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Pious Prostitutes: A Midrashic Exploration of Gender, Sexuality, Power & Otherness

This thesis uses the characters of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth to examine how the rabbis conceive of gender, sexuality, Jewish-Gentile relations, and the notion of "the other." The analysis begins with the Inter-testimental material from the Hellenistic period and continues through the beginning of the modern era, ending with Meam Loez.

This thesis consists of three chapters. It uses Jewish primary sources from the Bible to the modern period, as well as secondary sources, especially feminist and biblical scholars.

This thesis has four goals, to: (a) survey the midrashic material on Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth as it relates to gender, sexuality, Jewish-Gentile relations, and the concept of "otherness," (b) analyze what this material tells us about rabbinic views on these matters, (c) determine how later readers of the biblical text use the biblical text to respond to their own questions and challenges, and (d) determine the relevancy of this material for our own search for meaning and our own ability to respond to these questions.

The contribution of this thesis is to offer a systematic analysis of the characterizations of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, as their portrayals relate to questions of gender, sexuality, and Jewish-Gentile relations, and to discuss how the rabbis use these three women as vehicles to understand their own societal contexts. This thesis looks at how Jews have always interpreted and reinterpreted difficult texts in response to their own societal circumstances, and suggests ways that we as Reform Jews in the twenty-first century can reinterpret these women lives in light of our own societal reality.

PIOUS PROSTITUTES:
A Midrashic Exploration of Gender, Sexuality, Power & Otherness

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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Dedicated to my wife, Mira,

the only woman I know who possesses

finer beauty than Rahab,

greater courage than Tamar,

and deeper חסד than Ruth.

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בואי כלה, בואי כלה

Come my bride, Come my bride

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Special thanks to my advisor and teacher, Norman Cohen, whose love of Torah and practical wisdom were an invaluable aid to this project; my sister, Debra, who encouraged me and nudged me in just the right proportions; my parents, Fred and Roslyn, who taught me I could do anything and hung on my every word to make me feel brilliant; and my wife, Mira, my life-long *chevruta,* who parsed seemingly impossible verbs, scoured library shelves for missing tomes, and never let me give up.

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INTRODUCTION

I chose the topic of my thesis for two reasons, my love of *midrash* and my interest in how Jews address "the other." Since Jewish texts were generally written by Jewish men, I, as a product of twentieth century American feminism and multiculturalism, have long been intrigued by how these writers view those that are different from them, particularly women and Gentiles. With an eye towards our own contemporary society and Judaism's current challenges to remain true to tradition while empowering women, respecting Gentiles, addressing new understandings of sexuality, and welcoming the "others" in our own midst, I wanted to explore the intersection of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in rabbinic discourse. I hoped that by studying how the rabbis of old addressed changing societal notions of gender, sexuality, and Jewish-Gentile relations, I might learn something useful for us as Reform Jews in the twenty-first century, exploring gender, sexuality, and Jewish-Gentile relations in our own time.

I first fell in love with *midrash* because of its ability to turn a text on its head while still seemingly remaining 'true' to the very same text. I have long been impressed by the daring and creativity of many classical *midrashim.* In some respects, I believe the *midrash* may be the most creative avenue of Jewish expression.

I also believed that the study of *midrash* would be an excellent avenue for exploring the areas of gender, sexuality, and Jewish-Gentile relations, because of this same daring creativity. More so than legal texts, the world of *aggadah* seemed to me to be the perfect vehicle for "reading between the lines" of what the rabbis were really saying, both intentionally and unconsciously. By tracing the midrashic development of key characters over time, I hoped to get a glimpse of the worldview of the exegetes behind the texts.

Having decided to write a thesis in the area of *Midrash,* I had to carefully choose my subjects. Since I wished to explore gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, I determined that it would be best to chose non-Israelite women who engaged in sexual behavior. This greatly limited the pool of potential characters. Potifar's wife and Jezebel were considered and rejected because these women are so negatively portrayed. I preferred to study characters who were viewed in a more neutral or more nuanced fashion. Hagar remained a possibility for analyzing the idea of sexual relations with slaves and the manner in which she later became a symbolic pawn in the midrashic battle between Judaism and Islam. I found Zipporah to be a very intriguing character, especially given the narrative of the bridegroom of blood in which Zipporah wards of death by circumcising her son in Moses' stead (Exodus 4:24-26), surely a passage filled with gendered notions of power, danger, and the meaning of the male sexual organ. Up to the last possible moment, I wanted to study Yael, a foreign woman who used her seductive powers to slay Israel's enemies. I have always admired Yael's courage, strength, and sexual prowess, and wanted to learn more about her.

However, I did not wish to randomly choose two or three non-Israelite women whose stories would not be connected and whose narratives would go in different directions. I wanted my characters to have much in common and to tell a story together. In the end, that made my choice easy. Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are related to each other through the concept of messianism. All three women are believed, by some, to be the foremothers of the messiah. Within the Biblical text, Tamar and Rahab are linked via the symbol of the scarlet thread, and Tamar and Ruth are connected by genealogy and the motif of levirate marriage. Ultimately, I chose this trio because they are the central

characters of sexually charged narratives about non-Israelite born women who powerfully impact the destiny of the Jewish people.[1] As I began my studies, I was pleased to find more and more that these women had in common with each other.[2]

This thesis has four goals. They are:

1. To survey the midrashic material on Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth as that material relates to gender, sexuality, Jewish-Gentile relations, and the concept of "otherness."
2. To analyze what this material tells us about Rabbinic views on these matters, and to what extent Jewish views have changed over time.
3. To determine how later readers of the biblical text, from the Hellenistic period to the beginning of modern times, use the biblical text to respond to their contextual questions and challenges.
4. To determine the relevancy of this material for our own search for meaning and ability to respond to these questions.

Setting out to accomplish these goals, I began my research utilizing Torah Ha-Ketuvah Mesorah to locate rabbinic texts based upon key verses from the narratives regarding Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. Additionally, I did a thorough search of secondary scholarly literature, focusing on feminist scholars, biblical scholars, and scholars who study sexuality. As research progressed, I used the footnotes and bibliographies of secondary literature to locate additional sources, both primary and secondary.

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[1] When I initially chose this topic, I presumed that Tamar was non-Israelite at birth. I later learned that there is actually a debate about her ethnicity. Rahab is clearly Canaanite and Ruth is Moabite. This mix of nations and representation of Israel's enemies further enriched my study.

[2] I was also pleased to learn that Yael is ethnically related to Rahab and also viewed as a convert. I just couldn't resist the urge to work Yael into the mix, so I included her in relevant passages.

After collecting primary sources and scholarly analysis, I sorted through the material, separating out those sources most relevant to my goals. I searched those materials for themes, commonalities, and discrepancies. I sorted the material into categories and analyzed how the material in those categories answered the essential questions of my thesis.

The thesis is structured in three parts. Section 1 explores the biblical narratives. Though this is a *midrash* thesis, the biblical text grounds the *midrashim.* A sophisticated understanding of the biblical text is necessary to understand how the *midrashim* function and in what ways they diverge from the biblical narrative.

Section 1 consists of four parts. The first part summarizes and analyzes Genesis 38, the narrative of Judah and Tamar. The second part summarizes and analyzes Joshua 2, the primary narrative of Rahab, as well as Joshua 6, which mentions Rahab, and Joshua 7, which contrasts with Joshua 2. The third part summarizes and analyzes the Book of Ruth, breaking it down in accordance with its four chapters. In each of these three parts, I examine the language, the portrayal of the female character, the theme of crossing boundaries, and other relevant themes, including conversion, intertextuality, and the symbolism of the scarlet thread. In the fourth and final part of Part 1, the three different biblical narratives are compared and contrasted. This section also examines common themes, including prostitution, messianism, and survival.

Chapter 2 categorizes, summarizes and analyzes the midrashic material which is relevant to my topic. The relevant material is broken down into four themes which are repeatedly sounded by the *midrashim.* The first of these themes is the danger presented by foreign women. The second theme is the relationship between beauty, modesty, and

piety, and how and why these three things are attributed to the characters under discussion. The third theme is conversion as a form of domestication. This section analyzes how religious conversion is used to transform women into proper wives and mothers who stay at home. The fourth theme is reward, in which I discuss what the women are being rewarded for and the nature of the rewards they receive.

Part 3 analyzes the *midrashim* discussed in Part 2 in light of changing societal contexts and their implications for biblical exegesis. As examples of changing societal contexts, conversion, Hellenistic views of women, and sexual rhetoric are explored and the impacts of these changes on rabbinic literature are examined. Part 3 also examines how the rabbis address particularly difficult texts and enforce boundaries, in light of profound societal change.

Overall, this thesis seeks to convey the changes in the portrayals of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth over the course of approximately two millennia, from the time of the writing of the biblical text to the dawn of the modern period. This journey begins with the Hebrew Bible and concludes with *Meam Loez,* a late midrashic compilation of Sephardic origin. As we begin our study of the biblical narratives, we seek to understand what Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth meant to the contemporary reader in ancient times.

Part 1: The Biblical Narrative

In order to determine how the characters of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth develop over time, and how a variety of exegetes understand these characters differently, it is first necessary to study the relevant Biblical narratives on their own. Based upon this Biblical analysis, we will better understand how the rabbis treated our three characters. What follows is an analysis of each of the three relevant narratives individually, as well as in relationship to each other.

A. Genesis 38: The Story of Judah and Tamar

1. The Narrative

The narrative of Genesis 38 is set in a Canaanite context. This is made immediately clear by the opening lines:

> About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. (Genesis 38:1-2)

Right from the start, the reader learns that Judah separates himself from his Israelite family, settles in the midst of Canaanite society, as represented by the Canaanite city, Adullam, and immediately takes a Canaanite wife.

In the view of the famous scholar of Genesis, Claus Westerman, the Biblical narrator is not ashamed of Judah's journey to Canaanite territory or his marriage to a

Canaanite woman.[1] Certainly, there is no explicit condemnation of either action contained in our opening text.

However, there is one literary aspect of the verse which may subtly imply condemnation. Genesis 38:1 uses the verb *va-yered,* to go down, to describe Judah's movement away from his brothers and into Canaanite territory. While it is certainly possible that *vayered* is merely a figure of speech or a way to designate a geographic destination (moving South or traveling into a valley or other low area), it is also possible that it suggests moral or spiritual descent. Like Joseph who "went down" (*va-yered*) to Egypt, Judah, too, leaves his brothers and descends into an inferior culture.

Whichever way a reader may interpret the word *vayered,* it is clear that the Canaanite setting is of the utmost importance. The story of Judah and Tamar does not begin with Judah and Tamar. It starts with Judah moving to Canaanite territory and marrying "the daughter of a certain Canaanite." The woman's name, personality, history and actions are completely irrelevant. All that matters is that she is the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. Within the narrative of Genesis 38, she will never do anything except give birth, name her sons, and die. She is neither good nor evil. She simply establishes Judah's assimilation into Canaanite society and bears his children.

Bible scholars are in disagreement regarding the setting of the narrative. E. A. Speiser, also an expert in the Book of Genesis, believes that the story is set in Canaanite territory as a representation of a historical reality that during the period of the judges and the time of the early monarchy, the tribe of Judah "expanded by absorbing various

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[1] Claus Westerman, *Genesis 37-50: A Commentary,* trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 51.

Canaanite elements."[2] Westerman believes that the narrative arose "in a mixed population in which Canaanites and groups of immigrant Israelites still lived at peace with each other and intermarried."[3] In any case, this setting represents a certain period in Israelite history which reflects intermingling and cultural exchange between Israelites and Canaanites.

Judah has three sons by his wife, and it is in connection with this fact that Tamar is introduced, saying, "Judah got a wife for Er, his first-born; her name was Tamar."[4] Tamar is introduced in the opposite way of Judah's wife. Whereas Judah's wife has no name, but only a father, a lineage, and an ethnic identity, Tamar has a name, but her family and lineage and ethnic identity are unstated.

Er displeased God and was killed as punishment. Judah instructs his second son, Onan, to have sexual relations with Tamar in order to provide offspring for Er via levirate marriage. Onan purposely avoids providing these offspring for his brother by "wasting his seed."[5] This displeases God, and Onan, too, is killed for his sin. Judah tells Tamar to go back to her father's house to wait for his youngest son, Shelah, to grow up. However, Judah has no intention of giving Shelah to Tamar because he is concerned that Shelah, too, will die. Shua's daughter, Judah's wife, dies. Judah mourns for his wife, and at the conclusion of the mourning period, he travels with his friend Hirah, the Adullamite, to Timnah for the sheepshearing.

It is at this point that Tamar takes an active role in the narrative. The text reads:

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[2] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Translation, Introduction,and Notes,* Anchor Bible vol. 1 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 300.
[3] Westerman, *Genesis 37-50: A Commentary,* 50.
[4] Genesis 38:6.
[5] Genesis 38:9.

> And Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheepshearing. So she took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife. When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. So he turned aside to her by the road and said, "Here, let me sleep with you" – for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. "What," she asked, "will you pay for sleeping with me?" He replied, "I will send a kid from my flock." But she said, "You must leave a pledge until you have sent it." And he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry." So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by him. Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb.[6]

These seven verses put in motion a series of events which effect Israelite history. The liaison between Judah and Tamar affects all that is to come.

Much has been written about the location of this liaison, Petach Enaim. The Jewish Publication Society translates the phrase as "the entrance to Enaim," as if *Enaim* were a particular place. *Enaim* means 'eyes,' which allows for a number of different translations and interpretations. Richard Elliot Friedman, a scholar known for his Biblical translations, takes the phrase literally as "the opening of the eyes," and translates, "in a visible place."[7] However, many commentators, past and present, suggest more interpretive meanings for the phrase. David Cotter, the editor of the *Berit Olam* series, suggests that Petach Enaim begins the "reversal of Tamar's situation."[8] She who has

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[6] Genesis 38:13-19.
[7] Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah with a New English Translation* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003) 130.
[8] David W. Cotter, *Berit Olam: Genesis,* ed. David W. Cotter (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000), 285.

been invisible to all eyes for years in her widow's seclusion is now visible to the eyes of her father-in-law who has been ignoring her existence.[9]

However the phrase Petach Enaim is to be interpreted, the sexual liaison that occurs at Petach Enaim sets in motion all that occurs after it. As the narrative continues, Judah's friend, Hirah, attempts to bring the kid to the prostitute, as promised, but he is unable to find her. Hirah inquires, "Where is the cult prostitute?," referring to Tamar as a *kedesha,* a Hebrew word for a cult prostitute which has a resonance of 'holiness.' This is different from the term *zonah*, which means a common prostitute, which was used earlier in the narrative. In any event, Hirah is unable to find her and reclaim Judah's staff, cord, and seal. More concerned for his reputation than his property, Judah tells Hirah, "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughing stock."

As the narrative continues, the reader is presented with the high-point of the tale – a court scene where Tamar faces death. In describing this scene, the Biblical narrator informs the readers that approximately three months have passed. Judah is told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact she is with child by harlotry." Judah orders her brought out to be burned. As she is being brought out, she sends a message to Judah, telling him that she is pregnant by the owner of the staff, cord, and seal which she delivers. She pleads with him to recognize the symbols. Judah recognizes them as his own, and says, "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." From that point forward, Judah does not touch Tamar again.

Genesis 38 concludes with a birthing narrative:

> When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb! While she was in labor, one of them put out

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[9] *Ibid.*

> his hand, and the midwife tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first. But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was named Perez. Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the crimson thread; he was named Zerah.[10]

As a result of her liaison with Judah, Tamar gives birth to twins. Like Jacob and Esau, Perez and Zerah jostle for position.

This birth scene is the resolution of the narrative. All that came before was to make this birth possible. The scarlet thread is a symbol of royalty because scarlet is the color of royal birth.[11] The notion of a breach, from which Perez gets his name, suggests a victory over his brother. Together, both of these symbols prefigure messianic times to come. In this way, the reader is reminded that Perez will bear the royal line.

The birthing scene does not offer an etiology of Zerah's name. Robert Alter, the famous literary analyst, suggests that Zerah's name means 'shining,' and is linked with the scarlet thread on his hand.[12] Altar further suggests that the scarlet thread associates Zerah with Esau, who is red. Esau, like Zerah, is displaced from his initial position of first-born.

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[10] Genesis 38:27-30.

[11] The scarlet thread also symbolizes redemption and messianism, according to Elly Teman of the Hebrew University. See "The Meaning and Symbolism of the Scarlet Thread" Part 1:B.

[12] Robert Altar, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation With Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 220.

2. Tamar's Character

The Biblical Tamar is a patient woman. She waits passively for a very long time. She never directly challenges Judah nor resents her lot in life. She accepts her fate as a widow and her place in society. She respects the custom of levirate marriage and her obligations to her deceased husband's clan.

The only thing Tamar cannot accept is her perpetual childlessness. Denied the right to be a mother, Tamar risks all to conceive a child. She behaves bravely, strategically, and wisely. She plans well and executes her plan flawlessly. Ultimately, she achieves her goal and bears two sons by Judah, giving birth to the royal line of Israel. Having achieved her goal of having a son, Tamar does not pursue any further role for herself, but rather she recedes back into her quiet widowhood.

3. Crossing Boundaries

Tamar crosses boundaries only temporarily and only for the sake of reinforcing them. She violates the rules of patriarchy only in order to perpetuate the patriarchy in the form of becoming a mother to sons.

It is not Tamar's goal to violate societal norms, to cause conflict, or to rewrite the rules by which she is bound. She does not object to the rules which control her life. She only insists that those rules by applied fully and fairly.

Thus, her brief violation of societal rules (incest, prostitution) is only for the purpose of achieving the enforcement of another set of societal rules (levirate marriage and the production of a male heir). Though Tamar tricks Judah, her actions ultimately serve Judah's interests, providing Judah with male heirs to carry on his family line.

4. Summary

In summary, Genesis 38 is a self-contained tale that the Biblical editor has inserted in the midst of the Joseph narrative. This story draws on historical circumstances, as well as preexisting cultural traditions, to produce a tale of seduction and redemption.

A woman is wrongly denied her right to have a husband and children. In response, Tamar acts boldly and shockingly, seducing her father-in-law. This is surely sinful and disturbing behavior. Yet, ultimately her sinful behavior is compensated for by her pure intentions and by Judah's admission of his own culpability. This compensation is portrayed in the text by Judah stating that Tamar is *tzadika mimeni,* 'more righteous than I.'

Finally, Tamar gives birth to twins in a unique birthscene which foreshadows the royal and messianic future. Because her act has brought about the royal and messianic line, Tamar's behavior is redeemed. She has transgressed only for the sake of the greater good. She has boldly righted a wrong and made society better off for it.

B. Joshua 2, 6: The Tale of Rahab

1. The Narratives

Joshua 2 begins the story of Rahab, sometimes known as 'the whore of Jericho.' Like the narrative of Judah and Tamar, the opening line of Joshua 2 provides a

geographical setting which immediately frames the unfolding tale in a social and theological context, saying, "Joshua, son of Nun, secretly sent two spies from Shittim, saying, "Go, reconnoiter the region of Jericho."[13] The location of Shittim immediately reminds the reader of a prior incident at Shittim, the incident of Ba'al Peor in Numbers 25. Shittim was the place where Israel went astray and angered God by engaging in sexual intercourse and idolatry with the Moabite women. It is at Shittim that an Israelite man named Zimri engages in sex with a Midianite princess named Kozbi, and both are murdered in a zealous rage by Phineas. By reminding the reader of this episode, the opening of our narrative warns readers of the sexual and spiritual danger presented by foreign women.[14] The opening also foreshadows the sexuality, danger, and destruction that are to come.

The first verse continues, clearly communicating the sexuality of the tale and its main character, "So they set out, and they came to the house of a harlot named Rahab and lodged there," '*va-yelchu va-yavo'u beit isha zonah u'shma Rahav va-yishkavu shama.*'[15] No Hebrew readers could possibly miss the sexuality communicated in this phrasing. *Va-yavo'u* means 'they came,' but to come unto a woman means to have sexual intercourse with her.[16] The place they come to is not merely a house, but the house of a woman – a house not owned or resided in by a man. And what kind of house would be presided by a woman? To answer that question, the reader is told that the house if not that of any woman, but of a woman who is a *zonah,* a prostitute. And not just any prostitute, but a

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[13] Joshua 2:1.
[14] L. Daniel Hawk, *Berit Olam: Joshua,* ed. David W. Cotter (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000), 46.
[15] Joshua 2:1.
[16] Genesis 6:4, 16:2, 30:3, 38:8-9; 1 Samuel 12:24, 16:21; Ezekiel 23:44; Proverbs 6:29.

prostitute named "wide" (Rahav). A prostitute whose very name connotes that she is 'open for business,' with wide breasts and wide hips and legs spread wide for her customers.

Then, just in case the reader somehow missed the implication, we are finally told that the spies lied down, *va-yishchavu,* using the verb *shachav,* which is also used to refer to sexual intercourse, especially in Biblical tales depicting sexually prohibited behavior.[17] The verb *loon,* meaning, 'to lodge,' would have been a more obvious choice. The Biblical writer chose to employ a long series of sexually loaded terms.

As the narrative continues, so does the sexual innuendo. The king of Jericho arrives at Rahab's house, and demands that she turn over the Israelite spies. Rahab lies to the king and sends him away and hides the spies. As they speak of the men who have 'come' to her home, the verb *bo,* 'come,' which often has sexual connotations, is repeated in each verse of this dialogue.[18] As the narrative continues, the reader is told that, "the spies had not yet laid down *(yishkavoon)* when she came up to them on the roof."[19] The Biblical author could have used a verb that would convey sleep, but instead chose to repeat the verb, *shachav,* 'lie,' which has clear sexual implications.

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[17] The verb *shachav* is used exclusively to refer to sexual inappropriate behavior, primarily rape, incest, and adultery. This term occurs in the incest narratives of Lot's daughters (Genesis 19:31-38) and Reuben and Bilha (Genesis 35:22), the story of Potiphar's wife's efforts to seduce Joseph (Genesis 39:7, 10, 12), and the tale of the rape of Tamar by Amnon (2 Samuel 13:11). Other occurrences of the sexual use of this verb can be found in the Levitical code of sexual prohibitions (Leviticus 18), the legal proceedings regarding the wife suspected of adultery (Numbers 5:13), and the Deuteronomic laws regarding rape (Deuteronomy 22:23), as well as the curses of *Parashat Ki Tavo* (Deuteronomy 28:30).

[18] Joshua 2:2-4.

[19] Joshua 2:8.

As the tale continues, there is a marked shift as Rahab begins her famous speech. The narration no longer speaks of idolatry and sexual sin. Rather, the reader is shocked to hear a Canaanite prostitute speak of covenant and divine redemption. Rahab declares:

> I know that the Lord has given the country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed. When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you; for the Lord your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below.[20]

Rahab doesn't merely recognize that the Israelites have a mighty god who will grant them a military victory, she declares that the Israelite god is indeed 'the God,' the one and only supreme being of the universe. A Canaanite whore has been transformed into a prophet.

As Rahab continues, she turns her newly found faith in God and loyalty to the spies to her personal advantage. She proclaims:

> Now, since I have shown loyalty to you, swear to me by the Lord that you, in turn, will show loyalty to my family. Provide me with a reliable sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and save us from death.[21]

Still speaking the language of monotheism, Rahab requests that the spies "swear…by the Lord" to save her life and the lives of her entire family.

The spies agree and Rahab lowers them "down by a rope through the window – for her dwelling was at the outer side of the city wall and she lived in the actual wall."[22] She instructs them to head to the hills and wait for three days. As they are about to

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[20] Joshua 2:9-11.
[21] Joshua 2:12-13.
[22] Joshua 2:15.

depart, the spies clarify their agreement, adding important requirements. The spies warn her that they will be released from their oath which she has forced them to take unless, at the time of the invasion, she ties a particular scarlet thread to the window, and brings her family into her house. Anyone outside her home will not be saved. Similarly, they will be released from their oath if she discloses their mission to anyone. Rahab agrees.

The spies leave and Rahab ties the scarlet thread to her window. The spies, as instructed, flee to the hills and remain there for three days before returning to the Israelite camp. The spies report all that happened to Joshua, telling him, "The Lord has delivered the whole land into our power; in fact, all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before us."[23]

In the sixth chapter of the Book of Joshua, the Israelites conquer Jericho. As promised, they save the lives of Rahab and her family.

Whereas in Chapter 2, Rahab is the main character and she instigates much of the action, in Chapter 6, Rahab is passive and silent. She is spoken of, but not spoken to, nor does she herself ever speak. Rahab is mentioned three separate times during the course of the narrative of the conquering of Jericho. First, the text instructs the Israelites that:

> The city and everything in it are to be proscribed for the Lord; only Rahab the harlot is to be spared, and all who are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers we sent.[24]

Later, in the midst of the slaughter, the spies receive specific instructions:

> For Joshua bade the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the harlot's house and bring out the woman and all that belong to her, as you swore to her." So the young spies went in and brought out Rahab, her father, and her

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[23] Joshua 2:24.
[24] Joshua 6:17.

> mother, her brothers and all that belonged to her – they brought out her whole family and left them outside the camp of Israel.[25]

Finally, as the city is burnt, the reader is told:

> Only Rahab the harlot and her father's family were spared by Joshua, along with all that belonged to her, and she dwelt among the Israelites – as is still the case. For she had hidden the messengers that Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.[26]

Notice that, in each instance, Rahab is referred to as "the harlot." Joshua does not even use her name, choosing rather to call her "the harlot" and "the woman," two phrases which simultaneously depersonalize, demean, and sexualize her.

2. A Sexually-Charged Narrative

Many commentators have noted the sexually charged language of these opening verses. In the words of Bible scholar Richard Nelson, "Rahab's story is saturated in an atmosphere of sexuality."[27] Nelson and his colleague Frank Spina further suggest that even the red thread may have a sexual connotation.[28]

In particular, the opening phrase *"isha zonah u'shma Rahav"* demonstrates that Rahab represents a profound sexual and spiritual danger.[29] Rahab's very name, which means 'broad' or 'open,' implies "sexual looseness" and can best be translated as "wide-

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[25] Joshua 6:22-23.
[26] Joshua 6:25.
[27] Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary,* Old Testament Library (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 43.
[28] *Ibid.*, 44; Frank A. Spina, "Reversal of Fortune: Rahab the Israelite and Achan the Canaanite," *Bible Review,* August 2001, 28.
[29] Joshua 2:1.

open."[30] L. Daniel Hawk, editor of the *Berit Olam* volume on the Book of Joshua, suggests that, "As a woman of Canaan and a prostitute, Rahab personifies the temptation to apostatize."[31] In addition to leaving from Shittim, the site of apostasy, the spies go directly to a prostitute, the Biblical symbol of covenant violation and straying from God's laws.[32] This further hints at the possibility of idolatry, as well as the sexual immorality, on the horizon.

Not only does this tale begin with sexually charged language, but it concludes in the same fashion. The language of Joshua 6 constantly reminds the reader that Rahab is a prostitute. It is a fact which can never be forgotten.

3. Covenant Theology

Rahab's speech in Joshua 2:9-13 has often been referred to as a statement of "covenantal theology," the belief in the covenant between Israel and the one and only God. The Book of Joshua, like the Book of Deuteronomy, reflects this theological view. Bible scholar, Gordon Mitchell suggests that Rahab's confession is the "characteristic theology of the Deuteronomic History" which "focuses the theology of the chapter and, indeed, of the book as a whole."[33] This assertion is supported by Rahab's use of the verb

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[30] Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville:Westminster John Knox Press, 1994),151.
[31] Hawk, *Berit Olam: Joshua,* 47.
[32] Prostitution is used as a common metaphor for violation of YHWH's covenant (see, for example, Exodus 34:14-6, Deuteronomy 31:16-8, Judges 2:17, Jeremiah 3:1-10, and Hosea 3:3), and the prostitute is often employed to symbolize straying from God's laws (see, for example, Proverbs 5:1-6; 7:1-27; and Ezekiel 16:15-52).
[33] Gordon Mitchell, *Together In the Land* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), 36, 165. Mitchell suggests that the story of Rahab saving the spies existed independently as a pre-Deuteronomic oral tradition, which the Deuteronomist then attached to the saga of Jericho, adding Rahab's speech in Joshua 2:9-13 to weld the two together.

yadati, which implies intimate knowledge,[34] and "often has a specifically covenantal nuance, signifying the active acknowledgement that establishes a formal relationship."[35]

Rahab not only declares her own belief in 'the Lord,' but solicits the spies to swear by the Lord that they will save her. Given that an oath in God's name is inviolable in Israelite thought, this guarantees that the promise will be kept.

Ultimately, the reader must ask whether Rahab truly shares Israelite covenantal theology? Does she intend to give her full loyalty to the one God? Or, alternatively, does she simply hope to save herself by swearing loyalty to a more powerful deity or telling the spies what they want to hear, essentially trapping them with their own theology?

Many Biblical scholars suggest that Rahab's speech does indeed represent her active acceptance of covenantal theology.[36] Spina notes that Rahab uses the phrase "God in heaven above," which occurs only three times in the Bible. It is also spoken by Moses and Solomon. Rahab also declares "Yahweh, your God, is God" which occurs only four times in the Bible, and is spoken also by Jeremiah, King Jehoshaphat, and the Psalmist.[37]

Nelson disagrees with the view that Rahab completely accepts Israelite theology. He writes:

> Yet her words, for all their deuteronomist flavor, remain appropriate to the ancestor of a group who would remain outside Israel's camp. Yahweh remains "your God." She is not the Gentile convert that later tradition would make of

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[34] The common use of *yadati* to refer to a sexual act is based upon this understanding of *yadati* as intimate knowledge.
[35] Robert G. Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary,* Anchor Bible vol. 6 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1982), 146; Amos 3:2 is the classic text.
[36] Gordon Mitchell is amongst these.
[37] Spina, "Reversal of Fortune," 30.

> her, but rather one of those foreigners in the Hebrew Bible whose acknowledgement that Yahweh is God underscores the self-evident power and glory of Yahweh (Balaam, Naaman, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius).[38]

Nelson makes an excellent point in noting that Rahab calls God "your God" and does not say or do anything to suggest that she is taking Yahweh as her own deity. It is possible, that Rahab, as a polytheist, simply believes that Yahweh is a powerful deity, and fears him as such. It is likely that she has the spies swear by their God to guarantee their honesty and her own safety.

4. The Meaning and Symbolism of the Scarlet Thread

The scarlet thread is a powerful symbol. Referred to first as a *tiqvat chut shani,* and later simply as a *tiqvat shani,* this piece of thread is the key to Rahab's redemption.

Elly Teman, a doctoral candidate in cultural anthropology at the Hebrew University, won the prestigious Raphael Patai Prize in Jewish Folklore and Ethnology in 2004 for her research on the scarlet thread. In her paper on this subject, Ms. Teman notes that *adom,* red, and *shani,* scarlet, are distinct colors in the Bible. The color *shani* occurs in nine Biblical books. In addition to its usage here in Joshua 2, it is the color of the thread on Zerach's wrist (Genesis 38:28-30), the color worn by the rich (2 Samuel 1:24; Proverbs 31:21), a color of the textiles of the holy temple (Exodus 25:4; 26:1, 31, 36; 28:5, 6, 8, 15), the color figuratively used to signify sin (Isaiah 1:18; Jeremiah 4:30), and associated with purification rituals (Leviticus 14:4, 6, 51; Numbers 19:6).[39] Teman

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[38] Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary*, 50.
[39] Elly Teman, "The Red String," American Folklore Society, http://www.afsnet.org/sections/jewish/Elly_Teman.doc, copyright April 2004 (accessed October 25, 2005).

further suggests that the scarlet thread in the window is intended to call to mind the blood on the doorpost of the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12:6-7) further underscoring its association with the sparing of lives.[40] Teman contends that:

> The scarlet thread appears in situations where the boundaries must be asserted between sacred and profane, forsaken and redeemed; those destined to live and those judged to die, those who belong to the Israelite nation and those who do not.

This assertion is supported by Nelson's contention that there is a word play here on the word *tiqva,* which also means 'hope.'[41] The shared root underscores the hope of redemption and salvation symbolized by the scarlet color.

5. Parallel Texts

In addition to the other texts referenced or implied by the scarlet thread, there are other Biblical texts which relate to the Rahab tale in other ways. As a whole, the narrative subtly evokes the genre of hospitality for people in danger. In particular, the tale of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 comes to mind. In addition to a common plot of the destruction of cities and the deliverance of one special citizen and his/her family, there is a correspondence in structure and vocabulary.[42] For example, the king of Jericho's demand to produce the spies closely parallels the people of Sodom's demand to produce the angels, in both its position in the narrative and the language used.[43]

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[40] *Ibid.*
[41] Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary,* 52.
[42] *Ibid.*, 43, 48; Hawk, *Berit Olam: Joshua,* 36-38.
[43] Genesis 19:4-5; Joshua 2:2-3.

While in Genesis 19, the angels are sheltered by a man, Lot, in folktales it is often a woman who shelters and protects the fugitives.[44] This is the case in another Biblical narrative about the sheltering of spies found in 2 Samuel 17:18-21. Ahimaaz and Jonathan are on their way to report to David when they are saved by a woman who shelters them in a cistern covered by grain.

6. Diametrically Opposed Texts: Rahab and Achan

Perhaps the Biblical text most powerfully invoked by the Rahab narrative is the tale that immediately follows in Joshua 7. This text, the story of Achan, is diametrically opposed to the Rahab narrative. We know from Joshua 2 and 6 that a *herem* prevents the Israelites from taking spoils. Rather, all people and property must be destroyed or dedicated to God. However, Achan of the tribe of Judah violates this ban, breaking faith with the covenant and stealing for personal gain that which belongs to God. As a result, Israel loses the battle at Ai. To restore the covenant and Israel's victory, Joshua must not only return the stolen property, but burn and stone Achan, his family, and his property. The narrative concludes, "They put them to the fire and stoned them. They raised a huge mound of stones over him, which is still there. Then the anger of the Lord subsided. That is why that place was named the Valley of Achor – as is still the case."[45]

Joshua 7 is the exact reverse of Joshua 2 and 6. In the Rahab narrative, the lowest of Canaanite society (a Canaanite who lives literally on the edge of the city) defies all odds and saves the Israelites, thereby enabling the conquering of a major city, and saving the lives of her entire family. In the Achan story, the elite of Israelite society (a man of

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[44] Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary,* 43.
[45] Joshua 8:25-26.

good lineage from the royal tribe of Judah) defies all odds and condemns Israelites, thereby thwarting the conquering of a major city, but condemning his entire family to death. Rahab's family and Achan's family essentially trade places. A lowly Canaanite clan is saved and an elite Israelite family is slaughtered.

Frank Spina notes that Joshua 2 and Joshua 7 bracket the accounts of the capture of Jericho and suggests that "their contrasting tales provide the framework for understanding the religious meaning of the conquest."[46] Spina further establishes a number of parallels between the tales which indicate that "these stories should be read together."[47] For instance, they are the only two tales in Joshua that involve spies, and the accounts of the destruction of Jericho and the destruction of Achan and his household use very similar language. Additionally, both narratives begin and end in parallel. At the opening of each passage, both sets of spies are sent out with almost identical sets of instructions. As the tales conclude, the phrase "To this day" is repeated. " 'To this day,' Rahab's family is part of Israel; 'to this day,' Achan's betrayal is memorialized with a heap of stones in the Valley of Trouble."[48]

Spina suggests that Rahab is actually 'the Israelite' and Achan is in reality 'the Canaanite' because she behaves like an Israelite (speaking faithfully and saving Israelite lives) and she and her family join Israel, while he behaves like a Canaanite (violating the covenant, stealing, and causing the death of innocents) and he and his family are killed like Canaanites. He writes:

> In a remarkable reversal, the quintessential Canaanite,
> whose very occupation epitomized Canaanitism from the

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[46] Spina, "Reversal of Fortune," 25.
[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*, 54.

> Israelite perspective, has become an Israelite. The scarlet rope *(tiqvah)* that once hung in her window as a sign of her hope *(tiqvah)* for new customers comes to represent her hope for salvation as part of Israel. . . . The repetition of Achan's genealogy in Joshua 7:18 only reinforces his role as representative of all Israelites. . . . In order for Israel to be decanaanized, Achan and his house (equivalent to Rahab and her house) must be eliminated from the community. . . . The passage is a chilling echo of the destruction of Canaanite Jericho, in which the Israelites destroyed 'all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys.' "[49]

In Spina's view, Rahab's story can only be understood in light of Achan's tale. Taken together, these narratives represent what Spina calls a "reversal of fortune." This reversal of fortune demonstrates that an individual's faith and action trump blood and ethnicity.

7. Rahab's Character

Rahab's character looms large over her story. She is at the center of the tale from the very beginning. Indeed, in Joshua 2, Rahab is the only character with a name.[50] The other participants are just bit players with roles – the king, the spies. Rahab controls all the action.

But what motivates Rahab's actions and what are her intentions? How is the reader to understand Rahab's character? For Spina, Rahab is a faithful, caring, moral, and spiritual woman. She is quick-thinking and wise and perceptive, and she uses her powers for good. She is the quintessential Israelite. Her occupation as a prostitute, like her ethnicity as a Canaanite, exists to demonstrate that readers should not "judge a book

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[49] *Ibid.*, 53.
[50] Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary,* 46.

by its cover." Surprisingly, it is the person one would least expect to be the pious hero who ultimately saves the day.

Nelson strongly disagrees. He characterizes Rahab as a trickster and suggests that she only seems to aid the spies, but actually traps them.[51] Nelson suggests that a roof is not "a particularly good hiding place" and argues that "Rahab has hidden the spies in a place of dubious safety and undignified discomfort. . . . Rahab has both saved them and trapped them, to her ultimate advantage. Their supposed "deliverance" by Rahab has left them vulnerable and helpless."[52] In Nelson's understanding, Rahab behaves exactly as can be expected from a Canaanite and a harlot. She is deceitful and opportunistic, manipulative and selfish, conniving and two-faced.

Phyllis Bird, a Bible professor specializing in gender and sexuality in the Bible, disagrees with Nelson's reading of the tale. According to Bird, the whole plot turns on the fact that Rahab's behavior is ***not*** what is expected. Bird believes that Rahab's occupation as a prostitute is as important as her ethnicity as a Canaanite, as both factors establish negative expectations of her character, and her occupation sets her up as an outcast in Canaanite society. Bird asserts that "The entire account depends upon Rahab's marginal status, in both Canaanite and Israelite societies," and on prostitutes' "reputation for lying and self-interest."[53] The narrative relies on the expectation that, as a harlot, Rabah will be "commonly viewed as a predator...an opportunist with no loyalty beyond

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[51] *Ibid.*, 42-43.
[52] *Ibid.*, 49.
[53] Phyllis A. Bird, "The Harlot As Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition In Three Old Testament Texts," *Narrative Research on the Hebrew Bible, Semeia* 46 (1989): 133.

herself, acknowledging no principle or charity in her actions."[54] Thus, "in her display of loyalty, courage, and altruism, she acts out of keeping with her assumed character as a harlot and thus reveals her true character as a person."[55]

Nelson's view is compelling and well-argued. He offers a very interesting and completely legitimate reading of the Biblical text. However, he is in the minority. It is the view of this author that Spina and Bird offer the more accurate reading of the narrative.[56] Rahab's tale is a story of a Canaanite turned Israelite, a sinner turned savior.

8. Crossing Boundaries

As such, this is a tale of crossing boundaries – boundaries of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social status, and theology. Rahab crosses the boundaries between Canaanites and Israelites, women and men, prostitutes and prophets, the despised and the revered, the faithful and the faithless. In the end, this boundary crossing is represented by Rahab physically joining the Israelite camp.

At first, Rahab's family is kept outside the Israelite camp, but ultimately the text informs the reader that, 'Until this very day,' Rahab lives 'in the midst of Israel,' *b'kerev Yisrael.*[57] But what does *b'kerev Yisrael* mean? *Kerev* comes from the root *k.r.b.* which can mean draw near, approach, be imminent, or bring closer. Is Rahab and her family drawn near to Israel, meaning that they are taken into Israel, becoming an intrical part of

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[54] *Ibid.*, 130.
[55] *Ibid.*, 131.
[56] It is quite possible that I, like all modern readers, including Nelson, Spina, Bird, and others are influenced by the last two thousand years of exegesis which will be laid out in the forthcoming sections. I admit the possibility that Nelson's view might be that of the original author, and that this narrative has been reread in light of centuries of Jewish and Christian revision.
[57] Joshua 6:25.

her? Or does it mean that they continue to approach Israel, living near Israel, next to Israel, in the same space, but somehow always separate, never fully becoming Israel? Many Biblical commentators believe that Rahab and her family remain as a perpetually separate community. For example, Nelson believes the "saga provides an etiology for the continued existence of a non-Israelite group, the "house of Rahab," in or near Jericho."[58] Nelson suggests that this group lives "as resident aliens under covenantal protection."[59] Bird agrees, suggesting that, as a prostitute (and a Canaanite), Rahab's "place remains in the shadows of Israelite society."[60]

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, a Bible scholar also known for her studies of Biblical women and gender in the Ancient Near East, disagrees with Nelson and Bird about Rahab's final place in Israelite society. In Frymer-Kensky's view, Rahab is taken into Israel and permanently merged with her.[61]

The difference between joining Israel and living as a group of non-Israelite resident aliens is significant. This is not merely a semantic debate. In one case, this is the story of a Canaanite prostitute becoming an Israelite. In the other, it is a story of Israel learning to live amongst non-Israelite neighbors. In either event, however, a Canaanite prostitute saves God's chosen people, thereby disproving the expectation that such a woman will lead the Israelites down an evil and destructive path.

In light of this, the reference to Shittim and Phineas's zealous killing of Zimri and Kozbi stands in sharp contrast to what occurs in this story. As Frymer-Kensky notes,

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[58] Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary,* 43.
[59] *Ibid.*, 44.
[60] Bird, "The Harlot As Heroine," 133.
[61] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Studies In Bible and Feminist Criticism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 217-218.

while to Phineas, "the sight of a foreign woman being brought into Israel is such a danger that she must be eradicated immediately," to the narrator of Joshua 2, Rahab can be brought into the Israelite camp.[62] Had Phineas been at Jericho, Rahab would not have been permitted to live. This narrative presents the exception that proves the rule, and highlights the flexibility of boundaries. Rahab - the harlot, the Canaanite, the sexual and spiritual threat to Israelite men - actually saves Israelite men, and is permitted to enter the Jewish people. She and her family remain on the outskirts of Israelite society to be sure, but she is present within Israelite boundaries nonetheless. Frymer-Kensky further suggests that Rahab's name, " 'the broad,' is emblematic of God's inclusion of the many and of the permeable boundaries of the people of Israel."[63]

Rahab "is, in essence, the quintessential Other."[64] Thus, Joshua 2 is a tale of how the Other becomes the insider.

9. Summary

In summary, the Biblical character Rahab is the 'good Canaanite' - the person who shouldn't exist but does. She is the character whom you expect to be evil (an idolatrous prostitute), but who turns out to be good. She not only saves the spies, she also plays a significant role in covenant. She demonstrates the covenantal theology that is at the core of the Book of Joshua and perhaps even the entire Deuteronomic history.[65]

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[62] *Ibid.*, 217.
[63] *Ibid.*, 218.
[64] Hawk, *Berit Olam: Joshua,* 47.
[65] Contemporary Biblical scholars point to similar language and theology in the Book of Deuteronomy and the Book of Joshua as evidence that they were both written by the same author. The 'Deuteronomist,' as this author is called, is known for a theological perspective that emphasizes monotheism and centers on the idea of the covenant between

Rahab demonstrates that people are not always whom they seem to be and that God does not always work as expected. Sometimes God's will is accomplished not by divine miracle or military hero, but by those you least expect – "the bit players in the drama" who surprise us all – an alien prostitute, a foreign midwife, a nomadic housewife, or a powerless widow.[66] Rahab is the quintessential "Other," the outsider who becomes an insider.

C. The Book of Ruth

1. The Narrative

Ruth 1

As the Book of Ruth begins, the setting of time and place is established. Due to famine, the family leaves Bethlehem, the heart of Israelite and Judahite territory, for Moab, an enemy nation. The first two verses give no indication that this is a book about women. We are introduced to a patriarchal family headed by a man, who has a wife and two sons. The first inclination that this is a book about women comes in verse three, when Elimelech is referred to as *"ish Naomi,"* the husband of Naomi. This is the only Biblical occurrence of a man being referred to as a woman's husband.

God and Israel, and highlights God's power and miracles as the source of Israel's salvation, as well as Israel's obligation to live by God's law.

[66] Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary*, 47.

As the story begins, the reader is informed that Elimelech dies and his sons, Machlon and Chilyon, take Moabite wives named Orpah and Ruth. They all live in Moab for about ten years. Then Machlon and Chilyon die, leaving Naomi as a childless widow.

Naomi sets out to return to Judah, at first accompanied by her two widowed daughters-in-law. Naomi instructs her daughters to:

> Turn back, each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me! May the Lord grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband!...Have I any more sons in my body who might be husbands for you!...Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons, should you wait for them to grow up? Should you on their account debar yourselves from marriage?[67]

In response Orpah kisses Naomi goodbye and returns home, but Ruth continues traveling with Naomi.

Naomi urges Ruth to depart as well, but Ruth replies:

> Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you.[68]

Naomi saw Ruth's determination and stopped trying to persuade her, and the two of them traveled on to Judah.

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[67] Ruth 1:8-13.
[68] Ruth 1:16-17.

Ruth 2

Chapter 2 begins with Ruth and Naomi's arrival in Bethlehem. The reader is introduced to the character of Boaz, a member of Elimelech's family. Since Ruth and Naomi are without financial support, Ruth wishes to glean for food and gleans in Boaz's field. Boaz enquires about her and is informed by his employees that she is a hardworking Moabitess who returned with Naomi. Boaz instructs her to glean only in his field and to stay close to the other women, and he offers her drink and instructs the men not to molest her. He acts in a hospitable and gentlemanly fashion. Ruth asks him, "Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?"[69] Boaz tells her that he has learned of the kindness she has shown Naomi and prays that God may reward her deeds. They share a meal together and Boaz further instructs his employees to leave extra sheaves for Ruth. Ruth brings home an *ephah* of barley. Naomi is pleasantly surprised and asks who took notice of her. Naomi is pleased to hear that it was Boaz and gives thanks to God. Naomi explains to Ruth that Boaz is a kinsman and instructs Ruth to continue gleaning from his field. Ruth does so for the remainder of the barley and wheat harvests.

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[69] Ruth 2:10.

Ruth 3

As the harvest draws to a close, chapter 3 begins. Naomi seeks a husband, "a home," for Ruth, that she "might be happy."[70] Naomi tells Ruth that Boaz will be winnowing barley that night and instructs her:

> So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down to the threshing floor tonight. But do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what you are to do.[71]

Ruth does as instructed and lays down and uncovers Boaz's feet. Boaz awakens startled in the middle of the night and discovers a woman lying at his feet. Boaz asks who she is and Ruth replies, "I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman."[72] Boaz is grateful that she has not preferred a younger man and he promises to see her redeemed. He explains that there is another kinsman who is a closer redeemer and he will speak with him in the morning. If the other man does not wish to redeem her, he will do so himself in the morning.

He asks her to stay for the night. She lies at his feet until dawn. She rose before she could be seen because Boaz thought, "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor."[73] Boaz sends Ruth back to Naomi with six measures of barley and they wait for the news.

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[70] Ruth 3:1.
[71] Ruth 3:3-4.
[72] Ruth 3:9.
[73] Ruth 3:14.

Ruth 4

Meanwhile, Boaz has gone to the city gate to speak with the other kinsman and the elders regarding redeeming Ruth. The other kinsman, called Peloni Almoni, desires to redeem Elimelech's land, which would serve his own economic interests, but he backs off when he learns that this requires marrying Ruth as well. Peloni Almoni does not wish to marry Ruth, perhaps because she is a Moabitess, and claims that doing so would damage his estate. Peloni Almoni removes his shoe as a sign of refusal of levirate duty, and Boaz declares before the elders that he is redeeming Elimelech's estate, aquiring the land and taking Ruth as a wife. All the people at the gate bless Ruth and ask God to make her fertile and make her "like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel," and to make her house "like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah."[74]

Boaz and Ruth marry and she conceives a son. Naomi takes the child and holds it to her bosom. The women of the city name the boy Obed, and declare, "A son is born to Naomi." This declaration is puzzling because it is Ruth who is the child's biological mother. Yet she is not present in this scene. Ruth does not appear to hold or name her child. She does not appear in the conclusion of her own book.

The book concludes with a genealogy starting with Tamar's son Perez, including Obed, and ending with King David. This establishes Obed, and thus Ruth and Boaz, as ancestors of King David.

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[74] Ruth 4:11-12.

2. Ruth's Conversion

"Wherever you go, I will go..." (Ruth 1:16-17) is amongst the most well-known and most-beloved Biblical passages. They are often referenced in contemporary culture.

Dr. David Weisberg, a Bible professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, believes that Ruth 1:16-17 is the center of the Book of Ruth. He suggests it is the most beautiful passage, and the clause on which the rest of the story hinges.[75]

Rabbinic commentators have argued that Ruth 1:16-17 is Ruth's statement of conversion. It is at this moment, they suggest, that Ruth becomes a Jew. Most Biblical commentators disagree. They do not believe that rabbinic conversion, as we now know it, exists in the Biblical context. The Anchor Bible claims:

> The focus in Ruth's words is upon human loyalty and self-renouncing fidelity. Almost buried in her pledge is "your people become my people; your God is now my God," with expressions of her attachment to Naomi on either side of it.[76]

The Anchor Bible does not declare the usage of God's name to be meaningless, but it does seriously call into question the rabbinic assumption. The Anchor Bible firmly suggests this passage, and the tale as a whole, is more about "human loyalty" than religious conversion. The Anchor Bible further argues that:

> What makes Ruth a true Israelite is that she, like others in the story who are generically Israelites, behaves like one....there is no "conversion" at all, but simply a living out of the way of Yahweh.[77]

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[75] These remarks were made during a lecture on the Book of Ruth given by Dr. Weisberg at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem on March 21, 2006.
[76] Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary,* Anchor Bible vol. 7 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), 80.
[77] *Ibid.*, 82.

Whether Ruth at any point experiences a religious epiphany or goes through a formal conversion process (nowhere stated in the Biblical text), it is clear that Ruth essentially becomes a member of the tribe of Judah and behaves as a good Israelite woman is expected to behave. She essentially, if not formally, becomes a Jew.

3. Sexual Innuendo

The third chapter of the Book of Ruth is rife with sexual innuendo. Ellen van Wolde, a professor of religious studies, provides a lengthy list of sexual terminology, saying:

> Many words used in the threshing floor scene have a strong sexual connotation: *bo* ('enter', 3.3,4,7,7,14), *yada* ('know', in 3.3,3,4,14), *shachav* ('lie', 3.3,4,4,4,7,7,8,13,14), *margelotav* ('place of the feet', 3.3,7,14), *galah* ('uncover', 3.3,4,7), *regel* ('feet' and 'genitals', 3.3,7,14), *kanaf* ('wing', 'garment', 3.3, 9, elsewhere often used in the context of a marriage ceremony), *armah* ('grain pile', 3.7, showing a strong resemblance with *arum,* 'naked').[78]

Van Wolde thoroughly notes the many sexually loaded terms in the threshing floor scene which create an atmosphere loaded with sexual tension. The reader is intended to feel the sexual energy and to wonder what will happen.

The most famous instance of this sexually charged innuendo is the use of the word *margelotav,* his feet, in Naomi's command to Ruth to uncover Boaz's feet. Many scholars have suggested that 'feet' is a euphemism for the sexual organs. The Anchor Bible provides a long list of other Biblical texts and translations, including the Samaritan,

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[78] Ellen van Wolde, "Intertextuality: Ruth In Dialogue With Tamar," in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies,* ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 445.

Septuagint, Vulgate, and Syriac texts, and other Biblical usages of the word *regel* which demonstrate that *regel* means penis or vulva.[79] The Anchor Bible further suggests that the ambiguity is intentional.[80] The Biblical author could have stated clearly what occurred on the threshing floor, but chose not to.[81]

Dr. Weisberg agrees that the ambiguity is intentional but does not believe that *regel* is intended to be a euphemism for the male sexual organ.[82] Dr. Weisberg believes *margelotav* means pulling up his robe, which would be provocative enough. She needn't actually touch Boaz's genitals. A suggestive gesture would serve its purpose.

In either case, Ruth's actions are highly erotic. The encounter takes place at night in an isolated spot and both Boaz and Ruth are lying down. She touches him and his clothing.

As if this is not provocative enough, Bible professor Jack Sasson notes that whatever Ruth did "was sufficiently physical to awake a man deep in slumber."[83] Clearly, she did something that got a strong reaction.

Finally, the narrator further tells the reader that Ruth lay at Boaz's feet until the morning. She stayed all night, and they literally slept together.

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[79] Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary,* 121.
[80] *Ibid.*
[81] *Ibid.*
[82] These remarks were made during a lecture on the Book of Ruth given by Dr. Weisberg at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem on March 21, 2006.
[83] Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 93.

4. Intertextuality

The Book of Ruth draws upon many prior Biblical texts. When a Biblical text mentions another Biblical text within it in order to convey a message, contemporary scholars call this intertextuality. The Book of Ruth contains many such cases. First, the Book of Ruth utilizes the law of levirate marriage as a plot device. The author presumes that the reader is familiar with this legal tradition. However, as it appears in the Book of Ruth, levirate marriage takes a slightly different form than in the Biblical law and the narrative of Judah and Tamar.[84] In these earlier texts, levirate marriage is only performed by a brother and does not appear to be connected to landownership. In the Book of Ruth, levirate marriage can be performed by more distant relatives and it is linked to redemption of the land.

The other prime example of intertextuality occurs at the end of the book in Ruth 4:11-12. Here, famous Biblical women from earlier narratives are mentioned by name. Leah and Rachel are evoked for "building up the house of Israel," an image of fertility and matriarchy. Tamar is mentioned by name in relationship to her son Perez. This reference draws attention to the shared royal lineage between Perez and Obed, both of whom are ancestors of King David.[85]

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[84] In the Pentetuach, only a brother can be a *levir,* but in the Book of Ruth, Boaz and Peloni Almoni are more distant relatives. Similarly, in the Pentetuach, an act of levirate marriage is not connected to land ownership, whereas the Book of Ruth states that the two are inseparable.

[85] The reference to Tamar may also be intended to draw the reader's attention to other similarities between Tamar and Ruth's stories. These will be discussed in detail in Part 2:D.

5. Ruth's Character

Ruth's character is marked by kindness and compassion. She is consistently noticed for her caring and devoted nature. Ruth shows courage, as well as devotion, by staying with Naomi and traveling to Judah. Ruth is diligent and dedicated to her endeavors. It is not Ruth who concocts the plan to marry Boaz or choreographs the scene on the threshing floor. In these instances, and throughout the book, Ruth is relying on Naomi's advice, instruction, and wisdom. None the less, Ruth is more than a follower. She leaves her mark on those she encounters.

6. Crossing Boundaries

Ruth crosses the ultimate boundary – the boundary between Moab and Judah. She doesn't just physically cross the border, she metaphysically crosses between the two worlds – leaving Moab behind and taking on Judahite characteristics and identity.

Nonetheless, Ruth does violate boundaries as much as she blurs them. She doesn't expressly violate sexual boundaries, but she certainly challenges and blurs them on the threshing floor – risking her own reputation and Boaz's reputation to seduce her desired husband. She blurs the boundaries between Moab and Judah by being a Moabite who behaves in a manner that would be expected of a Judahite.

Sasson notes that when Ruth, at the threshing floor, tells Boaz, "I am Ruth your *amah,"* the phrase "of Moab" is absent.[86] He claims that this proves that Ruth is no longer Moabite, but a member of Boaz's clan. From this point on, except for two uses for legal purposes, there will be no more mention of Ruth's place of origin. Ruth has

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[86] Ruth 3:9.

effectively ceased to be a Moabitess and become a Judahite. She has blurred the boundary and come out on the other side of it.

7. Summary

The Book of Ruth is a tale of women struggling to survive in a man's world. Ruth and Naomi are both left alone and penniless, abandoned by the patriarchal society that denies them any power or resources of their own. Ruth and Naomi both demonstrate great strength, courage, and diligence. Ruth is a woman of great compassion and devotion. They use Naomi's brains and Ruth's youthful good looks to survive the only way they know how – through marriage and the production of heirs. Ruth takes a great risk on the threshing floor, seducing Boaz, a risk that pays off and produces the desired marriage and son. Ultimately, the women do succeed, thus producing an inspiring story about women's struggles to survive in a man's world.

D. Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth: Three Women Intertwined

Having examined the Biblical narratives of these three women separately, it is useful to compare them. Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth have much in common, and reading their tales together can enlighten the reader as to the deeper meaning behind their stories. Toward this end, it is useful to explore themes these narratives and characters have in common.

1. Women's Struggle to Survive in a Man's World

Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are all women struggling to survive in a patriarchal world. Tamar and Ruth are childless widows. Without husbands or sons, they are destitute and torn between their own biological families and their husband's families. Neither Tamar nor Ruth has been properly provided for by either family. Tamar works on her own to achieve what is rightfully hers, the right to a child and an heir. Ruth works in concert with Naomi to gain a husband and a son, so that both Ruth and Naomi might be provided for.

Rahab, in contrast, is not a widow, nor does she appear to desire offspring. When we meet her she does not appear to be economically destitute (like Ruth) or trapped in a patriarchal household (like Tamar). Rahab, though despised as a harlot, to be sure, appears to be independent and economically self-sufficient; that is, until men arrive to threaten her right to live. Rahab simply wishes to not be killed by the enemy nation. While she is not threatened specifically because she is female, it is nonetheless males who wish to kill her. Her very survival is threatened by the male conquering enemy. Thus Rahab acts to ensure her physical survival in a dangerous political situation, whereas Ruth acts to ensure her survival in an economic system which has failed to provide for widows and Tamar fights to have a child which has been denied her by a patriarchal ruler.

Yet, what all three of these women have in common is their struggle to survive in a world dominated by men. They experience and fight against a world where their very ability to live is controlled by male economic, political, and military power.

2. Their Actions Uphold Patriarchal Values

Though Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth each struggles to survive in a patriarchal world, they are not the direct threat to patriarchal values that they might at first seem to be. Their actions ultimately uphold the values of their male-dominated society.

Bible scholar Eleanor Beach demonstrates that Tamar is not atypical in this regard. She writes that:

> Genesis 38 is one of several family stories in Genesis 12-50 to have attracted feminist study because of its depiction of women working to achieve patriarchal priorities, by means that run counter to patriarchal control.[87]

Beach further notes that Tamar "is approved for having supported patriarchal goals, even if her means were unusual."[88] Tamar's goal of having a child served the function of producing a male heir for her deceased husband. This purpose supports patriarchal goals and actually furthers patriarchal power. Tamar does not use her liaison with Judah to free herself from levirate marriage so she will be free to engage in promiscuous sex with any man she chooses, nor is her intent to free herself from her father's control. Rather, she produces male heirs and lives the rest of her life as a proper mother in Judah's clan.

The same can be said of Ruth. She too, ultimately serves patriarchal goals. She does not use her husband's death and the failure of a *levir* to come forth to free herself. She does not engage in promiscuous sexual behavior. She does not remain unmarried, nor does she challenge male property ownership. She marries a man and gives birth to his son.

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[87] Eleanor Ferris Beach, "An Iconographic Approach To Genesis 38," in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies,* ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 290.
[88] *Ibid.*, 292.

Rahab also ultimately refrains from threatening male domination and control. She does not deny the right of the victor to conquer the land and slaughter its inhabitants. She does not challenge the right of men to rule, in Canaan or Israel. She arranges not only for her own survival, but for the survival of her father and her father's entire family (as defined by the patriarchal definition of family).

Even as a prostitute, Rahab does not challenge patriarchy, but rather serves it (albeit in an atypical fashion). Phyllis Bird describes how Rahab and other ancient women serve the needs of Biblical patriarchy. She explains:

> Prostitution...is characteristic...of urban patriarchal society. It is a product and sign of the unequal distribution of status and power between the sexes in patriarchal societies...Female prostitution is an accommodation to the conflicting demands of men for exclusive control of their wives' sexuality and for sexual access to other women. The greater the inaccessibility of women in the society due to restrictions on the wife and the unmarried nubile women, the greater the need for an institutionally legitimized "other" woman. The harlot is that "other" woman, tolerated but stigmatized, desired but ostracized.[89]

It is true that Rahab, as a prostitute, was vilified and despised by patriarchal society. It is also true that, as a prostitute who appears to have worked for herself and owned her own home and business, she was an anomaly. She presumably had more independence than most women, and was not under the immediate, direct, daily, control of a husband or father. However, as Bird points out, Rahab, like all prostitutes, serves male needs. She provides men with the sexual fulfillment they desire. She stabilizes and sustains patriarchal values and controls by giving men a way to have sexual access to several

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[89] Bird, "The Harlot As Heroine," 121.

women, while maintaining sexual control of their own wives, and guaranteeing the legitimacy of their heirs.

3. Prostitution

Another thing that Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth have is common is a theme of prostitution. Rahab is a conventional prostitute. Tamar is not a conventional prostitute, but she engages in a transaction in which she appears to have sex for pay. Additionally, she is accused of prostitution *(z'nut),* and she is referred to as a *kedesha,* a cultic prostitute.[90] Ruth does not engage in any act that can be called prostitution in the conventional sense. However, she does appear to seduce Boaz for her own economic security. She receives food (a commodity of economic value) from him following the night's activities on the threshing floor. Additionally, Boaz expresses concern that it would be bad for it to be known that Ruth came to the threshing floor. This is likely a concern for Ruth's reputation, as well as his own. Should it become known that Ruth went to the threshing floor and spent the night with Boaz, she might be assumed to be a harlot. In all three cases, the concept of prostitution plays an important role in the narrative and in determining the women's actions.

4. Messianism

Another concept that plays an important role in all three narratives is messianism. Though none of these tales explicitly state that these women are the ancestresses of the

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[90] *Z'nut*, from the same root as *zonah,* is often translated as prostitution. Essentially, Tamar is accused of "playing the harlot." However, it is important to note that *z'nut* is likely a general category of sexual immorality which includes not only prostitution, but also adultery and general promiscuity.

messiah who will redeem Israel, it is implied in all three cases. The implications are strongest in the Book of Ruth. The genealogy that concludes the Book of Ruth demonstrates that Obed (and Perez) are ancestors of King David, from whom the messiah will come.

In the story of Tamar, there is no genealogy to demonstrate that Perez is a progenitor of the messiah. However, the Book of Ruth makes this relationship explicit. Based upon the symbolism of the color *shani* (scarlet), it is also possible that the scarlet thread tied around Zerah's hand is symbolic of salvation and redemption.

Rahab's tale does not mention her having any children. Thus, there is no explicit indication that Rahab is an ancestress of the messiah. Jewish tradition is not clear on this matter.[91] However, the theme of salvation and redemption is present throughout Joshua 2. Rahab is clearly saved from death. Additionally, the scarlet thread may indeed be an indication of salvation and messianism.[92]

5. Intertextuality

The Book of Ruth's treatment of messianism is one example of intertextuality, the phenomenon where a Biblical text makes use of another Biblical text. The Book of Ruth establishes a messianic future for Obed by drawing upon the story of Tamar. The Book of Ruth says, "May your house be as the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah,

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[91] The Bible does not state that Rahab married or had children, and thus does not imply that she gave birth to a royal or messianic figure. However, such implications are made in later Jewish tradition. See Part 2:D.

[92] Teman, "The Red String," http://www.afsnet.org/sections/jewish/Elly_Teman.doc.

because of the seed that Yahweh will grant you by this woman."[93] This statement draws the reader's attention to the many similarities between Ruth and Tamar.

One such similarity is that the tales of Ruth and Tamar "presuppose a similar social and legal background of levirate marriage and redemption, and are the only texts in the Hebrew Bible that refer to this topic, which is formulated as a law in Deut. 25:5-6."[94] In both narratives, levirate marriage is a key plot device, setting up the conflict in the tale. It determines the women's marital and sexual partners, and influences their strategies. In both narratives, there is a closer relative who should perform levirate marriage, who must refuse his obligations in order for the narrative to proceed as it does. Van Wolde notes a number of parallels in Onan's and Peloni Almoni's behavior. She writes:

> Onan does not reject sexual intercourse with Tamar, but turns down his duty to give offspring to his brother; Peloni Almoni does not reject redeeming the possessions of Elimelekh..., but rejects his duty 'to keep the name of the deceased person alive.' In this sense they act in the same way: they do not want to provide a name for the dead male relative...This intertextual relationship is confirmed by the use of the word *(shachat)*, 'to ruin,' 'destroy' or 'spill': Onan spills *(shachat)* [his seed] on the ground (Gen. 38:9), and Peloni Almoni does not want to ruin *(shachat)* his inheritance (Ruth 4:6).[95]

It is possible that the author of the Book of Ruth was intentional in creating these parallels. Regardless, the shared worldview of levirate marriage is significant.

In addition to a common basis in levirate marriage, Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth contain very similar seduction scenes. Ruth and Tamar act in a similar manner. As van Wolde states:

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[93] Ruth 4:12.
[94] Wolde, "Intertextuality," 434-435.
[95] *Ibid.*, 442-443.

> Their 'seduction' procedures concern elderly male relatives and involve aspects of clothing, washing and make-up. They go to a public place, the threshing floor and gate respectively, and are in attendance for the men to come. They make themselves attractive, but not immediately recognizable.[96]

Boaz and Judah offer similar responses to these events. They both act to keep the events a secret. Both men are concerned for appearances, and thus wish to prevent the events from becoming public knowledge.

Another important similarity between Tamar and Ruth is that both women are central to the middle of their narratives, but on the outskirts as their stories start and finish. Van Wolde points out that Tamar and Ruth are absent at the beginnings and the ends of their stories. They are absent at the beginning because the tales "are told from a Judahite perspective and not from a Moabite or Canaanite one."[97] In the middle of the tales, Tamar and Ruth assume leading roles, generating the primary action and moving the plot. However, both women "become absent again in the concluding scenes" of the narratives.[98] The last chapter of the Book of Ruth is told from Boaz's perspective. The speech comes from Boaz, the elders, and the women. Ruth does not say a word. Ruth is not mentioned in the baby's genealogy. She is not even referred to as the child's mother. Naomi receives this honor when the women declare, "A child has been born to Naomi." Ruth does not even name her child. Rather, the boy is named by the women of Bethlehem. Ruth, having achieved her goals of obtaining a husband and child, is completely absent from the concluding scene.

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[96] *Ibid.*, 436.
[97] *Ibid.*, 434; Van Wolde presumes that Tamar is a Canaanite woman. While the Biblical text does not specify Tamar's ethnic background, most contemporary Biblical scholars presume that she was Canaanite.
[98] *Ibid.*

Tamar is similarly removed from the birthing scene at the conclusion of Genesis 38.[99] Although it is Tamar who is giving birth, her name does not appear. She is simply referred to with the pronoun 'her.' The birth story is not told from Tamar's perspective, but from that of a midwife who determines who is the first born. Tamar, like Ruth, does not even name her own children, as would be the custom. Rather, an unnamed man names both her twins.[100]

Rahab is similarly silenced at the end of her narrative. While in Joshua 2, Rahab is active and vocal, in Joshua 6, Rahab is silent. Rahab is the main character of Joshua 2; indeed she is the only character with a name. However, in Joshua 6, Rahab is merely an object. She has no agency or personality of her own.

Generally, Rahab's story is not as closely linked as are Tamar's and Ruth's. However, the notable exception to this dissimilarity is the scarlet thread. Genesis 38 and Joshua 2 share the symbol of a scarlet thread that connotes redemption. It is possible, though not certain, that the mention of the scarlet thread in Joshua is intended to remind readers of the narrative of Judah and Tamar and the birth of Perez and Zerah.

The parallels between Tamar and Rahab are especially intriguing. Both are Canaanites who succeed in securing a place within "Israel" and mark their success with a crimson cord (Gen 38:28-30; Josh 2:18, 21).[101] Ruth, though not a Canaanite, also secures a place in Israelite society.

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[99] *Ibid.*

[100] An unnamed third person masculine singular names the children in verses 38:29 and 38:30.

[101] Hawk, *Berit Olam: Joshua,* 36.

In addition to securing places in Israelite society, Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth similarly serve as 'outsiders' who hold up a mirror to 'insiders.' Ironically, they are non-Israelites who teach Israelites about what it means to be Israelites. Van Wolde writes:

> As foreigners they are able to confront the insiders and to hold a mirror up to their faces. This is why it is not enough to read these stories along the gender line only. The narratives are about Ruth and Tamar transforming the male relatives Boaz and Judah, but also about the changes of the 'inside-people' or Judahites, Naomi included. Insideness and outsideness is, together with gender, an important feature of both narratives.[102]

This theme also applies to Rahab. Her actions demonstrate faith and courage, and stand in contrast to Achan, as an example for all Israel.

6. Crossing Boundaries

Crossing boundaries is perhaps the most powerful theme that Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth have in common. All three women cross ethnic and sexual boundaries. All three women cease to be Canaanites/Moabites and join the Jewish people. All three women violate sexual boundaries. All three women are the quintessential 'other,' the outsider who comes in. They each represent the outsider who turns out to be more of an insider than the insider. This is the powerful Biblical legacy of these three women.

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[102] Wolde, "Intertextuality," 451.

Part 2: Rabbinic Themes of Midrashic Transformation

A. Foreignness Is Dangerous

1. The Danger of Foreign Women

The exegesis of the tales of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth sounds a common theme – foreignness is dangerous. This theme begins in the Hellenistic period with the *Testament of Judah,* part of a larger work known as the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs,*[103] which declares "Canaanites are an evil people,"[104] and continues through the middle ages and into the early modern period.[105]

In the *Testament of Judah* and the *Book of Jubilees,* a Hellenistic work from approximately the mid-second century b.c.e., the tale of Judah and Tamar is rewritten to demonize Canaanites. Whereas the Biblical narrative merely mentions the Canaanite background of his wife and does not name her, *Jubilees* and the *Testament of Judah* give her not only a name, but a forceful personality.[106] They enlarge her character, and make her a major protagonist for the purpose of making her a villainess. She is portrayed as evil, aggressive, and manipulative. This is done for the purpose of demonizing non-Israelites generally, and Canaanites in particular. Within the context of the narrative, this is accomplished via portraying the evils of Judah's Canaanite wife in contrast to the virtuous non-Canaanite Tamar

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[103] Scholars disagree about the dating of these Testaments, but there is a consensus that they are early Hellenistic documents.
[104] *Testament of Judah* 11:1.
[105] Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (New York: Brill, 1997), 147.
[106] Judah's wife is named Bathshua in the *Testament of Judah* and Betasuel in the *Book of Jubilees.*

Jewish exegesis loudly declares that foreign women are sexually immoral. In the *Testament of Judah* and the *Book of Jubilees,* Judah's Canaanite wife seduces him with her feminine wiles and causes her sons to commit the grave sexual sins of anal intercourse and coitus interuptus.[107] The *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael,* a *tannaitic midrash* compiled in the Amoraic period, continues this theme in its characterization of Rahab, declaring:

> Rahab was ten years old when Israel went out from Egypt. And during all the forty years that Israel was in the wilderness, she practiced harlotry.[108]

This concept is repeated almost word for word by the Talmud and various medieval and modern commentators, including the famous eleventh century Bible commentator, Rashi, and *Meam Loez,* an eighteenth century midrashic compilation by Rabbi Jacob Kuli.[109] Rashi declares, "There was no prince or ruler who had not had sexual relations with Rahab, the harlot."[110] In this manner, the tradition paints Rahab as not merely a harlot but a whore whose whole life revolves around prostitution and who sleeps literally with anyone and everyone. Consequentially, the Gentile world is depicted as being so sexually depraved that it is led by lustful men who use even pre-pubescent girls to satisfy their sexual depravity.

Lest readers believe that such sexual depravity is only the practice of the prostitutes, the rabbis are careful to point out that promiscuous sexual behavior is

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[107] Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics*, 143-150; Betsy Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees* (Boston: Brill, 1999), 113-114.
[108] Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta DeAmalek, parashah* 5.
[109] b. *Zevahim* 116b; Rashi on Joshua 2:11; Yalkut Shimoni II, Joshua, *remez* 207; Meam Loez on Joshua 2:11.
[110] Rashi on Joshua 2:11.

practiced by most women. As *Ruth Rabbah,* a *midrash* compiled in the late Amoraic period states, "A pagan has no paternity anyhow" because Gentile women sleep with multiple partners.[111] *Ruth Rabbah* tells us that the very night that Orpah left Naomi's side, she had sex with a hundred uncircumcised men so that "the Gentile semen of a hundred men was mixed up in her."[112] According to one rabbi, even a dog joined the orgy.[113]

To the authors of *Ruth Rabbah,* foreign women are so loose that even Ruth, even post conversion, is lustful because of her foreign nature. Commenting on the verse, "And Ruth, the Moabitess, said, 'Besides, he said to me, "You shall keep close by my servants until they have finished all my harvest,' " the *midrash* states:

> Said R. Huna ben Levi, "She most certainly was a Moabite woman [in having desire for the young men]. For while Boaz had said to her, "but keep close to my maidens," she said to Naomi, "by my [male] servants."[114]

Even Ruth, the righteous proselyte, cannot completely overcome her inherently lustful pagan nature.

This female promiscuity is not limited to Canaanites and Moabites. The Talmud Yerushalmi, speaking of Samson and his marriage to a Philistine woman, informs us that Samson is warned not to marry a Philistine woman because they are promiscuous. He is told, "Just as their [the Philistines'] vineyards are sown with diverse species, so, too, their daughters are sown with different species."[115]

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[111] Ruth Rabbah 1:8.
[112] Ruth Rabbah 1:14.
[113] Ruth Rabbah 1:14.
[114] Ruth Rabbah 2:21.
[115] y. *Sotah* 1:8, 17d.

Such depictions of female Gentile promiscuity are not limited to the tales of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. Gail Corrington Streete, a feminist Bible scholar, analyzes the sexual dynamics of Judges 4, and points out that Yael, as a foreign woman, is expected to behave seductively and promiscuously, and to use her sexuality to harm males. Streete declares, "Surely behavior like this is what can be expected of foreign women, especially when their husbands are absent; after all, look at Potiphar's wife, look at Delilah!"[116]

2. Sexual Danger = Spiritual Danger

As demonstrated by the characters of women like Judah's wife, Potiphar's wife, and Delilah, the sexual promiscuity of Gentile women is a threat to Israelite men. However, when we read Jewish exegetical literature more closely, we discover that sexual promiscuity is only the beginning of the danger that Gentile women pose to Israelite men. With sexual danger comes other dangers.

A lack of self-control in the sexual arena is indicative of a total lack of self-control in every area. This lack of self-control makes Gentiles cruel and violent. *Meam Loez* cites a *midrash* that:

> the monarchy came through women of pagan origins so that the kings would have an element of cruelty from the mother's side, in addition to compassion from the father's side. This equipped them with the ability to exact revenge from Israel's enemies while treating Israel with compassion.[117]

Israelites are compassionate and restrained. Gentiles are cruel and violent and out of control.

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[116] Gail Corrington Streete, *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 60.
[117] Meam Loez on Ruth 4:18.

Such a lack of self-control and incapacity for compassion leads to overall immorality. This immorality includes spiritual degradation. In this ancient worldview, idolatry is the spiritual practice of those who indulge their passions for lust and cruelty and idolatry. Gentile women lure Israelite men with their feminine wiles and seduce them to idolatrous practices. Michael Satlow, a scholar of rabbinic views of sexuality, writes:

> Gentiles are not Jews because, above all, they do not have self control, do not set limits for their own behavior. Other Gentile activities, such as idolatry, are seen as manifestations of this state. . . . For Palestinians especially, sexual excess was linked to decadence, femininity, and Gentiles. . . .
> Another more complex association that appears in Palestinian and Babylonian sources is a linkage between Gentiles, promiscuity, loss of self-control, and idolatry. . . . By ascribing laxity to Gentiles, the rabbis are warning their audience: loss of self-control will begin a slide that will lead to promiscuity and idolatry, just like the Gentiles![118]

This link between sexual promiscuity and spiritual downfall is made by the rabbis in their exegesis of 1 Kings 11, a tale where King Solomon's marriages to foreign women cause him to stray from the one true God. *Sifre Deuteronomy,* a *tannaitic midrash* compiled in the third through fifth centuries, states:

> King Solomon loved many foreign women in addition to Pharoah's daughter..., [1 Kings 11:1]. Since "Pharoah's daughter" is included [in "many foreign women"], why is she singled out? It is to teach that he loved her more than all the others and she caused him to sin more than all the others.[119]

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[118] Michael Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 320, 325.
[119] Sifre on Deuteronomy, *pisqa* 52.

The sin in question is idolatry.[120] The Talmud similarly associates Solomon's sexual intercourse with Gentiles with his idolatry.[121] This rabbinic association between sexual intercourse with pagan women and idolatry is also demonstrated by rabbinic traditions regarding the prophet Balaam and the sexual encounter between Zimri and Kozbi in the incident of Ba'al Peor in Numbers 25.[122]

The Talmud also suggests that those endangered by the influence of Gentile women are not only the men who have sexual intercourse with them, but also the children born of sexual encounters between Jewish men and Gentile women. In the course of a legal discourse about Leviticus 18:21, the Babylonian Talmud declares, "The School of R. Yishmael taught, the verse [Lev. 18:21] refers to a Jewish man who has intercourse with a Samaritan woman and bears from her a son (for idolatry)."[123] In a parallel text, the Palestinian Talmud remarks, "R. Yishmael taught, this is one who marries an Aramaean woman and bears from her children, [who] establishes enemies of God."[124] "Enemies of God" is clearly strong rhetoric. The influence of a dangerous Gentile woman is so strong that it will turn men and their offspring to idolatry, and render their children "enemies of God."

3. Gentiles Are Godless

While most rabbinic texts don't use language quite as strong as "enemies of God," the message is clear – Gentiles are Godless. As such, Gentiles are incapable of having a

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[120] Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 105.
[121] y. *Sanhedrin* 2:6, 70c; b. *Yevamot* 76a-b; b. *Shabbat* 57b.
[122] Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 105.
[123] b. *Megillah* 25a.
[124] y. *Megillah* 4:10, 75c.

relationship with God. Gentiles are unable to even recognize God's existence, and therefore they cannot serve God in any fashion.

This certainty regarding the Godless nature of Gentiles is problematic for the rabbis because the Bible contains Gentile characters who do, in fact, recognize God and take actions that serve God. These characters include Jethro, Rahab, and Yael, all three of whom through their actions change the future of the Jewish people: Jethro advices Moses; Rahab saves the spies; and Yael kills Israel's enemy Sisera. The rabbis must ask themselves: How could Moses be wisely guided by a Godless Gentile like Jethro? How could the spies be rescued by an evil temptress who speaks of her knowledge of God, as does Rahab? How could Israel be delivered from death at the hand of her enemies by a Godless seductress like Yael?

In all three cases, the rabbis reconcile this conflict by envisioning the Gentiles in question as righteous proselytes. For the rabbis, it is so unthinkable that a Canaanite would speak of knowing God and God's miraculous deeds that the rabbis presume that surely Rahab's speech in Joshua 2:9-13 must have been an act of conversion. As early as the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael,* Jethro and Rahab are portrayed as the paradigm of the ideal converts.[125] Slightly later, in *Ruth Rabbah* and other *midrashim,* Yael is also portrayed as a proselyte.[126]

This theme of converting Gentile characters is eventually expanded beyond just those who speak of God and do direct service to God, as Jethro, Rahab, and Yael do. Ultimately, the rabbis seem to convert every positive Biblical character who wasn't born Israelite. Ruth, Zipporah, Asenath (Joseph's wife), Hagar, Shifrah, Puah, Yael, and

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[125] Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta DeAmalek, parashah* 5.
[126] Ruth Rabbah 1:1.

Pharoah's daughter are all converted according to rabbinic tradition.[127] The Talmud implies conversion on behalf of Pharoah's daughter just prior to her discovery and adoption of Moses. Unable to fathom that Moses would be raised by a Godless Gentile, the rabbis inform us that Pharoah's daughter went to the river "to cleanse herself of her father's idolatry."[128] With this statement, the rabbis transform a bathing trip into a *mikveh* for religious conversion, and put Moses entirely under the control of proper Jewish women, as opposed to Godless Gentiles who might lead him astray.

This concern that Moses and the Jewish people should only be saved by proper Jews leads the rabbis to turn their attention to Shifra and Puah, the midwives who defy Pharoah and risk their lives to save Jewish male offspring. The Bible doesn't state the religious or ethnic background of the midwives, but the lack of any positive statement of Israelite identity leads to the assumption that these women might have been Egyptians themselves. But Gentiles, in the rabbinic construction, are cruel and violent and immoral. To save Jewish lives requires a great act of morality, faith and compassion. Rejecting the possibility that such motivations are possible from an Egyptian, two distinct Jewish traditions develop regarding Shifra and Puah. The first view, expressed in *Exodus Rabbah*, a twelfth-century *midrash,* states that Shifra and Puah were really Miriam and Yocheved.[129] The second tradition, cited in *Meam Loez,* lists Shifra and Puah as "counted among the nine pious women who joined the Jewish people."[130] In this account, Shifra and Puah were Egyptian women who found God, and, as a result, ceased to be Gentiles.

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[127] Meam Loez to Joshua 2:23.
[128] b. *Sotah* 12b.
[129] Exodus Rabbah 1:13.
[130] Meam Loez on Joshua 2:23.

In this fashion, the rabbis clearly communicate that converts are not Gentiles. For the rabbis, proselytes, by recognizing the one true God, make a complete break with the person they were before. They cease to be Godless Gentiles and they become righteous Jews. As a result, marriage to a convert is fine, but marriage to a Gentile, as noted above, leads to tragedy.

4. Intermarriage is a Terrible Sin

As stated by the Talmud, "One who marries an Aramaean woman and bears from her children, establishes enemies of God."[131] As Palestinian tradition makes clear, the sexual and spiritual danger posed by sexual intercourse with foreign women extends not only to sexual affairs and offspring, but to marriage as well. The Jewish tradition, from the Hellenistic period to modern times, presents a strong condemnation of intermarriage. Marriage to Gentiles is not only a terrible mistake, but also a terrible sin.

This anti-intermarriage theme begins in the *Testament of Judah* and the *Book of Jubilees,* in the Hellenistic period. In both of these texts, Judah is criticized less for the incident with Tamar than for marrying a Canaanite woman.[132] The leniency accorded Judah's act of incest and adultery is in stark contrast to the harsh critique of Judah's choice to marry a Canaanite woman. Judah's wife, Betasuel, is portrayed as controlling, manipulative, and cruel. She is responsible for the deaths of Er and Onan, and the

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[131] y. *Megillah* 4:10, 75c.
[132] Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*,156; in reference to *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, Judah*, Chapters 10-12, and the *Book of Jubilees* 41.

withholding of Shelah from Tamar. Consequentially, "all the disasters that come upon the family are a consequence of Judah's own marriage to a Canaanitess."[133]

The Book of Jubilees' strong stance against intermarriage is not limited to its retelling of Genesis 38. The Book of Jubilees rewrites the narrative of the rape of Dinah to transform it into "a prooftext for a ban on intermarriage."[134] In the Book of Jubilees' retelling, nobody in Jacob's family develops any kind of relationship with the people of the land. Dina never socializes with them. Jacob does not have business relationships with them. Most importantly, Jacob and his sons do not negotiate with Hamor and Shechem about the possibility of Dina marrying Shechem, and Jacob's sons do not bring back Canaanite women and children as spoils after destroying the city of Shechem, in complete opposition to the Biblical text of Genesis 34.[135]

Yet, the author of the Book of Jubilees is still not content that his point has been made. Just in case the reader fails to understand the subtext, he explicitly states the prohibition. The Dina narrative is immediately followed by an exegetical discourse about intermarriage.

The Book of Jubilees is so viscerally opposed to intermarriage that when it can't portray the evils intermarriage causes, it ignores its existence. Unwilling to portray Moses as a man who married a Gentile, and unable or unwilling to portray Zipporah as a proselyte, Jubilees solves this problem by completely ignoring Zipporah's existence, and the existence of her father, Jethro, as well.[136]

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[133] Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees*, 114.
[134] *Ibid.*, 129.
[135] *Ibid.*, 128.
[136] *Ibid.*, 124-5. It is impossible to be sure why the author of Jubilees chose not to portray Zipporah as a proselyte. It is possible that the concept of conversion did not yet exist, as

Betsy Halpern-Amaru, a scholar of Hellenistic Jewish literature, analyzes the portrayal of Gentile women and intermarriage in the *Book of Jubilees* and remarks:

> The moral quality of each generation is ultimately determined by the females who bear and wive its leaders. In maternity women carry the crucial genetic key to male character. In marriage they are either corrective partners who nurture the family and the future or corruptive companions who mate their consorts and sons to immorality and destruction. . . . Those of the ancients who . . . marry "of them whomever they chose" (7:21) parent corruption. Either by nature or nurture, the progeny or their unions are prone to idolatry, violence and injustice.[137]

As Halpern-Amaru demonstrates, the Book of Jubilees' view of intermarriage goes beyond dislike and discouragement. The author of the Book of Jubilees warns his reader that marrying a Gentile woman will bring disaster on oneself, one's children, and, consequentially, on the entire Jewish people.

The Book of Jubilees' diatribe against intermarriage is not unique. Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities, a late Hellenistic text dated to the first century b.c.e., constructs a similar discourse. Halpern-Amaru suggests that Pseudo-Philo uses Tamar as "the first of a number of women around whom Pseudo-Philo develops a diatribe against union with Gentiles."[138] In Pseudo-Philo's telling of Genesis 38, Tamar contemplates her options and declares, "It is better for me to die for having intercourse with my father-in-

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historians debate the timing of the development of conversion in Judaism. It is also possible that the concept of conversion existed, but Jews feared reprisals resulting from conversions, or that conversion was perceived negatively in some way. Other explanations might also be possible.

[137] *Ibid.*, 147.

[138] Betsy Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Women in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities," *'Women Like This' New Perspectives On Jewish Women In the Greco-Roman World,* ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 92.

law than to have intercourse with Gentiles."[139] With this speech, Pseudo-Philo suggests that intermarriage is so heinous that it is a worse sin than incest. Sexual relations between father-in-law and daughter-in-law is prohibited by Torah under penalty of death for both parties.[140] To suggest that sexual intercourse with Gentiles, which is not forbidden at all by Torah law, is a greater sin than a death penalty crime is quite a strong statement. Additionally, Tamar seems to suppose that she will be killed for her actions. Tamar prefers to die among Jews rather than engage in social and sexual intercourse with Gentiles.

In the rabbinic period, the rabbis make similarly strong statements against intermarriage. *Genesis Rabbah,* a Palestinian *midrash* compiled at the end of the Aramaic period, uses a verse from Malachi to claim that Judah's act of marrying a Canaanite woman has profaned God. The *midrash* declares:

> "Judah has done treacherously [and an abomination is committed in Israel . . . for Judah has profaned the holiness of the Lord which he loves and has married the daughter of a strange god]" (Mal. 2:11).
> [God] said to [Judah], "You have denied, Judah, you have lied, Judah."
> "...and an abomination is committed in Israel...for Judah has profaned," which is to say, Judah has become unconsecrated.
> "...the holiness of the Lord which he loves and has married the daughter of a strange god."[141]

This same *midrash* is repeated with great frequency throughout rabbinic literature.[142]

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[139] Biblical Antiquities 9:5-6.
[140] Leviticus 18:5; Leviticus 20:12.
[141] Genesis Rabbah 85:1.
[142] Tanhuma Buber, *Vayeshev* 9.9; Yalkut Shimoni I, *remez* 247; Midrash HaGadol to Genesis 38:1.

Like Jubilees before, *Genesis Rabbah* is not content to limit its critique of intermarriage to the narrative of Judah and Tamar. In parallel to Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities, *Genesis Rabbah* shares a presumption that incest is preferable to marriage to Gentiles. Rav Huna suggests that Dina married her brother, Simon, one of the two sons of Jacob who rescue Dina and avenge her rape by massacring the city of Shechem.[143] In reference to a genealogy that declares Shimon to be the father of "Saul, son of a Canaanite woman" (Genesis 46:10), the *midrash* suggests that the Canaanite woman in question is Dina and Saul is the offspring of her rape who is adopted by Shimon. The *midrash* suggests that Dina is called a Canaanite woman because she has engaged in sexual intercourse with a Canaanite.[144]

This short *midrash* conveys a great deal of information about the rabbis attitude towards Canaanites and those Israelites who marry Canaanites. It informs the reader that the rabbis are so repulsed by the suggestion that Shimon married a Canaanite women that they prefer a scenario where Jacob's children engage in an incestuous relationship prohibited by Torah.[145]

This *midrash* also suggests that the rabbis believe that Gentiles have some sort of ethnic essence that is conveyed through sexual intercourse. This essence results in Israelite women becoming like Canaanites. However, the reverse is not true in that a Canaanite woman who has sex with an Israelite man does not become an Israelite. The

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[143] Genesis Rabbah 80:11.
[144] *Ibid.*
[145] The Bible states that Shimon is Leah's son (Genesis 35:23) and the *midrash* suggests that Dina is Leah's daughter. They are not half-siblings, which might be slightly more socially acceptable. An alternative tradition reflected in b. *Sanhedrin* 54a states that twin sisters were born to each of Jacob's sons and the boys married their half-sisters, a practice which the Talmud suggests was permitted by *Bnai Noach* and is therefore acceptable before the giving of the Torah.

image suggested is one of spiritual contagion. Sexual contact with Canaanites is suggested to spread "Canaaniteness."

An alternative *midrash* is told about the story of the rape of Dina. In *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer,* an eighth century *midrash*, Dina's rape results in the birth of a daughter who is Aseneth.[146] After her birth, Aseneth is taken from her mother by the angel Michael and given to Potiphar, as an adopted daughter. Michael gives Aseneth an amulet inscribed "Holy to the Lord" so that Joseph will later recognize her as his wife of proper Jewish descent.

This *midrash* uses the narrative of the rape of Dina to serve another purpose – to explain Joseph's marriage to an Egyptian woman. It suggests that ensuring a good Jewish wife for Joseph is of such importance that God goes to great lengths to provide Joseph a proper spouse.

An alternative tradition proposes that Aseneth was a righteous proselyte. *Meam Loez* lists Aseneth "among the nine pious women who joined the Jewish people."[147] What these two contradictory interpretations share is a concern with providing Joseph a proper Jewish wife, rejecting the Biblical implication that Joseph married an Egyptian woman.

Though some of the strongest condemnations of intermarriage occur in relationship to the tales of Tamar, Dina, and Joseph, the rabbinic opposition to intermarriage is not limited to these tales. For example, rabbinic exegesis of the Book of Ruth is also quite concerned about intermarriage. The *Targum* to the Book of Ruth, an Aramaic translation written in the fifth through seventh centuries, posits that Machlon

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[146] Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 37.
[147] Meam Loez on Joshua 2:23.

and Chilyon were killed by God for marrying "with strange nations."[148] This is a common *midrash* throughout rabbinic literature. It is cited by many sources including *Ruth Rabbah* and *Meam Loez*.[149] Ibn Ezra, the medieval Biblical commentator, disagrees and insists that Machlon and Chilyon would not have married Ruth and Orpah without prior conversion.[150] This view is held by a minority of sources, including *Zohar Hadash*, a text of Jewish mysticism. Many Jewish exegetes have tried to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory views. One scholar suggests that Machlon and Chilyon and Naomi and Elimelech took opposing views on the halakhic question of whether a conversion in the absence of a *beit din* is valid.[151] Another points out that conversion for the sake of marriage is invalid, although accepted after the fact, and suggests that Scripture therefore regarded them as not converted.[152] It takes quite a strong polemic against intermarriage, and quite a bit of rabbinic angst, to suggest that two men were killed by God for marrying Gentile women, but the same two men would never commit such a terrible sin as to marry women who were not first properly converted.

This tendency to reconcile conflicting ideas led the rabbis to tackle another problem – a rabbinically created prohibition against marriage with Gentiles in the

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[148] Targum to Ruth 1:5.
[149] Ruth Rabbah 1:4; Meam Loez on Ruth 1:4.
[150] Ibn Ezra on Ruth 1:4.
[151] The rabbis themselves debated this point.
[152] *The Books of Esther, Song of Songs, Ruth: A New English Translation of the Text, Rashi and a Commentary Digest*, trans. A. J. Rosenberg (New York: Judaica Press, 1992), 7-8.

absence of a Biblical prohibition.[153] The rabbis of the Talmud rectified this by applying the Deuteronomic prohibition against intermarriage with Canaan to all Gentiles.[154]

Having gone to quite a lot of trouble to make their case, there could be no doubt regarding the rabbinic opposition to intermarriage. However, one important factor was still missing – a strong punishment. After all, what is a prohibition without a punishment to back it up. The tradition that Machlon and Chilyon were killed by God for marrying Moabite women suggests that the Hellenistic writer of the *Book of Jubilees* and the early rabbis of *Ruth Rabbah* and the *Targum* shared the assumption that the punishment for intermarriage was death. Some texts, however, are not satisfied with leaving such a matter as an assumption.

In an effort to spell out a more specific and more explicit punishment for intermarriage, the writer of Jubilees attaches to the narrative of Dina a legal discourse based on Leviticus 20:3, the prohibition against offering one's seed to Molech, and Malachi 2:11, quoted above in *Genesis Rabbah*.[155] The stated punishment in the Jubilees passage is that the offender's sacrifices will not be answered, but there appears to be an implication that offenders will be punished with death.

The Talmud suggests that Jewish men who have sexual relationships with Gentile women can expect to be abandoned by their people and sent to hell. Tractate *Eruvim* states:

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[153] The Torah only bans marriage with the seven nations of Canaan (Deuteronomy 7:3). There is no Biblical prohibition against intermarriage per se.
[154] b. *Kiddushin* 68b; b. *Avodah Zarah* 36b.
[155] The Book of Jubilees 30; It is possible, and perhaps likely, that the Jubilees exegesis using Malachi 2:11 to oppose intermarriage is the source of the *midrash* in Genesis Rabbah using the same Malachi text to forbid intermarriage.

> At that hour they [wicked Jews] warrant Gehenna, and Abraham, our father, comes and brings them up and receives them, except for a Jew who has had intercourse with a Gentile woman, because his foreskin is drawn up and he [Abraham] does not recognize him [as a Jew].[156]

Though this *sugya* speaks of sexual relations generally, as opposed to marriage specifically, men who marry Gentile women are undoubtedly amongst those whose "foreskin is drawn up" and will consequently suffer in hell. This *sugya* could not be clearer in stating that sex with a Gentile woman separates a Jewish man from the Jewish people and puts him beyond the pale. Not only will such men suffer in hell, but they will be the only Jews who *so* suffer, having been abandoned while the rest of Israel is rescued on the merit of their forefather.

Satlow analyzes this *sugya* and other rabbinic texts, including those passages regarding Solomon and Zimri and concludes that:

> Jewish men who have intercourse with Gentile women are threatened with instant death if caught in the act; flagellation if the act was discovered after the fact; and personal divine punishment if they escaped detection.[157]

Some of the passages in Rabbinic Literature deal specifically with intermarriage. Other passages do not mention marriage but address only sexual intercourse. Satlow notes important distinctions in this regard, but emphasis aside, the message is clear – stay far, *far* away from foreign women, and whatever you do, do *not* marry them.[158]

It is important to note that it is foreign women, and not foreign men, who are singled out for such opprobrium. As Halpern-Amaru said, "The moral quality of each

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[156] b. *Eruvim* 19a.
[157] Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 118.
[158] Such distinctions will be addressed in Part 3 of this thesis.

generation is ultimately determined by the females who bear and wive its leaders."[159] Her statement is true not only in reference to the *Book of Jubilees,* but to the rabbinic exegesis as well. The vast majority of rabbinic references to sexual relations with Gentiles and marriage with Gentiles deal specifically with Israelite men and Gentile women. As contemporary scholars have demonstrated, very few rabbinic texts address the issue of sexual relations between Jewish women and Gentile men.[160] Those that do address the issue fall into one of two categories.

One set of texts establish the communal identity of the children of such liaisons. They establish that the child is a Jew and debate whether such a child is a *mamzer.*[161]

Another set of texts addresses the liaisons of Biblical characters who are known to have engaged in such sexual relations. In the rabbinic *midrash,* Dina's rape is proof of the evil that befalls good Jewish girls who venture into the Gentile world. In some *midrashim* mentioned above, Dina ultimately marries an Israelite male or otherwise rejoins the Jewish people. The more famous liaison between a Jewish woman and a Gentile man is that of Queen Esther and King Ahashverosh. Some sources portray Esther as engaging in the liaison only to save her people, thus neutralizing some of the negativity.[162] In the Talmud, angels cause the king to sexually desire Esther, and Abaye declares that Esther "was really soil" which was merely passively "tilled" and therefore she deserves no condemnation.[163]

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[159] Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees,*147.
[160] Satlow, *Tasting the Dish,* 319.
[161] m. *Kiddushin* 3:12; m. *Yevamot* 7:5; *Sifra Emor* 5:4; y. *Kiddushin* 3:14, 64c-d; b. *Yevamot* 44b-45a.
[162] Greek additions to Esther; cited in Satlow, *Tasting the Dish,* 108.
[163] b. *Megillah* 15b; b. *Sanhedrin* 74b.

While sex and marriage between Israelite females and Gentile males is never condoned, the rabbis reserve their strongest condemnation for sex and marriage between Israelite males and Gentile females. Nowhere is it suggested that Jewish women who marry Gentiles will be killed or punished in Hell, nor is it ever suggested that their offspring are idolaters or enemies of God. Satlow compares these texts noting that:

> Not once do the rabbis engage in apologetic rhetoric for sex between Jews and Gentiles. In discussions of Jewish men, they in fact tend to exaggerate the sin. They treat Esther's liaison as inconsequential.[164]

The rabbis' treatment of male and female intermarriage is definitively unequal.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Hellenistic and rabbinic worldviews are clear about their views of "the other." Foreignness is dangerous, and foreign females are especially threatening. Gentiles represent a sexual, spiritual and social danger to ones family, one's community, and even one's own life. The female embodies this danger through her ability to seduce males into idolatry, adultery, and other immoral and ungodly behaviors. An Israelite (especially a male) who fails to take proper precautions against this threat will face the most severe consequences.

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[164] Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 108.

B. Beauty, Modesty, and Piety

A survey of the *midrashim* regarding Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth reveals an association between the concepts of beauty, modesty, and piety. All three of these qualities are portrayed as interconnected, and all three women are portrayed as possessing all three of these qualities. It is also worth noting that this triangle of virtue exists generally in rabbinic thought, aside from the understandings of any particular Biblical characters. For example, Satlow notes that, "sanctioned sexual intercourse done modestly in a proper state of mind, produces beautiful children."[165] The implication is that pious people engage in modest sexual intercourse which results in beautiful children. This further reinforces the notion that beauty, modesty, and piety are linked in the rabbinic worldview. Further investigation into the rabbinic understanding of these qualities will assist in providing a deeper comprehension of how the rabbis portray Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, and why.

1. Beautiful Biblical Women

Though the Biblical text never commented about the physical appearances of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, the rabbis make an effort to clearly establish the physical attractiveness of all three women.[166] In the Talmud, the rabbis suggest that Er "spilt his seed" to avoid impregnating Tamar "that she might not conceive and thus lose some of

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[165] *Ibid.*, 318.

[166] The rabbis' interest in portraying women as beautiful is not unique to these three women. b. *Megillah* 15a also stresses the beauty of Sarah, Abigail, Esther, Vashti, Yael, and Michal.

her beauty."[167] Elsewhere in the Talmud, Rahab's beauty is described in even stronger terms. She is listed as one of "four women of exceptional beauty," and it is noted that the mere mention of her name drove men to lust and caused them to have seminal emissions.[168]

The suggestion that any male who saw her was instantly sexually aroused is also made in regards to Ruth. *Ruth Rabbah* remarks on the usage of the word *mik'reha* in Ruth 2:3, and notes that the same consonants with different vowels means "nocturnal emission." Based on this verse, Rabbi Yohanan says, "whoever saw her was sexually aroused."[169]

In similar fashion, rabbinic literature often repeats the refrain that Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth were beautiful and their appearance inspired male lust. Having established the rabbinic interest in the beauty of these three women, it is helpful to explore how the rabbis understood beauty, and how they regarded beauty in relation to other virtues, specifically modesty and piety.

2. Female Beauty is Dangerous to Males

The rabbis, like the Hellenists before them, viewed female beauty as dangerous to males. As discussed previously in the section "Foreignness Is Dangerous," Jewish literature during the Hellenistic period which portrays foreign women as a danger suggests that such women utilize their beauty to negatively influence men and society. In

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[167] b. *Yevamot* 34b.
[168] b. *Megillahh* 15a; b. *Taanit* 5b.
[169] Ruth Rabbah 2:3.

the *Book of Jubilees,* Tamar's beauty appears to be the cause of Judah's downfall.[170] In the *Testament of Judah,* "Tamar's seductive beauty" entraps Judah.[171] Yet, the ultimate blame is placed on Judah's Canaanite wife, and her beauty. In his own monologue, when Judah reflects on his life, he "admits that he knew the Canaanites were an evil people, but laments that youth, feminine beauty, and wine nevertheless caused him to sin."[172]

However, the dangerous effects of female beauty are not limited to Gentiles. Israelite women too can cause men to sin. For example, Sarah's beauty entices Pharoah to unknowingly sin with her, and Batsheva's beauty causes David to intentionally behave in an adulterous and murderous fashion.[173] The Talmud informs readers that Abigail and Michal, like Rahab and Yael, inspired men to lust.[174]

This assumption that feminine beauty endangers men by causing them to lust is also operative in the rabbinic portrayal of Ruth. *Ruth Rabbah's* assertion that "whoever saw her was aroused" is echoed throughout rabbinic literature. *Meam Loez* asserts:

> that it was because Boaz's reapers were righteous that God arranged for Ruth to come to his field; so beautiful was she that anyone of lesser virtue came to sinful thought at the sight of her.

In other words, only the most virtuous men are able to withstand the moral challenges of female beauty.

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[170] Esther Terry Blachman, "The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation" (PhD diss., Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 2003), 145.
[171] Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics*, 153.
[172] *Ibid.*, 149.
[173] Genesis 12:10-20; 2 Samuel 11:1-27.
[174] b. *Megillah* 15a; Abigail and Michal are Israelites; Rahab is a Canaanite; Yael is married to a Kenite, a group associated with Canaanites.

Female beauty is a dangerous and destabilizing force when used in a way that usurps the interests of males and male-dominated society. For example, in the narrative of David and Batsheva, Batsheva's beauty and her careless immodesty in bathing naked on the roof causes David to be so overcome by lust that he violates Batsheva's husbands' rights and interests, and impregnates his wife. Then, in order to obtain Batsheva for himself, David has her husband killed so that he can marry the widow and cover his tracks. In this tale, female beauty clearly serves to usurp male prerogatives, specifically those of Batsheva's husband, whose sexual property is taken from him, along with his life.

In the rabbinic patriarchal mindset, it is male prerogative and societal stability that are of the utmost importance. Therefore, female sexuality is disturbing and destructive only when it is not for the benefit of males. Streete analyzes this phenomenon and notes:

> In the case of Judith, Jael, and Ruth, their seductive behavior is practiced to preserve Israel (Judith, Jael) or to reconstitute an Israelite family line through marriage to an Israelite (Ruth). In none of these cases does female sexual behavior threaten to destabilize the community ruled by male interests, but in fact it is subordinated to those interests. . . . Female sexual desire is portrayed as disturbing and destructive to the community when it is perceived to aim at no benefit to husband or household, and the community must rid itself of such a threatening force to retain its proper identity and to confirm its boundaries.[175]

The sexual behavior of Tamar and Ruth, on the other hand, does benefit husband and household and ultimately serves to reinforce community norms, especially the norm of levirate marriage and the patriarchal goal of providing male heirs.[176] Neither Tamar nor

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[175] Streete, *The Strange Woman*, 15-17.

[176] The same cannot be said for Rahab who, as a common prostitute, is seen by the rabbis as dangerous and threatening – the kind of beautiful woman who uses her beauty for evil

Ruth "makes use of the levir's unwillingness to perform his duty in order to seek her own sexual freedom."[177] Rather, both women are entirely focused on "securing the continuity of their husband's line by any means."[178] They do not make use of their own sexual freedom, but rather subordinate that freedom for the good of their husband's families. That is why they are righteous.[179] Ultimately, the ends justify the means. Patriarchal ends are always proper, and it is patriarchal ends that Tamar and Ruth seek. Thus, because Tamar and Ruth seek righteous (read patriarchal) ends, their characters must be seen in a righteous light. They do not fall in the category of women who use their beauty for evil, but rather they are women whose beauty is put to virtuous uses. In this way, their beauty reinforces their ultimate virtue and serves male interests.

3. A Woman's Beauty Makes Her Modesty a Stronger Virtue

Due to the fact that female beauty is viewed as dangerous to males, it becomes necessary to establish the virtue of beautiful women who are seen as positive characters. For this purpose, modesty is attributed to these women. Leila Bronner, a feminist scholar, notes that "both beauty and modesty are qualities the sages often attribute to female characters whose stories they embroider."[180] Tamar and Ruth are prime examples of this embroidering. Esther, Yael, and the matriarchs also receive such treatment. The

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and threatens male and societal interests. As a result, Rahab the prostitute is not portrayed as virtuous and modest. Rather, Rahab is redeemed by becoming the paradigm of repentance. Only after Rahab recognizes the sovereignty of God and repents for her sins can she be redeemed. At this point, she is no longer a prostitute, but is transformed into a proper woman. See Part 2C, "Conversion As Domestication."

[177] Streete, *The Strange Woman*, 41.

[178] *Ibid.*

[179] *Ibid.*

[180] Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*,150.

exception that proves this rule is Rahab. Given that Rahab is a prostitute, the rabbis seem to decide that the question of modesty is better left alone, as any discussion of Rahab's modesty would only highlight her career as a prostitute.[181]

Just as a woman's modesty serves to make her beauty safe, a woman's beauty serves to make her modesty a stronger virtue. If the woman in question was ugly she wouldn't need to be so careful to guard her attractiveness to men. Beautiful women could potentially use their beauty to influence men for evil, but the virtuous women choose not to. Unattractive women are unable to make such a moral choice. Therefore, the more beautiful a woman is the valuable and admirable her modesty.

Highlighting a woman's modesty is particularly important because modesty is a major attribute of "good" women. Proper women are modest and not sexually adventurous. Therefore, any woman whom the rabbis wish to portray as virtuous must be shown in a modest light. In the case of Tamar, the rabbis accomplish this goal via a *midrash* on Genesis 38:14, which says that Tamar "covered herself with a veil." The plain language of the verse states that Tamar veiled herself at *Petach Einaim* in order to appear as a harlot and hide her identity from Judah. The rabbis of *Genesis Rabbah* reread this verse to say that Judah saw Tamar's face but he failed to recognize her because he did not know what she looked like since she always veiled herself in his presence.[182] This idea serves not only to explain how Judah failed to identify Tamar, but also to stress Tamar's modesty. The Talmudic formulation of this idea states, "Because [Tamar] had always covered her face in her father-in-law's [Judah's] house out of modesty, and [Judah] did not even know what she looked like, she merited having kings and prophets

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[181] *Ibid.*
[182] Genesis Rabbah 85:8.

among her descendents."[183] The rabbis value modesty so highly that they claim that Tamar's modesty was the reason she merited being an ancestress of the messiah. This idea is oft repeated throughout the cannon of Jewish exegesis.[184] In this fashion, the rabbis took a verse that portrayed Tamar as a prostitute, the exemplar of immodesty par excellence, and turned it into a verse that demonstrates Tamar's modesty.

Modesty is a virtue for all women and all female Biblical characters. However, the rabbis are especially concerned to portray Ruth as an exemplar. As an ancestress of King David and the messiah, and the major character of an entire Biblical book, Ruth is a popular and powerful female Biblical personality. However, the Biblical text of the Book of Ruth strongly implies that Ruth seduces Boaz on the threshing floor. Such a suggestion is unthinkable to the rabbis, and therefore they expend a great deal of energy demonstrating Ruth's modesty. *Ruth Rabbah* says:

> Since he saw her as such a proper woman, whose deeds were so proper, he began to ask about her.
> [Why so?] "All the other women bend down to gather gleanings, but this one sits down and gathers.
> All the other women hitch up their skirts. She keeps hers down.
> All the other women make jokes with the reapers. She is modest.[185]

Similar statements are made in the Talmud, by Rashi, and elsewhere throughout rabbinic literature.[186] For example, Rashi writes, "she would glean the standing ears while standing and the lying ones while sitting, in order to avoid bending over."[187]

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[183] b. *Megillah* 10b.
[184] Targum Neofiti on Genesis 38:15; Tanhuma Buber, *Vayeshev,* 9:17; b. *Sotah* 10b; b. *Megillah* 10b; Rashi on Genesis 38:26; Ramban on Genesis 38:15; Yalkut Shimoni I, *remez* 111; Ein Yaakov, *Masekhet Megillah;* Meam Loez on Genesis 38:15.
[185] Ruth Rabbah 2:5.
[186] b. *Shabbat* 113b; Rashi on Ruth 2:5; Ein Yaakov, *Masekhet Shabbat.*

In addition to Ruth's efforts to guard her body from male gazes, the rabbis also portray Ruth as careful to guard her modest reputation. The Talmud notes that Naomi instructs Ruth to dress in a pleasing fashion and then go to the threshing floor.[188] Ruth, however, reverses the instructions because she is concerned for her reputation, that people might see her dressed in such a fashion out by herself at night and think her a harlot. Therefore, she goes to the threshing floor dressed in her regular clothes and then changes her clothes later. This idea becomes a common trope that is cited by Rashi and other commentators.[189]

Finally, the rabbis must address the behavior of Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor. Whereas the Biblical text leaves open the possibility that the two engaged in sexual intercourse, or otherwise improper sexual behavior, the rabbis reject any such assertion. Starting with *Ruth Rabbah* and continuing consistently throughout all of rabbinic literature, the rabbis repeat the refrain that 'nothing wrong happened on the threshing floor.' The rabbis even interpret Ruth's dialogue to make it sound chaste. *Ruth Rabbah* responds to Ruth's remark to Boaz, "I am Ruth, your maidservant; spread your skirt over your maidservant," by comparing it to the story of Potiphar's wife which says, "She caught him by his garment, saying, lie with me."[190] In contrast, Ruth's remark is portrayed as modest and appropriate.[191] In this fashion, the *midrash* takes a statement which suggests unchaste behavior on Ruth's behalf and transforms it into what Jacob

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[187] Rashi on Ruth 2:5.
[188] b. *Shabbat* 113b.
[189] Rashi on Ruth 3:6; Ein Yaakov, *Masekhet Shabbat*; Meam Loez on Ruth 3:6.
[190] Genesis 39:12.
[191] Ruth Rabbah 3:9.

Neusner, the famous rabbinic scholar and historian, calls "a chaste and loving dialogue."[192]

Finally, to avoid any possibility that the reader might posit a sexual encounter, *Ruth Rabbah* declares:

> "So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another."
> Said Rabbi Berekhiah, "The phrase, 'before one could recognize another' is written with an extra *vav*. This teaches that she remained there for six hours, the numerical value of that letter."
> "...and he said, 'Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.'
> To whom did he make that statement?
> Said Rabbi Meir, "To the steward of his household he made that statement."
> Rabbi Hunia and Rabbi Jeremiah in the name of Rabbi Samuel ben Rabbi Isaac:
> "That entire night Boaz lay stretched out prostrate, saying, 'Lord of the ages, it is perfectly obvious to you that I never laid a hand on her.
> May it be your will that it not be known that the woman has come to the threshing floor, so that the Name of Heaven not be profaned through me."[193]

Regarding this passage, Neusner remarks that "the thrust of [this] exegesis obviously is to avoid the notion that the couple had sexual relations."[194] The rabbis do this by creating Boaz's pious prayer, as well as creating the presence of a third party. The steward serves a dual purpose as both a chaperone to ensure that the couple will not engage in sexual relations as well as a witness to testify to the couple's chastity. In this fashion, *Ruth Rabbah* establishes no doubt as to the modesty and sexual morality of Ruth and Boaz.

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[192] Jacob Neusner, *Ruth Rabbah*, 153.
[193] Ruth Rabbah 3:14.
[194] Neusner, *Ruth Rabbah*, 167.

This trend continues throughout the *midrashim* and well into the modern period with the commentary of the Malbim. The Malbim continually shows the utmost concern for Ruth's virtue. Towards this end, he not only paraphrases earlier *midrashim,* but also adds some interpretations of his own. For example, in reference to Naomi's statement that "he will tell you what you shall do," Malbim adds,"whether you should speak to the closer relative or whether he will do so."[195] In this fashion, the Malbim adds his own voice to two millennia of exegesis concerned with maintaining Ruth and Boaz's reputations.

4. Modesty is a Sign of Piety, Especially for Jewish Women

Ruth's modesty serves not only to positively reinforce Ruth's character, but to establish her Jewish identity. Given the previously established associations between Gentile women and sexual immorality, it goes without saying that modesty is a Jewish virtue. It takes self-control and godly intentions for a woman to control herself in such a fashion. Because there is such a stark contrast between the sexual behavior of Jewish women and Gentile women, modesty on the part of women becomes a particularly important way that Jewish women establish their credentials as proper, pious women. As a result, the rabbis take a particular interest in establishing female modesty, much more than male modesty, and the rabbis see female modesty as evidence of a woman's overall piety.

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[195] Malbim on Ruth 3:4.

This linkage between modesty and piety is evident as early as *Genesis Rabbah.*[196] However, it is not limited to the early *midrashim,* but rather occurs throughout rabbinic literature. Most of the rabbinic texts cited above for demonstrating female modesty contain other indicators of piety as well, or otherwise link female modesty with feminine piety. For example, the *Ruth Rabbah* passage about how Ruth gleaned ends:

> All the other women bend down to gather gleanings, but this one sits down and gathers.
> All the other women hitch up their skirts. She keeps hers down.
> All the other women make jokes with the reapers. She is modest.
> All the other women gather from between the sheaves. She gathers only from grain that has already been left behind.[197]

This line suggests that while the other women are ignorant and careless in regards to the laws of gleanings, Ruth is wise and diligent regarding the *halacha,* ensuring that she does not pick up any sheaves that are not lawful gleanings. Similarly, Rashi writes:

> Now was it Boaz's habit to inquire about the women? But rather, he saw her modest and wise behavior. Two ears she would glean but three she would not glean; and she would glean the standing ears while standing and the lying ones while sitting, in order to avoid bending over.[198]

In this passage, Rashi links modesty and wisdom. Modest behavior is going to great lengths to avoid bending over; wise behavior is knowledge and diligence regarding the laws of gleanings. For Rashi, modesty, religious knowledge and diligence in observing *mitzvot* are important aspects of personal piety.

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[196] Blachman, "The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation," 199.
[197] Ruth Rabbah 2:5.
[198] Rashi on Ruth 2:5.

In the rabbinic viewpoint, knowledge of Torah law, like modesty, is a sign of piety. However, for a woman, modesty is more important and more stressed. For a man, the reverse is true.

In the case of male Biblical characters, modesty is emphasized only occasionally. For example, Joseph's modesty and sexual chastity in the face of temptation from Potiphar's wife is stressed.[199] However, Joseph is the exception that proves the rule. On the whole, the rabbis do not address this quality in regards to male Biblical characters. There are no famous tales of Moses' sexual modesty when he encounters Jethro's daughters at the well or *midrashim* about young Abraham admonishing his idolatrous relatives for their lust.

In comparison, male Biblical characters are regularly praised for studying Torah. For example, Isaac and Jacob both spend many year's studying Torah at Shem and Ever's yeshiva.[200] It is even taught that when Jacob was in the womb, when his mother would pass by a yeshiva, Jacob would kick with excitement and the desire to study.

This focus on men studying Torah occurs in the characterization of Boaz. In *Ruth Rabbah,* Boaz is portrayed as studying Torah that evening on the threshing floor. The *midrash* says:

> Another explanation of the phrase, "And when Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry," for he had eaten various sorts of sweets after the meal, since they make the tongue used to Torah.
> Another explanation of the phrase, "And when Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry," for he had

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[199] The rabbis also note that Joseph was very physically beautiful.
[200] Genesis Rabbah 56:11, 63:10; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Genesis 22:19; Rashi on Genesis 25:27.

> occupied himself with teachings of the Torah: "The Torah of your mouth is good to me." (Psalms 119:72)[201]

In this fashion, the rabbis transform a verse that suggests that Boaz was drunk into a verse that demonstrates Boaz's passion for Torah study. In rabbinic thought, to study Torah at midnight is praiseworthy and sure to make a man pious, wise, and strong in his ability to resist the *yetzer hara.*

Note that Ruth is portrayed as knowing and observing Torah laws, but she is not shown in the act of traditional Torah study. Boaz, on the other hand, is shown to pray and to be studying Torah which the rabbis believed to be a way to ward off the evil inclination. For this reason, studying is not only a sign of general piety and wisdom but also a way for males to guard against female immodesty and seduction. When the rabbis wish to portray both Ruth and Boaz in the best possible light, regarding sexual ethics, as well as their overall personae and virtues, they choose to emphasize sexual modesty on the part of the female, and Torah study (leading to sexual chastity) and prayer on the part of the male. This provides an intriguing glimpse into the rabbinic construction of piety.

In is important to note, however, that prayer is not a strictly male domain. In *Genesis Rabbah* and *Targum Neofiti,* an expansive Aramaic translation of the Pentetuach recorded in the Aramaic period, Tamar is shown praying at *Petach Eynaim.*[202] *Petach Eynaim* is the same location as the veiling. In the rabbinic imagination, Tamar goes to *Petach Eynaim* with the purest of intentions, hoping to serve God and fulfill her purpose. She veils herself modestly and prays to God that all might go in accordance with God's

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[201] Ruth Rabbah 3:7
[202] Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 233.

will.[203] This *midrash,* like those cited above, links modesty and piety on behalf of the Jewish female.

5. Piety is Linked to Trust in God, Courage, and a Willingness to Die

Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are all women who trust in God, act courageously, and show a willingness to risk their own lives. In the case of Tamar, Philo writes that Tamar "out of profound darkness, was able to see a slight beam of truth, she then, at the risk of her life, exerted all her energies to arrive at piety, caring little for life if she could not live virtuously."[204] *Genesis Rabbah* establishes a similar connection between piety, courage, and a willingness to die by comparing Tamar to her descendants Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who face martyrdom in the Book of Daniel.[205] Just as Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah face death in a fiery furnace, the rabbinic Tamar also faces death in a fiery furnace. In the *midrash,* Tamar is willing to let herself be burned by Judah rather than publicly embarrass Judah by declaring him the father of her child. Rashi, paraphrasing the *Talmud,* declares in regards to Tamar that, "It is preferable for a person that he throw himself into a fiery furnace, but let him not make his friend's face pale in public."[206] This concept becomes pervasive throughout rabbinic literature.[207] The *Meam Loez* elaborates:

> To Judah she sent the following secret message, "If you will, identify the owner of the seal, wrap, and staff. He is the one who made me pregnant. This is a secret between

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[203] *Ibid.*
[204] Philo, *On the Virtues.*
[205] Genesis Rabbah 99:8; Daniel 3.
[206] b. *Sotah* 10b; b. *Berachot* 43b; Rashi on 38:25; Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 108.
[207] Midrash HaGadol on Genesis 38:25; Ein Yaakov, *Masekhet Sotah*; Yalkut Shimoni I, *remez* 131.

> us. Even if it means that I will be burned, I will not reveal it and embarrass you. I trust in God that He will make you recognize the truth, and I will thus be saved from this horrible death."[208]

This formulation emphasizes not only Tamar's diligence in observing the law against public embarrassment, but her faith in God. Tamar trusts in God and places her life in God's hands. Using Tamar's character, the rabbis link piety, courage, trust in God, and a willingness to die.

A similar linkage is presented in the case of Rahab, as *Meam Loez* paraphrases a number of *midrashim* to portray Rahab as a woman willing to risk her life to join the Jewish people.[209] *Meam Loez* suggests that Rahab has been desiring to convert to Judaism for some time, at great risk to her personal safety, and she has been patiently and courageously trusting in God for many years. When the spies arrive, Rahab not only becomes a righteous proselyte, but risks her own life to save the spies and trusts in God that she, the spies, and the entire Jewish people will, in fact, be saved.

In the Bible and the rabbinic imagination, Ruth, too, risks her own well-being and shows great courage as she leaves her family and country behind (never able to return again), follows a poor widow to a foreign land, and risks her reputation and marriageable status to go to the threshing floor to acquire Boaz as her husband. Ruth may never be in imminent danger of being killed by human beings, like Tamar and Rahab, but she certainly risks her welfare and survival. In *Meam Loez's* reading of *Ruth Rabbah,* Ruth declares her willingness to die for God by accepting the Torah and its death penalty

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[208] Meam Loez on Genesis 38:25.
[209] Meam Loez on Joshua 2:23.

prescriptions for which she might be liable.[210] Finally, in the rabbinic view, Ruth demonstrates her strong faith in God by following Naomi to Judah and declaring "your people shall be my people and your God my God."[211]

6. Female Passivity is (Sometimes) a Value

In each portrayal of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, the Jewish exegetes portray these women in a manner which demonstrates their piety in keeping with contemporary cultural values. In some cases, contemporary cultural values may be at odds with the Biblical text.

In the Biblical tale, Tamar is shown to be assertive and decisive. She takes positive and effective action to obtain her goals. However, in some cultural contexts, particularly under Hellenistic influence, female passivity is considered a virtue. This forces commentators to rewrite Tamar's character to portray her in a more passive role. In the *Testament of Judah* and the *Book of Jubilees,* Tamar's character is rewritten to make her look more passive.[212] She is reconfigured to make her look, as Halpern-Amaru asserts, "not so unabashedly assertive" as in the Bible.[213] Tamar's portrayal in Jewish Hellenistic literature is a prime example of this phenomenon.[214]

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[210] Meam Loez on Ruth 1:17; Ruth Rabbah 1:17.
[211] Ruth Rabbah 1:16; Rashi on Ruth 1:16.
[212] Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 127.
[213] Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees*, 115.
[214] Philo speaks of Tamar as a passive figure in both *On the Virtues* and *On the Unchangeableness of God.* Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* values female passivity and this is reflected in its portrayal of Tamar. Halpern-Amaru suggests that Pseudo-Philo portrays Tamar as "not a live character" (Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Women in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities," 92). Josephus does not mention the narrative of Judah and Tamar in his known writings.

This phenomenon is not clearly evident in the characterizations of Rahab and Ruth because Rahab and Ruth do not receive as much attention from Hellenistic sources. Neither the Book of Jubilees nor the Testaments of the Patriarchs address Rahab or Ruth. Rahab and Ruth are included in the works of Josephus, however, emphasizing the passivity theme does not serve Josephus' purpose or coordinate with his method.[215] Despite these facts, Tamar is not the only character rendered passive by Hellenistic Jewish literature. For example, Biblical Antiquities portrays Yael "as hesitant and in constant need of reassurance."[216] Pseudo-Philo's Yael is shy and passive and nervous and in need of instruction and assistance. This is in contrast to the *midrashim* and the Talmud which portray Yael as actively seductive.[217]

7. Female Virginity is (Sometimes) a Value

Just as Hellenistic culture considers female passivity a virtue, it also places a high moral premium on female virginity. In Hellenistic society, and some other cultures, virginity is associated with modesty and is the opposite of female sexuality which is inherently unvirtuous.

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[215] Josephus serves his agenda by ignoring troubling passages whenever possible and begrudgingly minimizing those sexually charged texts he is forced to address. Consequently, Josephus completely skips over the story of Judah and Tamar, and tells the story of Ruth in a fashion that completely glances over the scene on the threshing floor. In the case of Rahab, Josephus ignores Rahab's prostitution and transforms her into a respectable innkeeper, thereby guarding Rahab's reputation as well as those of the two spies.

[216] Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Women in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities," 102.

[217] b. *Megillah* 15a; b. *Yevamot* 103a; b. *Nazir* 23b.

This trope of female virginity first appears in the Testament of Judah, which portrays Tamar at Petach Eynaim as a virgin.[218] For the authors of the *Testament of Judah,* Tamar's virginity, which is the result of the sexual immorality of her husbands, serves as a contrast to the whorish character of Judah's wife and sons, and assures her innocence and naiveté by guaranteeing her pure motives in her actions to seduce Judah. A similar attitude appears in the *Book of Jubilees.*[219]

Genesis Rabbah shares many of the same assumptions.[220] The *midrash* states that Er "was wicked in the sight of the Lord" because he would "plough on the roof," a reference to anal sex. The Talmud utilizes this presumption that Tamar was still a virgin because her husbands did not engage in vaginal intercourse with her, and elaborates on the tradition, stating:

> Surely Tamar conceived from a first contact! The other answered him: Tamar exercised friction with her finger; for Rabbi Isaac said: All the women of the house of Rabbi who exercise friction are designated Tamar because Tamar exercised friction with her finger. But were there not Er and Onan? Er and Onan indulged in unnatural intercourse.[221]

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[218] Blachman, "The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation," 124.
[219] Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees*, 113-115.
[220] Genesis Rabbah contains a number of motifs that appear earlier in Hellenistic Jewish exegesis. For example, the idea that Dina marries Job is seen in the Testament of Job 1:6 and Genesis Rabbah 80:4. Similarly, the view that Sarah is Haran's daughter is stated by the Book of Jubilees 12:9-11 and implied in Biblical Antiquities 23:4, and represented in rabbinic literature (b. *Megillah* 14a, b. *Sanhedrin* 69b, Genesis Rabbah 38:14). According to Albeck, Genesis Rabbah includes quotes from the Wisdom of Ben Sira, as well as traditions that are mentioned in Josephus and Philo. (Albeck, Chanoch. "Introduction." in *Midrash Bereshit Rabba.* Ed. J. Theodor and Albeck. Berlin: Defus Tsevi Hirsch Ittskavski, 1903-36; reprint Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965, vol. 3).
[221] b. *Yevamot* 34b. The rabbis believed that it was impossible for a woman to get pregnant during a sexual act that broke the hymen. Therefore, by suggesting that Tamar broke her own hymen in advance of the intercourse, the rabbis can maintain Tamar's virginity while still explaining how she was impregnated during that one sexual act. The

With this *sugya,* the rabbis establish Tamar's virginity, as well as her pure intentions, thus portraying Tamar as modest and innocent.

Bereishit Rabbati, an eleventh century midrashic anthology, adds a new twist to this tradition. *Bereishit Rabbati* portrays Tamar as a bride, stating:

> "And he thought that she was a prostitute."[222] Our Rabbis of blessed memory said: At the time that Judah went out of Kezib to go to Timnah, when he was on his way he ate and drank and got drunk. And Tamar, since she knew about him, went and put on bridal clothing and she stood at Petach Enaim. And since he looked upward and saw Tamar, the wine confused him and he thought in his heart that she was a *kedesha* sitting for the purpose of prostitution.[223]

In this fashion, *Bereishit Rabbati* not only blames the entire affair on Judah, but also implies that Tamar's intent was to marry Judah in accordance with the laws of levirate marriage. The result is that Tamar "appears guiltless," having dressed "as a bride, not a calculating temptress or a prostitute."[224] Later in *Bereishit Rabbati,* she does not ask for a fee, but only a pledge. In this fashion, rabbinic literature utilizes the idea of Tamar's virginity to emphasize her modesty, virtue, and pious intentions.

Philo, a Greco-Jewish philosopher from the first century in Alexandria, similarly uses the trope of Tamar's virginity to establish her virtue. However, Philo offers a unique approach based on his contrasting understanding of virtue and virginity. Philo writes:

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act of breaking her own hymen also demonstrates that Tamar's goal was solely to conceive children, in keeping with the laws of levirate marriage and her own destiny to bear "kings and prophets."

[222] Genesis 38:15.

[223] Bereishit Rabbati 38:15.

[224] Blachman, "The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation," 282.

> "And she is a widow;" not meaning by that, as we generally use the word, a woman when she is bereft of her husband, but that she is so, from being free from those passions which corrupt and destroy the soul, as Tamar is represented by Moses. For she also being a widow, was commanded to sit down in the house of the father, the only Saviour; on whose account, having forsaken for ever the company and society of men, she is at a distance from and widowhood of all human pleasures, and receives a divine seed; and being filled with the seeds of virtue, she conceives, and is in travail of virtuous actions.[225]

In this passage, Philo portrays Tamar as an allegorized virgin, a woman who has surpassed her female nature to achieve sexual and spiritual purity. As such, she is worthy of divine conception and innocent of any sexual sin or desire. Judith Romney Wegner, a feminist scholar of Greco-Roman Jewish literature, suggests that Philo uses virginity as a way to make women desexualized and therefore virtuous. She writes:

> Philo's exegetical enterprise sometimes forces him to account for the excellence of certain women whose virtue is recorded in Scripture, and this poses a problem inherent in the very term *virtue,* whose basic meaning is "manliness" in both Latin and Greek. Virtue, by definition, is any praiseworthy quality exhibited by a man.[226]

As Wegner notes, the very idea of a virtuous woman is, to Philo, anomalous. Therefore, Philo must find a way to reconcile his own view of women as lusty, physical, unvirtuous beings with the Torah's praise of female virtue. In the case of Tamar, Philo does this by making women "virgins" in the spiritual sense. In Philo's view, virginity takes away the bodily, lusty female qualities and allows a woman to be rational and manly.

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[225] Philo, *On the Unchangeableness of God.*

[226] Judith Romney Wegner, "Philo's Portrayal of Women – Hebraic or Hellenic?," *'Women Like This' New Perspectives On Jewish Women In the Greco-Roman World,* ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 54-55.

Philo uses a similar approach with Sarah. Philo offers a remarkable interpretation of Genesis 18:11, "The way of women had ceased for Sarah." Philo explains that "the female sex is irrational and akin to bestial passions, fear, sorrow . . . and indescribable diseases" which cause great unhappiness." He then explains to his readers that these periods of unhappiness were the "ways of women" which Sarah had ceased to have. Sarah had learned to suppress her feminine thoughts and emotions and had thus become like a man, "full of law" and no longer controlled by irrational "passions."[227]

In this passage, the cessation of Sarah's menses functions similarly to Tamar's widowhood, an allegorical means for Philo to solve the anomaly of the virtuous woman by transforming the woman in question into a spiritual man. Blackman notes this phenomenon and remarks:

> Philo's Biblical women are divided according to two typos: women and virgins. The virgin is associated with freedom from lust and other passions. . . . virginity is contrasted with womanhood and is not part of it. For Philo virginity is asexual and corresponds to maleness. Additionally, virginity is a state that can not only be lost but also regained. . . . Philo sees both the Israelite mother Sarah and Tamar as allegorized virgins.[228]

These remarks do an excellent job in summarizing Philo's view and usage of female virginity, and its relationship to modesty and virtue. In this unique fashion, Philo, like the rabbis discussed above, uses the concept of virginity, albeit allegorical virginity, to establish a woman's virtue.

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[227] *Ibid.*, 55; Philo, *Questions and Solutions in Genesis.*
[228] Blachman, "The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation," 160.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the worldview of the Jewish exegetes, Hellenistic and rabbinic alike, a woman's beauty is both evidence for and cause of either her virtue or her immorality. In the case of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, their beauty only aids in establishing their modesty and piety. Because a woman's beauty is dangerous to males, her beauty actually strengthens her modesty and virtue. Thus, female modesty is a sign of piety. The modesty and piety of Jewish women stand in stark contrast to the immodesty, immorality, danger, and idolatry of Gentile females. Thus piety is linked not only to monotheism, but to trust in God, which is in turn expressed through courage and a willingness to sacrifice one's life for God's service. This linkage between beauty, modesty, and piety is based on ancient values. In cultures where passivity and/or virginity are seen as important components of a woman's modesty and piety, the exegetes add passivity and/or virginity to the list of virtues attributed to Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth.

C. Conversion As Domestication

Having established that female modesty is a sign of piety, and that sexual morality is a defining distinction between Jewish and Gentile women, it is now possible to investigate how these ideas influence the notion of conversion. For the rabbis, conversion is a gendered construction. For women, the conversion process changes a

woman from a Gentile woman (lusty, whorish, dangerous, uncontrolled) into a Jewish woman (modest, married, motherly, proper).

For this reason, feminist scholar Judith Baskin entitles a chapter of her book, "Conversion as Domestication: The Fallen Woman Redeemed."[229] Baskin uses the character of Rahab to demonstrate how conversion serves a domesticating function. She writes:

> By imagining her as a repentant fallen woman who found the true God and emerged as a mother in Israel, the rabbis transformed Rahab into an exemplar of the efficacy of Judaism and its traditions in taming the disordering powers of female sexuality. . . . More strikingly, in the loving depiction of Rahab's journey from sinful prostitute to pious proselyte and Joshua's devoted wife, midrashic tradition demonstrated how otherness could be vitiated, foreign origins superceded, threatening sexuality defused, and disturbing female independence undercut.[230] . . . The Biblical Rahab epitomized personal autonomy, communal stature, sexual encounters with a variety of partners, and independent religious thinking. The rabbis neutralized her threatening propensities by subjecting her to all the disabilities seen as appropriate and essential for Jewish women.[231]

In the cases of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, each of these three figures is a paradigm of conversion.[232]

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[229] Judith Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (London: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 154.

[230] According to the Talmud, Joshua marries Rahab (b. *Megillah* 14b).

[231] Baskin, *Midrashic Women,* 155, 160, 163.

[232] It is important to note that there is a debate as to whether Tamar converted to Judaism. The Biblical text does not mention Tamar's ethnic background. The majority of scholars believe that she was from Aram, in modern day Syria (Abraham and the matriarchs come from Aram), although the Bible and a minority of later commentators allow for the possibility that Tamar was of Canaanite origin.
The debate over Tamar's conversionary status begins in the Hellenistic period and continues into modern times. The author of Jubilees (41:1) claims that Tamar is from Aram and uses her "kosher descent" to contrast her with Judah's Canaanite wife. Philo,

1. Marriage

As a first step towards domestication, all proselytes, and all women generally must be married off. In the rabbinic view, women must be married for their own good. Ibn Ezra declares that "a woman has no rest until she weds."[233] *Ruth Rabbah* remarks that the verse "...each of you in the house of her husband!" demonstrates "that a woman has satisfaction only in the house of her husband."[234]

Many women may indeed have found great satisfaction in marriage, and the rabbis were likely sincere in desiring to protect women's marital interests. However, these remarks also belie the rabbis' own discomfort with unmarried, and therefore unattached, women. The rabbis quickly create husbands for the few Biblical women who are not mentioned as being married.[235] Unmarried women are outside of male control and their beauty is dangerous to men, thus making them a destabilizing force on society.

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on the other hand, states that Tamar had a conversionary experience (*On the Virtues*). Meam Loez on Genesis 38: 16 states that Tamar was both a convert and a descendant of Shem. However, in Meam Loez on Joshua 2:23, Tamar is not listed "among the nine pious women who joined the Jewish people." If Tamar is indeed the daughter of Shem (Genesis Rabbah 85:10), she may not need to formally convert because Shem is portrayed as already being a member of the covenant and a conveyor of Torah. For example, Genesis Rabbah (26:3) declares that Shem was born circumcised, headed a *beit din* (36:8 and 85:12) and taught Torah directly to Isaac (56:11) and Jacob (63:10, 68:5, 68:11), and indirectly to Joseph (84:8).

[233] Ibn Ezra on Ruth 3:1.

[234] Ruth 1:9; Ruth Rabbah 1:9.

[235] Rahab is married to Joshua (b. *Megillah* 14b; *Kohelet Rabbah* 8:10), Miriam is married to Caleb (Exodus Rabbah 1:17; b. *Sotah* 12a), Dinah is married to Shimon (Genesis Rabbah 80:11); It is worth noting that there is a debate as to whether Tamar ever marries Judah. Some *midrashim,* including Meam Loez on Ruth 4:2, claim that Judah and Tamar were properly married before engaging in sexual intercourse. However, this is a minority view. Tamar is never explicitly married to Shelah or any other man after her liaison with Judah. However, that although Tamar may remain unmarried, she is nonetheless clearly under Judah's patriarchal control, as evidenced by Judah's ability to have her executed. It is also relevant that incest laws limit Tamar's potential husbands, and that Tamar has already fulfilled her prime patriarchal and domestic function, the

Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are not only married, but they must marry into the right family, into the base of power. Rahab marries Joshua, the leader of Israel and the successor to Moses.[236] Ruth marries not just Boaz, but a powerful judge.[237] This phenomenon is expanded beyond these three women to include other important Jewish women.[238] Miriam doesn't marry just anyone; she marries Caleb.[239] The rabbis are not content to leave Deborah as "the wife of Lapidot," an unknown and unimportant figure, so they say that Deborah was really married to Barak, the powerful judge.[240]

It is important to note that marriages between important women and important men not only place such women in the right families, they also place women under the control of powerful men.[241] An unimportant male might not succeed in properly controlling his wife. He would also likely be overshadowed by his wife. Being "Mister Miriam" would, in the rabbinic view, be embarrassing to a man, who would have his manly prowess demeaned by his wife exerting more power and influence than he. By marrying powerful women to powerful men, this problem is avoided. Caleb and Miriam are on equal footing, as are Deborah and Barak. The rabbis need not worry about

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creation of a suitable heir for Judah. Thus, Tamar, even in her widowed status, is not a real danger to male interests and male-dominated society.

[236] b. *Megillah* 14b.

[237] b. *Bava Batra* 91a states, "Boaz was Ivtsan the Judge who was like the head of government."

[238] Because Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are each an ancestress of the messiah, the rabbis are undoubtedly concerned with providing proper lineage for King David and the Messiah. (For example, Ruth is said to be the daughter of the Moabite king Eglon, likely an effort to give her, and thus King David and the messiah, royal lineage (Ruth Rabbah 1:4).) However, the need to give the messiah properly royal lineage cannot entirely explain the phenomenon of marrying important women to powerful men because other important women, who are not related to kings, are similarly married into powerful families.

[239] Exodus Rabbah 1:17; b. *Sotah* 12a.

[240] Judges 4:4; Yalkut Shimoni II, Judges, *remez* 247.

[241] Streete, *The Strange Woman*, 48.

Deborah overshadowing or controlling her husband when he is a powerful general. The man remains in control.

Several *midrashim* demonstrate the rabbis concern with maintaining the husband's control. *Kohelet Rabbah,* a *midrash* compiled during the eighth and ninth centuries, even credits Joshua with Rahab's conversion, which is quite a feat since the rabbis understand Rahab's speech to the spies about her knowledge of God (Joshua 2:9-13) to be her conversionary moment, and at that point in the narrative she could not yet have met Joshua. In this fashion, the rabbis remove Rahab's capacity for independent religious thought. The woman who independently left paganism and joined the Jewish people is now dependent on a man to tell her what she believes.

An equally unlikely interpretation is the idea that Yael was a proper wife who acted in accordance with her husband's will.[242] This idea turns the Biblical depiction of Yael on its head. She is no longer a seductress who lures a strange man to her bed when her husband is away. She is a good wife who only gave the appearance of impropriety to serve her husband's desires.

2. Motherhood and Matriarchy

For women, motherhood goes hand in hand with marriage. In the rabbinic paradigm, it is as important for a woman to have children as it is for her to have a husband. Therefore, the rabbis are sure to make Rahab a mother.[243] The Bible never mentions that Rahab had any descendants, nor does the Bible ever note any offspring attributed to Joshua, her husband. Rather than presume that the couple did not have

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[242] Tanna Debai Eliyahu Rabba 9; Yalkut Shimoni II, Judges, *remez* 247.
[243] b. *Megillah* 14b.

children, a sign of divine disfavor upon both Rahab and Joshua, as well as a belittling of Rahab's womanhood, the rabbis prefer to believe that the couple had only daughters, and girls would of course not be worthy of mention in genealogies.[244] What better way to rehabilitate a prostitute than to turn her into a "mother of Israel" (as opposed to a whore having children out of wedlock) who dedicates her energies to the rearing of children?!

In the cases of Tamar and Ruth, women who have children, the Jewish exegetes stress their motherly roles. From the earliest sources, they are portrayed as motherly and matriarchal.[245]

Tamar is consistently praised for her motherhood, and compared to the matriarchs of Israel. Pseudo-Philo calls Tamar "our mother Tamar" and portrays her as a matriarch.[246] Philo also associates Tamar with the matriarchs.[247] Tamar's connection to the matriarchs is hinted at via her birth in Aram, also the birthplace of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.[248] This connection is further demonstrated by giving Tamar prophetic insights. *Genesis Rabbah* asserts that "the matriarchs are prophets."[249] *Genesis Rabbah* never explicitly states that Tamar was a matriarch, but the suggestion of her prophecy clearly alludes to this possibility.

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[244] *Ibid.*; The rabbis do not name Rahab's daughters.
[245] The rabbis are careful to provide Rahab with a number of children, but they refrain from directly comparing her to the matriarchs. I believe that the rabbis refrain from this comparison because of Rahab's history as a prostitute. The rabbis are concerned that explicit comparisons between the matriarchs and a common whore would reflect poorly on the matriarchs. Therefore, in this instance, like the portrayals of modesty mentioned above, the rabbis choose discretion as the better part of valor.
[246] Biblical Antiquities 9:5.
[247] Philo, *On the Virtues.*
[248] The Book of Jubilees 41:1.
[249] Genesis Rabbah 67:9; 72:6. Rebecca's knowledge of Esau's plan to kill Jacob is attributed to this prophecy (67:9), as is Rachel's desire for only one more son after Joseph is born (72:6). Sarah's decision to give Hagar to Abraham is similarly attributed to her prophecy (45:2).

The implication that Tamar was a matriarch is strengthened by making Tamar the subject of an unusual conception.[250] *Genesis Rabbah* further highlights the association of Tamar and the matriarchs by favorably comparing Tamar to Rebecca. As the rabbis point out, both women wear veils and both women are rewarded for their modesty with the birth of twins.[251] Another *midrash* implies that Tamar is superior to Rebecca because Tamar gives birth to two righteous sons, whereas Rebecca gives birth to one righteous son and one wicked son, and also because Rebecca gives birth after a full gestational period, but Tamar gives birth prematurely, thereby making the birth all the more miraculous.[252]

Ruth is similarly praised as a mother and compared to the matriarchs of Israel. The Biblical text asks God to "make the woman...like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel," a remark which is elaborated in the *midrash*.[253] *Ruth Rabbah* further compares Ruth to Rebecca, suggesting that both women were given children by God.[254] Just in case readers have missed the point, the *midrash* implies a further comparison to Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah, by portraying Ruth as infertile until an act of God provides her with an ovary, thus allowing her to conceive a child.[255] The

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[250] Sarah conceives Isaac post-menopausally after a lifetime of barrenness. Rebecca, like Tamar, gives birth to twins. Rachel goes to great lengths to conceive and dies in childbirth. Blachman, "The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation," 213.
[251] Genesis Rabbah 60:16; 85:7.
[252] Genesis Rabbah 85:13; Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 341.
[253] Ruth 4:11; Ruth Rabbah 4:11.
[254] Ruth Rabbah 4:12.
[255] Ruth Rabbah 4:13. God creates an ovary for Sarah in Genesis Rabbah 47:2 and 53:5 and for Rebecca in Genesis Rabbah 63:5. Leah bears her sons miraculously because she has no womb, according to Genesis Rabbah 72:1.

motif of the miraculous conceptions and birthings of the matriarchs is well established and Tamar and Ruth are clearly related to the matriarchs in this fashion.

This phenomenon of comparison to Israel's matriarchs is not limited to Tamar and Ruth. A number of Biblical women are so portrayed. The rabbis commonly use such comparisons in regards to women whom they need to rehabilitate. Yael, another foreign woman with a sexually charged narrative, is similarly compared to the matriarchs, and in fact declared superior to them. The Bible declares, "Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent."[256] *Genesis Rabbah* cites this verse, and elaborates, stating, that Yael is blessed above the women in the tent because "They (matriarchs) gave birth to children, yet but for her (Jael) they (the children) would have been destroyed."[257] The same idea is repeated in similar passages in the Talmud.[258] In this understanding, Yael is an even greater matriarch of Israel then the original matriarchs, because she saves the entire Jewish people from annihilation.

3. Domestication as Removal from the Public Sphere

Such a glowing appraisal of Yael's daring role in saving the Jewish people surely portrays Yael and her actions in the most positive fashion. However, such shining praise is not intended to encourage other women to behave in such a fashion, or to suggest that such a public and powerful role is appropriate for a female. Such actions are the exceptions that support the general rule that a woman's place is in the domestic (private) sphere. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Yael, and other women are not portrayed as continuing

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[256] Judges 5:24.
[257] Genesis Rabbah 48:15.
[258] b. *Sanhedrin* 105b; b. *Horayot* 10b.

their daring actions. Rather, just the opposite is established. Tamar leaves Petach Enaim and becomes a quiet widow and mother. Ruth no longer needs to take such daring seductive action; having married Boaz, she can turn her focus to being a proper wife and mother. Rahab stops engaging in prostitution and marries and bears children. Yael returns to her husband. The daring actions of these women were one-time special occasions. Having accomplished their patriarchal goals, they return to their conventional domestic duties. Streete analyzes this phenomenon, remarking:

> Ruth, Rahab, and Jael are examples of "good" and therefore "wise" foreign women because they, like Tamar, Judith, and Esther, allow the boundaries of the communities they have saved to enclose and contain them once their extraordinary actions, "beyond the pale" but on behalf of sanctioned goals, are completed.[259]

In other words, these women violate patriarchal boundaries only temporarily, and only for the purpose of reinforcing those very boundaries. Ultimately, their lives reinforce the patriarchal social boundaries which assign women to the domestic, private sphere, while men occupy public space.

Several rabbinic texts establish this paradigm of men and women inhabiting separate spheres of influence. The *midrashim* and Talmudic *sugyot* about Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are written to reinforce this idea. For example, *Ruth Rabbah,* in an effort to explain why Moabite women may convert to Judaism but Moabite men may not, explains:

> "All the honor of the king's daughter is [remaining] within the palace" (Psalm 45:14): it is incumbent on a woman not to go out and provide (food), it is incumbent upon a man to do so. "And because they hired Balaam against you"

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[259] Streete, *The Strange Woman*, 104.

> (Deuteronomy 23:5): a man does the hiring, and a woman does not.[260]

The king is symbolic of God, and therefore, women serve God by remaining at home. Women are not only not required to leave their homes to feed the Israelites, they are indeed prohibited from doing so, because such actions would "dishonor" God. The fact that feeding God's people would be a service to God does not make this situation exceptional. Rather, men serve God by saving God's chosen people. Women honor God by staying home and leaving the public sphere entirely for male control and influence.

This distaste for women in the public sphere is similarly presented in the Talmud. A lengthy Talmudic *sugya* addresses the behavior of several influencial Biblical women, including Esther. Immediately prior to a section about Rahab,[261] the rabbis disparage Deborah, the judge, and Huldah, the prophetess, for taking public roles, remarking:

> Rav Nachum said: Prominence is not becoming to women. For there were two prominent women, and their names were repulsive. One's name meant bee, and one's name meant weasel. Concerning the "bee" (Deborah), it is written: And she sent and called Barak. However, she herself did not go to him. Concerning the "weasel" (Chuldah), it is written: Tell the man. But she did not (more respectfully) say: Tell the king.[262]

In other words, "prominence is not becoming to women" because women with power, women in public roles, get haughty. They do not know their proper place as females, less than men. As a result, they are disrespectful to men. They overstep their bounds.

This is not the end of the rabbis' criticism of Huldah. In fact, there is a substantial rabbinic smear campaign perpetrated against Huldah's character. Also in the Talmud, the

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[260] Ruth Rabbah 2:5.
[261] The connection between the *sugya* about Deborah and Huldah and the *sugya* about Rahab is that Rahab is an ancestress of Huldah.
[262] b. *Megillah* 14b.

rabbis ask why Jeremiah, Huldah's male contemporary, is not placed above her in the hierarchy. They claim that Jeremiah is indeed more important than Huldah, but Josiah picks her as judge because she is Jeremiah's cousin and he will, therefore, not be shamed if she is asked. They also say that Huldah is chosen because women are more compassionate than men, and she is, therefore, "likely to mitigate the curse found in the book."[263] In other words, political and religious leadership is certainly a man's job, but a woman is required in this unusual circumstance because of the female quality (i.e. domestic virtue that is usually a public disability) of compassion. To ask a woman as opposed to a man would generally be shameful to any male, but thankfully, this problem can be overcome in this instance because Jeremiah and Huldah have a familial relationship, and therefore Jeremiah will not be offended. However, this instance of female leadership is nonetheless problematic because, as noted above, Huldah allows the power to go to her head, causing her to become a haughty woman, disrespectful to the king. Hammer analyzes this narrative, asserting:

> The rabbis are somewhat uncomfortable with the honor that Josiah's court shows to Huldah as a mediator of God's word. . . . Huldah's role is limited in the rabbinic conception, probably because she is female. . . . there is even one *midrash* that says Huldah was given the gift of prophecy because her *husband* was righteous (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 33).[264]

In other words, Huldah's disability is her sex. The rabbis are uncomfortable with a woman asserting power in the public sphere, and consequentially deride Huldah's character. Ultimately, the rabbis maintain male prerogative by suggesting that both

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[263] b. *Megillah* 14b; Jill Hammer, *Sisters At Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2004), 285.
[264] *Ibid.*

Jeremiah, Huldah's cousin, and Shallum ben Tikvah, her husband, are more deserving of the prophecy than Huldah is. Thus, women do not deserve public roles.

4. Conclusion

In summary, conversion does not only turn a Gentile into a Jew, it turns a dangerous, uncontrollable, Gentile female into a proper Jewish woman. A proper Jewish woman is one who is limited to the domestic sphere. Her primary functions are to be a wife and mother. For these reasons, conversion is a form of domestication. Conversion assures that a woman is consigned to the private domain, away from the public eye. This reinforces patriarchal social boundaries.

D. Rewarded For What?

According to Jewish tradition, righteous behavior is rewarded. Thus, righteous women are rewarded for their piety. Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are not exceptions.

Tamar and Ruth, in particular, are not so much rewarded for their actions as for their intentions. Regarding Tamar, the tradition is divided as to whether her actions were technically sinful, but ultimately, all agree that her motives were righteous. She acted not based on her own desires, nor to do harm, but rather to bring about divinely intended events in the best interest of future generations. The Talmud declares:

> Both Tamar and Zimri committed adultery. Tamar committed adultery and gave birth to kings and prophets.

> Zimri committed adultery and on his account many tens of thousand of Israel perished. Rabbi Nahman ben Isaac said: A transgression with good intent is more meritorious than the performance of a commandment with no intent; for it is said, Blessed above women Jael be.[265]

A similar *sugya* that also refers to Tamar, Zimri and Yael states, "A transgression performed with good intention is better than a precept performed with evil intention."[266] *Genesis Rabbah* reinforces the notion of pure intention, and does so in a radical fashion, claiming that the odd Biblical placement of Genesis 38 is "in order to juxtapose Tamar's story and Potiphar's wife's story. Just as one acted for the sake of heaven, so the other acted for the sake of heaven."[267] This assertion is shocking given that this is the only positive portrayal of Potiphar's wife. Potiphar's wife is generally portrayed, in *Genesis Rabbah* and elsewhere, as evil.[268] This is a very surprising *midrash* designed for the purpose of proving Tamar's purity of intention.

While Ruth's intentions do not receive as much attention as Tamar's, the *midrash* tells us that Ruth, too, had pure intentions. *Genesis Rabbah* contrasts Ruth to Lot's daughters and declares that Ruth was motivated by the worthy goal of procreation while Lot's daughters were motivated by immoral desires.[269]

The *midrash* does not take the same interest in Rahab's motives. Perhaps this is because the deeds for which Rahab are rewarded, saving the lives of the spies and becoming a righteous proselyte, are not sexually tainted in the same way that Tamar's

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[265] b. *Horayot* 10b.
[266] b. *Nazir* 23b.
[267] Genesis Rabbah 85:2.
[268] In Genesis Rabbah, Potiphar's wife is called names (86:1, 87:2, 87:4, 87:5, 87:10) and is portrayed both as a seductive adulterous (87:1) and as a dangerous animal (42:3, 84:7, 84:19, 86:4, 87:3, 87:4).
[269] Genesis Rabbah 51:9-11.

and Ruth's deeds are.[270] Nonetheless, the rabbis are certain to portray Rahab's actions as motivated by a sincere faith in God and a genuine desire to repent. In the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael,* we learn that Rahab asks God for forgiveness, saying, "I have sinned in three things, forgive me because of three things, because of the cord, the window and the wall."[271] The same prayer is summarized in the Talmud.[272]

Thus, any bad deeds Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth may be guilty of are mitigated by or compensated for by their pious intentions and good deeds. For example, Rahab's prostitution is compensated for by her repentance for these actions. Similarly, Tamar's sexual intercourse with her father-in-law is mitigated by her pure motives for that act, as demonstrated in the Talmudic passages mentioned above.

Ultimately, Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are praised and rewarded for their pious intentions and their good deeds. This reward is manifested in a few different forms, the first of which is prophecy.

1. Rewarded With Prophecy

Many Jewish commentators perceive Rahab's knowledge of and faith in God as evidence of prophecy. They suggest that Rahab knew that God delivered Israel from Egypt, knew that the spies would come to her, and knew that the Israelites would

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[270] According to a simple reading of the Biblical narrative, Tamar and Ruth conceive royal offspring by seemingly sinful means, especially in the case of Tamar, who seduces her father-in-law in violation of Torah law. Rahab is clearly guilty of sexual sin in the form of prostitution, but the Biblical text does not read in a fashion which appears to reward her for the act of prostitution, nor does she conceive through prostitution.
[271] Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta DeAmalek, parashah* 5. Rahab is referring to the rope she used to raise men from outside the city wall and through her bedroom window so she could have sex with them. She used the very same rope, window, and wall to rescue the spies.
[272] b. *Zevahim* 116b.

annihilate the Canaanites, because she had a prophetic vision. This idea begins as early as Josephus and is continued in the tannaitic *midrashim.*[273] *Sifre Deuteronomy* states:

> We thus learn that the holy spirit rested upon her, for had it not done so, how would she have known that they would return in three days? This proves that the holy spirit rested upon her.[274]

This idea is repeated by Rashi and cited by other scholars.[275]

The concept that Tamar too received prophecy becomes equally widespread in Jewish tradition. In *Genesis Rabbah,* no fewer than three separate *midrashim* reference Tamar's prophetic vision. We are told that Petach Enaim means that Tamar's eyes were opened so that she foresaw that she would give birth to "kings and redeemers."[276] Another passage in *Genesis Rabbah* proclaims that, "The Holy Spirit was kindled within her."[277] In the very next *midrash,* Tamar, now pregnant, publicly shouts, "I am big with kings and redeemers."[278] This trope of Tamar's prophecy, which begins in *Genesis Rabbah,* is occasionally repeated in later rabbinic literature.[279]

Ruth is not given the gift of prophecy according to the rabbis. Some rabbinic texts do suggest that Boaz had prophetic insight into her descendants and shared this

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[273] Ruth Rabbah 2:1; Sifre to Deuteronomy, *pisqa* 22; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 5:12.
[274] Sifre to Deuteronomy, *pisqa* 22.
[275] Rashi on Joshua 2:16; Meam Loez on Joshua 2:16 concurs with Rashi; Radak on Joshua 2:16 cites Rashi but disagrees, claiming that Rahab reasoned that the king's men would spend one full day searching for the spies, and that it would be one day's journey in each direction.
[276] Genesis Rabbah 85:7.
[277] Genesis Rabbah 85:9.
[278] Genesis Rabbah 85:10.
[279] Tanhuma Buber, *Vayeshev* 9:17; Lekah Tov on Genesis 38:25; Sechel Tov on Genesis 38:24; The notion of Tamar's prophecy is glaringly absent from certain major compilations and commentators, including Rashi, Ramban, Yalkut Shimoni, and Meam Loez.

information with her.[280] However, this suggestion is different from Ruth herself having such a prophetic vision. Jewish exegetes never designate Ruth as a prophet. Ruth, however, does receive a unique gift that is not held by Tamar or Rahab or any other Biblical character.[281] The *midrash* tells us that "Ruth, the Moabitess, did not die until she saw Solomon, her grandson, sitting [upon a throne]."[282] Thus, rather than being given a vision of her offspring during her natural lifetime, Ruth's lifetime was miraculously extended so that she could see her famous offspring in the flesh.

While prophecy and immortality are distinct rewards, what they have in common is that they are focused on knowledge regarding one's progeny. Tamar and Ruth (or Boaz) are not rewarded with general prophecy. Unlike Huldah or Deborah or Rahab, they do not receive religious wisdom or gain knowledge that they use to directly save lives. Their prophetic gifts are limited to knowledge of their own children and great-grandchildren, and do not extend beyond the maternal sphere.[283]

2. Rewarded With Progeny

Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are not only rewarded with knowledge of their children, but they are rewarded with the children themselves. The good deeds and good intentions of these women are not disconnected from their offspring. Rather, the Jewish tradition

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[280] Targum on Ruth 2:11; Ein Yaakov, *Masekhet Shabbat*.
[281] In the *midrash,* Serach bat Asher does live through the Exodus, but this is not connected to her offspring, nor is it specified that her length-of-days is a reward. (Tanhuma hamidpas, *Shmot,* Exodus 4:2)
[282] Sifre on Numbers, *pisqa* 78; Ruth Rabbah 1:2.
[283] The rabbis commonly reward women with prophecy regarding their children. Leah is such an example (b. *Berachot* 7b; b. *Bava Batra* 123a; Genesis Rabbah 7:2).

clearly states that Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth were each rewarded by being given special offspring.

In the case of Tamar, she is given two separate rewards for two separate righteous deeds. In *Genesis Rabbah,* Tamar's descendants include Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah because they, like Tamar, are willing to be martyred in fire.[284] In the Talmud, it is because of Tamar's modesty that "she merited having kings and prophets among her descendants."[285] Tamar's great modesty not only merits the birth of the royal line of King David and through him the king messiah, but she is also the mother of many prophets, including the great prophet, Isaiah.[286] In an alternative formulation, the *Meam Loez* paraphrases a tradition that combines these two notions, saying that Tamar merited bearing the royal seed "because she was willing to suffer death, and with it, the loss of the royal seed she knew she was carrying, rather than shame Judah."[287]

The messianic role of Tamar's offspring is a theme that is particularly highlighted by the *midrash. Genesis Rabbah,* in particular, focuses on Tamar's messianic role, stating:

> "Before she labored, she gave birth" (Isaiah 66:7). Before the first oppressor was born, the final redeemer was born. "At that time" (Genesis 38:1).[288]

This passage suggests that the birth of Tamar's twins was a miraculous event which served the purpose of providing providential chronology. God, ever looking after the

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[284] Genesis Rabbah 99:8; Tanhuma Buber, *Vayehi* 10; Midrash Shmuel 9; Aggadat Bereishit 27; Ein Yaakov, *Masekhet Sotah.*
[285] b. *Megillah* 10b.
[286] Isaiah is not just any prophet. He is one of the greatest and best known Jewish prophets. He is also associated with messianic times.
[287] Meam Loez on Ruth 4:18.
[288] Genesis Rabbah 85:1; similar versions appear in Yalkut Shimoni I, *remez* 83 and Yalkut Shimoni II, Isaiah, *remez* 482.

Jewish people, ensured that before Israel's first oppressor, Pharoah, was born, the progenitor of Israel's redeemer, Perez, was born.[289]

Genesis Rabbah further focuses on Perez's messianic role by commenting:

> "When he drew back his hand" (Genesis 38:29). "This one is greater than all those who will make breaches, [for] from you will be established [the one about whom it is written], 'The breaker will go up before them' (Micah 2:13).[290]

This passage presents "an alternate etiology for Perez' name," suggesting that he is superior to others who make breaches, i.e., other conquerors and royal leaders.[291] This and other passages throughout Jewish tradition focus on Tamar as the ancestress of kings and the messiah.

The Jewish tradition similarly suggests that Ruth is also rewarded by being the ancestress of kings, prophets, and the messiah. The *Targum* tells us that Ruth receives this reward because of her kindness to Naomi and because she left her god and her family to join the Jewish faith.[292] This notion is repeated in *Meam Loez*, which states, "Ruth merited bearing the royal seed because of her kindness and her devoted cleaving to God."[293]

While the Bible states clearly that Tamar and Ruth were progenitors of King David, and thereby the messiah, the Bible does not state this fact regarding Rahab. In fact, the Biblical tale does not mention Rahab having any offspring at all. However, according to Christian Scripture, Rahab is an ancestress of Jesus, along with Tamar,

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[289] Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 325.
[290] Genesis Rabbah 85:14; similar passages occur in Yalkut Shimoni I, *remez* 82, Yalkut Makhiri, Micah, *remez* 551 and Aggadat Bereishit 63. The version in Aggadat Bereishit is even stronger, stating, "Perez is the messiah."
[291] Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 327.
[292] Targum on Ruth 2:11.
[293] Meam Loez on Ruth 4:18.

Ruth, and Batsheva.[294] This assertion likely represents a contemporary Jewish teaching that Rahab was an ancestress of the messiah, as it would be strange for the gospel writers to make up this assertion entirely on their own.

However, known rabbinic exegesis does not explicitly state any connection between Rahab and the future messiah.[295] However, the rabbis do develop a strong association between Rahab and human redemption. Rahab's contribution to human redemption is not her genetic offspring, but rather her personal merit. According to the *midrash,* Rahab's merit saved Hezekiah, healing him from his deathbed and causing him to repent and become a righteous and healthy man.[296] Rahab's healing powers are not limited to royalty, but available to all people. The rabbis teach that Rahab's merit assuages God's justice.[297] All of humanity, and not only Israel, will benefit from this

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[294] Matthew 1:1-17.

[295] However, such a connection is implied by *midrashim* which draw parallels between Tamar and Rahab, and claim that Rahab had contact with Tamar's royal son, Perez. For example, Midrash HaGadol, a Yemenite midrashic collection from the fourteenth century, introduces the idea that the spies were Tamar's sons, Perez and Zerah, and the scarlet thread given to Rahab was the same thread tied around Zerah's finger at birth (*Chayei Sarah* 94). Yair Zakowitch claims that Matthew's genealogy is based on *midrashim,* including Midrash HaGadol, which draw parallels between Rahab and Tamar. (Yair Zakowitch, "Rahab as the Mother of Boaz in the Genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5)," *Novum Testamentum* 17 (1975):1-5. Written in German.) Elly Teman, in her paper "The Red Thread," cites Zakowitch's article as evidence that there is a Jewish tradition that Rahab married Perez, Tamar's son. However, Teman does not cite the original source. Throughout research for this thesis, this author has not come across any other evidence of a tradition about Rahab marrying Perez.

[296] y. *Berachot* 8a; Mekhilta DeRabbi Simeon bar Yohai, *Yitro*; Kohelet Rabbah 6:1; Bernard H. Mehlman, "Rahab as a Model of Redemption," in *'Open Thou Mine Eyes...':Essays on Aggadah and Judaica Presented to Rabbi William G. Braude on His Eightieth Birthday and Dedicated to His Memory,* ed. Herman J. Blumberg, Benjamin Braude, Bernard H. Mehlman, Jerome S. Gurland, and Leslie Y. Gutterman (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav, 1992), 197.

[297] y. Rosh Hashanah 57a; Mehlman, "Rahab as a Model of Redemption," 199.

divine mercy. On account of Rahab, and other righteous proselytes, God will be merciful to the Gentile nations, as well as Israel.[298]

Just as Rahab's merit brings mercy to the world, it brings Rahab reward. Specifically, Rahab is rewarded for her faith, her repentance, and for her actions which save the spies. In addition to her redemptive powers, Rahab is rewarded by giving birth to a line of priests and prophets. The idea is oft repeated throughout rabbinic literature. *Sifre* on Numbers says of Rahab:

> Eight priests and eight prophets descended from her. These are: Jeremiah, Hilkiah, Seraiah, Machsaiah, Baruch, Neraiah, Hananel and Shallum. Rabbi Yehuda says: Also Huldah the prophetess was a descendent of Rahab.[299]

Similar and related passages are found throughout the Talmud and the *midrash.*[300] A small number of passages also credit Rahab with being the ancestress of the prophet Ezekiel.[301]

This tradition raises questions because Joshua is not of a priestly line. Therefore, how can it be that Rahab, who marries Joshua and remains his faithful wife, gives birth to a priestly line? *Numbers Rabbah,* a twelfth century *midrash,* explains, saying:

> What reward did she receive? Some of her daughters were married into the priesthood and bore sons who stood and performed service upon the altar and entered the Sanctuary, where, uttering the Ineffable Name of God, they would bless Israel.[302]

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[298] *Ibid.*, According to Midrash Tehilim 9:11, Rahab, Ruth, Zipporah and Jethro are credited with bringing God's mercy to the Gentile nations.
[299] Sifre on Numbers, *pisqa* 78.
[300] Ruth Rabbah 1:2; b. *Megillah* 14b; b. *Kallah Rabbati* 53b; Meam Loez on Joshua 2:23; Sifre on Deuteronomy, *pisqa* 338.
[301] Mehlman cites such passages in Ruth Rabbah and Midrash HaGadol, but fails to offer the full citations. For a chart of Rahab's offspring, see Mehlman, "Rahab as a Model of Redemption," 197.
[302] Numbers Rabbah 8:9.

Thus, the tradition that Rahab, too, is rewarded through her progeny is preserved.

3. Women Are Rewarded Through Men

It is important to note that these women are rewarded through men. Having themselves performed great acts of piety, they do not receive rewards for themselves in the form of personal recognition, power, or wealth. They themselves do not perform religious service or rule the people of Israel. Rahab and Ruth do not become judges to the tribes of Israel, even though at least one woman did serve this function, and there is a rabbinic tradition that adds Yael to the roster of the judges.[303] Tamar does not teach Torah to the tribe of Judah, nor does she fly off to Egypt to marry Joseph and enjoy the Pharoah's riches. Rather, Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are each rewarded via the accomplishments of males in their family. For a woman, it is a great honor to have a son who does great things!

In Rahab's case, she does not even have sons. Not only is it not Rahab herself who receives the real reward, but it is not her daughters either. Rather, it is her grandsons who, as males with priestly fathers, are worthy of entering the Sanctuary, uttering God's Ineffable Name, and blessing all Israel. Rahab's faith is held up as a model of piety. It is claimed that her faith in God was even stronger than Jethro's.[304] Yet, Rahab, as a woman, does not warrant the ultimate reward. She must be satisfied with bearing grandsons who will be privileged to serve God in a way she cannot.

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[303] Ruth Rabbah 1:1.
[304] Sifre to Deuteronomy, *pisqa* 78.

For the sake of fairness, it should be noted that Tamar and Rahab do receive the gift of prophecy and Ruth the gift of a miraculously long lifespan. However, as noted above, it is relevant that these gifts are mentioned only in regards to receiving knowledge of their famous male progeny. Tamar and Rahab are not themselves equal to the great prophets and prophetesses. They do not warrant a miraculous well like Miriam. They do not judge their people and lead them in battle, like Deborah. Neither do they verify the word of God, like Huldah. They merely receive the knowledge that their offspring will acheive greatness.

In the case of Rahab, there is one woman in her line who, according to the *midrash,* does receive such a great gift. This is Huldah, the prophetess. But the rabbis are not satisfied with this case. As discussed earlier, Huldah is vilified by the rabbis and called a haughty woman. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* even claims that "Huldah was given the gift of prophecy because her husband was righteous."[305] While this is clearly a minority opinion, it demonstrates the rabbis' discomfort with women gaining religious and political power and authority. For the rabbis, a woman belongs in the domestic sphere, and therefore, women can best be rewarded by being righteous mothers, the mothers of great leaders.

This trope of women being rewarded through men is not limited to the characters of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. Other traditions suggest similar rewards for other women. For example, *Exodus Rabbah* tells us that God rewards Yocheved and Miriam for their actions as midwives by making them mothers of priests and kings.[306] *Exodus Rabbah*

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[305] Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 33.

[306] Exodus Rabbah 1:17. The rabbis suggest that Shifra and Puah of Exodus 1 were actually Yocheved and Miriam. There is no Biblical evidence of a familial relationship

also says that Betzalel merited being the great artist of the *mishkan* not through his own merit, but "because of the merit of Miriam; he was Miriam's son."[307] This suggestion is especially shocking because Miriam, in both the Bible and rabbinic tradition, is clearly a prophetess. Couldn't the rabbis presume that Miriam is rewarded for her actions as a midwife by becoming a prophetess and warranting a miraculous well that sustains the Jewish people? Might the rabbis have suggested that Yocheved is rewarded by receiving a great vision of the Promised Land? Or perhaps Yocheved was rewarded by receiving the great artistic talent that decorated the *mishkan,* instead of this honor going to her grandson, Betzalel? The rabbis could have created such *midrashim,* but they chose instead to reward Yocheved and Miriam through their progeny.

In a related theme, the rabbis suggest that the women experience great joy from the accomplishments of their male relatives. The Talmud says of Elisheva that, "she had five joys more than all other daughters of Israel," and then gives a list of her male relatives: Aaron, her husband, the high priest; Moses, her brother-in-law, the prophet; Eliezer, her son, the High Priest; Pinchas, her grandson, the warrior-priest; and Nachshon, her brother, prince of the tribe of Judah and ancestor of the royal line.[308] Note that this list includes Elisheva's brother-in-law, Moses, but it does not include her sister-in-law, Miriam, the prophetess. Was Elisheva not happy on account of Miriam, or on account of her mother-in-law Yocheved? Even more important, was there anything about Elisheva that made her worthy of being the mother of the priestly tribe, or was this merely a coincidence resulting from marrying well? The rabbis of the Talmud are not

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between Yocheved and Miriam and the Davidic dynasty; this notion is entirely a creation of the rabbis.

[307] Exodus Rabbah 48:4.

[308] b. *Zevahim* 102a.

interested by these questions. Rather, they are happy to presume that women receive the ultimate joy from watching the accomplishments of their male relatives. In light of this worldview, it makes sense that Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth should be rewarded by receiving knowledge of the great accomplishments of their male offspring.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are rewarded for their pious intentions, as well as their righteous deeds. The rewards they are given are more about their male progeny than themselves. For the rabbis, it is inconceivable that a woman should wield any real power in the public sphere. Women belong in the domestic sphere, where they embrace their role as mothers. A woman's greatest joys are presumed to be the accomplishments of her male relatives. Therefore, there can be no greater reward for a woman than to be the mother of great men.

Part 3: Selected Overarching Issues

A. Changing Societal Contexts and Their Impact on Biblical Interpretation

The rabbis of every generation, like all human beings, are products of the society in which they live. As rabbis, they have a strong loyalty to Jewish tradition in the form of the Bible and earlier canonized Rabbinic Literature. As products of their own society, they hold contemporary societal values and assumptions, and face contemporary problems. As a result, when traditional Jewish texts appear to be at odds with their cultural reality, the rabbis are torn. They must find a way to reconcile this conflict in a manner which both maintains the "truth" and "holiness" of Jewish text and tradition, and simultaneously reflects the rabbis' own contemporary societal assumptions and values. They must find a way to respond to contemporary challenges from within a Jewish context.

Generation after generation of rabbis find themselves in this position. The conflict may occur in any number of areas, such as theology, scientific knowledge, and economic systems. Overtime, inevitable conflicts develop in the areas of gender, sexuality, and Jewish-Gentile relations.[309] As gender roles evolve, as sexual practices change, as the nature of Jewish-Gentile relations is transformed, these areas, too, are affected by this conflict.

Faced with a need to reconcile these changes with their inherited tradition, the rabbis constantly reinterpret texts, reapply laws, and reevaluate traditions. To understand

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[309] This thesis will focus on these three areas of conflict (gender, sexuality, and Jewish-Gentile relations) because they are the most relevant to the development of the *midrash* regarding Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. As three Biblical women of non-Israelite birth who engage in unusual sexual behavior, these three characters become a focus of conflict involving the evolution of the changing nature of gender, sexuality, and Jewish-Gentile relations.

how these developments are relevant to the characters of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, this final section will analyze examples of these practices, drawn from the material in Part 2 of this thesis.

1. The Advent of the Process of Conversion

The advent of conversion is an excellent example of how the rabbis respond to the changing nature of Jewish-Gentile relations; they reinterpret the Bible to make it better reflect their concerns and experiences. Historians have noted that the concept and practice of conversion to Judaism developed in the Greco-Roman period. Eventually, during the early Roman period of Jewish history, many Gentiles converted to Judaism.

Conversion, as it was understood by the rabbis, did not exist in the Bible. Yet, the rabbis wished to encourage non-Jews to convert to Judaism, and they also desired to encourage Jews to accept converts as fellow Jews. For this purpose, the rabbis chose to transform certain Biblical figures into paradigms of conversion. The male paradigm of conversion became Jethro, Moses's father-in-law. The female paradigm of conversion was Rahab. This approach begins in the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael,* which presents Rahab's monologue as a conversionary experience.[310] This midrashic approach suggests that Rahab rejects polytheism and accepts Yahweh as the one true God. Such an assertion is in opposition to two other possible readings of Rahab's remarks: that Rahab (a) tells the spies what they want to hear to save herself but doesn't really believe it, or (b) that Rahab acknowledges Yahweh as God because of Yahweh's obvious power, but does not cease to be a pagan or join the Jewish people.

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[310] Joshua 2:9-12; Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta DeAmalek, parashah* 5.

Either of these two possibilities seems to be more in keeping with the Biblical text than is the Mekhilta's interpretation. Biblical scholar Richard Nelson writes about Rahab's speech:

> Yet her words, for all their deuteronomist flavor, remain appropriate to the ancestor of a group who would remain outside Israel's camp. Yahweh remains "your God." She is not the Gentile convert that later tradition would make of her, but rather one of those foreigners in the Hebrew Bible whose acknowledgement that Yahweh is God underscores the self-evident power and glory of Yahweh (Balaam, Naaman, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius).[311]

Nelson may well be correct, but Nelson's perspective does not assist the rabbis in their efforts to legitimize and encourage conversion. The rabbinic worldview is not the Biblical worldview. While Biblical theology may be comfortable with Gentiles acknowledging monotheism but remaining Gentiles, the rabbis are not. Though conversion does not exist in the Bible, the rabbis must find a way to make conversion fit with their contemporary understanding of the Bible. They do this by reenvisioning Rahab and reinterpreting her words. Thus, Rahab is transformed from a Canaanite who acknowledges God's sovereignty to a righteous proselyte to the Jewish faith.

2. Hellenistic Misogyny

The rabbinic encounter with Greco-Roman society produced a complicated relationship, full of many interactions and tensions between the majority Greco-Roman culture and the minority Jewish culture. These tensions and changes were not limited to Jewish-Gentile relations. Other areas of change and conflict included the realm of gender – gender roles, gender assumptions, interactions between the sexes, and the very

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[311] Nelson, *Joshua,* 50.

understanding of what it meant to be male or female. As societal views of women changed, the Jewish exegetes of each generation reinterpreted the stories of female Biblical characters, molding those women in the image of their ideal female.

As was demonstrated earlier, Hellenistic portrayals of Tamar stress her passivity.[312] This is the case because Hellenistic teachings about gender hold that masculinity is inherently active and femininity inherently passive. Thus, the very nature of being a woman is to be passive, especially in relationship to men. In light of this cultural bias, Genesis 38 is a problematic and threatening narrative. The Biblical Tamar takes a very active role in the story. She initiates the sexual act. She acts vis a vis Judah, and not the reverse. She plots and schemes and makes everything come out exactly as she has planned. Hellenistic writers are shocked by this behavior. In order to redeem Tamar and the Jewish faith in the eyes of their fellow Hellenists, they rewrite Tamar's story.[313] In the Hellenized narrative, Tamar is "not so unabashedly assertive."[314]

Similarly, Hellenistic portrayals of Tamar also stress her virginity. This is likely because Hellenistic society saw virginity as an important female virtue. Equally important in the Hellenistic understanding of gender is the idea that a woman's virginity

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[312] Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 127; Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees*, 115; Tamar is portrayed as passive in the Testament of Judah, the Book of Jubilees, and Philo's *On the Unchangeableness of God.* Josephus omits the story of Judah and Tamar entirely. The portrayal of Tamar in *Biblical Antiquities* is, in regards to her passivity, a bit more nuanced. However, Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities is nonetheless a product of Hellenistic expectations for female passivity. See Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Women in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities."

[313] Several female characters who act in an assertive manner are so rewritten, including Yael in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*; Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Women in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities," 102.

[314] Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees*, 115.

limited her connection to the body.[315] When a woman became sexually active, she became entirely female in regards to her association with the physical body and the physical world (menstruation, sexual intercourse, childbearing, etc.). In Greek thought, this association with the physical world was negative, because it was in opposition to the masculine association with the spiritual, intellectual, and philosophical realm. The physical realm was for lesser creatures, like women, while men were privileged to engage in spiritual and intellectual pursuits.

Philo, the Jewish writer most strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, utilizes uniquely Hellenistic ideas of virginity in his allegorical interpretations of the Bible. As cited above, Philo transforms Tamar and Sarah, two Biblical characters who clearly engage in sexual intercourse, into allegorized "virgins." This spiritual virginity removes Tamar and Sarah from their physical bodies and gives them the divine gift of acting as spiritually advanced beings, i.e., as men.[316]

Yet another example of Hellenistic influence on Jewish gender discourse is found in the attitude of Hellenistic texts towards marital and sexual relationships between Jews and Gentiles. As demonstrated in Part 2, the Testament of Judah and the Book of Jubilees develop the character of Judah's wife for the purpose of creating rhetoric against

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[315] The belief that virginity was a female virtue was not unique to Hellenistic society, but was commonly held many patriarchal cultures. However, the separation between body and spirit, and the association of the body with the female and the spirit world with the male is unique to Hellenistic philosophy. See Wegner, "Philo's Portrayal of Women – Hebraic or Hellenic?"

[316] Wegner, "Philo's Portrayal of Women – Hebraic or Hellenic?," 54-55; Blachman, "The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation," 160.

intermarriage.[317] In these tales, Judah's marriage to a Canaanite is entirely responsible for all the bad things that befall Judah and his sons.

A similar discourse against intermarriage can be found in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities.* Halpern-Amaru notes that "Tamar is the first of a number of women around whom Pseudo-Philo develops a diatribe against union with Gentiles."[318] This polemic is not the same used by the Book of Jubilees. Rather, Tamar, and not Judah's wife, is the focus of this passage which is unique to *Biblical Antiquities.* Pseudo-Philo includes similar polemics against intermarriage attached to the account of Egyptian oppression, the beginning of the Deborah narrative, the tale of the Levite's concubine, the story of Samson and the Philistine women, and the narrative of the prophet Micah.[319]

With the single exception of the Book of Jubilees' portrayal of the rape of Dina, every Hellenistic diatribe against sexual relations between Jews and Gentiles focuses on Israelite men having sex with Gentile women. Halpern-Amaru does an excellent job of framing the many questions raised by the gendered nature of this discourse regarding marital and sexual relations between Jews and Gentiles.[320] She writes:

> Even given the significance of endogamy..., why is the polemic against intermarriage so heavily focused on foreign wives? Why is matrilineal descent the key feature in the genealogical history of the ancestors of that community? What is it about wives and mothers that

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[317] Page 47 of this thesis.
[318] Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Women in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities," 92.
[319] *Ibid.* Note that these narratives are all about Israelite men marrying or having sex with Gentile women. Pseudo-Philo does not elect to include a polemic against intermarriage in his telling of the stories of Dina or Esther. The Book of Jubilees does base a polemic against intermarriage on the narrative of Dina. However, the other polemics against intermarriage in the Book of Jubilees are all in regards to Israelite men marrying Gentile women.
[320] Halpern-Amaru's analysis is in reference to the Book of Jubilees. However, her observations and queries are fitting to the larger discourse of the entire Jewish tradition.

> necessitates transforming all the stories of the female progenitors into corroborative morality tales? What lies at the root of the great interest...in wives and mothers?[321]

These are excellent questions to ask. However, Halpern-Amaru poses less than satisfactory answers. She suggests that the prohibition of intermarriage might be "a separation response to Hellenization" and points out that "a matrilineal standard of purity would be the more rigorous one in a culture in which selection of spouse is a male activity."[322]

These are two excellent suggestions. Assimilation to and the cultural domination of Hellenism or any other majority culture will naturally create an endogamous response. Such endogamy, however, need not always be gendered.

Halpern-Amaru suggests that the response is gendered because men choose their spouses. This is also an important observation and a likely factor. In a patriarchal society, men choose their spouses. Under such circumstances, Israelite men will be relatively free to select Gentile spouses, whereas Israelite females will have little say in their selection of mates and will likely be "married off" to Israelite males by their fathers. Therefore, intermarriage between Israelite men and Gentile women may be much more common and much more likely, and therefore much more threatening, than intermarriage between Israelite females and Gentile males. However, this observation fails to completely explain the ferocity of the demonization of Gentile women.

I also believe that another sociological factor may be at work. In a patriarchal society where females go to live with their husband's communities, Israelite females who

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[321] Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees*, 151.
[322] *Ibid.*, 153, 158.

marry Gentile males will be "lost to the community," whereas Gentile females who marry Israelite males will join the community and therefore be a threat to its orderly functioning. I suspect that this factor, too, played some role in the gender bias in question.

Nonetheless, I believe that the fierceness of the fear of Gentile women goes beyond practical social factors. This fear is laced with a hatred of the "other," and the "other" in question is gendered to the extreme. I believe these texts belie a strong misogyny. Given the strong misogyny in Hellenistic culture, and the widespread effects such misogyny had on the western world for centuries to come, I believe this misogyny is likely, perhaps even mostly, of Greek origin. Many contemporary scholars have established that the Jews of the Inter-testimental period operated in a Hellenistic cultural paradigm which extended to their area of gender relations and was reflected in ancient Jewish literature, including The *Wisdom of Ben Sira,* the writings of Philo, and *Joseph and Aseneth.*[323] As in the case of Philo's view of virginity, Hellenistic misogyny found its way into Jewish sexual discourse. In the Greek view, the male is always primary and the female is thus always "other." The female body embodies the dangerous, lustful physical world which is at odds with spiritual pursuits.

Satlow suggests that this Hellenistic influence remains with Palestinian Jewry for many centuries to come, and strongly influences the Talmud.[324] Based on Satlow's analysis, it seems likely that a Hellenistic discourse of gender and sexuality continued to influence the rabbis of Palestine, and this influence can account for those Talmudic texts

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[323] See *"Women Like This": New Perspectives On Jewish Women In the Greco-Roman World.* ed. Amy-Jill Levine. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991.
[324] Satlow, *Tasting the Dish,* 331.

which present the strongest polemic against sex with pagan females. In particular, the Talmudic *sugya* from *Tractate Megillah* which declares the offspring of Jewish men and Gentile women to be "enemies of God," and the *aggadah* from *Tractate Eruvin* which states that Jewish men who have sexual intercourse with Gentile women "warrant Gehenna" and go unrecognized by Abraham because "his foreskin is drawn up," portray a harshness that goes beyond typical endorsements of endogamy.[325] Post-Talmudic texts still strongly oppose intermarriage, but they do so in a fashion which is less explicitly gendered and sexualized.

Over time, the anti-female Greek roots of this discourse begin to fade. By the early modern period, the *Meam Loez* summarizes the *midrash* that David comes from Gentile women so he will have the cruelty to crush Israel's enemies in a very matter-of-fact way, which does not suggest that there is anything "feminine" about this cruelty.[326] While the *Meam Loez* clearly opposes intermarriage, it does so without regard to the gender of the parties, noting generally that Machlon and Chilyon took foreign wives because "living among Gentiles leads to assimilation."[327] Thus, opposition to intermarriage remains constant over time, but the gendered dynamic of a fear of pagan women does not. With the setting of Hellenistic cultural influence, the profound sexualized fear of Gentile women fades away.

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[325] y. *Megillah* 4:10, 75c; b. *Eruvin* 19a.
[326] Meam Loez on Ruth 4:18.
[327] Meam Loez on Ruth 1:4; other objections to intermarriage occur in reference to Genesis 38:2 and Ruth 4:14.

3. Misunderstanding Sexual Rhetoric

In his book *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality,* Satlow traces how rabbinic views of sexuality change over time. Satlow notes that the Hellenistic cultural assumptions which influence the Palestinian rabbis (as demonstrated above) are foreign to the Babylonian rabbis of the same and subsequent generations. Satlow writes:

> Many of the assumptions that generated Palestinian rabbinic rhetoric on sexuality almost certainly derived from those of the Greeks and Romans. Although Palestinian rabbinic rulings on sexuality occasionally differ from their Greek and Roman equivalents, all are based upon a common language, shared thought-categories and assumptions. . . . Conversely, the Babylonian rabbis are at times so alienated from these sets of assumptions that they appear not to grasp fully the import of the dicta transmitted to them from Palestine. Babylonian rabbis were apparently working with quite different assumptions about sexuality. . . . Rabbinic assumptions about sexuality were as historically as textually determined, to the point where rabbinic texts created under one set of assumptions were misunderstood when read in societies that held different assumptions.[328]

Thus, contemporary cultural influence was so strong that when a new generation of commentators approached a text with new cultural assumptions, they could easily misunderstand the views and teachings of their predecessors.

Satlow clearly demonstrates that rabbinic attitudes towards sexuality are socially constructed. The rabbis are more influenced by the contemporary majority culture than by Biblical text and other early Jewish traditions. In some cases, the rabbis do not even understand the sexual assumptions of earlier Jewish traditions. The rabbis rewrite earlier texts in light of their own attitudes.

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[328] Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 331-333.

B. Addressing Particularly Difficult Texts – Rewriting Biblical Tales

Though the rabbis of every generation reinterpret texts in light of their own attitudes, some texts present the rabbis with greater challenges than others. When presented with a text which plainly states something the rabbis find unacceptable, how do the rabbis respond? This overview of the exegesis of the narratives of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth suggests that the rabbis utilize two different strategies.

1. Linguistic Gymnastics - The Text Couldn't Mean What It Clearly Says

The first strategy that the rabbis employ is to simply assume that the text couldn't possibly say what it says. The best example of this is how several rabbis address the fact that Rahab was a prostitute. Shocked that a prostitute would speak in a faithful fashion, behave in a moral manner (saving the lives of the spies), and join the Jewish people, a minority of Jewish exegetes argued that Rahab was not really a prostitute.[329]

These commentators use false linguistic evidence to claim that *zonah* did not mean prostitute.[330] The famous source of this idea is Rashi who comments on Joshua 2:1

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[329] The other rabbinic tradition cites Rahab's prostitution as evidence of her depravity prior to becoming a Jew. The rabbis thus turn Rahab into a model of repentance by suggesting that God forgiving Rahab's sexual sins is proof of God's loving ability to forgive any sins. In this depiction, Rahab feels quite guilty for her behavior, and repents in an effort to gain redemption, thus serving as an example of the power of *teshuvah.* (Mehlman, "Rahab as a Model of Redemption," 202). Phyllis Bird points out that the rabbis only allow Rahab to become a heroine as an ex-harlot (Bird, "The Harlot As Heroine," 129). These rabbis are able to understand Rahab's prostitution in a way which fits their theology as well as their views of sexuality and gender. Thus, they do not take the approach of denying Rahab's profession.

[330] This same technique is used to suggest that Judah did not marry a Canaanite woman. The *Gemara* declares, "For it is written: Judah saw there the daughter of a prominent *'kena'ani'* and he married her. Now, what is meant by *kena'ani* in this verse? If you say it literally means a Canaanite, how can that be? Is it possible that after Abraham came and warned Isaac not to marry a Canaanite, and after Isaac came and likewise warned

citing the *Targum* as evidence that Rahab was not a prostitute but an innkeeper.[331] Rashi argues that *zonah* is from the same root as *mazon,* meaning food. Rashi bases his remark on the Targum's rendering of *zonah* as *pundekita,* making the assumption that this Aramaic word means exactly the same as the Hebrew *pundakit,* which means hostess, or innkeeper.[332] However, Kimchi, in his remarks on Joshua 2:1, points out that Rashi misunderstands the *Targum.* The *Targum* to the Prophets renders *zonah* as *pundekita* in several places where it could not possibly mean anything besides prostitute.

In this case, the rabbis who take this approach go to great lengths to deny what is a simple Biblical fact: *Zonah* means prostitute. Rahab was a conventional whore. She had sex for money. Thus, a woman who had sex for money is a Biblical heroine. This is unfathomable for many rabbis, and they respond by denying this fact.

Jacob not to marry a Canaanite, would Judah then go and marry a Canaanite? Of course not! Therefore, the word *kena'ani* in this verse clearly does not refer to a Canaanite. Rather, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: The verse refers to the daughter of a prominent merchant" (B. T. *Pesahim* 50a). In this *sugya,* the rabbis assert that the Biblical text cannot be understood to say what it clearly means because the *peshat* of the text would by inconceivable to the rabbinic mindset. Thus, as an alternative, the *Talmud* claims that *kena'ani* actually means merchant, a usage that does not exist. The rabbis imply that *kena'ani* means merchant from *kanah,* to buy. However, this assertion is based entirely on sound. The rabbis do not explain that *kena'ani* is spelt with a *koof* and *kanah* with a *kaf.* Thus, the words come from different roots and cannot be related. Despite this fact, the rabbis choose to rely entirely on the similar sound. The rabbis go on to cite an unconvincing verse from Isaiah which uses similar but unrelated words for merchant (Isaiah 23:8). This idea is cited by later commentators. Note that the Talmud's claim that *kenaani* is from the root *kanah* is similar to Rashi's claim that *zonah* is from the same root as *mazon.* The view that Judah's wife was not a Canaanite is repeated by later commentators and compilations, including Meam Loez (Genesis 38:2).

[331] Josephus also calls Rahab an innkeeper, perhaps also based on the Targum. Josephus is likely motivated by his desire to convince the Romans that Jews are a sexually moral people.

[332] Encyclopedia Judaica, "Rahab," ed. Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder, vol. 14 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1982), 1513.

2. Filling in the Holes to Change the Plain Meaning of the Text

The second approach that the rabbis take to such troubling texts similarly denies the troubling reading of the text. In contrast to the linguistic gymnastics approach described above, this approach adds details to the narrative to take the story in a more acceptable direction.[333] A perfect example of this technique is the rabbinic exegesis of Ruth 3, the encounter between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor. Whereas the Biblical author purposely creates ambiguity as to what happened on the threshing floor, the rabbis fight against this ambiguity and argue resoundingly that nothing happened at all. The rabbis go out of their way to state ever so carefully exactly what occurred, and to tell a story which keeps Ruth's and Boaz's behavior in line with their own morals and expectations.

This practice begins in *Ruth Rabbah,* the earliest midrashic compilation about the Book of Ruth. Boaz is portrayed as being occupied with Torah study, and not, as would otherwise be assumed, drinking alcohol.[334] Upon awaking, Boaz believes that there is an evil spirit present. He questions Ruth and carefully determines that she is an unmarried woman who is ritually pure and lawfully available.[335] Nonetheless, Boaz does not give in to temptation because he would never have intercourse with a woman without lawfully

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[333] Another example of the rabbis taking the narrative in a more acceptable direction is the rabbinic portrayal of Huldah. The Biblical portrayal of Huldah is quite positive, and suggests no discomfort regarding Huldah's prominence. However, the rabbis believe that women belong in the private sphere, and the public sphere should be the domain of only men. This leads the rabbis to proclaim that "prominence is not becoming to women" and to paint Huldah in a negative light (b. *Megillah* 14b). Ultimately, the rabbis add details to Huldah's story, such as the suggestion that she received the prophecy on her husband's merit, which support their worldview, and undercut Huldah's prestige.

[334] Ruth Rabbah 3:7.

[335] Ruth Rabbah 3:9.

marrying her first.[336] To ensure that there can be no doubt about the chastity of Boaz and Ruth on the night they spent together, *Ruth Rabbah* creates a chaperone to witness this chaste event. The pair are no longer alone, but they are joined by the steward of Boaz's household, to whom Boaz expresses his concern that people not doubt their chastity.[337] So great was this concern that Boaz was unable to sleep and "that entire night Boaz lay stretched out prostrate, saying, 'Lord of the ages, it is perfectly obvious to you that I never laid a hand on her. May it be Your will that it not be known that the woman has come to the threshing floor, so that the name of Heaven not be profaned through me.'" Neusner notes that "the thrust of the exegesis is to avoid the notion that the couple had sexual relations."[338]

Later medieval and modern Bible commentators and midrashic compilations continue with this train of thought. Not one of them dares to suggest that Ruth and Boaz engaged in any kind of sexual activity on the threshing floor. Rather, they all embellish the tale of Ruth and Boaz's chastity. For example, Rashi in particular draws on the *midrashim* of *Ruth Rabbah* in his commentary.[339] Malbim takes a different approach, suggesting that Ruth intended for Boaz to redeem her immediately by having sexual intercourse with her (because levirate marriage is transacted by intercourse and does not require a marriage ritual), but Boaz informed her that there was another redeemer and they must wait chastely to see if he wishes to be her redeemer.[340]

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[336] Ruth Rabbah 3:13.
[337] Ruth Rabbah 3:14.
[338] Neusner, *Ruth Rabbah*, 167.
[339] Rashi on Ruth 3:3, 7, 13, 14.
[340] Malbim on Ruth 3:9.

The Meam Loez summarizes many of these teachings in his retelling of Ruth 3. For example, *Meam Loez* contrasts Ruth's request that Boaz "spread [his] skirt" with Potiphar's wife's demand that Joseph "lie with [her]."[341] Whereas Potiphar's wife is "brazen," Ruth, by comparison, speaks "obliquely and modestly."[342] *The Meam Loez* further explains that Boaz asked Ruth to "stay the night," not to have sexual intercourse, but rather "because it was unsafe for a woman to venture out alone at this late hour, and on the other hand harmful to their reputations for him to escort her."[343] *The Meam Loez* also summarizes *Ruth Rabbah's* mention of a chaperone to ensure their behavior, remarking, "It is noteworthy that Boaz was careful about being in seclusion with a woman, although the prohibition of *yichud* as such was first enacted by David."[344]

It is noteworthy that not one single commentator deviates from the approach that Ruth and Boaz did not have sexual intercourse on the threshing floor. Not even one *midrash* suggests that Ruth and Boaz gave in to temptation. Thus, the rabbinic retelling of Ruth 3 is complete. A Biblical tale of purposeful ambiguity and sexual innuendo is carefully transformed into a story of modesty, chastity, and perfect sexual morality.

C. Negotiating Boundaries

Ultimately, these questions of how to address difficult texts, and how to navigate changing societal contexts, are, at a certain level, really questions of boundaries. What boundaries are established by Jewish society? How are those boundaries enforced?

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[341] Ruth 3:9; Genesis 39:7.
[342] Meam Loez to Ruth 3:9.
[343] Meam Loez on Ruth 3:13.
[344] Meam Loez on Ruth 3:14.

What boundaries protect Jews and Judaism from outside influence? How does a minority community negotiate the majority culture?

1. Boundaries Between Jews and Gentiles

Much of the exegetical tradition about Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth is really about establishing and enforcing boundaries between Jews and non-Jews. As women who are not born Israelite, all three challenge these boundaries. Whether a character remains a Gentile or converts to Judaism, whether she lives among Jews or separately, or whether she is a threat to the Jewish community or a savior of it, all of these underscore certain boundaries. The non-Israelite woman must be defined. Her status must be settled, perhaps even transformed. A depiction of Rahab in which she remains a Canaanite and lives outside the Israelite camp tells readers that Canaanites are other, but we tolerate their presence amongst us. In contrast, a portrayal of Rahab as a righteous proselyte informs readers that there is no place for Canaanites amongst us, but conversion transforms the very essence of human beings, making Rahab one of us.

The assertion that Gentiles are dangerous, demonstrated in Part 2, is a means of establishing a clear boundary between us (Jews) and them (non-Jews). This boundary is particularly established and enforced around women. The rabbis use female Biblical characters to demonstrate this boundary. For example, the *midrash* states:

> Said R. Huna ben Levi, "She most certainly was a Moabite woman [in having desire for the young men]. For while Boaz had said to her, "but keep close to my maidens," she said to Naomi, "by my [male] servants."[345]

[345] Ruth Rabbah 2:21.

With this *midrash,* the rabbis assert that the power of one's Gentile nature is so strong that even Ruth cannot completely overcome it. Elsewhere in the corpus of Tannaitic Midrash, it is similarly taught:

> King Solomon loved many foreign women in addition to Pharoah's daughter..., [1 Kings 11:1]. Since "Pharoah's daughter" is included [in "many foreign women"], why is she singled out? It is to teach that he loved her more than all the others and she caused him to sin more than all the others.[346]

This passage warns Jewish men to stay away from foreign women, because the more they love a foreign woman, the more she will cause them to sin. Taken together, these *midrashim* demonstrate that Gentile women are not only immoral themselves; they are the vehicle through which otherwise fine Jewish men are corrupted. Such teachings establish clear boundaries and give Jews a clear warning to stay away.

The prohibition against intermarriage is similarly the establishment of a clear boundary between Jews and Gentiles. Given the absence of such a clear prohibition in the Bible, Hellenistic and Rabbinic texts make a point of creating one. First, the Book of Jubilees concludes the narrative of Dina with a strong prohibition against intermarriage based on Malachi 2:11, asserting that marrying "the daughter of a strange god" is a treacherous abomination.[347] Later, the rabbis of the Talmud take a different approach, using rabbinic rhetoric to advocate a Biblically based prohibition against intermarriage. They expand the Deuteronomic prohibition against marrying the seven Canaanite nations to include marrying all Gentiles.[348]

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[346] Sifre to Deuteronomy, *pisqa* 52.
[347] The Book of Jubilees 30.
[348] b. *Kiddushin* 68b; b. *Avodah Zarah* 36b.

However, a prohibition against intermarriage cannot stand alone. It requires enforcement. This enforcement is provided by rhetoric. For instance, the statement, "One who marries an Aramaean woman and bears from her children, establishes enemies of God," uses scare tactics to prevent Jewish men from marrying Gentile women.[349] Such rhetoric is also employed when Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* suggests that intermarriage is so heinous that it is worse than incest.[350] Such a claim uses a strong, universal, pre-existing taboo against incest to strengthen a weaker, newer taboo against intermarriage. The narrative of Judah and Tamar, in particular, is transformed into a case study for the merits of endogamy and the evils of intermarriage.[351] However, the Book of Ruth also receives attention for the advocacy of endogamy. For example, the Targum to the Book of Ruth posits that Machlon and Chilyon were killed by God for marrying "with strange nations."[352] Thus, Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth are used for the purpose of enforcing a prohibition against marrying foreigners. This prohibition is part of a larger boundary between Jewish and Gentile society.

2. Gender Roles

Just as the prohibition against intermarriage enforces boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, the separation between the public and private spheres enforces gender boundaries. By relegating women to the domestic sphere of home and family, and keeping women out of public matters such as politics, law, and official religion, the

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[349] y. *Megillah* 4:10, 75c.
[350] Biblical Antiquities 9:5.
[351] The Testament of Judah Chapters 8-12; the Book of Jubilees 41; Biblical Antiquities 9; Genesis Rabbah 85:1; Tanhuma Buber, *Vayeshev* 9.9; Midrash Hagadol to Genesis 38:1; Yalkut Shimoni I, *remez* 247.
[352] Targum to Ruth 1:5.

rabbis establish rigid gender roles and establish societal boundaries between men's work and women's work.

One of the ways that the rabbis relegate women to the domestic sphere is to insist that all women be married. As established in Part 2C, the rabbis are uncomfortable with unmarried and unattached women. Unmarried women are outside male control and their beauty is dangerous to men, thus making them a destabilizing force in society. The rabbis demonstrate this fear by creating husbands for the few Biblical women who are not mentioned as being married, because they cannot imagine unmarried women. The rabbis further demonstrate their concern with keeping women under their husband's control by creating *midrashim* that take away the independence of the most independent (and threatening) women in the Bible. For example, the midrash takes away Rahab's capacity for independent thought and places her firmly under her husband's influence by crediting Joshua with her conversion. An even more radical recasting of a powerful, independent, dangerous woman occurs in the case of Yael, whom the rabbis transform into a proper wife acting in accordance with her husband's will.[353]

Another way which the rabbis relegate women to the private sphere is to focus on women's maternal role. In the exegetical depictions of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, the rabbis stress their role as mothers, and the accomplishments of their offspring. In the case of Rahab, the rabbis give her children, all daughters. In regards to Tamar and Ruth, the rabbis portray them as equal to the matriarchs. In this way, the rabbis suggest that a woman's primary function is to raise children and her primary source of reward will also be through these offspring.

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[353] Tanna Debai Eliyahu Rabba 9; Yalkut Shimoni II, Judges, *remez* 247.

Another way the rabbis establish gender boundaries is to stress the importance of female modesty. In their depictions of Tamar and Ruth, the rabbis stress these virtues as signs of the women's piety. For example, Tamar is rewarded for always remaining veiled in Judah's house.[354] Similarly, Ruth is worthy of attracting Boaz's attention and bearing a royal son because she is so modest in every aspect of her behavior, including how she conducts herself while gleaning.[355] Modesty is shown to be an important virtue for Jewish women and a sign of their piety.

Finally, the rabbis reinforce this gendered boundary between males and females by punishing women who cross it. The nature of this punishment is dishonor and character defamation. A clear example of this phenomenon occurs in the Talmud in a *sugya* related to Rahab, which states:

> Rav Nachum said: Prominence is not becoming to women. For there were two prominent women, and their names were repulsive. One's name meant bee, and one's name meant weasel. Concerning the "bee" (Deborah), it is written: And she sent and called Barak. However, she herself did not go to him. Concerning the "weasel" (Chuldah), it is written: Tell the man. But she did not (more respectfully) say: Tell the king.[356]

With this and other passages, the rabbis rewrite Huldah's and Deborah's stories to express outrage at the prominent position given to the Biblical Huldah and Deborah. Though the Bible seems untroubled by the powerful public roles held by these women, the rabbis fear that their own women may get similar ideas. They thus recast Huldah and Deborah, to depict the negative consequences of women's haughty behavior.

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[354] Genesis Rabbah 85:8; b. *Megillah* 10b; Tanhuma Buber, *Vayeshev* 9:17.
[355] Ruth Rabbah 2:5; b. *Shabbat* 113b; Rashi on Ruth 2:5.
[356] b. *Megillah* 14b.

3. Sexual Boundaries

It is interesting that both the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles and the establishment of gender roles often focus on sexual behavior. Sexual behavior is not so much a separate category of action, as a subcategory of ethnic and gender relations. The rabbis show an interest in controlling who has what kind of sex with whom, as this allows them to control men and women, Jewish and Gentile alike. Sexual activity has profound consequences for society and is thus strongly regulated. In the characters of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, the rabbis encounter three women who are not born Israelites who engage in sexually troubling behavior. The way the rabbis address this behavior is linked with the rabbis own understanding of gender, ethnicity, religious identity, and sexuality. For example, the efforts of the rabbis to rewrite the Book of Ruth to deny any possibility of a sexual encounter between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor demonstrate the rabbis' discomfort with sexual activity between unmarried men and women.

Thus we find that changing societal contexts influence how the rabbis define and enforce boundaries and how they address difficult texts. Jewish exegesis weaves an intricate web of these interacting factors.

CONCLUSION

Tamar, Rahab and Ruth are all prominent women who engage in sexually atypical behavior, play an important role in covenant, join the Jewish people, and are rewarded through their male progeny. It is significant that foreigners should behave in such an admirable fashion, have such a profound effect on the Jewish people, and prove to be key figures in the Jewish legacy of covenant and redemption. It is equally noteworthy that these actions are taken by women, and that these women engage in sexual behavior of an atypical, and arguably immoral, nature. As both foreigners and females, these characters represent the "other." In contrast to the usual portrayal of the "other" as a threat, these women are transformed into the ultimate "insider."

The question remains as to how this transformation occurs and what it means. In one plausible Biblical reading, these women symbolize the possibility that foreigners can prove to be moral and enlightened creatures, and still be, in essence, foreigners. This idea would be represented by the Biblical view that Rahab and her family remained on the outskirts of Israelite society, a nation apart. In another plausible reading, this transformation requires foreigners to effectively cease to be foreign. In the moment they act for good, they cease to be foreign, because being foreign is inherently evil. This idea is demonstrated by the converse idea that Rahab had a conversionary experience.

As a general rule, the rabbis take the second approach. For the rabbis, the idea that foreignness is dangerous is all-pervasive. Gentiles represent an existential threat to the family's, communities, and very lives of Jewish people. Thus, they cannot save the Jewish people. The rabbis cannot except the notion of the good Gentile who remains a Gentile. In the rabbinic worldview, morality and spirituality and God's service are to closely tied to the notion of Jewishness. The possibility of a moral Gentile is

unthinkable. The very notion of a Gentile having a relationship with God is inconceivable – anathema. In the rabbinic mind, Rahab must convert because the alternative, that a pagan prostitute recognized the existence of God and acted in God's will and then went right back to her pagan ways, is shockingly, unimaginably, unacceptable! Rahab, like all positive Gentile figures, must transform into a Jew.

This transformation is inherently gendered. The transformation would not be as remarkable if it were experienced by men. In the rabbinic view, Gentile women are doubly threatening – as pagans and as females. The female, with her beauty and her seductive powers, feminine embodies the very danger the Gentile poses. Feminine wiles represent the power of the "other" to seduce males into idolatry, adultery, and other Godless behavior. Such uncontrolled sex appeal cannot be permitted to run free in the midst of the holy Jewish people. Thus, the rabbis view Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth through the lens of gender and sexuality. These three women are viewed as beautiful but modest, the height of proper female behavior.

However, it is not enough for the rabbis to transform these women from Gentiles into Jews. As women, this spiritual transformation must be represented in their gendered and sexual behavior. Thus, the rabbis employ the notion of conversion as a method of domestication. According to the rabbinic portrayal, the act of conversion transforms a seductive, slutty, uncontrollable Gentile female into a proper Jewish woman. To be a proper Jewish woman, she must be primarily a wife and a mother, and remain restricted to the private sphere. This concept sustains and perpetuates the rabbis' ideas of what constitutes proper female behavior.

Of course, these ideas arise from the rabbis' contemporary social context. They are not inherently, objectively obvious nor do they always flow from the Biblical text. Though there are other possible readings of the Biblical narratives of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, the rabbis choose to create an interpretation which is best in line with their own understandings of gender, sexuality, power, and Jewish-Gentile relations.

As can be expected, rabbinic understandings of gender, sexuality, power, and Jewish-Gentile relations change over time. Nonetheless, some general concepts remain constant for nearly two millennia, from the Hellenistic period to the dawn of modernity. For example, the idea that Gentiles are dangerous, the strong prohibition of intermarriage, the concern with female modesty, the presumption that all adults must marry (especially women), and the discomfort with prostitution do not seem to change in any significant fashion during the time period studied.

However, rabbinic discourse does not remain constant. The influence of Hellenistic thought rises, and then fades away, forcing the author of *Meam Loez,* and other later commentaries, to recast some of the strongest polemics of Hellenistic misogyny in a more egalitarian fashion. Thus, in modern times, the tradition that King David's cruelty is the result of his pagan ancestors is retold, but this idea is restated in a fashion that casts no aspersion on either women or the monotheistic gentiles of modernity. Similarly, medieval and modern exegetes show no interest in portraying women as passive. It is also noteworthy that the trope of the "evil Gentile" fades considerably in the post-Talmudic period, as Jews cease to live among pagans and begin to live amongst Christian and Muslim majorities. Gentiles remain the "other" to be sure, and strong boundaries are delineated (for example, intermarriage), but the respectable,

monotheistic Christians and Muslims with whom Jews dwell do not seem to fit the profile of the idolatrous, adulterous heathens painted by the rabbis of old. Thus, in the *Meam Loez,* the author is far more concerned with fighting assimilation than with demonstrating the overall evil nature of all Gentiles.

In this way, the rabbis use Biblical exegesis to respond to the societies in which they live and their contemporary issues. Through the *midrash,* the rabbis of every generation delineate and negotiate boundaries – boundaries between Jews and the Gentile majority, and boundaries between men and women. The rabbis use the vehicle of *midrash* to explain their own realities (for example, the existence of conversion) and to reconcile conflicts between their own worldview and the worldview of the Biblical text.

Just as the rabbis of old responded to their societal contexts, we today must do the same. Thus, we must ask ourselves what we can learn from the midrashic traditions of the past, and how we can develop the tradition in the exegesis of the future.

From the classical *midrashim* of the past, we can learn the importance of conversion (a value that is sometimes lost in twenty-first century Reform Jewish culture). We can be reminded that becoming a part of the Jewish people is not the same as "living in the midst" of that people while remaining "on the outskirts." We can learn that converts are a great blessing to the People of Israel. We can learn that some of our finest ancestors were "outsiders" who joined the covenant. We can learn the value of repentance and the possibility of transformational change. We can learn that being a Jew is more about behavior and belief than birth.

With an eye to our own society, we can reenvision these teachings to show us the way to a contemporary view of Jewish-Gentile relations, intermarriage, and otherness.

We can learn from Rahab that it is possible for a Gentile to believe in and serve God, while still remaining a Gentile. We can learn that there is much we have to learn from members of others faiths. We can learn that we should share our own faith with others, encouraging the "other" to fully join us, but also validating and even appreciating the "other" who remains "in our midst" and "on the outskirts."

In keeping with the best of a feminist infused Judaism, we can use the stories of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth to create a new Jewish perspective on gender, sexuality, and women's power. This work is already well underway. For some contemporary scholars, Tamar has become a feminist role model, a woman who had the courage to stand up to patriarchy and demand her rights. For these commentators, Tamar represents a disenfranchised minority fighting for justice.[357] For other women, Ruth represents a woman who loves women. To these lesbian writers, the story of Ruth and Naomi is a tale of two women who love each other deeply and join their lives and their fates to each other.[358] For other women, Rahab and Joshua model an interfaith marriage full of passionate love and equally passionate arguments. In this depiction, Rahab respects Judaism but still experiences guilt and feels loyalty to her own culture and family, and refuses to go to the ritual bath to officially become a Jew.[359] For contemporary feminists, who celebrate female sexuality and object to the demeaning of female prostitutes, Rahab stops engaging in acts of prostitution but continues to defend her past choice to have sex for money.

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[357] Blachman, "The Transformation of Tamar (Genesis 38) in the History of Jewish Interpretation," 428-9.
[358] Rebecca Alpert, "Finding Our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of the Book of Ruth," *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim A Sacred Story,* ed. Judith A Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 91-96.
[359] Jill Hammer, *Sisters At Sinai,* 147-153, 274-275.

In order to broaden this thesis, material from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries should be included. In order to curtail the scope of this project, and the length of this thesis, I ended my research with the dawn of modernity. *Meam Loez* was an arbitrary stopping point. To fully complete this endeavor, we would need to fully examine modern and contemporary material. This would include not only feminist midrash of the twentieth-century English language variety, but also Modern Hebrew poetry and prose, Yiddish writings and other sources.

A full investigation of this topic would also necessitate deeper exploration into the unknown world of obscure *midrashim,* untranslated texts, and unpublished interpretations. For example, is Teman's claim that there exists a tradition that Rahab married Perez accurate? Where is this source? What is the root of the Yemenite *midrash* that the scarlet thread tied from Rahab's window was the very same one tied to Zerah's finger? What other currently unknown teachings can be found in the unexcavated chambers housing the Jewish tradition?

Such an exploration would undoubtedly, eventually, lead to an investigation of the role played by Christian and Muslim society and exegesis. Understanding the rabbinic worldview requires not only an examination of Hellenistic thought (offered here), but an explanation of Christian and Muslim thought. Is the idea that Rahab is a foremother of King David a pre-Christian Jewish idea, or does it come into existence with the Gospel of Matthew? To what extent are Jewish exegetes influenced by Christian teachings about Rahab? Do Muslim texts speak of Tamar, Rahab, or Ruth? If so, what do they say? Are Yemenite *midrashim,* unknown in other Jewish texts, strongly influenced by Muslim tradition?

All these questions deserve to be asked and answered, but they will have to remain the topic of another thesis. In the meantime, I hope that this thesis has contributed in some small way to helping the twenty-first century Jewish reader to better understand the rabbis of old, and better contribute to the Judaism of tomorrow. May it be a link in the chain of reinterpreting the Jewish tradition in each generation!!

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