

Chapter Four

Rape, Enslavement, and Marriage Sexual Violence in the Hebrew Bible

After historical, biographical, and methodological examinations, in this chapter we discuss how feminist scholars have dealt with the theme of sexual violence in biblical literature. Sexual violence, of course, has a much longer history than publication dates indicate, whether in the field of feminist and women's studies or biblical studies. For centuries, sexual violence has plagued gender relations although differences in time and space have sometimes created differences in experience and reaction. Androcentric perspective usually blames the mostly female victim-survivors for rape, molestation, sexual abuse, incest, or murder. Legislation, lax or strong, has rarely deterred mostly male perpetrators from committing these crimes.

Religion, too, has contributed little to the elimination of sexual violence although the sacred texts of Christianity and Judaism contain many narratives and poems on the topic. Steeped in patriarchal ideology, interpreters ignored these "texts of terror"¹ for centuries and when they read them, they found love, desire, and even mutually consensual acts in them. Condemnation of sexual violence and sympathy for victim-survivors seldom made it into commentaries and textbooks written for students of theology who train for the ministry, teaching positions, or counseling responsibilities. Only during the past few decades have feminist exegetes identified crude, aggressive, and one-sided forms of sexual relations in biblical literature.

Feminist biblical scholars began examining sexual violence in the 1970s when the feminist movement became conscious of the relentless violence against women in past and present societies. Even today, women are sexually abused, molested, raped, and murdered at astonishing rates—and to an extent that remains unabated in many countries, cultures, and traditions. Feminists have tried to explain the disproportionate violence women suffer by men,

1. For this phrase, see Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

and they have connected it to bigoted institutions, policies, and customs of patriarchal societies. They have also examined histories and cultures to identify differences and similarities in the prevalence of sexual violence, and they insist on connecting gender violence with other forms of discrimination such as racism, classism, the caste system, or colonialism.

The academic interest in understanding sexual violence has led to many different explanations. Early feminist theories universalized women's experiences as if the phenomenon is the same whether it occurs among the ancient Sumerians, in the Middle Ages, or in the United States today. More recently, theorists have begun challenging explanations that essentialize sexual violence, and designed historically and culturally specific studies. They show that sexual violence occurs almost anywhere and at any time although reactions and experiences vary greatly. As a result, whether sexual violence is explained on the basis of biological differences between women and men or viewed as a historically specific strategy that tyrannizes mostly women, the scholarly output has made it impossible to ignore sexual violence as a crucial research topic. Biblical scholars, too, have joined this important area of investigation and focused much attention on the contributions of the Hebrew Bible to the ongoing existence of sexual violence.

This chapter introduces the breadth and depth of biblical literature as it relates to sexual violence, particularly rape. Primary and secondary sources are abundantly available and the chapter illuminates biblical prose and poetry as well as scholarly approaches.² The discussion illustrates the spectrum of exegetical positions taken and biblical meanings created by feminist scholars who refuse to comply with sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible and in today's world.

Raped and Enslaved: Sexual Violence in Biblical Narrative

Many biblical narratives contain stories about sexual violence although these tales have not been at the forefront of Jewish and Christian communities for centuries. They did not and still do not appear in Christian lectionaries and are rarely identified as rape stories in synagogue readings. It was only when feminist scholars began systematically studying the Hebrew Bible that they

2. For biblical and ancient Near Eastern rape legislation, see Cheryl B. Anderson, *Women, Ideology, and Violence: Critical Theory and the Construction of Gender in the Book of the Covenant and the Deuteronomio Law* (London/New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2004); Susanne Scholz, "Back Then It Was Legal: The Epistemological Imbalance in Readings of Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Rape Legislation," *Journal of Religion and Abuse* 7, issue 3 (December 2005), pp. 5–35; also published in *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1, no. 4 (December 2005): <http://publications.eprints.monash.edu/toe/bc/1/4>.

stumbled over the many narratives of rape, sexual abuse, molestation, incest, and murder. Among them are the stories of Hagar, Sarah, Rebekah, Bilhah and Zilpah, Dinah, Lot's daughters, Jephthah's daughter, the anonymous woman in Gibeah, the young women of Jabesh-gilead, Abishag, Tamar, the daughter of King David, this king's so-called concubines and Rizpah. In the narratives the women endure sexual violence in the forms of threatened or executed rape, incest, murder, and sexual abuse. The following discussion focuses on a particular area of sexual violence—rape, which is here defined as sexual intercourse by force, fear, or threat of retaliation, and against the will of a person.

Some scholars maintain that Israelite society considered women as property of men and women never had a right to consent to sexual intercourse, especially when they were married or enslaved, or when marriage was promised. To these interpreters, the classification of biblical stories as rape narratives is anachronistic because the Israelites themselves did not recognize what is nowadays defined as forced sexual intercourse. They claim that women's consent did not matter in Israelite society and contemporary interpreters, too, should not impose current vocabulary onto biblical texts.

This position is, however, not convincing because interpretation always involves contemporary language and perspective. Even if it were true that the Israelites did not recognize rape as a sexual violation, contemporary readers bring contemporary vocabulary and sensitivity to the interpretative process, and in today's world the biblical texts under consideration describe specific instances of rape. Of course, androcentric readers might still not define some or most of these narratives as rape stories. But to argue that such a view is objective and historically accurate is epistemologically problematic, even deceptive, when androcentric convictions are the premise of the argumentation.³ If readers make claims of objectivity and historical accuracy, their hermeneutical assumptions have to be evaluated carefully, especially when the topic is rape. Are they perhaps part of an androcentric strategy, unconscious or conscious, that tries to ignore sexual violence in the past and present? Or are they perhaps part of an effort to make the Hebrew Bible seem "rape-free" because religious texts, including the sacred texts of Christianity and Judaism, should not be involved in discussions on sexual violence? These are some of the questions that should be addressed when rape terminology is viewed as anachronistic in biblical interpretation.

3. For an opposing viewpoint, see Alice Ogden Bellis, "Objective Biblical Truth versus the Value of Various Viewpoints: A False Dichotomy," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* (17 June 1995), pp. 25–36.

Furthermore, biblical literature has a tendency to be ambiguous, and so readers create biblical meanings. Most, if not all, narratives are inherently open for interpretation and do not offer easy answers. Readers decide whether they emphasize compliance with or outrage for stories that report great horror in a terse, dense, and factual style. Even narratives that are one-sided and negligent of a woman's view can still be interpreted against the grain of androcentric and rape-prone meaning if readers decide to do so. Yet if readers do not question the androcentric status quo, the ambiguity of biblical literature allows readers to turn rape into love, as the history of interpretation demonstrates abundantly.

In addition, the argument that in biblical times women were the "property" of men—and therefore rape did not exist in the ancient Israelite "mind"—is flawed because the historicity of biblical texts, including the rape stories, is far from certain. To assume a generic acceptance of rape-prone belief and behavior among ancient Israelites for many centuries reveals a stereotypical characterization of a past which remains difficult to reconstruct. Research of the last decades has demonstrated the inherent problems in establishing historical accounts of ancient Israel, and the same difficulties apply to assumptions about gender expectations, roles, and rights.⁴ In short, then, the Hebrew Bible contains many rape stories that cannot be explained away with references to androcentric structures in Israelite society, politics, and economics. What is needed—and this is a central argument in this chapter—is an unapologetic look at rape in biblical literature.

As we proceed, the following pages examine the stories of two enslaved women (Gen. 29.31–30.24; 35.22) to illustrate the preponderance of rape in biblical narratives.⁵ The stories of Zilpah and Bilhah are particularly important because they relate rape to the societal force of classism which leads to

4. For the current scholarly dispute on ancient Israelite historiography, see, for example, "Minimalists on Parade: An Academic Conference in Rome Highlighted the Positions of Scholars Who Think the Bible Has Little or No Reliable History," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 31, 1 (January–February 2005), pp. 16–17; Thomas L. Thompson, "The Role of Faith in Historical Research," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19, 1 (2005), pp. 111–34; Hershel Shanks (ed.), "The Search for History in the Bible," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 26.2 (March–April 2000), pp. 22–51; Ben C. Ollenburger, "The History of Israel Contested and Revised," *Modern Theology* 16.4 (October 2000), pp. 529–40; Iain Provan, V. Philips Long and Tremper Longman III (eds), *Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003); Philips V. Long (ed.), *Israel's Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999).

5. Another woman who is enslaved and raped during her enslavement is Hagar whose story appears in Gen. 16.1–16; 21.9–21. For a discussion on Hagar's story, see Jessica Grimes, "Reinterpreting Hagar's Story," *lectio difficilior: European Electronic Journal of Feminist Exegesis* 1 (2004): http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/04_1/inhalt_e.htm.

considerable differences among women in androcentric society. Here women of a higher class, Leah and Rachel, are co-opted into androcentric privilege and use strategies of sexual violation to gain societal prestige.⁶

The Story of Bilhah and Zilpah

Women play center role in Gen. 29.31–30.24 in which the prominent characters are Leah and Rachel. They compete with each other for children and husbandly love. In the process, they force their slaves, Bilhah and Zilpah, to become pregnant by Jacob (Gen. 29.31–30.24). The story is painful: one of the sisters, Leah, is "hated" by the husband, but gives birth to six sons and one daughter. When her fertility ceases, she gains two more sons from her slave, Zilpah. The other sister, Rachel, loved by her husband, is infertile. She competes with her sister's fertility by forcing her slave, Bilhah, to become pregnant by Jacob. Consequently, Bilhah gives birth to two sons. Only toward the end of the story does Rachel herself give birth to a son. In a later chapter she has another son and dies in child birth (cf. Gen. 35.16–20). In Genesis 29–30 two women are the main actors, and two women are their slaves. Husband Jacob appears on the margins, speaking once (Gen. 30.2) while his wives do not stop talking. The story is troubling because the sisters Leah and Rachel use enslaved women to secure their progeny.⁷

Yet despite the story's central placement in the book of Genesis and its significance in explaining the origins of the twelve tribes of Israel, the narrative has not gained much attention in the scholarly literature. Whether readers subscribe to traditional, feminist, or womanist perspectives, the tale about two free and two enslaved women does not figure prominently in the Jewish or Christian imagination. It is not only a story about the sisters Leah and Rachel—both married to Jacob—but it is also one about two women, Bilhah and Zilpah, enslaved by other women who encourage their husband to rape their slaves. Perhaps Bilhah's and Zilpah's silence made them invisible to interpreters. Bilhah and Zilpah do not protest their treatment and they do not run away. They also do not encounter God unlike another enslaved woman, Hagar, who also endures sexual violence (Gen. 16.1–16; 21.1–21) and is renowned among feminist and womanist interpreters. Yet Bilhah's and

Zilpah's sons become central and equal members of the twelve tribes of Israel. It seems that their oppression turns into liberation in the next generation, and God supported at least their sons.

On Whose Side Is God? Here then lies the theological crux of the story: on whose side is God? The beginning of the narrative suggests that God supports Leah. "When Yahweh saw that Leah was unloved, God opened her womb" (Gen. 29.31). Later God also "remembers Rachel" (30.22), which leads to her long-awaited first pregnancy and the birth of Joseph. Yet no reference is made to Bilhah and Zilpah. For the enslaved women, raped and silenced, God seems absent. Womanist theologian Delores S. Williams observes that biblical narratives depict God as choosing when to side with the oppressed and when to side with the oppressor.⁸ In Genesis 29–30, God sides with the slave-owners, first with Leah and later with Rachel (Gen. 29.31; 30.22). This is not an attractive power dynamic for feminist and womanist readers. Is it thus surprising that Genesis 29–30 has received little exegetical attention from them?

An exception is the feminist reading of Esther Fuchs.⁹ She examines the story carefully in a study on androcentrism in biblical narrative. To Fuchs, the literary characteristics of Genesis 29–30 belong to a genre that justifies polygamy with references to a wife's infertility. The genre is found both in Genesis 16 and 29–30, Fuchs argues, where it exhibits androcentric bias that always centers on men and male concerns. The husbands, Abraham and Jacob, have sex with Hagar and Leah because these women are "naturally" fertile and share "a rather dubious array of characteristics, like foreignness, pridefulness, unattractiveness."¹⁰ The concern for the men's need for progeny justifies their polygamous behavior and it also illustrates the inherent androcentric nature of biblical narratives.

While this interpretation should be commended for dealing with Genesis 29–30, its lack of class analysis is problematic. According to Fuchs, Leah is a victim of patriarchy despite the fact that in the world of the narrative Leah actively participates and benefits from her social status as a slave-owning woman. Fuchs ignores the differences in the social positions of Hagar and

8. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 199.

9. For other feminist interpretations, see, for example, Imtraud Fischer, "Genesis 12–50: Die Ursprungsgeschichte Israels als Frauengeschichte," in *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998, 2nd edn), p. 19.

10. Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 63.

6. For an extensive analysis of these and other rape stories of enslaved women, see Susanne Scholz, "Gender, Class, and Androcentric Compliance in the Rapes of Enslaved Women in the Hebrew Bible," *lectio difficilior: European Electronic Journal of Feminist Exegesis* 1 (2004): http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/04_1/Scholz.Enslaved.htm.

7. Sometimes scholars suggest that this custom was common in the ancient Near East, as if to normalize a horrendous practice; see, for example, Raymond Westbrook, "The Female Slave," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews a.o. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 214–38, esp. pp. 224–9.

Leah, as if the women's shared fertility were the only characteristics for their fate in society. Yet Hagar is an enslaved woman and Leah a married woman of considerable social status. Unlike Hagar, Leah is not a slave who is raped by the husband of her owner. She complies with androcentric standards when she demands sexual intercourse with her husband. Leah also holds power as a slave-owning woman and she forces her slave, Zilpah, to have sex with her husband. It would thus be more appropriate to compare the fate of Hagar with the enslaved women, Zilpah and Bilhah, and not with Leah.¹¹

Fuchs is not the only interpreter who ignores the class distinctions in Genesis 29–30. Other interpreters, too, neglect this aspect and prefer to focus on God's support of Rachel and Leah, the slave-owning women. Generally, scholars approve of God's support because they ignore Bilhah and Zilpah. For instance, commentator Hermann Gunkel expresses relief about God helping Leah and Rachel and elaborates, "That Yāhweh cares for the despised is a comforting belief: Yāhweh helps the poor, the despised, the despairing, the fugitive slave (16.7ff.), the rejected child and his unfortunate mother (21.17ff.), the shamefully sold and slandered (39.2, 21ff.)."¹² To Gunkel, the fact that Leah and Rachel receive God's help while they also hold slaves does not enter his discussion.

Similarly, Gerhard von Rad highlights God's role in Leah's life: "After all the thoroughgoing worldliness of the previous story, God is again the subject of the event. He is the one who blesses and comforts the neglected wife."¹³ Like Gunkel, von Rad focuses on the fact that God brings fertility to one of the wives, ignoring the fact that she forces her slave to have sexual intercourse with her husband. Even feminist interpreter, Elyse Goldstein, does not relate the fate of Bilhah and Zilpah to God's one-sided support of Leah and Rachel. She writes, "God rewards Leah with fertility to make up for her troubles with her husband, and the women are now equalized. One gets a man's love; the

other gets a child's love. One woman gains status through her husband, the other woman status through her children."¹⁴

These and other interpreters appreciate God's option for the "despised" but they disregard the complex social position in which the narrative places Leah and Rachel. In other words, scholars regard Leah's fertility as a blessing and are pleased that God supports Leah and Rachel but they disregard Bilhah's and Zilpah's situation. Ultimately, however, divine care does not benefit Leah or Rachel, as Fuchs stresses. Communication between God and the women functions merely as divine justification for the institution of motherhood. Like other stories, Genesis 29–30 describes androcentric and hierarchical order as divine order. Once the women, free or enslaved, give birth to sons, they become superfluous in the world of the narrative. They disappear or die eventually. The story does not endorse feminist values, except perhaps when it is understood as an illustration about the traps of androcentric ideology for women, free or enslaved.

Androcentrism par excellence. There is little dispute over the fact that Genesis 29–30 represents an androcentric story par excellence. Scholars assert that the narrative depicts Leah and Rachel as embracing androcentric values in their struggle for children and husband. Athalya Brenner holds that the story is a "male-oriented, male-written judgement on female sociability and potential of socialization." To Brenner, Leah and Rachel are like other biblical mothers who eventually give birth to "heroes," and are portrayed as rivals who are mostly concerned with motherhood.¹⁵ Sharon Pace Jeanson also maintains, "The struggle between Rachel and Leah clearly arises from a context of patriarchal structures and expectations."¹⁶ Similarly, Peter Pitzele recognizes that the narrative "dramatize[s] in the starkest possible terms the worst features of the patriarchal system. Women bear sons for men. Motherhood has been co-opted in the interests of lineage and class ... Two sisters are corrupted by a system that prizes sons."¹⁷ Francine Klagsbrun also acknowledges the andro-

14. Elyse Goldstein, *ReVisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), p. 65. For the idea of God as the equalizer between the women, see also John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. John King (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), p. 140.

15. Athalya Brenner demonstrated that Genesis 29–30 follows the "birth-of-the-hero" paradigm, which pursues androcentric interests, see her article "Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns Within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm," *Letus Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1986), p. 273.

16. Sharon Pace Jeanson, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah To Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 79.

17. Peter Pitzele, "The Myth of the Wrestler," in *Our Fathers' Wells: A Personal Encounter with the Myths of Genesis* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 181.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 154–5, 158. For a parallelism of Hagar and the two enslaved women, see, for example, Cynthia Gordon, "Hagar: A Throw-Away Character Among the Marriage arches?," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1985 Seminar Papers*, ed. Kent H. Richards (Cambridge, MA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1985), p. 273; Renita J. Weems, "Do You See What I See? Diversity in Interpretation," *Church & Society* 82 (September–October 1991), p. 35; Ina J. Petermann, "Schick die Fremde in die Wüste! Oder: Sind die Sara-Hagar-Erzählungen aus Genesis 16 und 21 ein Beispiel (anti-) rassistischer Irritation aus dem Alten Israel?" in *(Anti-)Rassistische Irritationen: Biblische Texte und interkulturelle Zusammenhänge*, ed. Silvia Wagner, Gerdi Nützel, and Martin Kiek (Berlin: Alektor Verlag, 1994), p. 140.

12. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), p. 324.

13. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p. 294.

centric character of the narrative when she writes, "From a feminist point of view, we would say that they [Leah and Rachel] have incorporated patriarchal values, and certainly their stories are presented from a male perspective."¹⁸

Yet Klagsbrun hesitates to "dismiss these women simply as products of patriarchy." Do Leah and Rachel sense that they follow "a divinely directed destiny" which would make their children into the founders of a great nation? Klagsbrun believes so, alleging that "an intimacy with the divine . . . perhaps lay at the heart of their desire for children."¹⁹ Leah and Rachel are figures full of strength and determination who play crucial roles for the destiny of their people. Thus Klagsbrun suggests that one may learn a great deal from this story despite or, rather, because of the obvious androcentrism. Although her position tolerates, perhaps too easily, Leah's and Rachel's co-optation into androcentric and class oppression, Klagsbrun's concern is important. The story can be read as an illustration for why some women endorse patriarchal structures. Class privilege makes Leah and Rachel eager to conform to the patriarchal goal of having sons. They are also willing to use their class privilege and to force other women into helping them to maintain it. Thus read, the narrative illuminates the societal forces that make women accept and actively support androcentric hierarchies prevalent in society even today.

The Story's Literary Structure. A closer look at the literary structure uncovers the particularities of this dynamic. Four literary scenes structure the story. The first scene, Gen. 29:31-35, establishes the situation: Leah is unlabeled, but fertile, giving birth to four sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Their names receive explanatory comments from the mother. Although the relationship between the sons' names and Leah's explanations are etymologically mostly incorrect,²⁰ Leah's statements are significant. Except for the explanation of the name of Levi (v. 34), they refer to God. After the first birth, Leah acknowledges, "Yahweh saw my misery; now my husband will love me" (v. 32). After the second birth, she remarks: "For Yahweh heard that I was unlabeled, and so God has given me this one too" (v. 33). After the fourth birth, she exclaims: "Now I shall praise Yahweh!" (v. 35). In other words, Leah correlates her fertility to the divinity although her goal—to gain the love of

her husband—remains unattained. Initially, Leah believes to gain love for her fertility, but after the fourth son she recognizes that her God-given fertility will not provide her with Jacob's love, and so she praises God without a reference to her husband (v. 35).

The second scene, 30:1-8, reports Rachel's infertility which leads to Bilhah's rapes. When Rachel realizes that she does not become pregnant, she instructs Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" (v. 1). He, however, is more cautious than his wife: "Am I in the position of God, who has denied you the fruit of the womb?" (v. 2). Jacob does not respond to his wife's sorrow and refuses responsibility for her infertility. He defends himself because infertility is not his problem but ultimately God's. His brisk response startled the rabbis of the early centuries CE. A midrash lets God intervene: "Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Jacob: Is that a way to answer a woman in distress?"²¹ The rabbis reprimanded Jacob for his unsympathetic response. Yet in the narrative Jacob's answer leaves it up to his favorite wife to determine what to do next.

She takes action. "Here is my slave, Bilhah. Sleep with her, and let her give birth on my knees. Through her, then, I too shall have children" (v. 3). Without another comment from her husband, the deal is done. "Jacob slept with her" (v. 4). When Bilhah becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, Rachel invokes the divinity for the first time. "God has done me justice. Yes, God has heard my voice, and God has given me a son" (v. 6). Rachel learned her lesson. She believes that the divinity provides offspring through any means available. Forcing another woman to have intercourse with her husband, Rachel takes advantage of her class and later thanks God for the child. This is disturbing theology because Rachel justifies gendered class oppression as God's will. Is God, indeed, the provider and denier of fertility under such conditions? Rachel affirms this question which demonstrates her co-optation into androcentric ideology. She wants a son, no matter what, and since the process works for her, she forces Bilhah a second time to have intercourse with the husband (v. 7). After the birth of another son, Rachel invokes God again exclaiming, "I have wrestled a wrestling of Elohim with my sister, and I have won" (v. 8). To Rachel, her success in fulfilling patriarchal expectations means that God is on her side. This theology is not only disturbing but, worse, it is dangerous because it assumes patriarchy and classism as divinely sanctioned.

Rachel's exclamation in v. 8 raises many questions. At stake is the noun "God/Elohim." Interpreters often reject translating the Hebrew phrase as "a

21. Isaac Unterman, *The Five Books of Moses: The Book of Genesis: Profoundly Inspiring Commentaries and Interpretations Selected from the Talmudic-Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Bloch, 1973), p. 250.

18. Francine Klagsbrun, "Ruth and Naomi, Rachel and Leah," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, ed. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), p. 271.

19. *Ibid.*, "Ruth and Naomi," p. 271.

20. For a discussion about the etymologies of the names, see, for example, Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (The Anchor Bible Commentary, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 231-3; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), pp. 473-7.

wrestling of Elohim" and recommend alternatives. For instance, Nahum M. Sarna proposes, "A fateful contest I waged with my sister," explaining that his translation is based "on the occasional use of *'elohim*, 'God,' as an intensifying or superlative element." However, he also writes that the phrase could be translated as "a contest for God."²² Many interpreters follow Sarna's grammatical advice and consider the noun "God" in v. 8 as an intensifying adjective.²³ One of them is Terence E. Fretheim whose translation attempts to communicate the intense effort of Rachel. Deleting the terminological reference to the divinity in Hebrew, Fretheim translates the sentence as, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister."²⁴ Likewise Victor P. Hamilton compares Rachel's experience of wrestling "with Jacob's in Gen. 32:25f and considers God in v. 8 'as an intensifying epithet'." He translates v. 8, "I have been entangled in a desperate contest with my sister."²⁵ Other interpreters, such as Everett Fox, suggest a translation closer to the Hebrew text: "A struggle of God have I struggled with my sister."²⁶ It is indeed remarkable that the narrative relates the conflict between her sister and herself to the divinity. Does the Hebrew indicate more clearly than many vernacular translations that the women are deeply co-opted into androcentric theology?

The third scene, 30.9-13, switches back to Leah who, now infertile, resorts to having her slave raped twice. Unlike Rachel (Gen. 30.1), Leah does not react to her sister's success in getting two sons; she worries about herself. Thus, v. 9 does not state: "When Leah saw that Rachel had two sons," but observes instead: "When Leah saw that she had ceased to bear children." Hated by her husband and co-opted into androcentric values, Leah has learned to establish her social status through fertility. For different reasons, then, Leah resorts to the method earlier applied by Rachel. "Leah took her slave, Zilpah, and gave her to Jacob as a wife (*'issah*)" (v. 9). One interpreter, the Jewish medieval commentator Nachmanides (Ramban) points to the unusual nature of Leah's decision commenting, "I do not know what motivated this deed of Leah and why she gave her handmaid to her husband for she was not barren that she

should hope to have children through Zilpah, and it is not natural for women to increase the number of their husbands' wives."²⁷

Importantly, the terminology of v. 9 relies on the slave-owner's perspective. Zilpah, the slave, is not treated like a wife, as Nachmanides suggests, but reduced to the mere physical functions of her body. Sexually violated, she gives birth to a child that she probably did not want and is not able to call her own. Later, Zilpah is raped another time (Gen. 30.12). Both times, Leah names the child and comments on the name. Similar to her statement for her fourth son, Leah does not invoke the name of God (Gen. 29.32-35) but refers only to luck and her social recognition: "What good fortune!" and "What blessedness because women will call me blessed!" (30.11.13). The enslaved woman herself does not speak since she is a prop giving birth to two sons. Even Jacob obeys quietly. Does he actually enjoy having sex with so many women? The text is silent and perhaps this silence exposes Genesis 29-30 as an androcentric fantasy that imagines wives inviting the husband to have sex with them and their enslaved women.

The fourth scene, 30.14-24, depicts the negotiation between Leah and Rachel that leads to more children for Leah and, eventually, to a son for Rachel. The severity of the hostility between the sisters finds expression in their first and last conversation. When the eldest son of Leah, Reuben, finds a special fruit and brings it to his mother, Leah exchanges the fruit for a night with Jacob. When Rachel wants the fruit, Leah replies bitterly, "Is it not enough to have taken my husband? You take my son's mandrakes as well?" (v. 14). Embroiled in rivalry over husband and children, Leah vents her feelings of loss. Rachel hears the disappointment in her sister's voice and easily relinquishes the man for the fruit: "Very well, he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes" (v. 15). Without objection, Jacob obeys Leah's order at the end of the day: "You must come to me" (v. 16). In this narrative the husband does not care with whom he sleeps, going wherever his wives tell him. Is this text a realistic description of slave-owning women or not rather an androcentric fantasy? Jacob must have gone to Leah at least twice more because Leah gives birth to another son (vv. 19-20) and to her first and only daughter, Dinah (v. 21). After the births of the sons, Leah praises the divinity again. She believes that God rewarded her (v. 18), having given her a true gift (v. 20). The birth of her daughter, Dinah, does not receive such praise (v. 21), yet another indication of the narrative's androcentrism.

When the scene turns again to Rachel (v. 22), she becomes pregnant herself. "God remembered Rachel; God heard her, and God opened her

²⁷ Ramban (Nachmanides), *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, translated and annotated with index by Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo, 1971), p. 368.

²² Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary Series (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), p. 208.

²³ See also Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 271-2.

²⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al., vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 546.

²⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, p. 271f.

²⁶ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 139. Francis I. Anderson also argues that the noun "God" should remain visible in Genesis 30.8, see his brief comment, "Note on Genesis 30:8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (June 1969), p. 200.

womb; and she became pregnant, and she gave birth to a son" (v. 23). The race for fertility has found a preliminary end. Rachel names the son "Joseph" and exclaims, "God has taken away my disgrace!" and "May Yahweh add another son for me" (vv. 23, 24). This painful story about the co-optation of two sisters into patriarchal and class structures ends with the request to God for yet another son. Eventually, the belief in God as the provider and denier of fertility destroys Rachel (35.16-19). The story of Bilhah, her slave, however, continues in another fragmentary narrative.

Another Story of Bilhah

Bilhah appears once more in a verse in which the destructive relational pattern of Leah and Rachel moves reportedly to the next generation (Gen. 35.22). This, at least, is the sad conclusion based on an incident that involves Reuben, the oldest son of Leah, and Bilhah, Rachel's enslaved woman. The story demonstrates what Reuben learned: enslaved women are property to be raped without repercussion. Here is the short description of the event:

It happened when Israel lived in that land, Reuben went, and he laid Bilhah, the concubine of his father, and Israel heard of it. (Gen. 35.22a)

Rarely mentioned in scholarly discussions, this brief report about Bilhah appears after Rachel dies during the birth of her second son. Indirectly the verse refers to rape. The Hebrew verb, *šakab*, is not followed by the preposition with (*'im*) but by the Hebrew object marker *'et*, as in other rape stories such as the rape of Dinah (Gen. 34.2) or Tamar (2 Sam. 13.14). The grammatical observation has consequences for the verse's meaning. Reuben does not sleep "with" Bilhah, a translation that feigns consent by Bilhah. Rather he "laid" her. He is the subject of the action and she the object. As a concubine and slave, Bilhah is sexually violated, raped.

George G. Nicol and Mordechai Rotenberg discuss the verse in some detail and thus their readings merit closer scrutiny. First, George G. Nicol rejects E. A. Speiser's idea that Gen. 35.22 is an ethnographic explanation for the decline of the tribe of Reuben in the course of Israelite history. Speiser proposed that "[t]hese scattered hints suggest that the tribe of Reuben once enjoyed a pre-eminent position, only to fall upon evil days."²⁸ Nicol claims instead that the story remembers how Reuben avenges his mother whom Jacob never loved. Bilhah was the slave of Rachel, the loved wife. By raping Bilhah, Reuben challenges his father's authority, as other royal sons do when

they "take possession" of another man's concubines.²⁹ Nicol elaborates, "This incident must therefore be considered to have caused deep humiliation to Jacob, who ... had been usurped in the bed of [Rachel's] slave." To Nicol, Reuben introduces "an element of justice into the narrative" when he takes revenge in unexpected ways. Earlier, Leah called the birth of Reuben "the reversal of my humiliation" (Gen. 29.32). Even though Reuben is not able to reverse Jacob's hatred for her into love, the son reverses his father's fortune by humiliating his father "at precisely the time when he is emotionally at his weakest and least able to resist."³⁰ In short, Nicol suggests that Reuben tries to destroy his father by targeting Bilhah.

Read accordingly, Gen. 35.22 depicts a struggle over power between two men, son Reuben and his father Jacob. Such an androcentric interpretation shows little concern for Bilhah's perspective and turns Reuben's activity into "sexual intercourse," "his offence against his father" or as "taking possession of Bilhah." Indeed, in Nicol's view, the story demonstrates "a certain tastefulness in the fact that Genesis xxxv.22a associates Rachel's slave, and not Rachel herself, with Reuben's action." Reuben challenges Jacob's authority by "committing his offence" and shows "good taste" because Reuben attacks his aunt's slave and not his aunt.

Rotenberg, meanwhile, discusses Gen. 35.22 as an example of the "rehabilitative story telling" method of the ancient rabbis.³¹ The ancient rabbis noted that certain stories report particularly troubling activities of central biblical figures. Such a figure is Reuben whose "sin" is explicitly described in Gen. 35.22 and remembered by Jacob in Gen. 49.3-4. The rabbis were aware of Reuben's problematic behavior and tried to "rehabilitate" him. They wanted the story to be seen as "a righteous deed of honoring his [Reuben's] mother Leah," and so they explained, "He stood up against the humiliation of his mother by saying: If my mother's sister was a rival to my mother, shall the bondsmaid of my mother's sister be a rival to my mother? He thus arose and transposed the beds."³² According to the ancient rabbinic view, Reuben defended his mother by raping Bilhah, which is a rather precarious "rehabilitative" effort, one that excuses Reuben for "his deed."

Many centuries apart, the interpretations of Nicol and the ancient rabbis are quite similar. Both focus on the male characters and soften the sexual violence perpetrated by Reuben. Both also ignore Bilhah's perspective.

29. See, for example, 2 Sam. 3.6-11, 15-19; 1 Kgs 2.13-25.

30. George G. Nicol, "Genesis xxix.32 and xxxv.22a Reuben's Reversal," *Journal of Theological Studies* 31 (1980), pp. 536-9.

31. Mordechai Rotenberg, "The 'Midrash' and Biographic Rehabilitation," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25, no. 1 (1986), pp. 41-55.

32. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 46. The quote from the Babylonian Talmud is in bSabbabar 55b.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Genesis 35:22 belongs to a list of biblical texts, the so-called "forbidden targumim," that the ancient rabbis advised not to be explained to lay people. These "forbidden" texts "may be read [in Hebrew] but not translated [into the language of the congregation, e.g. English]." ³³ This approach is similar to the Christian strategy. Even today, Christian lectionaries exclude Gen. 35:22 from the recommended list of sermon texts so that the verse is not read aloud during Christian worship. An influential interpreter like Gerhard von Rad indirectly endorses this ecclesiastical silence when he comments, "The crime itself is condemned by the narrator, without the necessity for his expressly stating it. The note is brief and fragmentary that one can form no opinion about what is told in vs. 21f."³⁴ When a renowned scholar such as von Rad does not have an opinion on this passage, a preacher will certainly refrain from choosing it as the basis for a sermon. Other Christian scholars, too, avoid direct references to v. 22. Richard J. Clifford and Roland E. Murphy state, "The details of this ugly incident are not given; in fact, the text breaks off at this point."³⁵ To these Christian scholars, Gen. 35:22 is too short, unclear, and "ugly" to merit further comment. Neither interested in Bilhah nor the issue of rape, many Jewish and Christian readers prefer to ignore Reuben's rape of Bilhah.

Yet another aspect of the verse deserves mention. Bilhah is characterized as Jacob's "concubine" (*pileges*). The terminology is unusual since Bilhah is Rachel's slave and the majority of biblical references consider her "a slave of Rachel." In Gen. 29:29, Rachel's father, Laban, gives Bilhah as a slave to his daughter Rachel when she marries Jacob. In 30:3, 4, 7 and 35:25, Bilhah is called Rachel's slave. Also Gen. 46:25 refers to Bilhah as a slave of Rachel, given as a wedding gift. Yet in 1 Chron. 7:13, Bilhah is neither Rachel's nor Jacob's possession. There her sons are identified as "the descendants of Bilhah." Bilhah appears in relationship to Jacob only one more time, namely in Gen. 37:2. The verse calls her and Zilpah "the wives of his [Joseph's] father."

Immersed in androcentric bias, commentators take for granted the term "concubine." They presume that Bilhah turns automatically into Jacob's concubine after Rachel's death, and so the switch from "slave" to "concubine" does not bother them. Has she not "slept with" him before? Indeed,

33. Michael L. Klein, "Not to be Translated in Public," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 80-91.

34. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 341.

35. Richard J. Clifford and Roland E. Murphy, "Genesis," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 36.

the difference between an enslaved woman and a concubine is small. Like concubines, enslaved women are used to give birth to children who will be taken from them.³⁶ Both concubines and slaves have to submit to the orders of their superiors, whether this person is a slave-owner, a husband, or a king. Sometimes the tasks of concubines and slaves can also be different. A concubine's primary role is to provide children, whereas a slave also fulfills other functions.

Furthermore, a concubine gives a man more prestige than a slave. A concubine may also reconcile political power struggles at royal courts whereas a slave never interferes into such affairs.³⁷ Yet overall the roles of concubines and female slaves are similar so that the term "concubine" in Gen. 35:22 does not necessarily indicate a socially higher status than the term "slave." Even as a concubine, Bilhah is owned by Jacob who has unrestricted sexual access to her. She remains the property of the Jacob family whether she is concubine or slave, and Reuben is able to challenge his father's property rights when he rapes Bilhah. The narrative thus illustrates an important idea about rape: men rape women to mark their territory over other men, which makes the raped women arbitrary in the androcentric story world and in the world of interpreters.

In such a world, then, men regard women as objects available for sexual violation. A narrative's focus on men and their behavior exposes the destructive consequences of androcentrism. Women, especially when they are enslaved or concubines, are acted upon by men who view them as symbols of male power. Whether raped or not, the women are quickly forgotten, as the long history of androcentric interpretations demonstrates abundantly. Yet when we identify these texts as rape stories the fate of the women is exposed for what it is: a fate that either devastates women's lives or co-opts women into androcentrism. The tales do not offer optimistic answers and there is no Thelma and Louise tale in the Hebrew Bible, but there are enough biblical stories of rape to make visible some of the dynamics that shape women's and men's lives even today.

36. For a brief discussion on "slave concubines," see Westbrook, "The Female Slave," pp. 215-20.

37. For further explanations, see Karen Engelken, "*pilegates*," in *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, et al., vol. 6 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1987), pp. 586-90. See also Engelken, *Frauen im Alten Israel*, pp. 101, 124 where Engelken argues for a sharp distinction between the position of a concubine and a slave. For the opposite view, see Westbrook, "The Female Slave," p. 233, who finds the term *pileges* "totally inappropriate" and considers it as the author's effort "to spare Reuben, whose crime in sleeping with Bilhah would have been far more heinous if she were Jacob's wife."

The City as a Raped Woman: Sexual Violence in Biblical Poetry

The issue of rape is not only a prominent issue in biblical narratives but it also shapes biblical poetry. Some of the poems appear in the prophetic literature and deserve special mention. We turn our focus now to those poems that pronounce God to be an angry punisher of idolatrous actions against the biblical and ancient Near Eastern cities of Jerusalem, Babylon, and Nineveh. Written during the time of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE,³⁸ the poems depict cities as the main culprits for the Israelite disaster. Each city appears as a woman who prostituted herself and enjoyed her sexual prowess but whose end has come. Crude, brutal, and violent vocabulary prevails. The poems present God as condemning the woman, cursing and insulting her, and wishing upon her attacks of sexual violence. The poetry promotes imagery that relies on sexual violence as just and divinely ordained punishment. It is prophetic speech gone awry. The following sections explain the theological and ethical problems when metaphors rely on sexual violence as a divinely sanctioned punishment.

The Initial Victim: Jerusalem

In Isa. 3.16–17, Jer. 13.22, 26, Ezekiel 16 and 23, God prescribes sexual attacks and rape for Jerusalem and its female inhabitants. For instance, the prophetic poem in Isaiah characterizes the daughters of Zion as “haughty” and “walk[ing] with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet” (Isa. 3.16). Fashion-conscious in look and posture, women of Jerusalem are the recipients of androcentric mockery. They are viewed as “serious infractions of the social order,”³⁹ and their exaggerated obedience to androcentric standards of femininity makes them fair game for sexual attacks, at least according to the prophetic imagination. After the poem of Isaiah 3 established the women’s arrogance and pride, God appears as the authorizer and executor of pornographic attacks. Verse 17 describes God’s action over the women:

YHWH will afflict with scabs the heads of the daughters of Zion,
and YHWH will lay bare their secret parts.

The sexual candor of this poem makes many translators nervous—particularly those who translate the second line as a reference to the head rather

than the genital area, “and Yahweh will lay bare their forehead.”⁴⁰ They substitute sexual violence with a description that views captive women as being humiliated by having their hair shorn off. Grammatical ambiguity enables this change of meaning. At stake is the Hebrew noun *poṭ* that appears only one more time in 1 Kgs 7.50 as a reference to a “door socket.” Some scholars recognize that the text offers “coarse language”⁴¹ and regard the noun as a reference to female genitals in a vulgar and colloquial expression. Moreover, metaphorical language is always ambiguous, particularly in a theologically problematic setting in which God is portrayed as the violator of Jerusalem’s women. Why be clear and direct when the image of a door socket will do in which a door swings?

Another prophetic passage contains similarly troubling metaphors. In Jer. 13.22, 26 God announces the rape of the woman Jerusalem—here the city is imagined as a woman. In v. 22 the verb appears in the passive voice which avoids mentioning the identity of the rapist. Yet in v. 26 the verb is active and God its subject; God is the sexual violator. The following translation stays closely with the syntax of the Hebrew text:

(22) On account of the greatness of your iniquity
exposed/uncovered are your skirts,
violated are your heels/genitals . . .
(26) and also I myself shall strip your skirts over your face,
so that is seen your shame.⁴²

The passage is part of a larger poem in 13.20–27. The possessive pronouns in vv. 22 and 26 are in the second person feminine singular (“your”). God addresses the feminine city in this speech in which God invokes sexual punishment for her transgressions. In v. 24, the two verbs, “to uncover” and “to violate,” are in the passive voice and so the focus is on the woman’s situation. It is ambiguous who the perpetrator is although the scene is “clearly” one of rape.⁴³ The violator is identified later in v. 26; it is God. Yet because Jeremiah’s predictions often warn about the Babylonian siege and ultimate victory, interpreters usually assume that in v. 24 the rapists are the victorious Babylonian soldiers. As a whole, the poem proclaims that the woman brought this fate upon herself

40. See, for example, Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983, 2nd edn); Gene M. Tucker, *Isaiah*, The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. vi (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 81.

41. See Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*, p. 201.

42. This translation is taken from Angela Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah: A Feminist-Literary Reading* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 101–2.

43. So, for example, William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1–25* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), p. 414.

38. Perhaps Isa. 3.16–17 is a pre-exilic text although some commentators question an early date. For instance Joseph Blenkinsopp is uncertain if Isaiah or a later writer composed the passage, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 201.

39. Ibid.

and she is to be blamed for it. The prophet sides with the sexually violent perpetrators and views the attack as deserved and God as justifying it. Interestingly, commentators acknowledge freely that the passage is loaded with sexual metaphors. The nouns "skirt" and "heels" carry unambiguous sexual connotations and the verbs appear also in other contexts of sexual violence, such as in Isa. 47.3, Ezek. 16.36, 37 and 23.29.⁴⁴ The prophetic poem in Jeremiah 13, then, envisions God as relishing in the rape of woman Jerusalem, a rape that is perpetrated by the presumed Babylonian army and supported by the male God. It represents a climax of androcentric fury regarding women, and it is a major theological problem because the prophet proposes the metaphor of God as a rapist.

Although commentators are uncomfortable with this passage, sometimes recognizing it as a rape scene, they do not question the prophetic claim that these poems are God's speech. Robert Carroll, for instance, recognizes the brutality of the image in vv. 22 and 26. He emphasizes the suffering of the women who are brutally raped by the invading army, and he also recognizes the difficulties in excusing the poem as metaphorical speech. In the poem the metaphorical rapist is still a rapist and he is God. Carroll thus writes, "metaphors and reality combine to portray a sickening picture of battered sexuality and torn flesh, an image of a culture invaded, raped and devastated."⁴⁵ Even though Carroll emphasizes the link between metaphor and reality, he does not question the poet's sense of justice in which the poet depicts God as a sexual predator. Carroll accepts this image about God and he is not alone. Other interpreters, too, do not challenge the notion that Jeremiah 13 presents an acceptable theology, even when they wonder, "Why are these outrages Yahweh's portion for the city?"⁴⁶ Many commentators tolerate the fact that in these poems God punishes Jerusalem with sexual violence, and they side with the prophet. For instance, R. E. Clements explains:

[T]he people were eagerly placing the blame for their tragic misfortunes upon God and regarding themselves self-pitiingly as the unfortunate victims of a fate that they had not deserved. It was the concern of the prophet, as well as of his editors and followers, to show that the people could not evade the acceptance of responsibility for what they had suffered.⁴⁷

Clements, like other interpreters, does not reject androcentric extremism that characterizes God as the perpetrator of rape. He finds it a fitting illus-

tration of the prophet who criticizes his contemporaries for their mistaken political analysis. The prophet tells them that they are not victims, as they believe, but responsible for the national disaster of foreign occupation. Their own actions led to war, national annihilation, and exile because they were promiscuous and did not follow God. They brought this fate upon themselves like a sexually violated woman. Interpreters, caught in the prophetic perspective, endorse this theology that might be called a theology of the rapist. Perhaps they find it too frightening to contradict biblical prophecy and take for granted its androcentric assumptions.

Yet some commentators are disturbed by the depiction of God as a sexually violent retaliator. One of them is Gracia Fay Ellwood who acknowledges the conflict between the androcentric poems and their portrayal of God.⁴⁸ Ellwood surmises that probably God speaks through these texts but "in a different sense than we had thought." To her, the prophetic texts cannot mean what they seem to imply because God would not command the rape of women. There has to be another way of reading but, curiously, Ellwood does not provide an alternative.

Other prophetic poems promote a similarly problematic view on God's relationship to rape. Ezekiel 16 and 23 are perhaps among the most extreme passages reporting divine commandments for the metaphorical rape of cities. Again, Jerusalem is the target of verbal threats of rape and abuse. This time, the prophet Ezekiel claims the following words as those of God:

Thus says YHWH God, Because your shame was laid bare and your nakedness uncovered in your harlotries with your lovers, and because of all your idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers, with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you loved; I will gather them against you from every side, and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness... And I will give you into the hand of your lovers, and they shall strip you of your clothes and take your fair jewels, and leave you naked and bare. They shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords... So will I satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy shall depart from you; I will be calm, and will no more be angry (Ezek. 16.26-37, 39-40, 42).

These harsh words obscure the perspective of the woman so that readers view the accusations only through the eyes of the accuser, Yahweh.⁴⁹ God speaks whereas the woman is only the recipient of the action. Since the woman is not given an opportunity to reply, her point of view is absent. She is imagined as

48. See Gracia Fay Ellwood, "Rape and Judgment," *Daughters of Sarah* 11 (1985), p. 13.

49. See Mary E. Shields, "Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender in Ezekiel 16," in *Prophets and Daniel: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)*, ed. Adahya Brenner (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 140.

44. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 103-4; Robert P. Carroll, *The Book of Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), p. 303; Holladay, *Jeremiah* 1, p. 414.

45. Carroll, *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 304.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

47. R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 88.

naked, tortured, even murdered, and God is described as approving of these violent acts. The woman's body is the focus of the attention, as is the treatment that Yahweh curses upon her, and repetitive terminology hammers it home. She is to be stripped naked. Stoned and cut into pieces, the woman is ordered to be killed, and God expresses satisfaction about the prospect of her being thus punished.

The emphasis on the woman's nakedness stimulates androcentric pornographic fantasy. The objectified and naked woman is the forbidden sight of the perverse desire for more, which culminates in sexual violence and murder. She is imagined as being beaten and killed, all of which is commanded and justified by God. At the end of the poem, the woman is mutilated, raped, and slaughtered and God is satisfied. "So will I satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy shall depart from you; I will be calm and will not more be angry" (Ezek. 16.42). The prophetic poem also turns the sexually violated woman into a sign of warning for women in general. Ezek. 23.48 warns women about the dangers of sexual independence and self-determination stating, "Thus will I put an end to lewdness in the land, that all women may take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done."

Some commentators reflect on the consequences of portraying God as a sexually violent punisher. Mary E. Shields observes that many commentators empathize with the deity, downplay divine rage and jealousy, and consider God's rage as a sign of love for the woman.⁵⁰ This dysfunctional notion about love and relationship promises death to her. Shields thus insists that "it is dangerous... to let the male figure off the hook here, even if that figure is God..."⁵¹ She encourages readers to look closely and to endure "to be repelled by what we see" and "to call into question this text's validity as 'the word of God'."⁵² Shields also asks us to examine critically a metaphor in which God "does the wounding." Unlike Renita Weems who identifies with the abused and battered woman Jerusalem,⁵³ Shields maintains that the image of a raping God does not leave any room for grace because the prophecy of Ezekiel does not envision reconciliation.⁵⁴ The prophet imagines God as a raping murderer of women. To prevent misunderstandings, Shields asks for the deconstruction of this image of God so that it cannot be read as a justification of sexual violence.⁵⁵

50. Ibid., pp. 146-7.

51. Ibid., p. 148.

52. Ibid., p. 150.

53. Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), p. 113.

54. Shields, "Multiple Exposures," p. 152.

55. Ibid., p. 153.

While Shields does not offer a deconstructive reading of the sexually violent poems, she locates the metaphor firmly within the male prophetic psyche. This androcentric imagination links God with misogyny and sexual violence. It is not God speaking but men enhancing male power. They picture God as a sexually violent punisher of women because it allows men to be violent and abusive towards women, children, and even other men. Hence, Shields insists that Ezekiel 16 and 23 are words of the prophet who speaks his androcentric truth, but they are not the words of God.

The Other Victims: Babylon and Nineveh

Prophetic androcentrism does not rest with viewing Jerusalem as a woman cursed by God with rape, abuse, and murder. The cities of Babylon and Nineveh, as well as their female inhabitants, receive similar metaphoric treatment. For instance, a divine oracle against Babylon in Isa. 13.16 presents the women of Babylon as threatened with rape. The verb used to connote sexual violation is *šagel*, which also appears in Deut. 28.30 and Zech. 14.2 in the sense of "being violently taken."

In another passage, Isa. 47.2-3, 10-15, the prophet envisions God as cursing the city Babylon personified as a young woman. She is stripped of her clothes and forced to expose her genitals.

(2) Take the millstones
and grind meal,

put off your veil,
strip off your robe,

uncover your legs,
pass through the rivers.

(3) Your nakedness shall be uncovered
and your shame shall be seen.

I will take vengeance,

and I will spare no human. (Isa. 47.2-3)

Interestingly, the metaphor of sexual violence exhibits the same features with which prophetic speech also characterizes Israelite cities.⁵⁶ The metaphor depicts Israelite and foreign cities as women whom God threatens to strip, to lead around naked, and to expose their genitals. In the prophetic mind, woman is woman whether she is Israelite or a stranger.

Accordingly, the metaphor is not only applied to Babylon but also to Nineveh, another ancient Near Eastern city. This Assyrian city appears in Nah. 3.5-7 as a woman who receives threats of sexual violence.

56. Gerlinda Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 192.

- (5) Behold, I come over you,
says Yahweh of hosts,
and I will lift up your skirts over your face;
and I will let nations look on your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame.
- (6) I will throw filth at you
and I will sexually violate you,⁵⁷
and I will make you a gazing stock.
- (7) And all who look on you will shrink from you and say,
Wasted is Nineveh, who will bemoan her?
Whence shall I seek comforters for you?

Familiar imagery dominates in this poem. God is said to act as a sexually violent force. The terms "skirts," "nakedness," and "shame" are references to female genitals.⁵⁸ The translation of the sentence, "I will sexually violate you," uses the Hebrew verb *nabal* in *pi'el*, which connotes a clear-cut sexual violation. The verb also appears in rape narratives such as Gen. 34.7, Judges 19-21, and 2 Sam. 13.12.⁵⁹ In the entire poem (3.1-19) Nineveh is unable to withstand the military attack. The enemy's horses overrun the city. Citizens die by the sword, fire destroys the houses in the town and nobody is available to help. As in other prophetic poems, sexual violence intermingles with sexual harassment and murder. Rape appears as a predictable ingredient of the complete destruction, as the climax of this gruesome prophetic poetry.⁶⁰ The prophets see no greater penalty, no bigger depiction of total humiliation and destruction than to characterize it as rape. Rape is so abhorrent that it is God's ultimate punishment, and with such a reading of the poem, perhaps a feminist reader can even agree.

A Sacred Witness? Concluding Remarks

Once we recognize that biblical literature addresses the topic of sexual violence, it is difficult to comprehend how interpreters were able to ignore this topic for so long. It seems possible that their exegetical silence was based on

indifference to women's welfare. After all, androcentric bias and perspective have permeated Western society, culture, and religion for centuries. Only since the 1970s, when feminists began to speak out against sexual violence, did feminist Bible scholars discover the urgency of the issue. Many people are still not comfortable in placing responsibility for sexual violence where it belongs: with the perpetrators, with patriarchal assumptions about women and gender, with other forms of oppression such as classism and even with women's co-optation into androcentric standards. It certainly also belongs with the prophetic imagination that speaks of God as a sexually violent husband who uses rape as the ultimate form of punishment. Thus biblical narrative and poem address the phenomenon of sexual violence which makes it difficult to limit these texts to a bygone past alone. They seem to speak so directly to our time, in which rape-prone attitudes and behavior still harm women, children, and men. They seem eerily relevant for the twenty-first century.

In that sense, then, the Hebrew Bible is a witness to sexual violence perpetrated even today. Some interpreters maintain that biblical narratives and poems have contributed to the prevalence of sexual violence. For people of this conviction, the Bible is a perpetrator justifying and legitimating the heinous crime. Yet ultimately the Bible is merely a collection of texts, sacred texts in Christianity and Judaism. Yet if interpreters acquiesce to biblical stories of violence or read them to justify or ignore the issue, it is not the texts that are problematic but the reader's complicity with them. Readers create biblical meanings and, with this hermeneutical principle in mind, the Hebrew Bible emerges as a sacred witness. It refuses compliance with sexual violence because it contains texts addressing this topic. If readers are willing to engage it, the Hebrew Bible makes them tackle its narratives and poems. They require our attention and care, and if we proceed accordingly, we can read them as a critique of androcentric strategies that obfuscate, excuse, and even endorse the violation of women.

57. See Baumann's translation of this verse in her German book: *Liebe Und Gewalt: Die Ehe als Metapher für das Verhältnis JHWH—Israel in die Prophetenbüchern* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000), pp. 218, n. 629: "Ich will dich schänden." The English translation of the German text offers a weak translation of verse 6 on p. 209: "...and I will defile you ..." See also Gerlinde Baumann, *Gottes Gewalt im Wandel: Traditionsgeschichtliche und intertextuelle Studien zu Nahum 1,2-8* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005).

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-5; 210.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

60. Elke Seifert, *Töchter und Väter im Alten Testament: Eine ideologiekritische Untersuchung zur Verfügbarmachung von Väter über ihre Töchter* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), p. 308.