WOMEN AND SUBTERFUGE IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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To my family in Brooklyn,
my family in Israel,
and most of all
to Yigal, Liya and Yonatan,
for all that you have done
to create, shape, and enrich
my narrative.

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Introduction

It is perhaps not surprising that the main interest of the Talmud and midrash in Biblical narrative is focused on the male characters. A great deal more is written about their actions and motivations than about those of the Biblical women. This is not to say that traditional Jewish sources ignore the women characters, for they certainly do not. There is no lack of examples in which the traditional sources address questions related to the women that are as original and insightful today as they were when they were first posed. However, in many cases, the women are more useful to these sources as paradigms of representative female behavior. As such they take on great significance as role models, or even reverse role models. But there is a paucity of material in these sources about the Biblical women as individuals, and about the specifically female ways in which they are portrayed and treated by the text. Similarly, until recently, much of 20th century biblical scholarship has focused on the actions of the male protagonists as well. What is of central interest in the standard scholarly commentaries on Genesis, for example, are the actions of the males in the stories.[1] The women are important inasmuch as their actions intersect with the male thrust of the tale. It is only with the arrival of feminist biblical criticism that the female characters are being seriously studied and explored in

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[1]See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972; Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in Light of History*. New York: Schocken, 1966; E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*. Anchor Bible 1. Garden City, N Y: Doubleday, 1964; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37-50: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982.

their own right.[2]

One of the observations that immediately surfaces upon studying the women of the Bible is that in fact they are not, as a group, completely powerless or passive. There is episode after episode that turns on action initiated by a woman. What makes many of these episodes stand out, however, is that much of the action initiated by women is done through subterfuge, the art of operating in an under-handed manner, either behind the scenes, or by using deceit, disguise, or sleight of hand. What is it about biblical narrative that causes the women within it to resort to trickery in order to achieve their objectives? And who ultimately gains from this subterfuge?

In order to try to answer these questions, I have chosen six women from the many women, named and unnamed, in the Bible. Each of these women in some way uses subterfuge to achieve a goal. The first is Rebekah, who concocts a plan which will allow her favored but younger son Jacob to inherit the birthright from his father that should, according to biblical rules of inheritance, go to his older brother. Also from Genesis is Tamar, who poses as a prostitute in order to become pregnant by her father-in-law Judah, who has not provided her with his remaining son according to the rules of levirate marriage. Both of these women see what to them is perceived as a wrong, and set out to

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[2] See Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987; Athalya Brenner, ed. *Feminist Companion to the Book of Judges*. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1993; Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Stories*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.

right it, despite having to use underhanded means. From Judges I have chosen Yael and Delilah, both of whom use trust and hospitality to lull men into fatally letting down their guard. Yael, who despite her non-Israelite status kills Sisera, an enemy of the Israelites, merits great praise within the Bible itself, whereas Delilah, also a non-Israelite, is the undoing of Samson, a great Israelite hero, and thus is not viewed in the same light as Yael.[3] Two of David's wives from I Samuel, Michal and Abigail, will also be considered in this study. Michal, Saul's daughter who loves David and is used by her father as a snare, helps David to escape her father's wrath by pretending that he is asleep in her bed. Abigail goes behind her husband Nabal's back to help David, while also protecting David from being involved in unnecessary violence.

In this study, themes, motifs and language shared by these six stories will be closely examined. Divergences will be considered as well. Robert Alter provides a useful framework for the study of Biblical narrative. He identifies the use of repetition and patterns as part of the methodology of the narrative. Repetition is a basic element in a written narrative based on an older, oral tradition. But more than that, one of the crucial elements of this style of narrative is to note carefully where the text diverges from the pattern, for that difference will indicate a place of meaning. Alter uses the term type-scene to denote a kind of episode in the narrative that will function as a paradigm for later episodes. A type-scene will have a set of motifs and themes that differentiate it. As is the

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[3] J. Cheryl Exum puts forth a theory disputing Delilah's non-Israelite status in *Fragmented Women: Feminist Subversions of Biblical Narrative*. Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993.

case in the repetition of the language itself, the repetition of type-scenes sets the stage for certain expectations, and what becomes important is where the type-scene diverges from the paradigm.[4]

> The resurgence of certain pronounced patterns at certain narrative junctures was conventionally anticipated, even counted on, and that against that ground of anticipation the biblical authors set words, motifs, themes, personages, and actions into an elaborate dance of significant innovation.[5]

He goes on to outline the way in which the narrative uses these repetitions. These techniques involve: *leitwort*, or the word-motif; motif, which focuses on an repeated image, action, or article; theme, an on-going idea that is central to a particular narrative; sequence of actions, often used at an increasing pace to add a sense of action to narrative; and finally the type-scene.[6] These tools will form part of the approach to the examination of biblical narrative that forms this study.

Space, specifically domestic space, is one motif that recurs throughout these narratives. Almost all the episodes involving these women occur indoors, at home, within the female realm. Tamar's story then stands out and her taking on the role of a prostitute becomes even more prominent in the story when viewed in comparison to the tales of other women. The daring involved in her deception is further emphasized, as is the place

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[4] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 60-61.

[5] Ibid., 62.

[6] Ibid., 95-96.

of the prostitute as an outsider among women. Domestic objects also form part of the motif. Rebekah is involved with cooking and dressing, Yael serves milk, Michal's tale involves a bed, Abigail feeds David and his men. The idea of covering and uncovering is another motif that runs throughout these stories, sometimes even as a *leitwort*, working as apt metaphor for their acts of subterfuge. The women's bodies also form part of the motif. Tamar's body is both her weapon, and a battlefield. Delilah seduces Samson while he rests on her knees. When Yael killed Sisera he sinks between her legs. During Rebekah's pregnancy her body and the momentous changes happening within it foreshadow the events that are to come when Jacob and Esau are grown.

One of the first questions that needs to be addressed upon reading these tales is that of power and authority. Do these women have power? How do they use their power? And do they have any authority? Is there a connection between their lack of authority and their recourse to subterfuge as a way to exercise their power? Meyers, citing earlier work by Rosaldo, writes that authority is having the official the right to make decisions and influence the actions of others, while power is the ability to bring about results <u>despite</u> the lack of authority. She writes:

> Female power typically involves informal and unofficial modes of behavior that may never receive male acknowledgment but through which females may exert considerable and systematic direction over a range of circumstances. Authority is basically a hierarchical arrangement that may be expressed in formal legal or juridical traditions. Power has no such cultural sanctions but nonetheless can play a decisive role in social interaction.[7]

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[7] Carol L. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 41.

Meyers is quick to point out though that from an historical perspective, biblical women in a pre-monarchic setting in fact had a great deal of power and even perhaps some authority. She argues that during a period in which the household was the central communal unit, women had a decision making role. At a time when the main tasks of any communal unit were reproduction, defense, and the production of subsistence goods, women were partners with men in doing the necessary work. Much of the food preparation and technology was in the hands of women, who also oversaw and controlled a household of children and younger women.[8] At the same time, due to the workings of patrilineality and partilocality, marriage generally meant that men stayed in place while women entered completely new households. Because of the specific needs of working the land, the husband, who was familiar with the land and the technological systems needed to maximize production, exercised authority in that realm.[9]

With the rise of the state and the monarchic system, the household unit was no longer the main institution it had been. More clearly defined roles for men and women developed, especially with the creation of a national military. The demarcation of a male sphere, the public world, and a female sphere, the private, household world, took shape. An urban class developed in which there were women with leisure time and access to money. Even in rural areas, households became more specialized in areas of production

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[8] Ibid., 174.

[9] Ibid., 183-186.

and less subsistence-based. With the rise of large landowners, there also developed a wealthy class of rural dwellers.[10]

While Biblical women may not have had access to authority, they certainly had some amount of power. Not having had the authority to use their power overtly, they often reverted to subterfuge to produce the desired results. While for some commentators, these deceits were seen as typical female behavior,[11] more recently they are being understood as a necessary result of powerlessness rather than as indicative of inherent female character traits.[12] Ashley argues that these acts of deception are to be viewed as morally neutral.[13] They are simply ways to fix problems, conceived within the parameters of power available to the character. Indeed, she argues that women may in fact be doing a service by acting in such a way, providing for change in a way that man is unable to do.

> Insofar as females in biblical narrative are also social marginals, often morally ambiguous, or in violation of cultural categories, they may be available to the society as a means of renewal or change. They may use strategies which are not normally valid, including deception, or they may exploit linguistic ambiguity to

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[10] Ibid., 190-192.

[11] "Cherchez la femme" writes J.P. Fokkelman about Rebekah's behavior in Genesis 27. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975) 100.

[12] Kathleen M. Ashley. "Interrogating Biblical Deception and Trickster Theories: Narratives of Patriarchy or Possibility?" (*Semeia* 42, 1988) 103-116.

[13] Ashley, "Interrogating Biblical Deception and Trickster Theories: Narratives of Patriarchy or Possibility?" 106.

redefine terms in order to provide a solution to problems.[14]

Because women were already considered "other," and therefore were not judged by the same standards of behavior as their male counterparts, they were able to exercise a certain freedom of action in order to obtain results. In her own study of Biblical women and deceit, Bach notes of the episodes she investigates, "Each reflects the failure of *individual* male power. None questions the normalcy of that power."[15] The context in which these women operate in one in which they work against the limitations of their power vis-à-vis an assumption of greater power and authority on the part of the men they encounter and with whom they are involved.

Is there something specifically female, then, about the use of trickery, particularly in Biblical narrative? The trickster is a folk tale character common to many cultures. The trickster figure is generally male, and often not even human in form. Many times the trickster has the ability to change shapes. The trickster always represents the underdog, someone who triumphs despite his lack of authority. Hyde writes that tricksters "invert and disorder normal patterns."[16] The West African trickster tradition is particularly rich, and reveals many elements of the trickster motif.

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[14] Ibid., 107.

[15] Alice Bach. *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 188.

[16] Lewis Hyde. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art.* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) 186.

> West Africa it has been said is a place where stories grow on trees. All over the region folk myths and legends are still very much alive. The star character in a great many of the tales is the trickster, albeit he has several different guises and alibis. Part rogue, part pint-sized hero, he takes on the dubious laws of the jungle single-handed. What he lacks in sheer bulk or strength, he more than makes up for in natural cunning. Whether confronted by a roaring lion or a rustling famine his 'trickishness' is a sort of passport to survival in a far-from-ideal world. True, he sometimes overreaches himself and, much to everyone's amusement, is caught and punished. But it is never for so long that he cannot soon wriggle himself free to star in the next story, trickish and ingenious as ever.[17]

West Africa has its Anansi tales, which feature a spider. In China there are the stories of the White Bone Monkey. The American Brer Rabbit tales are classic trickster tales, which show an influence of African trickster rabbit stories. There is Juan Bobo, who is either a boy or a pig in stories from Puerto Rico, and Uncle Bouqui and Ti Malice from Haiti, who change their shapes. Many European stories, which straddle the line between folk tales and fairy tales, feature a human trickster character, like those featuring a Jack character, as in Jack and the Beanstalk. There are Jewish trickster tales which use the character of Elijah, and Isaac Bachevis Singer's character Todie the Fool is a re-invention of an Eastern European trickster figure.[18]

Because biblical women fit the description of trickster characters in many ways, some readers of biblical narrative have viewed these women as trickster figures. But while tricksters are generally portrayed as physically small and helpless, it is rare that any are

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[17] Bennett, Martin, reteller. *West African Trickster Tales.* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994) not paginated.

[18] Bernice E. Cullinan & Diane G. Person, eds. *Encyclopedia of Children's Literature,* (New York: Continuum Press, forthcoming).

female.[19] Hyde addresses this issue, writing:

> All the standard tricksters are male. There are three related reasons why this might be. First, these tricksters may belong to patriarchal mythologies, ones in which the prime actors, even oppositional actors, are male. Second, there may be a problem with the standard itself; there may be female tricksters who have simply been ignored. Finally, it may be that the trickster stories articulate some distinction between men and women, so that even in a matriarchal setting this figure would be male.[20]

Hyde recognizes that some scholars have described Biblical women as tricksters, citing as one example the case of Rachel hiding her father's teraphim. However, he maintains that "These are examples of female trickery, not of female tricksters."[21] He goes on further to argue that because trickster stories are in part stories about power and the subversion of power, and since power is a male prerogative, that in order for these stories to work, the trickster characters necessarily need to also be male.[22]

Another complication regarding the possibility of female trickster figures is the role that sexuality plays in the life of the trickster. Hyde argues that the kind of sexuality embodied by the trickster is necessarily antithetical to women.

> First of all, at least before the technology of birth control, the consequences of the kind of on-the-road opportunistic sexuality that trickster displays were clearly more serious for the sex that must gestate, bear, and suckle the young... Second, these might be stories about non-procreative creativity and so get attached to the sex that doesn't give birth. It should be noted that trickster's fabled sex drive

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[19] One exception are the Mollie Woopie tales from England which feature a female trickster in the guise of small but fearless girl.

[20] Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*, 335.

[21] Ibid., 338.

[22] Ibid., 340.

> rarely leads to any offspring. Tricksters do not make new life, they rearrange what is already at hand.[23]

Clearly these Biblical women do not fill the contours of the classic trickster mold. But that they "rearrange what is already at hand," is evident in the results of their acts of subterfuge. While they do not exhibit the same kind of casual catch-as-catch can approach to sexuality as the classic trickster, sexuality is an important element in each of these episodes of trickery. It is true that their trickery is encapsulated into one major incident, and they do not reappear as ongoing trickster characters within Biblical narrative itself, as do some male characters like Jacob. In some cases though, they do continue their trickster careers within the midrashic imagination. However, this may be a case of the chicken or the egg. Does their tendency to disappear from the text once their work is done owe to the fact that they are not true tricksters and therefore don't qualify for that designation, or do they disappear from the text and therefore not qualify because they are true tricksters and the patriarchal texts needs to diminish their power and reach? Perhaps it is possible, then, to see these women as representing a kind of Ancient Near Eastern trickster who differed from tricksters of other cultures but served a similar narrative need.

The language of relationships in which these women are embedded needs to be studied, as well as the texture of the relationships themselves. There were few roles available for Biblical women outside of being mothers and wives, so that how those roles get played out becomes critical to the narrative. It is through these roles that they derive,

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[23] Ibid., 341.

in most cases, their limited power, yet these stories also reflect the problematic limitations of those roles, and what happens to both the narrative and the woman herself when she is not safely bound within the family. Through their relationships with husbands, father-in-laws and sons, women gain security and status, escaping the fate of marginalization. Yet due to their dual role as sexual being and source of life, women too can hold the key to the fate of men, as it through women that men can be born, re-born, nurtured, seduced into danger, and even killed. The very way in which the text refers to women can be revealing as well. Rebekah, for example, is not referred to as אשת יצחק, "Isaac's wife," anywhere during the episode in which she and Jacob deceive Isaac. Instead she is referred to three times in Chapter 27 as *emo*, "his mother." Michal is portrayed as being caught in a tug-of-war between her father and husband, alternately referred to as Saul's daughter or as David's wife. Delilah, on the other hand, belongs to no one but herself, or so it would seem from the language with which she described in the text. She is simply Delilah, which is both part of her allure, and ultimately what makes her so dangerous for Samson.

This study takes the stories of these six women as part of whole. The concern is with the language of these stories and how the stories have been read and continue to be read. That they derive from different periods and have active within them different writers and editors is not a primary consideration of this study. Despite having come from different hands and different periods, they have been presented as a whole since the canonization of the Hebrew Bible. In that way then, they naturally offer insights into one another, and serve as commentary and points of contrast to each other.

Chapter One

Rebekah

Genesis is often described as a kind of primordial family album. It abounds with portraits of the first people, the first mothers and fathers, the first sons and to a lesser extent the first daughters, the first Israelites. Family stories are of the utmost concern in Genesis, as those first people make their way from the Garden of Eden into a unique covenantal relationship with the God of Israel. Rebekah emerges from this context as an significant character. Like Abraham, her father-in-law, she is willing to leave home and go out into the unknown. Also like Abraham, she receives direct prophecy from God. She is both the wife of one patriarch, and the mother of another. It is the part she plays in shaping the future of the not-yet established tribe that is the most remarkable, and merits her inclusion in this study. At a critical moment in the text, Rebekah steps in, and uses the limited tools at her disposal to dramatically effect the flow of the narrative.

The language of relationships which are used to describe Rebekah reveal much about the development of her character. When Rebekah is first mentioned, in Genesis 24:15, she is introduced as the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor. The text deliberately links her with Abraham's family, while at the same time emphasizing her daughterhood. She is her father's daughter, and not yet any man's wife. She herself repeats that same lineage, leaving out Abraham, when she introduces herself to the stranger at the well. This lineage is repeated once more by the servant himself, quoting Rebekah, when he speaks to Laban in 24:47, as if to reassure

Laban that he understood properly who she was, and that there had been no misunderstanding or improprieties. Her personal lineage is repeated again in 25:20, when she is reported to have become Isaac's wife. This lineage, which will be the last to link her to her family of birth, is longer and more formal than the previous lineages and emphasizes that she is now far from home by adding names of areas. Additionally, this one emphasizes Laban her brother, who took the active role in allowing her to go off and become Isaac's wife. By the very next line, 25:21, Rebekah already has a new identity. She is now אשתו, "Isaac's wife."

What is known about Rebekah? Rebekah is first introduced into the story of Genesis in chapter 24 when Abraham's servant sees her at a well. She is brought back to be Isaac's wife, and the text states that Isaac loved her, and that through her he found the comfort that he sought in having lost his mother. The text keeps her waiting offstage until she is reintroduced and mentioned as Isaac's wife in the middle of chapter 25. Then in the next line it is revealed that she is barren. With Isaac's intervention, she conceives and gives birth to twins.

What started out as a love story, albeit a one-sided tale with Rebekah's side missing from the text, becomes a story of a divided family. Fokkelman maintains that Isaac's one great moment comes when he intervenes with God to ask that Rebekah become pregnant (25:21). The fact that the text uses ללדת, "to give birth," in 25:24 and 25:26, as opposed to the more common "begot," implies that the Isaac had little to do with the conception of the children. Rather, they are the result of an affair between God

and Rebekah.[24] Having done his part, Isaac recedes from the narrative and Rebekah takes center stage.

Rebekah has had an unusual experience for women in biblical narrative. She has personally received prophecy from God. During her difficult pregnancy she was told that there were two nations in her womb, and that the older would serve the younger. Does this then explain her motivation for engaging in subterfuge in order to trick Isaac? Is her knowledge that Jacob is going to be the son who inherits and carries on the line which causes her to look out for him, protect him, and push him when necessary, doing her part to ensure the fulfillment of the prophecy despite that the fact that prophecy inevitably will come true? Or is there something in Jacob's character that is familiar to Rebekah, something she understands and want to nurture that is absent in Esau?

Exum writes that according to the rules of the narrative, Isaac cannot favor Jacob, for that would be going against the "patriarchal status quo."[25] She notes that the depiction of Rebekah here reflects a male view of motherhood, in which women will naturally advance the interests of their children, even if underhanded methods are needed to do so.[26] However, even if her heart belongs to Jacob, Esau is also her son. In the system of primogeniture, it is supposed to be the older son who carries on the line and inherits.

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[24] J.P. Fokkelman. *Narrative Art in Genesis*, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975) 92; also J. Cheryl Exum. *Fragmented Women: Feminist Subversions of Biblical Narrative*, (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993) 123.

[25] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 132.

[26] Ibid., 133.

Syrén posits that the importance in the Old Testament of the first-born is due in part to ancient agricultural rites which would have required the sacrifice to gods of the first-born and the first-fruits. A first-born son was also seen as a sign of the father's virility and strength.[27] It was common practice in the ancient Near East, attested to in extra-Biblical documents, that the first-born son inherited a greater share of the father's estate than any siblings.[28] While there is evidence in these documents that the status of first-born could be designated by the father, the law stated in Deuteronomy 21:15-17 makes it clear that in Biblical law this was not to be the case.[29] The first-born was to inherit whatever accompanied that status, regardless of the father's feelings towards that son. Sarna points out the special sanctity of the first-born Israelite son, noting that in the post-child sacrifice milieu, first-born sons had to be redeemed from their unique cultic status, but their position within the family remained unique in relation to the other offspring. He writes:

> Being the primary guarantor of the future of the family line and, hence, of the preservation of the ancestral heritage, he naturally ranked second only to the head of the family whose successor he would automatically become. The status of the first-born was thus bound up with responsibilities and obligations, on the one hand and rights, privileges and prerogatives on the other, including a double portion of the patrimony. All these were formalized by the father's testamentary blessing.[30]

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[27] Roger Syrén. *The Forsaken First-Born: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 88.

[28] Ibid., 90.

[29] Ibid., 91.

[30] Nahum M. Sarna. *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in Light of History*, (New York: Schocken, 1966) 184-185.

Despite the fact that in Biblical narrative it does in fact often happen that the younger son takes on the typical rights and responsibilities of the older son, that is presented as the surprise element of the story. As Syrén notes, the first-born son of each of the three patriarchs is rejected in favor of God's choice. He identifies this phenomenon of the Genesis narrative as the "motif of the forsaken first-born," a motif that is crucial to the theological underpinnings of the narrative as it serves "to underline Israel's consciousness of its own standing as God's elected people."[31] It is important to note that this is not the only example in Biblical narrative, Dueteronomic law notwithstanding, in which a father passes over his first-born son and chooses a younger son to inherit, though interestingly those episodes involve Jacob as well. The first occurs when Jacob denies Reuben his first-born status and the second when Jacob chooses his grandson Ephraim over Manasseh.[32]

That Jacob is the son of her heart, and that he comes to claims essentially all of her love, is evident in the language of the narrative itself. Throughout chapter 27, Esau is referred to as בנו, "his son" (27:5), אחיך, "your brother" (27:6, 42, 44), or אחי, "my brother" (27:11). While twice he is called בנה גדול, "her older son" (27:15, 42), Esau is never referred to as simply, בנה, "her son." He is only Rebekah's son in relation to Jacob. Jacob, however, is referred to several times as בנה, "her son" (27:6, 17), and even more

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[31] Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 142-143.

[32] Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 186.

intimately as בני, "my son" (27:7, 13, 43). Isaac is never referred to in direction connection to Rebekah, only as אביך, "your father" (27:6, 9, 10), and as אביו, "his father" (27:14), despite her having been אשתו in chapter 25, before the birth of their sons (25:21). With the arrival of Jacob, Isaac's importance for Rebekah recedes into the background, and her most primary relationship is with Jacob her son. Rebekah and Esau do not interact, and neither do Rebekah and Isaac until the very end of the tale. While Isaac is reported to have loved Rebekah upon seeing her the narrative never states that Rebekah returns this love (24:67). Instead, all the love that she is able to give is directed towards her son Jacob.

Rebekah's main role in the text is giving birth to the next generation of followers of Yahweh. Her female body, then, has a great deal to do with her actions in the story. Her barrenness is a problem, because without children not only is her main function denied, but God's promise to Abraham will go unfilled, albeit one generation later. It is her female body that is both a problem, and the solution. In the lines 25:19 through 25:25, which discuss her barrenness, her pregnancy, and the birth of the twins, her body, as a specifically female body, is talked about four times. The text uses the word קרבה to describe the children struggling within her (25:22). While the use of קרבה seems especially apt here as it plays off the name רבקה, "Rivkah," it does not appear to have a gender-specific usage. It is used to refer to Sarah's laughter that comes from within her, an image applicable to male or female (Gen 18:12) . The word קרב is used to indicate the inside of any person (Psalm 64:7). קרב can also be used to indicate inside space, space that is defined by a boundary from outer space, as in the number of righteous people to be

found within Sodom (Gen 18:24). But while there is not a specifically female anatomical connection to this word, there is a thematic connection, for the use of קרבה is a reminder of a woman's place. The interior is the woman's space, and it is inside the home that Rebekah functions. Once Rebekah becomes Isaac's wife, she is no longer seen in outdoor settings, except during the episode with Avimelech when she plays the role of a unmarried woman. Her importance in the narrative is intrinsically connected to the role the interior of her body plays in the story, and the way she pushes from within the home and within the family against the confines of her limited power.

The word בטן is used twice in that same small section, first in 25:23, and again in 25:24. בטן, like קרב, can mean the interior space of the body in a non-gendered way (Job 38:29, Prov 18:8). But בטן is also often used to specifically connote the place within women from which children come. פריבטן, fruit of the womb, is a common expression, used by Jacob in response to Rachel's complaints of barrenness (Gen 30:2). There is reference to refers to בטן־אמי, "my mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13), and to בטן־אמו, "his mother's womb" (Eccl 5:14). The state of pregnancy is often referred to using the word בטן, as in Jeremiah 1:5, indicating that God knew him since the time he was still within his mother. בטן can be used to represent a middle stage between birth and conception, in other words, pregnancy (Hos 9:11). In Gen 25:23, בטן is used to describe what is happening to Rebekah. However, in 25:24 בטן encompasses the birth itself, as the contents of the בטן are revealed to the outside. The actual construction of 25:24, where בטן is used to herald a birth in that way, is used only in one other place in the Bible, and there it is used almost identically. The text states והנה תומם בבטנה - "behold, there

were twins in her womb" (Gen 25:24). The exact same sentence reappears to describe the birth of Tamar's twins (Gen 38:27). The only difference between the two is that in chapter 25 תומם is written חסר, and in 38 it is written מעלה. That these two stories are meant to read one against the other will become even clearer when the study turns to Tamar.

The third word used to describe Rebekah's body is ממעיך (25:23). This is a much less common word than בטן or קרב, but like both of those words, it too can refer to gender-neutral innards as well as to specifically female anatomy. It can be used as a parallel of בטן (Ezek 3:3, Num 5:22). If all of these words are similar, and none is more specific to women than another, why does the text use three different words in such rapid sequence? The use of the different words makes it impossible to forget that Rebekah is now pregnant and awaiting the outcome of this fateful pregnancy. The repeated use of related words within such a small segment of text keeps the focus on the pregnancy, creates a sense of tension about the eventual outcome, and also literally crowds the text with the image of pregnancy, mirroring the crowding and tension that is actually going on inside Rebekah.

The twins are born, and within several lines, the text reports that Rebekah loves Jacob. There are very few instances in which a woman's love is noted in biblical narrative. Michal is the only other woman whom is reported to have loved. Women are loved, but rarely does the text allow them to be on the active side of loving. Clearly Rebekah's love for Jacob is a different kind of love than that of Isaac's for Rebekah, Samson's for Delilah, and Ahausuerus for Esther (Es 2:17). There are many kinds of love in the Bible. There is the sexual, sensual, physical love portrayed in the Song of Songs. There is the seemingly

non-physical but heartfelt love between two people of the same sex, David and Jonathan, which ensured David of Jonathan's loyalty and protection (1 Sam 20:17). There is love of God (Ps 97:10) and the love of a people for its monarch (I Sam 18:16). There is love too of material goods such as food (Gen 27:14) or money (Eccl 5:9). Love is also expressed as the opposite of hate (II Sam 19:7).

Love has the power to propel Rebekah into action. Unwilling to let events unfold on their own, she is determined to see Jacob realize his destiny, and sets out to activate what she understands to be God's plan. She does not initiate her plan for her own material benefit, but for the benefit of her beloved son. Because of her love, she is even willing to take on the consequences of the act herself and spare Jacob. She carries out her subterfuge not to gain Jacob's love in return, but to help him on his way. And in fact once the plan is in place, Jacob must flee and she never sees her son again. The difference between Isaac's love of Esau and Rebekah's love of Jacob is important to note. While according to the midrash, Rebekah loved Jacob because of what God had revealed to her about his great future, the Biblical text itself is silent.[33] The text reveals that Isaac's love was based on what he got from Esau. His son the hunter brought him the fresh game that he loved, and so he loved his son. But Rebekah's love is left unexplained. It appears to not be based on anything she got from the relationship. She simply loves Jacob.[34]

Images of domesticity fill Rebekah's story in chapter 27. Her weapons are the

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[33] Midrash Tehillim, 9:7.

[34] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 44.

items immediately and easily available to her. It is those things that mark this as a woman's story, and put Rebekah front and center in the story. She is based in interior space, if not literally inside then in the inner portion of the area defined as home. She has to send Jacob outside to get meat, while she has the utensils needed to prepare that meat nearby. Line 15 identifies her as being בבית, "inside the house." She has access to the family's clothing, and that too, along with food, becomes one of the weapons. Goatskin too may have been a common domestic item, an ancient kind of bedclothes. Armed with food and bread that she had prepared, dressed in Esau's clothing that she had set aside, and covered with goatskin she had given him, Rebekah sends Jacob off to trick his father into giving him Esau's birthright.

Rebekah has been alternately praised and condemned for her actions. Rashi's commentary is much more concerned with Isaac and Jacob than with Rebekah. While Speiser, Sarna, Coats and von Rad also basically overlook Rebekah as a character in the narrative and focus on Isaac and Jacob, Fokkelman takes quite a critical view of Rebekah. He calls her a manipulator and writes, "Cherchez la femme." Her actions here fit into expected female patterns of behavior for Fokkelman.[35] While he acknowledges her active role in the tale, he condemns her as a victim of her own maneuvering, never seeing her children again because of her actions. He lays all of the family's problems at her feet, writing, "finally we see scheming behind the scenes the originator of all the misery and the one who is responsible in the first place, Rebekah. ... She is the only one guilty with

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[35] Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 100.

respect to the others."[36] Sarna, on the other hand, sees no cause for blame in the events of this episode, writing "the presence of the oracle in the story constitutes, in effect, a moral judgment upon Jacob's behavior."[37] Despite the fact that for Sarna, Jacob is the main actor and not Rebekah, the prophecy that she received during her pregnancy justifies the actions that she and Jacob undertake. It is as if the oracle put God's stamp of approval on the subsequent act of deception.

Despite many 20th century commentator's unwillingness to give Rebekah credit for her actions, Alter draws attention to the language of chapter 27. Through a deliberate use of active verbs in chapter 27, Rebekah is shown to be in control of the plan to deceive Jacob.[38] The verbs used to describe her activities portray her ordering Jacob about, cooking, preparing, taking, dressing. Rebekah's repeated use of the expression שמע בקולי is important as well. Three times in chapter 27 [9, 13, 43] Rebekah tells Jacob to listen to her. She commands Jacob to do as she directs, and she repeats herself to make sure that she has his attention. This is a woman to be listened to, who can command attention, even if it is only from the younger son.

Rebekah appears to have some power, especially when it comes to Jacob, but, so it seems, no authority. She cannot bless Jacob or give him the birthright. In order for what she understands to be the divine plan to work properly, she must ensure that it is Jacob

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[36] Ibid., 199-120.

[37] Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 183.

[38] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 54.

who receives the birthright from Isaac.

> Fathers are primary, but they are often ineffective. Mothers lack the authority of fathers, yet they play prominent roles in the he structuring of the family. mothers often shape the family authority of the next generation by determining (by strategy or identity) which son will inherit or be favored.[39]

Rebekah devises a plan that will work through Isaac, even if it is without his knowledge or consent. She devises a way to usurp his authority and use it for her own ends. As Meyers has pointed out, subterfuge is a way that those in positions of limited power or powerlessness gain power and authority. What cannot be obtained through official channels is obtained through deception or creative strategizing. Bal points out that this necessity shows what happens as a result of lack of authority. If Rebekah had had the authority to work through the formal structures of inheritance, she would not have needed to use subterfuge and to pit brother against brother, son against father.[40]

Bledstein offers an alternate reading of the tale that assigns quite a different role to Isaac. In this reading, Isaac is in fact the trickster. He is not deceived by Rebekah, but rather has Rebekah do his dirty work for him. Because of the accepted rules of patrilineality, he is unable to overlook his older son. According to this reading, Rebekah is just a pawn, playing out Isaac's plan.[41] Or is her act simply unnecessary? Since prophecy

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[39] Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn. *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Stories*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 71.

[40] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 142.

[41] Adrien Janis Bledstein. "Binder, Trickster, Heel and Hairy-Man: Rereading Genesis 27 as a Trickster Tale Told by a Woman." In *Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Althalya Brenner. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 287-

by definition is bound to come true, would Isaac in fact have found a way to reward Jacob with the birthright and blessing? Aschkenasy points out the subtle but crucial difference in Isaac's blessings to Esau and Jacob. When Isaac blesses Jacob, thinking he is Esau, he leaves out mention of the covenantal elements of fruitfulness and the land. Later, having understood that he gave Esau's blessing to Jacob, not only does Isaac give Esau a blessing of his own, but he gives Jacob a second blessing, this time mentioning the specific elements of the covenant with Yahweh (28:34).

> Subtly and indirectly, then, the biblical narrator lets us know that Rebecca's elaborate scheme was completely unnecessary, and that her energy and talents were wasted on a ruse that only complicated her and her son's lives.[42]

In this reading, the fact that Jacob must leave home and is never reunited with Rebekah is seen as her punishment for having tried to interfere in the narrative. Her punishment is exacerbated by the knowledge that Isaac did not see fit to share with her his plan to handle the matter of ensuring Jacob's inheritance.[43]

Because women do not generally have authority in biblical narrative, they are able to work out creative strategies to problems that need unusual solutions. They stand outside of the system of authority and control, and therefore outside of the same set of rules governing their behavior. That enables them narratively to take on the daring plots

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[42] Nehama Achkenasy. *Eve's Journey: Feminine Images of Hebraic Literary Tradition*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986) 163.

[43] Aschkenasy, *Eve's Journey*, 163.

that will dramatically alter the course of events. Exum writes:

> Issues of national (male) conflict and dominance are resolved through the women, who are seen as the source of the discord and division. Females become the locus of conflict, when, in reality, male rivalry constructs stories in which women are assigned the role of disrupting familial integrity.[44]

However, not only do they disrupt it, generally their acts are for the good of the family in the long run. Lives are saved, the right side wins, the right son inherits, the family line continues.

The midrash credits Rebekah with a greater understanding of God's role in the story than do many of the modern commentators. That she gave him the food to carry in to Isaac but did not accompany him is seen as her acknowledgment that from thereon, God would guide Jacob.[45] This interpretation recovers her role as God's helper, and implies that she acted in accordance with God's plan, not as an interfering troublemaker. The Talmudic sages do not condemn Rebekah for her act of subterfuge, yet neither do they single her out for praise. Her actions seem to be overall accepted in the traditional interpretations of Biblical text, perhaps for the very reason that Rebekah's act was seen as necessary for Jacob to become the third patriarch and the father of the all important Joseph.

How much power does Rebekah really have in this story? Is she just an agent, ensuring that God's plan will work? Or is she an active initiator? Bal claims that the

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[44] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 145.

[45] Genesis Rabbah 65.17.

biblical narrator takes power away from Rebekah and hangs all the credit for the success of the plan on God.[46] Yet she does come across as a woman with some amount of power. Alter points out that she adds a significant change to the wording of the conversation she had overheard between Isaac and Esau. In her retelling, Isaac's command is much more direct and immediate, while Isaac's command left more room for ambiguity. In Rebekah's version, the relationship between getting Isaac food and being blessed is direct, while in Isaac's version, there is more of a sense that someday Esau will be blessed for the good he does for his father now. Her change of Isaac's command creates a situation of immediacy and importance of the blessing that is absent in Isaac's own words.[47] In 27:8 she uses the word *mitzvah* to get Jacob to do his part of the plan. In other words, she commands Jacob. In biblical narrative, God is not the only one who commands. It is a prerogative of people as well. But in order to command, one has to be able to exert some amount of power and even authority, otherwise one's commands go unheeded. Perhaps in part that is what her love of Jacob is based on - he is one person over whom she can exert some authority.

Using the limited authority she has over Jacob, Rebekah can turn him into the son she thinks he needs to become. She covers him up, disguising him to look appear enough like his brother, and sends him on his mission. She has just enough power and authority to

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[46] Mieke Bal. "Tricky Thematics." (*Semeia* 42, 1988) 142.

[47] Robert Alter. *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996) 138.

turn Jacob into a trickster. She enables him to be able to change his form, and that he does so using animal skin is not insignificant to the trickster motif. Writing about the role of women in shaping the Biblical narrative, Aschkenasy notes:

> In their roles as manipulators and hoaxers, ... women are seen as great creators of fiction, as spinners of tales and producers of imagined realities. Perhaps the first case of woman setting up a theatrical mask scene, intended to benefit her son through a case of mistaken identities, is the matriarch Rebecca.[48]

So while Rebekah is an active initiator in this tale, her main action is to be an enabler. She does not change her own form and steal the birthright for Jacob, but she empowers him to do it. Covering, like the cooking and dressing she is engaged in, is another familiar woman's act. It is not the act itself that is so unusual, but how she uses the resources available to her. This defines her act of subterfuge, using whatever power, authority and objects that were available to her to achieve the goal she sought, but having to do it through the act of covering up, not directly and out in the open.

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[48] Aschkenasy, *Eve's Journey*, 162.

Chapter Two

Tamar

The question of whether chapter 38 of Genesis belongs in the space it holds between chapters 37 and 39 almost overshadows questions concerning the tale within the chapter itself. Stuck between chapters 37 and 39, 38 would at first glance seem oddly out of place, an interruption in an otherwise seamless narrative. Chapter 37 tells of Joseph and his brothers, recounting their throwing him in a pit and selling him into slavery. Chapter 39 takes off where 37 leaves off, with the story of Joseph's travails in Egypt and his rise to power. Sandwiched in between is a tale that begins and ends in one chapter, that of Judah, one of Joseph's brothers, and Tamar, his daughter-in-law.

Chapter 38 has been viewed as an interloper, an intruder, a bothersome presence in the text. Speiser argues that there is no correlation between chapter 38 and the chapters that proceed and follow it, writing, "The narrative is a completely independent unit. It has no connection with the drama of Joseph, which it interrupts at the conclusion of Act I," a view with which Emerton agrees.[49] Westermann maintains that chapter 38 was inserted by redactors in order to provide more information about other sons of Jacob, before the story turned exclusively to Joseph.[50] However, Rashi noted that the opening words of chapter

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[49] E.A. Speiser. *Genesis*, Anchor Bible 1. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964) 299; J.A. Emerton. "Some Problems in Genesis XXXVIII ª)." (*Vetus Testamentum* 25, 1975).

[50] Claud Westermann, *Genesis 37-50: A Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 49.

38, ויהי בעת ההוא, "And it came to pass at that time," indicates that this chapter was placed here as a direct result of the events of the previous chapter. Judah's brothers blame his for their father's grief over Joseph and thus remove him from his status in the family. Having been removed from his familial position, he had more time to devote to his own affairs. Similarly, more recent biblical criticism has proposed that the scholarly arguments of arbitrary insertion are overlooking some very important connections of chapter 38 to chapters 37 and 39, and in so doing disregard the importance of chapter 38 itself.

Alter is one of the first to question the assumption that chapter 38 is an arbitrary insertion into the text. He notices a thematic connection between 37, 38, and 39, which all deal with the reversal of expectation that the older son will carry on the line, while the younger son in fact succeeds in doing so. Judah himself is a younger son, whose descendants will lead to the Davidic line. Alter further identifies the image of fathers mourning sons as another common thread between these chapters. These themes themselves are connected, since they are both about, as he writes, "the primary, problematic subject of the proper channel for the seed."[51] On a broad thematic level, chapter 38 also fits in well with the overarching themes that run throughout Genesis, the divine promises of offspring and inheritance.[52] Certainly these themes are of great importance in chapter 38.

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[51] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6.

[52] Johanna W.H. Bos, "Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4:17-22; Ruth 3." *Semeia* 42 (1988): 48.

Bal challenges the presupposition that there must be apparent unity in the text, and posits instead that there may be some level of intentionality on the part of the editors in placing this tale as it does. She identifies two other related themes as those which unite these stories - the themes of love and of tricksters.[53] While Alter focuses on the problem of the continuation of the line, Bal focuses on deceit. She notes that in all three chapters, someone is deceived through the use of an object. In chapter 37, Jacob is deceived by his sons into believing that Joseph is dead after seeing his bloody jacket. Tamar uses a veil to deceive Judah into thinking she is a harlot in chapter 38. And in chapter 39, Potiphar's wife uses Joseph's cloak to deceive her husband into thinking that Joseph had tried to rape her.[54] The connection between these stories is noted by the midrash as well, which imagines the goings-on in chapter 38 as a kind of joke played on Judah in retaliation for his behavior towards Joseph in chapter 37. The midrash pictures God telling Judah that because he deceived his father with a goat kid, so will he be deceived by Tamar with a goat kid.[55]

All three tales also involve some kind of love or sexuality. Jacob loved Joseph more than his brothers, and it is out of jealousy that his brothers act, barely managing to not actually kill Joseph. Tamar uses Judah's sexuality in order to be able to deceive him

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[53] Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 89-91.

[54] Ibid., 95-97.

[55] Genesis Rabbah 85.9.

and get from him what she needs, narrowly escaping being burned to death for her actions. Potiphar's wife uses sexuality as way to get Joseph into trouble, and he lands in prison. In all of these stories, love and sex are intertwined with danger.[56] Just as the story of Rebekah's deception of Jacob must be read against a backdrop of the other episodes involving both of them, so too must the story of Tamar and Judah be read in the context of chapters 37 and 39.

Judah is already a familiar character - the fourth son of Leah and Jacob. It is Judah who persuades his brothers in chapter 37 not to go ahead and actually kill Joseph, but rather to sell him into slavery. But who is Tamar? She is introduced in 38:6 as the woman Judah has selected for his oldest son, Er. Unlike her mother-in-law, whose parentage and clan is mentioned but who has no name, Tamar's family goes unmentioned. There is no clue in the text about who Tamar is and where she came from. Is she a Canaanite, like her mother-in-law? Is she a Philistine? Or is she perhaps an Israelite? For some, it would be useful to conceive of Tamar as an Israelite, with the purpose of assuming an undiluted blood line for Solomon. In this scenario, in order for Judah's line to lead to the Davidic dynasty, he had to impregnante Tamar himself, since his original sons were only half Israelite.[57]

Except for 38:6, in which Tamar is first brought into the family, she is always

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[56] Bal, *Lethal Love*, 95-97.

[57] This idea, first proposed by Leach, has been is strongly argued against in J.A. Emerton, "Some Problems of Genesis XXXVIII ᵅ)," (*Vetus Testamentum* 25: 1976) 81.

discussed in relationship to a man. She is אחיך אשת, "your brother's wife" (38:8), and אחיו אשת, "his brother's wife" (38:9). Later she is כלתו, "his daughter-in-law" (38:11; 38:16). Even when the reference is not as direct, the man to whom she is engaged in primary relationship at that moment appears in close proximity. Line 11 reports that Tamar was sent to live in her father's house. When she is named in line 13, the word חמיך, "your father-in-law," follows soon after. All throughout the actual episode of deception, she is not referred to by name at all, rather, as היא, "she." She is not mentioned by name again until she is referred to as קלתך, "your daughter-in-law" (38:24). After that, Tamar is not mentioned again by name in the story. Throughout the confrontation with Judah, and during the pregnancy and birth of her twins, she is nameless, only appearing in the text as היא. Though Tamar is seemingly rootless, she is bound closely by the relationships with the men around her.

The events in the beginning of chapter 38 occur in rapid sequence. Judah marries a Canaanite woman and together they have three sons. Tamar is chosen by Judah for his first born son, Er. Er dies without having produced any children, and Tamar is given to Onan, the second son. According to the laws of levirate marriage as outlined in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, if a man is to die without having produced a son, his widow is required to supply a son who will count as the late husband's. The brother is allowed to refuse to cooperate, though he must do so through an official ritual of refusal, while she has no choice in the matter and is not permitted to marry outside the family until she has

produced a son.[58] So Onan is instructed to do his duty by his brother, and through Tamar to provide his brother with a posthumous heir. Tamar's body is meant to be the conduit from one brother to the other. But this plan does not work either, as Onan refuses to comply and dies. Judah, meanwhile, still has no new generation to carry on the line, and Tamar has no child.

Tamar is called an אלמנה (38:11). In Ex 22:21, and in many other places in the Bible, a widow is presented as parallel in status to an orphan, someone in need of protection and who can be harmed or taken advantage of.[59] In Ex 22:23, having one's wives widowed and children orphaned is threatened as a punishment for not heeding the warning of Ex 22:21. Widowhood is a common threat, even as a punishment for engaging in magic (Is 47:8). The widow, the divorced woman and the prostitute all constitute the category of unacceptable women whom the high priest cannot marry (Lev 21:14), just as the Levitical priests are prohibited elsewhere (Ezek 44:22). A picture emerges, then, of a widow as a woman of low status, in need of extra protection, and outside of the acceptable categories of womanhood.

For Tamar, being a childless widow is no small thing. Because of patrilocality, women were often brought into the already established households of their husbands, as is

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[58] Richard Kalmin, "Levirate Law," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* IV, (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 296.

[59] Other examples can be found in Deut 24:14, Is 1:17, Is 1:23, Mal 3:5, Ps 94:6.

evident here in chapter 38, with the result that they were outsiders.[60] Their real point of connection to the household would come through the birth of children. As Fewell and Gunn point out:

> As women who have given up the security of their own kin to join a different family, daughters-in-law must actively make inroads into the family power structure, which they can do most easily by giving birth to male children who will assume the leadership of the family.[61]

Motherhood was women's main household function. While women were involved in other subsistence tasks like food preparation and basic farming and animal husbandry, reproduction was the one job that men could not do.[62] Barrenness in biblical narrative, while common, is problematic. Bird notes that not being able to bear a child is both a great shame, and seen as evidence of divine punishment or displeasure. Barrenness was not only a real threat to the woman's status, since without children she would not have been able to count on protection and support in the case of her husband's death, but her power would have been threatened as well, since it was through motherhood that women were able to gain a measure of power. Bird writes:

> Motherhood brought more than honor, more than security and approval of husband and society. It brought authority. It offered the woman her only

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[60] Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 55. However, there are examples to the contrary. Jacob travels to Haran to find a wife, though there are other reasons that made his departure from home advisable.

[61] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 71.

[62] See Meyers, 142-149.

opportunity to exercise legitimate power over another person.[63]

Niditch points out that a married woman without children is problematic in the ancient Near Eastern context, for she does not fit into the existing categories. As a widow, her inability to fit into the established social structure is increased. As someone outside the categories of existence, she presents a serious challenge to the social order. Niditch maintains that the purpose of levirate marriage was not only to provide continuity to the brother's line, but to fit the woman back into an acceptable category of normalcy.[64]

Judah, afraid that he will lose his youngest son as well, sends Tamar home to her father's house. Tamar, no longer bound to Judah's household through marriage to a son, and unable to claim a right to stay there as the mother of the next generation of the family, is sent back to her own family. Yet she is not the unmarried young girl she was when she left. Now she is a childless widow, the daughter-in-law of a man who still has one son left, and whose son, by rights, should be expected to give Tamar another chance at motherhood. This son's name is שלה, "Shelah," which vocalized differently than the Masoretic text could read as the word "hers." Shelah is hers, but she must wait for him back at the home of her own childhood.

Though the text then states וירבו הימים, a long time afterward, many things happen in rapid succession. Judah's wife dies, he mourns her, and when the mourning is

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[63] Bird, *Missing Persons*, 36.

[64] Susan Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38." *(Harvard Theological Review* 72: 1979), 146.

over, he goes to join his friend Hirah for some revelry at the sheepshearing. Tamar, upon hearing this, comes up with a plan to seek justice for herself. In contrast to the pace of the words themselves, the phrase וירבו הימים acts as a signal that despite Judah's promise to eventually give Shelah to Tamar, much time has passed, and he still had not done so. Up until this point no one has acted to help Tamar out of her situation of being neither here nor there. Judah has not come through as promised, and at least from what is apparent in the text, her father hasn't tried to defend her rights either. So she decides to take matters into her own hands.

Tamar takes off her normal clothes, בגדי אלמנותה, or her widow's garb, and putting on a veil and some kind of covering, she disguises herself. Judah doesn't recognize her, and takes her to be a prostitute. Like the traditional trickster figure, she has transmuted herself into another form. Just as the classic trickster is, in Hyde's words, a "boundary-crosser," Tamar not only changes her form but crosses from one category to another, from that of respectable but unprotected childless widow to that of dishonorable prostitute.

> Where someone's sense of honorable behavior has left him unable to act, trickster will appear to suggest an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again. Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox.[65]

True to the trickster motif, Tamar is the underdog, the powerless childless widow who uses subterfuge and deceit to right a wrong, because no other route is open to her. Yet

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[65] Hyde, 7.

given how closely linked is the status of the widow and the prostitute, perhaps it is not in fact such a stretch to go from one category to another. Niditch notes that prostitutes are "liminal characters, outside the social order."[66] A prostitute, by definition not tied to any one man, presented a danger and a threat to the society. So too the childless widow. As such, Tamar had already fallen between the cracks of comfortable societal norms.

The text uses two different words to describe Tamar's actions. In 38:15, when Judah first sees her, he assumes she is a זונה. In 38:21 and 22, when Hirah goes to find her in order to make good on Judah's pledge, she is called a קדשה. When Tamar's seemingly inappropriate behavior is described to Judah in 38:24, the root זנה is again used. The meaning of both of these terms, and their relationship to each other, has been a topic of heated scholarly debate. In his 1964 commentary on Genesis, Speiser writes that זונה and קדשה are not the same. He translates זונה as harlot, and קדשה as votary. In his definition of votary, he writes:

> Ancient Near Eastern society, notably in Mesopotamia, recognized various classes of temple women other than priestesses, who were employed for services connected with the cult. We know now that they had to be virgins in order to qualify...; any subsequent promiscuity was ritually conditioned. One of these classes was the *qadistu*, a cognate of Heb. *qedesa*. There is no indication that they were socially ostracized, although their status was inferior to that of married women. It is obvious that the *qedesa* was not the same as the *zona*.[67]

Westermann, writing later than Speiser, accepts as a given a similar understanding of

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[66] Niditch, "Wronged Woman,"147.

[67] Speiser, 299.

קדשה to that which forms the foundation of Speiser's work in this area. In his reading of Tamar's story, the kid she requests as payment from Judah is meant to be understood as a sacrifice for a ritual in service of a goddess of love.[68]

Astour bases his scholarship on many of the same assertions as Speiser. Based on intra-textual evidence, he maintains that there was sacred prostitution in Israel and Judah until the reforms of the 7th and 6th centuries.[69] However, he uses the text of Gen 38 to prove that זונה and קדשה are in fact the same thing, as they are used here interchangeably, and that their function is similar to that of the Greek hierodule.[70] His connection of these Hebrew terms to the hierodule then colors his whole understanding of Gen 38. As hierodules were forbidden to have children, but were permitted to marry, he reads Onan's spilling of his seed on the ground as a result of Tamar's need to not get pregnant. In Astour's scenario, it would have been Tamar's wish to not get pregnant, not Onan's wish to not impregnate her, that caused Tamar's childless state. He even reads Tamar's veil as the garment not of a prostitute, but that of a married hierodule, which she was permitted to keep even in widowhood. All of this is for Astour the story behind the story presented in Gen 38. He contends that the text that remains today is the remnant of this older text, and that it as the text was altered over time, Tamar status changed from

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[68] Westermann, 53

[69] Michael C. Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule: An Essay in the Method of Vestigal Motifs," (*Journal of Biblical Literature*: 1966), 185.

[70] Ibid., 186.

that of a permanent hierodule to that of a temporary one. In so far as the story faults Onan for not giving Tamar children, he explains that it would have been otherwise inconceivable for a later audience to accept Tamar's status of an Israelite hierodule who was not permitted to become pregnant.[71] Astour further explains the severe punishment that Judah orders for Tamar upon learning of her pregnancy, death by burning, as appropriate only if she is understood to belong to the cult, in which case her pregnancy would have been a terrible transgression.[72]

Later scholars reject some of the more far-fetched aspects of Astour's claims, yet the basic questions about זונה and קדשה have continued to occupy scholars.[73] Based on a prooftext from Deut 23:17-18, van der Toorn maintains that cult-related prostitution took place, but only as a way for women to be able to afford the money required for their vows when they had no other resources available. This theory posits that women had a rich religious life at that time, much of which was based on the making and taking of vows, especially as connected to the desire to have children. While money or goods obtained through prostitution may have contributed to the Temple economy, there was no organized fertility cult in Ancient Israel that incorporated cultic prostitution.[74] Van der

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[71] Ibid., 190-2.

[72] Ibid., 194.

[73] Emerton, "Some Problems," 357-8.

[74] Karel van der Toorn, "Female Prostitution in Payment of Vows in Ancient Israel," *(Journal of Biblical Literature* 108/2: 1989), 193-202.

Toorn writes:

> It is time the Old Testament scholars adopt a less biased view and update their anthropological premises. ... In the margins of the official cult, Israelite women often engaged in religious activities of various kinds. Vows ranked especially high in their devotional life. This prostitution may be called 'sacred' insofar as its revenues were spent in the payment of vows and were thus turned over to the Temple. 'Sacred prostitution' as a magical rite in the context of fertility cults, on the other hand, is a myth of historiography in the case of Ancient Israel.[75]

Westenholz adds yet another layer to the search for an understanding of קדשה and זונה. She notes that the word קדשה in chapter 38 is reserved only for use with the local inhabitants. She posits that while it might have had a cultic meaning, it was not necessarily sexual. While other commentators have assumed that Hirah is trying to be more polite by calling Tamar a קדשה instead of aזונה, perhaps in fact he is trying to change the focus all together, and is pretending, as seen in Hos 4:14, that he is trying to take the kid to the קדשה for sacrificial purposes. Westenholz also argues that the connection between זונה and קדשה reveals the bias of the Biblical author, writing, "To the Hebrew author, the pagan priestess must be a harlot, and vice versa, the harlot must have been a pagan priestess."[76] In an attempt to debunk the idea of sacred prostitution, she looks at similar figures from other ancient Near Eastern cultures. The Ugaritic kds were simply cultic functionaries. The Mesopotamian *qadištu* had several functions, some of which may have had to do helping women with the spiritual side of childbirth. The

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[75] Ibid., 204.

[76] Joan Goodnick Westenholz, "Tamar, *Qĕdēša, Qadištu*, and Sacred Prostitution in Mesopotamia," (*Harvard Theologial Review* 82: 1989), 248.

Sumerian *NU-GIG* was allowed to marry and have children, along with also helping in women's birth rites. There is evidence that the *qadištu* had some ritual duties, but no evidence of prostitution, and there is no evidence that the *ni-gig* had any cultic duties at all. Even if there was a place for sexual activity within the definitions of those cultic duties, Westenholz would not classify it as prostitution, since prostitution is by definition outside of the categories of controlled sexuality, while cultically proscribed sexuality is controlled and part of the system.[77] Given the evidence, Westenholz argues that there was no such thing as sacred prostitution.[78]

> This chapter in the annals of historical research, whereby a generalization derived from an ancient fiction coupled with a projection of a modern ideology of women onto historical data becomes fact in scholarly discourse can now be deleted. 'Sacred prostitution' is an amalgam of misconceptions, presuppositions, and inaccuracies.[79]

קדשה and זונה are not merely interchangeable, nor are they necessarily two forms of the same activity. However, it is clear that whatever they are exactly, thinking of this unrecognized woman in this way allowed Judah to get what he needed from her, because it put her in a category of "other," someone beyond the usual categories. At the same time, it allowed Tamar the freedom to get what she needed from Judah.

In order for Tamar's plan to succeed, she had to disguise herself so that Judah

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[77] Ibid., 262.

[78] Ibid., 250-260.

[79] Ibid., 263.

would not know her for who she really was. She took off the clothes she usually wore, put on a veil, and covered herself up. Sarna points out that the mention of her still wearing widow's clothing, presumably after considerable time has passed, contrasts with Judah's willingness to re-enter normal life after the mourning period for his wife was over.[80] Having been widowed affected Tamar's status and identity much more deeply than it did Judah. The theme that emerged in Rebekah's story of subterfuge surfaces here again, as something, in this case Tamar herself, is covered up and changed, at least superficially, to something else. The צעיף, the veil, as the definitively identified piece of her disguise, is an important element of this tale. By putting a layer between herself and the world, Tamar can change her identity. It has also been argued that the use of the veil might testify to the fact that she was not intending to play the part of a prostitute. Compared to Rebekah's donning of a veil upon seeing Isaac, the veil here could well indicate that Tamar meant something else entirely, perhaps intending a pointed message to Judah that she was a marriageable young woman.[81]

The issue of identity is an important issue for Judah as well. After he promises her that he will send a kid as payment, Tamar asks him for an ערבון, presumably to ensure that he will make do on his promise. Gen 38 is the only place in the Bible that ערבון is used, though it seems clear that it is a pledge or guarantee. As a pledge, she asks for

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[80] Nahum M. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 268.

[81] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise,* 88.

חותמך, ופתילך ומטך. It is these objects, along with her generic female sexuality and the veil, that become the weapons of her subterfuge. A חותם can be something that engraves (Ex 28:11, 21, 36, 39:6, 14, 30), something that goes on or is worn on the hand (Jer 22:24), something that can effect change to clay (Job 38:14), something that seals (Job 41:7), something special and chosen (Hag 2:23), something that identifies the ownership of someone or something (S of S 8:6), and something used for sealing letters, like a signature that identified who the letters were from (I Kings 21:8). Translated as seal[82] or signet ring,[83] it seems to be even more an indication of the identity of the wearer. פתיל appears to be something upon which an object could be placed, in particular a precious and sacred object, in some cases blue in color (Ex 28:37, 39:31), something like a thread that could be attached to fabric, again, specifically blue (Num 15:38), something blue that can bind one object to another (Ex 28:28, 39:21), a flammable, breakable piece of thread (Jud 16:9), thread from flax (Ezek 40:3), and thins strips or threads of gold (Ex 39:3). Translated as "cord," it is generally understood to go together with the signet as the material on which the signet was hung around Judah's neck[84] or belt. The third object, the מטה, is translated as staff.[85] Unlike the חותם and the פתיל, מטה is a much more common Biblical word. It is a מטה which empowers Moses as a leader, when he is told

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[82] Sarna, *JPS*, 268; Speiser, 296.

[83] Westermann, 48.

[84] Speiser, 298.

[85] Sarna, *JPS*, 268; Speiser, 296; Westermann, 48.

to use it to make signs for the Egyptians (Ex 4:17), strike the rock to bring forth water (Num 20:7-11), and turn it into a snake (Ex 7:15). מטה appears as a symbol of power in other places as well, as in Isaiah 14:5 or Ezekiel 19:11. The staff could also serve as an item of personal identification. There is evidence that staffs had markings distinctive enough to indicate ownership.[86] However, a מטה is also a tribe, and so in asking for Judah's מטה Tamar is also making a pun. By pursuing this plan of action, her goal is to obtain a stake in Judah's tribe for herself, and to further the line of the tribe.

The items that Tamar chose were not in and of themselves valuable. But she chose smartly, for the significance of those objects lay in their inherent connection to Judah. Alter has called them "a kind of ancient Near Eastern equivalent of all a person's major credit cards."[87] Speiser has pointed out that not only is the owner of such objects instantly identifiable, but that these items would have served as a "religious and legal surrogate" of the owner, so that anything which bore of the mark of these items would have had to be accepted as an act for which the owner would take full responsibility. The very possession of such items would have served as an indication that the owner was a person who could be held accountable for acts undertaken in his name, and was therefore both a prominent and reliable citizen.[88] Not only were they traceable directly back to Judah, but they were all items normally used in business transactions. The signet was used

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[86] Speiser, 298; Westermann, 53.

[87] Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 9.

[88] Speiser, 298; Westermann, 53; von Rad, 360.

to seal contracts, and the staff is thought to have been transferred from person to person at the conclusion of a transaction.[89] By asking for these items, Tamar is not only able to publicly identify Judah later, but she is able to claim that they carried out a fair transaction, one on which he had put his seal of approval as a willing participant. It was not she who duped him, but his own short-sighted vision which did not allow him to see what was really happening and who Tamar truly was.

Judah encounters Tamar at פתח עינים, Petach Enaim. From a philological or historical level, this has been understood as the road or juncture that leads to Enam, an area mentioned in Josh 15:34,[90] or as the entrance gate to Enaim, a village near Timnah.[91] However, the significance of this place is far greater in this tale than the question of where it might have in actuality been located. עינים can be read as "two wells." In this reading, the scene then becomes a reversed type-scene of the usual betrothal at the well, and serves as a foreshadowing of the twins that will result of this union.[92] Literally, פתח עינים could be understood as the place where eyes were opened. The midrash resolves the dilemma posed by Tamar's harlotry by reading עינים as Tamar lifting up her eyes in prayer, hoping for a positive outcome for her act.[93] In this way she is free of any stain

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[89] Speiser, 298.

[90] Speiser, 298.

[91] Westermann, 53.

[92] Alter, *Genesis*, 220.

[93] Genesis Rabbah 85:7.

associated with prostitution, for what she did was to act on prophecy that from her would come the messianic line. God enters the story in a direct way, and Tamar's character is unblemished.[94] The Talmudic interpretation of the story takes this idea even further. Here, the place is called עינים because Tamar gave eyes to her words. It relates a conversation between Tamar and Judah, in which he first questions her to make sure that what he is about to do will not be breaking too many rules.[95] Knowing what it is that he will want to hear, she answers in such a way that will enable Judah to go ahead and sleep with her, but that also serves to further her case against him. He asks if she is a non-Jew, and she replies that she is a convert. He asks if she is married, and she replies that she is not. He asks if her father has betrothed her, and she replies that she is an orphan. And he asks if she is unclean, to which she answers that she is pure. What her answers here point to is that she is the one who is in the right, and that she has been abandoned by the man supposed to take of her, Judah himself. Her vision, as portrayed in this hypothetical conversation, is clear, while Judah cannot see the truth.

The images of eyes and seeing emerge as powerful motifs in this tale. In 38:14, Tamar sees that Shelah is not שלה, that he has not been given to her. In 38:15, Judah sees a harlot by the side of the road, but does not see Tamar. After having lived in household for a period of time as his daughter-in-law, when he encounters her dressed in

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[94] Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 155.

[95] B Sota 10a.

different clothes, he does not recognize her. He only sees the surface of the situation. He wants to see a prostitute, and so that is what he sees. Good notes how striking it is that even in intercourse he does not recognize her. He thought she was a prostitute, and a man of his standing would not have thought it necessary to truly see who she was as person. That would not have been part of the deal.[96] Yet it is that very anonymity that Tamar is counting on, for that very anonymity of her available, female body is part of her weaponry. At this moment, she needs him to not truly see her.

It is not just in regard to Tamar's identity that Judah has blinders on. He also cannot see that what he done to Tamar is unjust, and he cannot see that in keeping Shelah from Tamar in order to keep Shelah alive and safe, he is effectively cutting off his line all the same. Tamar, on the other hand, sees very clearly. She sees that Shelah will never be hers, and she sees just how to get through to Judah and to get from him what she needs. She is the one behind the veil, but it is Judah who cannot see properly. It is only in the end, when Tamar presents Judah with his own seal, cord and staff, that his eyes are opened and he sees what has happened.

The use of the verb הכר figures prominently into this story. Connected here to the motif of seeing, הכר is used to mean "know" or "recognize." At the climax of the story, in 38:25, Tamar presents Judah with his seal, cord and staff, and tells him הכרנא, asking him to identify these things. The text then states ויכר יהודה, that Judah recognized them. Alter connects this back to the earlier story in chapter 37, in which

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[96] Edwin M. Good, "Deception and Women: A Response," (*Semeia* 42:1988), 118.

Jacob is presented with Joseph's coat and asked to identify it. Each story has an element of deceit in it, and in each Judah figures prominently. Jacob recognizes the coat, but has been deceived about Joseph's true fate and Judah's role in it, while it took an act of deception about Tamar's true identity in order to get Judah to recognize his own behavior vis-à-vis Tamar. In both cases, someone has been tricked through the use of clothing.[97]

Once Judah understands the whole story and takes responsibility for both his part in it and for the wrongs he committed that led to it, the text states that he not intimate with her again. Now the sense of knowing appears in the narrative through the use of another verb. ולא־יסף עוד לדעתה - now that he knew who she was, and he truly saw and understood his own actions, as Bos points out, he no longer needs to know her, to be intimate with her, again.[98] So it is at פתח עינים, the place of the opening of eyes, that Judah has his eyes opened.

Tamar emerges from the tale a hero. She has not only been vindicated, but she has merited being part of the messianic line. Westermann claims that the narrator of this tale supports Tamar's actions.

> It is characteristic of the patriarchal stories that revolt against the established social order, where it is a question of injustice, is initiated by women only. And in each case the justice of such self-defense is recognized.[99]

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[97] Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 4-10.

[98] Bos, 47.

[99] Westermann, 56.

While Judah possesses both power and authority, as seen in his privilege of either punishing or vindicating Tamar, she is able to use her specifically female power of sexuality to get what she needs from Judah. Her ability to make her own choices and exercise power, albeit within a limited sphere, shows that she was able to use the options open to her wisely.

That Tamar is the initiator of the central action in this tale is clear from the language itself. Until 38:14, Tamar is presented as passive, someone who is acted upon. She is chosen to be a wife, she is taken by the second brother, she is sent back to her father's house by her father-in-law. In 38:13, she is told of her father-in-law's whereabouts. And then suddenly the tone changes. Alter writes about "the detonating series of verbs" in line 14, while Bos notes that Tamar's actions are "overburdened with detail."[100] Suddenly the action shifts to Tamar. She takes off, she puts on, she wraps, she sits, she sees. She is putting a plan into action. Throughout the story, she remains actively involved, guiding the action along. She demands the pledge from Judah, they have intercourse, and she conceives. The text reports nothing of what happens to Judah immediately following their encounter, only that Tamar leaves him and changes back into her usual clothing. The focus is clearly on Tamar. She is then absent from the text while Judah and Hirah search for her in order to take back Judah's personal items, and give her the kid. When she reappears, noticeably pregnant, she again drives the action, choosing judiciously when and how to reveal the truth to Judah. Once she has been cleared of

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[100] Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 8; Bos, 41.

wrong-doing by Judah, he departs from the text entirely. The story closes with the focus solidly on Tamar and on her twins.

Niditch writes that "The union between Judah and Tamar does not mar the social fabric, but repairs it."[101] While it could have been regarded as a violation of the prohibition against incest, the requirements of the levirate laws are seen in this tale as more pressing than the question of incest.[102] While Tamar does resort to subterfuge, her actions actually benefit Judah. Because of what she does, Judah's line continues. Tamar emerges as a heroic figure who garners praise from traditional commentators as well as modern scholars. Speiser writes of Tamar, "[She] takes heroic measures and triumphs in the end. In resolutely following the intent of the law, by unorthodox and hazardous means, Tamar thus takes her place alongside Rachel. She had the stuff, it was felt, to be the mother of a virile clan, which is clearly the main theme of the story."[103] He goes on to contend that the twins subsequently born to Tamar are her reward to Judah for absolving her of guilt.[104] In this way Speiser shifts the focus of the story back to Judah and away from Tamar. According to Speiser's reading, it is as if, having somehow been involved in the death of his two sons previously, she now gives him a gift of two replacement sons. Bal also credits Tamar with allowing the family to continue, writing, "Overprotective

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[101] Niditch, "The Wronged Woman," 149.

[102] Ibid., 148.

[103] Speiser, 300.

[104] Ibid., 300.

fathers paralyze their sons and thus, by trying to remain the only subject, kill their own family and stop history."[105] In her analysis too, Tamar has acted for Judah's good.

Within the Bible itself, Tamar is recalled in a positive light when Ruth is blessed for her bold actions (ruth 4:12). While such a tale, which hinges on prostitution, could have presented serious problems for the rabbis, Tamar merits great praise. In his interpretation of 38:25, in which she sends for Judah, Rashi credits her with taking special care not to shame Judah, echoing one of the Talmudic portrayals of Tamar.[106] Bronner writes that instead of condemning Tamar, on the contrary, the rabbis find her to be a useful model of repentance.

> Harlots who repent are, in the rabbi's aggadic elaboration, forgiven and shown to live on and eventually to produce legitimate, even righteous offspring - indeed to become the progenitors of Israel.[107]

Through the use of the veil, she is connected midrashically to Rebekah, who put on a veil the first time she sees Jacob.[108] They are also connected through the parallel bearing of twin sons. This connection elevates Tamar's status and takes away any question about the sinfulness of her actions.[109] The veil is significant in midrashic readings of Tamar, because

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[105] Bal, *Lethal Love*, 102.

[106] In B Sotah 10b Tamar is repeatedly credited with being more righteous than Judah.

[107] Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, 147.

[108] Genesis Rabbah 60.15, 85:7; B Sotah 10a.

[109] Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, 154-155.

it allows her to be viewed as a modest woman, a positive attribute in the rabbinic value-system. Judah's inability to recognize her is seen as owing to the fact that while she had lived in his house, she had always worn her veil. In this interpretation, this modesty was what merited her a place in the messianic line.[110] Implied in the connection between Rebekah and Tamar is also that they are both important to the future of God's chosen people.

The noted above, the midrash and the Talmud do not ignore the blatant sexuality involved in the story of Tamar. In two places the Talmud poses the question of viewing Tamar's act as adultery. But it notes a difference between Tamar and Zimri, who commits adultery in Num 25:14. Whereas Tamar gave birth to kings and prophets, because of Zimri thousands lost their lives. The conclusion is that Tamar's act was justified, because the end justified the means.[111] One of the most problematic issues of the whole Tamar story for the sages of the Talmud is not that she acted inappropriately, but that she conceived so easily. What they are noting here, though not in this language, is that Tamar's sexual encounter with Judah is an example of a reversed type-scene of the barren woman in Biblical literature. That Tamar manages to conceive the one time she has a sexual relationship which involves the potential for conception, strikes the Talmudic sages as peculiar, since to their mind, women were not able to conceive the first time they had intercourse. Since her previous husbands did not have proper sexual relationships with

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[110] B Megillah 10b.

[111] B Nazir 23b; B Horayot 10b.

her, it was impossible to the Talmudic way of thinking that she had ever been sexually active. Therefore, she should not have been able to conceive. They resolve their dilemma by suggesting that she had taken away her own virginity through what they termed the act of מוכה, or "friction," better known as masturbation.[112] It was apparently easier to accept that Tamar might have masturbated than to accept that her husbands had, even once, had normal intercourse with her, or that she had been an adulterer or in any other way an dishonorable woman. Viewing her as a masturbator was a Talmudic strategy to maintain her honor.

Compared to Rachel, Rebekah and Ruth by traditional Jewish sources, Tamar is woman whose act of subterfuge is praised and justified. Her hard-won children are her reward for risk-taking, despite the deception and potential for dishonorable behavior. But this story serves to rehabilitate Judah as much as it makes a heroine out of Tamar. Having gotten himself into a sticky situation in chapter 37 with his brother Joseph, Judah's character needs to be redeemed. Because he and his tribe later becomes important in the political history of Israel, it is necessary for the narrative to find a way that he can emerge having made the right choice. Tamar's actions create a situation in which he first appears to be in the wrong, and then at the climatic moment acknowledges his wrong-doing and in so doing is seen as having repented. Just as Rebekah's actions serve the ongoing needs of the narrative, so do Tamar's. She gets her desired children, but is never heard from again with the exception of one mention in Ruth. Judah, on the other hand, gets a full make-

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[112] B Sotah 34a-34b.

over and essentially achieves immortality with the importance that his tribe will come to bear on the history of the children of Israel.

Chapter Three

Yael

The Book of Judges appears to be, like the rest of the Bible, a book about men and their exploits. Yet within the stories of these men, Judges features many women as central characters. While there are certainly women characters to be found elsewhere in the Bible, in contrast to other books of the Bible, the women portrayed in Judges represent far greater diversity than women in other books. Whereas many of the other Biblical women are bound together by one common goal, that of the perpetuation of the Israelite people, the women in Judges represent a wider spectrum of motivations, ethnicity, and social status.[113] It is also argued that because Judges itself is about marginalization, coming out of the period of transition leading into the Davidic monarchy, women are portrayed as marginal characters throughout the book.[114] In the Book of Judges, there are women who act heroically, women who are acted upon, women who are concerned with progeny and home, women who are portrayed with no connection to family ties whatsoever, and women who heroically step into areas normally considered male spheres. Some of these women are named, and some are only mentioned as nameless, shadowy figures, present in the text without their identities being revealed. Niditch writes that "Judges is a book

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[113] Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, (New York: Doubleday, in publication), 6.

[114] M. O'Conner, "The Women in the Book of Judges," (*Hebrew Annual Review* 10: 1986), 278-279.

about those who are usually weak but who with divine help prevail."[115] Clearly the abundance of female protagonists in the Book of Judges is in keeping with this theme of characters who do not have access to power. God's role in helping them thrive is one way to explain their ability to function outside of the normal channels of power and authority.

Yael appears in chapters 4 and 5 of Judges. Her story, part of the narrative concerning Deborah and Barak, is told twice, with slight differences between the two versions. In chapter 4, the story is in prose, while in 5 it is told in poetry. This study will focus on chapter 4, since the form of poetry raises narrative issues that are outside the scope of this work, but chapter 5 will be looked at as a point of reference and contrast. Scholars agree that chapter 5, despite its placement in Judges as the second version, is the older of the two and dates to the second half of the 11th century BCE, while chapter 4 most likely later.[116]

The Book of Judges is seen as a book resulting from a time of great transition. Given this context of upheaval and change, that women are allowing to step into typically male space is understandable. This helps to explain the unusual roles that both Yael and Deborah play in Judges. Meyers maintains that in typical pioneer societies, there are no organized armies, so that it would have been more common for women to contribute to

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[115] Susan Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak," (*Catholic Bible Quarterly* 52: 1990), 612.

[116] A.D.H. Mayes, "The Historical Context of the Battle Against Sisera," *(Vetus Testamentum* 19: 1969), 359.

Deborah, leads the Israelites and appears to be winning, despite the fact Sisera's troops are better equipped. He pursues Sisera, the head of the enemy army, who flees and seeks refuge in the tent of Yael. Yael is presented here as אשת חבר הקיני (4:17). It is unclear exactly how this is meant to be understood, and what this information is supposed to reveal about Yael. Boling takes this to be a proper name, so that literally Yael was the wife of Heber the smith. הקיני could also be read as "Kenite," belonging to the Kenite clan.[121] Soggin takes Heber to be the ethnic group to which Yael belonged, not the actual name of her husband.[122] As an explanation of why Sisera chose Yael's tent as his destination, the text reports that there was peace between the King of Yavin and the house of Heber the Kenite. If this peace was more than simply the lack of actual hostility but a real alliance, Sisera's choice becomes understandable.[123]

However, Ackerman offers a completely different reading of both Yael's pedigree and Sisera's motivation. Based on a theory proposed by Mazar, Ackerman finds many clues that indicate that Yael was a cultic functionary whose tent would have been considered sacred space. If so, it would have been natural for Sisera to assume that he could find refuge there. The first of these clues is the connection in 4:11 of Heber the Kenite to Hobab, one of the names associated with the figure of Moses' father-in-law, who

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[121] Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 96-97.

[122] J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 66.

[123] Ibid., 66.

is identified in Exodus as a priest (Ex 2:16, Ex 3:1). Heber, then, might be a priest as well.[124] From that Mazar arrives at the possibility that within that clan, women served as cultic functionaries and had some place in the cultic ritual, based on the episode of the Bloody Bridegroom in which Zipporah circumcises someone and saves him from God's wrath (Ex 24-26). So by extension, as part of this clan, Yael might also have had religious duties.[125] Mazar additionally points out that the location of Yael's tent near the oak of Za'ananim may indicate that the tent was set on sacred ground, as oak trees in Biblical narrative are references to holy trees.[126] Ackerman adds to this that the reference of the proximity to Kedesh is also important, because Kedesh is one of the cities of refuge mentioned in Josh 20:7.[127] Kedesh is also associated with cultic activity in Josh 21:32. This combination then would logically have seemed to Sisera to be a place to where he could safely flee.[128] Certain aspects of the story also connect Yael to attributes associated with the Kenites in other Biblical sources. Kenites are thought to be people who live in tents, as does Yael, who are involved in herding, hinted at by Yael's access to dairy products, and smithing, to which her access to a tent-peg may be a reference.[129]

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[124] Ackerman, 110-2.

[125] Ibid., 112-3.

[126] Ibid., 113.

[127] Also Boling, 100.

[128] Ackerman, 115.

[129] Ibid., 119-120.

If it is understandable that Sisera would have fled to Yael's tent, why would Yael have let him in? It is possible that she had no choice in the matter. Perhaps she was too weak, either physically or in status, to stop him from entering.[130] However, that seems unlikely, given the events that are about to unfold. It is possible that she was simply taken by surprise. Or, perhaps, like Tamar upon hearing of her father-in-law's imminent arrival, she saw his appearance at her tent as a perfect opportunity. Yael's killing of Sisera can be read as an act of pure self-interest. Understanding that her clan is on the losing side, she decides to act to reverse their fate.

> Her best bet for survival for herself, and no doubt for her family, is to turn Sisera's presence in her tent into proof of her own personal allegiance to the victors. ... Violence delivers her, gains her security and will earn her praise in patriarchal Israel.[131]

Or alternately, in keeping with Ackerman's theory, she can be read as a loyalist to Yahweh, the God of the Israelites.

The version of this episode in chapter 5 relies more heavily on the presence of Yahweh in the story, and so Yael's act is understood in that context as being an act of loyalty to Yahweh, which earns Yael great praise.

> Crucial to recall here is the nature of the war that Judges 5 believes is being waged against Sisera: it is a holy way declared by Yahweh. It is thus Yahweh's will that Sisera be killed, even if committing this murder means violating a space that otherwise would be considered a divinely-sanctioned haven. But, although Yahweh requires that in this particular instance religious convention be suspended,

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[130] Soggin, 78.

[131] Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5," (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58: 1990), 396-7.

> how is it that Jael knows that this is the case? She knows because she is somehow privy to the intent of the divine, because she is, after all, a religious functionary. Jael's sanction to assassinate Sisera thus demonstrates, albeit ironically, that Judges 5 regards her as a religious specialist. It is her privileged relationship with God that reveals to her the necessity of overturning the traditions associated with religious sanctuary and murdering Sisera in her tent-cum-shrine.[132]

While Boling calls Yael a "covenant loyalist" and explains her actions in this way, he essentially removes Yael as the central actor in the drama altogether by crediting Yahweh with the victory in battle against Sisera and ultimately being responsible for Sisera making his way to Yael. This, he claims, is the underlying message of the whole narrative, that it is Yahweh who is directing the action.[133] Understanding Yael's act is a matter of perspective.

Yael's encounter with Sisera begins with the words ותצא יעל לקראת סיסרא, "Yael went out to meet Sisera" (4:18). This would seem to indicate some level of premeditation on her part. She has seen him approaching, and has quickly thought of a plan. She also enters the encounter in an active role. She does not wait passively to be approached, but steps directly into the situation. The first words she speaks are soothing and comforting. She tells Sisera, סורה אדני סורה אלי, "turn in my lord, turn in to me" (4:18). With the use of אדני, "my lord," she puts herself in an obsequies position vis-à-vis Sisera. She is the willing servant, awaiting his wishes.

The disguise she puts on to hide her intentions are her words. Alternately, Niditch

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[132] Ackerman, 120.

[133] Boling, 100.

contends that she disguises herself as Sisera's savior.[134] Either way, this trickster-like behavior of disguise is her act of subterfuge - lulling Sisera into her sphere, so that she can kill him. Like Judah who saw in Tamar only what he wanted to see, Sisera does not see the threat and danger beyond her words of welcome. סורה comes from the root סור, "to turn." Besides the clear meaning of the words, the phrase סורה אדני סורה אלי, with its repetition of סורה, has a soothing, lullaby-like quality to it. Her first set of weapons then are the expectations that go along with her gender. Unable to act as a warrior outside the realm of her tent, she uses her female-ness to bring him into the small arena in which she could exercise some power. Immediately after telling Sisera סורה אלי, "to turn in to her," Yael tells him אל־תירא, "don't be afraid" (4:18). This too is part of her disguise. Bal sees these words, uttered in the context of an offer of hospitality, as a guarded warning. For under normal circumstances, what would there be for Sisera to fear in accepting the customary hospitality? It is an expression that comes from a militaristic setting, and is a premonition of Yael's willingness to enter the battle in her own way.[135] But Sisera does not notice the threat within the reassurance. He only hears what he wants to hear, and he turns in to her, as invited. Throughout this narrative, the themes of woman as nurturer/mother and of woman as seductress/sexual being both play a role, and Yael uses this to her advantage. The rabbis of the Talmud also understood both the power of

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[134] Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 113.

[135] Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 212-213.

language and the sexual undertones in this tale, teaching that it was with her voice that Yael inspired lust.[136] For surely an invitation from a woman to enter her tent, her private space, cannot help but carry a sexual allusion, however subtle.

Yael's next action is to cover Sisera with a שמיכא (4:18). Like Rebekah and Tamar, Yael's subterfuge involves the act of covering. There are many layers of covering taking place in this tale. In seeking refuge in Yael's tent, Sisera is covering himself up and hiding from what is outside. Yael's covering, and then subsequent re-covering of Sisera with the שמיכה, the covering within the covering, is another layer. And Yael's seemingly gracious hospitality is yet another layer of cover, hiding the truth of her intentions from Sisera. The word שמיכה is a hapaxlegomenon. Boling considers both "rug" and "fly-net," but remains undecided, for, as he puts it, a rug would not be a logical thing for Sisera to want after a heated dash to reach her tent, nor would fly-net work if what Sisera was seeking was concealment.[137] Is this שמיכה an allusion to a mother covering and caring for a child, or a reference to what else goes on beneath the bedcovers? Is this a covering placed on Sisera to protect him for others from the outside who may be searching for him, or a way to put a barrier between him and Yael?

The maternal imagery and the sexual imagery in this narrative are so closely intertwined that is difficult to separate one from the other. Sisera's next act is to ask Yael for water (4:19). She responds in a rapid series of three verbs: she opens a container of

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[136] B Megillah 15a.

[137] Boling, 97.

milk, gives it to him to drink, and covers him up (4:19). Like other narratives where women are the central actors, the *leitworts* of this tale are everyday domestic items, despite the unusual ways they may be being used. So what begins as a benign story involving covering up with some kind of object and drinking milk ends on quite a different note. Many have written about the soporific effects of the milk given here, thought to be goat's milk. Boling writes, "She duped him and doped him."[138] In other words, despite the common nature of the milk, in giving him milk when all he asked for was water, she adds milk to her weaponry. Bal points out that by giving him more than he asked for, Yael takes the first step into battle with him.[139] The very act of being overly generous, raising the standard of hospitality, is a way for Yael to gaining power over Sisera. It is also a way to mark this scene as different than the typical scenes of showing hospitality through giving water at the well, which lead to marriages.[140] In this counter-type-scene, the abundant hospitality will lead not to marriage but to death. What is more, the giving of milk is a maternal and reassuring act.

> This danger, the enemy, is represented by the woman. The man who was once so powerful in the superiority of his chariots must now ask for water, the minimal element of survival, from a woman. He gets more than he asks for: he is *nourished*. What Jael offers him are the basic attributes of maternity: protection,

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[138] Ibid., 97-98.

[139] Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 61.

[140] Ibid., 62.

rest, and milk.[141]

The combination of protecting him, giving the milk, and covering him up all have the effect of infantilizing Sisera. In doing these seemingly harmless and even hospitable acts, Yael is taking away Sisera's power, and gaining control, albeit in a purely female way.

Once Yael has given Sisera the milk and covered him again, he asks her to stand in the opening of the tent. The word פתח, echoing the opening of the milk container in the previous line, is connected to both the maternal and sexual motifs at play in the narrative. פתח is used to describe the opening of the womb at birth (Gen 29:31, 30:22), as well as a woman opening herself to a lover (S of S 5:2, 5:6). There is also a play here on פתה, used to mean entice, seduce, or allure (Jud 14:5, 16:4, Hos 2:14). Fewell and Gunn write, "... the tent and its opening become uterine and vaginal images respectively."[142] The rabbis of the Talmud picked up on the interweaving of the maternal and the sexual in this tale. In a discussion about the purity of bodily secretions, there is an obscure reference made to Tamar giving Sisera breast milk to drink.[143]

In making this request to Yael, Sisera's language has changed. Where previously he has asked politely, using the word נא, his speech now changes to an order (4:20).[144]

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[141] Ibid., 121.

[142] Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 393.

[143] B Nidah 55b.

[144] Bos, 54.

He tells her to stand in the opening of the tent, and should a man asks if there is man inside, she should say no. The repeated use of the word man, איש, serves as a reminder that he is now inside a woman's space, out of the male realm. He is out of his element, in a space that does not allow for the possibility of his existence, and as Yael continues to gain power over him, his very manhood is threatened. Inside Yael's tent, in her space, he does not have the authority to give her an order. She does obey his order, but not in the sense that it was intended. Instead of agreeing to his order and lying about his presence within, she does away with his presence, so that there truly will not be a man inside, or at least not a live man. Bal points out the pun inherent in Sisera's order. By asking her to say that there is no man inside, he is in effect questioning his own masculinity and his own existence.[145]

Yael's next act is to approach Sisera with יתד האהל and a מקבת in her hands (4:21). Her approach is described in the text as ותבוא אליו בלאט. The use of תבוא, from the word "to come," carries sexual connotations and is often used to allude to sexual entry (Gen 29:21, Gen 38:9, GEn 38:16, Deut 22:13, Ezek 23:44).[146] Translated as tiptoed,[147] stealthily,[148] and silently,[149] בלאט is a hapaxlegomenon, though perhaps related

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[145] Bal, *Death and Dissymetry*, 213.

[146] Niditch, *War*, 114.

[147] Boling, 98.

[148] *The Prophets*: *Nevi'im*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1978), 61.

[149] Soggin, 62.

toלט, which connotes a sense of both secrecy and stealth (1 Sam 18:22, 24:4, Ruth 3:7). Picking up on the sexual undertones of this scene, Fewell and Gunn ask if she is approaching him softly, like a lover, which is born out by the use of בלאט in Ruth 3:7, or in stealth like a rapist.[150] Yael does not want to forewarn Sisera about what is going to happen - she wants to catch him off guard. Having acted the part of the courteous hostess, she does not want him to suspect that anything is amiss. To approach him בלאט is part of the methodology of her subterfuge. Up to now Yael's weaponry has included language, milk, and a covering of sorts, items not typically present in an arsenal of actual weapons, nor items that could do much actual physical harm. This changes in 4:21, when she takes יתד האהל and the מקבת. Now she is holding items that, while still not usually used as weapons, can certainly do psyical harm.

יתד is an item which has many uses in the Bible. It is used for fastening or anchoring (Is 22:23, Ez 9:8, Jud 16:14, Ex 38:20, 27:19, Num 3:37), something upon which objects can be hung (Ezek 15:3), used in battle (Zech 10:4), or for digging (Deut 23:14). Used as it is here in conjunction with אהל, it is thought to be a tent peg. Anthropological sources indicate that putting up the tents was generally a woman's job, so that a tent peg would have been a sharp object that Yael would have easily had access to. Soggin points out that still today, within the culture of the Bedouins living in modern Israel, it is the women who are responsible for putting up the tents.[151] A tent peg needs to

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[150] Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 393.

[151] Soggin, 67.

be hammered in with another object, and this is the purpose of the מקבת, identified as a tool of iron (I K 6:7), a tool used by an ironsmith to make an ax (Is 44:12), and something that is used for fastening (Jer 10:4). The image conveyed here is something that is heavy and used, if not as a weapon, as a tool to do work that the bare hands cannot accomplish. If she had been acting either quickly, without thinking through her actions, or meant to simply harm him, she might have just grabbed a nearby tent peg. But the combination of the tent peg and the hammer implies that Yael thought out what she was going to do, and that the damage she wanted to inflict on Sisera was meant to be grave, if not absolutely fatal. There is also irony implicit in Yael's use of the tent peg and hammer. At the beginning of the chapter, Sisera is associated with chariots, the newest technology of warfare, and a technology superior to that possessed by the Israelites. Yet here he is killed not only by a woman, ironic enough, but with a crude and primitive form of metal-based technology.

Yael drives the tent peg into Sisera (4:21). The word used to describe the part of his body into which the peg was hammered is רקה. Boling translates this as neck, and while acknowledging that the meaning is obscure, rules out brains and skull.[152] Another translation is temple.[153] The only other place where this word appears, outside of Judges 4 and 5, is in two references in Song of Songs, where in one case it clearly refers to a part that would be behind a veil (Song of Songs 4:3, 6:7). Fewell and Gunn take exception

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[152] Boling, 98.

[153] *The Prophets*, 61; Soggin, 62.

with these translations and argue that רקה is best translated as "mouth," meaning that she thrust the tent peg through Sisera's "parted lips."[154] The importance of the differences in interpretation lie in whether or not Sisera could have seen what was coming. If she had targeted his brain or skull, she could have been coming at him from behind. However, if רקה implies temple or some part of the face or front of the body, Yael would have run the danger of Sisera having a moment to comprehend what she was about to do. Giving him the milk instead of water takes on even greater significance in this scenario. For her plan to work, Yael needed to be sure that Sisera would be asleep.

It is immediately following Yael's act that Sisera is reported to be asleep. Right after she plunges the tent peg into him, the text describes three verbs in rapid succession - he was asleep, he was tired, and he died (4:21). The order of these three verbs is unclear, for it would make more sense logically if it was stated first that he was tired, then that he went to sleep, and then while he was asleep, that Yael approached him and he died. רדם is used to connote a trance-like state (Dan 8:18, 10:9, Gen 15:12), a state opposite to being awake and alert (Jonah 1:5, 1:6), being stunned or in a stupor as a result of war (Ps 76:7), and as a sign of being irresponsible (Prov 10:5). Instead of simply being asleep beforehand, despite having been made sleepy by the milk, Yael's blow to his temple stunned him into a stupor, he became unconscious, and then died. The resulting image is of a death that happens in several gory stages. With its sexual undertones, sense of

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[154] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 124.

premeditation, and extreme violence, this scene has been referred to as a reversed rape.[155] All power has been taken from Sisera by Yael, who penetrates him with the unmistakably phallic tent peg.[156]

It is worth looking briefly at the death scene in Judges 5. This version of the tale is as redolent in both maternal and sexual imagery as Judges 4, if not more so. Yael's subterfuge of acting like a generous hostess is even more pronounced here, for not only does she bring him milk when he has asked for water, but she also brings him a richer dairy product which she presents in a special bowl (5:25). In this chapter, Sisera's death takes up more narrative space, is yet more graphic, and more puzzling. Three verbs are used in 5:27 to describe his actions: כרע, נפל, and שכב. Bal suggests that the succession of these three verbs can be seen as an allusion to orgasm, during which he sags, falls, and lies down, spent.[157]

כרע is used often in connection to kneeling on one's knees (Jud 7:6, Ez 9:5), especially in supplication (I K 8:54, II Chron 29:29, Es 3:2, Is 45:23), being made to submit to a greater will (Is 10:4), and as a stage that occurs right before falling (Ps 20:9). נפל is a common Biblical word used to connote falling, though it can range from choosing to fall down as a sign of contrition or submission (Josh 7:10, Ezek 3:23), or to fall down

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[155] Bal, *Death and Dissymetry*, 215; Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 394.

[156] Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 394.

[157] Bal, *Death and Dissymetry*, 103.

dead (Num 14:43, II Sam 1:12). שכב is also a common word, though it is used in a variety of contexts. It is used in a sexual sense to mean lying with a woman (Gen 39:14, Gen 26:10, Deut 22:25, II Sam 11:11), and it can be a metaphor for death (Ps 88:6, Ps 41:9). That this imagery is repeated, with כרע and נפל used twice more in rapid succession, only makes it all the more powerful and graphic. Ackerman notes the effect of this sequence of violence imagery on the reader.

> Just as Jael's hammer struck unrelentingly against Sisera's skull, we suffer the thrust of the verbs in verse 27 hitting us over and over, metaphorically, at least, beating our minds into a pulp. And, although unlike Sisera, we do not ultimately find that we are rendered dead, we do feel as if we have been deadened or numbed, pounded by the language and images of verse 27 into a state of stupefaction and shock.[158]

Sisera's death, as it is described in chapter 5, is horribly violent and gruesome, and through repetition, the language effects a similar experience on the reader.

The place where Sisera slumps, falls, and lies down dead is בין רגליה, between her legs. Boling connects this to a military motif inherent in this tale, recalling the use of רגליו in Jud 4:10 and 5:15, which he reads as "under his command."[159] Here Sisera is fully under her command. Yael has thus gained complete control over Sisera, despite his attempt at exerting his authority over her by giving her an order. There is more to this expression though than a shift of power. The word רגל is often used as a euphemism for either male or female genitalia (II Sam 11:18, Ruth 3:4, Es 8:3), underscoring the sexual

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[158] Ackerman, 153.

[159] Boling, 115.

imagery inherent in these events. Bal points out that בין רגליה is also used in Deut 28:57 in the context of childbirth.[160] She takes this reversed maternal image and plays it all the way out, comparing his death to a sort of abortion.

> The destruction of Sisera is not represented, here, in relation to his honor, his social position, his being a man. It is represented in three successive steps that appeal to all the possible resources of the imagination of which a woman disposes: he falls, he ceases to live, he returns to the beginning of life to make a false start as afterbirth - we might say abortion: he never existed.[161]

Though perhaps taking the imagery to an extreme, it is a logical extreme. In Bal's reading, Yael's excessive violence is a result of having been denied power as a woman and mother.[162] Niditch writes:

> Motifs of sex, violence and trickery spin the contest for power between the one who is outside the group and those with the power. ... The trickster ideology of war has the potential to produce unabashedly and uncontrolledly violent behavior, a war ideology of the oppressed that is a step away from guerilla warfare and terrorism.[163]

She cannot fight the enemy on the battlefield, so she makes him into an infant whom she can abort or deliver into the world still-born, his danger and power stripped away.

Not only is Yael praised in Judges 5 as a being blessed above women (5:24), an

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[160] Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 195.

[161] Ibid., 131.

[162] Ibid., 228.

[163] Niditch, *War*, 113.

indication that her act was seen as justified by the Biblical narrators and/or editors, but she is generally praised by the later rabbis of the Talmud and midrashic literature. That a modern reader finds in the language of Judges 4 & 5 an allusion to orgasm is not so novel, given that the rabbis of the Talmud picked up on this theme many years earlier. The rabbis count the expressions of sinking and falling in 5:27 and determine that this represents seven times that Yael had intercourse with Sisera. However, instead of criticizing her, since according to their reading she was a married woman and was prohibited from engaging in sexual activity with a man other than her husband, they conclude that the end justifies the means. Just as they refrain from censuring Tamar for her act of harlotry with Judah, they decide that Yael did not derive pleasure from the intercourse, but rather performed these transgressions with an ulterior, and in their minds positive, motive of killing him.[164]

The version of the story described in Judges 5 inverts the usual male-female relationships in a variety of ways. Not only is a woman the killer and victor, but power is completely reversed.

> Rather than proving virility, Sisera loses virility between a woman's legs. In the world of the song, a world turned upside down, Sisera loses virility between a woman's legs.[165]

Elements that are central to the version in Judges 5 are left out and changed in the later

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[164] B Nazir 23b; also B Horayot 10b; B Yebamot 103a.

[165] Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 404.

version of Judges 4. The death scenes as it is retold in Judges 4 has the effect of softening the violence of Judges 5 and removes some of the more lethal aspects of the nexus of the maternal and sexual imagery. One important difference between the two versions is the presence of Sisera's mother in chapter 5, and by contrast her absence in Judges 4. The dichotomy that is created between Yael and Sisera's mother is a strong element in Judges 5, for the two women serve as the representations of the two poles of Sisera's life, death and birth, and further draw out the inverted maternal imagry of the relationship between Yael and Sisera.

> As [verse 27] ends, Sisera lies ravaged between Jael's legs in a pose of sexual submission; in the very next line, we see Sisera's mother, the woman between whose legs Sisera as a newborn first lay. But, although Sisera lies helpless at Jael's genatalia in the same way that he once lay helpless at the mouth of his mother's womb, disjunction is once more the poem's point, for while Sisera's helplessness as an infant was the fragility of the newly living, his helplessness as he lies in Jael's tent is the impotence of the newly dead.[166]

Ackerman also notes that the sexual imagery of Judges 5 only comes after the killing, while in Judges 4 they are already apparent from the beginning.[167] The focus of the story has shifted in Judges 4. That Yael's main role in Judges 4 is seductress, while in Judges 5 it is warrior, she attributes to the later date of Judges 4. As a later text, it would have been bound to the need at that time to conform to more accepted Israelite norms of female

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[166] Ackerman, 154.

[167] Ibid., 82

behavior.[168]

Chapter 4 ends with Yael going out of the tent to show Barak, who is still pursuing Sisera, that she has his dead body inside. She has succeeded where he has not. It would seem that the death of Sisera is a turning point in the battle, and after that the Israelites continue to win. At this point, Yael is referred to simply her personal name, without any connection to her husband or tribe (4:22). She is referred to in the same way when she goes out to meet Sisera (4:18). However, at the moment that she takes the tent peg and kills Sisera, she is once again אשת חבר (4:21). A pattern emerges, in which at the moments that she steps outside the tent, whether to address Sisera or Barak, she is acting freely as an agent in the public domain and is called simply Yael. But when she is inside the tent as in 4:17 or 4:21, she is enmeshed in the language of familial and kinship connections. The fact that her connection to Hever is mentioned at the moment of the murder also supports the idea that her actions were meant to help not only herself but to place her whole family or clan on the winning side of the battle for the good of them all.

Much of the imagery that surfaces in Judges 4 and 5 will reappear, though in somewhat different trappings, in the tale of Delilah and Samson in Judges 16. Both of these episodes are battle scenes that have been transposed into the female realm. Both involve reknown heroes, albeit from different sides, and women who manage to overcome them through subterfuge. And both rely on a powerful mix of the sexual, the maternal, and the political. As Niditch writes:

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[168] Ibid., 83.

> The sexual is equated with the political; the one serves as a comment on the other, as in so many tales of thsoe who employ trickery to alter their marginal status.[169]

The two tales also represent reversed images of each other. As such, they offer useful commentary on the contrasting story. While Yael's act of killing in Israelite enemy serves the needs of the pro-Isralite narrative, Delilah is the undoing of an Israelite hero.

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[169] Niditch, *War*, 107.

Chapter Four

Delilah

The Book of Judges offers portrayals of women that go against the usual expectations of female spheres and roles. While Yael is conspicuous for her act of violently and purposefully killing an enemy chief, Delilah stands out in Judges 16 as an independent agent whose sole motivation appears to be financial. Bal relates Yael and Delilah closely to each other, calling them both "patriotic heroines" who either kill or cause the death of an enemy hero.[170] Yet while there are important links between the two women and their tales, there are also important differences, not the least of which is the question of their motivations. Unlike other biblical women, Delilah is not caught in any web of familial or kinship relations, nor does her act of subterfuge seem to serve any political purpose for herself.

As the story of Delilah and Samson unfolds in Judges 16, Delilah is never identified in any way other than as simply Delilah. She does not seem to be bound to any one man by marriage or birth, nor is her ethnicity made clear. Bal assumes that since her act helps the Philistines, she must herself be Philistine, an assumption echoed by Exum who calls her "the Philistine version of Yael."[171] That she is a Philistine would seem a safe guess, since

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[170] Bal, *Death and Dissymetry*, 14.

[171] J. Cheryl Exum, "Delilah," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* II, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 134.

she willingly goes along with a Philistine plan to destroy Samson. But she is never actually identified as a such. Since according to the text it is money and not patriotism or theology that motivates her, she could well have belonged to another ethnic group. Exum suggests the possibility that she might actually be an Israelite woman, pointing out that it is only the bias of the text, in which an Israelite woman would never betray an Israelite hero, that makes such a reading impossible.[172]

Delilah does not fit into any of the possible categories of possibilities for women, as she is presented as neither mother, marriageable virgin, widow, or prostitute. While money is the defining element for her in her relationship with Samson, as would be the case if she was a prostitute, it is only once Samson's love for her is known that money enters as the tale. Though Delilah might have been motivated to act only because of the money, it is not Samson who has offered the money and who defines the relationship as a business transaction, but rather a different group of men. Unlike a prostitute, Delilah is being paid by one party to engage in a relationship with another, who may be completely unaware of the financial underpinnings at the beginning.[173] While Delilah's status is not made clear, what is clear is what she is *not*. Niditch writes:

> She is no would-be wife, nor necessarily a harlot, but the sort of dangerous, traitorous woman about whom proverbial wisdom warns, one who underscores the

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[172] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 69.

[173] Lillian R. Klein, "The Book of Judges: Paradigm and Deviation in Images of Women," in *Feminist Companion to the Book of Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 62.

impossibility of alliances with the godless foreigners.[174]

By identifying her only as Delilah, she is a stark contrast the other women associated with Samson, none of whom are named but who are all identified as someone's wife or daughter.[175] In breaking the pattern, the narrative foreshadows what is to come. No woman has been able to gain control over Samson until Delilah enters his life. Delilah, powerful enough to stand on her own in the text without the support of family or clan, is powerful enough to overcome Samson and strip away his power.

Delilah's name has been mined for meaning and clues to her identity. Boling relates it to the Arabic word *dallatum*, meaning flirt.[176] Soggin suggests several possibilities. Delilah might derive from either of two Hebrew words: דלילה which means "falling curl" and would be a reference to her hair, or דלל, meaning "to be humble or submissive." There could be a connection to the Arabic root for the world "beloved." He also notes that it is similar to an Akkadian name used as a compound with Ishtar and meaning "dedicated to the deity X," which he sees as evidence that Delilah is most likely Caananite or Philistine. Lastly, he wonders if Delilah is a deliberate but obscured play on the demon figure of Lilith.[177] Another possible origin of her name might lie in its similarity

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[174] Niditch, "Samson," 620.

[175] Jack M. Sasson, "Who Cut Samson's Hair? (And Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)," (*Prooftexts* 8: 1988), 334.

[176] Boling, 248.

[177] Soggin, 253.

to the Hebrew word לילה, meaning "night." There is a great deal of sun-related imagery in this text, and the name Samson itself is related to the Hebrew word for sun, שמש. Exum wonders if Delilah might be a pun on the sun imagery, presenting Delilah as "night" to Samson's "sun." She writes, "On a symbolic level, their names suggest the overcoming of the sun by the night."[178] The rabbis of the Talmud also find insights into the tale in Delilah's name. They find another pun in her name, connecting it to the word דילדלה, meaning "weaken." Looking closely at the text, they write:

> If her name had not been called Delilah, she was fit that it should be so called. She weakened his strength, she weakened his heart, she weakened his actions.[179]

Delilah's family or ethnicity is not made clear, but she is connected with a geographic area, Nahal Soreq, and a specific vocabulary associated with that area. Klein asserts that this location may illuminate some aspect of Delilah's personality or role in the text that is absent given her lack of connections to any particular group or family. She examines the meaning of these associations, and notes that nahal is a wadi, a place in which rain streams torrentially at certain times of the year. Nahal then provides an implication of the torrential in the narrative, something streaming in an uncontrolled way. Soreq alludes to choice wine grapes, and is therefore a reference to wine or the specific states of being associated with wine. The combination of both names creates a backdrop

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[178] J. Cheryl Exum, "Delilah," (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday, 1992), 133.

[179] B Sotah 9b.

for Delilah of all-consuming passion and loss of control, auguring what will come.[180] Boling translates Nahal Soreq literally as Vineyard Valley, without addressing the implications of this association vis-à-vis Delilah's character.[181]

Delilah's place in the text is inextricably bound up with the idea of love, for she is loved by Samson. As opposed to the love felt by Rebecca for her son Jacob, this is a sexual kind of love. It is also a one-sided love, as Delilah is not said to have loved Samson in return. Rather, immediately after introducing the theme of love, the text reports that Delilah is approached by Philistines who offer her money to figure out how Samson can be destroyed. It is as if they have been stalking Samson, waiting for an opportunity to ambush him. Upon seeing the extent of his feelings for Delilah, they alight on her as a means of getting to Samson. In accepting their money, she agrees to use Samson's feelings for her to deceive him and take advantage of him. How they are sure she will accept is a puzzle, but she is presented as a woman to whom a man's love means less than money. In this way, her actions do closely resemble the normative behavior of a prostitute.

Three times, Delilah asks Samson to reveal the secret of his strength to her without success. The first time she asks politely, saying הגידה־נא (16:6), "please tell me." But despite her gentility, she does not play games. Her question is direct and straightforward. The only deception that is possibly going on here is Samson's self-deception. Does he

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[180] Klein, "Paradigm and Deviation," 61.

[181] Boling, 248.

understand why she is asking him these questions, or he is so attracted to her and in love with her that he is blind to any danger? Like Judah and Sisera, he sees in a woman only what he wants to see. He sees her only in relation to himself and what he needs from her. She, of course, is using this to her advantage, doing exactly what the Philistines told her to do when they said פתי אותו. In the discussion of Yael, the play in the text of Judges 4 between the words פתח, "open," and פתה was pointed out.[182] Here the text is as direct as Delilah's own speech, enjoining her to behave in a certain way in order to become privy to Samson's secret.

Delilah is not the first woman told by men to act in this manner with Samson. The same word is used in Jud 14:15, when Samson's wife is told to wheedle or entice out of him the answer to his riddle. The root פתה is used in connection with deception (Deut 11:16, Ezek 14:9, Prov 24:28), and specifically deception by a woman (Job 31:9). The word carries a connotation of both falsehood and persuasion (I Kings 22:22, Jer 20:7), and is identified as the act of a sinner (Prov 1:10). There is a strong negative sense to the word, which is described as the activity as someone violent or evil (Prov 16:29), as well as a sexual undertone and sense of seduction (Ex 22:15 and Hos 2:16). The Philistines have given Delilah directions to prey on his weakness, his love for her. She is to allow him to go along with the fiction created by her female gender and his sexual attraction to her. Her ability to act in this manner and thus gain power over Samson is her basic weapon.

After instructing Delilah to act in this manner towards Samson, the Philistines say

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[182] Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 393.

that they need this information so that they can bind him and in order לענתו, from the root ענה (16:6). Translated as "torture,"[183] or "make him helpless,"[184] it is commonly used as a term for rape (Gen 34:2, Deut 21:14, 22:24, Jud 19:24, 20:5, II Sam 13:12, 14, 22, 32, Ezek 22:10, 11, and Lam 5:11).[185] In all of these cases, the person being violated is a woman and the person perpetrating the abuse is a man. Here the roles are reversed, and the intended victim is Samson, but the aim is the same. While the Philistines claim that they want to be able to do this to Samson, it will only be possible through Delilah's intervention. Thus, like the rape imagery in the episode of Yael and Sisera, here too a heroic male figure is made to submit and is thus made impotent and symbolically raped at the hand of a woman or because of a woman's actions. This allusion to rape also works against the image of Delilah as a prostitute, since in the typical prostitute-client relationship, it is the man who retains the power over the woman by paying her for her services and setting the agenda of the encounter. In the encounter between Delilah and Samson, a third party is paying Delilah to gain power over Samson, who thinks his relationship with Delilah is based on love. She causes him to be raped and rendered powerless, not the usual outcome of encounter between prostitute and client.

The second and third times Delilah asks Samson to reveal his secret (16:10, 16:13), she first reproaches him, accusing him of deceiving and lying to her. Her use of

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[183] Boling, 246.

[184] Soggin, 251.

[185] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 79.

the word התלת, from the root תלל, used to describe Pharaoh's deceitful dealings (Ex 8:25), and Laban's deception of Jacob (Gen 31:7), puts Samson in the same camp as these classic deceivers. Pharoah and Laban, despite their attempts at trickery, were both defeated because their opponents, Moses and Jacob respectively, had God, righteousness, and the future of the narrative on their sides. Delilah's accusation thus puts her in the same category as Moses and Jacob, and attempts to lend the weight of righteousness to her actions. But this is in opposition to the point of view of the narrative, according to which Delilah is the outsider and Samson the hero, so that even when his secret has been revealed and he is defeated, he manages to have the last laugh and in his death kill thousands of Philistines, dying with God on his side. כזבים, the second part of her accusation, are lies and untruths (Prov 6:19, 14:25, Hosh 7:13, Am 2:4, Zep 3:13). It is ironic that Delilah, who will provide the key to Samson's undoing, accuses him of trickery and deceitfulness. And yet it is true that she does not overtly deceive him. Her intentions are straightforward and her deception lies in how she uses his own self-deception to ruin him.

Each time he is asked, Samson answers differently. First he tells Delilah that if he is bound with fresh, undried יתרים, he will be just like every other man (16:7). The second time he tells her to bind him with untouched new עבתים, and he will be like any other man (16:11). The third time he tells her to weave the מחלפות of his head with the web of the loom (16:13). The fourth and final time he tells her the truth, that if he is shaved he will become weak like any other man (16:17). Elsewhere, יתרים are bowstrings (Ps 11:2) and cord used for binding (Job 30:11). Boling translates this as

"fresh gut," and notes Samson's insistence that it be unprocessed, in its freshest, rawest and most unusable state.[186] Samson has had an earlier experience with the second of his answers to Delilah, the עבתים. In 15:13, they is used by the Philistines to bind Samson, but he manages to break free. עבתים are best understood here as cords or ropes used for binding (Ezek 3:25, Ps 118:27. Hosh 11:4) or fastening (Ex 28:25, 39:18). מחלפות is a word used only here in Judges 16. Because מחלפות is used as a conjunction with ראשו, "his head," Boling translates it as braids,[187] while Soggin translates it as locks.[188] Either way, instead of telling Delilah to use a certain object to bind him, he now instructs her to bind him with part of his own body. In this third cycle of questioning and answering, he leaves out what he has previously added on to his answers, that if he is bound in this way, he will be like any other man. Because the mention of his hair in this third answer is dangerously close to the truth, Samson omits that part of his answer.

Boling notes that Samson's answers move from magic to reality.[189] The allusion to an evocation of magic is present in the language of this exchange itself. Delilah's use of the word כזבים in her accusation to Samson that he is lying to her (16:10) hints at an undertone of magic, in that throughout Ezekiel, כזבים is the word used to qualify the practice of magic or divination (13:6, 13:7, 13:9, 21:34, 22:28), as in "false magic."

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[186] Boling, 249.

[187] Ibid., 246.

[188] Soggin, 251.

[189] Boling, 249.

Delilah's accusation thus comes as an acknowledgment that not only is Samson playing games with her, but his trickery is rooted in symbols of false magic. Samson's answers also fit into the pattern of dichotomy that Niditch notices between nature and culture.[190] The fresh, unprocessed bowstrings are straight from nature, in their rawest state. The cords of his second answer are made of harvested material that needs to be treated by and worked upon by man, but still needs to be new and unused.[191] In his third answer, he names his hair, something completely from nature that is even still attached to his body, but must be acted upon by manmade technology, the loom.

> Samson is, indeed, a mediator between the "raw and the cooked" like the transformer heroes of so many cultures. He is a bridge between what humans have transformed, neatened, shaped, institutionalized, and socialized and what is found in nature, wild and unsocial. He moves between both worlds, but his source of strength, his unusual and emphasized qualities are in the realm of the raw, the wild, the natural and the nonsocial...[192]

While in his first three answers, he is essentially teasing Delilah, his answers foreshadow the truth, in that what will ultimately take away his strength is the cutting of his hair, the triumph of manmade culture and technology over his nature.

The image of the loom in his third answer not only represents civilization and technology, but also speaks to Samson's relationship with women and specifically with Delilah. Bal points out that weaving is stronger than binding, writing:

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[190] Niditch, "Samson," 613.

[191] Ibid., 615

[192] Ibid., 613-614.

> The weaving loom is traditionally a metonymical symbol of women. It points to domestic labor, family life, and spatial confinement.[193]

The loom represents not only the danger of entrapment, but also specifically entrapment by a woman within a woman's sphere. Niditch also notices the importance of the use of the weaving and loom imagery. She writes:

> An image of safely taming and elaborately tying thus intermingles with an evocation of the woman as maker of webs and plots.[194]

Despite the fact that Delilah is acting as an agent for the Philistines who want Samson defeated, the fact that his undoing will come at the hands of a woman and not in battle against other men is a critical aspect of this tale. Despite the similarities of Delilah's second and third questions, there is an important difference in Samson's answer to the third exchange. Whereas up to now he has addressed Delilah impersonally with instructions about how to overcome him, in his third answer he addresses her directly, instructing her personally in what actions to take. It is Delilah's very female-ness that does Samson in. She is not a warrior in the male sense; she is not out in the battlefield with bows and arrows, and horses and chariots, but she is inside, in interior female space, and she uses her specifically female skills and everyday household objects to entrap him and defeat him. Delilah's role is not accidental or coincidental but a crucial part of how the text is shaping the narrative of Samson. By asking Delilah to play a part in seeking

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[193] Bal, *Lethal Love*, 54.

[194] Niditch, "Samson," 616.

the downfall of Samson, the Philistines have enlisted Delilah as a warrior in their battle against an enemy hero. Like Yael playing her part in battle, she uses specifically female weapons and methods to achieve success. By to situating the action בחדר, the text places Delilah inside, in interior space. Like both Rebecca and Yael, her battlefield is the woman's sphere of home.

The fourth and final time that Delilah tries to get his secret out of him, she tries a different tactic (16:15). This time she evokes love, asking him how he could say he loves her when his heart is not with her, for had it been, he would not have deceived her. Her question creates a dichotomy between love and deception. Delilah carefully and deliberately does not mention her feelings towards Samson, but reflects his feelings for her back to him. If he truly loved her, he would not deceive her. If his love was real, he would give up his strength to her in complete abandonment. Bal writes, "Love, in this view, has two features: it is full, whole, absolute, and it is surrender."[195] Employing the tools of psychoanalysis, Bal reads this story of Delilah and Samson as the final stage in Samson's psycho-sexual development. She sees Samson as a virgin who is not yet ready to completely let go and become emotionally and sexually immersed, despite his attempts at previous relationships with women.[196] The concern with love in the story is the manifestation of Samson's anxiety about letting himself enter a relationship with a woman.

It is the myth of anxiety. Fear of the female, the feminine attraction and impurity,

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[195] Bal, *Lethal Love*, 56.

[196] Ibid., 53.

> fear of initiation, of the first time. Fear of the *vagina dentata*. Fear of emotional surrender, of too strong an attachment. Fear of old age and of the return to the womb, of the powerlessness of the child. Above all, fear caused by the irresistible attraction of all these things.[197]

By using love and challenging him to let himself go, Delilah finally convinces Samson to tell her the truth. It is a catch-22 -- in order to prove his masculinity, Samson must give up the very secret of his heroic powers and make himself impotent.

Like the story of Yael and Sisera, the tale of Delilah and Samson is laden with interwoven motifs of sexuality and maternity. When Samson finally reveals his secret to Delilah, he tells her that he has been a nazirite since he came from his mother's womb (16:17). This puts Delilah in his mother's place as the next woman in his life who will effect a dramatic change in his status. It was through his mother that he became a nazirite, and it will be through Delilah that that status becomes undone. Ackerman suggests that what happens here is a transfer of power between Samson's mother and Delilah. Delilah is the only one who can obtain from Samson the secret of his strength, but the only one who knew that secret was his mother.[198] Just as Yael blended the two into a fatal mix, Delilah fuses her powers of seduction with maternal references.

Once Samson has revealed his secret, Delilah realizes that this time he has been honest with her. Perhaps it is the mention of his mother or, as the midrash suggests, the

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[197] Ibid., 65-66.

[198] Ackerman, 281.

mention of God this time that signals to her the truth of his declaration.[199] She immediately calls for the Philistines, but unlike the first three attempts, she does not act right away to conquer Samson. Curiously, the Philistines pay her at that time, as if they have faith that she will not double-cross them or fail. Perhaps it is because Delilah knows that now she really does hold the secret to Samson's undoing that she chooses to lull him into sleep before beginning to overpower him. In the three previous ventures, he had been awake and presumably aware of what was going on. Even this time, he is not yet asleep when the Philistines enter. Could it be that Delilah is afraid that even the power of love will not be strong enough to enable Samson to give himself up to her? Does Delilah think that Samson has given up his secret because, in his love for her, he believes that he can trust her not to betray him?

Delilah uses that sense of trust to lull Samson to sleep (16:19). Sleep is an important element in Delilah's undoing of Samson, just as sleep figured prominently in Yael's killing of Sisera. Sleep is the ultimate state of powerlessness, as well as a king of temporary death that foreshadows literal death. Delilah places Samson עלברכיה, upon her knees. Just as Yael infantilized Sisera by covering him and giving him milk, Delilah infantilizes Samson by placing him on her knees and putting him to sleep. The version of this tale in the Septuagint changes עלברכיה, "upon her knees," to ביךברכיה, "between her knees," recalling the ביךרגליה, with all its attendant sexual undertones, that features

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[199] Numbers Rabbah 9.24.

in the story of Sisera's death in Judges 5.[200] Bal notes that even the weaving of Samson's hair in the loom during the third failed attempt is suggestive of a sexual relationship between Samson and Delilah, as it represents the interweaving of lover's hair.[201] The expression על ברכי, "upon my knees," is used in Gen 30:3 in connection to childbirth. Thus Samson's placement on Delilah's knees is both an image of surrender after lovemaking, and a birth image, just as was Sisera's placement between Yael's legs in Judges 5.[202]

At that moment that Samson lies asleep on Delilah's lap, the text presents a puzzle. Delilah puts Samson to sleep and his hair is shaved off (16:19). But sandwiched in between those two actions are the words, ותקרא איש, "she called to the man." Who is this man to whom Delilah called, and what is his role in this episode? Who in fact shaves Samson? While this is generally read as Delilah calling to one of the waiting Philistines to come shave Samson, Sasson argues that the man to whom she calls is Samson himself. She calls to him in order to make sure he is sleeping deeply, and upon not receiving an answer, goes ahead and shaves him.[203] She has gained power over him at last. Bal reads the haircutting as the severing of Samson's bonds with his mother, who had instructed him

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[200] Sasson, 334.

[201] Bal, *Lethal Love*, 54.

[202] Ibid., 58-9.

[203] Sasson, 338.

never to cut his hair.[204] She also points out the Freudian connection between hair-cutting and castration.[205] In classical Greek and Mesopotamian sources, heroes traditionally have long hair, so that this act of removing his hair can also be seen as the act of stripping him of his hero status.[206] Either way, by cutting off his hair, he is tamed, made impotent, and stripped of power. Exum looks at the connection between surrender to Delilah and virility, writing:

> The man who surrenders is emasculated; he loses his potency. At another level, this is the male fear of losing the penis to the woman, and anxiety that finds representation in Samson's symbolic castration that takes place when his hair is cut and he blinded.[207]

When he wakes up, he is bald and powerless, soon to be sightless as well. Ackerson connects this image of Sisera with that of him between his mother's legs at birth, also bald and powerless.[208] Delilah, the agent of his death, and Samson's mother, who gave birth to him, frame the beginning and end of Samson's life in similar ways, expressing death as a kind of inverted birth, just as Yael and Sisera's mother frame the beginning and end of Sisera's life in Judges 5.

The question of whether or not Delilah herself shaves Samson's head is significant.

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[204] Bal, *Death and Dissymetry*, 225.

[205] Bal, *Lethal Love*, 55.

[206] This connection was pointed out by Sharon Keller.

[207] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 83.

[208] Ackerman, 280.

If the text is read according to Sasson, Delilah emerges as a truly active participant in the downfall of Samson. Throughout their encounter, she has little by little gained power over him, so much so that in the end he literally gives up all his power into her hand. She has used the skills specific to her as a woman to gain power over a heroic man. Exum and Ackerman both note that knowledge is power, and Delilah has increasingly greater power as this tale proceeds.[209] Not only does she know the reason she is convincing Samson to reveal his secret to her, but she eventually learns the secret itself. Niditch carries the hair-cutting metaphor to its natural conclusion, stating that "... the defeated warrior has been made into a woman."[210] She continues, writing:

> Thus the language and imagery here partake of the epic language of the defeated warrior as a sexually subdued woman in order to emphasize the Israelite Samson's subdued and oppressed status.[211]

By obtaining his secret and stripping him of his power, Delilah has equalized their status and brought Samson into her arena. However, if the text is read according to the more traditional interpretation, in which Delilah calls to a man, presumably one of the Philistines, who comes and does away with the source of Samson's strength, then Delilah becomes a much more passive presence in the text, playing out her role in order to get her money, but standing in the background during the climatic scene.

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[209] Exum, *Fragmented Women,* 81; Ackerman, 82.

[210] Nidith, "Samson," 617.

[211] Ibid., 617.

But in the end, despite having been stripped of his powers by Delilah, Samson has the last laugh. His hair grows back, and though he dies doing so, he manages to destroy the Philistines. Exum notes that once he dies, his body is gathered by his brothers and kinsmen, and buried in his father's tomb (16:31).[212] Delilah transformed him temporarily into a woman-like figure, but he dies as a warrior and is brought back into the male realm in his death. Ultimately, Delilah's actions serve to further Samson's cause and the goal of the narrative, the destruction of the Philistines.

Unlike the other women considered in this study, Delilah does not fit the trickster motif. She does not try to be anyone other than who she is, despite the fact that she uses Samson's feelings for her own purposes. But she is straightforward with him. While she uses typical female methods of seduction and mothering as a form of subterfuge, to lull him into a sense of complacency and trust, it would be hard to imagine him truly being surprised by her intentions. Her greatest act of subterfuge may in fact be concealing her bottom-line motivation from him. Thinking she got his secret out of him because she was loyal to the other side would have been a matter of all being fair in love and war, because at least that way his hero status remains unchanged. He is still a hero, albeit a hero who needs to be destroyed so that her side can triumph. But knowing that she did it for money puts a whole other spin on the encounter. His power is further diminished as he becomes less significant and less of a hero.

The trickster in this tale is Samson himself. Like the typical trickster, he uses

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[212] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 85.

riddles and secrets to gain power over others. Niditch calls Samson a 'bandit," which she identifies as a sub-category of the trickster.

> The bandit is a variety of hero and trickster whose tale involves a challenge to the power of the establishment by weaker or oppressed elements in society. His adventures, like those of the trickster, involve deception and issues of status. His death is by betrayal and often features traits of false invulnerability.[213]

Just as tricksters change forms, Samson's form changes temporarily from heroic male warrior to powerless female with the cutting of his hair, though it was Delilah that effected that change. But is difficult to overlook Samson's collusion with her actions. Soggin points out that the story is improbable and illogical.

> Samson, who is presented elsewhere as being skilled at riddles, here appears so ingenuous and absurdly infatuated that his behavior smacks of stupidity or even mental abnormality.[214]

It is difficult to see Samson as a character simply duped by Delilah. Surely he was in love and love certainly can affect one's judgment. But Delilah could not have been more direct with him. She makes it clear that she wants to know how his powers can be weakened, and each time she binds him and calls in the Philistines to capture Samson. It is only the fourth time that the text mentions that he is asleep, so presumably he would have been aware of being bound and of the entrance of the Philistines in the three previous attempts. In fact, his behavior makes no sense unless the thought is entertained that Samson was so arrogant that he thought nothing could weaken him, or that he himself had an ulterior

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[213] Niditch, "Samson," 609.

[214] Soggin, 257.

motive.

Delilah, a woman with no identifiable family or ethnicity, manages to bring down the hero Samson. Recalling Niditch's remark that the Book of Judges is concerned with the victory of the weak due to God's help,[215] this episode is to a certain extent Delilah's triumph. Using her wit and her female power, she has managed to do what the male Philistines have been unable to manage. Yet because Samson is an Israelite figure, ultimately the narrative is on his side. Delilah is not praised like Yael is for her work in defeating the enemy, because he is not the enemy of the text, only an enemy of the enemy. Other than financially, Delilah does not emerge triumphant for her hard work. When Samson is first captured, the Philistines credit their god for delivering Samson to them, not Delilah. She disappears from the text the moment Samson is shorn and awoken. She has fulfilled her side of the bargain and is no longer necessary. And ultimately, in the end the victory is Samson's. With God's help, Samson dies in glory, killing scores of Philistines. The point of the narrative is not to show that God is on the side of Delilah who is in a position of weakness but triumphs, rather to show that God is on the side of Samson and his less powerful people the Israelites.

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[215] Niditch, "Samson," 612.

Chapter Five

Michal

If Judges is set in the context of a period of transition from pre-monarchal to monarchal, I Samuel is squarely set against a backdrop of the monarchy. McCarter writes that the Book of I Samuel, written to legitimize David's succession over Saul, is "prophetic in perspective and suspicious of the institution of monarchy."[216] As discussed earlier, the establishment of the monarchy resulted in increased urbanization and centralization of the population, as well as greater stratification between male and female roles.[217] Thus the depictions of women in I Samuel are limited almost exclusively that of wives, daughters, and mothers. Among these women are the many wives of David.

Michal is both daughter and wife. As Saul's daughter and David's wife, she straddles the two competing dynasties. Michal is first introduced in I Sam 14:49 as הקטנה, the smallest or youngest of Saul 's five children. Throughout Biblical narrative, the younger sibling is often the favored one. Rachel is referred to as the younger sister (Gen 29:16, 18), Jacob, the younger twin, is Rebekah's favored son (Gen 27), Joseph and Benjamin are Jacob's favored sons (Gen 37:3, 42:13, 42:15, 42:20, 42:34, 43:29, 44:23, 44:26), and Samson's wife younger sister is said to be the prettier one (Jud 15:2). As discussed in chapter 1, despite the framework of primogeniture in which the older son is

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[216] P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel*, (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 18-22.

[217] Meyers, 190-192.

supposed to inherit, the motif of the younger son emerging as the heir the family lineage and birthright is common throughout Biblical narrative. One of the central motifs in Biblical narrative, identified above as the "motif of the forsaken first-born,"[218] is the ability of the younger sibling to triumph due to wit, ability, or trickery. That Jonathan is Saul's eldest son is not enough in this narrative to ensure him the throne. David, the youngest son of Jesse (I Sam 17:14), will prove himself to be worthy of being king by his deeds, not by his place in the family birth order, helped along the way by the loyal and unambitious Jonathan.

Michal's introduction as the youngest might then, in the context of this narrative that tends to turn archetypal birth order determinations on its head, seem to be suggesting that Michal will emerge a triumphant character. Though she does marry David, and carries out an important act of subterfuge, she could hardly be called a winner, for in the end she is disgraced and cast aside. What is more indicative of her portrayal in the text is the other ways in which she is referred to. At all times that Michal is mentioned, she is either Saul's daughter or David's wife, with one important exception. Her importance is measured in terms of whose interests her actions are serving and who has authority over her. The only time she appears in the text as simply Michal it is at the very moment that her role as a point of contact and conflict between the two men is at its most climatic (19:17).

After Saul promises David his older daughter Merav as a wife but then gives her

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[218] Syrén, 142.

instead to Adriel, Saul offers Michal to David. Here she is part consolation prize, and part a dangerous threat, for Saul's offer is hardly that of a caring, peace-loving father-in-law-to-be. Michal is re-introduced into the text in 18:20 as בתשאול, "Shaul's daughter." Her importance to Saul here as a pawn to be used against David is evident. She is Saul's and he can do with her what he wishes. However, the text also reports that ותאהב מיכל, "Michal loved David." While Biblical woman occasionally are said to love members of their family, as in the examples of Rebekah's love for her son Jacob (Gen 25:28) and Ruth's love of her mother-in-law Naomi (Ruth 4:15), this is the only instance in Biblical narrative of a woman loving a man to whom she is not related. McCarter in fact translated this love as "falling in love," to differentiate between this and other forms of love.[219]

Saul, whose political concerns far outweighed his concern for his daughters, is pleased to be told of Michal's feelings for David. Rather than worrying that she is not being loyal to him, he sees a chance to use this love against David. At the same time, David is not reported to have any particular feelings for Michal, but seems happy enough to marry any one of Saul's daughters that might be offered to him. When Merav, Michal's older sister, is first offered to David, he responds obsequiously, asking who he is that he could merit becoming the king's son-in-law (I Sam 18:18). Like Saul, he is presented here as a shrewd politician, and not as a romantic figure. Couching his response in terms of his prospective relationship to Saul, he seems much more concerned with the political ramifications of marrying one of the king's daughters than with the specifics of who that

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[219] McCarter, 315.

daughter might be. Bowman points out that they use the same language to express their attitude toward the proposed match. Saul is said have found the idea of Michal's love for pleasing in his eyes (I Sam 18:20), while David finds the idea of being the king's son-in-law pleasing in his eyes (I Sam 19:26).

> Michal is thus portrayed as a victim twice over. She is at once the victim of Saul's desire to eliminate David and the victim of David's desire to establish ties with royal family by becoming the king's son-in-law.[220]

They react similarly, seeing only each other and their own self-interest, their eyes closed to the person being used and traded between them. That Michal's looks are never mentioned is a telling commentary on her narrative role as a useful pawn between her father and David rather than as a woman worthy of being noticed and loved.[221] The tale of Michal and David that is about to unfold is not a love story, but rather a story about the nexus of the male and female spheres and concerns. A clear winner and loser will emerge here, as it becomes evident that male concerns and the male realm takes priority in the narrative.

Upon learning of Michal's love for David, Saul understands that a union between Michal and David could well serve his interests, and decides to use Michal as a מוקש.

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[220] Richard Bowman, "The Fortune of King David/The Fate of Queen Michal: A Literary Critical Analysis of 2 Samuel 1-8," in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, eds. David J.A. Clines and Tamara Eskenazi, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 104.

[221] Aschkenasy, 144.

This has been translated as either "enticement,"[222] or "snare."[223] Driver wrote that it is "some kind of fowling-implement, - certainly not a 'snare' ... but probably the trigger of a trap with a bait laid upon it.... Hence it is often used metaphorically of that which allures a person to destruction."[224] This is well illustrated by the usage of מוקש in Amos 3:5. מוקש can also be used to describe a stumbling block, something that gets in the way of achieving a goal (Ex 10:7,), or simply a metaphor for being trapped (Prov 12:13, Ex 34:12, Ps 69:23). There can also a theological implication underpinning to מוקש, in the sense that idol-worship is a kind of ensnarement (Ex 23:33, Deut 7:16, Jud 2:3). A מוקש is dangerous and possibly fatal, something to be avoided. Joshua 23:13 makes clear just how dangerous a מוקשcan be, using the word to indicate something which causes bodily damage, blindness, and even death. The conjunction of מוקש with מוות, "death" indicates similar danger (II Sam 22:6, Ps 18:6, and Prov 13;14 and 14:27). Saul means business here by placing Michal before David as a trap, and he means to bring harm to David. Bach writes, "She is to spell death for David, although her love for him keeps her from snapping the trap."[225]

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[222] McCarter, 315.

[223] *The Prophets: Nevi'im*, 140; Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 159.

[224] S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Book of Samuel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 153.

[225] Alice Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," in *Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 121.

Saul's motivation for using Michal in this way is multifold. His main purpose is to get rid of David by setting a high bride price for Michal. While generally the *mohar* was a price set by the bride's father to be paid by the groom, there is one other Old Testament instance in which certain acts on the part of the prospective groom could be considered sufficient, that being the episode in which Caleb offers to give his daughter to whomever would defeat Kiryat-Sefer (Josh 15:16, 17, Jud 1:12, 13).[226] After a discussion in which David declares to Saul's servants that he does not have the means to be the king's son-in-law, referring not only to his status but to his financial situation, Saul sends David into battle with the purpose of bringing back one hundred Philistine foreskins as the bride-price (18:25). Hertzberg justifies Saul's earlier actions regarding a marriage between Merav and David by viewing him as that of a father who son-in-law-to-be is quite young and must still prove himself in the world before being allowed to marry his daughter.[227] In the case of the marriage to Michal, Hertzberg again justifies Saul's sending David to war by viewing it an attempt on Saul's part to let David win her as a warrior.[228] However, the text itself is hard pressed to bear out these sympathetic readings of Saul, since he seems to care nothing for his daughters beyond their usefulness and only wants harm to come to David. Rather, for Saul, promising David his daughter and then sending him to his death in battle is the perfect way to remain powerful in the face of David's

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[226] Victor P. Hamilton, "Marriage," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* IV, (New York: Doubleday: 1992), 563.

[227] Hertzberg, 160.

[228] Ibid., 162.

popularity, and to get David out of the way. He uses Michal as a way to entrap and kill David.

Through Michal, Saul can claim control over David. But not only does he plan to manipulate David, he manipulates Michal. He uses her love for David as a way to get to him. Even if his plan does not work and David does not die in battle, by having David married to his daughter Saul hopes to be able to maintain some control over him. He will expect to be able to use Michal as a kind of spy, like placing a mole in David's house to monitor his every move. But his plan backfires, precisely because of that love that he hoped to use for his own advantage. All this time, as Saul plots and plans, Michal is still being referred to as his daughter. But David brings back the foreskins as promised, in fact he brings back double the amount, and Michal is given to him as promised. In the same line it is stated that Saul saw then that God was with David, and that Michal loved David (I Sam 18:28). Saul became even more afraid and threatened by David than ever before (I Sam 18:29). Saul understands then that Michal, while essentially powerless, has some control over the way in which she loves and what results from that love. It is at that point that Michal temporarily stops being referred to as Saul's daughter. When she reappears in the next chapter, she will be called David's wife. From Saul's perspective, she has gone over to the other side. Instead of destroying David, Michal's love for him will save him from Saul.

What is David's impetus in accepting both the challenge to fight the Philistines and the reward of Michal as a wife? Michal's love for David is a critical part of the narrative, but nothing is mentioned of David's feelings in return. He is not the lover, but

the beloved. Does Michal's devotion or attraction to him appeal to his vanity and enhance his sense of virility? Surely it is not just coincidental that he is sent to collect foreskins. What a better test of his manhood could there be than destroying the lives of a multitude other men and taking as proof the part of their bodies intrinsically connected to their vanquished manhood? Or does he see that accepting any of Saul's daughters in marriage is an ideal way to get a toehold into Saul's family and legitimize his claim to the monarchy? Whatever his reason, and surely it is some combination of the two, marriage to Michal would certainly be useful to David.

The next time Michal emerges in the text, she is suddenly no longer Saul's daughter but David's wife (I Sam 19:11). In the midst of a scene in which David is trying to flee the wrath of Saul, Michal suddenly surfaces and takes action. In the entire drama that is about to unfold, it is never David who speaks, but Michal. From being a passive appendage she abruptly bursts forth as a daring, active character who takes initiative, and takes sides. Yet despite her boldness she is a woman, bound by the narrative conventions of her gender. Michal's space is interior space, the home. This space is identified as בית דויד, "David's house" (I Sam 19:10). This is where David runs to find shelter, away from the male sphere of politics and warfare and strife. He runs to his wife Michal, who is inside. In this regard he is like Sisera and Samson, two heroes who seek refuge in a woman's realm. However, in this case, since Michal is his wife, he has more of claim on the safety of this space than did Sisera or Samson, and in fact he receives the safety and help he needs. Michal tells David that he must fear for his life, and concocts a plan to help save him. She lets him escape out her window and lies about his whereabouts when Saul's

messengers come to find him. Then Michal lies to her father about her reasons for letting David escape. Here a woman does not use his needs or expectations against him, rather, her act of subterfuge is in helping him and not another man to whom she is also bound.

Michal's space, the private interior space of the household, is not a place where David can remain. His realm, the place where he is powerful and where his story must unfold, is outside in the public realm. And so Michal helps him escape back to the outside, but managing to avoid being trapped by Saul's men as he does so. Her act of subterfuge lies in enabling David to re-enter the male sphere and his own on-going narrative, using her to circumvent what lies in his way. McCarter notes that houses were often built as part of the city wall, so that the image of David escaping by going out the window is not farfetched.[229] Michal is his own personal shortcut to freedom.

Michal's weapons of subterfuge involve the same motifs as those of the other women in this study. Not only is the arena of her actions the world of the home and the interior, but her tools are everyday domestic items. Once David has taken flight out the window into freedom, she arranges her bed so that it will look like David is there asleep. She takes the תרפים, lays them on the bed, puts כביר העזים at one end, and conceals the arrangement with a cloth or covering. She has used what is on hand to create the illusion that David is resting in her bed.

McCarter points out that תרפים refers to household idols which may have had a role in divination. While there are several places where the possession of such objects is

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[229] McCarter, 325.

condemned (I Sam 15:23, II Kings 23:24), there are also other examples of a tacit acknowledgment of their existence in Israelite households and religious life (Gen 31:19, Ezek 21:26, Zech 10:2).[230] Despite the seeming incompatibility of objects like teraphim with the Israelite cult ideology, there is compelling evidence that women in fact had their own household rituals, practices and religious objects. Alongside the official cult, there may have been an unofficial women's religious practice that suited women's specific needs and circumstances.

> Local shrines, saints and spirits, home rituals in the company of other women (often with women ritual leaders), the making and paying of vows (often by holding feasts), life-cycle rites, especially those related to birth and death - these widely attested elements of women's religious practice appear better suited to women's spiritual and emotional needs and the patterns of their lives than the rituals of the central sanctuary, the great pilgrimages and assemblies, and the liturgical calendar of the agricultural year.[231]

Archeological research has led to speculation about household figurines of naked women as common objects that women would have possessed, possibly related to fertility rites, but there are as yet no clear conclusions.[232] What is apparent is that Michal, like Rachel, was able to manipulate the use of the household gods. Comparing the two episodes, Aschkenasy writes:

> Both know how to take charge of the household gods (*teraphim*), and both are

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[230] Ibid., 326.

[231] Bird, *Missing Persons*, 87.

[232] Phyllis A. Bird, "Women: Old Testament," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* VI, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 955.

> more than a match for their father when it comes to words. Each grounds the power of her words in an aspect of women's experience that, for differing reasons, renders male reply impossible. Each leaves her father speechless.[233]

That she and Rachel both used תרפים in contexts that involved covering up and deception gives strong evidence that these were objects readily accessible to women and that were in some way associated with women. That both these episodes specifically involve the deception of their fathers is an indication that given the realities of patrilocality, daughter's loyalties shifted from father to husband, despite the initial usefulness of the marriage from the father's perspective.

The exact meaning of כביר עזים is difficult to ascertain, as כביר is a hapaxlegomenon. Driver associates כביר with the words for sieve and coverlet. He suggests that is might be something used to cover someone's head or face while asleep.[234] McCarter translates this expression as "a tangle of goat hair." Making the same associations as Driver with similar words, he understands כביר as "something intertwined, netted," as in a kind of netting. But he also notes the comparison in Song of Songs 4:1 in which hair is compared to a flock of goats, thus the connection to hair.[235] Michal's placement of the object would seem to indicate that her intention was to have it look like hair.

This episode of Michal's subterfuge is strikingly similar to that of other women in

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[233] Aschkenasy, 147.

[234] Driver, 157.

[235] McCarter, 326.

Biblical narrative. Like Rebekah who dressed Jacob in goatskins in order to trick Isaac into thinking that the son he was seeing was Esau, Michal uses an object connected to goats to trick her father Saul's men into thinking that what they saw in her bed was David. Like Yael, Michal welcomes a fleeing hero and uses covering to obtain victory. Like Tamar, Michal literally covers up the truth to create a temporary but useful illusion. Like Delilah, Michal's interior space becomes an extension of the outside public sphere by the arrival of men seeking to overcome the male enemy hero. Whether it is food, drink, clothing, coverings, or other household objects, all of these women perpetrate their subterfuge in specifically female ways, using items and methods available to women. Michal's actions also parallel the incident in Josh 2:15 in which Rahab helps the spies escape through the window.[236] The rabbis of the Talmud noticed this connection as well, grouping Michal and Rahab in the same category of women who inspired lust in men.[237]

No less important is the specific place where Michal's subterfuge is located. Her bed is the focal point of her deception. Like the narratives involving Tamar, Yael and Delilah, there is an undertone here of sexuality. Since she is David's wife, the natural place for him to be would be in her bed. Once inside Michal's arena, the bed is where he belonged. That it is there that Saul's men come to seek David is not pure chance, but is in keeping with the logic of the narrative and underscores the sexual nature of the relationship between Michal and David. Just as Yael and Delilah's tales also interweave

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[236] Ibid., 325.

[237] B Megillah 15a.

sexual imagery with maternal imagery, and specifically allusions to birth, and just as Rebekah's tale is based on giving birth and mothering and Tamar's results in giving birth, so too is David birthed through Michal's window into the outside world, as Exum writes, "David ... passes through the vagina/window into the larger world, so to speak, to meet his destiny."[238]

Saul has two children who love David, Michal and Jonathan. Saul's fatal flaw lies in assuming that their loyalty to him will outweigh their love for David. But the text dramatically illustrates David's charismatic powers through Michal and Jonathan's unswaying loyalty to David. Through his need to destroy David, Saul winds up destroyed himself and loses both Jonathan and Michal to David.[239] Breuggeman writes that while Jonathan is overt and confrontational in his siding with David, Michal is "devious and indirect."[240] In many ways, they are each other's appositely gendered doubles, representing two gender-specific approaches to the same set of circumstances. Exum writes:

> As a woman, Michal is not free to choose between conflicting allegiances in an open, political way - in the way, for example, Jonathan is free.[241]

Jonathan's reciprocated relationship with David, his ability to take action and his

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[238] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 47.

[239] Walter Breuggeman, *First and Second Samuel*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 144.

[240] Ibid., 143.

[241] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 45.

placement in the center of the narrative point up the limitations placed on Michal due to her gender.

In another way though, they trade places and take on attributes typically associated with the opposite gender, as Berlin points out. In stating her love for David and making it known publicly, Michal has acted in a way generally reserved for men. The image of her walking away from a weeping spouse also puts her in the typically male role. As for Jonathan, he receives the physical contact, gratitude, and tenderness from David that is withheld from Michal (I Sam 20:41). While both siblings save David's life, Michal does it through action while Jonathan does it by using words. She is the brave, active initiator, while Jonathan basically follows David's orders.[242] However they may have traded roles or qualities in their lives though, they still remain bound in important ways by their gendered realities. Ultimately the text does away with both of these members of the Saulide dynasty, but while Jonathan dies a hero's death and is mourned publicly by David, Michal is silenced, punished, disgraced and cut out of David's life and the text.[243]

Until Michal's last appearance in the text, David never speaks to her. Her love for him and his lack of reciprocation has defined their relationship. He speaks about the prospect of marrying her to his father, and he goes and does what Saul has challenged him to do in order to attain her. David's words and deeds show that he considered her useful

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[242] Adele Berlin, "Characterization in Biblical Narrative: David's Wives," in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, eds. David J.A. Clines and Tamara Eskenazi (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 91-92

[243] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 56-59.

and worth acquiring, but not worth engaging in a relationship with. Her role is not to please him personally, but to help him politically. She speaks to him, but he never answers or responds directly to her. In 19:17, the words that Michal relates to her father as David's are words she has invented herself.[244] It is as if Michal does not really exist for David other than as an object that can help him obtain power.

As a woman caught between a warring husband and father, whose husband is not yet king, Michal has no authority. However, for a brief moment, Michal has power. She is able to conceive of and carry out a plan to help her beloved. He comes to her, into her space, to seek her help, and she is able to use her resources to invent a heroic response to the danger that awaited David.

> The house is the woman's domain; here she is safe and can even exercise power, while outside, in the larger world, men wield authority."[245]

For that moment, Michal steps out of all roles. She is neither daughter or wife, but simply Michal, wielding the power available to her to carry out her plan. All the verbs used by the text to describe the episode are active verbs with Michal as the subject. David is not the active one here, rather he acts in response to the plan Michal puts into action. But her power is limited. Once she has helped him escape, her usefulness is over. He is outside, in the male sphere, and he no longer needs her, nor does her power extend to the outside realm. Michal and David don't interact again until once again, Michal takes initiative, and

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[244] Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 120.

[245] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 29.

in so doing this time incurs David's wrath. What is more, having helped David to escape, Michal is left with an empty bed and an imitation husband. Bowman notes that even her act of daring only helps David and leaves her with nothing.

> Ironically, Michal acts to protect David, but she cannot protect herself. After Michal aids David in his escape from the court of Saul, he never returns. Michal is in a 'no win situation'. If she does not arrange for David's escape, Saul will kill him. If she does, David will in effect be forced by circumstances to desert her. Either way she loses him: to death or to desertion. Whether she acts or fails to act, she is the victim of David's deteriorating relationship with Saul.[246]

Bach points out that David hasn't just escaped Saul, but he has escaped Michal.[247] Bach identifies Michal as a transitional figure between Saul and David. Once he can successfully escape Saul, Michal is no longer useful to him. She writes, "Michal, the companion of David's liminal period, is discarded like an outgrown garment."[248] Clines points out that when Michal lies to her father about David threatening her into helping him escape, she tells him that David demanded that she let him go. By using these specific words, Michal acknowledges that what was at issue was not so much saving David's life as truly letting him go from her life.[249]

In the meantime, Michal has chosen to take sides. When Saul's servants come to

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[246] Bowman, 107-108.

[247] Bach, "Pleasure," 123.

[248] Ibid., 125.

[249] David J.A. Clines, "The Story of Michal, Wife of David, in its Sequential Unfolding," in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, eds. David J.A. Clines and Tamara Eskenazi (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 131.

find David, she tells them that he is sick (I Sam 19:14). On Saul's orders, they try to force him to appear before Saul, and in so doing discover Michal's ruse. Saul confronts Michal and asks how she could have deceived him, and how she could have let his enemy escape. He makes no note of the fact that while David is his enemy, he is Michal's husband. Bach writes, "Michal has no part in the deal struck between her father and David. She is the reward of a struggle between men going violence to men."[250] Her feelings don't factor into this from Saul's point of view. He gave Michal to David because it made good political sense, and David accepted her for the same reasons. Despite being tied to David by marriage, Saul expected Michal to act in his own best interests. Instead, Michal has helped David escape her father, and what is more, she then lies to Saul about her motivations, telling him that David threatened to kill her if she did not help him (19:17). Understanding that David has left her and that she not free to act as she wishes but is now back under her father's protection, she acts in her own best interest by capitalizing on Saul's already existing mistrust of David and telling him something that will easy for him to believe about David.

David's adventures continue as I Samuel proceeds, and he acquires other wives. Michal remains out of the text, except for one mention in 25:44. Here she hangs in limbo. She is identified, within one line, as both Saul's daughter and David's wife. But since David had escaped Saul and left Michal behind, it is Saul who has authority over Michal. In this one compact line Michal is reported to have been taken away from David and given

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[250] Bach, "Pleasure," 122.

to Palti as a wife. For what reason, and under what circumstances, the text does not say. That Saul chose to punish David in this way is plausible, as is the irrelevance of Michal's feelings or wishes to Saul.

In II Samuel Michal is mentioned again, first briefly in passing in chapter 3 where she momentarily becomes useful once again to David. In II Samuel 3:13, she is called Saul's daughter and becomes an element of a transaction between David and Avner. As Clines writes:

> Abner has just offered to defect from Saul to David, so it is not remarkable that David should require him to bring with him, as a token of his good faith, a piece of Saul's property.[251]

Yet one line later, when speaking to Ishboshet, David calls Michal his wife. It has been pointed out that it would make no sense for David to speak about Michal as Saul's daughter to Ishboshet, Saul's son.[252] McCarter proposes that Saul gave Michal to Paltiel in order to weaken David's claim to the monarchy. It is for this reason that David demands her return here, as a symbolic action meant to strengthen his claim to throne as he prepares to bring Judah and Israel together under his rule in the aftermath of Saul's death.[253] Referring to Michal like this is a way of confronting Ishboshet with both David's claim on Michal, despite Saul's having given her to another man, and his authority over

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[251] Clines, 136.

[252] Ibid., 136.

[253] McCarter, 400.

Ishboshet, a hypothetical competitor to the throne.[254] His order to Ishboshet is a reminder of David's victory. So David has Michal wrenched her away from her new husband Paltiel, who follows behind her crying (3:16). Paltiel's actions vis-à-vis Michal stand in strong contrast to David's cavalier attitude and readiness to use Michal whenever it is useful to him.

Ben-Barak has noted that Michal's marriage to Paltiel and then subsequent reunion later with David is problematic, given the Biblical prohibitions against one woman being married to more than one man, and the dire consequences for a married woman who engages in sexual relationship with another man. The Talmudic midrash addresses this point as well, asserting both that Michal and Paltiel never had a physical relationship, as he placed a sword between to avoid temptation.[255] Ben-Barak, pursuing a legal solution, points out that while Paltiel grieves the loss of Michal, he does not object, refuse, or appeal the decision, perhaps because he was aware of laws that allowed such a situation to occur.[256] Looking to Mesopotamian sources, she finds evidence that there were laws in which a wife whose husband had been captured, and who had no children or visible means of support, could be considered a widow and allowed to remarry. However, upon the

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[254] Clines, 127.

[255] B Sanhedrin 19b.

[256] Zafrira Ben-Barak, "The Legal Background to the Restoration of Michal to David," in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, eds. David J.A. Clines and Tamara Eskenazi (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 76-78.

reappearance of her first husband, she reverted back to being his wife and the second marriage is invalidated.[257] While David has not been captured, he has been in exile, hiding from Saul who would surely capture him if he could.

> Michal's status is similar to that of the free women of the upper class whose only protector is the formal authority. I should also be remembered that the woman no longer belongs to her father's household; it is not clear, moreover, what the relations between Saul and Michal were after she helped David to escape. At all events, Michal, without father-in-law, and sons, was in the eyes of the law without means of support and therefore entitled to marry another man. The accounts of David's wanderings point to his being way from home for years. According to the Assyrian law, which lays down a period of two years for the time that a wife still belongs to her first husband, Michal would be free to remarry. ... [Saul's] action must be recognized as a customary official act and not as the arbitrary act of Saul giving his daughter in marriage.[258]

Ben-Barak argues that Mesopotamian law would have had a greater influence on the events of I Samuel than the laws of Deuteronomy, which come from a later period. Whether these laws apply to this situation or not, Michal is depicted as having no control or say in her fate. If one man does not take care of her, another must be found who will. If the first man reappears, or if he chooses to reclaim her, she gets transferred back to him.

David and Michal briefly meet once more in II Samuel. By this time, David is triumphant. His long awaited victory over the Saulide dynasty has taken place and he is king. In II Sam 6:16, Michal looks through a window and sees David dancing and cavorting in jubilation, and is disgusted with what she sees. She is still inside, in her limited female domain, glancing out the world beyond. Her marginalization is accentuated

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[257] Ibid., 85.

[258] Ibid., 86-87.

by her placement by the window, looking out but not a part of the revelry going on outside, as it is by her identification as Saul's daughter. Connected to both men, she is no longer useful to either. Is her disgust due to the very sight of David himself, who abandoned her and took advantage of her love for him? Or is she passing judgment on his actions?

For the second time, Michal takes action and pushes against the confines of her boundaries. She steps outside of her place in the text, and goes outside (II Sam 6:20). Still identified as Saul's daughter, she openly and sarcastically criticizes David for acting inappropriately. As Saul's daughter, if not as David's wife and thus the queen, she speaks with authority, but the authority which she summons does not help her. David lets her know in no uncertain terms that he has God, the ultimate authority, on his side, and that God has chosen him over Saul to be king (6:21). Thus he effectively strips Michal of any authority. Exum writes:

> Michal ... opposes the system that would have her remain inside, in her place, doubly subordinated as subject to her king and as woman to her husband. Here the message is: refusal to submit leads to rebuke and humiliation. Michal speaks out against the figure of authority - the husband/king - and is silenced.[259]

Her words of rebuke are the last words she is allowed to have in the text, and David's harsh answer is the only time he speaks to her. He lets her know that she has overstepped her place.[260] While this was all right when she did so to help him, she does not have the

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[259] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 34.

[260] Ibid., 28-9.

power to do so as she wishes, and this time she should not have done so since it was not in David's best interest. Alter writes, "The breaking off of the dialogue at this point is itself an implicit commentary."[261] He has had not only his sole dialogue with her, but he has the power and authority to have the last words of the exchange.

Breuggeman notes that their exchange is a "total inversion." David is criticized by Michal, whereas he is now loved by all the people. Michal, who thought she had authority to address David in this way, is in fact powerless and unloved.[262] Exum notes the political subtext to the exchange.

> The woman provides an opportunity for narratively displacing a strategic and embarrassing problem at the political level onto the domestic level, where it offers less of a threat. The animosity between the houses of Saul and David is then symbolically resolved as a marital conflict.[263]

David's feelings for Saul get projected onto Michal, just as her criticism of David's behavior is a criticism from the Saulide dynasty to the Davidic dynasty regarding the proper comportment for a king.[264]

This exchange between Michal and David is followed by the information that Michal is never to have any children (II Sam 6:23). In a context in which having children was a route to power and fulfillment for women, as well as assurance that someone would

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[261] Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 125.

[262] Breuggeman, 253.

[263] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 27.

[264] Ibid., 27.

take care of them in the case of divorce or widowhood, taking away from her the ability to have children is quite a grim fate. While as Alter points out, the narrator avoids making an overt connection between Michal's barrenness and her criticism of David, but the connection is there all the same.[265] Coming as it does immediately after the interaction with David, the question of the intention of the narrative naturally arises.

Is Michal's barrenness a punishment for her words against God's ordained king? That is certainly one way to read her barrenness. But there are other possibilities that need to be considered as well. It has been cogently argued that Michal's barrenness is a necessity given the political priorities of the narrative. Exum suggests that it would be theologically unacceptable for David and Michal to have a child.

> Poetics and ideology work together to remove Michal from the narrative. The rejection of Saul's house requires that Michal have no children.[266]

Any child resulting from the union of Michal and David would automatically pose a threat to David's claim to the throne. Yet it could also be argued that Michal's barrenness is stated by the text simply as fact rather than as a judgment. Both Alter and Exum suggest that her barrenness might be a result of the lack of sexual activity. Once David publicly humiliates her, and she is no longer useful politically to him, perhaps he never has a sexual relationship with her again.[267] Michal's diminished presence and importance in the text is

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[265] Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 125.

[266] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 26.

[267] Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 125; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 25-26.

in direct proportion to her usefulness to the men in her life. Echoing this idea, Bach writes, "The length of female textual life seems to be directly connected to the extent of sexual pleasure she provides her male creators."[268] Exum also suggests the possibility that Michal might have chosen not to let him have a sexual relationship with her any longer, now that she has seen his undignified behavior.[269] Given the realities of the power relations as portrayed in the narrative, and the fate of a childless woman, that Michal would have had such a choice or would have made such choice is unlikely, though perhaps this was her last grasp at maintaining power in the only domain left for her to control. Michal resurfaces one more time. In II Samuel 21:8 she appears once again, this time as Saul's daughter without any reference to David. Surprisingly, here she is reported to have born five sons to Adriel. Some scholars, as well as traditional Jewish sources, have responded to this quandary by concluding that this is a case of mistaken identity and the text is meant to be read as Merav, Michal's older sister.[270] Alternately, Ben-Barak contends that instead of substituting the women's names to obtain a correct reading here, Adriel should be read as Paltiel, as both names have the same meaning in Aramaic and Hebrew, respectively, and therefore are likely to refer to the same person. Since these were Paltiel's children, they remained with their father when Michal was sent back to

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[268] Bach, "Pleasure," 122.

[269] Exum, *Fragmented Women,"* 25-26.

[270] Kyle P. McCarter, *II Samuel,* (Garden City, N Y: Doubleday, 1984), 225; Hertzberg, 383; Exum, *Fragmented Women,* 38; B Sanhedrin 21a.

David.[271] The rabbis of the Talmud solve this problem by maintaining that the five sons were Merav's but that Michal helped to raise them and therefore merited being called their mother.[272] Even so, these aren't David's sons, so the existence of these children don't invalidate the suggestions that David and Michal could not have children because it was either theologically inexpedient or not possible because of the changed nature of their relationship. As for barrenness as a punishment, these children could be read as Michal's consolation prize, since they are neither the children of the man she loved, nor part of the Davidic dynasty. However the existence of these children is interpreted, in the end their existence is a moot point, because their very mention here only serves to tell of their violent death. If Michal did become a mother, her motherhood is brief and tragic, and she outlives her children to obtain the same troublesome status she would have held if she had been barren all along.

The Talmud is unsure what to do with Michal. On the one hand, she is grouped in a category of women who inspired lust in men, along with Rahab, Yael and Abigail. Her particular tool in inspiring lust was thought to be her appearance.[273] This would indicate that not only did the Talmudic sages see women's power as integrally linked to their sexuality, but also that in their minds, there was something less than wholesome about her actions. On the other hand, she is reported to be a woman who wore tefillin and was not

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[271] Ben-Barak, 87.

[272] B Sanhedrin 19b.

[273] B Megillah 15a.

prevented by the sages to do so, surely a sign of her righteousness. Moreover, as wearing tefillin is associated with the study of sacred text, the midrash is endowing Michal with the gift of scholarship.[274] Their comment about Michal raising Merav's children similarly endows Michal with honor, comparing the situation with that of Ruth's son being called Naomi's son.[275] As Aschkenasy points out, traditional Jewish sources gloss over the possible connection between the problems in Michal and David's relationship and her subsequent barrenness. By not focusing on the events immediately preceding the declaration of her barrennes, David is absolved of guilt towards Michal and can maintain his heroic stature in the midrashic sources, and Michal is not primarily remembered as a rejected wife.[276]

Michal's aid to David, which is critical to the continuation of David's story and his ultimate victory over Saul's monarchy, is narrated in a specifically female manner using gender-specific motifs and imagery. But despite the female nature of Michal's act of subterfuge, it is an act which comes at a critical moment in the development of the narrative and changes the outcome of events. Ultimately, Michal takes a risks to save David, but once David is triumphant, Michal is no longer necessary and fades out the story.

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[274] B Erubin 96a. Also Tamara C. Eskenazi, "Michal in Hebrew Sources," in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, eds. David J.A. Clines and Tamara Eskenazi (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 159.

[275] B Sanhedrin 19b.

[276] Aschkenasy, 144.

Chapter Six

Abigail

Michal is David's first wife, the wife of his youth, but her importance fades once he has managed to escape from her father. David goes out into the wider world and begins to acquire other wives as his fortune changes. Each wife comes to represent a different aspect of David, and brings him something that he needs, if only momentarily. Abigail is the next important woman to step into the David narrative. The stories of Michal and of Abigail intersect and overlap. As Bach writes, "Michal is essentially erased from David's life when Abigail is inserted into it."[277] Abigail enters David's story at a critical moment, helps him, and then like Michal, fades out of view as David moves on and his needs and focus change.

Once David escapes from Saul, he spends his time staying away from Saul's clutches, engaging in skirmishes, and gathering a following. In chapter 25 of I Samuel, he encounters a wealthy landowner named Nabal who refuses to bestow any generosity on David and his men. David is greatly angered and sends a small group of his men to threaten Nabal. A group of Nabal's servants report what is happening to Abigail, the landowner's wife, and they indicate that it was Nabal who had acted inappropriately, since David's men had treated them well and had even protected them from others. Abigail quickly acts to avert a potential crisis. What is to come between David, Nabal and Abigail

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[277] Bach, "Pleasure," 113.

is set out in one of the first lines of episode. Though Nabal is introduced by name first, followed by the introduction of Abigail אישתו, "his wife," it is Abigail's qualities that the text focuses on before continuing on with a description of Nabal (25:3). In this way the text makes it immediately apparent that Abigail will be the primary character of the two, and that Nabal will merely play a secondary role.

Abigail is described as being טובתשכל and ויפת תאר, intelligent and beautiful. That שכל is paired in other places with the word בינה, "understanding," lends meaning to שכל (I Ch 22:12, II Chron 2:11, Neh 8:8). This line in I Samuel is the only example of טובת שכל, but someone who has a שכל טוב, a closely related expression, is someone who has wisdom and understanding, is on the right path, knows how to properly serve Yahweh (Ps 111:10, Prov 13:15, II Chron 30:22), and who is thought well of by God and man (Prov 3:4). There is also a specific connection between שכל and the character of David. Other words from the same root are used several times to describe the special qualities that make David stand out from the rest as a skilled warrior and someone upon whom God showed favor (I Sam 18:5, I Sam 18:14, I Sam 18:15, I Sam 18:30).

The expression יפת תאר is used once to refer to beautiful women in general (Deut 21:11), and is used to describe Rachel and Esther (Gen 29:17, Es 2:7), both women who are noticed by men because of their great beauty and who are loved above other women. Joseph, Jacob's favored son, is the only male in the Bible to whom this description is given (Gen 39:6). It is implied that there is a connection to having an extra helping of good looks and being especially loved. The fat and healthy cows of Pharaoh's dream, the cows that symbolized a period of richness and plenty, are also described in this way (Gen

41:18). Adonijah, one of David's sons, is described as being טוב תואר מאד, "very good looking," a variation on יפת תואר. David himself is described as being an איש תואר, a "good-looking man."

Through the use of similar attributes, the text has created a connection between Abigail and David before they even encounter each other. Noting these similarities in the portrayals of Abigail and David, McCarter writes:

> Abigail's qualities, intelligence and beauty, are precisely those of the man who the audience may already suspect will become her new husband.... Abigail is as well matched with David as she is mismatched with Nabal.[278]

Nabal, however, is described as being hard-hearted and רע, "bad," the opposite of the word טוב or "good" used in Abigail's description. Many commentators have pointed out that Nabal, or in Hebrew, נבל, means "fool."[279] Driver read even more in this choice of a name, writing that Nabal was not so much a fool as much as he was "insensible to the claims of either God or man, and who was consequently at once irreligious and churlish."[280] The contrast between Abigail and Nabal is thus heightened. As Bach points out:

> Abigail is labeled the good-sense wife, the embodiment of *sekel* in contrast to her husband *nabal*, the fool.[281]

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[278] McCarter, 396.

[279] Hertzberg, 202; McCarter, 396.

[280] Driver, 200.

[281] Bach, "Pleasure," 114.

Additionally, Breuggeman notes that Nabal is first encountered in terms of his possessions.[282] Even before he is given a name, and before anything is mentioned about his personality, the text reports that he is wealthy and owned many flocks (25:2). For David, this information about Nabal will be the most important and the most useful.

Abigail assesses the situation and quickly decides to act (25:18). She steps into the role of provider and nurturer, and concludes that it would be best to help David. She provides the food for David that her husband had refused to give him. The text clearly states that she did not consult her husband and made this decision independently (25:19). Though her act involved such every day items as food and the seemingly harmless act of giving food, seen in this light her gift of food is in fact an act of subterfuge. She is acting behind her husband's back, not only without his knowledge but against his wishes. She is feeding the man who Nabal has identified as the enemy.

What is also striking here is that unlike Rebekah, Yael, Delilah and Michal, who were all situated safely inside or at most right beyond the opening of the tent, in the drama that is about to play out, Abigail is seen acting outside of the usual interior woman's space. Abigail is free to go about the countryside. Tamar's climatic episode is also placed outside, but that is consistent with Tamar's temporarily taking on the role of a prostitute, a woman positioned outside the regular boundaries of female space. But Abigail is not a prostitute, nor is she yet a widow. Having been identified earlier as a wife, as such she is

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[282] Breuggeman, 175.

safely within a normal female category of being. Yet when she begins to put her plan vis-à-vis David into action, she is no longer identified as Nabal's wife, rather simply as Abigail, emphasizing her independence and ability to make her own decisions (25:18). While Delilah and Yael's actions, like those of Abigail, had political ramifications far beyond the usual woman's sphere of influence, Abigail is unlike the other women in this study in that she is a woman who is able to go outside and perform in the public arena. But like Rebekah and again Yael, among the most powerful weapons in her arsenal are food and speech.

The motif of covering is present in this tale, as it is in the other stories of women and subterfuge in this study. In this case, Abigail uses the cover of a mountain to cover up from Nabal her alliance with David. Abigail mounts an ass and sets off across the hills to meet David (25:20). She runs into him in a place the text identifies as סתר ההר. The use of this expression, translated as "cover of the mountain,"[283] is significant. While this is the only Biblical example of this conjunction of סתר and הר, סתר is used to connote acting in secrecy (Deut 13:7, 27:15, 28:57, II Sam 12:12, Is 45:19, Prov 21:14,), hiding (I Sam 19:2, Is 28:17, 32:2, Ps 27:5, 31:21, 61:5) or as an aspect of subterfuge (Jer 37:17, Job 13:10, 24:15). As Abigail sets off to meet David behind her husband's back, she meets him in a place hidden from view. The hill will act as a cover for this meeting. That they happen upon each other there establishes a context of subterfuge and reinforces the deliberate nature of Abigail's act. The text states that David ran into her there, as if she

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[283] Hertzberg, 200; McCarter, 390.

had picked a place hidden from Nabal's view in order to await for David's arrival (25:20). It is in this meeting that they will establish a relationship that will exclude Nabal not only right now but forever.

Once in David's presence, Abigail acts quickly to attract David's attention and distract him from rushing to cause harm to Nabal. In the ensuing encounter, she shows her astuteness by using the kind of gendered behavior that would be expected of her in order to make her point and achieve her goal. Like the other women in this study, she is able to use the means at her disposal, however limited they may be, to accomplish goals that in fact may lie far outside the realm of expected female behavior. Yael may have used milk, a covering and tent peg, but with those items she managed to kill Sisera and ensure success for Israel. Likewise, using specifically female actions and language, Abigail will able to disarm David, prevent bloodshed, and at the same time maneuver herself into a more advantageous position than the one in which she started out, while she is also ensuring the establishment of the Davidic dynasty in Israel.

Abigail dismounts the ass and falls at David's feet. Her physical position vis-à-vis David is meant to be an acknowledgment of David's power and her relative powerlessness. Despite the content of what she will say to David, she wants him to view her as a non-threatening, powerless presence. The language she uses to address him serves a similar purpose. But all is not as Abigail would like David to believe. That she does not wait for him to speak first is an indication that despite her physical position, and despite the language in which her speech is couched, she in fact has quite a lot to say to David and that it would behoove him to listen. Similarly, Bach notes the use of active

verbs associated here with Abigail. She has initiated the action here and has planned what steps to take.[284] Behind the obsequiousness of her speech there is an intelligent woman with a purpose and a plan.

Abigail addresses David as אדוני, "my lord," fourteen times in the space of eight lines (25:24-31). In contrast, she refers to herself as אמתך and שפחתך, meaning "handmaid" or "servant," a total of six times in those same eight lines of text. Despite the seriousness of Abigail's mission, there is an element of humor in the extent of Abigail's exaggeration. Bach points out of the contrast between Abigail's "cloying humility" on the one hand, and her pointed actions on the other.[285] Fewell and Gunn note that Abigail is using David's own vanity and appetite for success to capture David's attention.[286] Is David so vain that he does not suspect she is overdoing it? Is he, like Judah, Sisera and Samson, only seeing what he wants to see, and not seeing, in this case, a woman desperately using any means available so that he will heed her words?

While Abigail insists on humility by her use of language, the actual content of her remarks to David reflect a far different reality. She takes the guilt for the wrong done to David and his men on herself, as Hertzberg notes, just as she simultaneously sets herself apart from her husband.[287] She denigrates her husband, telling David that Nabal is as

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[284] Bach, "Pleasure," 107.

[285] Ibid., 109.

[286] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 156.

[287] Hertzberg, 203.

much of a fool as his name would suggest and that he should not be taken seriously, and then states that she did not see David's servants when they came, implying that she would have helped them if they had come to her (25:25). The effect of this is to squarely place the guilt back on Nabal, in spite of her seeming to accept responsibility for what has happened. She then immediately turns the focus of her speech to David's relationship with Yahweh (25:26-31). In this way, she captures David's attention and signals the importance of her message, again in spite of the language in which it is embedded. In these next lines, Abigail reminds David that he has a task greater than the current potential confrontation with Nabal, that he is fighting Yahweh's battles, and that blood spilled in vain would harm David's success. Aschkenasy writes:

> ... Abigail serves as a moderating force that averts the clash of two extremes, and at the same time, she is also the wise teacher, who instructs and directs the man, and whose advice is heeded.[288]

She does not use euphemism, but reminds David in a straightforward manner that he is likely to be appointed king of Israel by Yahweh, if he does not put this into jeopardy by acting in such a way that make this impossible. She closes by asking David to remember her, underscoring the importance of her message for his successful fulfillment of his goal to become king (25:31). Rashi notes that Abigail is setting up the possibility here that should something happen to Nabal, David would do well to marry her. The Talmud, noting the import of this closing message to David, writes, "While a woman talks she

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[288] Aschkenasy, 176.

spins,"[289] implying that while she sought to give David good counsel, she was also trying to figure out how she could best gain from the situation. Unlike Michal, who was not able to successfully negotiate between two competing male forces, and had to take the side of one against the other, in the end losing both, Abigail is able to figure out how to keep the two sides apart and emerge with some fleeting degree of success for herself

. When confronting a powerful man, Abigail, like Tamar, takes on a specific physical presence in order to present herself as the image of woman who can fill his need and in so doing manage to direct his behavior in a certain direction. That the text depicts Abigail as falling at David's feet strengthens the comparison to Tamar. Abigail uses her female sexuality to get his attention, albeit here in a much more subtle way than Tamar. Falling at David's feet can certainly be read in several ways. There is of course the suggestion of humility and subservience. But it cannot be overlooked that רגליו, "his feet," is often used in Biblical narrative as a euphemism for male genitalia. In two particular cases, the use of רגליו is associated with women trying to get what they want from a man (Ruth 3:4, Es 8:3). Because David is a man and she is a woman, one of the ways in which she can emphasize her position of power in contrast to his is by using sexuality. Not only is she politically powerless, but she could be his, if he so wanted. Knowing what is to come in the story, it would seem that David took note of this allusion to Abigail's availability, and stored it away for future reference.

However, not all is as it seems. Abigail is hardly the powerless, submissive

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[289] B Megillah 14b.

character she is making herself out to be, for there are several things she has which could be extremely useful to David. And in fact, during this encounter, she is the one who gives while David takes. She has what he needs. In addition to the food she offers, she has, through her husband, wealth and land. But most importantly, Abigail has wisdom and insight that will prove to serve David well and help him achieve success. Abigail's intervention here saves David from himself, by preventing him from harming Nabal and rendering himself ineligible for his pre-ordained role as king.[290] But perhaps equally important, David is in the process of what McCarter defines as "building a base of power."[291] Abigail will serve David well in this endeavor. David's response to Abigail is an affirmation of her good intentions. He thanks her for saving him from harming both Nabal and his own aspirations.

> The story is designed to illustrate the excellent qualities of one of David's wives and to show that she became his wife precisely because of her excellence (and Yahweh's help), not because of mere accident or (emphatically) any wrongdoing on David's part. The partnership of such a wife bodes well for David's future, not only because of her "good intelligence" (v3) and counseling skills, but because she is the widow of a very rich Calebite landowner.[292]

David takes Abigail's words seriously. His own words back to her reflect his understanding of the situation, according to which Abigail was sent to him as a messenger from God.

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[290] McCarter, 400.

[291] McCarter, 402.

[292] McCarter, 402.

Having been blessed and dismissed by David, Abigail returns to Nabal, who is in the process of feasting and getting drunk (25:36). The word for feasting here is משתה, used generally for festivities which involved many people (Gen 19:3, 40:20, Jud 14;10, II Sam 3:20, I Kings 3:15, Es 1:3, Es 1:5, Es 2:18). The image of Nabal as host of a festive drinking party then is that of lord of the manor, providing drink all the while that his generosity here, in marked contrast to his refusal to give anything to David, is subtly reminding all his guests just who is in charge and controls the flow of the drink. What adds to this image is the addition of the words כמשתה המלך, "like the feast of a king" (25:36). Nabal generosity is a display not only of his great wealth, but also of his position of power. His great enjoyment of his position, as is evidenced by the text stating that his heart was merry and that he was extremely drunk, is about to be shattered.

Abigail waits until the next day to reveal to him what she had done. He is not pleased. The text relates that his heart dies and turns to stone, in contrast to the merriment in his heart the day before (25:37). Ten days later he is struck by Yahweh and dies. Has Nabal been struck down as punishment for not helping David? Or has Abigail's betrayal literally killed him? In either case, his death is certainly convenient. David can make Abigail his wife and thus gain all of Nabal's wealth, and Abigail can escape Nabal's wrath. Moreover, by killing off Nabal and justifying his death as being caused by Yahweh, the narrative seeks to remove from Abigail and David any hint of improper behavior, such as that which will haunt David later in the case of Bathsheba and Uriah. David is not seen here as in any way causing Nabal's death, or inappropriately obtaining Abigail as a wife, and Abigail avoids the risk of being seen as an adulterer. This story then also becomes the

perfect foil for the subsequent story of David and Bathsheba.[293]

When David learns of Nabal's death, he responds by being grateful that he was kept from doing harm to Nabal, but sees the death as God's retribution for Nabal's lack of hospitality. He quickly sends his servants to Abigail to ask her to be his wife. Once again, Abigail prostrates herself, this time not even before David himself but before his servants, and uses the image of washing feet (25:41). This time, however, the feet referred to are those of the servants. Again, this is an allusion to sexuality (II Sam 11:8). She is prepared to accept the offer and be David's wife. As Fewell and Gunn point out, her goal is to attach herself to a source of power. She understands that real power is held by men, and in this way, by lacing her submissiveness with an undertone of sexuality, she can secure for herself a better future than she would have had otherwise.[294] Like Yael, she is smart enough to have chosen the winning side, despite the risk of going against her husband's wishes or loyalties. Her original choice to help David was the choice of a survivor who understood that connecting herself to David, despite his current lack of material goods, was a better bet than sticking with her husband. Bach writes:

> The moral code [of the tale] reflects patriarchal values: a woman's personal payoff for virtue is connecting herself to a 'better' husband, one as beautiful, pious, and pleasing to God as she is herself.[295]

Since she herself cannot obtain real, public power, she has transferred her loyalties to a

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[293] This was pointed out by Sharon Keller.

[294] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 156.

[295] Bach, "Pleasure," 114.

man in whom she saw the potential for embodying considerably more access to power than both herself and her husband.

The trickster motif is at work in this tale and the trickster is clearly Abigail. Her disguise is that of a humble, submissive woman, willing to be of service to the man who embodies power and authority. But behind that camouflage lies an intelligent, ambitious survivor who has taken the initiative in this story. That Abigail is hardly as powerless as she wants David to believe can be seen also in the fact that, as Bach points out, none of the other actors in this drama interact with each other. All the interaction goes on through Abigail. She is front and center in this story, brokering the actions and reactions of the others and saving them from each other and themselves. Moreover, Fewell and Gunn point out that the reference in 25:42 to Abigail's five servants girls is also an indication that she is no lowly servant herself, but a woman of substance used to wielding at least some limited amount of power.[296]

Yet curiously, the real winner of this episode is not Abigail. Hertzberg sees Abigail's role here as that of a conduit between God and David. Her words have kept David from going off track.[297] More than that, the ongoing invokation of God in the remarks of both Abigail and David imply that their actions here are justified. Both of them are God's ordained, and they are acting according to God's will. This leaves little room to criticize their actions, especially those of Abigail vis-à-vis Nabal. He is simply a fool who

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[296] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 156.

[297] Hertzberg, 204.

had to be gotten rid of so that David could not only obtain Abigail's prophecy but her wealth. And that is the eventual goal of this tale. David is the true winner. In her role as trickster, Abigail has the ability to cause David himself to change form. Seen through Nabal's eyes, David is a lawless good-for-nothing, upon whom he is not willing to waste his goods or hospitality. However, Abigail re-casts this image entirely. The David she describes is man chosen by the ultimate authority of all, Yahweh, to rule and prevail. As Hertzberg notes, David as seen by Nabal is re-written by Abigail.[298] She transforms David from a homeless, marginal young man with monarchial aspirations into a mature man fit to be king. Like the other women in this study, Abigail's act of subterfuge ultimately serves the purpose of the narrative and of David in a far greater way than it helps her.

> When Abigail is placed at the center of her drama, she emerges as a redeemer whose action and prophecy are necessary in assuring the future role of David, the divinely chosen monarch of Israel.[299]

Once she has saved David from self-destruction, and once she has conceded to become his wife and thus greatly increase his wealth , she is no longer important or necessary to him. He has gotten from her all that he can.

The question arises then - in light of what Abigail has risked to become David's wife, is Abigail in fact better off with David than she was with Nabal? Bach thinks not.

The vibrant verbal Abigail seem to have functioned better as the wife of Nabal.

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[298] Hertzberg, 203.

[299] Bach, "Pleasure," 110.

> While he lived, she demonstrated bravery. She had the power of prophecy. After his death, Abigail's voice is absorbed into David's, much as she is absorbed into his household. Once inside his house, she is no longer a threat or a redeemer to men .... Abigail is denied political agency and her own identity.[300]

The casual mention of David taking another wife in 25:43 also serves to diminish Abigail's triumph. Fewell and Gunn write:

> But a shadow falls across her even as she reaches eagerly for her place of power (25:42-43) ... David's policy is to dissipate all power but his own. He will not have one wife but several. And no wife will be first in his house. He will keep his political options open and Abigail, whose options are now closing, will have to learn to live in their shadow.[301]

Abigail does not have another opportunity to speak or act. Once she becomes David's wife and is under his jurisdiction, she essentially disappears from the text. All the text reveals about Abigail is the identity of her husband, but not that of her father or clan. She is not the wife whose lineage is important to David, as that role has already been filled by Michal. Despite her allusions to sexuality, she is not the wife who will fulfill David's sexual needs, as that responsibility will fall on Bathsheba. Though she does bear David a son, he is not David's first-born, nor will he become an important son as David's story continues to progress (II Sam 3:3). Moreover, each time that Abigail is subsequently mentioned in the text, in addition to being called David's wife she is referred to as Nabal's wife (27:3, 30:5, II Sam 2:2, 3:3), as if she is forever marked by that association. In each of these later references to Abigail, she is named as just one of David's wives, and no

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[300] Ibid., 128.

[301] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise,"* 157.

longer stands out as an independent personality.

There is no one dominant rabbinic image of Abigail. The rabbis of the Talmud accord Abigail the honor of being one of the four great beauties of the world, along with Sarah, Rahab, and Esther.[302] Bach finds in the mention evidence that at least in this instance, Abigail is considered the most important of David's wives. She writes, "It is understood by the rabbis that Abigail's moral goodness and self-control cools David's ardor, thus distinguishing her from Bathsheba."[303] She is also understood through her sexuality and grouped in a category of women who inspired lust, each in a different way, along with Yael, Michal, and again, Rahab. According to the sages, her way of inspiring lust by using her memory.[304] The sages allow Abigail the designation of prophetess, along with Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Hulda and Esther, but they connect her prophecy to acting with what they see as typical female cunning and manipulation.[305] As Valler notes, the Talmud "utilizes the opportunity for attributing intrigue and falsehood to the whole female gender."[306]

While Michal's act of subterfuge was an example of risk-taking that literally saved

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[302] B Megillah 15a.

[303] Bach, "Pleasure," 115.

[304] B Megillah 15a.

[305] B Megillah 14a.

[306] Shulamit Valler, "King David and 'His' Women: Biblical Stories and Talmudic Discussions," in *Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 136.

David's life, Abigail's risk-taking saved David's career. They represent different stages in David's development, and brought him different gifts. Seen in her own light, Abigail is a woman who was able to quickly conceive of a plan to better her own situaion. That she figured out a way to use male power for her own advantage does no less credit to the text's claim of her intelligence. It could be argued that she is acting like a prophetess and is thinking only of David as she carries out her subterfuge. While it is certainly true that ultimately David reaps far greater benefit than she does as a result of her actions, her own self-interest is not to be overlooked. Her loyalty to David and the Israelite cause is perhaps based merely on expediency. The clearest picture of Abigail that emerges from the text is that of a survivor who uses whatever means available to her to advance her cause, in this case herself. That she helps David advance his own cause is crucial to the narrative of David, but incidental to the story of Abigail.

Conclusion

This study has closely considered six different Biblical women who all engage in subterfuge. Their stories come from different Biblical books and various historical stratum and sources. They were most likely not compiled and edited by the same hand, nor even originally intended to be read together. Yet because of their inclusion in the canon of the Old Testament, we cannot help but read them as a group. In their present form, they offer commentary and insight into each other, and there are a surprising number of similarities between the stories.

The primary link between these stories is subterfuge, the art of using trickery, deceit or underhanded methods to arrive at a goal or, alternately, to avoid a certain fate. Beyond that, there are recurrent themes, motifs, methodologies and language that bind these together. And there are questions that resurface as these stories are read one against the other. What is the role of these women in the narrative? Is there anything about their specifically female gender that enable them to operate through subterfuge? Are their stories necessary to the central aim of text, or are they interesting but parenthetical asides? What do the women gain by their actions, and who finally benefits?

There are common objects or *leitworts* that appear in each of these stories, as if conjuring up the image of a woman immediately fills the text with certain gender-specific items. All the women except for Tamar and Abigail are placed in interior space. Tamar, playing the role of a seductress, is necessarily placed outside of a home, for her action is diametrically opposed to the male-female unions that go on within the home. Abigail is

unique in being portrayed as a woman who was free to roam independently outdoors, yet her ability to do so at that moment in the text is also indicative of her process of changing households, from that of her husband to that of David. To make the change, she must go outside and move from one to the other. But even in the cases of Tamar and Abigail, their narratives, like those of the other women, involve domestic items such as food, clothing, and other household objects. Never do they handle male weapons or implements. Even Yael, the only one of the women to actually kill a man herself, uses a tent peg, a common domestic article for tent-dwelling peoples.

In addition to the literal interior space that these women occupy, they also occupy another kind of space. The subterfuge of each one of these women has something to do with mediating between men, and thus their existence and actions fill the space between these men. The women are sandwhiched on the inside, surrounded by men on the outside. Rebakah mediates between Isaac and Jacob, dealing with one and then the other, but never both together. Tamar operates in the space between her two husbands, and between her husbands and her father-in-law. Though she does so by drawing the battlefield into her tent, Yael steps into the conflict between Barak and Sisera. Delilah negotiates between the Philistines who are paying her, and Samson, who loves her. Michal slips into the struggle between Saul and David. And Abigail keeps Nabal and David safely apart, managing to avert a potential disaster.

Curiously enough, goats are another leitwort that appear in almost all these acts of subterfuge. In Genesis 27:9, Rebekah tells Jacob to fetch her two גדי עזים, "goat kids," and in 27:16, Rebekah covers Jacob's arms with ערת גדיי עזים, "the skins of goat kids,"

in order to ensure the success of her plan. Tamar is promised גדי עזים, "a goat kid," by Judah as payment, testifying to her success in covering up her true identity (Gen 38:17). The milk that Yael gave Sisera in Judges 4:19 in order to put him off guard, though it is not specified in the text, is commonly thought to be goat's milk. Michal constructs a fake man in her bed out of כביר עזים, thought to be goat's hair, so that Saul's messengers will think that David is there asleep (I Sam 19:13). Nabal, Abigail's foolish husband, is said to possess one thousand goats, which later will add to the picture of Abigail as a wealthy widow (I Sam 25:2). Like the other domestic items, it is likely that goats were the more domestic of the animals a family or clan might have possessed, and therefore animals to which the women had both greater access, in the cases of Rebekah, Yael, and Michal, as well as a greater need in the case of Tamar. There certainly seems to be a connection between women and goats, and in several of these episodes the goats or goat products form part of the women's weaponry in carrying out her subterfuge. Rashi actually notes that the goats mentioned in Genesis 27:9 are Rebekah's property as specified by the provisions of her ketubah.

The motifs of love, in both its sexual and maternal forms, runs through all these stories, in many cases with the two getting hopelessly intertwined. In Rebekah's story, love and mothering are intimately connected. Isaac, her husband, is said to have loved Rebekah, and is comforted by her after his mother's death (Gen 24:67). The implication here is that she becomes in some way a substitute mother for him, an idea that the midrash

picks up and elaborates on extensively.[307] But surely mention of Isaac's love for her suggests that her role vis-à-vis Isaac was not purely maternal. Meanwhile, Rebekah is never said to have loved Isaac. Instead, her love moves down one generation to Jacob, her favored son (Gen 25:29). Tamar, who needs children for the sake of her own security and status, figures out that the only way she can get children and right the wrong done to her by her father-in-law is to have his children. She uses her sexuality to become the mother she needs to be. Yael gains Sisera's trust by acting in a fashion that combines elements of maternal nurturing, such as protection and the giving of nourishment, with elements of sexuality. Her killing of Sisera has been read as both a symbolic aborted birth, and a reversed rape. Likewise, Delilah also uses a combination of nurture and sexual allure to gain access to Samson's secret. She uses his attraction, or love, for her to cause his downfall, in a scene that is again read like a combination birth and rape scene. Michal loves David, the only woman in all of Biblical narrative to let her feelings for a man other than a son to be known. Yet despite her sexual feelings for him, she winds up fulfilling more of a maternal, protective role in letting him escape her father, and ultimately the constraints of their sexual relationship. She births him out into the wider world, and is left with only a fake version of David in her bed. Abigail, David's second wife, also protects David in motherly fashion, and although she alludes to sexuality as she addresses him, she too will ultimately not hold the attraction for him that Bathsheba will later capture. It is tempting to suppose that the text does not know quite what to make of women, especially

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[307] Genesis Rabbah 60.16.

women who step out of their narrowly confined roles to effect change, and so they are always seen through the lens of typical female guises as mother or lover, defined by roles related to their specifically female bodies.

That these stories all involve the literal act of covering up is fitting to the thread of subterfuge that ties these tales together. In some cases the covering up is overt, and words related to covering are used. In other cases the covering up is more understated, yet still present in the workings of the narrative. Rebekah covers Jacob's arms and neck so that he will appear to Isaac as Esau (Gen 27:16). Tamar covers her face with a veil and her body with different clothes so that Judah will not recognize her (Gen 38:14). Yael places some kind of covering on Sisera (Jud 4:18, 19), and Delilah covers Samson with a variety of bindings, and uncovers his secret by uncovering his head (Jud 16). Michal covers up the fake man in her bed (I Sam 19:13) and Abigail meets David at the covert of the hill (I Sam 25:20). Unable to achieve their goals by direct means, these women dissemble reality, cover up what might otherwise be seen, and thus creatively employ subterfuge.

What is seen and what is not seen, and by whom, are also important elements in these six stories. Very often throughout these tales, men's eyes are closed to the realities represented by the women. Even when the truth is not covered up, often the men don't see what is in front of them. Given the imbalance of power relationships in these stories, and women's general lack of access to real authority, women are able to use this male weakness to gain some limited power and effect change. Isaac is presented as blind, and not only can he not see Isaac, but he does not recognize Isaac's voice. The success of

Rebekah's plan is contingent upon Isaac not recognizing Jacob for who he truly he is. Tamar's plan relies on Judah seeing only what he wants to see or expects to see, and would not have worked if he had recognized this woman as his daughter-in-law. Later, when he condemns Tamar to death, she opens his eyes to the truth of the situation, and to his own actions towards her. Yael uses hospitality to make Sisera think that what he sees in Yael is the nice, generous wife of an ally who will protect him. When she approaches him to kill him, she goes from behind, so that he cannot see her true intention. Despite her straightforward language, Delilah does not let Samson see that her true motivation is financial. He is blinded by his own attraction for her, and Delilah uses this attraction to get him to trust her. That Samson is literally blinded as a result only reinforces his prior inability to see the situation for what it truly was. David is blind to Michal herself, and only sees the ways in which she will be politically useful to him, while Saul is blind to the power of Michal's love for David, assuming that Michal will act as a loyal daughter and choose her father's interests over that of her husband's. David is equally blind to Abigail, seeing her only in terms of her strategic importance for him but essentially ignoring her pointed allusions to a potential sexual relationship, while Nabal is blind to the whole exchange between his wife Abigail and David.

Because the women are expected to act in certain ways and operate in certain limited arenas, they are in fact able to move about unnoticed behind the scenes as they orchestrate outcomes which turn out to be critical to the narrative. At the same time, in a shift of power dynamics, the women use this blindness on the part of men to literally create the men they need. In a variation on the trickster motif, the women are the

underdogs who change the form of the men with whom they interact and thus in so doing manage to wield some power. Rebekah makes Jacob into Esau, Tamar makes Judah into a temporary husband, Yael and Delilah birth men recast as disempowered, impotent, and non-threatening, Michal creates a man, albeit an inanimate one, who will remain in her bed, and Abigail transforms David from an upstart, impulsive youth into a mature man worthy of being king of Israel.

Despite the myriad ways in which these Biblical women do not fit the trickster paradigm, trickster ideology remains a useful tool with which to examine these tales. Writing about stories of trickster warriors, Niditch notes:

> ...the tales themselves would have held special appeal to Israelite societies as a whole during their many periods of external political, economic, and cultural subjugation, which accounts for virtually the whole of Israel's history....Pragmatic, self-sufficient, and street-smart, this ideology is more realistic than others about the possibility of eliminating the sources of oppression and discord.[308]

According to Niditch's suggestion, the Israelites, themselves an oppressed, marginalized people, would have understood the need for tricksters, and thus for subterfuge as a narrative technique. The acts of these women are not unique in Biblical narrative. Given limited options, trickery or subterfuge becomes a survival technique.

The women and their subterfuge serve the goals of the narrative. This too is in keeping with the trickster paradigm. Hyde writes:

> In spite of all their disruptive behavior, tricksters are regularly honored as the creators of culture. They are imagined not only to have stolen certain essential

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[308] Niditch, *War*, 119.

> goods from heaven and given them to the race but to have gone on and helped shape this world so as to make it a hospitable place for human life.[309]

While their actions may cause harm in the short term to an individual man and thus represent a kind of toxic femininity, they serve the general male goal of the text and advance the purpose of the narrative. As considered in the introduction, tricksters are generally not women, nor do the Biblical women meet all the requirements of being a trickster. Yet they are able to do the important work that they do in subverting the social structure in order to maintain it because they themselves, being female, are already outside the normal pattern or category.

The crucial importance of these trickster-like transformations for the narrative, however, raises an important question. For whose good are these acts of subterfuge? While their acts have, in most cases, helped the women gain some power, the power is temporary and in most cases the women aren't ultimately the winners. Rebekah ensures that Jacob is able to go on and become the next patriarch, inheriting God's blessings and the land. Tamar enables Judah's character to be redeemed, and his line continued, leading to the Davidic dynasty. Yael kills an enemy of Israel, and Delilah, while causing the undoing of an Israelite hero, also causes a multitude of Philistines to be killed as Samson manages to die a heroic death. Michal and Abigail are pit stops in the ongoing David narrative and send him on his way to greatness. Most of the women disappear from the text immediately after their act has been done, or in the case of Michal and Abigail, they

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[309] Hyde, 8.

reappear later only to be marginalized and rendered unimportant. In all these cases, the act of subterfuge on the part of a woman has served the needs of the men and the narrative to a much greater extent than they themselves have been helped. The text employs these women to carry out deeds which need to accomplished, but can't be attained through more direct channels. In keeping with their status as "other, " and due in part to men's inability to see the women for who and what they truly are, they can afford to take greater risks to realize the goals of the narrative. On their own, these stories are rich, compelling, and fascinating, But in the end, they are for the most part fragmented pieces of larger narratives. The women are critical in the ensuring the proper functioning of the narrative, but do not themselves stand at the center.

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man in whom she saw the potential for embodying considerably more access to power than both herself and her husband.

The trickster motif is at work in this tale and the trickster is clearly Abigail. Her disguise is that of a humble, submissive woman, willing to be of service to the man who embodies power and authority. But behind that camouflage lies an intelligent, ambitious survivor who has taken the initiative in this story. That Abigail is hardly as powerless as she wants David to believe can be seen also in the fact that, as Bach points out, none of the other actors in this drama interact with each other. All the interaction goes on through Abigail. She is front and center in this story, brokering the actions and reactions of the others and saving them from each other and themselves. Moreover, Fewell and Gunn point out that the reference in 25:42 to Abigail's five servants girls is also an indication that she is no lowly servant herself, but a woman of substance used to wielding at least some limited amount of power.[296]

Yet curiously, the real winner of this episode is not Abigail. Hertzberg sees Abigail's role here as that of a conduit between God and David. Her words have kept David from going off track.[297] More than that, the ongoing invokation of God in the remarks of both Abigail and David imply that their actions here are justified. Both of them are God's ordained, and they are acting according to God's will. This leaves little room to criticize their actions, especially those of Abigail vis-à-vis Nabal. He is simply a fool who

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[296] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 156.

[297] Hertzberg, 204.

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[297] Hertzberg, 204.

had to be gotten rid of so that David could not only obtain Abigail's prophecy but her wealth. And that is the eventual goal of this tale. David is the true winner. In her role as trickster, Abigail has the ability to cause David himself to change form. Seen through Nabal's eyes, David is a lawless good-for-nothing, upon whom he is not willing to waste his goods or hospitality. However, Abigail re-casts this image entirely. The David she describes is man chosen by the ultimate authority of all, Yahweh, to rule and prevail. As Hertzberg notes, David as seen by Nabal is re-written by Abigail.[298] She transforms David from a homeless, marginal young man with monarchial aspirations into a mature man fit to be king. Like the other women in this study, Abigail's act of subterfuge ultimately serves the purpose of the narrative and of David in a far greater way than it helps her.

> When Abigail is placed at the center of her drama, she emerges as a redeemer whose action and prophecy are necessary in assuring the future role of David, the divinely chosen monarch of Israel.[299]

Once she has saved David from self-destruction, and once she has conceded to become his wife and thus greatly increase his wealth , she is no longer important or necessary to him. He has gotten from her all that he can.

The question arises then - in light of what Abigail has risked to become David's wife, is Abigail in fact better off with David than she was with Nabal? Bach thinks not.

The vibrant verbal Abigail seem to have functioned better as the wife of Nabal.

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[298] Hertzberg, 203.

[299] Bach, "Pleasure," 110.

> While he lived, she demonstrated bravery. She had the power of prophecy. After his death, Abigail's voice is absorbed into David's, much as she is absorbed into his household. Once inside his house, she is no longer a threat or a redeemer to men .... Abigail is denied political agency and her own identity.[300]

The casual mention of David taking another wife in 25:43 also serves to diminish Abigail's triumph. Fewell and Gunn write:

> But a shadow falls across her even as she reaches eagerly for her place of power (25:42-43) ... David's policy is to dissipate all power but his own. He will not have one wife but several. And no wife will be first in his house. He will keep his political options open and Abigail, whose options are now closing, will have to learn to live in their shadow.[301]

Abigail does not have another opportunity to speak or act. Once she becomes David's wife and is under his jurisdiction, she essentially disappears from the text. All the text reveals about Abigail is the identity of her husband, but not that of her father or clan. She is not the wife whose lineage is important to David, as that role has already been filled by Michal. Despite her allusions to sexuality, she is not the wife who will fulfill David's sexual needs, as that responsibility will fall on Bathsheba. Though she does bear David a son, he is not David's first-born, nor will he become an important son as David's story continues to progress (II Sam 3:3). Moreover, each time that Abigail is subsequently mentioned in the text, in addition to being called David's wife she is referred to as Nabal's wife (27:3, 30:5, II Sam 2:2, 3:3), as if she is forever marked by that association. In each of these later references to Abigail, she is named as just one of David's wives, and no

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[300] Ibid., 128.

[301] Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise,"* 157.

longer stands out as an independent personality.

There is no one dominant rabbinic image of Abigail. The rabbis of the Talmud accord Abigail the honor of being one of the four great beauties of the world, along with Sarah, Rahab, and Esther.[302] Bach finds in the mention evidence that at least in this instance, Abigail is considered the most important of David's wives. She writes, "It is understood by the rabbis that Abigail's moral goodness and self-control cools David's ardor, thus distinguishing her from Bathsheba."[303] She is also understood through her sexuality and grouped in a category of women who inspired lust, each in a different way, along with Yael, Michal, and again, Rahab. According to the sages, her way of inspiring lust by using her memory.[304] The sages allow Abigail the designation of prophetess, along with Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Hulda and Esther, but they connect her prophecy to acting with what they see as typical female cunning and manipulation.[305] As Valler notes, the Talmud "utilizes the opportunity for attributing intrigue and falsehood to the whole female gender."[306]

While Michal's act of subterfuge was an example of risk-taking that literally saved

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[302] B Megillah 15a.

[303] Bach, "Pleasure," 115.

[304] B Megillah 15a.

[305] B Megillah 14a.

[306] Shulamit Valler, "King David and 'His' Women: Biblical Stories and Talmudic Discussions," in *Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 136.

David's life, Abigail's risk-taking saved David's career. They represent different stages in David's development, and brought him different gifts. Seen in her own light, Abigail is a woman who was able to quickly conceive of a plan to better her own situaion. That she figured out a way to use male power for her own advantage does no less credit to the text's claim of her intelligence. It could be argued that she is acting like a prophetess and is thinking only of David as she carries out her subterfuge. While it is certainly true that ultimately David reaps far greater benefit than she does as a result of her actions, her own self-interest is not to be overlooked. Her loyalty to David and the Israelite cause is perhaps based merely on expediency. The clearest picture of Abigail that emerges from the text is that of a survivor who uses whatever means available to her to advance her cause, in this case herself. That she helps David advance his own cause is crucial to the narrative of David, but incidental to the story of Abigail.

Conclusion

This study has closely considered six different Biblical women who all engage in subterfuge. Their stories come from different Biblical books and various historical stratum and sources. They were most likely not compiled and edited by the same hand, nor even originally intended to be read together. Yet because of their inclusion in the canon of the Old Testament, we cannot help but read them as a group. In their present form, they offer commentary and insight into each other, and there are a surprising number of similarities between the stories.

The primary link between these stories is subterfuge, the art of using trickery, deceit or underhanded methods to arrive at a goal or, alternately, to avoid a certain fate. Beyond that, there are recurrent themes, motifs, methodologies and language that bind these together. And there are questions that resurface as these stories are read one against the other. What is the role of these women in the narrative? Is there anything about their specifically female gender that enable them to operate through subterfuge? Are their stories necessary to the central aim of text, or are they interesting but parenthetical asides? What do the women gain by their actions, and who finally benefits?

There are common objects or *leitworts* that appear in each of these stories, as if conjuring up the image of a woman immediately fills the text with certain gender-specific items. All the women except for Tamar and Abigail are placed in interior space. Tamar, playing the role of a seductress, is necessarily placed outside of a home, for her action is diametrically opposed to the male-female unions that go on within the home. Abigail is

unique in being portrayed as a woman who was free to roam independently outdoors, yet her ability to do so at that moment in the text is also indicative of her process of changing households, from that of her husband to that of David. To make the change, she must go outside and move from one to the other. But even in the cases of Tamar and Abigail, their narratives, like those of the other women, involve domestic items such as food, clothing, and other household objects. Never do they handle male weapons or implements. Even Yael, the only one of the women to actually kill a man herself, uses a tent peg, a common domestic article for tent-dwelling peoples.

In addition to the literal interior space that these women occupy, they also occupy another kind of space. The subterfuge of each one of these women has something to do with mediating between men, and thus their existence and actions fill the space between these men. The women are sandwiched on the inside, surrounded by men on the outside. Rebakah mediates between Isaac and Jacob, dealing with one and then the other, but never both together. Tamar operates in the space between her two husbands, and between her husbands and her father-in-law. Though she does so by drawing the battlefield into her tent, Yael steps into the conflict between Barak and Sisera. Delilah negotiates between the Philistines who are paying her, and Samson, who loves her. Michal slips into the struggle between Saul and David. And Abigail keeps Nabal and David safely apart, managing to avert a potential disaster.

Curiously enough, goats are another leitwort that appear in almost all these acts of subterfuge. In Genesis 27:9, Rebekah tells Jacob to fetch her two גדי עזים, "goat kids," and in 27:16, Rebekah covers Jacob's arms with ערת גדיי עזים, "the skins of goat kids,"

in order to ensure the success of her plan. Tamar is promised גדי עזים, "a goat kid," by Judah as payment, testifying to her success in covering up her true identity (Gen 38:17). The milk that Yael gave Sisera in Judges 4:19 in order to put him off guard, though it is not specified in the text, is commonly thought to be goat's milk. Michal constructs a fake man in her bed out of כביר עזים, thought to be goat's hair, so that Saul's messengers will think that David is there asleep (I Sam 19:13). Nabal, Abigail's foolish husband, is said to possess one thousand goats, which later will add to the picture of Abigail as a wealthy widow (I Sam 25:2). Like the other domestic items, it is likely that goats were the more domestic of the animals a family or clan might have possessed, and therefore animals to which the women had both greater access, in the cases of Rebekah, Yael, and Michal, as well as a greater need in the case of Tamar. There certainly seems to be a connection between women and goats, and in several of these episodes the goats or goat products form part of the women's weaponry in carrying out her subterfuge. Rashi actually notes that the goats mentioned in Genesis 27:9 are Rebekah's property as specified by the provisions of her ketubah.

The motifs of love, in both its sexual and maternal forms, runs through all these stories, in many cases with the two getting hopelessly intertwined. In Rebekah's story, love and mothering are intimately connected. Isaac, her husband, is said to have loved Rebekah, and is comforted by her after his mother's death (Gen 24:67). The implication here is that she becomes in some way a substitute mother for him, an idea that the midrash

picks up and elaborates on extensively.[307] But surely mention of Isaac's love for her suggests that her role vis-à-vis Isaac was not purely maternal. Meanwhile, Rebekah is never said to have loved Isaac. Instead, her love moves down one generation to Jacob, her favored son (Gen 25:29). Tamar, who needs children for the sake of her own security and status, figures out that the only way she can get children and right the wrong done to her by her father-in-law is to have his children. She uses her sexuality to become the mother she needs to be. Yael gains Sisera's trust by acting in a fashion that combines elements of maternal nurturing, such as protection and the giving of nourishment, with elements of sexuality. Her killing of Sisera has been read as both a symbolic aborted birth, and a reversed rape. Likewise, Delilah also uses a combination of nurture and sexual allure to gain access to Samson's secret. She uses his attraction, or love, for her to cause his downfall, in a scene that is again read like a combination birth and rape scene. Michal loves David, the only woman in all of Biblical narrative to let her feelings for a man other than a son to be known. Yet despite her sexual feelings for him, she winds up fulfilling more of a maternal, protective role in letting him escape her father, and ultimately the constraints of their sexual relationship. She births him out into the wider world, and is left with only a fake version of David in her bed. Abigail, David's second wife, also protects David in motherly fashion, and although she alludes to sexuality as she addresses him, she too will ultimately not hold the attraction for him that Bathsheba will later capture. It is tempting to suppose that the text does not know quite what to make of women, especially

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[307] Genesis Rabbah 60.16.

women who step out of their narrowly confined roles to effect change, and so they are always seen through the lens of typical female guises as mother or lover, defined by roles related to their specifically female bodies.

That these stories all involve the literal act of covering up is fitting to the thread of subterfuge that ties these tales together. In some cases the covering up is overt, and words related to covering are used. In other cases the covering up is more understated, yet still present in the workings of the narrative. Rebekah covers Jacob's arms and neck so that he will appear to Isaac as Esau (Gen 27:16). Tamar covers her face with a veil and her body with different clothes so that Judah will not recognize her (Gen 38:14). Yael places some kind of covering on Sisera (Jud 4:18, 19), and Delilah covers Samson with a variety of bindings, and uncovers his secret by uncovering his head (Jud 16). Michal covers up the fake man in her bed (I Sam 19:13) and Abigail meets David at the covert of the hill (I Sam 25:20). Unable to achieve their goals by direct means, these women dissemble reality, cover up what might otherwise be seen, and thus creatively employ subterfuge.

What is seen and what is not seen, and by whom, are also important elements in these six stories. Very often throughout these tales, men's eyes are closed to the realities represented by the women. Even when the truth is not covered up, often the men don't see what is in front of them. Given the imbalance of power relationships in these stories, and women's general lack of access to real authority, women are able to use this male weakness to gain some limited power and effect change. Isaac is presented as blind, and not only can he not see Isaac, but he does not recognize Isaac's voice. The success of

underdogs who change the form of the men with whom they interact and thus in so doing manage to wield some power. Rebekah makes Jacob into Esau, Tamar makes Judah into a temporary husband, Yael and Delilah birth men recast as disempowered, impotent, and non-threatening, Michal creates a man, albeit an inanimate one, who will remain in her bed, and Abigail transforms David from an upstart, impulsive youth into a mature man worthy of being king of Israel.

Despite the myriad ways in which these Biblical women do not fit the trickster paradigm, trickster ideology remains a useful tool with which to examine these tales. Writing about stories of trickster warriors, Niditch notes:

> ...the tales themselves would have held special appeal to Israelite societies as a whole during their many periods of external political, economic, and cultural subjugation, which accounts for virtually the whole of Israel's history....Pragmatic, self-sufficient, and street-smart, this ideology is more realistic than others about the possibility of eliminating the sources of oppression and discord.[308]

According to Niditch's suggestion, the Israelites, themselves an oppressed, marginalized people, would have understood the need for tricksters, and thus for subterfuge as a narrative technique. The acts of these women are not unique in Biblical narrative. Given limited options, trickery or subterfuge becomes a survival technique.

The women and their subterfuge serve the goals of the narrative. This too is in keeping with the trickster paradigm. Hyde writes:

> In spite of all their disruptive behavior, tricksters are regularly honored as the creators of culture. They are imagined not only to have stolen certain essential

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[308] Niditch, *War*, 119.

Rebekah's plan is contingent upon Isaac not recognizing Jacob for who he truly he is. Tamar's plan relies on Judah seeing only what he wants to see or expects to see, and would not have worked if he had recognized this woman as his daughter-in-law. Later, when he condemns Tamar to death, she opens his eyes to the truth of the situation, and to his own actions towards her. Yael uses hospitality to make Sisera think that what he sees in Yael is the nice, generous wife of an ally who will protect him. When she approaches him to kill him, she goes from behind, so that he cannot see her true intention. Despite her straightforward language, Delilah does not let Samson see that her true motivation is financial. He is blinded by his own attraction for her, and Delilah uses this attraction to get him to trust her. That Samson is literally blinded as a result only reinforces his prior inability to see the situation for what it truly was. David is blind to Michal herself, and only sees the ways in which she will be politically useful to him, while Saul is blind to the power of Michal's love for David, assuming that Michal will act as a loyal daughter and choose her father's interests over that of her husband's. David is equally blind to Abigail, seeing her only in terms of her strategic importance for him but essentially ignoring her pointed allusions to a potential sexual relationship, while Nabal is blind to the whole exchange between his wife Abigail and David.

Because the women are expected to act in certain ways and operate in certain limited arenas, they are in fact able to move about unnoticed behind the scenes as they orchestrate outcomes which turn out to be critical to the narrative. At the same time, in a shift of power dynamics, the women use this blindness on the part of men to literally create the men they need. In a variation on the trickster motif, the women are the

> goods from heaven and given them to the race but to have gone on and helped shape this world so as to make it a hospitable place for human life.[309]

While their actions may cause harm in the short term to an individual man and thus represent a kind of toxic femininity, they serve the general male goal of the text and advance the purpose of the narrative. As considered in the introduction, tricksters are generally not women, nor do the Biblical women meet all the requirements of being a trickster. Yet they are able to do the important work that they do in subverting the social structure in order to maintain it because they themselves, being female, are already outside the normal pattern or category.

The crucial importance of these trickster-like transformations for the narrative, however, raises an important question. For whose good are these acts of subterfuge? While their acts have, in most cases, helped the women gain some power, the power is temporary and in most cases the women aren't ultimately the winners. Rebekah ensures that Jacob is able to go on and become the next patriarch, inheriting God's blessings and the land. Tamar enables Judah's character to be redeemed, and his line continued, leading to the Davidic dynasty. Yael kills an enemy of Israel, and Delilah, while causing the undoing of an Israelite hero, also causes a multitude of Philistines to be killed as Samson manages to die a heroic death. Michal and Abigail are pit stops in the ongoing David narrative and send him on his way to greatness. Most of the women disappear from the text immediately after their act has been done, or in the case of Michal and Abigail, they

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[309] Hyde, 8.

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