



Gender and Sexuality in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity

Literary Representations of Women in the Hebrew Bible: *In Memoriam of Female Victims*



‘The Disposable Wife’

- In some biblical texts women are mistreated ‘under the surface’.
- Abraham and Isaac are prepared to offer their beautiful wives, Sarah and Rebekah, to foreign men in order to save their own skin (cf. Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:7-11).

David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-5)

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

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

Gazing at Bathsheba

Does she seduce David into committing adultery with her?

'We must, however, ask, whether Bathsheba did not count on the possibility of being seen bathing' (H.W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, 1964:309)

Book of Hours, Paris, 1500.

Bathsheba stands in a pool, while David in regal robes leans on the balcony to look at her.



Gazing at Bathsheba



Or does the encounter begin with the lustful gaze of a king who takes advantage of one of his subjects?

Who else 'gazes' at Bathsheba? Does it not encourage the reader/hearer to engage in a form of voyeurism?

'David and Bathsheba', Hans Memling 1482

'Bathsheba Bathing', Lucas Cranach, 1526

A fully clothed Bathsheba has her feet washed by one of her maidservants. David watches this act of footwashing while playing the harp in the company of others.



The 'Taking' of Bathsheba



- Bathsheba (like Sarah) is 'taken' because of her beauty.
- David knows that she is the wife of another man, and yet consciously (and openly) initiates an act of adultery.

'Bathsheba at the Bath', Friedrich Heinrich Füger (1751-1818)

The 'Taking' of Bathsheba



'So David sent messengers to fetch her, and she came to him, and he lay with her' (11:4).

Motives and responses are left undefined.

Bathsheba is a passive figure ('I am pregnant').

Cheryl Exum speaks of 'the rape of Bathsheba by the pen'. The male author casts her in such an ambiguous light that her actions could be deemed questionable by later authors. Her 'literary rape' encourages her objectification.

'David and Bathsheba', Ernst Fuchs, 1985.



A Marriage of Convenience

- David had no intention of taking Bathsheba away from her husband Uriah.
- He calls Uriah from the battlefield so that he can lie with his wife and assume paternity of the child (2 Samuel 11:6-13).
- When the plan fails, David ensures that Uriah dies on the battlefield to avoid accusations of adultery (11:14-25).
- There is no expression of love for Bathsheba, only David's demonstration of concern for his own reputation.
- Bathsheba mourns for her dead husband:
'When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him' (11:26).
- 'When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son' (11:27).



‘David displeases the Lord’

(2 Samuel 11:27)

- David is condemned in the parable recited by the prophet Nathan: ‘Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife’ (2 Samuel 12:9).
- The transgression is against Uriah (for violating his marital rights), not Bathsheba (= ‘the wife of Uriah’).
- The death of the child is taken as divine punishment for David’s sin.
- ‘Then David consoled his wife Bathsheba, and went to her, and lay with her; and she bore a son and he named him Solomon’ (12:24).

The Levite's Concubine (Judges 19)

In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. But his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah and was there for some four months. Then her husband set out after her, to speak tenderly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys. When he reached her father's house, the girl's father saw him and came with joy to meet him. His father-in-law, the girl's father, made him stay, and he remained with him for three days; so they ate and drank, and he stayed there (19:1-4).

'No king in Israel' (19:1; cf. 18:1; 21:25) - anticipation of the social chaos that follows.

Levite - hill - Ephraim

Concubine - city - Bethlehem

Concubine or 'secondary wife' - Hebrew *pilegish*.

He is the 'husband' of the woman (19:3; 20:4), the 'son-in-law' of the woman's father (19:5), who is the Levite's 'father-in-law' (19:4, 7, 9).



Brief Reversal of Male Control

‘But his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father’s house at Bethlehem in Judah and was there for some four months’ (19:2).

- ‘She became angry with him’ (Greek and Old Latin texts; cf. New Revised Standard Version).
- ‘She prostituted herself against him’ or ‘played the harlot’ (Hebrew text; cf. NRSV footnote).
- It could denote a metaphorical form of ‘prostitution’ or infidelity: she acts against her husband, thereby violating the marriage contract.
- After consummating the marriage, the Levite accuses her of not having been a virgin, as required of a Levite’s wife (Leviticus 21:1-15).



The Men of Gibeah (19:11-25)

When they were near Jebus, the day was far spent, and the servant said to his master, 'Come now, let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites, and spend the night in it.' But his master said to him, 'We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel' but we will continue on to Gibeah'.

Then at evening there was an old man coming from his work in the field. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was residing in Gibeah..... The old man said [to the Levite], 'Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square. So he brought him into his house, and fed the donkeys; they washed their feet, and ate and drank....



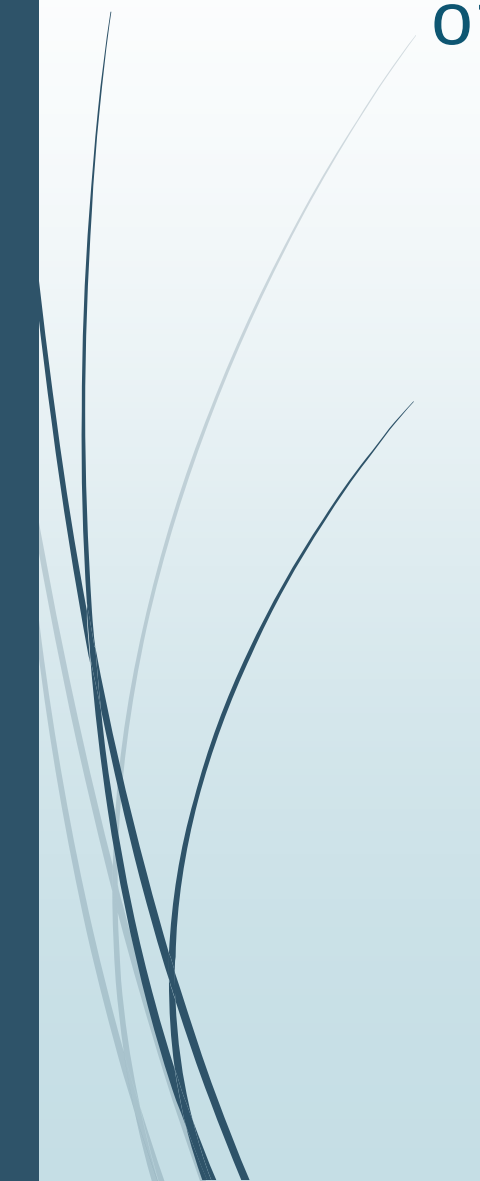
The Men of Gibeah (19:11-25)



While the men were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a depraved lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, 'Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him.' And the man, the master of the house, went out to meet them, and said to them, 'No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing.' But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go.



The Sacrifice of Females for the Sake of Hospitality



The old man offers his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine to the men of Ephraim to protect the life and reputation of the Levite.

Compare Lot's offer of his two daughters to the men of Sodom to protect his own guests: 'Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under shelter of my roof' (Genesis 19:8).

The Abuse Continues

As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light. In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. 'Get up', he said to her, 'we are going'. But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey; and the man set out for his home (19:27-28).

Johann Christoph Weigel, woodcut 1695





The Levite Completes the Violence

When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, 'Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, "Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out' (19:29-30).

There is no sign of mourning on the Levite's part.

The act resembles the preparation of an offering for sacrifice (the language of taking a knife is reminiscent of the sacrifice of Isaac).

‘A Vile Outrage in Israel’ (20:6)

- The Levite seeks to account for his deed in the presence of all Israel.

‘I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night. The lords of Gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house at night. They intended to kill me, and they raped my concubine until she died. Then I took my concubine and cut her into pieces and sent her throughout the whole extent of Israel’s territory; for they have committed a vile outrage in Israel’ (20:4-6).