and Benjamin conclude that as the ancient storytellers voice their outrage against rape, they struggle with the story of justice. “They want their audience to think about how to use power to feed and protect the people.”³³⁹

Tikva Frymer, in her very detailed study of the story of Tamar, concludes that, like many victims of domestic sexual abuse, Tamar was trapped by the family obligation to keep quiet and not to disrupt the honor of the household:

“And her brother Absalom said to her, ‘Has Amnon your brother been with you? Now stay quiet, my sister. He is your brother; do not take this to heart.’ So Tamar lived, a lonely woman, in her brother Absalom’s house” (2 Sam 13:20).

Frymer notes that Tamar gradually loses her voice and ability to speak for herself, from logically arguing and negotiating with Amnon, to crying out, to being silenced by those family members who were supposed to protect her and her honor. “Like so many other victims of domestic rape, she joins the conspiracy of silence that dooms her.”³⁴⁰

Frymer points to the use of the verb *zaak* (זעק) to “cry out” in verse 19; the use of the term reminds the audience of the cry of the Israelites tormented in Egypt and the laws against the abuse of the widow, fatherless and the migrant in Deuteronomy. In all these

³³⁹ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 186.

³⁴⁰ Frymer, “Trauma and Tragedy,” in *Reading the Woman of the Bible*, 167.

references, God had heard the cry of the oppressed and avenged their misfortune from the offender.

Another interesting reference is the term “an ornamented tunic,” which princess Tamar wore when she was sent by her father, David, to Amnon’s house (2 Sam 13:19). This “ornamented tunic” (כֹּתֶנֶת פָּסִים) is the exact term used to describe Joseph’s tunic in Genesis 37:4. Both narratives describe brotherly toxic and dangerous relations, preferential treatment of one son by the father, and signal “the writing on the wall” of a father who sends his child to a dangerous situation. (Compare to Genesis 37:14, when Jacob sent Joseph to his brothers).³⁴¹

Ancient Near East

Incest was condemned in all societies of the ancient Near East, yet as Hennie Marsman states, it occurred in all societies.³⁴² The limits of relations which were considered taboo differ in various cultures and across time. In Egypt, incestuous relations would not occur between commoners, yet they were tolerated in the royal family. Egyptian kings married their sisters and half-sisters, and fathers married their daughters. The scholar Rosalind

³⁴¹ Frymer, alludes to and links the narratives of Joseph and Tamar in “Trauma and Tragedy,” in *Reading the Woman of the Bible*, 160-161.

³⁴² For detailed information see Eve Levavi Feinstein, "Sexual Prohibitions in biblical literature and the ANE: A Comparison" *TheTorah.com* (2018).
<https://thetorah.com/article/sexual-prohibitions-in-the-bible-and-the-ane-a-comparison>

and Jac Janssen explained that a marriage between a pharaoh and his sister removed him from his subjects and allowed him to approach the Divine circle.³⁴³

According to the Law of Hammurabi, a man who ‘carnally knew his daughter’ was banished from the city, yet not condemned to death. (law154). Yet if a mother had sex with her son after the father had died, both of them would be burned to death (law 157). Marsman points out that power imbalance played a significant role in the father-daughter incest, and understandably, in other relationships as well, since unmarried women were under the authority of the men of their households.

On the other hand, Marten Stol notes that some societies had a “relaxed attitude” to incest between father and daughter, uncle and niece, and father-in-law- daughter-in-law.³⁴⁴ He further notes that a man could instigate an affair with a lower-ranking family member, yet the woman could not.

As to rape, the scholar, Michael Carden examined rape from an anthropological point of view. He argues that “rape is to be understood as sexual violence grounded in issues of power and anger.” Thus, the rape of a woman was to overpower or shame

³⁴³ R.M Janssen, J.J. Janssen, *Growing up in Ancient Egypt*, London 1990, 122. cited in Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 243-244.

³⁴⁴ Marten Stol, “Incest”, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 270-271.

<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9781614512639-014/html>

another man, whose woman was under his responsibility.³⁴⁵ Stol adds that in cases of rape, the Mesopotamian law books were mostly interested in deciding whether the woman was betrothed or married and then whether she was raped against her will.³⁴⁶

Summary

In contrast to the Egyptian and Canaanites practices, the biblical literature strongly rejects incest stating: “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes” (Lev 18:3). Some scholars explain that these laws were intended to set boundaries between the Israelites and other nations. Others explain that these laws were about boundaries within the family structure.³⁴⁷ However, I agree with Jacob Milgrom stating that these laws were created to protect women in a vulnerable position in their household.

Unfortunately, till today as Madeline Gay McClenney notes, “Numerous studies on incest have shown that where power differentials exist, coercion or force is rarely needed to ensure the compliance of a reluctant person.” Thus, the biblical incest

³⁴⁵ M. Carden, “Homophobia and Rape in Sodom and Gibeah: A Response to Ken Stone”, *JSOT* 82 (1999),86. cited in Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 283.

³⁴⁶ Marten Stol, “Rape”, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 255.

³⁴⁷ Tikva Frymer, “Sexual Politics” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 297.

prohibitions serve to protect females from sexual predators and problematic relations within the family.³⁴⁸

McClenney adds that according to socioeconomic structures of the family reflected by the incest laws of Leviticus 18 and 20, these regulations reflect the family and settlement structures of early Iron Age, date to the early twelve to the tenth-century BCE³⁴⁹ (and not as was formally accepted, ascribing them to the Levitical priests in Babylonia the fifth-century BCE). This may explain the variations in attitudes towards incest between the Levitical laws and earlier narratives that allowed marriages between cousins (Abraham and Sarah) and other incest-related relationships (Lot's Daughters, Tamar and Judah, Rachel and Leah). The discrepancies may reflect changes in incest taboos and perhaps changes in family structures throughout time.³⁵⁰

Tikva Frymer, in her article "Power and Person; A Problem of Political Life," summarizes: "Since Israel is under a special obligation to create a fully just society, the Deuteronomistic historian relates these stories of outrages against women [in the books of

³⁴⁸ Madeline Gay McClenney-Sadler, "Women in Incest Regulations" in *Women in Scripture*, 208.

³⁴⁹ Madeline Gay McClenney-Sadler, "Women in Incest Regulations" in *Women in Scripture*, 207

³⁵⁰ McClenney, "Women in Incest Regulations" in *Women in Scripture*, 207

Judges and Samuel] as a key indicator of the failure of the social order. Because such things happened, Israel was destroyed.”³⁵¹

The biblical laws in Leviticus 18 and 20 and the cautionary tale about the downfall of the house of David operate as a warning to the Israelite society in terms of personal punishment and a national disaster. Be it a commoner or a prince, all are equal under the Levitical Law and accountable to God.

³⁵¹ Tikva Frymer, “Power and Person; A Problem of Political Life” in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 170.

Widowhood

In a patriarchal society, once married, the woman joined her husband's household. Yet because men were usually older than their wives when they married, marriages were shorter, and widowhood was commonplace.³⁵² In case her husband died, the widow remained part of her husband's family, thus eligible to partake in the family's resources and the protection of male kin (assuming that she had them). If the widow had sons who were old enough, they would take care of her; if not, the widow and the orphans would be under the responsibility of her father-in-law.

Economically speaking, the widow could draw some economic support from her bride-wealth or dowry. Yet, one should not assume that she would have had enough to sustain herself, nor could she inherit her husband's property (only his children, usually the sons, could).³⁵³

In her essay "'Whence Shall Help Come To Me?': The Biblical Widow," Paula Hiebert raises serious questions regarding the status and vulnerability of the widow. She asks why the *almāna* was considered so vulnerable in a society where the concept of

³⁵² Stol, Marten. "The Widow," *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 201, 277.

³⁵³ There is a scholarly debate if indeed the bride was the recipient of the bride-wealth, most scholars maintain that the father/the family of the bride was the recipient of the gift. For detailed discussion with examples see chapters on virginity and matchmaking, see also the chapter on inheritance.

levirate was legislated. Where was the kin who was obligated to provide for her? What was her financial situation? And why was she in need of YHWH's special protection?³⁵⁴

After a comparison with Middle Assyrian laws and biblical texts, she concludes that the term *almama* (like *almattu* in Middle Assyrian laws) refers to a widow whose links to her husband's relatives have been severed; she has no economic support, physical protection, or representation in the public sphere. "Yahweh takes special care of the *almana*, supplying the role of the missing male kin who would have been concerned for her well-being and economic support." Hiebert notes that *Almana*, (אלמנה) in Hebrew comes from the root word א.ל.מ. which means "mute," one without a voice. In such reference, the *almana* had no voice of her own, God was her voice and protector.³⁵⁵

In this chapter, "widow" refers to the *almana*, a widow without a male kin protector. Naturally assuming family ties and fate, over half of the biblical references to a widow group her with the orphan (Ex.22:22,24, Job 31:16, Isa.1:17,10:2).³⁵⁶ In Deuteronomy, the widow is grouped with the orphan and the sojourners as a marginalized group, lacking a male protector, kinship ties, a land to live off, or other means of support.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁴ Paula Hiebert, "Whence Shall Help Come to Me?": The Biblical Widow" in *Gender and Difference*, 127.

³⁵⁵ Hiebert, in *Gender and Difference*, 130, 137.

³⁵⁶ Frank S Frick, "Widows" in *Women in Scripture*, 197-199.

³⁵⁷ Cheryl B. Anderson, *Women Ideology and Violence*, (London: T&T Clark International, 2004),29.

Harold V. Bennett, in his book *Injustice Made Legal*, speculates the possibility that the widow *did have* living adult male relatives, but these men were reluctant to protect and support her [or could not afford to]. To him, this is a critical point since: “This social feature of her predicament invites suspicion and denigration of this person. It breaks ground to the exploitation of this individual by other social actors in the biblical communities also.”³⁵⁸

Widowhood during the ancient Israelite times was a stark reality. Unfortunately, due to ongoing wars, many women became widows, were displaced from their land, lost male kin and protection.

The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the psalmists expressed this dire situation using the metaphor of a widow to describe the Israelite nation, defeated in war and exiled. “How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations!” (Lam 1:1).

When the prophet Jeremiah wrote his lamentations after the Babylonian exile and the destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth century (589-580) BCE,³⁵⁹ he related to God’s

³⁵⁸ Harold V. Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal: Deuteronomic Law and The Plight of Widows, Strangers, and Orphans In Ancient Israel*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 37. While I do not agree with most of the comments he makes in this book and his conclusion, I appreciate the academic different perspectives.

³⁵⁹ According to tradition, the book of Lamentations is ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah who was vocally active before and after the destruction of Jerusalem.

absence and lack of protection: “Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners. We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows” (Lamentations 5:3). Later, the Psalms repeated the theme: “They crush your people, YHWH, and afflict your heritage. They kill the widow and the sojourner and murder the fatherless, and they say, “YHWH does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive” (Ps 94:5-7).

There is a consistent message throughout the biblical literature that God cares for and protects the widow. This message is demonstrated both on the personal and national levels. “YHWH watches over the sojourners, He upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked He brings to ruin” (Ps 146:9). This message is consistent with the prevalent concept in the ancient Near East that the king is responsible for protecting the widow and fatherless (YHWH is the King of Israel).

On the national level, the prophet Isaiah related to the desolate Jerusalem in his consolation prophecy: “Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more” (Isa 54:4). And in the Psalm, God presented as the father of the nation: “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation” (Ps 68:6).

To ensure some protection for the widows and orphans, laws were constituted in Exodus and Deuteronomy, narratives exemplifying God’s care for the widow were

circulated, and narratives of hope and continuation of legacy were created. We will examine how each of the components helped alleviate the stark condition of the widow.

Law

Exodus 22:22-23

“You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.”

This statement with its full gravitas is located in the holy and serious section of *Mishpatim*, laws given to the Israelite people at Mount Sinai, immediately after God’s revelation. These laws are only second to the Ten Commandments in importance. This comes to teach us about the high regard God attributed to protecting the widows and fatherless.

In this extraordinary statement, not only does God warn the people about mistreating the widow and the fatherless, but He also warns about retribution: God will punish those who mistreat the widow with the same fate. Thus God declares himself as the **protector-in-chief!**

This warning was later reiterated by Moses in Deuteronomy 27:19, as part of the covenant between YHWH and the people of Israel before entering the land: “Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. And

all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’” Later the prophets referred to the stark fate of Israel as a result of not following these rules (Jeremiah 7).

“And my wrath will burn”: with this statement God takes the mistreatment of the widow and the fatherless *personally*; the mistreatment of any widow angers God to extreme measures. Moreover, the statement “they will cry out to me and I will hear their cry” is a reference to Exodus 3:7 “Then YHWH said, ‘I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings.’”

This textual and thematic link sends the message of hope and reassurance: The Israelites in Egypt were like widows, mistreated and oppressed, with no protection. God sent Moses to deliver them and killed all the male Egyptian soldiers at the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 14:30-31). As God cared for and delivered the people of Israel, punishing those who oppressed them, God will care and protect widows as persons and avenge their exploitation.

Establishing a link between the national and the personal promise of deliverance is an important literary clue, which will be elaborated on later.

Deuteronomy 10:17-18

“For YHWH your God is God of gods, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.”

God affirms His affection and duties towards the widow, *ger*, and the fatherless. Not only is God responsible to feed and clothe them, but He is also their legal warrior, executing justice for them,³⁶⁰ This is a reiteration of the biblical message that flows throughout the Torah: God is the fender of those who cannot fend for themselves.

Deuteronomy 24:17-18

“You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow’s garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and YHWH your God redeemed you from there; therefore, I command you to do this.”

God's commandment addresses the whole Israelite community not to subvert justice for the stranger and the fatherless, and specifically, not to humiliate the widow by taking her garment as a pawn for money. The law assures the widow items that were essential for her basic dignity.

Furthermore, the “widow’s garment” is a symbol of her identity and thus grants her social protection as a member of the “protected class.”³⁶¹ Stripping her from her

³⁶⁰ The convention that God (and also human king), as supreme ruler, was the protector of the poor and needy in society was prevalent in the ancient Near East. See references below: Ancient Near East.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi comments that the male imagery [of YHWH as king] does not necessarily mean that the composer(s) of Deuteronomy conceived God as a male being. *The Torah*, 1102.

³⁶¹ “widow’s garment”- traditionally refers to black clothes widows would wear to symbolize their mourning.

clothes not only degrades her but also takes away the only thing that provided her some protection.

Moreover, clothing, like food, is essential; whoever holds the cloth controls the situation and has the upper hand. Clothing is a metaphor for dominance (see for example, Potiphar's wife grabbing Joseph's coat in Genesis 39:12, David grabbing and tearing King Saul's coat in 1 Samuel 24:12, and Jeroboam taking ten pieces of the robe to symbolize assuming control over the ten tribes of Israel (1 Kings 11: 29-31)). Thus we can understand this passage in a broader context, as not to assume dominance over the widow (physical or legal).

We will further explore the narratives about Tamar and Ruth, both widows who changed their destiny and the destiny of the Israelite people. Interestingly (or as a literary motif), both widows changed their clothes to symbolize a change of identity and, more importantly, to symbolize the change of control of the situation.

Deuteronomy 24:19-22

“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that YHWH your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore, I command you to do this.”

The very detailed harvesting regulations provided some economic means of survival to those who were impoverished. The Deuteronomic authors expanded the laws in Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22 to include the widow and the fatherless. The passage repeatedly specifies the social groups who were under the protection of this law: the migrant, fatherless, and the widow, to eliminate any misunderstanding or to misinterpret of the law which would lead to abuse of the “protected groups.”

The scholar A.D.H Mayes notes that it was customary in ancient times to leave behind a portion of the crops for the deities or fertility spirits of the field. Harold V. Bennett builds on Mayes’ study to conclude that the Deuteronomic and Leviticus’ Holiness Code authors incorporated local customs of gleaning into law.³⁶² If this is the case, I see it as a theological innovation: the (“forgotten”) designated crop in the field belonged to YHWH, and thus the migrant, fatherless, and the widow, who were God’s proteges, could glean and benefit from the crop, legally.

Bennett successfully argues that these laws *had* to be incorporated into the most important codex of law (with additional emphasis of invoking divine blessing and command) since, in a hard-working agrarian society which had to pay high taxes to both ‘land gods’ and monarchy, leaving produce in the field was counter to self-preservation

³⁶² Bennett, *Injustice*, 102.

and counterintuitive. Thus, the formalistic signature of the moral and historical reference to Egypt was added for emphasis.

Bennett notes that the gleaning was part of the local social welfare system stating: “The [biblical] verse ends with a basis for moral action and this innovation suggests that the drafters of this legal injunction allowed their ideas about proper morality to shape codes on the distribution of gleanings in ancient Israel.” Yet, according to him, these laws exacerbated, not rectified, the plight of the migrants, fatherless and widows in society.³⁶³

Further, Bennett observes what was *not* distributed: seed, land domesticated animals, or tools -- anything that would help the poor individuals to ‘stat up,’ better themselves, and control their fate.³⁶⁴

Deuteronomy 25 5:10

The Law of the Levirate

“If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go into her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. And if the man does not wish to take his brother’s wife, then his brother’s wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, ‘My husband’s brother refuses to perpetuate his brother’s name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband’s brother to me.’

³⁶³ Bennett, *Injustice*, 104-106.

³⁶⁴ Bennett, *Injustice*, 121.

Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, ‘I do not wish to take her,’ then his brother’s wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, ‘So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.’ And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, ‘The house of him who had his sandal pulled off.’”

While this law might seem to contradict the laws of incest discussed in the previous chapters,³⁶⁵ it only comes to effect when the husband dies, and there are no male heirs to carry the family line and inheritance of an estate. The sole purpose of this law was to ensure the survival and continuity of the deceased husband’s family.

Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, in their book *Social World of Ancient Israel*, examined the political and economic aspects of social institutions in Ancient Israel (1250-587 BCE). They studied the social institution of a ‘legal guardian.’ In case a man died and left his household without an heir, it was the responsibility of the elders of the tribe (or the village) to appoint a legal guardian to the land and household. The guardian represented the interests of the tribe concerning protection from a hostile takeover of the estate by other men and ensuring the household would not lose its ability to feed and protect its members thus, becoming a liability for the village.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁵ See chapter on incest.

³⁶⁶ Matthews and Benjamin “The Legal Guardian” in *Social World*, 110-114.

Matthews and Benjamin specify the requirements of the appointed legal guardian: the legal guardian must be a relative of the deceased (usually a brother) – to prevent a stranger from taking over the estate. He must live in the same village. Thus, he would have the required political and economic relationships to care for the estate. The guardian must assume the dead brother's assets and liabilities (to pay debts if needed, take care of the widow and the household, work the land, and tend the herds for which he was now responsible). Most important: the guardian must father an heir with the dead brother's wife (yet not marry her) and return the land and control over the household to the heir when he becomes old enough (this could take about two to ten years).³⁶⁷

The legal guardian did not marry the widow; he simply carried out the physical, economic, and legal commitments until the heir could take over. This may explain why some legal guardians were reluctant to take on such heavy responsibility, consuming their time and resources for years to come, with no value added for them.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 112-113. Matthews and Benjamin are at odds with the biblical statement that the levirate must marry the widow.

³⁶⁸ Devorah Weisberg in her article, "The Widow of Our Discontent" claims that the survey of biblical passages regarding levirate marriage reflects the anxiety of biblical men regarding this practice (see especially p 405). She also provides a list of articles for further reading.

Devorah Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent: Levirate Marriage in biblical literature and Ancient Israel" (The Continuum Publishing Group, 2004), [*JSOT* 28.4 (2004) 403-429] ISSN 0309-0892.

Moreover, providing an heir to the deceased brother was counter to the legal guardian's self-interest since he would get a bigger portion of the family's estate if his brother would not have an heir. (Usually, the deceased brother would be the older son; thus, his heir would be entitled to double the portion of the estate. Thus, by *not* providing an heir to the brother, the guardian's children will gain a larger property).

If the guardian over-reached his guardianship in time or conduct or underperformed in providing for the household, the widow could take legal action to remove the guardian. She could file a complaint before the elders of the village assembly, and they would mediate or impeach him.³⁶⁹

To stress the responsibility of the guardian and deter evasion, public shaming was implemented. The ritual of remission of levirate duty (Halizah) was done in public: the widow removed the guardian's sandal, spit in his face, and declared, "So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house."

The sandal was a symbolic 'title of the land' since in ancient times one would measure a land by walking a distance in a day.³⁷⁰ By removing the sandal of her guardian, the widow removed his authority over the estate. Moreover, Matthews and Benjamin see the sandal as a symbol of the widow herself, "placed on his foot." By removing the guardian's sandal, the widow removed his authority over her and his legal ability to have

³⁶⁹ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 114.

³⁷⁰ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 114

sex with her. “Removing the sandal of the legal guardian enacts coitus interruptus, where the sandal is a euphemism for her vagina, the foot of the guardian is a euphemism for his penis.”³⁷¹

In his article “False Weights in the Scales of Biblical Justice,” Eckart Otto states that this law was concerned with the legal and economic protection of the widow and not with her deceased husband's lineage and patrilineal name. The law acknowledged the widow's vulnerable situation of potentially losing land and livelihood. By this law, the woman was recognized as a legal subject in her own right and was able to act as a plaintiff against her guardian in front of the village assembly.³⁷²

Isaac Sassoon points out that the incest laws in Leviticus 18:16 do not allow the option of levirate marriage.³⁷³ I want to suggest that perhaps we are witnessing the different stages of the development of the levirate law.³⁷⁴ The custom and law of levirate were established during the time of the Israelites dwelling in the land of Israel when the stability of lineage and inheritance of the land was at stake; the Levitical text was mostly

³⁷¹ Ibid., 114.

³⁷² Eckart Otto, “False Weights in The Scales of Biblical Justice? Different Views of Women from Patriarchy to Religious Equality in the Book of Deuteronomy.” In *Gender and Law*, 139-140.

³⁷³ Isaac S. D. Sassoon, "The Priestly Repudiation of Yibbum" *TheTorah.com* (2016). <https://thetorah.com/article/the-priestly-repudiation-of-yibbum>

³⁷⁴ See footnote 8 in Devorah Weisberg, “The Widow of Our Discontent: Levirate Marriage in biblical literature and Ancient Israel.”

composed in Babylonia when other considerations (such as the purity of the Israelite nation) took precedence.³⁷⁵

Deuteronomy 26: 12-13

“When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your towns and be filled, then you shall say before YHWH your God, ‘I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all your commandment that you have commanded me. I have not transgressed any of your commandments, nor have I forgotten them.”

In the third year, the tithes were not to be taken to the central sanctuary but to be distributed locally among the needy residence of the town: the Levites, migrants, fatherless, and widows. This commandment is repetition and expansion of the law in Deuteronomy 14:22-29.

This passage raises questions regarding the collection and distribution of the tithes: since the commandment for local distribution is only once in three years, one should ask: who would feed the widow, fatherless, and the migrant in the other two years? Was this a one-time occasion, or was the distribution to cover the whole year?

³⁷⁵ For further discussion on Levirate Marriage see Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary Ruth*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2011), Introduction xxxii-xxxviii. Also, see McClenney’s comments regarding incest p.189.

Were there local institutions that took care of the needy? Were there criteria for the distribution of the food?³⁷⁶

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi notes that the Torah does not offer a systematic way to integrate the Levite, stranger, fatherless, and the widow into the community or an alternative family so that they could be cared for and protected by the elders; neither were these vulnerable groups of individuals given resources that would enable them to fend for themselves.³⁷⁷ The community as a whole was charged with taking care of them; they were placed at the mercy of others.

Nonetheless, integrating the theological concept of God as the patron of the needy, historical reference to suffering in Egypt, ritual practices of worshipping YHWH, and the instruction to designate ten percent of the household's annual income as portions of food for the disadvantaged groups in the society, was impactful. These concepts and instructions have influenced generations across millennia and are prevalent in all major religions till today, throughout the world.

Narrative

There are different references to widows in biblical literature. Some are descriptive, like Lamentations 1:1, which describes the desperate situation of Jerusalem as a metaphorical

³⁷⁶ Harold Bennentt raises questions regarding insidious intents of distribution of goods. See Bennett *Injustice*, 89

³⁷⁷ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi Ed. *The Torah*, 1128.

widow: “How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become... She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies” (Lam 1:1-2).

Other references are causal, like Jeremiah 7, stressing that the horrific fate befallen on Jerusalem was a result of not observing the commandment in Exodus 22: 22-23, and mistreating the widow and the fatherless, among other offenses. God’s punishment of Jerusalem reinforced the message of Deuteronomy 10:18 that God executes justice for the widow and fatherless and would vindicate wrongdoing towards them.

Generations later, the prophet Zechariah explained to the people in Babylonian exile why they had been uprooted from their land: “And the word of YHWH came to Zechariah, saying, ‘Thus says the YHWH of hosts, render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another. Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.’ But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear” (Zec 7:8-11). This passage again reinforces the convention that God is the avenger of the widow and the fatherless and sends a strong message of “don’t mess with the widow; otherwise you will hear from Me.”

Not only is God the avenger of the widow, but God is also a financial sustainer and a protector. In both the narratives of 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4:1-7, God, working

through the prophets Elijah and Elisha, provided abundant sustenance for the poor widow and her children.

The repeated motif in these narratives is the fragile financial situation of the widow, which in some cases reflected reality. As Frank S. Frick notes, “Autonomous widows [i.e., without any male kin], unless their spouses and fathers were wealthy, were socially and economically marginalized, barely able to survive in times of plenty and clearly at-risk during droughts.”³⁷⁸ Thus the emphasis on God’s help was an important creed in the biblical narratives.

1 Kings 17

God commanded the prophet, Elijah, to go to Zarephath during a time of drought in the land. There Elijah met a widow who scarcely had some flour and oil to make a meager meal for her son and herself. Elijah, God’s miracle worker, promised her: “For thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that YHWH sends rain upon the earth’” (1 Kings 17:14). And indeed, the promise was kept, just as God has spoken through Elijah. Moreover, when the widow’s son fell ill and passed away, Elijah prayed for him to God, and the child was brought to life.

³⁷⁸ Frank S. Frick, “Widow of Zarephath:1Kgs 17:8-24” in *Women in Scripture*, 272.

2 Kings 4:1-7

This narrative involves a widow and her two sons. Her late husband was one of the disciples of the prophets, which probably meant he did not have land or steady means of income that could support the widow and her sons. The children were in danger of being seized by a creditor into debt slavery. Elisha, (אלישע) which means in Hebrew “*Eli-Ysha*” (“my God will save”), performed a miracle in the name of God supplying the widow with an endless supply of oil. The widow sold the oil in the market, had enough money to save her children from debt slavery, and sustain herself and her family. Here too, God is active through miracle workers to protect the widow and the fatherless.

Worse than being a widow with children to sustain and support was being a childless widow. In ancient times not having an heir (in most cases, a son) meant social and financial death. The next set of narratives discusses childless widows; one should ask why these narratives were repeated with variations? What was so important about these childless widows? And what is unique about their story of redemption and having a male child?

In her book *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative*, Ester Fuchs links “the childless widow” narratives with “the barren woman” narratives under the broader theme of the restoration of patrilineage. Thus, both “the barren woman” and “the widow’s redemption” narratives involve a childless woman who managed to rebuild the

temporarily disrupted patrilineage of her husband (while acting in accordance with the divine plan).³⁷⁹

Fuchs states that “both type scenes indicate a growing interest in the prospective mother, her character and conduct.” Fuchs critiques these narratives by saying: “the repeated motif in both the annunciation and seduction type scenes is the denial of the woman’s ‘natural’ ability to give birth.”³⁸⁰ She adds that the “annunciation” type scene valorizes the loyal wife who becomes a mother while the “temptation” type scene valorizes the loyal daughter-in-law, only to discard both of them later.³⁸¹

Fuchs regards the widow narratives as a “seduction” type scene (or a “temptation” type scene on page 65). I disagree; I believe this is degrading, and to some degree, “judging” the woman figure in the narrative.³⁸² This paper will regard the following narratives as “the widow’s redemption” type scene. In this sequence of type scenes, we

³⁷⁹ Ester Fuchs, “The Biblical Mother: The Annunciation and Temptation Type -Scenes” in *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative, Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*, (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 310, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 2003), 47-48.

³⁸⁰ Fuchs, “The Biblical Mother” in *Sexual Politics*, 47-48

³⁸¹ Fuchs, “The Biblical Mother” in *Sexual Politics*, 66.

³⁸² Ester Fuchs chose to call these scenes “seduction” or “temptation narratives” just to criticize the stigmatization of women in these narratives later. “Subtle as the temptation scene may be, it nevertheless leaves a stigmatic impact on the naturally fertile mother-figure, an impact which complements the attribution of her foreignness.” *Ibid.*, 84.

have three stories that link each other “historically” and thematically: Lot’s daughters, Tamar, and Ruth.

Genesis 19 -Lot’s Daughters

After the complete annihilation of the cities Sodom and Gomorrah, only Lot and his two daughters survived. The daughters, previously engaged, lost their future husbands and any prospects of getting married and bearing children. So, to “maintain life through our father” (Gen 19:32), they made Lot drunk and lay with him, each on a different night.

After the first time, both daughters became pregnant and bore sons: “The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-Ammi. He is the father of the Ammonites to this day” (Gen 19:37-38). In Hebrew, the name *Moab* means *me-ab* “from the father,” and *Ben- Ami* means “son of my kin,” implying that incest took place (which creates negative connotations for the nations of Ammon and Moab who were enemies of Israel).

Although father-daughter incest is forbidden, the biblical authors stress that the daughters had a noble motive-to save humanity (Gen 19:32, 34), and Lot was completely drunk and unaware of his deeds (Gen 19:33, 35).³⁸³

Tikva Frymer notes that in the ancient Near East stories: “Ancestors, gods, and gods-on-earth are special beings, marked in their specialness by their breaking of the taboos,

³⁸³ See also See McClenney’s comments in the chapter on incest p.189.

including the one against incest, that restrain ordinary people.”³⁸⁴ She notes, for example, that in the Egyptian culture, the Pharaohs bore children out of incest, and the heirs were considered “pure blood” of gods.

For glory or disgrace, conception caused by incest is a significant thing. The child would be marked from the moment of conception as unique. Frymer concludes that Lot’s daughters acted out of love and faithfulness to their father and the need to give life. She calls their action an “honorable, even heroic act” for which they were rewarded by “mothering” two nations: Moab and Amon.³⁸⁵

Genesis 38- Tamar

Judah married a Canaanite woman who bore him three sons. Judah chose a woman by the name of Tamar to wed his eldest son Er.³⁸⁶ The son died, and Judah appointed his second son, Onan, as a husband and legal guardian of Tamar.³⁸⁷ However, Onan evaded his duties towards Tamar by ejaculating his seed to the ground each time he came into her and did not provide her with offspring.

³⁸⁴ Tikva Frymer “The Moabite” in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 260.

³⁸⁵ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 263.

³⁸⁶ Tamar (תמר) is the Hebrew name of a Palm tree- a fruitful tree that can survive extreme conditions and replenish itself. The meaning of Tamar’s name was that she had the potential to be fruitful. Tikva Frymer, “Royal Origins: Tamar” in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 266.

³⁸⁷ See discussion on the levirate law Deuteronomy 25 in this chapter.

For his actions, God punished him with the death penalty! (Gen 38:9-10; this is also a reference to the law in Exodus 22:21-23). Judah, who did not know why Onan died, feared to give his youngest son to Tamar and sent her back to reside as a widow in her father's house. In essence, Judah recused himself from responsibilities towards Tamar, yet he did not free her as a free widow.³⁸⁸

As time passed, Judah's wife died, and his youngest son grew up, yet Tamar was not "redeemed." Tamar took matters into her own hands when the opportunity arrived; She changed her widow's clothes (signifying the change of status, identity, and control over the situation), disguised herself, and sat on the path where Judah was coming from his sheep-shearing.

Considering her a harlot, Judah lay with her.³⁸⁹ As a pledge for payment, Judah left his seal, cord, and staff with Tamar (Gen 38:18). Tamar conceived, and after three months, the word about Tamar's ("harlotry") pregnancy came to Judah. Angrily, he assumed his authority over her and sentenced her to death by burning (severe and cruel punishment for adultery).

³⁸⁸ Onan (נחל) means to masturbator in Hebrew. In Judaism, it is forbidden to misuse one's seed, not for procreation.

³⁸⁹ Judah is portrayed by the narrative as one who doesn't know what is happening, this creates a literary sense of irony (since the audience knows what is going on), irony, as we encountered before, is a literary device that calls for moral judgment by the audience.

In return, to her defense, Tamar sent the staff and seal to Judah, stating, “I am with a child by the man to whom these belong, please recognize to whom the staff and seal belong” (Gen 38:25). Judah recognized his (double) mistake and declared, “She is more in the right than I since I did not give her to my son Shelah” (Gen 38:26).³⁹⁰

From this pregnancy, Tamar bore twins (a symbol of God’s double blessing), Perez and Zerah. Frymer notes that the name Perez (פרץ) means “breaking through” in Hebrew, which is a symbol for Tamar’s deeds “breaking through” social constraints and her childless widowhood status. Frymer concludes regarding Tamar: “Her boldness, initiative, and willingness to defy society’s expectations have enabled God to provide Judah with two sons after the death of his first two sons.”³⁹¹

Ruth³⁹²

Ruth was a Moabite childless widow who moved with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to the land of Israel. When they arrived at the town of Bethlehem, Ruth, with no means to sustain herself and her mother-in-law, went to glean barley after the harvest. “It so happened” that the field she gleaned belonged to Boaz, a wealthy distant relative of Elimelech’s (Naomi’s husband and Ruth’s father-in-law). When Boaz learned who Ruth was, he granted her protection and gleaning privileges in the field.

³⁹⁰ See McClenney’s remarks regarding incest, P.189.

³⁹¹ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 174

³⁹² See more on Ruth in the chapter on migration.

Naomi recognized Boaz's responsibilities towards herself and Ruth as a relative to her deceased husband: "And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed by YHWH, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers." (Ruth 2:20). Instead of "conventionally" approaching Boaz as the redeemer (*goel*) or a legal guardian who is responsible for sustaining, protecting, and providing seed for Elimelech's family, Naomi sent Ruth on a mission.

Naomi instructed Ruth: "Wash therefore and anoint yourself and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do." (Ruth 3:3-4).³⁹³

Ruth did as instructed; at the nightly encounter with Boaz, she proclaimed her request from him: "He said, 'Who are you?' And she answered, 'I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer'" (Ruth 3:9). Boaz accepted his role as a "redeemer" of Ruth, blessing her and her motives: "And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet, there is a redeemer closer than me. Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him

³⁹³ For detailed interpretation of the scene at the threshing floor see Eskenazi and Frymer, *JPS Commentary Ruth*, 49-68.

do it. But if he is unwilling to redeem you, then, as YHWH lives, I will redeem you. So lie down until the morning” (Ruth 3:11-13).

Boaz arranged the legal “redemption” of the widow(s) and of the land which belonged to Elimelech (invoking the levirate release ritual from Deuteronomy 25) and married Ruth with the blessing of his town’s women.³⁹⁴

“Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day.’ Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, ‘We are witnesses. May YHWH make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that YHWH will give you by this young woman” (Ruth 4:11-13).

From this blessed union, a son was born. This son, Obed, is the grandfather of King David.

In this story, we have a combination of references: Ruth is a Moabite woman (a reference to Lot’s daughters), she meets and marries Boaz, who is an offspring of Perez, Tamar’s son (Ruth 4:18-22). Thus the grandparents of King David are both connected to the “widow’s redemption” narratives. Perhaps these literary and “historic” links were

³⁹⁴ For detailed interpretation of the redemption scene (*goel*) see Eskenazi and Frymer, *JPS Commentary Ruth*, 69-82.

created to assert that even in the most desolate situations, there is salvation, and at times, unconventional actions must be taken to ensure the continuity of the family.³⁹⁵

Tikva Frymer, in her essay “Ruth on the Royal Way,” reads the story as an allegory. She sees Naomi as a personification of the Israelites returning from exile with foreign women. Frymer adds that story is about leaving a family property and re-acquiring it and the interactions with those who stayed in the land. Thus the “redeeming story” is about redeeming of land, as well as the women.³⁹⁶

To conclude: According to our narratives, King David, the “redeemer of Israel,” is the product of extraordinary women: Lot’s Daughters, Tamar, and Ruth. All three acted per God’s approval (though God was less active) to bring salvation to themselves and the continuity of their families.

Tamar, Ruth, and Lot’s daughters acted unconventionally, “breaking” social conventions and sexual norms. Each acted the way she did as a result of a perilous situation. Through

³⁹⁵ Pamela Barmash maintains that both Tamar (Gen 38) and Ruth achieved restorative justice through their unconventional actions. See more in

Pamela Barmash "Achieving Justice Through Narrative" *TheTorah.com* (2016). <https://thetorah.com/article/book-of-ruth-achieving-justice-through-narrative>

And Pamela Barmash, "Tamar’s Extraordinary Risk: A Narrative—not a Law—of Yibbum" *TheTorah.com* (2016). <https://thetorah.com/article/tamars-extraordinary-risk-a-narrative-not-a-law-of-yibbum>

³⁹⁶ Tikva Frymer “Ruth on the Royal Way” in *Women of the Bible*, 254-255.

no fault of their own, as a childless widow, each was in a vulnerable and pitiful situation with no resolution in a “conventional” way.

These women faced a dire situation resulting from the death of their husbands and had minimal prospects of bearing a child. In extreme situations like these, unconventional measures are needed. All three women acted outside the normal social and moral norms, yet their actions were from an altruistic motive, to continue their family line.

Not only does the biblical literature not critique them, but it is also clear that God’s blessing was at play: Lot’s daughters became matriarchs of great nations, *Moab* and *Amon*, Tamar gave birth to twins (double blessing), and Ruth became the grandmother of the most important King of Israel-- King David.

In all three cases of the “widow’s redemption” narratives, the biblical author explicitly states the motive of their actions to eliminate moral judgment by the readers. The biblical authors stress the continuation of lineage above all social norms.

All four women were proactive and ready to risk the little dignity they had for a greater cause. Through the narratives, these extraordinary women share resourcefulness, wits, perseverance in the face of death, assertiveness when met with obstacles, and above all, altruistic motives. The biblical literature portrays them as loyal and righteous. *They are the epitome of continuity.*

The biblical literature stresses that it were *the women* who saved their (husband’s) family line and brought salvation on a national scale. Thanks to these bold and strong women, the United Israelite Kingdom was born. Thus, “the widow’s redemption” type

scene is the blueprint of the transition from vulnerability to a continuation of lineage narratives.

Interestingly, the narrative in 1 Kings 11:26 introduces Jeroboam: “Jeroboam the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite of Zeredah, a servant of Solomon, whose mother’s name was Zeruah, a widow, also lifted his hand against the king.” Jeroboam rebelled against King Solomon’s dynasty and split the United Kingdom into the Northern and the Southern kingdoms.

The introduction uses the terms “servant of Solomon,” “widow,” and the name of the mother, “Zeruah” (leper), which all might be understood as degrading terms. And indeed, in ancient times, the term “son of a widow” was derogatory because of the weak situation of the widow. Yet the authors of this chapter made efforts to portray Jeroboam as David, alluding to “Solomon fearing the lad” (1 King 11:28) just as Saul feared David and tried to kill him; Jeroboam being anointed by a prophet in the name of God; and also the reference “to tearing of a coat” reminded the audience of David’s and Saul’s conflict (1 Kings 11:30-32 and 1 Samuel 24:12). The text even states explicitly, “And if you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways, and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you and will build you a sure house, as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you” (1 Kings 11:38).

This strong and explicit connection to David and the emphasis on telling us that his mother was a widow, right at the introduction of king Jeroboam, makes me wonder

about the thematic connection between widowhood and kingship. One speculative explanation can be that as the widow needed someone to protect her, so did the nation that was weak and needed a protector. King David united the kingdom and protected it from the Philistine oppression. King Jeroboam protected the Northern kingdom from Rehoboam's (Solomon's son) high taxation and oppression.

Thus, the metaphoric references to the widow are national, as was later reiterated by Isaiah 54:4 "Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more." God is the ultimate protector of the widow, be it as a person or the Israelite nation.

In biblical convention, God is responsible for both the land and fertility (children). This is exactly the role of the legal guardian of the *almana*, to protect the land and provide a child. As a child is from God, thus the kingdom is granted by God. Yet redemption, both personal and national, heavily relies upon human actions.

God, as a redeemer and protector, sent Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and four resourceful widows to take care of dire situations regarding death, famine, and real threat to continuity. On the national level, God sent King David and King Jeroboam to act as redeemers and protectors.

Ancient Near East

Paula Hiebert, in her essay “The Biblical Widow,” notes that the word *almana* is cognates in Akkadian (*almattu*), Ugaritic (*Imnt*), Phoenician (*Imt*), Aramaic (*armalta*), and Arabic (*armattu*) languages. She infers that the term is very old and had wide use in the ancient Near East world. Hiebert defines the meaning of *almana* based on Middle Assyrian laws which refer to *almattu*, only when there was no male (husband, son, or father-in-law) to assume responsibility to care for her. These laws were found on clay tablets dating from the time of Tiglath Pileser I (late twelfth to early eleventh centuries BCE), yet could have been formulated before.³⁹⁷

[If] a woman is still dwelling in her father’s house, (and) her husband is dead and [she] has sons,[she shall dwell in a] house [belonging to them where she chooses. [If] she has no [son, her father-in-law shall give her] to whichever [of his sons] he likes...or, if he pleases, he shall give her as a spouse to her father-in-law. If her husband and father-in-law are [indeed]dead and she has no son, she becomes (in-law) a widow (*almattu*); she shall go whither she pleases. (source A 33).

These laws address three situations: if the woman had sons, if there was a levirate within the husband’s family, and in case she had no sons nor levirate, she was a free woman and had a choice where to live. Other sources inform us that if the woman had a son at least ten years of age, the son could “give” his mother to be married.

³⁹⁷ Paula S. Hiebert, “The Biblical Widow” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, 128. The parenthesis are in the book. Source A 33.

Concerning the husband's being missing as a result of war (he could have died or be taken as a prisoner of war in perpetuity), the law declares that after the woman waited for two years for her husband's return, she would be declared a widow. A tablet (official document) would be issued for her as "*tuppasa ki almatte*," She would be free to marry a man of her choice.³⁹⁸

Provisions for the appointment of a legal guardian were found throughout the ancient Near East. Matthews and Benjamin note that the provisions found in the Hittite code, which represents the Hittite Empire between 1450-1200 BCE, were very similar in legal vocabulary and social institutions to the biblical laws. "If a married man dies, then his brother must marry the widow; if the brother dies, then his father must marry her; if his father dies, then one of his brother's sons must marry the widow."³⁹⁹

Marten Stol, in his book *Women in the Ancient Near East*, adds that the Nuzi, Assyrians, Canaanites, and the Israelites all practiced levirate marriage. This practice, designed to protect the family's assets, is mentioned in the law books of Middle Assyrian, Hittite Laws, and Deuteronomy 25:5–10. Yet levirate marriage seems to be practice only in the period between 1500 and 1000 BCE.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ Hiebert, "The Biblical Widow" in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, 128.

³⁹⁹ Hittite Code Article 193, (Mathews and Benjamin 199 Ib:71) in Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE*, 111-112.

⁴⁰⁰ Marten Stol, "Levirate marriage" in *Women in the Ancient Near East*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, 296. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614512639-016>

Stol gives an in-depth description of widowhood in the ancient Near East and reminds us that throughout history and place, we cannot speak of “a widow” as one facet.⁴⁰¹ Yet in general, the situation of the widow was vulnerable from a psychological, economic, and social point of view.

Widows with no protection of a kin male were vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse; they could be pushed away from their land or lose their possessions to ill-doers. For example, a widow in Emar was compelled to sell her plot of land to pay off a debt of forty-five shekels of silver, yet later her children were allowed to buy the ground back for ninety shekels.⁴⁰² (double the price!)

The Babylonian kings were aware of this potential of ill-doing and took the role of protectors of widows and the fatherless upon themselves. In their inscriptions, the declaration of their role as protectors became a standard element as kings and rulers. Justice for widows and orphans was also ensured by the gods, particularly by *Utu/ Šamaš*, the sun god.⁴⁰³ (This statement provides the historical context of YHWH’s declaration as the protector of the widows and fatherless in biblical literature).

⁴⁰¹ Stol, "The Widow" in *Women in the Ancient Near East*, pp. 275-295. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614512639-015>

⁴⁰² Ibid., 281

⁴⁰³ Stol, "The widow" in *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 275, also see footnote 3 there.

Laws regarding the protection of widows were upheld by the Old-Babylonian kings, Nur-Adad and Hammurabi, and by the kings of Cana'an. Moreover, records of food supply show distribution to widows and orphans, for example: "In a register from a Sumerian institution a widow with five children was allowed thirty liters of barley, but even that was not much."⁴⁰⁴

In Babylonian convention, widows were usually seen as poor. Yet, records from Mesopotamia show that husbands would appoint their wives as executors of their will, and the widow would carry on the mantle of taking care of the household until the sons reached maturity. Regarding the authority of the widow over the household, the Sumerian law states: "If a man dies, his wife will act in the house like one heir" (possibly it was meant "like the first heir," who was the most important). Furthermore, old Assyrian texts refer to the widow by saying, "She is the father and the mother" in terms of her authority.⁴⁰⁵

Also, ancient records of wills show that husbands did assign portions of the family's wealth to the wife, designated who would take care of her, or gave her generous gifts of a property while alive. "In Emar, this gift was called the *kubuddû* and could consist of a few slaves, kitchen utensils, and sometimes a piece of ground."⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁴ Stol, "The widow" in *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 281

⁴⁰⁵ Stol, "The widow" in *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 284.

⁴⁰⁶ Stol, "The widow" in *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 282

An example of a rich widow would be: “the wife shall take her dowry, and the gift (*nudunnû*) which her husband had given her and had recorded on a clay tablet, and she shall remain living in the house of her husband. As long as she lives, she shall have the usufruct of it. She may not sell it. Her inheritance belongs to her sons (§ 171).”⁴⁰⁷

Summary

Hennie J. Marsman, in her book *Woman in Ugarit and Israel*, states that in all societies of the ancient Near East, the social ideal of care for the widow was upheld. In Mesopotamia, Egypt, Ugarit, and Israel, it was a virtue of a good king to care for and protect the widow. Widows were considered as protected by gods, yet in reality, their lot was not secured. If a widow had adult children, it would be their responsibility to care for their mother; if she did not have children, her situation was more complicated as she was at the mercy of her male kin to take responsibility for her and support her.⁴⁰⁸

The biblical authors took notice of the vulnerable situation of the widow and installed laws protecting the widows and the fatherless. The laws recorded in Exodus 22 and Deuteronomy 10 establish God as the legal warrior, executing justice for the widow. In Deuteronomy 24, the law assures the widow her basic dignity by mandating not to

⁴⁰⁷ Stol, "The widow" in *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 283-284.

⁴⁰⁸ Hennie J. Marsman, *Woman in Ugarit and Israel; Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East*, (Brill, Leiden- Boston, 2003), 319.

pawn her garments. Further, the very detailed harvesting regulations provided some economic means of survival to those who were in need. These laws were incorporated into the most important codex of law, invoking both divine blessing and command. (The formalistic signature of the moral and historical reference to oppression in Egypt was added).

Deuteronomy 25 specifies that if a man died and left his household without an heir, it was the responsibility of the elders of the tribe to appoint a legal guardian to the land and household. A public shaming ritual was instituted to deter the legal guardian from not performing his duties as a levier.

Deuteronomy 26 states that the tithes were not to be taken to the central sanctuary in the third year but distributed locally among the town's needy residents: the Levites, migrants, fatherless, and widows. Thus, the community as a whole was charged with taking care of the needy.

Integrating the theological concept of God as the patron of the needy, historical reference to suffering in Egypt, ritual practices of worshipping YHWH, and the instruction to designate ten percent of the household's annual income as portions of food for the disadvantaged groups in the society, was impactful. This instruction has influenced generations across millennia and is prevalent in all major religions until today, across the world.

Further, the narratives in 1 Kings¹⁷ and 2 Kings 4:1-7 demonstrate that God is not only the avenger of the widow but also a financial sustainer and a protector. In both

the narratives of 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4:1-7, God, working through the prophets Elijah and Elisha, provided an abundance of sustenance for the poor widow and her children.

Furthermore, King David, the “redeemer of Israel,” was the heir of extraordinary women: Lot’s Daughters, Tamar, and Ruth. These women were childless widows, the most vulnerable in their society. Yet, they were the ones who saved the paternal lineage of their husbands, leading to the birth of King David. These women acted in unconventional ways yet, with God’s approval (though God was less active) to bring salvation to themselves and the continuity of their families.

From these narratives, we infer that “widow’s redemption” type scenes are thus the blueprint of transition from vulnerability to a continuation of lineage narratives. The biblical literature stresses that *the women* saved their (husband’s) family line and brought salvation on a national scale. Thanks to these bold and strong women, the United Israelite Kingdom was born.

Inheritance

Marten Stol reminds us that not all widows in ancient times were in miserable social and economic conditions. We have evidence that women oversaw households and were given property in a will or a gift before the husband's death. The *Book of Judith*, a post-biblical source, talks about a rich, powerful, independent, and beautiful widow by the name of Judith, who brought deliverance to her people from the conquering Assyrian army.

On the other hand, unmarried daughters could find themselves in a different situation from widows. In ancient times, when a woman got married, she and her possessions were considered as her husband's property. This created a problem regarding daughters' ownership of land. The land belonged to families and tribes, and there was an understandable reluctance to move land titles. The narrative about Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 26-27 deals with such a situation.

Narrative

Numbers 26

The chapter begins with God's instruction for a census: "Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, from twenty years old and upward, by their fathers' houses, all in Israel who are able to go to war" (Num 26:1). This commandment was followed by a list of the Israelite tribes divided by families and their heads of households.

The biblical authors made a special note to mention Zelophehad's situation: "Now Zelophehad the son of Hepher had no sons, but daughters. And the names of the

daughters of Zelophehad were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah” (Num 26:33).

Among fifty-two thousand and seven hundred people in the tribe of Menashe, the daughters of Zelophehad were the only ones mentioned by name and the only *women* mentioned in the census.

One can notice that the daughters did not fit the specification of the census since they could not participate in the conquest wars, and yet, they were counted in the census. This is a significant point. What was the reason the biblical authors mentioned them (and only them)?

Zelophehad’s daughters embody the succession of generations; in the next chapter, the succession will be linked to the inheritance of land. Their tribal position as heads of Zelophehad’s household will be considered and tied to rights of inheritance.

Numbers 27

The five daughters of Zelophehad: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, approached Moses, Aaron, and the community elders and requested to be counted among those legally entitled to inherit and own land. They presented their case not as beggars, pleading for a “favor,” but as a legal argument with five stages:

“Our father died in the wilderness. He was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against YHWH in the company of Korah but died for his sin. And he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers” (Num 27:3-4).

The sisters' argument was well constructed: First, they stated that their father died in the desert and thus would not be able to claim his rightful share of land. Second, by stating that their father was not part of Korah's rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, they insisted that he did not lose his right to an inheritance, and they, as his daughters, also distanced themselves from any appearance of challenging Moses's authority. They stated that their father had no son to inherit from him and keep his legacy and asked that their father's name would not be lost, a reasonable request and a righteous objective in a patriarchal society. Addressing the legal and communal concern of continuation of lineage, they concluded with the (audacious) request to inherit land among the share of their relatives.

Moses brought their case "*mishpat*"- (in Hebrew, a rule, or law) to God, the highest ruling authority. God approved their claim, stating explicitly: "The daughters of Zelophehad are right. You shall give them possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers and transfer the inheritance of their father to them" (Num 27:6-7). In Hebrew, the wording is "נתון תיתן" doubling the verb "to give" for emphasis.⁴⁰⁹

Further, it is important to note that Zelophehad's daughters ask for *achuza*, (אחזזה) possession of the land that lasts for one or more generations, yet God grants them *nachala*, (נחלה) possession of the land in perpetuity.

⁴⁰⁹ The use of a verb and an absolute infinitive as a literary device for emphasis.

Furthermore, not only God approved of their specific case as being righteous and right, but also, God made it a general law regarding *all daughters'* rights to inherit the land for generations to come. God stated: “And you shall speak to the people of Israel, saying, ‘If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter’” (Num 26:8). Thus, if the father had no son to inherit him, his daughters would prioritize inheritance rights over their uncles.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah were fatherless, with no legal and physical protection of their father or other males in their immediate family. More so, they dared to advocate for a change that would counter the interests of the other males in the family and the tribe of Menashe (maybe even risking their safety and wellbeing, since no man would be willing to give up land without a fight).

Not only that, but Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah also challenged a long-standing tradition or a well-established law that only males inherit the land. This groundbreaking, unconventional, and radical initiative required courage, wisdom, righteousness, and determination to argue their case publicly in front of all-male leadership, tribal council, and their kin.

This revolutionary idea, that unmarried women could inherit the land, not only got the stamp of approval by God, but also was legislated into law by Moses before the land could be conquered and distributed.

The succession of Moses's leadership to Joshua-son of Nun immediately followed the daughters' legal case. Both narratives emphasize the importance of continuity: family lineage, ownership of land, and national leadership.

To emphasize the importance of this unprecedented law, this narrative was repeated in Numbers 36 and Joshua 17, stated and delivered as a legal deposition, and, as the biblical literature portrays, sealed with God making it a law.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi states that the story is a two-part reformulation of law, enabling daughters to inherit the land. She adds, "So important are they that their names are repeated in full in each episode. The fact that they receive so much "press" in the biblical literature is itself proof of their significance."⁴¹⁰

Archaeologists discovered the names Noah and Hogleh listed as town names on clay fragments of pottery vessels of wine and oil, from the eighth-century BCE, known as "Samaria Ostraca."⁴¹¹ Biblical scholars associate Mahlah as a place mentioned in 1 Kings 19:6; Milcah as a region between the towns Noah and Hogleh; and Tirzah as a well-known royal city in the Northern kingdom in the 10th century BCE (1Kings 14:17).

⁴¹⁰ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *The Torah*, 971.

⁴¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the meaning of the names of each of the daughters and the archaeological finding of the Samarian Ostraca, see Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *The Torah*, 972-273, and Aaron Demsky, "The Daughters of Zelophehad: A Historical-Geographical Approach" *TheTorah.com* (2019). <https://thetorah.com/article/the-daughters-of-zelophehad-a-historical-geographical-approach>

Eskenazi notes, “The appearance of those names on the ostraca, together with the fact that Joshua 17:3-6 lists all five daughters as receivers of land in the northern region of Manasseh, suggests that these women were significant figures in early Israel. It is conceivable that the five sisters are among the ancestors whose names became toponyms (place names).”⁴¹²

Law

Numbers 36

Regarding the case of Zelophehad's daughters, the clan leaders of the tribe of Menashe presented a potential problem before Moses and the other heads of clans. They argued that when each of Zelophad’s daughters would marry a person from the other tribes, her inheritance of land would move with her, and thus the tribe would lose land in perpetuity.

To stress the severity of their claim, they repeated it twice and included the jubilee year: “And when the jubilee of the people of Israel comes, then their inheritance will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry, and their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of the tribe of our fathers” (Num 36:4).

The mentioning of the jubilee year is unclear since the Israelite people were still in the desert, not owning any land. Also, Leviticus 25 states that all property of land

⁴¹² Eskenazi, *The Torah*, 273.

would return to its clan during the jubilee year. “And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan” (Lev 25:10).

Moses (in God’s name) declared the solution to this legal entanglement in the case of Zelophehad’s daughters: the women could marry any men they wish (not necessarily their relatives), yet these men must be from their father’s tribe. Thus, the inheritance of land would not pass over from tribe to tribe. Moreover, Moses declared this as a general law to *all unmarried women* in Israel: “And every daughter who possesses an inheritance in any tribe of the people of Israel shall be wife to one of the clan of the tribe of her father, so that every one of the people of Israel may possess the inheritance of his fathers. So no inheritance shall be transferred from one tribe to another, for each of the tribes of the people of Israel shall hold on to its inheritance.”(Num 36:8-9).

The story concludes with a statement that indeed all Zelophehad’s daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, married their cousins, and their inheritance remained part of their father’s tribal territory.

Katharine Doob Sakenfeld sees the narrative and law as placing “specific marriage restrictions” upon women.⁴¹³ Yet, it is important to remember that in biblical times, more often than not, marriage would mostly be among family or tribe members anyway. Moreover, the tribe of Menashe was significantly large, so the women had enough men to choose from.

Joshua 17

After the conquest of the land, when it was time to distribute the properties among the tribes and within the tribes, the daughters of Zelophehad, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, approached the new leadership of the Israelites, Eleazar the high priest, Joshua son of Nun and the chieftains, and asked for what was promised to them by God. And indeed, the biblical literature states that they were granted a portion of land among their father’s relatives, following YHWH instructions.

Furthermore, the legal precedent of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, was generalized to include *all daughters* of the tribe of Menashe to inherit the land: “Because the daughters of Manasseh received an inheritance along with his sons. The land of Gilead was allotted to the rest of the people of Manasseh” (Josh 17:6).

⁴¹³ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld “Daughters of Zelophehad” in *Women in Scripture*, 220-221.

Ancient Near East

Hennie Marsman, in her book *Women In Ugarit and Israel*, states that in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Ugarit, and Israel, the continuation of the family line was most important. In a patriarchal society, sons usually perpetuated the family name and inherited land. In most cases, lineage was connected to a property; thus, sons would be the ones to inherit the land. (Daughters, in most cases, left their parental household and joined their husband's family).⁴¹⁴

In general, when a man did not have sons, daughters could inherit their father's estate. Marsman gives examples of such cases from *Gude of Lagash* (2150 BCE) and the law code of *Lipit Ishtar* (1930 BCE).⁴¹⁵ She also references Driver and Mils, who infer that ordinary [married] daughters were also entitled to a share of the estate if their father had not provided them with a dowry.⁴¹⁶ Yet, according to Marsman, it was relatively rare that an unmarried daughter received a share of the inheritance together with her brothers. Usually, if the father did not have sons, he would get a second wife, a slave-woman, adopt a son, or adopt his son-in-law. In other cases, he would declare his daughter as a son, and by changing her gender formally, she would be entitled to the inheritance.

⁴¹⁴ Hennie J. Marsman, *Woman in Ugarit and Israel*, 289.

⁴¹⁵ Marsman, *Woman in Ugarit and Israel*, 259.

⁴¹⁶ Marsman, *Woman in Ugarit and Israel*, 260.

On the other hand, from Nuzi, Old Assyrian, and Old Babylonian documents, we learn that, in those cultures, daughters could inherit together with their brothers on an equal basis, and a daughter could be a sole heir. Yet other documents state that to inherit, daughters had to be formally endowed with the male gender.⁴¹⁷

In Egypt, daughters could inherit from both their mother and father and on an equal basis to their brothers. In Mesopotamia, daughters had a legal right to inherit when there were no sons. In other cases, to secure the daughters' right to inherit together with their brothers, they could be given legal documents granting them a share of the inheritance or receive the status of a “son.”

Marten Stol adds that a married woman legally belonged to her husband's household under the common law and thus, lost her right to inherit her natal family. Her dowry and occasional gifts from her father were her shares in the inheritance.

In other cases, fathers would “give donations” in anticipation of death (*donations mortis causa*) to their family members on their death beds. Thus, wives, daughters, and even grandchildren and adopted or minor sons could be beneficiaries; otherwise, they would not be able to enjoy the fruits of the estate.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁷ Marsman, *Woman in Ugarit and Israel*, 261

⁴¹⁸ Marten Stol, “Woman's Right to Inheritance” in *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 301. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9781614512639-017/html>.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614512639-017>

Summary

In Israel, as in all ancient Near East civilizations, the law was that sons would inherit the family land. However, a “legal” case needed to be made to ensure the right of daughters to inherit the land. The biblical authors were thus compelled to include and secure (!) the inheritance rights of unmarried daughters in one of the most important teachings of the law.

The literary location of these narratives takes place just before Moses’s departure and the Israelites entering the Promised Land. At the delicate time of succession of both leadership and generations, it was important to ensure the financial protection of the most fragile members of the Israelite community, the fatherless unmarried women.

To strengthen the intent of the law, the narrative about the five daughters of Zelophehad was presented as a legal case, formulated by God as a general law which includes *all* daughters’ right to inherit, and appeared twice (with modification, Numbers chapters 27 and 36).

Later, with the conquest of the land, it was important to record that God’s law was indeed fulfilled, and Zelophehad’s daughters received an inheritance among their relatives.

The biblical authors went one step further to declare that “Menashe’s daughters inherited a portion in these together with his sons” (Josh 17:6). A lenient reading of this statement means that all daughters, regardless of their marital status, could inherit the family property within the tribe of Menashe.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, “[t]he women who sought to ensure that their father’s name not be written out of history now enter history themselves by gaining a legacy of land and law.”⁴¹⁹ Once again, the most vulnerable in Israelite society, fatherless and unmarried women, ensured by their action and wisdom the continuation of lineage and land for generations to come.

⁴¹⁹ Eskenazi, *The Torah*, 273.

Special Situations

In biblical times, common life vulnerabilities got complicated when special situations occurred. Migration, war, debt, and slavery were prevalent throughout ancient history. In these cases, women could find themselves in difficult circumstances. The following chapters will explore each of these situations, asking what measures of protection women had?

Migration:

The call, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the place which I will show you” (Gen. 12:1), describes the human experience of migration. Throughout the biblical narratives, migration due to war or famine was common.⁴²⁰ The dangers of being a defenseless minority were expressed by Jacob to his sons after the Dinah affair:⁴²¹ “Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, ‘You have brought trouble on me by making me stink 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.’” (Gen.34:30).

⁴²⁰ For modern feminist perspective on migration narratives with current days examples, see Suanne Scholz, “On the Development of a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics of Migration” in *The Oxford Book of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, Susanne Scholz Ed. (NY: Oxford University Press,2021),247-262.

⁴²¹ See chapter on maidenhood (virginity) for elaborate discussion about Dinah.

The biblical literature makes sure to protect the *Ger* and *Gera* (male and female foreigners) in the same measure through laws and commandments to include them under the biblical law and worship rituals.⁴²² The biblical literature repeats the commandment not to oppress foreigners numerous times.⁴²³ Furthermore, as we shall see, the social laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy were meant to alleviate the economic struggle of foreigners. Foreign women were in double jeopardy because of the combination of gender and class.

Historically, the Israelites were a minority community in Babylon from the beginning of the sixth century BCE to the end of that century.⁴²⁴ On the other hand, the Israelites also had to deal with foreigners living among them before the exilic period and, even more dramatically, after returning to Zion at the beginning of the fifth century.⁴²⁵

⁴²² See for example: Ex. 12:19, 48, 49; Ex. 20:10, Ex. 23:9, Lev. 16:29, Lev. 13-15 Lev. 18:26 and more.

⁴²³ See Appendix Three- "Biblical References to Foreigners."

⁴²⁴ There is a scholarly debate on the dating of the beginning and end of the exile since it was done in waves of rebellions and expulsions from the land of Zion (597 BCE King's Jehoiachin exile, or 586 BCE. the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. The same debate is true regarding the return to Zion; whether it begins with King Cyrus's declaration in 538 BCE. or the arrival of Ezra and his delegation to Zion in 457 BCE.

⁴²⁵ Scholars debate on the identity and definition of *Gerim* in the biblical period. Some scholars believe that the foreigners were fugitives from the northern kingdom, after the fall of Samaria to the Assyrian army and its brutal conquest in 722 BCE. Others believe they were strangers in the local milieu.

More on the debate see Harold V. Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal Deuteronomic Law And The Plight Of Widows, Strangers, And Orphans In Ancient Israel*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 38-48.

The biblical narratives reflect both realities; we have texts which describe circumstances of Israelite women being a minority in foreign lands (Sarah, Lot's daughters, and Esther, for example), and narratives about foreign women among the Israelites (Ruth and foreign queen wives). We have laws aiming to protect the foreigners (*Gerim*) living among the Israelites (these laws protect equally both males and females) and narratives with a theological message of God's protection, elevating women's role in the divine plan.

Law

Elaine Goodfriend and Tamara Eskenazi convincingly argue that all the laws regarding migrants (*Gerim*) are gender-neutral and apply both to men and women.⁴²⁶ The biblical law in Leviticus and Numbers treats the foreigner with equal rights before God in all manners regarding worship and justice. "You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and the native, for I am God your God." (Lev. 24:22).⁴²⁷

The sojourners who joined the Israelites leaving Egypt were considered part of the covenant, as the biblical literature states: "And all Israel, sojourner as well as native-born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before

⁴²⁶ "In Biblical Hebrew, masculine grammatical form does not specify social gender unless it is used to refer to a definite, particular person." Elaine Goodfriend, *The Torah*, 416. For other examples of laws that are formulated in a masculine language but represent an inclusive category see *The Torah*, 429-430 and 1038.

⁴²⁷ For more examples see Appendix Three- Biblical References to Foreigners.

the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of YHWH, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of YHWH had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel.” (Josh. 8:33).

Further, the commandment not to oppress the outsider, for the Israelites were outsiders in Egypt, was expressed repeatedly in Exodus (Ex. 22:21, 23:9), Leviticus (Lev.19:33-34), and Deuteronomy (Deut. 10:19). Yet general commandments and declarations were not enough: When dealing with important matters, such as the treatment of migrants who had no family or tribe members to advocate for them or protect them from the oppressing forces of society and economy, God alone was their patron.⁴²⁸ Using his full command and authority, YHWH set commandments and warnings to ensure the protection of the migrants.

The theological message is repeated in biblical literature: the land belongs to God, and its holiness depends on observing YHWH’s ritual practices and social laws regarding the poor and needy, the widow, orphans, and migrants.

The biblical authors made efforts to specify and articulate calls for justice before the law, labor protections, and ensuring sufficient food supplies to anyone in need (usually regarding the widow, orphan, and the stranger as one unit of vulnerable social class).

⁴²⁸ Max Weber argues that a *ger* would place himself/ herself under the guardianship of a household or a patron. Bennet, *Injustice Made Legal*, 39. This may explain Ruth’s seeking protection under Boaz wings (Ruth 3:9).

In terms of labor protection, the law repeated in Exodus 20, 22, and Deuteronomy 5 commands the observance of the Sabbath. This law prevents the abuse of workers and ensures that everyone gets a day of rest-- even the foreigners, who may not follow the belief in YHWH.⁴²⁹ “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed” (Ex. 23:12).

Later, Deuteronomy 24 warns against oppressing a (migrant) hired worker who is poor and needy. “You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is poor and counts on it, lest he cries against you to YHWH, and you be guilty of sin” (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). God is the supreme protector of the needy, both Israelite and migrant, man and women.⁴³⁰

Food was another primary concern since migrants did not have land and could not rely on agriculture to provide food for themselves and family. The book of Leviticus specifies regulations on harvesting regarding vineyards, fields, and olive trees (repeated in Deuteronomy 24:19-22). These laws use the name of God, the authority of YHWH, to emphasize the importance of leaving a portion for the needy.

“And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner: I am

⁴²⁹ To stress the importance of this law, the *ger* was already included in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:10), when the Israelites were still in the desert. This commandment is from Sinai(!)

⁴³⁰ In many cases such as this one, Biblical Hebrew words with masculine endings encompass both man and women.

YHWH your God.” (Lev. 19:10). “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner: I am YHWH your God.” (Lev. 23:22).

Later, the book of Ruth underscores the importance of this commandment, positioning Ruth to glean in Boaz’s field, and presenting Boaz as a righteous man.⁴³¹ The narrative in chapters 2-3 highlights the theological message that Ruth is under God’s protection, and Boaz operates under God’s instructions. “May you have a full recompense from YHWH, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge” (Ruth 2:11).

In addition, the biblical text commands the Israelites to share their food portions during celebrations and pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem with orphans, widows, and sojourners. “And you shall rejoice before YHWH your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you, at the place that YHWH your God will choose, to make his name dwell there.” (Deu 16:11).

Last, the book of Numbers declares that foreigners could use any of the six designated cities of refuge, just as the Israelites could (Num. 35:15). The book of Deuteronomy emphasizes judging righteously between foreigners and Israelites: “And I charged your judges at that time, ‘Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge

⁴³¹ Ruth was in double jeopardy; she was both a childless widow and a foreigner. See more on Ruth in the chapter on widowhood.

righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him” (Deu 1:16).

Furthermore, Deuteronomy goes to the extent of declaring a curse over those who pervert the justice due to foreigners, fatherless, and widows: “Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’” (Deu 27:19).

Narrative

The laws and protections are equal for both men and women, yet there are some narratives regarding women migrants in particular. The narratives about the jeopardized safety and well-being of Sarah and Rebeca in a foreign land are disturbing when read individually. Yet read *as a sequence* together with the narratives about Lot’s daughters and Ruth, these texts build a theme of transformation from vulnerability to continuity of generations. In all narratives, God operates directly or indirectly as a guardian of the women.

Wife as Sister Narratives

In Genesis 12, 20, and 26, twice Abraham and then Isaac traveled to a foreign land because of a drought in Canaan. Both Abraham and Isaac feared for their lives because of their wives. Thus, they both presented them as “a sister” instead of “a wife.”⁴³²

⁴³² In the Ancient Middle East social environment such fear would not be unsubstantiated, see for example 2 Samuel 11, where King David was interested in Bathsheba and therefore, sent her husband, Uria, to die in the battlefield. (More on Bathsheba see next chapter “War Times”).

Presented as “a sister,” positioned Sarah and later, Rebecca, in an unprotected situation, “free” to be taken as a wife by the local men.

In the narratives in Genesis, God intervened twice to save Sarah from the king’s desires, inflicting both Pharaoh and King Abimelech with disease and infertility (Gen.12:17, Gen.12:18). However, there was no need for God’s intervention in Rebecca’s case since King Abimelech has already internalized God’s message and had issued a decree, warning with a death penalty to anyone who would touch Isaac or Rebecca (Gen. 26:11).

In all three cases, after realizing the true nature of the “sister,” the kings feared the dire consequences of adultery and reproached Abraham and Isaac.⁴³³ Yet strangely, the biblical narrator stated that the husbands (Abraham and Isaac) greatly benefited financially in the aftermath of the events. What was the reason to mention great prosperity immediately after these fearful incidents? Why did these narratives repeat a similar situation three times? What was the meaning of these texts for the ancient Israelite audience?

Cheryl Exum in her essay “Who’s Afraid of The Endangered Ancestress?” asks who were the persons at risk and what the patriarchs were (really) afraid of.⁴³⁴ Her thesis is that the thrice-repeated narrative represents the male’s fascination with and neurosis

⁴³³ In Egypt, Ugarit and Canaan sleeping with another man’s wife was a serious transgression, with a death penalty for both parties.

⁴³⁴ Exum, “Who’s Afraid of The Endangered Ancestress”? in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 141-156.

concerning women's sexuality and woman's sexual knowledge acquired by having sex with another man.

Exum bases her argument on Freud's psychoanalytical theory and builds upon similarities between interpreting dreams and texts. For example, Freud described the repetition of dreams as "repetition compulsion" -- the impulse to work over an experience until "figuring it out" or reaching a solution.

According to Freud's psychoanalysis theory, the stories in Gen 12, 20, and 26 work out the sexual and fearful obsession with the wife being taken by a more powerful man. Exum sees progression in the unfolding of the stories until the tension and phobia are resolved.⁴³⁵

Building on Exum's theory, I suggest that these texts "work out" not only sexual phobias but also the *real* fears of the Israelites in exile for their own lives, the welfare of their wives and daughters, and the fulfillment of God's promise regarding land, offspring, and prosperity.

Exum also argues that these biblical narratives represent an androcentric (male in the center) value system, and a point of view in which a woman is only an object in the

⁴³⁵ For elaborate explanation of the theory and its implantation in our narratives, see Exum, "Endangered Ancestress", in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 146-150.

story about male fears and desires.”⁴³⁶ I would like to read these texts differently, putting the female heroine in the center.

Reading these texts in their literary context may provide an insight into a pattern of transformation from existential threat to prosperity. In these texts, Sara and Rebecca play a significant role, though not seen at first glance.

Genesis 12:10-20

To read this text in context, we should begin with Genesis 11, which is the story about the disruption of the town of Babel and its people. The chapter continues with a long list of Avram and Sarai’s genealogy.⁴³⁷ Chapter 12 opens with God’s order to Avram to leave his country and travel to the place which God has planned for him, followed by a promise: “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2). Avram and Sarai migrate for the first time.

Famine in the land of Canaan forced Avram and his wife Sari to migrate to Egypt. There, fearing for his life because of Sarai’s beauty, Avram asked her to pretend to be his sister. Sarai then was taken to the palace, and Avram benefited on her behalf: “And for her sake, it went well with Avram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels” (Gen 12:16). God intervened on Sarai’s

⁴³⁶ Exum, *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 150.

⁴³⁷ The names Avram and Sarai appear in the original text until chapter 17.

behalf and inflicted Pharaoh and his household, preventing him from approaching Sarai sexually.

Pharaoh confronted Avram for his deceit, asking him, “what have you done to me?” [why have you endangered me by making me cross a taboo] and expelled both Avram and Sarai. The next chapter begins with an accounting of Avram’s great wealth: “Now Avram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and gold” (Gen.13:2).

The literary unit comes complete cycle: from a state of chaos in Babel, hunger in Canaan, and Sarai’s barrenness, we move to fulfillment of God’s promise and prosperity. Avram returned to Canaan and became great in wealth. The text states twice that Sarai is responsible for this wealth: “Please say that you are my sister that it will go well for me because of you.” (Gen.12:13) and, in 12:16. Sarai is the center of this unit; through her is the fulfillment of God’s promise. The following literary unit of “wife as a sister” narratives (Genesis 20) will fulfill God’s most important promise - a successor.

Chapters 17-19 can be read as a literary bridge between the two units: in chapter 17, God blesses Avram and Sarai and changes their names. Sarai receives a specific covenantal blessing: “And God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of nations shall come from her’” (Gen.17:15-16).

Thus, not only is Sarah an equal partner with Abraham in the fulfillment of God’s covenantal promise, but she also has a central role in the continuation of Abraham’s

bloodline. Chapter 18 declares God's promise to Abraham and Sarah via the three angels who visit them. Chapter 19 is the prelude to the next literary unit, which begins with a disaster once again.

Genesis 19

Chapter 19 describes the violent distraction of the sinful city of Sodom. In the face of complete distraction and inhalation of humanity, Lot's daughters tricked their father into having sex with them and conceived.

The narratives in chapters 19-20 express the motif of "sex as means of survival," stressing the importance of the continuation of the clan. For example, in Genesis 19:8, Lot was ready to give away his virgin daughters to the mob to save his male guests; in Genesis 20, Abraham was willing to give his wife to save himself. In both cases, God intervened and saved the women.

Genesis 20: 1-18

Chapter 20 begins with Abraham's family travel to Gerar and the repetition of the "wife as sister" motif. As in the previous type scene, Sarah was taken to King Abimelech's palace. God, as Sarah's protector, appeared in Abimelech's dream and warned him with the death penalty for sleeping with another man's wife (Gen. 20:3-7). Thus the biblical author (using the appearance of God) reinforced norms against adultery, this time with the severe threat of death.

Abimelech rebuked Abraham for his hurtful deceit, repeating the phrase “what have you done to me?” referring to “things that ought not to be done” as the taboo against sleeping with another man’s wife (Gen. 20:9). Abraham stated his fears that in this godless place, “they will kill me because of my wife.” Abimelech returned Sarah to Abraham, offered them to sit in the land, and gave Abraham thousand of pieces of silver on Sarah’s behalf (Gen. 20:16). Again, Abraham’s great wealth was thanks to Sarah.

The literary unit concludes with God’s “conceiving” Sarah in Genesis 21:1-2. Once more, the audience moves from devastation and fear of continuity to fulfilling God’s promise of land, wealth, and offspring - through Sarah.

Genesis 26:1-14

In Isaac’s and Rebecca’s case, the narrative begins in the previous chapter, which recalls the deaths of Sarah, Abraham, and Isaac’s brother, Ismael. Isaac’s favorite son, Esau, gave up his share in the inheritance for a lentil stew. This prelude symbolizes a threat to the continuation of the family and the fulfillment of God’s great promise to Abraham.

Chapter 26 begins with building the literary frame of the story and connecting the audience to previous narratives. The linking is done through repetition of elements such as famine in Canaan, travel to Gerar, the appearance of King Abimelech, God’s repetition of blessing and promise to Isaac, a beautiful wife, Isaac’s fear for his life, resulting in “wife as sister” motif.

This time there was an essential change in the narrative, which resolved the tension and completed the cycle of the three-fold narratives. Not only was Rebecca *not*

taken to Abimelech's palace, but King Abimelech (after rebuking Isaac for his deceit) took it as a communal responsibility to prevent adultery and issued a decree of death to anyone who touches Isaac and his wife.

Immediately after, the narrator reports Isaac's financial success (Gen 26:12-13). The chapter continues with Isaac digging wells and finding water springs, which represent the continuity of life and succession of generations.⁴³⁸ The plot ends with the completion of God's promise: "And he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it. So he called its name Rehoboth, saying, 'For now YHWH has granted us a wide space, and we shall be fruitful in the land'" (Gen.26:22). Once again, 'the audience' completes a full cycle: from migration due to hunger, fear for one's life and bloodline, to fulfillment of God's promise and prosperity.

The three "wife as sister" narratives stress the dire consequences to those who sleep with a woman unlawfully. To augment this biblical message, we can add the narratives in Genesis 34 (where Dinah's brothers avenge her rape and severely punished the whole town of Shechem)⁴³⁹ and King David's severe punishment by God for sleeping with Bathsheba unlawfully. "Now, therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says YHWH, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own

⁴³⁸ See the metaphorical meaning of wells in "meeting at the well" type-scene in the matchmaking chapter.

⁴³⁹ See discussion on Dinah in the chapter on virginity.

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 sun.” (2 Samuel 12: 10-11).⁴⁴⁰

The “wife as sister” and “Bathsheba” narratives can also be read as part of a greater literary theme of survival and continuity, as embodied in both the “the palace” type scenes and the “sex as means of survival” motif. A woman who is also a foreigner is usually at the center of these narratives.

The Palace Type Scene

The scene “to be taken to the king’s palace” recalls other famous narratives: Joseph (Gen.39), Moses (Exodus 2:10), Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11), and Esther (Esther 2). In most of these narratives, the hero or heroine is a foreigner in a vulnerable position. Also, most of these narratives allude to sexual encounters, reinforcing the motif of “sex as means of survival” without a moral judgment.

More importantly, “to be taken into the palace” figuratively and metaphorically means to be taken into a place of influence. Thus, the hero/heroine is placed in a position of agency and acts as God’s conduit to ensure the continuation of life: Joseph provided salvation from hunger for the Egyptians and Jacob’s lineage; Moses liberated the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage; Bathsheba was the mother of King Solomon, the successor of the Davidic dynasty; Esther saved her people from annihilation. Sarah, too,

⁴⁴⁰ See Bathsheba in “War Times” chapter.

fits in this category by ensuring the survival of Abraham and the fulfillment of God's blessing.

Sex as Means of Survival Motif

The motif of "sex for survival" appears in the biblical literature in a non-judgmental way and plays an important role in the literary understanding of the narratives. Sex, both in reality and as a literary motif, marks texts about the continuation of the bloodline.

Lot's Daughters

Building on Cheryl Exum's interpretation, the narrative about Lot's daughters (Genesis 19) can be understood as a mechanism to reflect and psychologically work out the fear fathers had that more powerful man may sexually subjugate their daughters. This fear was enhanced under the migrant experience. Further, this narrative is also used as a literary device to articulate the "sex as means of survival" motif.

Lot's family was a migrant resident in the town of Sodom. The town's people mobbed their house, demanding Lot to surrender his guests to them. To protect his guests, Lot offered his daughters as means to soothe the mob (Gen. 19:8). God, through his angels, intervened to save both the daughters and Lot from the people of Sodom (Gen.19:10-11).

Later, the angels saved Lot's family from the destruction and annihilation of Sodom. The daughters, concerned with their survival and continuation of the bloodline,

slept with their father (Gen. 19:32).⁴⁴¹ Thus “sex as means of survival” serves as a literary motif, indicating the continuation of the lineage.

Ruth

The motif of sex, survival, and continuation of lineage appears again in the book of Ruth. Further, there is a textual connection to the previous narrative: Lot’s older daughter is the mother of Moab, Ruth’s place of origin (Gen.19:37). Ruth migrated from Moab with her mother-in-law, Naomi, after the death of both their husbands. As a young female, a stranger in the land of Canaan, she had no one to protect her. This time, it was Naomi who instructed Ruth to present herself to Boaz in a semi-sexual manner, to seek protection “under his wings:”

“Then Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.” (Ruth 3:1-4)⁴⁴²

The plot worked as planned; not only Boaz, a God-fearing man, did not take advantage of Ruth, he vowed to protect her, gave her and Naomi enough food, and arranged to marry Ruth, becoming the redeemer of her husband’s family.

⁴⁴¹ Later, explicitly forbidden in Leviticus 18:6-7, see the chapter on incest.

⁴⁴² The word “feet” in biblical references is a euphemism of genitals which makes the sexual connotation obvious. Also see the chapter on Jael in “War Times.”

“So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went into her, and YHWH gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be YHWH, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! (Ruth 4:13-14). The book of Ruth ends with the announcement and genealogy of the house of King David.

Once again, a book that begins with famine, illness, death, and threat to the continuation of the bloodline ends with a joyful celebration of harvest, wedding, and offspring, all through a migrant woman protected and directed by God.

Esther

The book of Esther combines both the “sex as means of survival” motif and the “at the palace” type scene. Both literary elements construct the more prominent theme of migration/ minority narratives.

We find Esther, a young unmarried woman, an orphan, and a Jew, living as a member of a minority group in Shushan, the Capitol of Persia. Beautiful Esther was taken to King’s Ahasuerus palace to be part of his harem.⁴⁴³ The king fell in love with Esther and made her his queen. (Est.2:8-9, repeated in vs. 16-17). Thus Esther was placed in a position of power, which she used later to save her people: “And she said, ‘If it pleases the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the

⁴⁴³ Some commentators believe that it was Mordecai, Ester’s uncle, who persuaded Ester to go to the palace, but the text does not support such a claim.

king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?” (Est. 6:5-6).

Although God’s name was not mentioned directly in the book, according to tradition, God operated indirectly throughout the plot.

Once again, a complete cycle from fear of destruction and annihilation to celebration and merriments for generations to come: “And in every province and in every city, wherever the king’s command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them” (Est. 8:17).

Ancient Near East

Although the Akkadian words for foreigner *nakru* and *nakiru* may mean “enemy” as well, the Middle Assyrian laws do not bar foreigners from legal interactions or specify that the law applies only to natives. Other than that, the Mesopotamian legal collection says very little about foreigners.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴⁴ T.M. Lemos, *Violence and Personhood in Ancient Israel and Comparative Context*, (UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 38.

Summary

All the Biblical laws regarding migrants or foreigners (*Gerim*) are gender-neutral and apply to men and women. The theological message that God is the protector of the migrants is repeated throughout biblical literature. Using full authority and invoking the Name, God makes sure that migrants, who have no tribe members to protect them, nor land to live off, are taken care of in the Israelite community.

The biblical authors made efforts to specify and articulate calls for justice before the law, labor protections, and ensuring sufficient supplies of food to anyone in need. The book of Leviticus (Lev. 23:22) specifies regulations on harvesting regarding vineyards, fields, and olive trees. These laws are repeated in Deuteronomy 24:19-22 for additional emphasis.

The commandment to ensure the observance of the Sabbath, repeated three times (Ex. 20, 22, and Deut. 5), provides a day of rest and prevents the abuse of workers. In addition, there is a specific commandment in Deuteronomy 24:14-15 not to oppress the migrant worker.

The biblical laws in Leviticus and Numbers treat the foreigner with equal rights before God in all manners regarding worship and justice. Likewise, the book of Deuteronomy commands the Israelite's chieftains to judge righteously between foreigners and the Israelites (Deut. 1:16).

Biblical narratives describe circumstances of Israelite women being a minority in a foreign land (Sarah, Lot's daughters, and Esther) and foreign women among the

Israelites (Ruth). These narratives spread throughout the biblical literature repeat and reinforce a theological message of God's protection and women's role in the divine plan.

The narratives regarding Sara and Rebecca appear disturbing at first. Yet read in sequence together with the narratives about Lot's daughters and Ruth, these texts build a theme of transformation from vulnerability to continuity of generations. These narratives enable the audience to complete an entire cycle, from migration due to hunger, fear for one's life and bloodline, to fulfillment of God's promise and prosperity.

Among the literary devices that reinforce the theme of survival and continuity are "at the palace" type scenes and the "sex as means of survival" motif. At the center of these narratives is a woman who is also a foreigner. "At the palace," the heroine is placed in a position of agency and acts as God's conduit to ensure the continuation of life and legacy (Sara, Esther).

"Sex as means of survival" is, as seen in the narratives regarding Lot's daughters and Ruth, a literary motif that marks the bloodline's continuation. All the women we encounter in this chapter not only help their close kin but also ensure the protection of the family line and create circumstances that have an impact on a national level.

Last, living as a minority in exile, men did fear for their lives, the real possibility of their wives being taken by other men, and the risk to the continuation of their families. The repeated message in the narratives is that God will be there, protecting their women and afflicting those who attempt to touch them.

These texts soothe not only the anxieties of the Israelite men, as Cheryl Exum argues, but also calm women's fears, presenting them as the heroines of the plot and as God's agents for the survival of the clan.

War Time

Although traditionally, women did not participate in the battlefield, they suffered considerable casualties. Biblical narratives from Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges present a grim picture of death and captivity. Numbers 31:9-18 describe the Israelites' attack on the Midianites, killing all men and taking women, children, cattle, and wealth as booty. Moses was angry with the commanders for taking the women, fearing that they would sway the hearts of the Israelites to worship other gods.⁴⁴⁵ Moses ordered: "Therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him. But all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him keep alive for yourselves" (Num.31:17-18).

Later, as the Israelites approached the land of Canaan and prepared for conquest, Deuteronomy 20 specified behaviors during the war. Deuteronomy 20:10-18 identified at least three scenarios: a town which surrenders peacefully -- all the people stay unharmed, pay taxes, and serve as forced labor. The second: in case of a war, if the war were a conquest of the land of Canaan -- all men, women, and children should be killed to preclude the influence of foreign worship practices.⁴⁴⁶ The third possibility: in wars in

⁴⁴⁵ The irony that Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of the Midianite priest, is not lost on the reader.

⁴⁴⁶ Alexander Rofer in his article "The Laws of Warfare in the Book of Deuteronomy: Their Origins, Intent and Positivity," argues that Deuteronomic laws were regarding the Canaanite people, nations that by the seventh century, (the time of formulating the Deuteronomic laws), no longer existed. These laws were written in retrospect, to signal a political point. *Herem* (complete annihilation) was forbidden in later wars. See

foreign lands, when the risk of such influence was lower -- all men should be killed, but the women could be taken as a bounty (as slaves or wives).⁴⁴⁷

Sadly, rape was also associated with war as the prophet Zechariah describes the fate of Jerusalem: “For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken, and the houses plundered, and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city” (Zech. 14:2). The same sentiment is expressed in Lamentations 5:11. Sandra Gravatt states that rape in wartime was both a reality for women in the Ancient Near East and a literary motif used to describe the subjugation of people by their enemies.⁴⁴⁸

Beyond the apparent horrors of death, rape, and captivity, women were also vulnerable to becoming widows and taken by other men once their legal protector was away, at war. In this segment, I wish to look at laws regarding captive women, wives or fiancées of soldiers, and narratives about women who, through no intention of their own, got involved in war affairs like Jael, Abigail, and Bathsheba.

Alexander Rofe, “The Laws of Warfare in the Book of Deuteronomy: Their Origins, Intent and Positivity,” *JSOT* 32 (1985), p. 39. Cited in Footnotes 34-35 in, Harold C Washington, “‘Lest He Die In The Battle And Another man Take Her:’ Violence And the Construction of Gender In The Laws of Deuteronomy 20-22”, in *Gender and Law*, 195-196.

⁴⁴⁷ As we learn from laws regarding slavery (see next chapter) and based on Deuteronomy 25:44 Israelites had slaves of foreign descent. It could be that these slaves were acquired through war. Men too were taken as bounty and *not* killed.

⁴⁴⁸ Sandra Gravett, “Raped Women” in *Women In Scripture*, 356-357.

Law

Deuteronomy 21:10-14 - A Women in Captivity

When you go out to war against your enemies, and YHWH your God gives them into your hand, and you take them captive, and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you desire to take her to be your wife, and you bring her home to your house, and she shall shave her head and pare her nails. And she shall take off the clothes in which she was captured and shall remain in your house and lament her father and her mother a full month. After that, you may go into her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. But if you no longer delight in her, you shall let her go where she wants. But you shall not sell her for money, nor shall you treat her as a slave since you have humiliated her.

In ancient times, women, children, cattle, and other goods were considered “war trophies”, showing off the successes of the victorious men. In some cases, the prospects of financial gain were the incentive to go to war. Women were a desirable prize, as Sisera’s mother fancied: “A womb or two for every man” (Judg. 5:30). Women of childbearing age were in high demand since the mortality rate of young women during childbirth was high. The captured women and children made up for the needed population, reproduction, and labor.⁴⁴⁹

Harold C. Washington, in his article “‘Lest He Die in the Battle and Another Man Take Her:’ Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Laws of Deuteronomy 20-22,” states that in the ancient cultural milieu of the Deuteronomistic laws (late seventh

⁴⁴⁹ Meyers, “Women in Distant Towns as Booty” in *Women in Scripture*, 227-228.

century BCE), violence against women, especially during wartime, was a way of showing masculine identity.⁴⁵⁰

Washington's strong critique of these laws is that they *merely* govern and curb violence against women *rather than* eliminate and forbid such practice.^{451, 452} He interprets the Deuteronomic laws as *governing* warfare and sexual assault, proposing that the laws "render warfare and rape intelligible and acceptable, providing the means for people both to justify and endure violence."⁴⁵³ I disagree with his perspective and consider the Deuteronomic law from the female's perspective. My goal is to examine where the law protects the woman and preserves her human dignity.

To limit sexual looting, the biblical literature established a law regulating the treatment of captive women. Tamara Eshkenazi notes that the law in Deuteronomy 21 respects the woman as an individual who has gone through trauma and allows her time to transition into her new home.

⁴⁵⁰ Harold C. Washington, "'Lest He Die In The Battle And Another Man Take Her: Violence And the Construction of Gender In The Laws of Deuteronomy 20-22", in *Gender and Law*, 185-213.

⁴⁵¹ Washington, "'Lest He Die" in *Gender and Law*, 186-187.

⁴⁵² According to the 'critical legal theory' movement which Washington bases his arguments upon, the law is viewed not as an objective, neutral intelligible moral order, but as an "instrument of oppression and domination." Thus according to Washington, these laws legitimize and perpetuate oppression and violence against women. *Ibid.*, 188-189.

⁴⁵³ Washington, "'Lest He Die" in *Gender and Law*, 187 and Shaye J. D. Cohen, Zev Farber, "Marrying a Beautiful Captive Woman" *TheTorah.com* (2020).
<https://thetorah.com/article/marrying-a-beautiful-captive-woman>

The conquering husband must wait a month before (sexually) approaching the captive woman, allowing her to mourn the loss of her husband, parents, and previous life. Later, there is a transition ritual: shaving the head, trimming the nails, and changing her clothes. Only then can the husband approach her as a wife.

The law in Deuteronomy is significant since the woman is a non- Israelite, not presumed to be a virgin, and could be the wife of another man among the defeated enemy. Washington cites Pressler, who argues that this law intended to provide legal means for a man to marry a war captive woman.⁴⁵⁴ Washington argues that the month's period of abstinence was not only to let the woman grieve and allow for psychological and social transition but, more importantly, to allow time for the woman's cycle of her period, thus ensuring the fatherhood of her future children.⁴⁵⁵

The ritual aspect of shaving the head and trimming the nails is a symbolic disconnection from the previous life by shaving the hair and trimming the nails. In the liminal time, the woman is less attractive (which could be seen as additional protection), yet both hair and nails grow and symbolize new beginnings and renewal of life.

⁴⁵⁴ Washington, "'Lest He Die" in *Gender and Law*, 204.

⁴⁵⁵ Washington, "'Lest He Die" in *Gender and Law*, 206.

Burnette-Bletsch adds that changing the foreign garments transforms the woman from a foreigner to an Israelite, and the ritual itself marks her as a wife and not a “war-spoil.”⁴⁵⁶

Both Washington and Burnette-Bletsch concluded that the rituals described and the period of waiting marked the woman as belonging to the household of the Israelite man and her children as legal partners in the community. Thus, the captive woman becomes part of the Israelite community, legally.

Biblical law adds a prohibition against selling the woman as a slave or treating her with cruelty since she was already humiliated. If the husband does not want to keep the captive woman as a wife, he must make her a free woman. Thus, the biblical law safeguards the captive woman from economic and sexual exploitation. This is an example of the protection of women, even foreign women who were the most vulnerable.

Deuteronomy 20:5-7 and 24:5 -A Wife of a Soldier

Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, ‘Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. And is there any man who has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy its fruit. And is there any man who has betrothed a wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her.

⁴⁵⁶ Cheryl B. Anderson, *Woman, Ideology and Violence: Critical Theory and the Construction of Gender in the Book of the Covenant and the Deuteronomic Law*, (NY: T&T Clark International, London, 2004), 47-48.

There are laws concerned with the wellbeing of the soldier, his wife, and the continuation of his family if he dies. For example, the law in Deuteronomy 20:5-9 allows a man who built a new house, has planted a vineyard, or betrothed a woman, to stay at home and not join the battlefield to ensure the continuation of the household physically and in terms of procreation. In Deuteronomy 24:5, the newly married man is commanded: “He shall not go out with the army or be liable for any other public duty. He shall be free at home one year to be happy with his wife whom he has taken.”

Washington argues that the exemption from combat is grounded in man’s anxiety that ‘another man’ might enjoy the newly acquired house, vineyard, or wife. He sees these laws as protecting the male’s “right to ownership.”⁴⁵⁷

Once again, I see the law differently, as protecting the woman who is a soldier’s wife. In case her husband dies on the battlefield, the law tries to ensure that the woman would have a home to live in, means of economic support (a vineyard or other crops), the status of a widow instead of a fiancée (betrothed), so she would be entitled to some inheritance, and hopefully, she would have a child, which would mean the continuation of the family and improved status for the woman.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁷ Anderson, *Woman, Ideology and Violence*, 202.

⁴⁵⁸ One can argue that the “Force of the Future” program offering US active service members to freeze their sperm is a modern application of this law. Patricia Kime, *Military Times*, January 29, 2016. <https://www.militarytimes.com/pay-benefits/military-benefits/health-care/2016/01/29/military-s-new-fertility-benefit-will-let-troops-freeze-their-sperm-and-eggs/> and also, Israeli court ruling allowing the family to use dead

Narrative

Judges 4-5

Among the many women caught in a war, we have narratives emphasizing Deborah, the wife of Lapidot, who was a prophetess and a judge in the hill country of Ephraim, and Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite at Wadi Kishon.

Deborah

Deborah was a respected judicial authority with political authority to lead. She is called “a mother in Israel” (Judg. 5:7). A “Mother” could be an honorific title for an authority figure. Tikva Frymer connects the reference of a mother to the matriarchs, commenting that, like them, “Deborah was the commissioner of God’s plan.”⁴⁵⁹

The text construct Deborah’s actions to resemble those of Moses and Miriam: she makes judicial decisions for the Israelites (Judg. 4:4-5), speaks on behalf of God (4:6), summons the warriors of Israel, leads them in war (4:6-9), declares God’s deliverance, and after the victory, she constructs and sings a song of praise to God (Judg. 5).⁴⁶⁰

soldier’s frozen sperm to produce offspring. Aron Heller, Associated Press, “The Northerner”, January 31, 2007.
<https://www.thenortherner.com/news/2007/01/31/israeli-court-rules-dead-soldiers-family-can-use-his-frozen-sperm-to-produce-offspring/>

⁴⁵⁹ Tikva Frymer, “Debora 2” *Women in Scripture*, 67.

⁴⁶⁰ Marvin Sweeney, *The Prophetic Literature* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2005), 30.

Deborah is presented in an unprecedented empowering way: not only is she a judge by profession (unique among the Israelites in Biblical times), but she also assumes a priestly role as she accompanies the soldiers to battle as a spiritual leader and God's messenger. In Biblical eyes, Deborah is equivalent to Barak, the military leader.

Frymer, in her article "Warriors by Weapon and Word," explains that Deborah's name, *Eshet Lapidot*, can mean "Torch Lady," and *Barak* means "lighting." These names fit with Mesopotamian mythology: the torch and the lighting are the signals of the storm god. "In the same way, 'Torch Lady' and 'Lighting' are fit agents for the God of Israel who defeats Sisera by creating a river of mud to incapacitate his chariots."⁴⁶¹

Deborah summoned Barak, yet he refused to go without her: "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go" (Jud 4:8). In most biblical narratives, women need protection; here, it is Deborah who provides moral courage and divine protection. Her oracle to Barak was that God would deliver Sisera and his army into the hands of a woman. That woman was Jael.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶¹ Frymer, "Warriors by Weapon and Word" in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 46.

⁴⁶² Jacob Wright argues that a recurrent theme in the book of Judges is the devaluation of male power through elevating of women heroines. Jacob L. Wright, "Yael and the Subversion of Male Leaders in Judges" *TheTorah.com* (2018).
<https://thetorah.com/article/yael-and-the-subversion-of-male-leaders-in-judges>

Jael

Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, is at the center of the great victory over the Canaanites narrative. Yet we know very little about her; we do not know her age, looks, or other attributes. She is presented as an ordinary woman who lived near Wadi Kishon, where the battle between the Canaanite general Sisera and the Israelites took place.

The text states Heber's genealogy and that there were peaceful relationships between the King of Hazor and the Kenites (4:17). The text does not tell us where her husband was or why he was absent from the household during such a perilous time.

Jael was alone in her tent when she saw Sisera, the Canaanite general, fleeing from Barak's army. She came out of her tent to greet Sisera and welcomed him into her tent "Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid" (4:18). In the tent, she covered him with a warm blanket, opened a skin of milk, gave him to drink, and covered him again. Sisera asked her to stand outside the tent and guard him. Here, with no explanation or a trigger, a dramatic turn in the plot occurred: instead of guarding him from his adversaries, Jael became the adversary.

While Sisera was sleeping, exhausted from the battle, Jael took a tent spike and a hammer in her hands, approached him quietly, and drove the pin through his temple until it dropped to the ground (4:21). Jael killed Sisera. An ordinary woman, not a soldier,

killed the great Canaanite commander. When Jael saw Barak, she approached him, saying: “Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.” (4:22). On that day, God delivered the King of Canaan to the Israelites -through the hands of a woman.

Jael fulfilled Deborah’s prophecy. Once again, women, both ordinary and in professional roles, acted on a national scale and altered the political reality of the Israelites. Both Deborah and Jael are presented as emissaries of YHWH, and their actions are praised: “Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed” (Judg. 5:24).

Deborah’s praising song emphasizes Sisera falling and lying between Jael’s legs (Judg.5:24). Midrash and modern interpreters exploit sexual connotations.⁴⁶³ Some even go to the extent of portraying Jael as a sexual seducer and implying that Jael “exhausted Sisera sexually.” Yet neither the text nor the song presents Jael sexually.

Susan Niditch, in her article “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael” and Robert Alter, in his book *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, elaborate on the sexual connotations of “her legs” and see Sisera lying between her feet as “a hideous parody of soldierly assault on the women of a defeated foe.”⁴⁶⁴ Thus the sexual metaphor serves as an ironic riposte:

⁴⁶³ Susan Niditch “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, Peggy L. Day Ed. (43-57), especially pg.46-48.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid. 46 and, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 54.

reversing soldiers raping women during wartime. As we have seen in previous cases, irony as a literary tool indicates moral judgment.⁴⁶⁵

Tikva Frymer notes that in the Graeco-Roman period, many of the biblical stories about women were eroticized.⁴⁶⁶ She compares the story of Jael with the story of Judith: “The difference between Yael and Judith is precisely the difference between biblical ideas and the ideas that came into Israel from the Greek world.”⁴⁶⁷

Frymer continues, “Yet when the outside world of national battles comes into her domestic space, Jael takes up a domestic “weapon of opportunity” and becomes a heroine.”⁴⁶⁸ The story of Jael not only sends the message that ordinary women are part of the war effort and its success. It also sends a psychological message to the women afraid of being raped by the invading soldiers while their husbands were at war. Jael “showed” them what to do and symbolically “did it” for all of them.

⁴⁶⁵ See chapter on child sacrifice- Jephthah’s daughter.

⁴⁶⁶ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 55.

⁴⁶⁷ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 56. The book of Judith was written in the Graeco-Roman period and is part of the “external books” (those who did not get into the biblical canon), the Apocrypha. The story about Judith is a variation of the story of Jael, yet heavily stresses Judith’s beauty and alludes to erotism.

⁴⁶⁸ Tikva Frymer, “Jael” *Women in Scripture*, 97-98.

1 Samuel 25- Abigail

Abigail was the beautiful and intelligent wife of a wealthy man by the name of Nabal. When Nabal was shearing his sheep in Carmel and having a feast, David sent ten young men to greet him and ask for payment for “the protection” Nabal and his shepherds enjoyed by David’s band. Nabal refused to pay and added a sarcastic remark regarding David’s situation of fleeing from King Saul. “Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many slaves who run away from their masters” (1Sam. 25:10-11). David, in turn, set out with his band of four-hundred-armed people to avenge the insult and take what he considered his due.

Upon hearing what had transpired and feared the dire consequence of the encounter between her defenseless husband and David’s armed gang, Abigail reacted by sending a generous load of food and wine to David’s men (1 Sam. 25:18). Without consulting or telling her husband about her plan, Abigail took matters into her hands and set out to meet David and his gang. When she saw David, she quickly jumped off the donkey and fell at his feet. In a long monologue, Abigail both warned David in the name of God and promised him a bright future. Invoking the name of God five times, she convinced David not to harm her husband (1 Sam. 25:26).⁴⁶⁹

Frymer notes that Abigail knew how to approach David and talk to his heart about what was most important to him: his stature in the eyes of God and his people. Abigail

⁴⁶⁹ Tikva Frymer, “Abigail” in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 320-321.

delivered an oracle declaring that YHWH is on David's side, predicting David's success over his enemies and becoming "the prince over Israel."

David agreed with her and blessed her in the name of God for preventing him from bloodshed:

"Blessed be YHWH, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from working salvation with my own hand! unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there had not been left to Nabal so much as one male" (1 Sam. 25:32-34).

Thus, the intelligent and resourceful Abigail managed to save not only her husband and household from death and looting by David's gang but also David from committing murder and tainting his name with bloodguilt. Later, her husband Nabal died from a heart attack and opened the way for David to take Abigail as his wife (1 Sam 25:37-42).

It is important to note that the theme of food is repeated three times in this narrative, twice in association with Nabal's feasts and once at the center of the plot -- as the "game-changer" associated with Abigail. Food, as an essential means of sustenance, was also means of control (see Joseph in Egypt, Genesis 41-43). As we saw with Jacob giving his brother, Esau, a bowl of lentil stew (Gen. 25:30-34), and as we saw with Jael and the Canaanite general, Sisera, the one who offers the food is the one in control of the situation. Here too, Abigail is the one who offers David food and drives the plot.

Some biblical scholars and social conventions tend to connect women with food as examples of nourishment and hospitality.⁴⁷⁰ Yet while this is true, food also associate them with power. As some of the biblical texts show, food is associated with both power and dynamics of control.⁴⁷¹

Abigail is an example of a wise and resourceful woman, acting to save her husband when danger threatens her household. She does not seek her husband's permission and assumes full authority over the situation. She acts in the domain of her household, yet her influence is far-reaching in forming a king.

2 Samuel 3

Second Samuel 3 portrays the transition of monarchy from Saul to David. Two women are mentioned at the center of the plot: Rizpah Bat-Aiah, King Saul's concubine, and Saul's daughter, Michal. Both women were caught in the conflict between Saul and David. Though not active themselves, their roles were both the "cause" and the "symbol" of the transition from the reign of the house of Saul to the house of David.

Rizpah Bat Aiah was the cause for Abner, King Saul's army commander (who slept with the King's concubine, was caught, and confronted), to switch sides and swear

⁴⁷⁰ Geoffrey Miller, "A Riposte Form in The Song of Deborah" in *Gender and Law*, 116,122, 124.

⁴⁷¹ See also Genesis 3:6 and 3:12: when Eve gave Adam the fruit to eat.

“to transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul and set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan to Beersheba” (2 Sam 3:10).

Michal, Saul’s daughter and David’s first wife, was given in marriage to Paltiel, the son of Laish, by Saul. However, David asked for her back, so Princess Michal, who represents the “crown,” became David’s possession. In contrast to Abigail, Rizpah and Michal were portrayed as passive characters in the plot, yet they serve as important literary markers of the transition of power.

2 Samuel 14, 20

Two influential women praised for their wisdom during David’s endless battles were the “wise woman” from Tekoa in 2 Samuel 14:1-24 and the “wise woman” from the town of Abel of Beth- Ma’acah in 2 Samuel 20:15-22. Both had the title “Wise Woman,” implying they were known for their wisdom in counsel and had acquired enough political power to be in a position to speak with King David or Joab, his military commander.

The wise woman from Tekoa convinced King David to stop the pursuit after his son, Absalom, and bring him back to Jerusalem. The wise woman from Abel convinced Joab to stop the siege on the city and saved the entire town from destruction and death. Once again, women played a significant role in saving lives and in changing political landscape.

2 Samuel 11-12 - Bathsheba

Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, King David's loyal soldier, became the subject of the King's desires while her husband was at the battlefield, fighting for the king. David sent messengers to bring her to the palace and laid with her. Bathsheba was in a vulnerable situation: her husband was away; she could not decline the King's summon nor refuse his advancements towards her.⁴⁷² From this affair, she became pregnant. Pregnancy, while the husband was absent, implied adultery and exacerbated her vulnerability.

King David summoned Uriah from the battle and tried to convince him to go home and lie with his wife. Thus Bathsheba would have been clean from suspicion of adultery, and the child would be Uriah's. The plot got complicated when Uriah refused to go home, saying to David: "The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, and my YHWH Joab and the servants of my YHWH are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife?" (2 Sam 11:11). Then, King David sent messengers to Joab, his military commander, to have Uriah killed in the battle

⁴⁷² We do not know if Bathsheba was basically raped by the king or if she was a cooperating partner in the adultery. The text does not tell us about Bathsheba's thoughts or feelings toward King David. Sara Koering notes that many modern novels sexualize and objectify the character of Bathsheba, depicting her either as a victim or a manipulative seducer, thus perpetuating gender stereotypes. Sara M. Koering "Bathsheba in Contemporary Romance Novels" in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, Susanne Scholz Ed. (NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 407-423.

(2 Sam. 11: 15). After Uriah's death in the battle, David took Bathsheba as his legal wife. The child born out of David's first encounter with Bathsheba died soon after his birth as a punishment from God.

The role of Bathsheba in this plot was intentionally minimized to focus the story on David. King David abused his power, committed adultery, and ordered murder. Thus, he would carry the heavy mental burden of responsibility and condemnation. The shameful event could not go without repercussions from God. The prophet Nathan delivers a dire prophecy to the house and kingdom of David:

“Why have you despised the word of YHWH 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. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ Thus says YHWH, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of 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 sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun’”. (2 Samuel 12:9-12).

The text reinforced the prohibition and the dire consequences of adultery, sending a strong message of death as punishment to those who would take advantage of women while their husbands were at war. In King's David case, the death penalty would be extended to his heirs and multiplied to include *all* of his households. The text emphasized that YHWH is the supreme power of law and moral conduct, not the king.

The story of Bathsheba echoes the “wife as sister” narratives, where God punished the male kings, yet not the women who had no power of dissent. Building on these four narratives, one can assume that during wartime (or other vulnerable situations),

when other men might take advantage of the husbands' absence, the women would not have been considered guilty of adultery, and God would punish the offending men.

Moreover, the literal character of Bathsheba plays well into the type scene of a "woman being taken into the palace," positioning her in a place of influence over the continuation of the Davidic dynasty. Later, Bathsheba becomes influential by plotting with the prophet Nathan to ensure that her second child, Solomon, will be the legitimate heir. This narrative flips the convention of a helpless woman being used as an object and presents Bathsheba as a resourceful woman.

To conclude, most of the women mentioned in the King David narratives played an essential role in changing the political reality. Abigail, Michal, and Rizpah Bat Aiah were markers of King David's rise to power and monarchy. Bathsheba, Tamar, and Michal marked his moral and political downfall. The wise women from Tekoa and Abel Beth Ma'acah played significant roles in preventing bloodshed and the destruction of towns. The French expression "*Cherchez la femme*" (search for the woman's influence) exemplifies the importance of women in the rise and fall of the Davidic Dynasty.

Ancient Near East

The narrative about Deborah is not unusual; women prophetesses were not uncommon in the Ancient Near East. In Assyria, for example, most of the prophets were women. Further, reports from Ancient Near East battlefields indicate that women shamans were

an integral part of the army. Their “job description” was to bless and encourage the troops and curse the enemy.⁴⁷³

As for the story of Jael, a similar story about the warrior goddess Anat circulated among the Canaanites. In the “*Aghat epic*,” Anat avenged her brother's death (different versions of the story) and killed her adversary in the tent.⁴⁷⁴ Thus Jael can allude to the “fierce warrior goddess.”

Marten Stol notes that some scholars assume that in ancient times wars were waged to supplement the workforce. Male, female, and even children were captured to be enslaved. Documents from the Old Akkadian period (2300–2100 BC) reported their conquests of cities and gave precise numbers of the dead and prisoners of war. For example, from wars in Ur and Lagash, there were 8040 dead and 5460 captured.

Women together with their very young offspring were marched thousands of miles to the cities of the victorious armies. Captive women were used as slaves in different occupations such as weaving and milling flour, cooking for the male slaves who were building new cities and palaces. In Mari, women were identified as accompanying

⁴⁷³ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 48.

⁴⁷⁴ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 56. For further comparisons between Anat and Jael, see Susan Nidetch’s “Eroticism and Death in The Tale of Jael” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, Peggy L. Day Ed. (43-54).

the forced male laborers to prepare their food. One woman had to cook for five men. Some would have a future career as singers and musicians.⁴⁷⁵

Carol Meyers adds that women's reproductive capacity was their advantage over men (who were killed). She sums: "Indeed, it is not uncommon in many premodern cultures, in which there are relatively fewer women of childbearing age than men because of the death of women in childbirth, for the ethics of military victory to allow for claiming wives among the female survivors."⁴⁷⁶

Summary

During wartime, women found themselves in life-threatening, serious vulnerable situations. Being a woman on the defeated side meant death, rape, or captivity. Being a woman on the winning side also had its challenges of men taking advantage of the husband's absence.

The biblical literature tries to address these situations and send a soothing message to women through law and narratives. The Deuteronomic authors instituted laws protecting both Israelites and captive women (who were the most vulnerable), protecting their lives and dignity.

⁴⁷⁵ Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 337.

⁴⁷⁶ Carol Meyers, "Wives and Children as Booty" in *Women in Scripture*, 219-220.

The law in Deuteronomy 21 protects the captive woman from brutality and exploitation. She is viewed as a person who has experienced the trauma of war and is given time to recover and adjust to her new situation. Her captor must marry her, thus allowing her and her children full legal rights. She cannot be sold into slavery or to another man. A ritual is provided to mark her transition.

The laws in Deuteronomy 20 and 24 potentially provide a “safety net” for the wife or fiancée of a soldier in case he dies in the battle. She will have a house to live in, means to support herself, and hopefully, a child to continue and inherit the man’s legacy and estate.

The narratives in Judges 4-5 introduce inspiring messages of strong and resourceful women, Debora and Jael. Both are praised for their actions, acting in God’s name and as His emissaries. Jael’s role is important to send two messages: First, ordinary women can participate in war efforts and influence the national scale of events. Second, building on Cheryl Exum’s psychological theory, Jael’s agency, resourcefulness, and victory can help alleviate women’s anxiety about prospective rape by conquering soldiers.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁷ Cheryl Exum, “Who’s Afraid of The Endangered Ancestress”? in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 141-156.

The women presented in the many narratives regarding David's turbulent wartimes are wise, resourceful, and assertive. Not only are they influential in saving lives, households, and towns, but they are also influential players on the political scene, marking the continuation of King David's legacy.

Furthermore, the theme of food is played out as a motif of power dynamics and control. The woman who gives the food to the military leader (both Sisera and David) is the one who is in control of the situation and ultimately gets her way.

Last, the biblical literature reinforces the prohibition and punishment against adultery in David and Bathsheba's narrative, sending a clear message to men not to abuse the absence of husbands during wartimes, since God will punish them and their household for their miss deeds.

Slavery

In biblical times slavery was a crucial component of the economy. The primary means of acquiring slaves were war and debt. The enslavement of war prisoners was common throughout the history of Mesopotamia. Israelites also went to war to conquer land and take slaves. Prisoners of war became slaves of the state in perpetuity and worked on public projects such as palaces, temples, and the estates of monarchs and other officials.⁴⁷⁸

Debt slavery, on the other hand, came from within the Israelite community. Debt slavery was temporary by law, with a maximum length of six years. The slaves mainly worked for the household to whom they owed money.⁴⁷⁹ Debt slavery became more prominent after the establishment of monarchy in Israel (approximately in 1037 BCE). The kings imposed high taxes, which debilitated poor farmers. Impoverished farmers, who had to take loans, mortgaged their land, homes, and household inhabitants (all family members, including children).

At least two biblical references to such destitute situations are mentioned: In 2 Kings 4, the widow's sons were about to be taken into servitude for an unpaid debt when Elisha provided a miraculous source of income for the widow to save her children. Second, Nehemiah 5:4-5 records the complaints of the Israelite community: "And there

⁴⁷⁸ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social Worlds of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE*, 199-205.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 199.

were those who said, ‘We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, and our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.’”

Once the debt was paid or, on the seventh year of their slavery, debt slaves were released and restored to free citizen status. Yet economically, they were still impoverished and had to start all over again.

Women were sold into slavery more often than men; some were sold as household maids, some as wives or a ‘slave-wife,’ or surrogate wombs.⁴⁸⁰ The biblical literature refers to such occurrences in the narratives about Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah (Gen.16, Gen.30). The biblical literature uses the terms *ama* (אמה) and *shifcha* (שפחה) for a female slave and sometimes *pilegish* (פילגש) as a concubine. Although it seemed interchangeable, Carol Meyers notes that *shifchah* indicates a lower servitude and unskilled labor than *ama* (maidservant).⁴⁸¹

This chapter will examine the laws in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy to learn how women slaves were protected and what we can learn from the narrative about Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21.

⁴⁸⁰ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social Worlds*, 204.

⁴⁸¹ Carol Meyers “Female (and Male) Slaves” in *Women in Scripture*, 178, 180.

Law

In his article “The Female Slave,” Raymond Westbrook notes that in general, in the ancient Near East, male and female slaves were subject to the same law. Yet because the female slave could bear children, she was a particular economic asset. Raymond makes the critical observation that the rules which governed the condition of female slaves arose from a conflict between family law, which applied to slaves as *persons*, and property law, which applied to slaves as *chattels*. “Sometimes one institution prevailed, sometimes the other, and sometimes the rules represented a compromise between the two.”⁴⁸²

Exodus 21:1-11, 26-27

Setting limits on time of servitude and cruelty towards debt slaves.

Subcases: a married male slave and a girl who was sold as a slave-wife.

Exodus 21 is part of “The Book of the Covenant,” the *Mishpatim* (rules) given on Mount Sinai to the Israelite people, to be taught and instructed for generations to come.

Positioning laws regarding slaves in “The Book of Covenant” shows the importance of these laws. The laws seek to regulate the master’s behavior and find the balance between protecting the owners’ rights to the rights of the slaves. The laws in this codex treat both male and female slaves equally unless specified differently.⁴⁸³ Carolyn Pressler

⁴⁸² Raymond Westbrook, “The Female Slave” in *Gender and Law*, 214, 220.

⁴⁸³ Tamara Eskenazi, *The Torah*, 429-430. The translation of the following passages is based on gender-inclusive understanding and on the Torah’s translation.

understands *ibri* (עברי) as referring to economically marginalized Israelites.⁴⁸⁴ The Israelite slave has protection and rights that the non-Israelite slave does not have.

Ex.21:2 “When you buy a Hebrew slave, (s)he shall serve six years, and in the seventh (s)he shall go out free, without payment.” This law can be read as regarding both male and female slaves who worked out their debt for a maximum of six years. They must be set free in the seventh year without any obligation to pay the rest of the debt.⁴⁸⁵ This law is repeated with explicit reference for male and female slaves in Deuteronomy 15:12-14 and 28:68.⁴⁸⁶

The next section is case and gender-specific.

Ex.21: 3-6 “If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him.” Here the focus is on the male slave and his wife. If he was married before, both the slave and his wife (a family unit) were freed together. However, if his master gave him a wife, she and her children are the possession of her master. The

⁴⁸⁴ Carolyn Pressler, “Wives And Daughters, Bond And Free: Views of Women In The Slave Laws Of Exodus 21.2-11” in *Gender and Law*, 147-172.

⁴⁸⁵ *The Torah*, 430, note explanation on gender-inclusive of word “slave.”

⁴⁸⁶ There is a scholarly debate whether the statement in Exodus 21:2 was gender-inclusive. Some scholars see the progression of inclusivity in the law from Exodus to Deuteronomy. See discussion in Cheryl Anderson, *Women, Ideology, and Violence*, 26-27; Carolyn Pressler, “Wives And Daughters, Bond And Free: Views of Women In The Slave Laws Of Exodus 21.2-11” in *Gender and Law*, 149, and Tamara Eskenazi, Ed. *The Torah*, 1074.

law sets up a public ritual to allow the male slave to stay with his family under his masters' household for perpetuity if he wishes to do so.

Ex. 21:7 “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the other slaves do.” (We understand the daughter to be a minor, un-betrothed girl).

Across the board, scholars agree that parents surrendered their children into bondage only in extremely dire straits and as a last resort. Some scholars maintain that girls may have been especially vulnerable to being sold.⁴⁸⁷ The reasons for parents selling their daughters may be twofold: availability of food in more affluent households and assuring the girl would be married, which was a necessity (and a parent's responsibility) in biblical times.

It is believed that the father would try to secure the best possible place (and future) for his daughter, given the family's condition of extreme poverty. Some scholars suggest that “[m]arriage to the master or the master's son seems to be the condition the father makes for his daughter's indenture.”⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁷ *The Torah*,755.

⁴⁸⁸ *The Torah*,431.

Gregory Chirichigno distinguishes the status of a girl who was sold as a general household slave and would be released after six years to a girl who was sold specifically with the intent of marriage. He narrows the application of this law.⁴⁸⁹

According to this passage, presumably, the girl was designated as a wife to the master or his son once she grew up (after six years). Kristine Garroway, in her book *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, compares the passage to other examples from the ancient Near East (YOS8 51).⁴⁹⁰ She explains the case of a girl named *Tabbi-Istar*, who was given to the creditor's household like an adopted daughter, to be later married off in the family. It is possible that the father gave his daughter to his creditor as a future wife to reduce the amount of money he owed. The "bride price" canceled the debt. The clause in this girl's contract protected her legally from (sexual) abuse.

This case can shed light on Exodus 21:7. Garroway regards the situation as a non-normative betrothal of a free-born daughter. "Because of the father's crisis, he utilized another avenue for marrying his daughter."⁴⁹¹ She explains that when the father sold his daughter to the man, he did so with the understanding that someone in the family would

⁴⁸⁹ Carolyn Pressler, "Wives and Daughters" in *Gender and Law*, 156.

⁴⁹⁰ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 114-117.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

marry her. “It is possible the father placed his daughter in this position because he could not provide for her or could not afford the necessary dowry for her marriage.”⁴⁹²

Raymond Westbrook notes that in ancient Near Eastern law, a man could not be a master and a husband at the same time. He explains that the purpose of marriage was to produce a legitimate heir to inherit from the father. If the wife were a slave, her children would be considered slaves, part of the father’s property, and could not inherit from him. This conflict of interests dictated that once married, the status of a slave girl changed to a free wife.⁴⁹³

Carolyn Pressler notes that the subcases stated above seek to protect the enslaved girl by setting forth the master’s obligations towards her if she was purchased as a concubine.⁴⁹⁴ She cites Chirichgno and Sprinkle, who both assert that the law of the enslaved daughter was intended to guarantee the enslaved girl the same rights afforded to free daughters who were married in the traditional manner.⁴⁹⁵

Ex.21:8 “If she proves to be displeasing to her master, who has designated her for himself, then he must let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people since he has broken faith with her.” This subcase protects the girl who was

⁴⁹² Ibid., 127.

⁴⁹³ Westbrook, “The Female Slave”, *Gender and Law*, 233.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 150.

initially designated to become the wife of her master or his son, yet her circumstances have changed.

If her master was not going to marry her and upgrade her to the status of “wife,” her family had the right (*obligation*, according to Leviticus 25:47-49) to redeem her and set her free. If not, her master could make the arrangements to marry her off (sell her?) within the Israelite community but could not sell her as a slave to a non-Israelite. The phrase “he has broken faith with her” signals that the master has an obligation towards the slave girl.

Ex.21:9 “If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as is the practice with free maidens.” This passage implies that, after six years, the girl is free. She is given as a wife with full rights. “The practice of free maidens” implies that it is the responsibility of her master to make sure she is also given a dowry.

Ex.21:10-11 “If he takes another wife for himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights.⁴⁹⁶ And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out free, without payment of money.” The (former) slave girl already has the status of a wife; she has full rights to complete dignity: sufficient food, clothing, a dwelling place, and marital relations (the right for procreation). If her husband cannot

⁴⁹⁶ *The Torah*, 432, v.10 see different interpretations and translations of “*onatah*”: a dwelling place or, oil, as basic needs of dependents in the ancient Near East.

provide these requirements, the girl has the right to leave her husband's home as a free woman, with no obligation to pay back (for her dowry or other expenses).

Ex.21:20-21 “When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. But if the slave survives after a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his property.” Gregory Chirchigno, in his book *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, interprets this passage to mean “But if the slave *recovers* after a day or two.”⁴⁹⁷

Though the law does not protect the slaves from abuse by their masters, the law insists that the life of a slave matters and must be avenged (but does not specify by whom). The law also ensures equal legal protection for both female and male slaves.

Ex. 21:26-27 “If a man strikes his servant's eye, or his maid's eye, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for his eye's sake. If he strikes out his manservant's tooth, or his maid-servant's tooth, he shall let him go free for his tooth's sake.” Limiting even further the scope of cruelty a master can inflict upon his servant, this passage warns explicitly that severe damage (or even less severe, as in the case of a tooth) will legally result in setting the slave free, thus causing the master financial damage. Thus, not only does the

⁴⁹⁷ Gregory C. Chirchigno, “Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East,” *JSOTS* supp41; Sheffield, UK; JSOT Press 1993, 174-177 as quoted in T.M. Lemos, *Violence and Personhood in Ancient Israel and Comparative Contexts*, (UK: Oxford University Press, 2017),116.

law regard the slaves with full humanity and care for their lives (21:20), the law also cares for their physical well-being.

Leviticus 25:35-45 - Laws of Release from Slavery on the Jubilee

“If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest nor give him your food for profit.

I am YHWH, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God. If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave; he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God. As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations around you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers, the people of Israel, you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly.”

Leviticus 25 begins with the proclamation from God on Mount Sinai. As we saw before, important laws were referenced as given in Sinai and sealed with divine authority. The laws in this codex aim to sustain and protect the poor members of the Israelite community from losing their land and freedom for time without end. “The jubilee legislation envisions a permanently regulated system for adjusting economic imbalance

every 50 years.”⁴⁹⁸ If not redeemed earlier, land and slaves (both male and female) should be released at the jubilee year.⁴⁹⁹ “And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you when each of you shall return to his property, and each of you shall return to his clan.” (Lev.25:10).

Leviticus 35-45 clearly distinguishes the treatment and rights of debt-slaves from the Israelite community to foreign slaves. Although foreign male and female slaves can be bought for servitude in perpetuity, the Israelite male and female slaves should not be treated cruelly, allowed to be redeemed by kin, or released on the Jubilee year.

The theological message “For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt”; and “I am YHWH your God” (Lev:25:42 and 25:55) is repeated in correlation with the treatment of the most vulnerable members of the Israelite community.⁵⁰⁰ God is the ultimate protector of the slaves, both male and female.

Deuteronomy

As T.M. Lemos, in her book *Violence And Personhood In Ancient Israel And Comparative Contexts*, states: “The book of Deuteronomy, as well, maintains disposition

⁴⁹⁸ Tamara Eskenazi and Jocelyn Hudson, *The Torah*, 747.

⁴⁹⁹ See Ibid, 755 a scholarly debate about the inconsistency between Exodus and Deuteronomy, insisting on the release of slaves after six years, to the Jubilee law releasing after 49 years.

⁵⁰⁰ As was previously discussed in the chapter on widowhood.

towards slaves uncommon for texts from the ancient world.”⁵⁰¹ As can we see from the examples given below, Deuteronomy ensures the inclusion of both male and female slaves under the protection of the law.

Deuteronomy 5:12-14

The Sabbath

“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as YHWH your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to YHWH your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.”

Deuteronomy 5 is one of the most important chapters in biblical literature. It contains the basis of Judaism, the *Shema*, and the Ten Commandments. Just before the Israelites enter the promised land, they are reminded that their dwelling in the land is a gift from God, stipulated by their moral, civil, and ritual conduct. The observation of the Sabbath is one of the most important laws, embodied by the theological message that the land and all inhabitants belong to God and that YHWH was the one who brought the Israelites from the house of bondage (5:15).

⁵⁰¹ T.M. Lemos, *Violence and Personhood*, 112.

It is important to note that not only law stipulates the right to rest for both the master's household and the servants, it also specifies the gender. The specific inclusion under the Sabbath law for both male and female slaves is to eliminate any mistreatment.

Deuteronomy 12:12- Participation in Cultic Celebrations

“And you shall rejoice before YHWH your God, you and your sons and your daughters, your male servants and your female servants, and the Levite that is within your towns since he has no portion or inheritance with you.”

Deuteronomy 12:12 expands the inclusion of female and male slaves in the household celebrations, including partaking in the sacrificial meal. In regards to the poor diet of the agrarian society and slaves, in particular, the occasional access to meat (and other, better quality “festive foods”) was beneficial.

Also, the Israelites were commanded to bring burned offerings, sacrifices, and tithes. The food was to be distributed with care, not only to the household but also to slaves and the Levites, who had no means of supporting themselves. This commandment is later expanded even more to include the migrant, fatherless, and the widow who were part of the Israelite community. Deuteronomy 16 repeats this commandment twice (16:11, 14): “You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns.”

Deuteronomy 15:12-15- Setting up the Freed Slave for Economic Stability

“If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year, you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As YHWH, your God has blessed you; you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and YHWH your God redeemed you; therefore, I command you this today.”

The passage in Deuteronomy repeats the limit set on debt-slavery for six years for both male and female slaves. Yet the law in Deuteronomy 15 goes much further than the law in Exodus 21, stating that in the seventh year, not only must the master emancipate the slaves, but he is also obligated to give them from his flock, wheat, and wine press.

“When you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. “You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, and out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress; as YHWH your God has blessed you, you shall give to him” (Deut. 15: 13-14).

This passage is both a theological acknowledgment of YHWH and a practical means to help the freed slave to re-enter the economic and social sphere. The obligation to provide the freed slaves means to support themselves is unprecedented forward-thinking, both in economic and social terms (unfortunately, not always practiced, even in modern times and the best of societies).

Since providing the freed slave with the master’s produce was a difficult requirement, the coda, “You shall remember that you were a bondservant in the land of

Egypt, and YHWH your God redeemed you: therefore, I command you this thing today” (15:15), was added for more gravitas.

Deuteronomy 23: 15-16- Protecting a Runaway Slave

Deuteronomy 23 institutes a revolutionary law in terms of property laws: “You shall not extradite a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him.” This law was later understood by commentators to apply only to foreign refugees, not Israelite run-away slaves.⁵⁰² Yet, the text does not specify the ethnicity or gender of the slave and thus can be read in the most expansive and revolutionary way.⁵⁰³

T. Lemos observes that the Deuteronomic law contrasts sharply with the Laws of Hammurabi and other West Asian legal collections, which demanded that the fugitive slave will be returned to his master.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰² *The Torah*, 1177.

⁵⁰³ This law intensifies extraordinary with regards to the dark period of slave ownership in the United States (1776-1865) and the gruesome fate of run-away slaves.

⁵⁰⁴ Lemos, *Violence and Personhood*, 112-113.

Narrative

Genesis 16, 21- Hagar

The biblical literature emphasizes the Israelite foundational narrative as being slaves in Egypt. The book of Exodus is dedicated to detailing the narrative of the enslaved people and their redemption. There are numerous references to God saving the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, reminding them of their past.⁵⁰⁵ The passage “for you were a slave in Egypt” is invoked in connection to God’s commandment to protect those who were vulnerable such as slaves, orphans, migrants, and widows (Deuteronomy 5:15, 15:15, and 24:22).

Yet, the personification of enslavement and its vulnerabilities is exemplified by the narrative about Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21. Hagar, the slave from Egypt, foreshadows the Israelites’ future slavery in Egypt.⁵⁰⁶ Tikva Frymer sees Hagar as the archetype of Israel’s future: “Hagar anticipates Israel as she lives out the life of an oppressed, covenanted, and eventually emancipated slave in Abraham’s household.”⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁵ For the many references to God saving the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage, see Appendix Four.

⁵⁰⁶ More on the similarities between Hagar and the people of Israel, see Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, “Hagar” in *Women in Scripture*, 87 and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Hagar, My Other, My Self” in *Reading the women of the Bible*, 232-236.

⁵⁰⁷ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Hagar, My Other, My Self” in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 236.

In the biblical tradition, Hagar was Sarah's maiden slave, an Egyptian woman.⁵⁰⁸ The literary meaning of her name can be read as *Ha-ger*, which means "the foreigner" in Hebrew. Hagar was alone in a foreign country, with no family support.⁵⁰⁹ The text refers to her as *shifchah*, which is a lesser status of a slave than *ama*. From a literary and theological perspective, it is important to note that there was no one to protect Hagar-- but God.

After ten years of barrenness, Sarah gave her maidservant, Hagar, as a wife to Abraham so that Sarah could have a child through Hagar. (In ancient times, children of slaves legally belonged to their master.) After Hagar had conceived and was bearing

⁵⁰⁸ In the Islamic tradition, Hagar, the matriarch of the Islamic nation, was a princess wed to Abraham. Frymer, "Hagar," in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 226.

⁵⁰⁹ One can speculate that Abraham and Sarah received Hagar from the King of Egypt after the "wife as sister" debacle in Genesis 12:11-16. Or, mentioning that Hagar was an Egyptian could be a literary connector. Tikva Frymer notes "The narrator does not innocently identify Hagar as an "Egyptian": no coincidence, it is a direct allusion to the central myth of Israel's origins." Frymer, "Hagar" in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 233.

Abraham's child, she began to look down at her mistress. Agonized and envious, Sarah treated Hagar harshly, which led to Hagar's running away from Sarah to the desert.^{510,511}

In the desert, God's angel found her next to a spring of water.⁵¹² The angel engaged Hagar in a conversation calling her by name and stating her status as Sarah's slave, thus indicating that Hagar was not a random person or a stranger to God. Next, the angel asked Hagar "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" His question allowed Hagar to tell her story and to have a voice. Then, God's angel instructed Hagar to return to her mistress and submit to her. In addition, the angel delivered God's promise to Hagar:

"The angel of YHWH said to her, 'I will multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.'" And the angel of YHWH also said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael because YHWH has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone,

⁵¹⁰ The laws of Hammurabi note that once a slave becomes a slave-wife or is bearing a child, her status is elevated from a regular slave. (If it possible that the intent of this law was to prevent miscarriage due to harsh physical labor of the slave who is now pregnant. The master had an incentive in protecting the pregnancy of the slave since the offspring was her/ his property). Yet her mistress can denote her to an ordinary slave, which according to Frymer, was what Sarah did. Frymer, "Hagar" in *Reading the women of biblical literature*, 228-229.

⁵¹¹ Today modern feminist commentators try to reconcile the rupture between Sarah and Hagar (and the people they represent), through modern midrash. See Noam Zion, "Reconciling Hagar and Sarah: Feminist Midrash and National Conflict" *TheTorah.com* (2019). <https://thetorah.com/article/reconciling-hagar-and-sarah-feminist-midrash-and-national-conflict>

⁵¹² Water represents life and re-birth. See Robert Adler's references to Moses under "meeting at the well" type scene (Ziporah), in the chapter about matchmaking and marriage.

and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." Genesis 16:10-12.

The verse, "The angel of YHWH said to her," was repeated three times to stress that Hagar is addressed by God. Hagar, like Abraham, received a promise of great offspring and of becoming a great nation. She was the *only woman* in the biblical literature to receive such an expansive prophecy directly.⁵¹³

The angel instructed Hagar to call her son "Ishmael," which in Hebrew means "God will hear." The child's name embodied the theological message that God hears the plight of those in distress. Hagar, in turn, called the place of the encounter with God's angel "El- Roi," meaning "God had seen me."

In biblical literature, the naming of children and places meant agency and special connection. Here we have an interesting twist: instead of the mother naming her child, it was God (and later Abraham), who named Ishmael and established a connection with him. Hagar, on the other hand, was given the privilege of naming a place. In the desert, a well of water had great importance. The narrator stresses this point by giving us the exact location of the well for future generations (16:14).

The repetition of the name "Ishmael" (16:15 and 16:16) and naming the well "Le'chai Roi" echoes Hagar's statement that God has seen her (16:13-14). Naming both the child and the well stresses that God both hears and sees the afflicted. The theological

⁵¹³ Frymer, "Hagar" in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 230.

message that God hears is reinforced regarding Ishmael: “And God heard the voice of the boy...” (Gen.21:17). And later echoed in Exodus 3:7 regarding the Israelites:

“Then YHWH said, ‘I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings.’”

Tikva Frymer, in her article “Hagar--My Other, My Self,” points to the literary play and the many repetitions of “eye” and “heard” throughout the narratives in Genesis 16 and 21.⁵¹⁴ The auditory emphasis helps drive the theological message that God sees and hears. The well as means of survival is also a symbol of the continuation of family lineage.⁵¹⁵ The well is mentioned twice (16:7 and 16:14) to emphasize continuity despite the challenges.

The promise for Hagar’s offspring to become a great nation is repeated and doubled in chapter 21, after Abraham had sent Hagar and Ishmael to the desert with only some bread and a skin of water, with very slim chances of survival (21:13 and 21:18). The discovery of the well is followed immediately after the repetition of the promise. “Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink” (Gen.21:19).

⁵¹⁴ Frymer, “Hagar” in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 231.

⁵¹⁵ For example, see the “at the well” type scene in the chapter on marriage.

God himself heard Hagar's plight and had "opened her eyes" to see the well. There are many references to "opening of the eyes" in biblical literature. For example, 2 Kings 4:17-35 has to do with Elisha saving a boy's life, and in 2 Kings 6:8-23, the opening of the eyes refers to national salvation by God. In Genesis 3:5-7 (Adam and Eve), the opening of the eyes means realization and knowledge, yet also, a beginning of a genealogy. Thus, "God had opened her eyes" signals both personal salvation as echoed in 2 Kings 4 and a beginning of a new national legacy, as echoed in 2 Kings 6:17. Moreover, Hagar is also symbolically is an Eve, mother of a new nation.

Tikva Frymer observes that the "annunciation scene" by the angel is similar to the annunciation of a child to Hannah, the mother of Samson, and Marry, the mother of Jesus. "All would have children with special destinies, and all are addressed personally, not through husbands."⁵¹⁶

Robert Adler states that Hagar's narrative is a special variation of the recurrent theme of bitter rivalry between a barren, favored wife and a fertile co-wife or a concubine.⁵¹⁷ The motif directs the audience's attention to the born child, signaling a birth of a hero. Here both the barren woman and her rival were mothers of "heroes."

Jo-Ann Hackett, in her essay "Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments Of An Epic Pattern," sees the narratives about Hagar in Genesis 16 and Ishmael in Genesis 21 as part

⁵¹⁶ Frymer-Kensky, "Hagar" in *Women in Scripture*, 87.

⁵¹⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 49.

of a larger literary genre in the ancient Near East.⁵¹⁸ In these type scenes, the less powerful is the protagonist and hero of the story. Further, hardship or disaster serve to add tension to the plot. Finally, the tension is resolved through divine intervention, which serves as a theological message glorifying God and empowering the hero.

Hackett states, “The force of this general storyline is to make us sympathetic toward the underling and to emphasize the moral gap that often exists between the absolutely powerful and the rest of us.”⁵¹⁹ She adds that the J source writer gave a twist to the plot by making the protagonist a female.⁵²⁰ She writes: “J narrative, then, is sensitive not just to power relationships, but also to gender relationships and is, further, not above making a female, a particularly powerless one at that, the hero of this story.”⁵²¹

Hackett concludes that the Israelite version of the well-known ancient Near East narrative could have been to make a point of the dominance some people have over others, especially over those who are in the most vulnerable position: females, slaves, and foreigners.

⁵¹⁸ Jo Ann Hackett, “Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of An Epic Pattern” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, 12- 25.

⁵¹⁹ Hackett, “Rehabilitating Hagar” in *Gender and Difference*, 22.

⁵²⁰ See explanation about the “J Source” in the introduction, “Literary Use of Biblical Text.”

⁵²¹ Hackett, “Rehabilitating Hagar” in *Gender and Difference*, 24-25.

Building on Hackett's insights, I wish to interpret the narratives of Genesis 16 and 21 as sending an empowering message to those who are less powerful. Hagar, the slave girl, is made significant by having a whole chapter in the biblical literature dedicated to her. This is more literary attention than her mistress, Sarah, received.

Second, the phrase, "And the angel of YHWH said to her," is repeated consecutively to stress that God's oracle was delivered directly to Hagar, not through her master or mistress (Gen 16:19-11). Furthermore, the biblical author draws parallels between Hagar and Abraham, both regarding God's promise of a great nation and with the angel's intervention.⁵²²

In Genesis 21:17, "And the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven" is parallel to Genesis 22: 11 and 21:15, "And the angel of YHWH called to Abraham a second time from heaven." This literal parallelism stresses the theological concept that to God, Hagar is equivalent to Abraham. In God's plan for humanity, Hagar is as important as Abraham and Sarah. God "sees," "hears," and communicates directly with humans, regardless of their social position.⁵²³

⁵²² The angel of God intervenes to save the vulnerable child who needs God's protection. Both Ishmael in Genesis 21 and Isaac in Genesis 22 were saved by God's angel.

⁵²³ Frymer notes the repetition of the use of "eyes" and "seeing" in the Hagar narrative. Frymer, "Hagar" in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 231.

The biblical references to “the angel of God” signals personal protection and national deliverance.⁵²⁴ Thus, it conveys that both Hagar’s and Abraham’s offspring will benefit from God’s protection.

Ancient Near East

Throughout the history of the ancient world, slavery was essential both for economics and for structures of social power.⁵²⁵ The scholar T. Lemos in her book *Violence And Personhood In Ancient Israel And Comparative Contexts*, warns us against collapsing the whole of the ancient Near East civilizations and history into one undifferentiated approach to slavery.

The evidence for slavery in Mesopotamia is diverse and complex in terms of available sources, the ethnic makeup of the society, different historical periods, sites, and regions. Also, there were different types of slavery: temporary debt slaves and permanent “chattel slavery,” which existed alongside other forms of dependent labor.

Each civilization differed in its treatment of slaves. For example, the Greeks tended to see slaves as mere bodies, relating to them as *soma* (body), *katharma* (“garbage”), and *andrapodon* (“man footed creature,” this term derived from the term

⁵²⁴A few among many examples of God’s angel appearance as a protector: Genesis 28:12, and 31:11 (Jacob’s fleeing from Esau), Genesis 48:16 (Joseph in Egypt), Exodus 3:2 (Moses and the burning bush), and Exodus 14:19 the Israelites exodus.

⁵²⁵ Lemos, *Violence and Personhood*, 101,105.

terapodom, which meant cattle). On the other hand, Roman law recognized the slave to have moral agency. Yet this did not diminish Roman cruelty towards slaves.⁵²⁶

Old Babylonian contracts record entire families, including very young children, who were temporarily enslaved to pay the father's debt (CH 177, Chiera PBS 8/2 162).⁵²⁷ The Law of Hammurabi (CH 117) states that the maximum period to enslave a person for debt is only three years. Kristine Garroway explains that while debt slaves were working to pay off the debt, they were *not* considered chattel slaves by society, they were free people in potential.⁵²⁸

A slave's worth was determined by gender, age, skills, and looks. Babylonian sources reveal the different price ranges for slaves. An average male would cost 50-60 shekels, a female 30-40, and children 10-19 shekels. Garroway adds that regarding foreign slaves, an "exotic value" was added to their price.⁵²⁹

Neo-Babylonian text (Nbn.639) shows evidence of "branding"— a physical marker on the slave's body to show belonging to the owner (sometimes a star, sometimes the name of the owner). The mark signified the social status of the slave and set the social

⁵²⁶ Lemos, *Violence and Personhood*, 103.

⁵²⁷ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 113, 142.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

protocol of interactions. The mark was made to ensure that a slave would be returned to his/ her owner if the slave were stolen or ran away.⁵³⁰

Mesopotamian sources reveal that women were sold into slavery disproportionately more often than men.⁵³¹ There is also evidence in various texts that women were vulnerable to sexual exploitation.⁵³² Hennie Marsman notes that the most striking exploitation of female slaves, both by the institutions and by individuals, was to hire them out to brothels or individuals as prostitutes. The fee paid for them was the income of their masters or the temple they belonged to. Marsman added, “Female slaves had no say over their sexuality. A sexual offense against a slave girl was regarded as an offense against her owner.”⁵³³

Carolyn Pressler assumes that the girls who were sold into slavery were minors, non-betrothed girls, “whose primary economic value would be their sexual and reproductive capacity.”⁵³⁴ Thus, when a slave gave birth to a child, the child legally belonged to her master and was considered part of the household slaves. Alarming, this

⁵³⁰ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 144-145. In this case the mark was on the slave’s wrist. The biblical evidence of marking slaves in perpetuity are in Exodus 21:6 and Deuteronomy 15:16.

⁵³¹ Matthews and Benjamin. *Social World*, 204.

⁵³² Lemos, *Violence and Personhood*, 125.

⁵³³ Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 444-445.

⁵³⁴ Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 150.

was an inducement to masters to exploit their female slaves for reproduction purposes, to enrich their possessions of slaves.

Another way of exploiting a female slave's body was "a surrogate womb" for the master and his wife. Tikva Frymer notes that the practice of the "surrogate womb" was prevalent in ancient Mesopotamia. Ancient Near Eastern marriage contracts stipulate that if the wife were barren after a specified number of years, she would give her husband a female slave. The slave could be part of the wife's dowry or purchased for the "surrogate womb."⁵³⁵ Examples of such practice were found in the Laws of Hammurabi (paragraph 146), marriage documents from an Assyrian colony in Anatolia around 1900 BCE., Nuzi documents around 1600 BCE., and Southern Babylonia around 500 BCE.

Once the slave woman was pregnant, Hammurabi's Laws acknowledged the possibility that a pregnant slave might claim equality with her mistress and allowed the mistress to treat the pregnant slave as an ordinary slave (law 146).

Sources from the Ur III period describe thousands of female slaves as temple slaves.⁵³⁶ These were mostly widows, orphans, and disabled women who were "donated" to the temple and became protected by the temple. They were obligated to work in the temple's industries, such as agriculture or weaving.

⁵³⁵ Frymer, "Hagar", in *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 227.

⁵³⁶ Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 438.

Amelie Kuhrt states that female temple slaves were less vulnerable to sexual exploitation and advances, could have a family, and their children would belong to them. Moreover, since they were the institution's property, their age, physical attributes, or health could not affect their market value or perniciously play against them. In essence, the temple protected the most vulnerable in society. By contrast, a slave-girl in the household had no protection or agency over her sexuality and was at the mercy of her owner. "Because of their reproductive and sexual function, moreover, those who were beautiful were highly prized..., and lost their value as they aged."⁵³⁷

Summary

Biblical laws aiming to protect both male and female slaves appear in the most important chapters of biblical literature. Exodus 21 is part of "The Book of the Covenant." The laws in Exodus 21 set time limits and restrictions on cruelty towards slaves. Leviticus 25 begins with the proclamation from God on Mount Sinai and continues with the laws of release in the Jubilee Year. The laws in this codex aim to sustain and protect the poor members of the Israelite community from losing their land and freedom in perpetuity.

In Deuteronomy, the treatment of slaves is mentioned in the most important chapters and the Decalogue (Deut. 5); This sends the theological message that God cares for the slaves and sees them as equal individuals. The coda, "Remember that you were a

⁵³⁷ Amelie Kuhrt "Non -Royal Woman in the Late Babylonian Period: A Survey" in WER, 231, in, Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 440 footnote 11.

slave in Egypt,” is a recurrent theme in Deuteronomy.⁵³⁸ The passage is stated in the singular, to address each of the Israelite audience personally, as if they were slaves in Egypt.

The laws in Deuteronomy ensure the inclusion of both male and female slaves under the protection of the law, especially regarding the Sabbath’s rest and participation in communal celebrations. Moreover, Deuteronomy innovates with revolutionary laws which protect runaway slaves (Deut.23: 16-17) and obligates the master to supply the freed slave with “seed products” to enable their economic re-entry into the society (Deut.15:12-14).

Lemos, in her book *Violence and Personhood*, states: “One can only conclude with certitude that the protections offered to slaves in these texts are atypical not just for ancient West Asian literature but for ancient literature as a whole.”⁵³⁹ She suggests that realistically, the biblical authors could not ban slavery since it was a critical component of the economic system. Instead, they aimed to change the institution of slavery from within.⁵⁴⁰

Kristine Garroway theorizes the reasons for the progressive laws regarding slaves in biblical literature. She supposes the Israelites perceived themselves as God’s chosen

⁵³⁸ See Appendix Four- references to Israelites being slaves in Egypt.

⁵³⁹ Lemos, *Violence and Personhood*,114.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid, 121.

people, delivered from slavery in Egypt. Thus no Israelite could be sold as a slave in perpetuity. “While slavery existed, laws such as Lev. 25:42 and Deut. 15:12 sought to ameliorate the practice of chattel slavery.”⁵⁴¹

Concerning women, Carolyn Pressler relates to the differences between the laws protecting women in Exodus and Deuteronomy. She hypothesizes that laws protecting widows and orphans in Deuteronomy alluded to times of war (and other social disruptions). In these times, *more women* became economically vulnerable and needed support and protection. Therefore, she suggests, “The enslavement of women during the time of Deuteronomy may have been correspondingly more frequent than it was in the time the *mishpatim* (the rules of Exodus) were compiled.”⁵⁴²

On top of laws aiming to protect female slaves, the narratives relating to Hagar, in Genesis 16 and 21, send a powerful message to the audience. Not only do the stories transform Hagar from a simple slave-girl into a founder of a nation, but they also stress the theological message that God is the ultimate protector of slaves and their children.

Furthermore, though Sara and Abraham saw Hagar as a lowly slave, to be used for their purpose, God saw her as Abraham’s counterpart in importance and worthiness. Thus, it was Hagar, the foreign slave, who fulfilled God’s promise and became the matriarch of a great nation.

⁵⁴¹ Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household*, 147.

⁵⁴² Carolyn Pressler, “Wives and Daughters” in *Gender and Law*, 171.

To conclude, Hagar is yet another example of the continuous biblical message that women, regardless of their social status, have an important role in fulfilling God's promises and continuing the pedigree of a nation.

Conclusion

For about seven hundred years (1200-587 BCE), ancient Israel was a diverse community living in difficult environmental and political circumstances. The Hebrew Bible as we know it today is a reflection or a testimony to the continuing struggle of the ancient Israelites through enormous challenges and their survival. Though the theme of hope and continuation is not explicit in biblical literature, it is the overarching and inter-connecting theme.

The biblical scholar Peggy Day notes that “gender is a significant aspect of social identity and therefore must be recognized and addressed when discussing biblical texts and the communities that produced them.”⁵⁴³

Like many feminist scholars and theologians of her time, Ester Fuchs reads the biblical literature as “a political speech act, one that justifies the political subordination of women.” She views women as marginal victims of patriarchal ideology and argues that biblical narratives and laws establish gender-related, power-based, hierarchical societal norms.⁵⁴⁴

For example, Fuchs notes, “Laws pertaining to betrothal and marriage, divorce, inheritance, vows, cultic and religious observance construct the wife as chattel, along

⁵⁴³ Peggy Day, introduction to *Gender and Difference*, 1.

⁵⁴⁴ Ester Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative*, 13, 133-134

with a man's other wives, concubines, children, servants, and livestock.”⁵⁴⁵ I find this statement to be harsh and, in a way, disrespectful towards women. I choose to read the biblical literature differently; I see the female characters as humans who happened to be in a vulnerable situation at times, and the biblical provisions of laws, rituals, and narratives, as trying to protect women's life and dignity when they are most vulnerable.

Carol Meyers notes that throughout biblical literature, “telling a story to transmit key ideas was more important than presenting factual, accurate information.”⁵⁴⁶ Building on this understanding, I have argued in this dissertation that the biblical narratives sent a deliberate message of protection and empowerment of women as part of a greater theme of God's protection to the nation.

Further, in her scholarly introduction to *Women in Scripture*, Alice Ogden Bells states: “The biblical literature in all its various canons and translations has probably been the most influential body of literature in the West and certainly has been the most significant with respect to women's rights and roles. To understand it and the history of its interpretation empowers the interpreter to shape the present and the future.”

Ogden reminds us that each reader comes to the text with a set of pre-set convictions, assumptions, and perspectives, including the previous generations of feminist interpreters who were ideological and androcentric. Ogden concludes her

⁵⁴⁵ Ester Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative*, 116.

⁵⁴⁶ Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 13.

assessment by suggesting that “there is a dearth of constructive theology grounded in modern biblical scholarship, especially from a feminist perspective.”⁵⁴⁷

It is my hope that this dissertation, which puts women at the center of interest and presents empowering applications of biblical law, text, and ritual, will contribute to the field of constructive, modern feminist scholarship.

Throughout 14 chapters, this paper has explored biblical narratives, rituals, and laws, examining if, how, and when the biblical literature has protected women. This concluding chapter will answer the questions I have asked at the beginning of my research.

Were there deliberate strategies to protect females in vulnerable situations?

This paper examined and found forty-two laws, forty-two narratives, and eleven rituals, all aiming to protect women and alleviate their vulnerability.⁵⁴⁸ After a thorough examination of the biblical texts, I believe that the biblical authors incorporated and utilized the different laws, narratives, and rituals as strategies to protect women in biblical times.

⁵⁴⁷ Ogden Bells, *Women in Scripture*, 27-31.

⁵⁴⁸ For a detailed account of the laws, narratives, and rituals, see Appendix Five.

What were the strategies used in the biblical literature to protect vulnerable females?

Laws were the most common and binding strategies. Yet repeated type scenes and literary motifs such as “the barren woman,” “meeting at the well,” “taken to the palace,” and “serving food” were also effective strategies to communicate God's providence and women's partnership in the divine plan.

The narratives in the type scenes mentioned above began with a woman in a vulnerable situation, experiencing risk to her well-being or even life, yet always end in her favor. These narratives of vulnerability are spread throughout the biblical literature and are usually read in different contexts. Yet, when **read as a sequence**, they point to an important message: vulnerable women such as Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Hannah, Ruth, Abigail, Michal, and Bathsheba, for example, turned out to be markers of succession and influence on the national scale.

Further, one can argue that the biblical authors used the sub-genre of “cautionary tales” intentionally to send a stark message of personal and national destruction, as a strategy in specific, serious situations such as child sacrifice (Jephthah's daughter, Judges 11), rape, unlawful sexual conduct (Dinah- Genesis 34), or incest (Tamar -2 Samuel 13).

Which of the strategies was most often used and why?

Laws and narratives were equally commonly used. As a strategy, laws were placed in the most important sections of the biblical literature and repeated (with elaborations) multiple times. For instance, laws against incest were placed in Leviticus 18 and 20 as part of

“The Code of Holiness,” laws protecting slaves were placed in Exodus 21 and 26, as part of “The book of Covenant” and repeated in Leviticus 25, and Deuteronomy 5, 12,15.

In order to strengthen their intent, most laws were combined either with a series of narratives or with a ritual. Thus, for example, the laws against child sacrifice repeated in Leviticus 18:21, Deuteronomy 12:30-31, and Deuteronomy 18:10 were exemplified by a narrative in Judges 11. This narrative concerning Jephthah and his daughter was sealed with an annual ritual aiming to instill the prohibition against child sacrifice in the cultural memory.

Which strategy was implied to which circumstance? Is there a connection, correlation, or conclusion to draw?

The research found that there was no “one strategy to fit each circumstance.” Mostly, laws and narratives were used in combination to enhance each other's message. However, in life and death situations such as birth-giving, child sacrifice, suspicion of adultery, or war, rituals were incorporated as well. Thus, as we saw throughout this paper, the more severe the situation, the more protective strategies were implied.

Rituals, a strategy by themselves, served as mechanisms to help with transitions from perilous situations to normality. Another aspect of rituals was restoring family life, mainly relations between a husband and his wife. Some examples would be purgation and thanksgiving rituals after birth-giving (Leviticus 12:1-8), the ritual of public trial to “prove” the virginity of the maiden being accused of unchastity (Deuteronomy 22:13-21), and “the revealing water” public ritual for a woman accused of adultery (Numbers 5:11-

24). Another ritual was instituted as a law to protect captive women from sexual exploitation and instituting a path for them into Israelite society as free, equal rights women (Deuteronomy 21:10-14).

One example of using multiple strategies in sensitive and important circumstances is the biblical treatment of widows, who were among the most vulnerable. A series of seven laws were legislated in some of the most important chapters of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 10, 24, 25, 26, and 27). Added to that was the strategy of a public shaming ritual of the legal guardian who refused to fulfill his obligations to the widow (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). On top of that, the biblical authors inserted five narratives of childless widows who bore children that became leaders in the national redemption narrative: Lot's daughters (Genesis 19), Tamar (Genesis 38), Ruth (the book of Ruth) and the widows (1Kings 17 and 2Kings 4).

Narratives as a strategy to convey a national story:

The biblical authors used storytelling techniques to convey national messages of identity, theology, and hope. For elaborating on this topic, see the answer to the question, “Is there a development of a theme throughout the biblical narratives?”

In which circumstances were females *not* protected? Why?

Adultery posed a serious threat to the family's stability, economy, and societal norms. Moreover, adultery was considered an offense against the husband's property, God's moral law of conduct, and the purity of the land. Such was the threat that capital punishment for both the man and the woman was instituted: “If a man commits adultery

with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Lev 20:10). This law is part of the Holiness Code of the book of Leviticus, which tells us about its importance. Deuteronomy 22:22 repeats the death penalty for both the man and the woman and adds the moral justification: “So you shall purge the evil from Israel.”

Another circumstance that did not protect females enough was punishment for rape. Indeed we have at least three cautionary tales of the severe personal and national calamity befallen upon the violators of Dinah (Genesis 34), Princess Tamar (2 Samuel 13), and the Levite's concubine (Judges 19-21), yet the deterrent message is not strong enough. (Compare, for example, the deterrent messages against the abuse of the migrant, widow, and the fatherless).

Furthermore, beyond the laws protecting females from incest in the Code of Holiness (Leviticus 18, 20) and the law in Deuteronomy 22:23- 29 (which differentiates between betrothed and un-betrothed women and the location of the rape), there are not enough laws protecting women from rape.

Last, there are very few references to old age and only one reference to an older woman, Sara (Genesis 24). There are no rituals for aging women nor laws protecting them. The beautiful passage in Psalms, “Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent.” (Psa 71:9), could be indicative of a sad reality of older parents (both men and women) who were in vulnerable positions, dependent on their children to take care of them.

One reason for the lack of references and protections could be that most people did not live to old age in ancient times due to malnutrition, war, disease, and general hardships of life. Achieving longevity was considered a special blessing from God and not a vulnerability.

Who were the audiences which these strategies targeted?

Carol Meyers explains that the narratives, laws, and rituals largely collected, written, and produced by elite males (the priests), were addressed to male heads of households.⁵⁴⁹

Thus the strategy of laws was most common and binding. However, through storytelling, the messages embodied in the biblical narratives were passed in towns and villages, reached, and influenced men and women alike. Storytelling also contributed to passing the messages from generation to generation.

Did the different ages of the females imply different vulnerabilities and stakes?

Did the difference in social status imply different vulnerabilities and thus require different strategies?

The diverse narratives and laws show that females could be in a vulnerable situation in all stages of life. Their vulnerability was not a question of age or stage in the life cycle but of

⁵⁴⁹ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 19.

social status and family ties.⁵⁵⁰ Most vulnerable females were foreigners in the intersectionality of their ethnicity, familial status, and age as young women.

Examples of such vulnerability would be Ruth, a widow and a foreigner; Dinah, a maiden in alien territory; Hagar, a slave-girl in a foreign country; Ester, fatherless in a foreign country; Bathsheba, the wife of a soldier missing from home and maybe also a foreigner, and to an extent, Sara and Rebecca in the “sister as wife” narratives.

The narratives about migrant women are spread throughout biblical literature, reinforcing the theological message of God's protection and women's important roles in the divine plan. These narratives can also be read as part of a greater literary theme of survival and continuity, thus employed as a hope and empowerment strategy.

The dire vulnerability of the social and ethnic status of migrants is also reflected in the many laws aiming to protect them: Exodus 22:21, 23:9, Leviticus 19:33-34, Deuteronomy 10:19, and Exodus 20, 22. Laws regarding Shabbat aiming to prevent abuse of migrant workers (Deuteronomy 5), laws mandating sharing of food in national and familial celebrations (Deuteronomy 16:11). Deuteronomy 24 warns against oppressing a migrant hired worker and articulates harvesting regulations to ensure some means of substance to migrants. Numbers 35:15 ensures that foreigners too could use

⁵⁵⁰ There is not enough information on age in biblical literature, and therefore we cannot draw conclusions regarding age and vulnerability. For estimates on age as it correlates to life cycle stages, see Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near East*, 19.

cities of refuge and be protected by the law. Last, Deuteronomy 27:19 reiterates full justice and equality in front of the law for the migrants as citizens.

All the Biblical laws regarding migrants (*Gerim*) are gender-neutral and apply to men and women. The theological message that God is the protector of migrants is repeated throughout biblical literature. Using full authority and invoking the Name, God makes sure that migrants, who have no tribe members to protect them, nor land to live off, are taken care of in the Israelite community.

In which stages of their life were females most vulnerable and needed the most protection?

According to Carol Meyers, women during pregnancy and childbearing were in the most vulnerable situation. The combination of young age (teen pregnancies), labor complications, long lactation periods, and malnutrition meant body exhaustion and greater mortality rates for women.⁵⁵¹ Kristine Garroway suggests that infants faced the most vulnerable time of their life cycle.⁵⁵²

Unfortunately, the biblical literature lacks narratives emphasizing God's active participation in the process of labor or smooth childbirths (in comparison to Mesopotamian childbearing narratives, for example).

⁵⁵¹ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 100.

⁵⁵² Garroway, *Growing Up in Ancient Israel*, 270-271.

Meyers and Garroway stress the archaeological findings of protective amulets and rituals, which reflect home-based religion and worship of multiple gods to protect the mother and the child (Asherah, Baal, Bes).⁵⁵³

The biblical literature provides us with strategies of law and rituals (Leviticus 12:1-8) which dictate separation from the Sancta for a limited time and re-entering ritual to the holy place, avoiding sexual relations, purification rituals, thanksgiving and purgation sacrifices, celebratory feast, baby naming, and circumcision for the baby boy. These procedures and rituals enabled women to physically heal and provided for gradual transition back to normal life in the household and society.

What can we infer from the narratives and laws about the environments where females most needed protection?

The many narratives regarding war and migration may help us infer the environments where females were most vulnerable. During wartime, women found themselves in life-threatening, serious situations. As a result, the Deuteronomic authors instituted laws protecting both Israelite women and captive women, who were the most vulnerable. The laws in Deuteronomy 20:5-9, 21:10-14, and 24:5 aimed to protect women's lives and dignity.

⁵⁵³ Garroway, *Growing Up in Ancient Israel*, 270.

Furthermore, women are the heroines in all the narratives of wartime in which they appear. The Women are active, wise, resourceful, and take matters into their hands. For example, Debora and Jael (Judges 4-5) presented in an unprecedented empowering way; they are brave and capable warriors credited with the national victory.

The women in King David's wartime narratives played an essential role in changing the political reality. Abigail (1Samuel 25), Michal, and Rizpah-Bat-Aiah (2samuel 3) were markers of King David's rise to power and monarchy. Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12), Tamar (2 Samuel 13), and Michal marked his moral and political downfall.

The wise women from Tekoa and Abel Beth Ma'acah (2 Samuel 14,20) played significant roles in preventing bloodshed and the destruction of towns. Both women had the title "Wise Woman," implying they were known for their wisdom in counsel and had acquired enough political power to be in a position to speak with King David or Joab, his military commander.

These narratives suggest that women were perceived as an influential part of the political landscape and send an empowering message to women of all walks of life.

Were there different protections for females based on their social-economic/ethnic status?

An important issue in the biblical literature is the protection of humans regarding their ethnicity and social status as slaves. Therefore, biblical laws aiming to protect both male and female slaves appear in the most important chapters of biblical literature. For

example, the laws in Exodus 21 are part of “The Book of the Covenant”; The laws in Deuteronomy ensure the inclusion of both male and female slaves under the protection of the law, especially regarding the Sabbath's rest and participation in communal celebrations.

Moreover, Deuteronomy innovates with revolutionary laws which protect runaway slaves (Deut.23: 16-17) and obligates the master to supply the freed slave with “seed products” to enable their economic re-entry into the society (Deut.15:12-14).

In the background of these important laws is the story of Hagar. The narratives about Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21) not only transform her from a simple slave-girl into the matriarch of a great nation (compatible with Abraham and Sarah), but they also stress the theological message that God is the ultimate protector of slaves and their children.

Furthermore, the narratives about Hagar, Bilhah, Zilpah, and Ruth stress the continuous biblical message that women, regardless of their age, social status, or ethnicity, have an important role in fulfilling God's promises and continuing the pedigree of a nation.

Did the different historical times change the strategies regarding women in vulnerable situations--and if so, what has changed?

It is very difficult to trace the development of the narratives that circulated through storytelling for generations before they were collected, edited, and codified in biblical literature. Yet, we see changes in laws relating to incest and the protection of migrants, widows, and the fatherless.

In her article "Who's Afraid of The Endangered Ancestress"? Cheryl Exum speaks to the fears of the post-exilic generations.⁵⁵⁴ Since the biblical literature was edited in the times of Babylonian exile and Persian rule, one can assume that many of the biblical narratives allude to the foreigner experience.

Further, the chapter on migration explores the vast development of laws protecting migrants. Harrold Bennet, in his book *Injustice Made Legal*, speculates on the historical reasons for the changes. He argues that the Omride dynasty's high taxation depleted the nuclear families in Israel of working force, land, livestock, produce, and leadership. "[This] breakdown of major kingship subgrouping devastated any extant social welfare systems for the relief of widows, strangers, and orphans." Thus, he concludes, the political cult of "YHWH alone" drafted the laws in Deuteronomy "to establish and legitimize their politico-economic program in Israel during the ninth century BCE."⁵⁵⁵

Madeline McClenney explains the variations in attitudes towards incest between the Levitical laws and earlier narratives that allowed marriages between cousins (Abraham and Sarah) and other incest-related relationships (Lot's Daughters, Tamar and

⁵⁵⁴ Exum, "Who's Afraid of The Endangered Ancestress"? In *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 141-156.

⁵⁵⁵ Harold Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, 152-153.

Judah, Rachel and Leah). The discrepancies may reflect changes in incest taboos and perhaps changes in family structures throughout time.⁵⁵⁶

Compared to ancient Near East sources, what (other or additional) strategies of protecting females were used? Conversely, what strategies were *not* used and why?

Although the study of the ancient Near East was not the center of this research and served only as providing social and historical background, comparison of documents deduce that, not surprisingly, Israel, which was part of the social, philosophical, and ethical milieu of the ancient Near East, had similar strategies of protecting its vulnerable females.

Which of the strategies was most effective? Effective to biblical time or had a lasting effect? How would we know that?

In my opinion, laws were the most effective strategies, especially those inserted in the important parts of biblical literature, thus ensuring that they would be practiced. Since the biblical literature was studied throughout the generations, translated to numerous languages, and through Christianity, had a vast influence on social and moral aspects of communities around the world, one can conclude that the biblical laws were the most effective (yet not perfect) strategy of protection.

⁵⁵⁶ McClenney, "Women in Incest Regulations" in *Women in Scripture*, 207

Is there a development of a theme throughout the biblical narratives? For example, is there a progression of protection?

This research is rooted in social theory and biblical literary criticism; both reveal the theme of God's protection of the vulnerable and the interplay of vulnerability and continuity woven throughout the texts.

Furthermore, surveying the biblical texts found that the "national agenda" was embedded in the seemingly simple narratives about vulnerable women. The repetition of motifs and type scenes created "intertextual fabric" and a connecting tissue between the texts. Further yet, the type scenes connected between the biblical generations and reinforced the overall national story.

For example, the "meeting at the well" type scene represents the *succession of generations* and connects the biblical literature as one unit with a repeated message that God operates behind the scenes, sending rescuers and matchmakers. The narratives about the meeting of Rebecca and Isaac (Genesis 24), Rachel and Jacob (Genesis 29), Zipporah and Moses (Exodus 2), and Ruth and Boaz (the book of Ruth), when read as a chronological sequence, mark the journey of the Israelite people.

Additionally, each time there is a danger of continuance, "a well" as a literary motif is mentioned. "The well" appears as a salvation motif in the narratives about Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21), Moses, and Miriam leading the people of Israel in the desert.

Furthermore, narratives of fathers marrying off their daughters appear to signal important successions in the national story. For example, Laban marrying Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29) represents the succession of the patriarchs and matriarchs; Caleb Ben Jephunneh marrying his daughter, Achsah, to the one who would conquer the town of Debir (Judges 1:12-15) represents succession from the desert generation to the conquest of the land (succession of leadership and land); King Saul marrying his daughter Michal to David (1Samuel 18:17-27) represents the transfer of monarchy.

Reading these texts from a feminist perspective reveals that, as *literary heroines*, daughters are the biblical links between generations and markers of succession and continuation. Thus, the maidens who were presented as “vulnerable damsels” in the “matchmaking” narratives turned out to be powerful players in the saga of the Israelite people.

Another powerful national message is the theme of a barren woman giving birth to a “chosen” child. Childbearing had theological and national importance and was understood as an integral part of God's care for Israel. This understanding may explain the multiplicity of the barren woman narratives: Sara (Genesis 11,16,18,21). Rebecca (Genesis 25), Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29-30), the mother of Samson (Judges 13), Hanna (1 Samuel 1-2), the Shunammite woman (2Kings 4), and Israel as a nation in Isaiah 54.

Reading these narratives in order reveals a “build-up” of a theme. The sequence reiterates continuity in the face of vulnerability. This “build-up” leads to the Isaiah 54

narrative: “Rejoice o barren one,” sending a soothing message: if Israel as a nation is metaphorically the “barren woman,” then, regardless of Israel's fragility, there is always redemption by God, and continuity of the nation.

How the theme of protecting females in vulnerable situations throughout their life, fits into the larger narrative of biblical literature? Is it consistent?

As alluded to before, I read the biblical narratives, laws, and rituals as part of a greater overarching theme, a promise of continuity in the face of national vulnerability.

Exploring the different vulnerable situations in which females found themselves from birth through maidenhood, marriage, childbearing and barrenness, divorce and suspicion of adultery, widowhood, rights of inheritance the land, migration, war, and slavery, all reflect the nation, Israel.

The scholar Tikvah Frymer, in her article “Women of Metaphor, Metaphors of Women,” elaborates on the connection between the biblical woman and the Israelite nation.⁵⁵⁷ She notes that in all biblical narratives, plot and character are subordinate to the larger [national] concerns. “Their stories are important for what they indicate about Israel’s society, history and destiny, ... *the personal is political*.”⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁷ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 333-338.

⁵⁵⁸ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 333.

This statement encompasses the shift in perspective. One should read the biblical narratives about women as human stories *and* as an archetype to the nation.

Frymer observes the identification of Israel as a nation with the vulnerable woman.

“Israel’s sense of self as a woman is explicit in the poetic metaphor of ‘maiden Israel,’ ‘maiden Zion.’ Zion as a daughter or a mother, and Israel as the “wife” of God.⁵⁵⁹ Thus, the biblical stories about women are also stories about Israel: “As victor, as victim, as vulnerable, and as vehicle for the divine, Israel saw herself as the “woman” of the world.”⁵⁶⁰ Frymer explains:

“The paradigmatic⁵⁶¹ nature of the stories about victors and victims is not self-evident until we realize that the victor stories follow the paradigm of Israel central sacred story: the lowly are raised, the marginal come to the center...Little Israel, like its heroes and heroines, triumphs by the will of God.”⁵⁶²

This statement adds a powerful dimension to reading the biblical texts as a metaphor in which the vulnerable child, maiden, the barren-wife, a widow, a slave-girl, or a migrant always find protection and redemption through God.

As we have seen throughout the chapters in this work, in the different stages of the life cycle of the female, there is always a sense of vulnerability, yet also a message of

⁵⁵⁹ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, introduction: xx-xxi.

⁵⁶⁰ Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 337.

⁵⁶¹ Paradigmatic- serving as a typical example of something.

⁵⁶² Frymer, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 335.

continuity. In addition, Carol Meyers relates to the biblical writers noting, “Most of their writings concern national, collective institutions and events. They sought to convey their beliefs about the emergence and existence of a corporate entity-the people of Israel.”⁵⁶³

Building on Tikva Frymer and Carol Meyers, it may be far to stretch, yet not inconceivable, that the message of God’s protection and redemption of the vulnerable female, which reflects God’s protection and redemption of the nation, was (intentionally) embedded in the biblical texts as a strategy to convey a national message.

This, I dare to say, is the underlying message reiterated throughout the many narratives, laws, and rituals protecting the biblical woman: as God protects the vulnerable female throughout her life cycle, no matter the circumstance, God will protect the nation Israel throughout the generations.

As was proven by the multiple narratives, no matter the vulnerable situation, there is *always* survival, success, and succession for “maiden Israel.” This message of hope and continuity in the face of vulnerability served the biblical Israelites during times of hardship, war, and migration; and the Jewish people throughout the past two-thousand and five hundred years.

⁵⁶³ Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 21.

To this day, Jewish parents proudly name their daughters Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Hannah, Tamar, Abigail, Jael, Deborah, Ester, Ruth, and Noah, in honor of the many biblical heroines who ensured the continuity of their people.

Appendix One -The Semantic Range of the Term Birth-Giver- “Yoleda”

Narrative

Eve

Gen. 3:16 וְהָיָה בְעָצְבְךָ תֵלְדִי בָנִים וְאַל-אִשְׁךָ תִּשְׁוֶקְמָךְ וְהָיָה סָבִיבָהּ

Rachel

Gen. 35:16 וַיֵּסְעוּ מִבֵּית אֵל וַיְהִי-עוֹד בְּכַרְת־הָאָרֶץ לְבֹא אֶפְרַתָּה וַתֵּלֶד רָחֵל וַתִּקְשׁ בְּלִדְתָּהּ: Gen. 35:17 וַיְהִי בְהַקְשָׁתָהּ בְּלִדְתָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמִּילָדָה אֶל-תִּירְאִי כִּי-גִם-נָהָה לָךְ בֵּן: Gen. 35:18 וַיְהִי בְצָאֵת נַפְשָׁהּ כִּי מָתָה וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בֶן-אוֹנִי וְאָבִיו קָרָא-לּוֹ בְנִימִין: Gen. 35:19 וַתָּמָת רָחֵל וַתִּקָּבֵר בְּדֶרֶךְ אֶפְרַתָּה הוּא בֵּית לְחֶם:

Shifra and Puah

Ex. 1:15 וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לַמִּילָדֹת הָעִבְרִית אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאֶחָד שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה: Ex. 1:16 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיָלְדָכֶן אֶת-הָעִבְרִיּוֹת וַיִּרְאוּן עַל-הָאֲבָנִים אֲסִיּוֹת הוּא וְהַמֶּלֶךְ וְאִם-בָּת הִיא וְחָיָה: Ex. 1:17 וַתִּירָאֵן הַמִּילָדֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַתַּחֲיֶינָן אֶת-הַיָּלָדִים: Ex. 1:18 וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ-מִצְרַיִם לַמִּילָדֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מָדוּעַ עֹשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַתַּחֲיֶינָן אֶת-הַיָּלָדִים: Ex. 1:19 וַתֹּאמְרֶן הַמִּילָדֹת אֶל-פְּרֹעֶה כִּי לֹא כְנָשִׁים הַמִּצְרִית הָעִבְרִית כִּי-חַיֹּת הֵנָּה בְּטָרֶם תָּבֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמִּילָדֹת וַיִּלְדוּ: Ex. 1:20 וַיִּשָּׁב אֱלֹהִים לַמִּילָדֹת וַיַּרְבּ הָעָם וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ מֵאָד: Ex. 1:21 וַיְהִי כִּי-יִנְרָאוּ הַמִּילָדֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים:

Pinchas' Wife

1Sam. 4:19 וְכִלְתּוּ אֶשֶׁת-פִּינְחָס הַכֹּהֵן לָלֶחֶת וַתִּשְׁמַע אֶת-הַשְּׂמִיעָה אֶל-הַלֵּקֶחַ אַרְוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים וַמָּתָה חֲמִיָּה וְאִישָׁהּ: 1Sam. 4:20 וַיִּבְרָכֶה וַתִּבְרָנָה הַנְּצֻבוֹת עָלֶיהָ אֶל-תִּירְאִי כִּי בֶן יֵלְדָתָהּ וְלֹא עֲנָתָה וְלֹא-שָׂתָה לָבָה: 1Sam. 4:21 וַתִּקְרָא לְנֶעֱר אִי-כְבוֹד לֵאמֹר גִּלְהָ כְבוֹד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-הַלֵּקֶחַ אַרְוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים וְאִישָׁהּ: 1Sam. 4:22 וַתֹּאמֶר גִּלְהָ כְבוֹד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל כִּי נִלְקַח אַרְוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים: פ

Fear and Agony

Is. 13:8 וַיִּבְהָלוּ צִירִים וְחִבְלִים יִאֲחָזוּן כִּי-יִלְדָה יִחִילוּן אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ יִתְמָהוּ פָגִי לְהָבִים פְּגִיָּה: Is. 21:3 עַל-כֵּן מָלְאוּ מִתְנֵי חִלְחָלָה צִירִים אֲחֻזּוֹנִי כְּצִירֵי יוֹלְדָה נִעְנִיתִי מִשְׁמַע גְּבֻהַּ לְתִי מִרְאֹת: Is. 42:14 הַחֲשִׁיתִי מֵעוֹלָם אֲחִירִישׁ אֶתְאַפֵּק כִּי-יִלְדָה אֶפְשָׁה אֲשֶׁם וְאֲשָׂאָה יָחִיד: Jer. 4:31 כִּי קוֹל כְּחוֹלָה שְׁמַעְתִּי צָרָה כְּמִבְכִּיָּה קוֹל בַּת-צִיּוֹן תִּתְנַפֵּחַ תִּפְרָשׁ כַּפֶּיָּה אוֹיֵהָ לִי כִּי-עֲיָפָה נַפְשִׁי: Jer. 6:24 שְׁמַעְנוּ אֶת-שְׁמִעוֹ רָפוּ גִדְּנוּ צָרָה הִחְזִילָתָנוּ חִיל כִּי-יִלְדָה: Jer. 30:6 שְׂאֲלוּ-נָא וּרְאוּ אִם-יִלְדוּ זָכָר מָדוּעַ רָאִיתִי כְּלִ-גֶּבֶר יִגְדּוּ עַל-חִלְצִי כִּי-יִלְדָה וְנִהְפְּכוּ כְּלִ-פָּנִים לִי־קוֹן: Jer. 49:24 רָפְתָה דְּמָשֶׁק הַפְּגָתָה לְנוֹס וּרְטָט הַתְּזִיקָה צָרָה וְחִבְלִים אֲחֻזָּתָה כִּי-יִלְדָה: Jer. 50:43 שְׁמַע מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל אֶת-שְׁמִעָם וּרְפוּ יִגְדּוּ צָרָה הִחְזִילָתָהּ חִיל כִּי-יִלְדָה: Hos. 13:13 חִבְלֵי יוֹלְדָה יִבְאוּ לוֹ הוּא-בֶן לֹא חָכַם כִּי-עָתָה לֹא-יִצְמָד בְּמִשְׁבֵּר בָּנִים: Hos. 14:1 תֹּאשָׁם שְׁמָרוֹן כִּי מָרְתָה בְּאֵלֶיהָ בְּחָרִב יָפְלוּ עַל-לִיָּהּ יִשְׁשׁוּ וְהָרִיתוּ יִבְקָעוּ: פ

Psa. 48:6 תמה ראו כן תמהו נבקהו נחפזו:

Psa. 48:7 רעדה אחזמם שם חיל פילדה:

Mic. 4:9 עתה למה תריעי גע המלך אין-כף אם-יועצה אבד כיהחזיקה חיל פילדה:

Mic. 4:10 חולי נגחי בתציון פילדה כיעתה תצאי מקרזה ושכנת בשדה ובאת עד-בכל שם תנצלי שם יגאלך יהנה מפר איביך:

Restoration

Mic. 5:2 לכן יתנם עד-עת יולדה ונתר אחיו ושובון על-בני ישראל:

Is. 66:7 בטרם תחיל ילדה בטרם יבוא תכל לה והמליטה זכר:

Is. 66:8 מי-שמע כזאת מי ראה כאלה הניחל ארץ ביום אחד אם-יגלד גוי פעם אחת כיתלה גם-ילדה ציון את-בניה:

Is. 66:9 האני אשפיר ולא אוליד יאמר יהוה אם-אני המוליד ועצרתי אמר אליהו:

Is. 66:10 שמחו את-ירושלם וגילו בה כל-אהביה שישו אתה משוב כל-המתאבלים עליה:

Is. 66:11 למען תינקו ושבעתם משד תנחמיה למען תמצו והתענגתם מזי כבודה: ס

Law

Lev. 12:1 וידבר יהוה אלי-משה לאמר:

Lev. 12:2 דבר אל-בני ישראל לאמר אשה כי תזריע וילדה זכר וטמאה שבעת ימים כימי גת דותה וטמא:

Lev. 12:3 וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו:

Lev. 12:4 ושלשים יום ושלשת ימים תשב בדמי טהרה בכל-קדש לא-תגע ואלי-המקדש לא תבא עד-מלאת ימי טהרה:

Lev. 12:5 ואם-ינקבה תלד וטמאה שבעים כנדתה וששים יום ושלשת ימים תשב על-דמי טהרה:

Ritual

Lev. 12:6 ובמלאת ימי טהרה לבן או לבת תביא כבש בן-שנתו לעלה ובז-יונה או-תר לחטאת אל-פתח אהל-מועד אל-הפך:

Lev. 12:7 והקריבו לפני יהוה וכפר עליה וטהרה ממקור דמיה זאת תורת הילדת לזכר או לנקבה:

Lev. 12:8 ואם-לא תמצא ידה זי שה ולקחה שתי-תרים או שני בני יונה אחד לעלה ואחד לחטאת וכפר עליה הפך וטהרה: פ

English Translation

Fear and Agony

Is. 13:8 They will be dismayed; pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at one another; their faces will be aflame.

Is. 21:3 Therefore my loins are filled with anguish; pangs have seized me, like the pangs of a woman in labor; I am bowed down so that I cannot hear; I am dismayed so that I cannot see.

Is. 42:14 For a long time I have held my peace; I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor; I will gasp and pant.

Jer. 6:24 We have heard the report of it; our hands fall helpless; anguish has taken hold of us, pain as of a woman in labor.

Jer. 30:6 Ask now, and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labor? Why has every face turned pale?

Jer. 49:24 Damascus has become feeble, she turned to flee, and panic seized her; anguish and sorrows have taken hold of her, as of a woman in labor.

Jer. 50:43 The king of Babylon heard the report of them, and his hands fell helpless; anguish seized him, pain as of a woman in labor.

Hos. 13:13 The pangs of childbirth come for him, but he is an unwise son, for at the right time he does not present himself at the opening of the womb.

Mic. 4:9 Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in you? Has your counselor perished, that pain seized you like a woman in labor?

Mic. 4:10 Writhe and groan, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in labor, for now you shall go out from the city and dwell in the open country; you shall go to Babylon. There you shall be rescued; there the YHWH will redeem you from the hand of your enemies.

Mic. 5:3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.

Psa. 48:6 Trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor.

Appendix Two- The Semantic Range of “Gave Birth”-“Vateled”

- Gen. 4:1 ותלד ותהר ותלד את־קין ותאמר קניתי איש את־יהוה: 1
- Gen. 4:17 וידע קין את־אשתו ותהר ותלד את־חנוך ויהי בנה עיר ויקרא שם העיר כשם בנו חנוך:
- Gen. 4:20 ותלד עדה את־יבל הוא היה אבי יושב אהל ומקנה: 20
- Gen. 4:25 וידע אדם עוד את־אשתו ותלד בן ותקרא את־שמו שׂת כי שׂת־לי אלהים זרע אחר תחת הבל כי הרגו קין:
- Gen. 16:15 ותלד הגר לאברהם בן ויקרא אברהם שם־בנו אשר־ילדה הגר ישמעאל: 15
- Gen. 19:37 ותלד הבכירה בן ותקרא שמו מואב הוא אבי־מואב עד־היום: 37
- Gen. 21:2 ותהר ותלד שרה לאברהם בן לזקניו למועד אשר־דבר אתו אלהים: 2
- Gen. 22:24 ופילגשו ושמא ראומה ותלד גם־הוא את־טבח ואת־גחם ואת־תחש ואת־מעכה: 24
- Gen. 24:36 ותלד שרה אשת אדני בן לאדני אחרי זקנתה ויתן־לו את־כל־אשר־לו: 36
- Gen. 25:2 ותלד לו את־זמרון ואת־יקשן ואת־מדן ואת־מדין ואת־ישבק ואת־שוח: 2
- Gen. 29:32 ותהר לאה ותלד בן ותקרא שמו ראובן כי אמרה כי־ראה יהוה בעיני כי עתה יאהבני אישי:
- Gen. 29:33 ותהר עוד ותלד בן ותאמר כי־שמע יהוה כי־שנואה אנכי ויתן־לי גם־את־זה ותקרא שמו שמעון:
- Gen. 29:34 ותהר עוד ותלד בן ותאמר עתה הפעם ילדה אישי אלי כי־ילדתי לו שלשה בנים על־כן קרא־שמו לוי:
- Gen. 29:35 ותהר עוד ותלד בן ותאמר הפעם אודה את־יהוה על־כן קראה שמו יהודה ותעמד מלדת:
- Gen. 30:3 ותאמר הגה אمتי בלה בלא אליה ותלד על־ברכי ואבנה גם־אנכי ממנה: 3
- Gen. 30:5 ותהר בלה ותלד ליעקב בן: 5
- Gen. 30:7 ותהר עוד ותלד בלה שפחת רחל בן שני ליעקב: 7
- Gen. 30:10 ותלד זלפה שפחת לאה ליעקב בן: 10
- Gen. 30:12 ותלד זלפה שפחת לאה בן שני ליעקב: 12
- Gen. 30:17 וישמע אלהים אל־לאה ותהר ותלד ליעקב בן חמישי: 17
- Gen. 30:19 ותהר עוד לאה ותלד בן־ששי ליעקב: 19
- Gen. 30:23 ותהר ותלד בן ותאמר אסף אלהים את־חרפתי: 23

וַיִּסְעוּ מִבֵּית אֵל וַיְהִי-עוֹד כְּבֶרֶת-הָאָרֶץ לָבוֹא אֶפְרָתָה וַתֵּלֶד רָחֵל וַתִּקְשׁ בְּלִדְתָּהּ: Gen. 35:16

וַתֵּלֶד עֲדָה לַעֲשׂוֹ אֶת-אֱלִיפַז וּבְשֹׁמֶת יִלְדָה אֶת-רְעוּאֵל: Gen. 36:4

וַתִּמְנַע | הִיטָה פִּילְגָשׁ לְאֱלִיפַז בֶּן-עֲשׂוֹ וַתֵּלֶד לְאֱלִיפַז אֶת-עַמְלִיק אֵלָה בְּנִי עֲדָה אִשְׁתּוֹ Gen. 36:12
עֲשׂוֹ:

וְאֵלָה הָיוּ בְנֵי אֱהֱלִיבָמָה בַּת-עֵגָה בַּת-צִבְעוֹן אִשְׁתּוֹ עֲשׂוֹ וַתֵּלֶד לַעֲשׂוֹ אֶת-יַעֲשִׁי [יַעֲוִשׁ] Gen. 36:14
וְאֶת-יַעֲלֹם וְאֶת-קָרַח:

וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ עֵר: Gen. 38:3

וַתֵּהָר עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ אוֹנָן: Gen. 38:4

וַתִּסְפֹּף עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ שִׁלָּה וְהָיָה בְּכַזִּיב בְּלִדְתָּהּ אֹתוֹ: Gen. 38:5

אֵלָה בְּנֵי זִלְפָּה אֲשֶׁר-נָתַן לָבֵן לְלֵאָה בִּתּוֹ וַתֵּלֶד אֶת-אֵלָה לַיַּעֲקֹב שֵׁשׁ עָשָׂרָה נָפֶשׁ: Gen. 46:18

אֵלָה בְּנֵי בִלְהָה אֲשֶׁר-נָתַן לָבֵן לְרָחֵל בִּתּוֹ וַתֵּלֶד אֶת-אֵלָה לַיַּעֲקֹב כָּל-נָפֶשׁ שִׁבְעָה: Gen. 46:25

וַתֵּהָר הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ כִּי-טוֹב הוּא וַתִּצְפְּנֶהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָרֵחִים: Ex. 2:2

וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ גֶּרְשֶׁם כִּי אָמַר גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נֹכְרִיָּה: Ex. 2:22

וַיִּקַּח עַמְרָם אֶת-יֹכָבֵד דֹּדְתּוֹ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת-אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת-מֹשֶׁה וְשֵׁנֵי חָיִי עַמְרָם Ex. 6:20
שִׁבְעָה וְשָׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה:

וַיִּקַּח אַהֲרֹן אֶת-אֵלִישֶׁבַע בַּת-עַמִּינָדָב אַחֹת נַחֲשֹׁן לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת-נָדָב וְאֶת- Ex. 6:23
אֲבִיהוּא אֶת-אֶלְעָזָר וְאֶת-אִיתָמָר:

וְאֶלְעָזָר בֶּן-אַהֲרֹן לָקַח-לוֹ מִבְּנוֹת פּוּטִיאֵל לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת-פִּינְחָס אֵלָה רֹאשִׁי אֲבוֹת Ex. 6:25
הַלְוִיִּם לַמִּשְׁפָּחָתָם:

וְשֵׁם | אִשְׁתּוֹ עַמְרָם יוֹכָבֵד בַּת-לוֹי אֲשֶׁר יִלְדָה אֹתָהּ לְלוֹי בְּמִצְרַיִם וַתֵּלֶד לַעַמְרָם אֶת- Num. 26:59
אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת מִרְיָם אָחִיתָם:

וַתֵּלֶד אִשְׁת-גִּלְעָד לוֹ בָּנִים וַיִּגְדְּלוּ בְנֵי-הָאִשָּׁה וַיִּגְרְשׁוּ אֶת-יִפְתָּח וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ לֹא-תִנָּחַל Judg. 11:2
בְּבֵית-אֲבִינוֹ כִּי בֶן-אִשָּׁה אַחֲרֵת אָתָּה:

וַתֵּלֶד הָאִשָּׁה בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ שִׁמְשׁוֹן וַיִּגְדֵּל הַנָּעַר וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ יְהוָה: Judg. 13:24

וַיְהִי לַתִּקְפוֹת הַיָּמִים וַתֵּהָר חַנָּה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ שְׁמוּאֵל כִּי מִיְהוָה שְׂאֵלְתִּיו: 1Sam. 1:20

כִּי-פָקַד יְהוָה אֶת-חַנָּה וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֶד שְׁלֹשָׁה-בָנִים וְשֵׁתִי בָנוֹת וַיִּגְדֵּל הַנָּעַר שְׁמוּאֵל עִם- 1Sam. 2:21
יְהוָה: o

וְכָלִיתוּ אִשְׁת-פִּינְחָס הָרָה לָלֶדֶת וַתִּשְׁמַע אֶת-הַשְּׂמֵעָה אֶל-הַלֵּקָח אֲרוֹן הַאֱלֹהִים וַיֵּמֶת 1Sam. 4:19
חַמִּיָּה וַאִשָּׁה וַתִּכְרַע וַתֵּלֶד כִּי-נִהְפְּכוּ עָלֶיהָ צָרִיָּה:

וַיַּעֲבֵר הָאֲבִל וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד וַיֹּאסְפֶה אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ וַתֵּהִי-לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ בֶּן וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר 2Sam. 11:27
אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה דָּוִד בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה: פ

וַיִּנָּחֵם דָּוִד אֶת בֶּת־שֶׁבַע אִשְׁתּוֹ וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא [ו] [תִּקְרָא] 2Sam. 12:24
אֶת־שְׁמוֹ שְׁלֹמֹה וַיהוָה אָהָבוּ:

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לִלְדֹתַי וַתֵּלֶד גַּם־הָאִשָּׁה הַזֹּאת וַאֲנֹחֲנוּ יַחְדָּו אֵין־זָר אֶתְּנוּ בְּבֵית 1Kings 3:18
זולתי שְׁתֵּים־אֲנֹחֲנוּ בְּבֵית:

וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֲחֹת תַּחֲפָנִיס אֶת גִּנְבֶּת בְּנוֹ וַתִּגְמְלֶהוּ תַּחֲפָנִיס בְּתוֹךְ בֵּית פְּרָעָה וַיְהִי 1Kings 11:20
גִּנְבֶּת בְּבֵית פְּרָעָה בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי פְּרָעָה:

וַתֵּהָרֶה הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן לַמֹּעֵד הַזֶּה כָּעֵת חִיָּה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֵלֶיהָ אֵלִישָׁע: 2Kings 4:17

וַאֲקִרְבֹּ אֶל־הַנְּבִיאָה וַתֵּהָרֶה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי קָרָא שְׁמוֹ מִהָר שְׁלָל חֵשׁ בָּ: 8:3: Is.

וַיִּלְךָ וַיִּלָּח אֶת־גָּמֶר בֶּת־דְּבָלִים וַתֵּהָרֶה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ בֶּן: 1:3: Hos.

וַתֵּהָרֶה עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֵּת וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ קָרָא שְׁמָהּ לֹא רַחֲמָה כִּי לֹא אוֹסִיף עוֹד אֶרְחֹם אֶת־בֵּית 1:6: Hos.
יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־נִשְׂאָ אִשָּׁא לָהֶם:

וַתִּגְמַל אֶת־לֹא רַחֲמָה וַתֵּהָרֶה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן: 1:8: Hos.

וַיִּלָּח בָּעַז אֶת־רוּת וַתְּהַיֶּי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה לָהּ הַרְבֵּי בָנִים וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן: 4:13: Ruth

וַתִּמָּת עַזְבָּה וַיִּקַּח־לוֹ כָּלֵב אֶת־אֶפְרַת וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת־חֹור: 2:19: 1Chr.

וַאֲחֵר בָּא חֲצֹרֹן אֶל־בֶּת־מְכִיר אָבִי גִלְעָד וְהוּא לִקְחָהּ וְהוּא בֶּן־שָׁשִׁים שָׁנָה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ 2:21: 1Chr.
אֶת־שִׁגְוֹב:

וַאֲחֵר מוֹת־חֲצֹרֹן בְּכָלֵב אֶפְרַתָּה וַאֲשֶׁת חֲצֹרֹן אֲבִיהָ וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת־אֲשִׁחֹר אָבִי תְקוּעָה: 2:24: 1Chr.

וְשֵׁם אִשָּׁת אֲבִישׁוּר אֲבִיהֶיִל וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת־אֲחִיבָן וְאֶת־מוֹלִיד: 2:29: 1Chr.

וַיִּתֵּן שֵׁשׁ אֶת־בָּתּוֹ לִירְחָע עַבְדּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת־עֵתִי: 2:35: 1Chr.

וַתֵּלֶד שְׁעָף אָבִי מִדְּמֹנָה אֶת־שִׁנְאָ אָבִי מִכְּבֹנָה וְאָבִי גִבְעָא וּבֶת־כָּלֵב עַכְסָה: 2:49: 1Chr.

וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ נַעֲרָה אֶת־אַחְזָם וְאֶת־חֹפֶר וְאֶת־תִּימְנִי וְאֶת־הָאֲחִישֶׁתַּי אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי נַעֲרָה: 4:6: 1Chr.

וַתֵּלֶד מַעֲכָה אִשָּׁת־מְכִיר בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ פֶּרֶשׁ וְשֵׁם אָחִיו שָׂרֵשׁ וּבְנֵיו אוֹלָם וְרָקִם: 7:16: 1Chr.

וַיָּבֹא אֶל־אִשְׁתּוֹ וַתֵּהָרֶה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ בְּרִיעָה כִּי בְרָעָה הָיְתָה בְּבֵיתוֹ: 7:23: 1Chr.

וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ בָּנִים אֶת־יַעוֹשׁ וְאֶת־שְׁמָרְיָה וְאֶת־זָהֵם: 11:19: 2Chr.

וַאֲחֵרֶיהָ לָקַח אֶת־מַעֲכָה בֶּת־אֲבִשְׁלֹם וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת־אֲבִיהָ וְאֶת־עֵתִי וְאֶת־זִיזָא וְאֶת־ 11:20: 2Chr.
שְׁלִמִית:

English Translation

Gen. 4:1 Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the YHWH.”

Gen. 4:17 Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch.

Gen. 4:20 Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock.

Gen. 4:25 And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him."

Gen. 16:15 And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.

Gen. 19:37 The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab.² "He is the father of the Moabites to this day.

Gen. 21:2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.

Gen. 22:24 Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

Gen. 24:36 And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old, and to him he has given all that he has.

Gen. 25:2 She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah.

Gen. 29:32 And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, "Because the YHWH has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me."

Gen. 29:33 She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the YHWH has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also." And she called his name Simeon.

Gen. 29:34 Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore his name was called Levi.

Gen. 29:35 And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the YHWH." Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing.

Gen. 30:3 Then she said, "Here is my servant Bilhah; go into her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her."

Gen. 30:5 And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son.

Gen. 30:7 Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son.

Gen. 30:10 Then Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son.

Gen. 30:12 Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son.

Gen. 30:17 And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son.

Gen. 30:19 And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son.

Gen. 30:23 She conceived and bore a son and said, “God has taken away my reproach.”

Gen. 35:16 Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor.

Gen. 36:4 And Adah bore to Esau, Eliphaz; Basemath bore Reuel;

Gen. 36:12 (Timna was a concubine of Eliphaz, Esau’s son; she bore Amalek to Eliphaz.) These are the sons of Adah, Esau’s wife.

Gen. 36:14 These are the sons of Oholibamah the daughter of Anah the daughter of Zibeon, Esau’s wife: she bore to Esau Jeush, Jalam, and Korah.

Gen. 38:3 and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er.

Gen. 38:4 She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan.

Gen. 38:5 Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him.

Gen. 46:18 These are the sons of Zilpah, whom Laban gave to Leah his daughter; and these she bore to Jacob—sixteen persons.

Gen. 46:25 These are the sons of Bilhah, whom Laban gave to Rachel his daughter, and these she bore to Jacob—seven persons in all.

Ex. 2:2 The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months.

Ex. 2:22 She gave birth to a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.”

Ex. 6:20 Amram took as his wife Jochebed his father’s sister, and she bore him Aaron and Moses, the years of the life of Amram being 137 years.

Ex. 6:23 Aaron took as his wife Elisheba, the daughter of Amminadab and the sister of Nahshon, and she bore him Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar.

Ex. 6:25 Eleazar, Aaron’s son, took as his wife one of the daughters of Putiel, and she bore him Phinehas. These are the heads of the fathers’ houses of the Levites by their clans.

Num. 26:59 The name of Amram’s wife was Jochebed the daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt. And she bore to Amram Aaron and Moses and Miriam their sister.

Judg. 11:2 And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, "You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman."

Judg. 13:24 And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the YHWH blessed him.

1Sam. 1:20 And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, "I have asked for him from the YHWH."

1Sam. 2:21 Indeed the YHWH visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew in the presence of the YHWH.

1Sam. 4:19 Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her.

2 Sam. 11:27 And 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 YHWH.

2 Sam. 12:24 Then David comforted his wife, Bathsheba, and went into her and lay with her, and she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. And the YHWH loved him

1 Kings 3:18 Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. And we were alone. There was no one else with us in the house; only we two were in the house.

1 Kings 11:20 And the sister of Tahpenes bore him Genubath his son, whom Tahpenes weaned in Pharaoh's house. And Genubath was in Pharaoh's house among the sons of Pharaoh.

2 Kings 4:17 But the woman conceived, and she bore a son about that time the following spring, as Elisha had said to her.

Is. 8:3 And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the YHWH said to me, "Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz.

Hos. 1:3 So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

Hos. 1:6 She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the YHWH said to him, "Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all.

Hos. 1:8 When she had weaned No Mercy, she conceived and bore a son.

Ruth 4:13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the YHWH gave her conception, and she bore a son.

1 Chr. 2:19 When Azubah died, Caleb married Ephrath, who bore him Hur.

1 Chr. 2:21 Afterward Hezron went in to the daughter of Machir the father of Gilead, whom he married when he was sixty years old, and she bore him Segub.

1 Chr. 2:24 After the death of Hezron, Caleb went in to Ephrathah, the wife of Hezron his father, and she bore him Ashhur, the father of Tekoa.

1 Chr. 2:29 The name of Abishur's wife was Abihail, and she bore him Ahban and Molid.

1 Chr. 2:35 So Sheshan gave his daughter in marriage to Jarha his slave, and she bore him Attai.

1 Chr. 2:49 She also bore Shaaph the father of Madmannah, Sheva the father of Machbenah and the father of Gibeaz; and the daughter of Caleb was Achsah.

1 Chr. 4:6 Naarah bore him Ahuzzam, Hephzer, Temen, and Haahashtari. These were the sons of Naarah.

1 Chr. 7:16 And Maacah the wife of Machir bore a son, and she called his name Peresh; and the name of his brother was Sheresh; and his sons were Ulam and Rakem.

1 Chr. 7:23 And Ephraim went into his wife, and she conceived and bore a son. And he called his name Beriah because disaster had befallen his house.

2 Chr. 11:19 and she bore him sons, Jeush, Shemariah, and Zebad.

2 Chr. 11:20 After her he took Maacah the daughter of Absalom, who bore him Abijah, Attai, Ziza, and Shelomith.

Appendix Three- Biblical References to Foreigners “*Gerim*”

Protection of Foreigners “*Gerim*”

Ex. 20:10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to YHWH your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.

Ex. 23:12 Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed.

Lev. 19:10 And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am YHWH your God.

Lev. 23:22 “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am YHWH your God.

Num. 35:15 These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there.

Deut. 1:16 And I charged your judges at that time, ‘Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him.

Deut. 5:14 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to YHWH your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.

Deut. 10:18 He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

Deut. 14:29 And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that YHWH your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

Deut. 16:11 And you shall rejoice before YHWH your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you, at the place that YHWH your God will choose, to make his name dwell there.

Deut. 16:14 You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns.

Deut. 24:14 You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns.

Deut. 24:17 You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless or take a widow's garment in pledge.

Deut. 24:19 When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that YHWH your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Deut. 24:20 When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.

Deut. 24:21 When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.

Deut. 26:11 And you shall rejoice in all the good that YHWH your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

Deut. 26:12 When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your towns and be filled.

Deut. 26:13 then you shall say before YHWH your God, 'I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover, I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all your commandment that you have commanded me. I have not transgressed any of your commandments, nor have I forgotten them.

Deut. 27:19 Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

Zech. 7:10 do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."

Psa. 146:9 YHWH watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

Commandments Not to Wrong Foreigners

Ex. 22:21 You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

Ex. 23:9 You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

Lev. 19:33 When a stranger sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.

Lev. 19:34 You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am YHWH your God.

Deut. 10:19 Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

Equal Treatment of The Israelite and the Foreigner

Lev. 17:8 And you shall say to them, any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice...

Lev. 18:26 But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you.

Lev. 22:18 Speak to Aaron and his sons and all the people of Israel and say to them, 'When any one of the house of Israel or of the sojourners in Israel presents a burnt offering as his offering, for any of their vows or freewill offerings that they offer to YHWH'.

Lev. 24:16 Whoever blasphemes the name of YHWH shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.

Lev. 24:22 You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am YHWH your God.

Num. 9:14 And if a stranger sojourn among you and would keep the Passover to YHWH, according to the statute of the Passover and according to its rule, so shall he do. You shall have one statute, both for the sojourner and for the native.

Num. 15:14 And if a stranger is sojourning with you, or anyone is living permanently among you, and he wishes to offer a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to YHWH, he shall do as you do.

Num. 15:15 For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner shall be alike before YHWH.

Num. 15:16 One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you.

Num. 15:26 And all the congregation of the people of Israel shall be forgiven, and the stranger who sojourns among them, because the whole population was involved in the mistake.

Num. 15:29 You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the people of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them.

Deut. 31:12 Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear YHWH your God and be careful to do all the words of this law.

Josh. 8:33 And all Israel, sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of YHWH, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of YHWH had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel.

Josh. 8:35 There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.

Jer. 22:3 Thus says YHWH: Do justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.

Ezek. 47:22 You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the sojourners who reside among you and have had children among you. They shall be to you as native-born children of Israel. With you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel.

Ezek. 47:23 In whatever tribe the sojourner resides, there you shall assign him his inheritance, declares YHWH.

Appendix Four - References to Israelites Being Slaves in Egypt

Ex. 20:2 I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Lev. 25:42 For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves.

Lev. 25:55 For it is to me that the people of Israel are servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am YHWH your God.

Deut. 5:6 I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Deut. 7:8 but it is because YHWH loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that YHWH has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Deut. 5:15 You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and YHWH your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, YHWH your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Deut. 13:5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which YHWH your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Deut. 13:10 You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Deut. 15:15 You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and YHWH your God redeemed you; therefore, I command you this today.

Deut. 16:12 You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt; and you shall be careful to observe these statutes.

Deut. 24:18 but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and YHWH your God redeemed you from there; therefore, I command you to do this.

Deut. 24:22 You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.

**Appendix Five- Summary of Laws, Narratives, and Rituals Aiming to
Protect Women in Vulnerable Situations throughout their Life Cycle.**

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
Birth Giving	<p>Leviticus 12:1-8</p> <p>Separation from the Sancta (and, therefore from crowds),</p> <p>Avoiding sexual relations.</p> <p>These procedures enabled women to physically heal and provided for gradual transition back to normal life in the household and society.</p>	<p>Genesis 35:16-19 And 1 Samuel 4:19-22</p> <p>the biblical narratives stress both God's involvement in pregnancy and the anguish and risks of labor. The narratives which begin with vulnerability and hardship in Genesis 3:16 culminate with fulfilling the prophecy of offspring.</p> <p>Isaiah 66:8 echoes Gen 3:16 yet in a positive inclination: with God's help, "Zion labored and at once bore her children." God</p>	<p>Leviticus 12:1-8</p> <p>Purification rituals,</p> <p>Thanksgiving and purgation sacrifices</p> <p>Celebratory feast</p> <p>Baby naming</p> <p>Circumcision</p> <p>Protective rituals and symbols at home</p>	

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
		will deliver Jerusalem and will make sure she has plenty of milk to suck from the breast of <i>El Shaddai</i> . “You should be carried on shoulders and dandled upon knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.” (Isa 66:12-13)		
Baby Girl	Leviticus 12:1- 5	Named baby girls in narratives: Dinah- Genesis 30:21, <i>Lo-Ruhamah</i> (No Mercy) Hosea.1:6, <i>Achsah</i> 1Chronicles 2:49 * Exodus 1:15-17 Pharaoh allowed the girls to live while insisted all baby boys	Leviticus 12:1-5 Ezekiel 16:1-11 God’s caring for a baby girl- Jerusalem	The biblical literature provides legislation and ritual to allow female babies and their mothers an extended bonding time.

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
		would be killed.		
Child Sacrifice	<p>Lev 18:21, Deuteronomy 12:30-31 and 18:10</p> <p>legislative prohibitions against child sacrifice are continuously repeated, with harsh consequences of personal death for any violation.</p>	<p>Judges 11</p> <p>The story of Jephthah's daughter came to pass as an educational tool to strengthen the message and “illustrate” what would happen if child sacrifice would be practiced.</p> <p>The folk tale genre was an effective tool to reach and influence all members of society, not just those who were literate of the law.</p>	<p>Judges 11:40</p> <p>Instituting an annual commemoration event transmitted the message even further, not only throughout the country and all members of society but throughout the generations as well.</p>	
Transition into Maidenhood Menstruation	<p>Leviticus 15:19-30 considers menstruant (niddah) to be in a temporary physical condition with</p>	<p>Genesis 31:19-35, Racheal steals her father's household idols</p>	<p>Ezekiel 44:25-26 and Zech. 9:9-11</p> <p>Elyse Goldstein's reading of Zechariah 9:9-</p>	<p>The only restriction is on the <i>man</i> not to have sex with a menstruant woman.</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
	implication on the state of ritual impurity.		11 suggests considering the menstruant blood as a sign of women's covenant with God - <i>dam brit</i> . Likewise, cross textual reading of Ezekiel 44:25 suggests a woman in a condition of niddah is like a priestess of her temple -tending to its most holy part- the womb.	
Virginity	Exodus 22:15-17 Leviticus 19:29 Deuteronomy 22:23-29 The law aimed to protect the girl and her family in both scenarios, forcible and voluntary sex. In addition, with no option of divorce, permanent marriage protected the girl who might	Genesis 34 and 2 Samuel 13 The narrative about Dinah's rape belongs to the genre of prose-fiction and sub-genre of <i>cautionary tales</i> , which builds and strengthens the message that violence against even <i>one</i> woman will cause dire consequences	Deuteronomy 22: 13-21 Eckart Otto sums that the law and ritual in Deuteronomy 22:13-21 aimed to prevent abuse of martial law and protect women from unjust divorce. Victor Matthews adds that the honor and legal rights of inheritance of the woman	

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
	otherwise find it very difficult to re-remarry after a history of sexual promiscuousness.	to the whole community. In Dinah's and Tamar's rape, the biblical message is clear: violence against a woman will bring personal and societal calamity. The death penalty for the violator would be the same for Israelites and foreigners, royalty and commoners alike. Furthermore, it is a communal responsibility to ensure that "such a thing will not happen in Israel."	and her children are protected against slanderous or unjustified claims for divorce.	
Marriage		"Meeting at the Well" type scene: Genesis 24- Isaac and Rebecca		"Meeting at the well" narratives signal that it is God who operates behind the scenes sending

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
		<p>Genesis 29- Jacob and Rachel</p> <p>Exodus 2:15-22- Moses and Zipporah</p> <p>Ruth 2- Boaz and Ruth</p> <p>“Fathers obtaining future husbands”</p> <p>Gen. 29:19- Leah and Rachel</p> <p>Judg.1:12-15- Achsah</p> <p>1 Samuel 18:17-27- Michael</p>		<p>the rescuers and matchmakers.</p> <p>Each time there is a danger of continuance, the well is symbolized as a source of life, and a “chosen” woman appears. The chosen woman matches the chosen man in God’s plan for the Israelites.</p> <p>Moreover, the sequence of the stories (Rebecca, Rachel, Zipporah, and Ruth) creates a connective tissue between the generations and marks the journey of the people of Israel.</p> <p>To signal important successions,</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
				<p>narratives of fathers marrying off their daughters appear.</p> <p>As literary heroines, these daughters are the biblical links between generations and markers of succession and continuation.</p> <p>From this perspective, these maidens are no longer perceived as vulnerable damsels but rather as powerful players in the saga of the Israelite people.</p> <p>** it could possibly be that there is an embedded national message in the biblical narratives, and it is transmitted</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
				through the vulnerable women.
Barrenness		<p>Genesis 11, 16, 18, 21- Sarah</p> <p>Genesis 25- Rebecca</p> <p>Genesis 29 -30- Leah and Rachel</p> <p>Judges 13- The Mother of Samson</p> <p>1 Samuel 1-2- Hannah</p> <p>2 Kings 4- The Shunammite Woman</p> <p>Isaiah 54 - Israel as a Nation</p>		<p>Childbearing had theological and national importance and was understood as an integral part of God's care for Israel.</p> <p>Reading the narratives regarding barren women in sequence reveals a "build-up" of a theme.</p> <p>This theme holds a great national promise for the Israelite people, as bearing a child means continuation.</p> <p>The sequence of narratives reiterates continuity in the face of</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
				vulnerability, both of the mother and the child. This leads to the Isaiah 54 narrative: if Israel as a nation is metaphorically the “barren woman,” then, regardless of Israel’s fragility, there is always redemption by God and continuity of the nation.
Divorce and Adultery	Lev 20:10 Deuteronomy 22:22 Deuteronomy 24:1-4	Hosea 1-3	Numbers 5:11-24 the ritual protected the woman from her husband’s (or other members in the community) unsubstantiated suspicions. This law and ritual protected women's lives,	

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
			who otherwise would be stoned to death as adulterous, without disrupting the community's family unit and the social order.	
Incest	<p>Leviticus 18 and 20 – Code of Holiness</p> <p>The laws in Leviticus 18: 6-18 articulate that <i>all</i> female family members, including stepdaughters, stepsisters, and in-laws, to the third generation of granddaughters, are off-limits, including biological and marital relatives.</p>	<p>2 Samuel 13</p> <p>The narrative foreshadows in a sophisticated way that damaging her honor would harm and disrupt the stability of the Davidic kingdom. To put it more strongly, a rape of the princes foreshadows catastrophe to the nation.</p>		<p>The biblical incest prohibitions serve to protect females from sexual predators and problematic relations within the family.</p> <p>The biblical laws in Leviticus 18 and 20 and the cautionary tale about the downfall of the house of David operate as a warning to the Israelite society in terms of personal punishment and a national disaster. Be it</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
				a commoner or a prince, all are equal under the Levitical Law and accountable to God.
Widowhood	<p>Exodus 22:22-23</p> <p>Deuteronomy 10:17-18- God is the protector of the widow and the fatherless.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 24:17-18- assuring the widow basic dignity.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 24:19-22- detailed harvest regulations to provide some economic means of support.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 25 5:10-the institution of a legal guardian.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 26: 12-13- sharing of the</p>	<p>Genesis 19 - Lot's Daughters</p> <p>Genesis 38- Tamar</p> <p>The Book of Ruth</p> <p>"Widow's redemption" type scenes are the blueprint of transition from vulnerability to a continuation of lineage narratives.</p> <p>Furthermore, King David, the "redeemer of Israel," was the heir of extraordinary women: Lot's Daughters, Tamar, and Ruth. These women were childless</p>	<p>Deuteronomy 25 5:10- The Law of the Levirate</p> <p>The levirate must assume the dead brother's assets and liabilities (to pay debts if needed, take care of the widow and the household, work the land, and tend the herds for which he was now responsible). Most important: the guardian must father an heir with the dead brother's wife (yet not marry her) and return the land and control over</p>	<p>The biblical authors took notice of the vulnerable situation of the widow and installed laws protecting the widows and the fatherless. God was considered their patron.</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
	<p>tithes with the needy</p> <p>Deuteronomy 27:19- God is the warrior and protector of the widow and the fatherless.</p> <p>“You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.”</p> <p>This statement with its full gravitas is located in the holy and serious section of <i>Mishpatim</i>, laws given to the Israelite people at Mount Sinai, immediately after</p>	<p>widows, the most vulnerable in their society. Yet, they were the ones who saved the paternal lineage of their husbands, leading to the birth of King David.</p> <p>The women acted in unconventional ways yet, with God’s approval (though God was less active) to bring salvation to themselves and the continuity of their families.</p> <p>1 Kings 17</p> <p>2 Kings 4:1-7</p> <p>Working through the prophets Elijah and Elisha, God provided an abundance of sustenance for the poor widow</p>	<p>the household to the heir when he becomes old enough.</p> <p>To stress the responsibility of the guardian and deter evasion, the ritual of public shaming was implemented.</p> <p>Eckart Otto states that this law was concerned with the legal and economic protection of the widow and not with her deceased husband's lineage and patrilineal name. The law acknowledged the widow’s vulnerable situation of potentially losing land and livelihood. By this law, the woman was recognized as a legal subject in her own right</p>	

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
	<p>God's revelation. These laws are only second to the Ten Commandments in importance. This comes to teach us about the high regard God attributed to protecting the widows and fatherless.</p>	<p>and her children.</p> <p>These narratives demonstrate that God is not only the avenger of the widow but also a financial sustainer and a protector.</p> <p>Jeremiah 7</p> <p>Zec 7:8-11</p> <p>Lamentations 1:1</p> <p>Jerusalem as a widow</p>	<p>and was able to act as a plaintiff against her guardian in front of the village assembly.</p>	
Inheritance	<p>Numbers 27</p> <p>Numbers 36</p> <p>a "legal" case needed to be made to ensure the right of daughters to inherit the land. The biblical authors were thus compelled to include and secure (!) the inheritance rights of unmarried</p>	<p>Numbers 27</p> <p>Numbers 36</p> <p>Joshua 17</p> <p>The five daughters of Zelophehad: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, approached Moses, Aaron, and the community elders and</p>		<p>Once again, the most vulnerable in Israelite society, fatherless and unmarried women, ensured by their action and wisdom the continuation of lineage and land for</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
	<p>daughters in one of the most important teachings of the law.</p> <p>To strengthen the law's intent, the narrative about the five daughters of Zelophehad was presented as a legal case, formulated by God as a general law which includes <i>all</i> daughters' right to inherit, and appeared twice (with modification, chapters 27 and 36).</p>	<p>requested to be counted among those legally entitled to inherit and own land.</p>		<p>generations to come.</p>
Migration	<p>Exodus 22:21, 23:9,</p> <p>Leviticus 19:33-34 Deuteronomy 10:19</p> <p>Exodus 20, 22, and Deuteronomy 5- laws regarding Shabbat-to</p>	<p>Genesis 12, 20, and 26- “wife as sister” narratives.</p> <p>“Wife as sister” and “Bathsheba” narratives can also be read as part of a greater literary theme of survival and</p>		<p>All the Biblical laws regarding migrants or foreigners (<i>Gerim</i>) are gender-neutral and apply to men and women. The theological message that</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
	<p>prevent abuse of migrant workers.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 16:11- sharing of food in national and familial celebrations</p> <p>Deuteronomy 24 warns against oppressing a (migrant) hired worker and harvesting regulations to ensure some means of substance.</p> <p>Num. 35:15- foreigners too could use cities of refuge and be protected by the law.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 27:19- ensuring full justice for the migrants as citizens.</p>	<p>continuity, as embodied in both the “the palace” type scenes and the “sex as means of survival” motif.</p> <p>At the center of these narratives is a woman who is also a foreigner.</p> <p>Genesis 19- Lot’s daughters</p> <p>Ruth 1-4- the story of Ruth</p> <p>The Book of Ester</p> <p>These narratives enable the audience to complete an entire cycle, from migration due to hunger, fear for one’s life and bloodline, to fulfillment of God’s promise and prosperity.</p>		<p>God is the protector of the migrants is repeated throughout biblical literature. Using full authority and invoking the Name, God makes sure that migrants, who have no tribe members to protect them, nor land to live off, are taken care of in the Israelite community.</p> <p>The biblical authors made efforts to specify and articulate calls for justice before the law, labor protections, and ensuring sufficient food supplies to anyone in need.</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
				<p>The biblical laws in Leviticus and Numbers treat the foreigner with equal rights before God in all manners regarding worship and justice. Likewise, the book of Deuteronomy commands the Israelite's chieftains to judge righteously between foreigners and the Israelites</p> <p>These narratives spread throughout the biblical literature repeat and reinforce a theological message of God's protection and women's role</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
				<p>in the divine plan.</p> <p>*Also, could be read as a national message of survival and continuity (as migration was a real problem in biblical times).</p>
War	<p>Deuteronomy 20:10-18</p> <p>Deuteronomy 21:10-14 – protection from brutality and exploitation of a woman in captivity. Her captor must marry her, thus allowing her and her children full legal rights. She cannot be sold into slavery or to another man. A ritual is provided to mark her transition.</p> <p>The biblical literature adds a</p>	<p>Numbers 31:9-18</p> <p>Judges 4-5</p> <p>Deborah-</p> <p>Deborah is presented in an unprecedented empowering way: not only is she a judge by profession (unique among the Israelites in Biblical times), but she also assumes a priestly role as she accompanies the soldiers to battle as a spiritual leader and God's</p>	<p>Deuteronomy 21:10-14</p> <p>To limit sexual looting, the biblical literature established a law regulating the treatment of captive women. Tamara Eshkenazi notes that the law and ritual in Deuteronomy respect the woman as an individual who has gone through trauma and allows her time for</p>	<p>During wartime, women found themselves in life-threatening, serious vulnerable situations.</p> <p>The Deuteronomic authors instituted laws protecting both Israelites and captive women (who were the most vulnerable), protecting their lives and dignity.</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
	<p>prohibition against selling the woman as a slave or treating her with cruelty since she was already humiliated. If the husband does not want to keep the captive woman as a wife, he must make her a free woman. Thus, the biblical law safeguards the captive woman from economic and sexual exploitation.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 20:5-9 and 24:5</p> <p>Wife of a soldier.</p> <p>In case her husband dies on the battlefield, the law tries to provide a “safety net” and ensure that the woman would have a home to live in, means of economic support (a vineyard or other</p>	<p>messenger. Thus, in Biblical eyes, Deborah is equivalent to Barak, the military leader, and Moses, the historic national leader.</p> <p>Jael</p> <p>The story of Jael not only sends the message that ordinary women are part of the war effort and its success. It also sends a psychological message to the women afraid of being raped by the invading soldiers while their husbands were at war. Jael’s agency, resourcefulness, and victory can help alleviate women’s anxiety about prospective rape by</p>	<p>transition into her new home.</p>	<p>Note the many narratives regarding women during war times and their extraordinary actions to save the nation.</p> <p>Most of the women mentioned in the King David narratives played an essential role in changing the political reality. Abigail, Michal, and Rizpah Bat Aiah were markers of King David’s rise to power and monarchy. Bathsheba, Tamar, and Michal marked his moral and political downfall. The wise women from Tekoa and Abel Beth Ma’acah</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
	<p>crops), the status of a window instead of a fiancée (betrothed), so she would be entitled to some inheritance, and hopefully, she would have a child, which would mean the continuation of the family and improved status for the woman</p>	<p>conquering soldiers.</p> <p>1 Samuel 25</p> <p>Abigail</p> <p>Abigail is an example of a wise and resourceful woman, acting to save her husband when danger threatens her household. She does not seek her husband's permission and assumes full authority over the situation. She acts in the domain of her household, yet her influence is far-reaching in forming a king.</p> <p>2 Samuel 3</p> <p>Rizpah Bat-Aiah- King Saul's concubine; and Saul's daughter, Michal. Both women were caught in the</p>		<p>played significant roles in preventing bloodshed and the destruction of towns.</p> <p>The French expression "<i>Cherchez la femme</i>" (look for the woman) exemplifies the importance of women in the rise and fall of the Davidic Dynasty.</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
		<p>conflict between Saul and David. Though not active themselves, their roles were both the “cause” and the “symbol” of the transition from the reign of the house of Saul to the house of David.</p> <p>2 Samuel 14, 20</p> <p>Two influential women praised for their wisdom during David’s endless battles were the “wise woman” from Tekoa in 2 Samuel 14:1-24, and the “wise woman” from the town of Abel of Beth- Ma’acah in 2 Samuel 20:15-22. Both had the title “Wise Woman,” implying they were known for</p>		

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
		<p>their wisdom in counsel and had acquired enough political power to be in a position to speak with King David or Joab, his military commander.</p> <p>2 Samuel 11-12</p> <p>Bathsheba</p> <p>Bible reinforces the prohibition and punishment against adultery in David and Bathsheba's narrative, sending a clear message to men not to abuse the absence of husbands during wartimes, since God will punish them and their household for their miss deeds.</p>		

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
Slavery	<p>Exodus 21:1-11, 26-27</p> <p>Laws setting limits on time of servitude and cruelty towards debt slaves.</p> <p>Leviticus 25:35-45</p> <p>Laws of release from slavery on the Jubilee</p> <p>Deuteronomy 5:12-14</p> <p>The Sabbath rest, protecting slaves from exploitation.</p> <p>The observation of the Sabbath is one of the most important laws, embodied by the theological message that the land and all inhabitants belong to God and that YHWH was the one who brought the Israelites from the house of bondage.</p>	<p>Genesis.16, 21 and Gen.30- Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah as slave-wife,' or surrogate wombs.</p> <p>Genesis 16, 21 -Hagar</p> <p>The narratives about Hagar not only transform her from a simple slave-girl into a founder and the matriarch of a great nation, but they also stress the theological message that God is the ultimate protector of slaves and their children.</p> <p>Hagar is yet another example of the continuous biblical message that women,</p>		<p>Biblical laws aiming to protect both male and female slaves appear in the most important chapters of biblical literature. Exodus 21 is part of "The Book of the Covenant."</p> <p>The laws in Deuteronomy ensure the inclusion of both male and female slaves under the protection of the law, especially regarding the Sabbath's rest and participation in communal celebrations. Moreover, Deuteronomy innovates with revolutionary laws which protect runaway slaves</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
	<p>Deuteronomy 12:12</p> <p>Participation in cultic celebrations</p> <p>Deuteronomy 15:12-15</p> <p>Setting up the freed slave for economic stability. The obligation to provide the freed slaves means to support themselves is unprecedented forward-thinking, both in economic and social terms.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 23: 15-16</p> <p>Protecting a runaway slave. The text does not specify the ethnicity nor the gender of the slave and thus can be read in the most expansive and revolutionary way.</p>	<p>regardless of their social status, have an important role in fulfilling God's promises and continuing the pedigree of a nation.</p>		<p>(Deut.23: 16-17) and obligates the master to supply the freed slave with "seed products" to enable their economic re-entry into the society (Deut.15:12-14).</p> <p>Kristine Garroway theorizes the reasons for the progressive laws regarding slaves in biblical literature. She supposes the Israelites perceived themselves as God's chosen people, delivered from slavery in Egypt. Thus no Israelite could be sold as a slave in perpetuity.</p>

Life cycle occasion	Law	Narrative	Ritual	
				While slavery existed, laws such as Lev. 25:42 and Deut. 15:12 sought to ameliorate the practice of chattel slavery

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