Reading the Bible from the Inside Out:
Biblical Models for Feminist Hermeneutics

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ABSTRACT

It is a truism that the Hebrew Bible is a patriarchal text, that it was produced in a patriarchal culture, and that the perspectives and experiences of women are underrepresented by it. Feminist biblical critics have responded with a bounty of diverse interpretations and methods, but despite this diversity, they all to some degree share in the resignation that women stand at the margins of biblical literature and tradition, that feminist readers must bring their concerns into the text from the outside if they hope to find them there at all. Such assumptions are certainly not unfounded, especially if one confines the scope of her analysis to biblical texts that deal explicitly with women and gender—texts which so often reflect and conform to the dominant gender ideologies of their day. This dissertation will argue, however, it is nevertheless possible to locate the dynamics of feminist reading within the biblical text itself. At its most fundamental, I define "feminist reading" as the result of one's encounter with a text/situation/ worldview/etc. that fails to adequately reflect one's own subjectivity and sense of self in service to some other, oppressive ideological agenda. In fact, the biblical narrative abounds with characters grappling with similar clashes between the subjective experience of self and the external ideologies imposed upon it. I argue that, in those instances, the biblical narrative privileges these marginalized characters' subjectivities and invites the reader to empathetically engage with those subjectivities. I will explore three examples of this dynamic as it appears in the Hebrew Bible, using narratological methods to trace how the text encourages the reader to "read with" marginalized characters instead of with the ideologies that marginalize them.

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CHAPTER 1
INTERVENTIONS IN FEMINIST BIBLICAL CRITICISM

I. Putting the Feminist in Biblical Criticism

Of the many approaches housed under the umbrella of biblical studies,
feminist biblical criticism is unique—and faces a unique set of challenges—in that
it straddles two distinct orientations toward biblical literature and history. On the
one hand, feminist biblical criticism looks much like any other form of biblical
criticism: it shares in the common enterprise of augmenting our body of
knowledge concerning biblical literature, history, and culture, and it does so by
applying such well-established methods as philology, literary analysis, source
criticism, etc. One may well assume that the only thing distinguishing the
subcategory of "feminist biblical criticism" from the broader category of "biblical
criticism" is its focus on a particular constellation of questions concerning women
and gender.

On the other hand, however, feminist biblical criticism cannot be reduced to
any one of its shared methods or relationships to biblical criticism writ large. This
is the case because feminist biblical criticism is not—nor does it pretend to be—
ideologically neutral. While it is possible for other historical or literary inquiries
to settle comfortably within the grain of the text—offering, for example, a
dispassionate analysis of the gender norms a text constructs and leaving it at that
—feminist critics can enjoy no such luxury. Ideological concerns are the very
things that stimulate feminist readings and guide the interpretive avenues they

pursue. Feminist approaches are animated by the recognition that women's interests are underrepresented by the biblical text. They are vivified by the desire to figure out how and why women's voices came to be muted. When they seek ways to recover and do justice to women's stories, feminist critics do so not only for the sake of a fuller account of biblical history, but for the sake of contemporary readers struggling to understand their relationships to this monumental text while wrestling with the fact that their own identities as women may not be reflected in it.

In fact, the first prominent moves to bring feminist interpretation into the fold of academic biblical study were not inspired by traditional biblical scholarship, but by the feminist activists and public intellectuals of the 1960s Women's Liberation Movement.[1] These activists and intellectuals did approach the biblical text with an impassive interest in unearthing more knowledge, but because they felt the Bible's patriarchalism must be implicated as one of the cultural edifices contributing to the real oppression of women and the devaluation of women's experiences.

For example, Simone de Beauvoir, whose pioneering book *The Second Sex* gave voice to the dawning Women's Liberation Movement, writes of the creation of Eve:

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[1] With the notable exception of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who will be discussed in the proceeding chapter.

> God did not spontaneously choose to create her as an end in herself and in order to be worshipped directly by her in turn for it. She was destined by Him for man...and therein lies the wondrous hope that man has often put in woman: he hopes to fulfill himself as a being by carnally possessing a being, but at the same time confirming his sense of freedom through the docility of a free person.[2]

De Beauvoir approaches this text in its abiding mythological sense, as a story told since time immemorial in which woman is construed as the depersonalized 'other,' the object born to serve the primary male subject's physical and psychological needs. In her book *Sexual Politics,* activist and intellectual Kate Millet reads the same text as an effort as inimical as it is conscious about vilifying and keeping women under the thumb of male authority:

> Patriarchy has God on its side. One of its most effective agents of control is the powerfully expeditious character of its doctrines as to the nature and origin of the female and the attribution to her alone of the dangers and evils it imputes to sexuality...To blame the evils and sorrows of life—loss of Eden and the rest—on sexuality would all too logically implicate the male, and such implication is hardly the purpose of the story, designed as it is expressly in order to blame all this world's discomfort on the female.[3]

Each of these readings discusses the creation of humanity in Genesis 2 as at best symptomatic of (de Beauvoir) or at worst an intentional instrument for (Millett) the female oppression that ramifies in the lived experiences of women throughout history and up to the present moment. Millett and de Beauvoir read this text with the goal of exposing the cultural sources of contemporary patriarchal oppression and, through this exposure, resisting it. In other words,

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[2] *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 159-160.

[3] *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 51-54.

they consider the authority of the Bible to be a prime example of the oppressive forces that women must reject. Their work, in turn, precipitated the responses from female biblical scholars that, during the ensuing decades, would set in motion the emergence of a subfield of feminist criticism from within the academy of religious and biblical studies.

All of this is to say that, from its inception, feminist biblical criticism has been part of a live conversation about the real experiences of contemporary women and how their lives are affected by the specter of patriarchal authority. Picking up the mantle of Women's Liberation thinkers, feminist biblical scholars have incorporated in their work a a keen awareness of the normative influence of the Bible and its function as a source of authority which, throughout its history, has proven so damaging for women. However, feminist biblical critics have not been satisfied with the Women's Liberation case for rejecting the Bible's authority, maintaining that its history of oppression makes understanding and working with the text that much more urgent.[4] Phyllis Trible, for example, rejects the temptation to dismiss the Bible's reception as divinely authoritative. She proposes that feminist critics continue to work within "the household of faith," because it is within this household that many women encounter the biblical text:[5]

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[4] Even Robert Alter, a scholar of comparative literature who does not have the same stakes in biblical literature that a feminist biblical critic does, recognizes that the Bible is "not an antiquarian book or historical document but a literature that speaks to us urgently" (*The World of Biblical Literature* [New York: Basic Books, 1992], 23).

[5] *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), xvi.

> I face a terrible dilemma: Choose ye this day whom you will serve: The God of the fathers or the God of the sisterhood. If the God of the fathers then the Bible supplies models for your slavery. If the God of the sisterhood, then you must reject patriarchal religion and go forth without models to claim your freedom. Yet I myself perceive neither war nor neutrality between biblical faith and Women's Liberation. The more I participate in the Movement, the more I discover my freedom through the appropriation of biblical symbols....The Women's Movement errs when it dismisses the Bible as inconsequential or condemns it as enslaving. In rejecting Scripture women ironically accept male chauvinistic interpretations and thereby capitulate to the very view they are protesting.[6]

As Trible warns, it is ultimately irresponsible to follow the recommendations of Women's Liberation thinkers in rejecting the Bible and its authority wholesale. Cultural goliath that the Bible is, to ignore this elephant in the room will not make it any less present. The only way forward is to walk right up to it and inspect it closely, to shed light on its potential for multivocality with respect to gender, and to draw it into a feminist dialogue by virtue of reading it as feminists, seeking therein an avenue for women to claim the biblical tradition as their own.

While Trible is relatively optimistic about the potential of the Bible to speak positively to contemporary women, less optimistic feminist biblical critics join her in asserting the value of academic studies of the Bible as a contribution to feminist goals. For example, J. Cheryl Exum, among the most trenchant critics of biblical patriarchalism, proffers her analyses of biblical narratives "in order to *reveal* strategies by which patriarchal literature excludes, marginalizes, and

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[6] "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 1 (March 1973), 31.

otherwise operates to subjugate women."[7] With this, Exum does not recommend setting aside the biblical text as a condemnation of its patriarchalism, but rather a revitalized interest in understanding the biblical text and the mechanisms by which it has contributed to the subjugation of women.

Thus, feminist biblical criticism is truly the child of two parents: it inherits its practicable, political spirit from the feminist movement, and its methods and modes of inquiry from the field of biblical studies. As such, feminist biblical criticism cannot entirely bracket the issue of the Bible's reception as more than just a text, but as a consecrated deposit of history and holy commands. Biblical texts indifferent to or unfriendly toward women's concerns and questions still carry all of the weight of the Bible's tremendous normative influence, and the fruits of feminist literary and historical interpretations will bear very real implications for contemporary women's understandings of themselves as religious/cultural/social subjects and participants in their religious traditions. The stakes of this enterprise are no less than the determination of how—or even *if* —women can truly claim a seat at the table of biblical tradition.

The concept of "biblical tradition," and the need to locate women within it, begs an immediate question: what is the hermeneutical relationship between

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[7] *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 9. Emphasis mine. Esther Fuchs agrees that feminist critics cannot simply dismiss biblical patriarchalism, criticizing her peers for failing to grapple seriously enough with patriarchal power politics and fashioning her own work as a clear-eyed and unwavering look at the literary injustices done to female characters ("Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women: The Neoliberal Turn in Contemporary Feminist Scholarship," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2 [2008], 47).

contemporary readers and the (ancient) biblical text and its shapers? How do the ideologies, subjectivities, social contexts, and experiences of contemporary readers interact with a textual world so far removed and yet so persistently influential? This question, ever-present and ever-relevant in any context where hermeneutics is concerned, becomes that much more pressing—and demands that much more engagement and theorization—when biblical interlocutors are not equally invested in the types of conversations that feminist interpreters ask their texts to host. After all, there is the undeniable fact that biblical texts were generated in a deeply patriarchal context in which men were the dominant producers, shapers, and keepers of literary culture. With few notable exceptions, their literary products reflect androcentric perspectives,[8] and when these texts do address women, they by and large conform to patriarchal norms. Feminist biblical critics must fully recognize the historical reality of the Bible's patiarchalism—and the nagging question of whether it is even possible to reclaim feminist perspectives in such a text—while seeking new historical, literary, and hermeneutical methods that will permit the possible discovery and appreciation of subterranean perspectives, perspectives which biblical authors and narrators may not self-consciously engage or may even resist or suppress. A viable feminist

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[8] For the possibilities of female authorship of certain texts, see, for example, Athalya Brenner, "Women Poets and Authors," in *The Israelite Woman* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985); Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien Van-Dijk Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); S.D. Goitein, "The Song of Songs: A Female Composition," in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible, Volume 1,* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 58-66; and Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Fokkelien Van-Dijk Hemmes, "The Canon of the Old Testament and Women's Cultural Traditions," in Ibid., 67-85.

approach to biblical literature must balance an objective recognition of the unyielding reality of historical patriarchalism with the pragmatic realization that actual female subjects have borne and will continue to bear the often stifling weight of its cultural influence.

II. A Survey of Feminist Critical Approaches

Feminist biblical critics have contributed a variety of answers, each with its own potential and limitations. While I cannot exhaust these contributions here, I will discuss below the work of several scholars who represent prominent trends in feminist biblical criticism.

a. Phyllis Trible

As mentioned above, Phyllis Trible endeavors to offer a correction to other feminists' pessimism about the possibility of finding something reclaimable for women amid the Bible's patriarchalism. In her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality,* she analyzes certain signal texts with the aim of discovering therein a biblical ideology of gender which permits a fundamental equality among the genders. She concludes that the possibility of locating a sense of gender egalitarianism in the Bible hinges upon the divine identification with both

genders[9] in the creation account of Genesis 1. Given its pride of place in the canon and in the biblical telling of human history, Trible treats this account as the key to the lock of biblical gender ideology, with Genesis 1:27 serving as her true "clue in the text":

> So God created humankind in his image,
> In the image of God he created them;
> Male and female he created them.

On Trible's reading, the structural parallelism between "the image God" and "humankind," and then between "humankind" and "male and female," suggests that God is not to be identified exclusively with the male, as so much divine imagery and so many masculine pronouns may lead one to assume. But nor is God neither male *nor* female—another possibility, but one which would bear very little theologically interpretive fruit when attempting to understand human gender relations in light of their relationship to the divine image. Rather, as Trible argues, this verse unequivocally indicates that God is both male *and* female: maleness *and* femaleness are both reflections of the divine image and share equally in their possession of the image of God.[10] As such, a socially-determined gender hierarchy bucks against God's creative act in bringing forth

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[9] I am certainly aware that in contemporary Western culture, and in other cultures throughout history, more than two genders are recognized. (See, for example, Judith Lorber, "Men as Women and Women as Men: Disrupting Gender," in *Paradoxes of Gender* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994], 80ff.) I (and Trible) must, however, follow the Bible's binary gender system in treating its texts.

[10] *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality,* 17.

humanity in its essential equality.[11] Trible's argument about the creation of

humankind in Genesis 1 packs extra punch because it is one of the examples of

gender equality in the Bible that Women's Liberation feminists tend to neglect in

favor of critiques of the patriarchalism that elsewhere abounds.[12]

The creation account of Genesis 2, which de Beauvoir and especially Millet

inveighed against, is a tougher nut to crack, but Trible continues to read this

narrative through the lens of gender equality she acquired in her analysis of

Genesis 1. She suggests that, through and through, Genesis 2 is a narrative

celebrating "dominion without domination, hierarchy without oppression."[13] The

first human (*ha-adam*/האדם) and the earth from which his flesh was fashioned

are both mutually dependent upon one another for survival. *Ha-adam* is granted

dominion over nature and commanded to "till and keep" the garden (Genesis

2:15), but this so-called dominion carries no oppressive connotations: *ha-adam* is

responsible for sustaining the land that will in turn give him sustenance. Trible

reads a similar dynamic in the creation of woman from *ha-adam.* Just as *ha-*

adam was granted a being and identity independent from the land that lent him

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[11] See Ibid., 21-22.

[12] Perhaps this neglect owes in part to the fact that the dynamics of gender as a socially embedded and enacted phenomenon are scarcely explored in the space of a single verse. Phyllis Bird, moreover, argues that male (זכר) and female (נקבה) refer to biological sex rather than gender strictly speaking, and so, if anything, these terms are meant to be semantically grouped with the biological imperative to "be fruitful and multiply" in the following verse ("'Male and Female He Created Them': Genesis 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 2 [1981]: 129-159.

[13] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 85.

his flesh, so too does the female attain a being and identity independent from the being that lent her *his* flesh. Similarly, *ha-adam* dominates the creature fashioned from him no more than the land dominates the creature fashioned from it. In sum, according to Trible, differentiation without domination is the ideal state of creation as described in Genesis 2.[14]

Up until this point, the term *adam* functions as a generic, genderless term for "human being," and just as in Genesis 1:27, the creation of new differentiated categories ("man" and "woman," *ish*/אש and *ishah*/אשה [Genesis 2:22]) happens simultaneously. Thus, on Trible's reading, the introduction of new, explicitly gendered terms indicates that the first human being was not in fact male, but that male and female are complementary and equal categories that cannot exist independently of one another. Without a female, there can be no male, and without a male, there can be no female.[15] Moreover, it is only when the sexes are differentiated—and then symbolically united as one flesh (Genesis 2:24)—that humankind can escape its isolation and find its true fulfillment.[16] The existence of two equal and mutually-informing genders, then, is intrinsically good and necessary for human flourishing, as evidenced by the man's joyful and relieved exclamation at having found his true companion: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!" (Genesis 2:23).

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[14] Ibid., 85-90.

[15] Ibid., 94-97.

[16] Ibid., 99-103.

Of course, as Trible is well aware, this ideal of creation is sullied almost immediately by the first humans' failure to act in accordance with the unity for which they were intended. The woman fails to consult with her husband on a matter so weighty as defying a commandment from God even though, as it turns out, he was with her at the time (Genesis 3:6). And, although they both ate the forbidden fruit, the man widens the fissure between himself and his wife by attempting to place the blame for the transgression entirely on her (Genesis 3:12). With this, the unity of their flesh and the equality of their relationship is torn asunder. According to Trible, this is the true reason for their respective punishments and the resultant imbalance in gendered relationships. Female subordination is thus not a part of the natural order—quite the opposite, in fact—but it is a consequence of disregarding that very same natural order according to which men and women were to act harmoniously as equal partners. The transgression in the garden would indeed set gender relations on a different course, wherein women would become subordinate to men. And indeed, this course would continue to inform lived social and historical reality from that point forward, but the creation accounts figure women's subordination not as a natural consequence of the innate, created nature of woman. Rather, it is an entirely avoidable and unfortunate consequence of Adam and Eve's failures to respect the principle of their unity in the flesh.[17]

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[17] Ibid., 128.

Having reached these conclusions, Trible can then relativize those texts that do subdue women's voices or figure them as disempowered, because this picture of gender relations, though reflective of the new post-Eden reality, is neither absolute nor grounded in theology and creation.

Trible's rhetorical analysis does a fine job of correcting the tendency to see in the Bible only the patriarchal authority that oppresses women, laying the groundwork for an understanding of biblical ideologies of gender that allows for its true complexity. She does, however, push too far in the opposite direction. Rather than taking seriously the Bible's elevation of male authority, she is so focused on making the case that the Bible is at its core a champion of gender equality that she fails to truly reconcile the fact that, although Adam and Eve may in theory have been equivalently culpable for the first human transgression, only Eve's punishment places her under the thumb of another human authority. Pointedly, this other human authority is a man: her husband, who will now rule over her (Genesis 3:16).

Indeed, Trible is so keen to remove the teeth from biblical patriarchalism that, even as she intends to confine her analysis to the literary evidence, she always happens to find exactly the kind of evidence she is looking for, even if the literary data itself suggests otherwise. For example, much of her argument about the second creation account hinges on the fact that *adam* is the generic and effectively gender-neutral term for "human being," such that the primordial human being was not male in any real sense, but rather contained the potentiality

of both male and female.[18] She neglects to acknowledge, however, that the term

adam seamlessly shifts to the proper name Adam, still referring to this first

creature. While the notion that sexual differentiation does not take place until the

second human being is drawn forth and the new categories of *ish* and *ishah* are

introduced is impeccable in theory—and while it generates exciting possibilities

for seeing the biblical text as one which places the status of both genders on equal

footing—Trible asks her reader to accept the implausibility that the term means

two entirely different things from one verse (Genesis 2:21) to the next (Genesis

2:22). In doing so, Trible glosses over the co-equivalence of the male Adam in *ha-

adam.*[19] Adam/*ish* may acknowledge his new gendered identity through his

encounter with *ishah,* but nothing in the text suggests that Adam acquires a new

identity altogether. On the contrary, the same person maintains the memories

and experiences that pre-dated the introduction of Eve: he must, for example,

remember the frustrated experiment of finding a suitable companion in the

animal kingdom if he expresses his relief in "at last" recognizing his counterpart

in Eve.

Moreover, Trible's selectively optimistic view of biblical gender ideology

has limited utility for feminist readers who will inevitably encounter other,

patently patriarchal passages. Her approach has trouble reconciling what she

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[18] Ibid., 80.

[19] Ilana Pardes offers this criticism in *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 23, as does Cynthia Chapman in "The Breath of Life: Speech, Gender, and Authority in the Garden of Eden," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138, no. 2 (2019): 241–262.

posits as an essential equality between men and women with the social and

historical reality of women's subordinate status as it is so often manifest in

biblical narrative and, indeed, divine law. Law is by definition prescriptive; it

does more than describe postlapsarian gender reality, but it justifies social

responses to certain human sexual behaviors by equating those responses with

the will of God. One may wonder, then, how Trible's argument for a God who

intended nothing but harmony in human sexuality would fare when that same

God is said to directly command the stoning of a non-virgin bride while making

no mention of the consequences for a non-virgin bridegroom (Deuteronomy

22:20-21).[20] As Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza aptly puts it, "[A] biblical theology

that does not seriously confront 'the patriarchal stamp' of the Bible and its

religious-political legitimization of the patriarchal oppression of women is in

danger of using a feminist perspective to rehabilitate the authority of the Bible,

rather than to rehabilitate women's biblical history and theological heritage."[21]

And yet, Trible is by no means blind to these difficult passages. As

something of a followup and complement to 1978's *God and the Rhetoric of*

Sexuality, her 1984 book *Texts of Terror[22]* takes an unrelenting look at stories of

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[20] One cogent way to resolve these inconsistencies with respect to gender in the Bible would be to appeal to source criticism and acknowledge the range of ideologically distinct biblical authors. This resolution, however, would not be consistent with Trible's thinking. Her premise is that the radical gender equality described in Genesis 1:27 is the true biblical ideal, standing over and against any other biblical text that would suggest otherwise.

[21] *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins,* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), 21.

[22] (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

female oppression and the patriarchal mores that are culpable in it. From Hagar's abuse at the hands of the patriarch Abraham's wife to the rape of Tamar at the hands of her own brother and the social death she undergoes because of it, Trible offers detailed portraits of these women's suffering, seizing upon those fine-grained rhetorical components that allow her to tell and interpret their stories in such a way that their suffering cannot be ignored amid the broader national narratives of which they are a part. This volume stands in stark contrast to the hopefulness that marked *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Framed by the observation that sometimes there can be no happy ending to a sad story, and that all that is left for us to do is make sure these stories are told and offer our sympathy to these characters in their suffering and neglect,[23] Trible returns to the fact that no theory about the creation of humankind can free women from the real social and cultural constraints that keep them subordinate. In the end, what Trible offers is a sort of canon-within-the-canon: isolated texts that celebrate equality among the genders, and those that she can only deem "texts of terror." Perhaps principles of gender equality are theoretically and theologically intrinsic to humanity, but Trible does not offer an extrapolatable theory for how these principles of gender equality can inform or reverberate throughout the complex of biblical literature and the patriarchal norms that pervade it. As a result, Trible finds herself caught within a curious combination of optimism and resignation, highlighting the need for feminist critics to find a more comprehensive approach

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[23] Ibid., 3.

to the biblical text that can continue to work even when the patriarchal stamp is most pronounced—and when it is most pernicious.

b. Athalya Brenner

In *The Israelite Woman,*[24] Athalya Brenner squarely acknowledges the patriarchal biases in biblical literature, but she then moves to consider the possibility that these biases are the secondary consequences of discrete literary motivations which influence the authors'/redactors' decisions to prioritize certain details and characters in their renderings of Israel's history. Women may be all too frequently subordinated to these aims, and they are all too often flattened or stereotyped. Brenner's claim is that, if we can discern these literary motivations, then we are on our way to discerning the roads not taken—roads dusted with clues about the actual roles of women in Israelite society and, hence, in biblical tradition. Brenner's aim is twofold: first, acknowledging that a culture's literary conventions may not necessarily reflect the lived realities of its people, she seeks to reconstruct the actual positions of Israelite women in their socio-political spheres. Second, armed with this reconstruction, she pursues the question of what literary and ideological motivations would lead biblical authors to portray and/or stereotype women in certain ways.[25]

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[24] Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985.

[25] Ibid., 9.

One of Brenner's flagship examples is her treatment of the two parts of the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15: the longer portion sung by Moses and the male Israelites (vv. 1-18), and the shorter portion sung by Miriam and the other women present (vv. 20-21). Because the longer portion reads as a full song unto itself, made no more complete by the inclusion of a separate women's verse, Brenner takes the truncated women's song as a hushed but persistent clue about the vocational roles of women in Israelite society—namely, that women were frequently the composers and singers of songs. That the biblical compiler felt compelled to include an extraneous performance, this time sung by women, suggests to Brenner that there was a strong tradition of attributing the Song of the Sea to Miriam and of songwriting in general to women. The redactor, then, was torn between his accountability to the popular knowledge of his readers, which would prevent him from getting away with altogether erasing the attribution of the song to Miriam, and his accountability to the literary project of building up the Moses mythos and centralizing Moses' role in the exodus. This latter motivation took precedence, and it is an essentially patriarchal motivation: it endeavors to shore up a male figure's authority and primacy as a producer of literary culture at the expense of a competing history according to which this hymn to the Israelite God owes to women. Nevertheless, the nod to popular tradition by including Miriam's vestigial verse may provide an historical clue about Israelite women's occupations as songwriters, especially when taken

together with the marked gynocentrism of the Song of Songs and the Song of

Deborah in Judges 5.[26]

On Brenner's view, if one can identify the authors'/redactors' guiding

motivations, then one can peel back the patriarchal layers that diminish women's

roles in literary representations of Israel's history and, in the process, find the

germs of an historical reconstruction of women's actual roles in Israelite society

and culture. It follows that if we can reclaim these spaces for women in biblical

history and tradition, we can rewrite women into the story and thus afford

contemporary feminist readers the opportunity to carve places for women in

largely untold—but nevertheless present—historical perspectives. Brenner's

approach is a commendable effort to acknowledge patriarchal biases within the

Bible while at the same time using them to the advantage of feminist readers. By

carefully attending to these literary clues and how they build toward a picture of

the authors' ideological aims, Brenner establishes an ideological baseline by

which apparently extraneous or contradictory details emerge in higher relief,

making it possible to see a fuller historical picture of and for women that may fall

beyond the immediate priorities of the story being told.

A consequence of this approach, however, is that the Bible's patriarchal

tendencies are reified. At best, women's stories are dismissed unconsciously,

deemed less-than-necessary in achieving the goal of narrating Israel's history. At

worst, as seems to be the the case with the example of Miriam in Exodus 15,

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[26] Ibid., 50-56.

women's stories are consciously subdued. Women's roles in the cultural

production of songs are ripped from their hands and given to more prominent

male figures. On Brenner's reading, the popular knowledge of Miriam as a

songwriter clearly works against the interests of the biblical storyteller, and

Miriam's inclusion seems little more than a begrudging concession. Faced with a

choice between preserving the voices of women and handing their voices over to a

more important male figure, the redactor opts to overwrite the female presence in

the exodus. The best a feminist reader can do is look through the text and into

what it does *not* say—to accept that women have been largely cast out of the

regnant historical narrative and to attempt to cobble together a separate,

alternative history from the scraps. Brenner does well to locate women in biblical

history, but in doing so she must also concede that they have been stripped of

their place in biblical tradition from the start. In other words, Brenner's approach

continues to be nagged by the implication that, though feminists may have reason

to be optimistic about the possibility of finding vestiges of women's stories

embedded in biblical literature, these stories have intentionally or

unintentionally been placed outside of biblical tradition, its texts, and what is

deemed central in shaping the history of the religion and its subjects. This mode

of feminist interpretation may run alongside the text, but it does not intersect

with it in a way that empowers women to claim that text as their story, too. If

Israelite women are relegated to the margins of history, then Brenner's readers

must join them there.

c. Esther Fuchs

Esther Fuchs, on the other hand, is deeply skeptical about the potential of any attempt to find vestiges of female empowerment in the biblical text and/or its culture. For Fuchs, the Bible's patriarchalism is so ubiquitous—and its bias against women so malignant—that efforts to retrieve remnants of women's cultural agency or notions of gender equality are little more than misguided: they paper over the harsh reality with which feminist interpreters are compelled reckon. On Fuchs' view, the only way by which women can claim agency over the biblical text is by exposing and critiquing its damaging patriarchal ideologies for what they are. To interpret as a feminist, for Fuchs, is to never lose sight of the patriarchal grain of the text. One must self-consciously read against it, owning her place at the margins rather than attempting to chisel a space inside of a text that is patently inhospitable to feminist concerns. According to Fuchs, any realistic reading will acknowledge that contemporary feminist ideologies of gender are at fundamental odds with biblical gender ideology, and this pragmatic recognition necessitates a subversive posture on the part of feminist interpreters. In fact, Fuchs equates "reading as a woman" with reading from the margins and against the patriarchal grain of the text.[27]

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[27] "Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women, The Neoliberal Turn in Contemporary Feminist Scholarship," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2 (2008), 47. She further develops this concept throughout the essays collected in her *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

In her own work, Fuchs enacts this subversive posture by focusing exclusively on the misogynistic over- and undertones that biblical representations of women entail. For example, in her essay "Who Is Hiding the Truth?: Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism,"[28] she argues that even characters whom other feminist interpreters have embraced as positive examples are in fact installed to cast suspicion on all women—even and especially when it seems that the biblical narrative evaluates them positively. She describes what she calls "the biblical double standard" by which the deceptive acts of male and female characters are appraised through the narrative. By Fuchs' calculations, almost every significant female character—friend and foe alike—uses deceptive means to achieve her ends. As a result, even as Ruth's benign manipulation of Boaz is celebrated, Delilah's malign manipulation of Samson echoes in the background, reminding the reader that all women are inherently deceptive and that they may just as easily ply their wiles to the detriment of Israel and its men.[29]

Moreover, although such prominent figures as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David resort to deception for survival or to get what they want, their characters are not defined wholly by their deceptions. The narrative rounds them out with other characteristics and story arcs that allow for more development and more opportunities for the reader to sympathize with them and their motivations.[30]

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[28] In *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship,* ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

[29] Ibid., 142.

[30] Ibid., 141.

Women must deceive because they are politically and socially powerless; indirect means are the only options available to them in order to achieve their ends. But, according to Fuchs, the Bible declines to explore this motivation with respect to women deceivers, withholding the benefit of the doubt in order to produce "female portraits intended, among other things, to validate the suspicion that women's apparent impotence is nothing but a deceptive disguise, that underneath their vulnerable coyness lurks a dangerously calculating mind."[31] Indeed, one can hardly deny that Delilah's only literary function is to act as a deceptive adversary to Samson, while David goes on to take his place as one of the most celebrated biblical figures even after his murderous deception of Uriah is roundly condemned by the narrative.

In the example of Genesis 27, however, Fuchs dismisses out of hand the possibility that Rebekah's motives for tricking her husband factor into the narrative's characterization of her: "Rebekah's deception of the old and blind Isaac does not so much as hint at the wife's powerlessness versus her husband. It does not take into account that deception is Rebekah's only means of granting her preferred son a blessing."[32] However, if Rebekah had any other means with which to confer a blessing to Jacob, then this entire tale of trickery would be rendered insensible. One may well argue that the narrative of Rebekah's deception is entirely predicated upon the fact that she, as a mother, lacks the social and legal

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[31] Ibid., 143.

[32] Ibid., 138.

agency of a father. Perhaps the narrative merely reflects this consequence of the patriarchy: whether used by heroines or female villains, women's acts of deceptiveness reflect women's limited agency within a patriarchal society.

Rebekah's is a particularly interesting case of female deception in that she is blatantly working against her husband's interests, but in addition to working for her own, she is also instrumental in bringing to fruition an oracle that defeats her husband's preferences. She is, then, neither an example of a dangerous, anti-social female deceiver like Delilah, nor is she a clear example of those laudable female tricksters, like Rahab or Jael, who deceive for Israel's benefit. Rebekah's ambiguous situation between her husband's will, her own will, and the will expressed in the oracle challenges Fuchs' totalizing binary between "good" female deceivers and "bad" female deceivers, demanding that attention be given to the nuances of each particular situation in which female deception is employed.[33] While Fuchs maintains that, at the end of the day, the narrative of Genesis 27 cannot characterize Rebekah's actions positively because she is working against the interests of a male character,[34] one would be hard pressed to claim that she is necessarily evaluated negatively on those grounds. By choosing to align Rebekah's will with the oracle in this way, the narrative may well have intended

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[33] In a subsequent essay, Fuchs does come closer to acknowledging that male and female biblical tricksters are portrayed in much the same ways in terms of their methods and motivations, but she continues to insist on maintaining her male/female binary by which female tricksters are ultimately bad and male tricksters are ultimately good ("'For I Have the Way of Women:' Deception, Gender, and Ideology in Biblical Narrative," *Semeia* 42 [1988]: 68-83).

[34] Ibid., 137.

to cajole the reader to forgive Rebekah's deception and curb possible criticism of her character for exploiting her husband's ailments.

One may also consider the story of Tamar's deception of Judah in Genesis 38. Tamar's trickery in conceiving Judah's child in the guise of a harlot would, to be sure, benefit her deceased husband (and patriarchal custom) by securing an heir in his name by the law of levirate marriage. The narrative, however, makes no direct mention that she is acting primarily in the interests of her deceased husband. It is just as likely that she is acting in self-interest: with marriage, Tamar would have severed her ties with her father's household in order to join her husband's, but without children, she would never have solidified her place in her new husband's household—and nor would she have the protection of her children's households in her old age.[35] While it is certainly true that Tamar's condoned act of deception coincides with the interests of the patriarchy, and that Tamar's only choices for social survival fall within patriarchal constraints, the narrative itself does not overburden her character with a self-sacrificing allegiance to her dead husband's needs.

Fuchs' interpretation of how the Bible portrays deceptive women is cogent and certainly thought-provoking; it does its best work in illustrating the extent to which the choices available to biblical women were constrained by the norms of the patriarchy. Her approach is problematic, however, in that her rigorous

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[35] See Susan Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," *Harvard Theological Review* 72, no. 1 (1979): 143-149.

hermeneutics of suspicion assumes *a priori* that that the patriarchal context of biblical literature necessarily means that the text is the feminist's adversary. She writes, "The real deception is not committed by the biblical women but by the androcentric text,"[36] implying that the biblical text seeks actively to deceive its readers about the nature of women through its negative portrayals of them (even when those portrayals appear to be positive). This attitude prevents her from contemplating the intricate interplay between the social reality described within the narrative and the narrative's own moral evaluations of it. If this interplay is more complex than Fuchs allows, then there is more room for feminist readings to gain a foothold within the text's own grammar.

The result of such an approach is a feminist reading that stands on one side of an ideological chasm and declaims an ideological opponent that cannot and will not answer. In her effort to be as realistic as possible about the Bible's patriarchalism, though certainly called for, she jettisons another reality: that, upon closer inspection, biblical representations of gender are complex, and in that complexity feminist considerations can move and breathe. While Trible may too optimistically flatten the complexity of biblical gender ideology, Fuchs too pessimistically flattens it.

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[36] Fuchs, "Who Is Hiding the Truth?," 144.

d. Ilana Pardes

If Trible and Fuchs fail to reconcile the Bible's heterogeneity with respect to gender, then Ilana Pardes takes this heterogeneity as the starting point for her feminist approach to biblical texts.[37] By applying Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, Pardes argues that, not only does the canon's variety of authorial voices, contexts, and historical perspectives mitigate against a monolithic biblical view of gender, but also that a single text can sound the voices of different classes, social contexts, and genders. These voices are capable of speaking to readers in ways in which the author may not have anticipated and may not have even been aware. Taken as a canonical whole, these texts also converse with one another and, in the process, complicate and render one another more complex.[38] For example, despite the fact that it appears as a self-enclosed literary unit, Pardes reads the Book of Ruth as a window into a tacit conversation about gender that is taking place within the canon. On the one hand, this gynocentric story places women and their agency at the center of a pivotal moment in Israel's history: the establishment of David's lineage. As such, it may be read as a gentle rallying cry against the Bible's tendency to narratively subordinate, and thus alienate, women from the main lines of Israel's history and the sense of national identity that grows from this history. By incorporating women into this national story, the

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[37] Pardes herself positions her work as a corrective to Fuchs and Trible, among others. (*Countertraditions in the Bible*, 3).

[38] Ibid., 4.

Book of Ruth challenges patriarchal assumptions about what Israel is, and it

spurs the reader to redefine the concept in light of the role that female

protagonists can and do play.[39] On the other hand, the Book of Ruth may also be

read as part of a more localized conversation with the sad story of Rachel and

Leah. Pardes suggests that we read Ruth and Naomi's cooperation and mutual

support as an optimistic rewriting of the jealousy and tension that marked Rachel

and Leah's difficult experiences in a society that places a woman's entire worth on

her ability to produce offspring. If the sisterly relationship between Rachel and

Leah was an unfortunate casualty of the social imperative to compete for the role

of primary child bearer, then Ruth and Naomi are examples of women who can

bear that burden together: rather than devolving into adversaries, as Rachel and

Leah do, Ruth and Naomi find solidarity in the shared experience of being

women in such a society.[40]

　　For Pardes' Bakhtinian reading, the ability of texts like the Book of Ruth to

foster a productive dialogue with other, more flatly patriarchal texts is an

inherent possibility that the reader can activate by synthesizing the various

textual voices she encounters. The text itself need not be conscious of this

possibility, and it cannot control how the reader will hear the latent voices in the

heteroglossic conversation. Thus, although this method for attending to the

female experience in the biblical text is at least theoretically rooted in the text's

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[39] Ibid., 98-99.

[40] Ibid., 100-117.

own anatomy, it is never clear to what extent this signification is something that happens within the text, or to what extent it happens outside of the text and in the reader's interpretive process. Although Pardes' Bakhtinian approach offers both a realistic account of biblical androcentrism as well as a generative discussion of the possibility that this androcentric picture may be destabilized by the reader's interpretive agency, she is less clear about whether the text invites these readings—whether the reader is truly engaging the biblical literary tradition or seizing a loosely textual opportunity to import her own contemporary concerns into it.

The answer may lie in the language with which Pardes talks about her enterprise. Although I would argue that she does have the most theoretically robust strategy for locating entrées for ideological incongruities within the text's own language, she cannot quite seem to get beyond the notion that, at best, she is "sneaking up on" the text, catching it unawares in a moment in which one of its voices impeaches its own regnant picture of gender relations. The first pages of her *Countertraditions in the Bible* are steeped in the language of contest: she consistently characterizes female voices as "antithetical" elements,[41] persisting "against all odds" and resisting "patriarchal modes of censorship,"[42] as though the biblical text writ large is none other than a personification of the patriarchal despotism against which subversive undercurrents and interpretations revolt.

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[41] Ibid., 4.

[42] Ibid., 2.

e. Mieke Bal

With her postmodern deconstructionist approach, Mieke Bal suggests that we altogether dispense with the notion that the biblical text is itself a source of divine authority. In *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories,* she suggests that the resignation feminist readers feel when they encounter the Bible's sexism is only an issue if one considers the text a determinate, univocal source of binding religious truth. The theoretical framework of deconstruction calls into question the very possibility that the message of any text can stand independently of (or, to put it more bitingly, uncontaminated by) its traditions of interpretation. Bal argues instead that what we have come to assume is the text's own self-signification is in fact mistaken for the cluster of interpretations which have been superimposed upon it. Furthermore, no interpretation is free from the ideological interests of the interpreter, and the androcentric lenses through which readings of biblical texts have been filtered for millennia have co-opted the interpretive possibilities of the text and replaced them with the (patriarchal) authority of the interpreters themselves. These dominant interpretations are self-perpetuating. As Bal describes it, a reader will naturally resolve the ambiguity of a biblical passage by making that passage conform to their predisposed expectations. These expectations, conditioned by a long history of androcentrism, in turn determine what literary details the reader will choose to privilege. This process does not yield the only "natural" meaning possible, but rather, over time, the text's ability

to yield other possible meanings becomes subsumed by the apparent stability of the interpretive tradition whose influence continues to compound over time.[43]

According to Bal, it is the cumulative weight of these interpretive traditions, and the assumptions and expectations they foster, which give the impression of a certain biblical attitude toward gender. A different reader, however, may choose to privilege different textual information to find quite another meaning in the text. For Bal, the text in and of itself is ideologically indeterminate, possessing no stable, intrinsic meaning and capable of undermining its own apparent assertions about such things as gender. It is only the dominant interpretations—and not the text—that have grains against which feminist interpreters read. The Bible may easily be reclaimed as a feminist text if feminist readers eschew misogynistic interpretations and impose their own. Contra Fuchs, it is only the patriarchalism of the dominant interpretive traditions that feminist readers must resist; the biblical text has no ideological allegiance and no oppressive agenda of its own.

For example, Bal follows Trible in her assertions that the first earth creature was truly androgynous, that gender and sexual differentiation only occurred at the moment of woman's creation, and that no gender hierarchy existed before Eve's punishment in Genesis 3:16.[44] She departs from Trible, however, in her lack of interest in rehabilitating the biblical text as a scripturally authoritative

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[43] *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1ff.

[44] Ibid., 112-128.

resource for women's claims to equality. Unlike Trible, whose approach struggles

to reconcile beacons of biblical egalitarianism with a preponderance of gender

hierarchies, Bal's deconstructionist belief in textual indeterminacy means that

she faces no difficulty in allowing Genesis 2-3 to contain moments of both gender

equality *and* women's divinely imposed subordination. In allowing for this

biblical equivocation, Bal is in a position to claim that misogynistic

interpretations are in fact discrete choices on the part of the interpreter. Bal

specifically names the author of 1 Timothy as the culprit in distorting Genesis 2-3

to limit women's identities to motherhood and to sanction their subjugation:

> Let women learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

According to Bal, the author of 1 Timothy here fails to recognize that Eve's

character and role is one that emerges and develops gradually: the first man's

incompleteness without the woman, the celebration of his attraction to her, and

her independent actions toward acquiring wisdom come well before she ever

receives the name that would chain her identity to motherhood.[45] The author of 1

Timothy, then, is willfully mistaking the final outcome of the story as its static,

abiding meaning. As Bal argues, 1 Timothy's sexist interpretation is the result of

his own psychological anxieties about the role of women:

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[45] Eve (חוה), which Adam gives her in recognition that she is "the mother of all the living" (Genesis 3:20).

> Indeed, in stressing the prohibition against women teaching, he seems to react to this motherly function inscribed in the proper name. At the same time, the collocation of the inferior body and moral inferiority strands in opposition to motherhood....The question arises: do women deserve contempt in spite of, or because of, their motherhood? Christian morality, echoed in the invention of "pure" motherhood in the character of Mary, the anti-Eve...holds the former; psychoanalysis, in stressing the problems the child has to live through, the too-binding relation with the mother, suggests the latter.[46]

Bal's postmodern re-visioning of the reader/text/tradition relationship may offer exciting new prospects for feminist biblical critics. However, she underestimates the challenge still posed by asking women to simply overcome the interpretive traditions—in many cases *their* traditions—to which these texts have played host. 1 Timothy is, to be sure, an interpretation of Genesis 2-3, and so the interpretive moves that it makes are certainly ripe for the kind of analysis that Bal offers. But nonetheless, 1 Timothy has accrued a scriptural authority all its own, and because of the textual indeterminacy of Genesis 2-3 that Bal helpfully unravels, one may wonder whether 1 Timothy's is the neurotic, bad faith reading that Bal implies.

Bal does in passing acknowledge that, historically and culturally, the Bible undeniably carries religious authority for its readers, but with the same breath she insists that it is also just literature, as if calling it "literature" could automatically dispel the friction between regarding it as a religious text and reading it as a text like any other:

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[46] Ibid., 128.

> Relations between biblical and literary scholarship tend to be limited to the question of 'literary readings of the Bible'—the question if, and to what extent, the Bible can, deserves, and needs to be read 'as' literature. The question is wrongly put and betrays an attempt to separate religious from secular concerns. Such an attempt is futile…the Bible is both totally religious, whatever that may mean, and totally literary.[47]

This, to my knowledge, is the only mention Bal makes about the knotty and eminently debatable issue of reading the Bible as literature, and then only to dismiss it.[48] With this dismissal, Bal positions herself as a deconstructionist literary critic first and a feminist biblical critic second. As a literary critic, she is understandably quite comfortable with regarding the Bible as literature irregardless of a deeply rooted history which insists that it exceeds that secularized category—a history according to which the Bible communicates divine truths and divinely sanctioned paradigms for society that have had and continue to have real ramifications for the women whose lives have been informed by this text and the cultural attitudes it reflects and reproduces. To acknowledge that the Bible is by all rights a body of literature, and that it can therefore be deciphered with literary critical methods, does not negate its long history as a powerful cultural agent wielded as nothing less than a witness to the divine will. It is this very recognition which has animated feminist biblical

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[47] "Introduction," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mieke Bal (Decatur, GA: The Almond Press, 1989), 11.

[48] A more engaged discussion of this issue plays out between Adele Berlin and James Kugel in the pages of *Prooftexts:* James Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," *Prooftexts* 1, no. 3 (1981): 217-236; Adele Berlin, "On the Bible as Literature," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 323-328; James Kugel, "Rejoinder to Adele Berlin," *Prooftexts 2* (1982): 329-332.

criticism since its inception and shaped a social consciousness that breaches the ivory walls of "pure" scholarship.

III. Toward a Biblical Feminist Hermeneutic

All of these approaches—diverse and valuable though they certainly are—are dogged by the same fundamental but unresolved and closely entwined questions. First, what does it mean to read, to encounter the biblical world through text at a steep temporal and ideological remove? Second, can biblical literature be made to speak to contemporary concerns when it comes to gender, and if so, how? Does reading happen by following the text and thereby discovering how it signifies for itself (Trible in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*)? If this is the case, then what is a feminist reader to do with the fact that biblical texts are so often patently unsympathetic to contemporary feminist sensibilities? Must we instead conclude that to realize the texts' patriarchal biases is tantamount to recognizing that these texts in fact cannot speak to these issues, but rather that they are antithetical to them (Fuchs and Trible in *Texts of Terror*)? Or can feminism gain a foothold in biblical tradition by reading from the outside in, peeling back its ideological layers to reveal a reclaimable space for women's stories—if not in the text itself, then in the history and voices that peek out from behind it (Brenner)? The question inevitably arises, however, as to what extent this strategy really amounts to engaging with biblical literature and tradition as true interlocutors, when their trajectories ultimately end in the concealment of women's cultural traditions. Is it

then sufficient to simply acknowledge and accept that contemporary concerns will inevitably intrude upon readings of the past, and that the text's meaning effectively lies in the contemporary reader's interpretive appropriation of it (Pardes and Bal)? But wouldn't this mean, then, that the text is asked to host a conversation of which it is not itself actually a part, and that the contemporary feminist reader is *talking past* biblical tradition rather than finding herself *represented within* it?

While feminist biblical criticism has done well to raise these questions about the nature of the encounter between (feminist) reader and text—questions salient not only to feminist approaches more narrowly, but also to the broader discipline of literary theory—it has found less success in answering them. One reason for this is that the theoretical issues of text and reader are often approached obliquely. Various understandings of the reader/text encounter are implicit or assumed, but the theoretical and methodological implications of this reader/text dynamic are rarely clearly defined or discussed outright. The resulting impression is that feminist reading is something that must necessarily happen outside of the text, that biblical androcentrism is so inextricable and well-established that the text cannot shape the feminist reader. Instead, the feminist reader, from her outsider orientation, can re-orient the text with or without its complicity. In other words, it is always, at least to some degree, taken as *de facto* truth that contemporary feminist ideology stands over and against biblical gender

ideology, and that the experiences of women and the concerns of contemporary feminism must be read *in* if they are to be read at all.

a. Female vs. Feminist Texts

To begin, then, essential theoretical distinctions must be made between a "female text," a "feminist text," and a "feminist hermeneutic." The aforementioned scholars tend nearly exclusively to seek out what might be called "female texts," i.e., texts possibly authored by women or which explicitly deal with the experience of being a woman in biblical culture. And, to be sure, the simple act of telling and attending to women's stories can be regarded as a feminist act in itself, in the sense that it lends visibility to what patriarchalism obscures. As a feminist strategy, the telling of women's stories is known as "consciousness raising," by which encountering women's stories teaches the reader to recognize in the female experience the full, human significance that is denied marginalized individuals when their experiences do not fit neatly into a society's dominant ideology. In insisting that these stories be brought forward in the cultural consciousness, what constitutes the human experience—the stories that society deems worth telling and hearing—will eventually expand.[49]

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[49] For a helpful overview of how consciousness raising became an important practice among second-wave feminists and continues to evolve among third-wave feminists today, see Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar, "The Rhetorical Functions of Consciousness Raising in Third-Wave Feminism," *Communication Studies* 55, vol. 4 (2004): 535-552.

It is tempting, then, to assume that any literature that foregrounds the female experience is doing critical work: that by articulating the experiences of the marginalized, it calls attention to the fact of women's marginalization and the mechanisms by which that marginalization is achieved and perpetuated. However, stories about women do not necessarily do this critical work simply by virtue of their subject matter. For example, several biblical narratives *could* be embraced as examples of consciousness raising. There is the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon, her pleas with him to stop and her subsequent social "death" as a woman defiled by circumstances beyond her control, or the strife between Rachel and Leah as they compete for their husband's affection and the role of child bearer, their sisterly relationship strained by their needs to jockey for position within the limited roles afforded to women and in relation to the patriarch Jacob. The problem with these stories as examples of strategic consciousness raising, however, is that they are primarily descriptive, lacking the critical thrust that constitutes feminism as an analytical mode of exposing patriarchal power and its consequences in the lives of those subject to it. As descriptions, these accounts of women's experiences are submitted without comment and equally permit multiple interpretations. One reader may see the stories of Tamar, Rachel, and Leah as invitations to contemplate and sympathize with the plights of these women as they attempt to navigate their thoroughly patriarchal societies. Another reader may see these stories simply as reports on events that spur the development of the larger narratives about fraternal rivalry and male power plays

within the patriarchal political and family structure. Still another reader may interpret them as evidence of the extent to which these women have internalized their subordinate places within the patriarchy, endeavoring as they do to protect their limited social statuses as mothers, wives, and virgins among the men in their lives. These stories are certainly open to feminist readings, but they do not necessarily constitute a social critique unto themselves. The extent to which the text itself may be participant in the critique is indeterminate, and, therefore, such stories cannot be considered biblical examples of "feminist texts"— texts interested in exposing and critiquing patriarchal power—without strict qualification. In other words, these "female texts" may be readable through a feminist hermeneutic, but a feminist hermeneutic is not necessarily an inherent feature of the texts themselves.

b. Feminist Hermeneutics[50]

How, then, might a feminist hermeneutic be defined? To begin, contemporary feminist theory is built upon the axiom that gender is socially constructed: there are no inherent differences between male and female, and gendered behaviors and attitudes toward gender that would seem to suggest essential differences are in fact performances that stem from social conditioning

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[50] With full awareness of the depth of the study of hermeneutics as a discipline unto itself, I use the term here in a general sense, referring to the encounter between a person and a literary artifact.

and the internalization of gender constructs.[51] This constellation of social forces, and the gendered experiences these social forces produce, opens up to the study of women's epistemology—how socially embodied experiences lead to particular ways of knowing, of evaluating experiential data with respect to one's own concept of self. The experience of being a woman may produce knowledge that is at odds with the types of knowledge imposed by systematized patriarchalism, and it becomes the feminist's task to privilege her experiential knowledge over and against socially and culturally imposed forms of knowledge.[52] In this, there is an implicit imperative: women must use their embodied knowledge to resist systemic subordination and to refuse to pay into the the patriarchal knowledge system. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, women who fail to do so become "mutilated" and "immanent";[53] they allow themselves to be defined by patriarchal norms and expectations, and they surrender their own agency in order to uphold the very system that prevents them from fully realizing their agency. A woman's recognition and articulation of her own subjectivity is the first step toward laying bare the insufficiency of patriarchal ideology in accounting for the real

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[51] This idea was, of course, articulated most famously by Judith Butler in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[52] Cynthia Willett, Ellie Anderson, and Diana Meyers, "Feminist Perspectives on the Self," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/feminism-self/. See also Sandra Harding, who champions a "standpoint epistemology" according to which members of marginalized groups in fact enjoy a privileged epistemic position because they can appraise social problems from a perspective not available to the dominant class (*Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991]).

[53] De Beauvoir, 73; Willet et. al.

experiences of women and the alternative kinds of knowledge that women's experiences produce. In order to effect real social change, feminist epistemology begins with a woman drawing her experiences inward so as to first articulate an individual sense of self: a self which is effected by systemic patriarchal attitudes but which experiences these attitudes independently as a thinking, feeling, and knowing subject. Once this self is grasped, she can turn it outward again and use it to challenge the validity of gender stereotypes and androcentric epistemologies.[54]

Feminist criticism's part is to expose those patriarchal constructs as they are enacted and perpetuated in various types of discourse. It attends, on the one hand, to how these discourses are complicit in the objectification, stereotyping, and continued oppression of women. On the other hand, it attends to how discourses may lend agency to female subjects. Patriarchal social forces shape representations of women in art, literature, philosophy, etc., and they also shape women's experiences of being in the world. Feminist criticism of these cultural products casts an analytical eye upon how these invisible forces impact both social assumptions about women and how those assumptions in turn shape women's lives in either beneficial or detrimental ways:

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[54] Marianne Janack, "Feminist Epistemology," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* http://www.iep.utm.edu/fem-epis/.

> One does not occupy the 'feminist standpoint,' for instance, simply in virtue of being a woman; the feminist standpoint is an achievement rather than something one is born with. One comes to occupy the feminist standpoint by engaging in critical thought about one's experience and its relationship to larger social and political structures.[55]

As it pertains specifically to text, feminist hermeneutics places the experiential data produced by being a woman in a patriarchal society at the center of the interpretive enterprise, allowing that information to guide what type of textual information is privileged and to form the resulting interpretation. As such, it is more than understandable that feminist biblical critics tend to read the biblical text from the outside in, since a feminist hermeneutic is determined *a priori* by a particular set of guiding issues.

The question remains, however, as to whether this outside-in process sufficiently allows feminist readers to lay claim to the Bible as meaningfully representative of their experiences. The ideal, of course, would be to locate in the biblical text itself a sincere and consistent interest in the humanity and subjectivity of women—sincere and consistent enough to counterbalance the undeniable disenfranchisement of women that so often pervades biblical narratives and legal discourses. This possibility continues to elude feminist biblical critics. Because biblical culture and the texts that reflect it are overtly patriarchal, these endeavors reach the same discouraging conclusion in a variety of different ways: that one can read the Bible as a feminist, but that the biblical text will never fully lend itself to the effort.

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[55] (Willet et. al.).

But while this discouragement may well be inevitable if the analytical scope of feminist biblical criticism is limited to those texts that deal explicitly with gender and the relationships between men and women, it need not be the case if we widen our purview to include texts that may not take up gender specifically, but which do invite meditation on the sometimes uneasy correspondence between a subjective experience of the world and that world's system of norms as the text presents them. To cast a critical eye upon this dynamic between personal subjectivity and reductive ideology is, I would argue, feminist hermeneutics at its most basic. Crucially, I also argue that this critical lens is something that the biblical text can be shown to affirm.

As feminist theorist Julia Kristeva contends, when speaking of a patriarchal worldview, "the female" may be equated with "the marginalized."[56] As such, feminist criticism may be understood as a refined term for the broader category of the analysis of discourses concerning the marginalized, of which women in patriarchal societies are a conspicuous example. Thus, once freed of the imperative to look only to biblical texts that deal with women and gender outright, feminist criticism can find a new set of discursive data within the Bible that is inherently conducive to and inclusive of feminist concerns.

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[56] Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981).

c. The Possibility of a Biblically-Generated Hermeneutic of the Marginalized

This dissertation will therefore argue that certain biblical texts *do* imagine and *do* self-consciously consider the implications of clashes between the subjectivity of marginalized characters and the ideological constructions of reality against which this subjectivity and experience of self comes up. As my analysis will show, these examples adopt an "epistemology of the marginalized" that centers the discourse upon the experiences of marginalized figures and their conceptions of self, privileging and taking seriously these figures' subjectivities rather than automatically subordinating them to the dominant ideologies at play. Taken together, these examples comprise a biblical "hermeneutic of the marginalized" in which the reader is coached to attend to the perspectives of the socially disenfranchised, even and especially when those perspectives challenge assumptions about inherent dominance and inferiority. Once this hermeneutic is realized—and because it is the narrative structure of the biblical texts themselves that develop it—feminist biblical critics will find surer footing in claiming that stories like Tamar's and Rachel's and Leah's do invite—and even demand— awareness of and sympathy for the female experience.

IV. Chapter Summaries

The proceeding chapter will proffer narratology as the approach that best achieves these goals for feminist criticism. Unlike New Criticism, which regards

the text as an inert deposit of meaning for the reader to objectively excavate, and unlike reader-response criticism, which locates a text's meaning entirely in the subjective mind of the reader, narratology bridges the objective and subjective by seeing the structuring of a narrative as the common ground where the text's intentions and the reader's responses to them meet. This approach ensures that the reader and the text are engaging one another as partners in conversation. By carefully attending to the ways in which certain narratives are structured, it is possible to discern how the text does indeed condition the reader to respond with empathy to the experiences of marginalized figures.

The three chapters to follow will each demonstrate how the narratological method reveals the sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit hermeneutics of the marginalized in which the literary structuring of each text inculcates the reader. The first of these chapters will find in stories of election, more specifically in the divine reversals of primogeniture in the book of Genesis, a subtle but persistent narrative focus on the subjectivity of the non-elect—even as these stories ostensibly mean to recount Israel's unfolding history through the elevated younger son. The chapter will begin with a narratological analysis of Cain's story in Genesis 4, concentrating on how the narrative is structured so as to elicit the reader's sympathy for Cain despite the fact that he is jettisoned from the familial history to follow. I will further argue that Genesis 4's primacy in the ensuing cycle of election narratives—and its clear focalization on the the subjectivity of the non-elect—carries a hermeneutic significance that will reverberate throughout later

visitations upon the theme, serving to remind the reader to heed the full

humanity of those whose stories fall outside of an ideology according to which

certain parties appear to be more worthy of conveying the history of Israel's

origins.

While the previous chapter focuses on tacit, narratively embedded forms

of communication between the reader and the text, the following chapter will

argue that the book of Job self-consciously plays with different narrative

structures and the ways in which those structures differently influence the

reader's engagement with the narrative's subjects. My analysis will show that the

book of Job first critiques two examples of the narrative dynamics between the

reader, the text, and the subject who is read before finally advocating a third type

of narrative—and a third hermeneutic—which compels the reader to privilege

Job's subjective understanding of his own experiences.

In the fifth chapter, I will at last turn to a discussion of how the biblical

"hermeneutic of the marginalized" bears specifically upon the issue of gender,

using the Song of Songs as a case study. I will analyze the ways in which the male

and female lovers use language—his external, oriented outward toward the

observable world, and hers internalized and imaginative, recounting her personal

fantasies—in order to discern how their respective languages condition the

reader's encounter with these characters and with their experiences of love.

Through narratological analysis, I will argue that the Shulammite's imaginative

experiences of love emerge as no less evocative, no less *real,* than the more

concrete sphere of experience in which her lover operates and which polices her ability to externalize her feelings. And because the reader is made intimately aware of the Shulammite's perspective, her perspective is able to stand not just in tension, but in critical dialogue with the social forces that repress her. The Shulammite may not be completely free from male hegemony, but because the text demonstrates why male hegemony is not as absolute as it may seem, the audience is encouraged to recognize women as the autonomous subjects that they are—over and against a socially constructed system of gender that would have the audience believe otherwise. In this way, the Song's complex and thoughtful portrayals of gender can be taken as a meaningful and productively subversive commentary on gender imbalance as it pervades the biblical canon.

The sixth and final chapter will consider how each of these three examples —election in Genesis, the book of Job, and the Song of Songs—make similar hermeneutical (and ethical) demands on the reader, despite the wide diversity of their genres, subject matters, and modes of discourse. From this observation, I suggest that an interest in the experiences of the marginalized comprises a thread that runs throughout the biblical canon—not at every turn, to be sure, but nonetheless a thread that emerges frequently enough to complicate the assumption that the biblical text makes no concessions to contemporary feminist concerns. I will also gesture toward other texts upon which the methods I employ could meaningfully bear.

CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Because this dissertation hinges upon the claim that the biblical text does indeed invite the types of reading strategies that feminist critics adopt, it is important first to explore and evaluate prominent ideas about how texts communicate—and how readers receive and interact with these communications —before diving into any analysis of the biblical text itself. As the above survey of the field has suggested, direct address of the reader/text relationship is absent in much feminist biblical scholarship, as it tends to dive first into discussions of content concerning women and gender in the Bible, and to leave implicit the operative theories concerning the relational dynamics between text/tradition and reader. The want of a sustained theoretical discussion about the reader/text dynamic has, to varying degrees, left feminist biblical critics with a restrictive choice: either the biblical text has one prevailing, discouraging attitude toward women and gender, and so it is an adversary against whom the feminist critic must argue, or that feminist readings may well take place *alongside* the biblical text, but not necessarily *with* it.

This survey of prominent literary-critical approaches, then, will be guided by the following questions: first, how does each approach conceive of the relationship between reader and text, and how does this conception work to the advantage or disadvantage of the feminist critical enterprise? Second, and most importantly, how well do these approaches apply to the manner in which the

biblical text in particular communicates with its readers? I will finally proffer narratology as the analytical approach which best appreciates the particular ways in which the dynamics of the relationships among author, reader, text, and tradition are represented in biblical literature. The surplus benefit of a narratological approach is that it contains within it a functional methodology for parsing the ways in which the text activates the reader to question, critique, sympathize, etc. As subsequent chapters will illustrate, the application of the narratological method will substantiate the conclusion that the biblical literary tradition indeed fosters a hermeneutical posture conducive to the concerns of contemporary feminism, even if the biblical text may not anticipate contemporary feminist concerns as such.

I. Historical Criticism

The development of biblical criticism as an academic discipline has its roots in the rationalism of the German Enlightenment, during which time the religious (read: ecclesial) authority of the Bible was challenged in favor of viewing the text humanistically. With the German Enlightenment came a steep rise in historical consciousness. Consequently, early biblical critics drew examinations of the Bible into the spheres of secular historical and linguistic studies. Unqualified acceptance of the Bible as divine was dislodged by an interest in uncovering the historical circumstances of the text's (human) composers and compilers. Essentially, the earliest biblical critics contended that the text's "true" meaning

was its "original" meaning—the connotations it would have held in its own historical moment—and that its meaning should not be imposed or controlled by modern religious authorities.[57] Put another way, high estimations of the Bible's divine authority meant that those ecclesial institutions had been acting as the gatekeepers of the text's meaning, and historical critics saw them as determining this meaning according to their own interests. Lay adherents to an ecclesial tradition, then, were not so much engaging with the biblical text in its own terms as they were engaging with the interpretations imposed by their religious authorities.

On one hand, the advent of historical biblical criticism liberated the text and its readers from the hegemonic interests of ecclesial authority. It re-endowed the text with the ability to speak in its own language and within its own context, while it also, theoretically, re-endowed the reader with the ability to access the text's meaning apart from constraints imposed by interpretive authorities. On the other hand, however, these historical methods risked alienating the reader in a new way—and alienating the text from its ability to communicate as literature. Coming to be known in the nineteenth century as "higher criticism," this designation makes a clear value judgment about what type of biblical analysis is most worthwhile: only through a careful reconstruction of the historical and

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[57] See Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism,* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 19-20. For a more detailed account of the early figures associated with the rise of biblical criticism, see chapter 2 of David R. Law, *Historical-Critical Method: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

cultural contexts of a text's production could its meaning be realized. That is to say, the text's meaning could not be fully discerned through what it says—the words on the page that any thoughtful reader can access—but only through the kinds of rigorous historical and linguistic analysis that take place in the academy. This, consequently, implies a stark value judgment about readers of the text as well: the ideal reader that higher criticism imagines—the only one who can truly reconstruct the meaning of the text—is a highly trained academic, of which there are few.[58] If the text was once able to speak directly to its readers and draw them into an active and present communicative encounter, it is now a deposit of the distant past. The reader is a further step removed, left to reconstruct what that encounter would have been like rather than to actively participate in it.

But nonetheless, despite an impoverished view of the text as active communicator and the reader as active interlocutor, historical criticism invigorated the possibility of making the biblical text available to literary inquiry at all. The Bible's reception and self-presentation as sacred and universally binding aside, historical criticism's interest in the human hands that shaped the biblical text paved the way for the reader to appreciate the rich tapestry of its development, how it witnesses the changing tides of history and theological thought, and how it appeals to audiences in different times, places, and social milieus. Thus, the runaway benefit of historical criticism is that its humanistic emphasis reveals the contingency of those ancient ideologies that we might

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[58] For this reason, the term "higher criticism" has fallen out of use (Soulen, 108).

consider ill-fitting and problematic in our contemporary moment. If biblical texts are the products of particular minds whose works are influenced by their particular historical, cultural, and social contexts, then it follows that the ideologies they contain are equally historically, culturally, and socially contingent. As the historical critical approach posits, if each biblical text or part thereof is a product of its own particular author—an author himself conditioned by his own particular experiences and world views—then there can be no such thing as a certain, univocal biblical attitude toward any subject. Naturally, this critical approach affords its practitioners a heightened sense of relativism: biblical attitudes toward something contemporary readers may find distasteful can be acknowledged without concluding that they are binding for all time. In fact, Julius Wellhausen, a German scholar at the vanguard of biblical historical criticism, proffered his documentary hypothesis in no small part because of his personal distaste for biblical legalism. By virtue of its assumed centrality to the tradition, he saw this legalism as having come to overshadow what he considered the more appealing parts of the Bible. He could not imagine that something he found so distasteful could be a feature of the original (and therefore, in his estimation, the truest) biblical religion. In reaction, he sought a more "primitive," romantic expression of religiosity in the Hebrew Bible that comported better with his own sensibilities. He concluded that the legal materials were late, exilic additions, displaced by both time and ideology from the "golden age" of Israelite tradition. By claiming that the legal materials were belated interlopers, their

negative impact on the religious expressions that grew from them, as Wellhausen perceived it, could thereby be neutered.[59] While Wellhausen's motivations to dislodge the legal traditions from the center of biblical tradition verges on bald anti-Semitism, as these legal traditions sit at the heart of rabbinic Judaism, it nonetheless speaks to the possibility of leveraging the relativism afforded by historical approaches to work around elements of biblical ideology that come to be perceived as unsavory as time marches on and as new readers, with new interests and sensibilities, are introduced to the text.[60]

As it pertains to feminist concerns, Elizabeth Cady Stanton makes a similar point in terms of her distaste for certain biblical portrayals of female figures. Recognizing the potential for feminists afforded by the historical critical work of such figures as Julius Wellhausen, she writes, "The Bible cannot be accepted or rejected as a whole, its teachings are varied and its lessons differ widely from each other. In criticizing the peccadillos of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, we would not shadow the virtues of Deborah, Huldah, and Vashti."[61] Clearly, feminist criticism can and does take welcome advantage of the cultural relativism that

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[59] See *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1983), 3.

[60] Subsequent generations of scholars have since called into question Wellhausen's assumption that the "earthier" Yahwist and Elohist sources represent the earliest strata of biblical tradition, but despite his clearly ideological motivations, it seems that Wellhausen stumbled upon some truth in that it remains generally accepted that the codification of the Priestly materials, and of much of the Pentateuch itself, dates to the exilic period. See, for example, John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010); Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Uncreation, Recreation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

[61] *The Women's Bible* (Seattle: Coalition on Women and Religion, 1895), 13.

attends such historical-literary approaches to the biblical text. If it is appreciated as a document that developed over the course of centuries and through the workings of dozens of authors and redactors, then it can support a myriad of different socially- and culturally-bound attitudes toward something like gender— none of which have the final word.

Nevertheless, the methods employed by more traditional biblical scholarship were not necessarily machined to address how the biblical text plays into contemporary social issues, and feminist biblical scholars continue to face the task of finding ways to marry traditional biblical criticism with a practical concern for women as participants in their cultures and religious traditions. This task is, perhaps surprisingly, fraught. For instance, one might assume that historical criticism would be nothing but a boon to the feminist critical enterprise, as it proceeds from the premise that notions of gender are culturally and historically bound. If feminist critics were content to think of the Bible as merely the product of its time and culture, like any other piece of literature, then they could chock its patriarchalism up to a bygone age—certainly worth studying, but dispossessed of the authoritative currency that figures like de Beauvoir and Millet implicate in contemporary women's struggles. However, feminist biblical criticism, which traces its maternal genealogy to the Women's Liberation Movement and its emphasis on the experiential, cannot be content with this expediency. It must grapple seriously with the fact that the whole of the Bible has been and continues to be endowed with an authority by which the behaviors, and

the very identities, of women are judged. The nature and severity of these judgments are no doubt a product of interpretation, of tradents determining which biblical information about gender to prioritize. Nonetheless, the authority of these tradents' interpretations is ultimately derived from the claim that the biblical text is, at the very least, proximately divine. Whether or not a feminist reader accepts this proposition, it is nonetheless true that this view affects the ways that women are seen both in religious contexts and in the broader societies where biblical ideas are part of the public discourse. Therefore, to jettison or too easily relativize the more overtly misogynistic and patriarchal biblical texts does not address the lived, experiential problems which feminism generally seeks to rectify and which feminist criticism seeks to address in biblical traditions.

Moreover, historical criticism necessitates the recognition that biblical authors spoke from within their own patriarchal cultures. If, as historical criticism posits, the meaning of a text lies in the historical situation of its authors, then one has little choice but to conclude that patriarchal principles are intrinsic to the text's meaning according to historical critical definitions. All in all, the historical critical approach to biblical literature may justify feminist readers in choosing to seize upon those texts most amenable to a feminist outlook, but it risks forcing feminists into another, less palatable and less constructive choice. Key biblical texts that deal with gender from within a patriarchal situation may be ignored completely, in which case the feminist interpreter is left ill-equipped to address the reality that those texts have been and continue to be used to oppress

women. Or, feminist interpreters may acknowledge fully that a patriarchal

culture lies behind the biblical text writ large, in which case the biblical text is, in

its essence, antithetical to feminist concerns and cannot be retrieved by feminist

readers. Historical criticism renders authorial intention wholly determinative of

the text's meaning, leading the reader to assume that discerning the author's

intended interpretive trajectory is tantamount to appreciating the text as it is

meant to be read—and there is no getting around the historical fact of the Bible's

patriarchalism.

The historical critical approach imagines reading as an exercise in retrieving

the meaning of a text in its historical context. But, when that context is so far

removed from that of the contemporary feminist, it becomes difficult to draw the

ancient text and the contemporary reader into a meaningful conversation across

the historical divide. The contemporary feminist is placed in a position of either/

or evaluation of the text's ideology: a given text can either be leveraged by

feminists or must be rejected as an obsolete opponent to feminist goals. By

fracturing the text into its constituent parts, the historical critical approach risks

begging the dicy question of which biblical texts are "more true," more

representative of a "biblical" way of thinking about gender and the

marginalized.[62] This either/or way of thinking, however, cannot account for the

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[62] For a fuller discussion of thee pitfalls of this stance, see my treatment of Phyllis Trible
in the previous chapter, in which she identifies the P source's creation account as a
champion of gender egalitarianism but struggles to reconcile this with the gender
hierarchy of the J source's creation account that immediately follows.

actuality that patriarchal and misogynistic texts are just as much a part of the Bible as any other, and that they are read and rendered meaningful in ways that tangibly affect women and their senses of place within tradition.

In sum, the historical critical reader's task is less to engage the text as a true act of communication and more to excavate a crystallized historical signification. In historical criticism, one seeks to "read" the original author more than the text he produced. There is little room in this view to appreciate the relationship forged between the reader and the text as the site of the communicative encounter, as historical and cultural context determines and delimits the range of questions the reader may ask of the text, regardless of the questions and responses that the text itself may activate in its function as literary communication. The move to treat the historical author as an object of literary analysis in his own right does make it possible for feminist readers to regard him as the product of his own culture just as they are the products of *their* own cultures. The consequence, however, is an impoverished ability a.) to address the reality and the lived ramifications of the Bible's elevated reception even in the present day, and b.) to appreciate the dynamic ways in which readers and literary texts themselves engage one another.

II. New Criticism

New Criticism arose in the mid-twentieth century as a direct reaction against the historicism of the methods described above. In the New Critical way of thinking, to locate the text's meaning in the mind or world of the author is not

only to impose unnecessary constraints upon what the text itself may be capable of signifying, but also to cling foolhardily to the impossibility of reading an author's mind. As New Critics W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley famously put it, "The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a literary work of art."[63] With this, Wimsatt and Beardsley assert that, in the inevitable absence of the original author himself, a reconstruction of his intended meaning could never be more than speculative. Once he has produced a text that has made its way into the reader's hands, the text itself is the only entity able to communicate directly with the reader. The text may well be capable of signifying in ways that the original author would never have imagined, and the author can no longer control what the reader will make of his text.

New Critics thus proposed a formalist approach to interpreting literary works, arguing that a literary text's only retrievable meaning lies in its native language and structure—and not in the external factors of its author and history. If it is impossible to read an author's mind, it is eminently possible to read an author's *text*. With this observation, New Criticism positions itself a corrective to what may be described as the "tyranny of the author,"[64] of a single will imposed upon the reader and compelling her to accept it. Via New Criticism, if the

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[63] "The Intentional Fallacy," in *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1954), 3.

[64] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text,* ed. S. Heath (London: Mill and Wang, 1967), 147.

historical situations and culturally conditioned ideologies of human authors can be disentangled from the significations of the texts they produce, then it is possible for feminist readers to find empowerment in biblical texts despite the unavoidable historical reality of the patriarchal contexts of their production. When the text is seen as a signifying object in its own right, the reader is no longer beholden to the limiting historical/social/cultural attitudes of the author—attitudes that may have shaped his work but which exist outside of it. To apply this to the discussion at hand, the New Critical approach can acknowledge without qualms that the biblical text was produced in an overtly patriarchal culture by authors steeped in that context, but the critic is not obliged by this acknowledgment to read the text according to its historical and cultural influences—if, that is, the text itself signals some other interpretive possibility. Thus, the patriarchal worldview of a biblical author cannot determine the meaning of the text he has produced. His literary product may very well subvert his own patriarchal ideology, and because only the text can interface with the reader, it is only the text's meaning that stands. The New Critical approach can claim a sense of interpretive liberty, checked only by the text's formal presentation rather than by assumptions concerning its external situation or the elusive question of what the author may have intended. One can see, for example, the strong New Critical influence in Trible's work, as she brackets the question of cultural patriarchalism and takes the formal structure of the text as her singular

starting point, ultimately concluding that the text of Genesis 1 is in fact radically anti-patriarchal.

In the New Critical view, the language and structure of the text communicate all of the meaning that a text is capable of conveying, and so the reader's task becomes one of describing what she sees in those formal structures, extracting the text's perfectly self-contained meaning through close formal analysis. As such, this approach tends to regard the text as an inert deposit of meaning, not *communicating* meaning so much as passively *possessing* it. The role of the reader is more to *reveal* the static meaning encoded within, and less to *interact* with the text as one who naturally responds to emotional cues in the narrative and who may ruminate on the moral and ethical implications raised by the text. In its efforts to liberate the text from the personal context of the author, New Criticism depersonalizes it altogether. Consequently, the reader's role is depersonalized along with it: she becomes obligated to don an air of complete analytical objectivity, at the expense of the other sorts of literary data that an engagement with the text may provide (such as the knotty emotional, psychological, moral, or ethical issues to which it may stimulate its reader to react, and which reactions may be intrinsic to how the text means to impact its reader).

New Criticism, then, is ill-equipped to account for the possibility that literary texts are capable of communicating not simply a semantically-intact message, but also of inviting a range of human responses. Moreover, the posture

of perfect objectivity is neither attainable nor sufficient for understanding a text's

meaning in its fullness. Perhaps the clearest example of this formalist pitfall lies

in the debate between Meir Sternberg and Dana Nolan Fewell and David Gunn.

Sternberg posits that the Bible is "difficult to read, easy to underread and

overread and even misread, but virtually impossible to, so to speak,

counterread."[65] Sternberg suggests that, if the point of a text is to communicate

something to its reader, then it will not fail to do so with foolproof clarity. Though

the text may contain ambiguities and shades of gray—and though these elements

are important aspects of the readerly experience of the text—if a competent

reader is attuned to the text's poetic structure, then she will not mistake the

ultimate conclusion that the text intends for her to take away. So, for example,

Sternberg concludes of the so-called "rape of Dinah" in Genesis 34 that, while the

reader may at turns find the behavior of all of the narrative's main actors morally

reprehensible (Schechem for his initial act of violence against Dinah, Dinah's

brothers for their disproportionate violence against Schechem and his people,

and Jacob for his passivity), the brothers having the final word in the conflict

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[65] *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 50. To be precise, poetics is the study of how literary texts work rhetorically to persuade their readers of a particular point of view. As such, at least in theory, poetics does take seriously the dynamic communicative encounters between reader and text. However, and especially as Sternberg employs it, poetics in practice bears an exceedingly strong resemblance to New Criticism: it shares in its most basic assumption that the text will yield its unequivocal meaning through close formal analysis; while the reader's experience of a story may be spiced with various reactions along the way, these reactions will ultimately be extraneous to the text's fundamental point.

incontrovertibly proves that the narrative wants to leave its readers on the brothers' side, seeing them as the only true agents of justice in the affair.

However, as Dana Nolan Fewell and David Gunn point out, such objectivity is never so easily achieved. They note that Sternberg proceeds from certain preconceived assumptions stemming from an unacknowledged androcentric perspective. In particular, they charge Sternberg with jumping to the conclusion that the brother's defense of family honor is the central conflict around which the story centers. However, if one chooses to place Dinah's experience at the center, as Fewell and Gunn do, then one uncovers the possibility that it is in fact only Jacob who acts honorably. He is the only one who is sensitive to Dinah's precarious position, realizing that he must hear out Shechem's proposal because this is the only marital option now open to the de-flowered Dinah. Moreover, if Genesis 34 is considered in light of Deuteronomy 22, it is entirely possible that Shechem has technically committed no crime at all. According to Deuteronomy, the man is obligated to propose marriage and pay a prescribed bride price if a situation occurs such as the one described in Genesis 34. Shechem and Hamor's willingness to pay any bride price goes above and beyond the law prescribed in Deuteronomy, and it paints them as having good intentions rather than as glibly ignorant to the heinousness of the initial crime, as Sternberg's reading suggests. In that case, it is the brothers who are the villains, because they are the ones who obstruct Dinah's ability to recover her reputation and live the life of a respectable ancient Israelite woman. Thus, by offering an alternative reading—and one still

attentive to the literary contours of the text—Fewell and Gunn refute the claim that any competent reader would arrive at the same moral conclusion. What Sternberg has failed to take into account is that the interpreter's ideology is variable and easily left unacknowledged. By positing that the biblical text is "foolproof," Sternberg conflates his own reading with what he supposes is the text's stable "truth." In a sense, he positions himself as the final arbiter of who is a competent reader and who is not, while Fewell and Gunn prove that other competent readers can draw quite different conclusions through an equally close reading the text.[66]

Thus, the human element of the interpreter inevitably asserts itself, and because the text is regarded as a deposit rather than a communicator, the interpreter's own persuasions can appear as though they are coequal with the text itself. Ironically, the bolder the assertion of pure objectivity in a reading, the easier it is for the interpreter's influence to masquerade as fact. As is the case with Sternberg, this fallacy can do more harm than good to the feminist critical project, since texts appear to take on the deeply-ingrained androcentric perspectives of the people and cultures by whom and in which they are interpreted—whether or not the text could feasibly support other possibilities.

Moreover, the New Critical attitude toward the meaning-making authority of the biblical text lends itself to the notion that the meaning the reader makes of

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[66] "Tipping the Balance: Sternberg's Reader and the Rape of Dinah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 193-211.

the text is either allied with the text's inherent meaning or stands in opposition to the intended meaning of the text. We think of readings that conform as "going with the grain," faithfully following the contours of the text as it is presented, and readings that do not conform as "going against the grain," when the reader's diagnosis of the unifying theme does not comport with the author/text's diagnosis. The reader is either on board with and acquiescent to the text's meaning, or she is denying what is patently there. There is no in-between. Phyllis Trible falls into this trap when she asserts on the basis of a structural reading of Genesis 1 that the biblical ideal is radical equality among the genders. Yet it is difficult to deny that other sources (such as the laws concerning sexual relations, marriage, and divorce in Deuteronomy) clearly support the interests of men.[67]

In sum, while New Criticism liberates biblical texts from the ideological confines of their historical moments, it assumes that the text itself—and all of the canonical authority that attends it—will possess one clear, objective meaning. However, the fact remains that biblical texts will, more often than not, have historical patriarchalism embedded within them. Without historical criticism's invitation to relativize these patriarchal elements, they don the air of timeless and objective truth. In obscuring the dynamic communicative roles of the reader and the text, New Critical approaches are ill-equipped to address the multivocality of

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[67] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 17–22. One cogent way to resolve these inconsistencies with respect to gender in the Bible would be to appeal to source criticism and acknowledge the range of ideologically distinct biblical authors. This resolution, however, would not be consistent with Trible's method. Her premise is that the radical gender equality described in Genesis 1:27 is the true biblical ideal, standing over and against any other biblical text that would suggest otherwise.

the text—both at the level of the canon, which is the result of a gradual and complex redactional process that embraces the voices of multiple authors from multiple places and time periods, and at the level of individual texts, which are rich enough to host a myriad of perspectives. Although a given text may sound the voice of patriarchalism, and perhaps even misogyny, it is unnecessarily limiting to assume that it would not invite the kind of dialogue that would allow feminist readers to be active participants in the complex conversations that biblical texts are capable of hosting—and, as I will argue below, that biblical texts actually invite.

III. Reader-Response Criticism

Indeed, as the next wave of literary critics would assert, the delimitation of meaning to the formal structures of the text constitutes its own kind of tyranny against readers, such as feminists, whose perspectives may be marginalized by the more dominant ideologies that biblical literature inevitably reflects. Leading reader-response critic Stanley Fish summarizes the problem aptly:

> As someone who believes in determinant meaning, disagreement can only be a theological error. The truth lies plainly in view, available to anyone who has the eyes to see; but some readers choose not to see it and perversely substitute their own meanings for the meanings that texts obviously bear…There is simply the conviction that the facts exist in their own self-evident shape and disagreements are to be resolved by referring the respective parties to the facts as they are. In the view that I have been

> urging, however, disagreements cannot be resolved by reference to the facts, because the facts emerge only in the context of some point of view.[68]

Here, Fish echoes Fewell and Gunn's critiques of Sternberg's poetics: the claims of formalist, New Critical types of analysis are fundamentally unrealistic. No matter how objective a literary analysis purports to be, readers are human: they are influenced by their own contexts, and they make subjective choices. It follows, therefore, that if the author cannot control how his text will signify, as the New Critics assert, then neither can the text control how the reader will understand it. Reader-response criticism accordingly places the reader's subjective encounter with the text at the center of its analysis, recognizing the communicative play between author, text, and reader and regarding this dynamic as a fertile site for critical analysis. Reader-response criticism maintains that the presence of the reader is precisely what makes the communication of meaning possible in the first place, and it is in the reader's response where the text's potentialities are actualized.

In this sense, feminist biblical critics could claim reader-response criticism as an ally. Whether the text itself is interested in feminists' questions is beside the point; the "factuality" of a text's meaning is obtained only to the extent that it strikes a particular reader or community of readers as factual. In terms of feminist criticism, whatever the author or his text may have intended vis-á-vis the status of women, the fact is that it evinces certain responses from feminist

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[68] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 338.

readers, and reader-response criticism insists that whatever reactions the text incites in the reader are real elements of the text's communication—whether it communicates them wittingly or not. In theory, then, feminist interpretations can always be a part of the text, irregardless of its or its author's complicity in feminist lines of interpretation. Phyllis Trible and her readers can be right that biblical gender ideology is egalitarian in its purest expression, and Esther Fuchs and her readers can be right that the Bible is hopelessly misogynistic. If the text's meaning lies in the effect it has upon an individual reader or community of readers, then feminist interpreters theoretically have no trouble actualizing a meaning with which a patriarchal text would not agree.

However, while certainly empowering in theory, reader-response criticism can easily devolve into a sort of nihilism. If the meaning of a text is wholly determined by a given interpretive community, each with its own idiosyncratic version of what the text ultimately signifies concerning gender, then how can the feminist reader be sure that she is indeed engaging with biblical text and tradition? Is she truly communicating with the biblical text, or is she simply communicating with other sympathetic readers who remain with her on the margins of the biblical text? Other communities of readers, after all, will have their own, equally viable versions of what constitutes a self-evident biblical fact, and when those other communities are aligned with hegemonic ideologies such as patriarchalism, their versions of the facts will continue to dominate. In a sense, in reader-response criticism, feminist readers will have scheduled their own

dinner party across town rather than claiming their seats at the long-established symposium of biblical tradition. How, then, could feminist perspectives complicate and shed fresh light on the patriarchalism that has historically dominated biblical interpretive traditions?

Thus, without the formalist methodological controls of New Criticism or the historical methodological controls of historical criticism, reader-response criticism is at a loss to ensure that feminist readers are indeed engaging rigorously with what the text communicates, and that their conclusions are indeed sound and persuasive enough to affect real change in how the biblical picture of gender relations is understood. Reader-response criticism appears to empower the reader in unprecedented ways, but it remains unclear as to whether the reader and the text are sincerely participating in the same communicative encounter, or whether they are merely talking past one another.

Historical criticism, New Criticism, and reader-response criticism are each innovative reactions against the hermeneutic predecessors they have perceived as unduly limiting. In critiquing previously held assumptions about how best to determine a text's meaning, and how best to comprehend the activity of reading that makes the text yield that meaning, they are each commendable efforts to reclaim the dynamic possibilities of a text, to appreciate how it lives and breathes and moves beyond its confines within a particular mind, a particular historical moment, or a particular set of literary rules. Each is best appreciated as a gesture beyond the shortcomings of the approaches that came before; none reaches a

definitive, perfectly satisfying answer to the question of what binds author, text, and reader in relationship. Historical criticism liberates the reader from the hermeneutic constraints imposed by religious authorities whose best interests may not align with those of the reader, but it constrains the signifying power of the text to a distant historical moment in the past. New Criticism liberates the text from this "tyranny of the author," but it flattens the reader/text dynamic by seeing the text as a deposit and the reader a mere describer. Reader-response criticism imagines a fully liberated reader, but it curtails the communicative agency the text and/or author may have had. Each avails different types of readers, with different attitudes toward the biblical text, in different ways. Each approach has its own utility for feminist biblical interpreters.

However, when it comes to literary approaches to the Bible, the question is not simply one of utility. One must ask whether and to what extent these approaches are appropriate to this singular text—a text which developed quite unlike the literary products that contemporary critical methods have in mind.

IV. The Virtues of a Narratological Approach

Namely, contemporary notions of "author" and "authorship," operative in each of the approaches described above, are anachronistic vis-à-vis the biblical text. Michel Foucault draws into contemporary critical discourse something that form and redaction critics of the Bible have long recognized:

> The 'author-function' is not universal or constant in all discourse. Even within our civilization, the same types of texts have not always required authors; there was a time when those texts which we now call 'literary' (stories, folk tales, epics, and tragedies) were accepted, circulated, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author.[69]

With the exception of prophetic works attributed to specific figures,[70] no literary contributor to the biblical corpus claims his text as his own intellectual property or as the product of his own genius—two ideas upon which the modern notion of authorship hinges.[71] Given this absence of overt claims to authorship, it would be more accurate to say that the content of biblical literature was regarded as the property of tradition, and that biblical "authors" saw themselves as contributing to and interacting with the literary traditions they received. Thus, the biblical text as we have it has grown out of an *a priori* act of reading those received traditions. Interpreting, questioning, struggling to make sense—all of these activities

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[69] Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 125.

[70] Even then, the attribution of prophetic works to particular historical figures is something of a fiction. For example, scholars widely acknowledge that chapters 40-55 of Isaiah describe an historical situation far later than that of Isaiah ben Amoz, and that chapters 56-66 describe a situation later still. (See, for example, Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah,* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], 3). Nonetheless, these new segments composed by other writers have been freely joined with the earlier core of the book of Isaiah. Similarly, there is consensus that the book of Jeremiah grew over a long period of time, ostensibly voiced by a pre-exilic figure but containing some passages that reflect post-exilic circumstances. (See, for example, Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008] 11).

[71] Foucault, 124-125. In fact, in the ancient literary imagination, such a proprietary attitude and admission of the novelty of a work would lessen the credibility its. To take just a couple of famous examples, consider the early Christian *Testament of Adam* or the pseudo-Pauline epistles.

associated with the reader are always already embedded within the biblical text that the reader encounters. As such, biblical literature does more than simply relay content with a monolithic voice; it also discloses prior acts of reading, revealing the qualms, questions, and possibilities raised by the content of tradition and entertained by a fellow reader of that tradition.

When dealing with biblical literature, then, one finds readers all the way down. Traditional tales are collected and arranged, and in that arrangement, one sees an author/redactor/implied narrator who is encoding his own acts of reading into the stories he receives and subsequently shapes. In his own reading, the author/redactor/narrator recommends a way to read the events his work describes. He puts forth an interpretive possibility for the traditions he relates, and this one interpretive possibility is already in dialogue with the received tradition. In this way, the biblical author preserves and presents some dominant possibilities for approaching the meaning of the story's events, but at the same time, he weighs in on them, destabilizing the weight of any one particular interpretation. What we have in the biblical text, then, is a reader entering into a dialogue concerning meaning, and the dialogue is already underway. This reader encounters the interpretive possibility offered by the author/redactor/narrator while also encountering the interpretive possibilities that the author/redactor/ narator leaves aside.

In this sense, the dynamic of the relationship between the text, the author/ redactor/narrator, and the contemporary reader is this common enterprise that

may be called reading—and, importantly, because this activity is represented in the biblical text itself, the modes of inquiry with which contemporary readers engage are implicitly but powerfully sanctioned. Feminist readers need not choose from the limited options of saying, "This is what the Bible means, and it is amenable to my cause," or "This is what the Bible means, and it is antithetical to my cause," or "Whatever the Bible may have meant, this is what I choose to make of it." Instead, feminist readers can enter into a readerly discourse which is an inherent feature of the biblical text and which, as a result, has been codified as a feature of the workings of biblical tradition.

According to critical theorist Kaja Silverman, language is not simply about the capacity to describe the world in a stable, monolithic way. Rather, effective communication in language is predicated first and foremost on a dynamic encounter between two subjectivities. Behind any text is an implicit "I" who is speaking, and when an "I" speaks, there is always an implicit "you"—the audience —who receives and confirms the "I" as a subject. Because an act of linguistic communication always anticipates some kind of audience, the listener is in turn implicitly confirmed as an actively listening and thinking subject in her own right.[72] In other words, by virtue of its nature as communicative language, the biblical text is neither an historical deposit (historical criticism), nor a semantic deposit (New Criticism), nor an occasion for the reader to instantiate her own

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[72] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3ff. See also Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami: Miami University Press, 1971).

particular ideology (reader-response criticism). It is, rather, the context of an encounter between two subjectivities together grappling with the issues raised in the text.

In terms of biblical literature, wherein the actual author/redactor/implied narrator operates anonymously and declines to be identified as a discrete personage, his subjectivity is encoded within the structures of the texts that he produces through artful arrangement. As Mieke Bal puts it, "It is only once we know how a text is structured that the reader's share—and responsibility—can be clearly assessed."[73] The operative question, then, is less "What does the text say?" and more "How does the text facilitate this encounter between subjectivities?" The narratological approach is directly focused on answering this question. Assuming *a priori* that texts are dynamic sites of communication, it supplies a rigorous method for outlining and appreciating the catalysts of the conversation between the reader and the author (here understood as retrievable through the text he has offered to his reader). The author/redactor/implied narrator communicates his own wrestlings with the issues he invokes in the ways that he has structured his text: how he arranges the events, actors, locations, and narrative time, when and why he chooses to grant particular characters direct speech and to make the audience privy to a certain character's perspective at a certain time. The work of narratology is to analyze closely these literary features

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[73] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 11.

as the means by which the reader's experience of the text is structured and the boundaries laid for the conversation into which she enters with the implicit author.

In this way, narratology can offer a viable corrective to the pitfalls associated with the methods outlined above. Because it posits that the reader is being called into a present conversation with the text, it preserves the dynamism that risks being lost with the historical critical approach and its assumption that the text's meaning is confined to its historical signification. Rather, the narratological reader is drawn into an ongoing dialogue that has always already been underway, beginning in an ancient moment and persisting, through new encounters with the text, into the present. Because it takes seriously both the subjectivity of the author and the reader, it avoids the unrealistic and limiting drawbacks of the New Critical claim to objectivity. But because it retains the analytical rigor of New Criticism's structural analysis, it ensures that the reader is engaging closely and deeply with biblical text and tradition in ways that reader-response criticism cannot. In the words of Mieke Bal, "If the description of a text is understood as a proposal that can be presented to others, the fact that the description is formulated within the framework of a systematic theory facilitates discussion of the proposed description."[74]

For the feminist reader, narratology allows for the inevitability that biblical texts will reflect historical patriarchal realities, but it does not oblige the reader to

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[74] Ibid., 4.

either accept or reject the text wholesale on those grounds. If the reader is herself a subject, in equal standing with the subjectivity of the author, then her responses to the text are part and parcel of the ongoing dialogue with which the biblical text/author is engaged. What's more, narratology's rigorous structural analysis attunes the reader to moments, *within the text itself,* where there is room to push back against the dominant ideology. When the feminist reader does push back, she can be assured that the text has invited her response—that she is not standing outside of the biblical literary tradition, but that she is truly engaging with it.

Narratology is a method in the truest sense. That is, its utility can only be fully appreciated through the direct application of its modes of analysis. In the chapters to follow, I will use the narratological method to demonstrate how the biblical text invites the reader to empathize with and privilege the experiences of socially and ideologically marginalized figures, revealing the ways in which the biblical text itself fosters the type of hermeneutic stance that validates the enterprise of contemporary feminist criticism.

CHAPTER 3
THE BLESSING OF CAIN: THE BIBLICAL GENERATION OF A
NARRATIVE ETHIC FOR THE MARGINALIZED

I. Introduction

The theme of divine election, as it recurs throughout the Hebrew Bible, it

among is most pervasive and persistent elements. It is a primary means through

which Israel explores her self-conception as a nation uniquely elevated by God.

Time and again, the reader encounters an omniscient deity who can see the

superior merits of individuals when the naked eye cannot: a man deserving of the

covenant in Abraham, heroism in the stuttering and reluctant Moses, and royalty

in the brash and youthful David, to name but a few. As these stories progress, the

reader is assured that God's choice to elevate certain parties is right and just.

Faced with the ultimate test of sacrificing the miracle child whom God had

promised, Abraham's devotion retroactively earns him the divine favor he had

already received. Moses overcomes his personal impediments and

misapprehensions to lead the Israelites triumphantly out of their bondage in

Egypt and toward the Promised Land, mediating a pivotal covenant along the

way. David grows into his roles as warrior and king to unite the monarchy and

usher in a period of peace. The mystery of God's initial preference of these

individuals progressively dissipates, as the narrative's focus tightens around

them, implications of the divine preference grows: Israel is in fact God's chosen

people, and her story—more than the story of any other nation—is the one the Bible deems worth telling.

This assessment can, however, yield sobering ethical implications. As Regina Schwartz suggests, divine election institutes an "us vs. them" mechanism for identity formation that may even be abused as a divinely-sanctioned impetus for murder. For Schwartz, the suggestion that God would limit his favor to a single individual—and by extension to the single ethno-religious group represented by the individual—sacralizes the baser human impulses toward hatred, fear, and violent exclusion of the other.[75] Joel Kaminsky similarly notes that biblical election has been construed as "crude ethnocentrism," a mode of identity construction that is both damaging to the non-elect and incompatible with post-Enlightenment ideals of human equality.[76] To assume that the interpretive work of all stories concerning divine election rests upon discerning the rationale for divine choices, and hence the superior merits of the chosen ones, is naturally to assume that the unchosen party is demonstrably inferior and therefore expendable—in terms of both the narrative and, ultimately, in terms of the real society that the narrative reflects.

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[75] *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2ff.

[76] *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 1. After acknowledging this, Kaminsky goes on to argue that the Bible's presentation of the theme of election is far more complicated and less damaging than this assumption would admit.

This concept of divine election begins to be explored for the first time in the book of Genesis, particularly through a series of reversals of primogeniture. The social convention of the first-born son carrying on the family line is upended time and time again. Although upending the social expectation that eldest sons should inherit the patriarchal lineage may at first seem refreshing and liberating, since it bucks against a system that would diminish the social value of certain individuals by an accident of birth, the basic outcome in the ensuing narrative is consistent: the elder brother quickly falls out of the reader's view and beyond the narrative's scope, while the telling of Israel's ancestral history is advanced through the life of the younger. By leaving these elder brothers behind, the narrative seems to tell the reader which stories—which lives—are the ones that truly matter, the ones with which the reader should bother to engage. Reversals of primogeniture in Genesis are particularly ethically fraught because, unlike the choice of Noah or Abraham, for example, one individual is directly pitted against another. The value of the unchosen individuals is directly called into question when they are first deemed wanting as candidates for carrying on Israel's story and then summarily excluded from the narrative to follow.

While the figures apparently excluded from this "real" story in Genesis may be specific to their particular stories and their particular brothers, the same logic can be extrapolated to disregard different types of otherness. Throughout the book of Genesis, for example, it is clear that Israel's historical narrative is advanced through a linear series of patriarchs. Despite the important role that

female characters sometimes play, the advancement of the narrative is consistently re-centered around male characters. Even Rebekah's initiative, so instrumental in ensuring that her own preferred son becomes the next installment in the patriarchal line, is in the end displaced by the reminder that the relationship between son and father ultimately determines the outcome. After all, given that she must resort to subterfuge, Rebekah is well aware that she has no maternal blessing of her own to give. This episode reinforces that, however much Rebekah may enjoy a proximal agency behind the scenes, Isaac alone possesses the power to pass along the patriarchal torch. Thus, the non-elect emerge only briefly before receding again into the background and outside of the frame of the "real" story. This all too easily lends itself to the conclusion that other secondary figures and their stories, such as women, need not be reckoned as vital parts of Israel's history.

At best, on this view, whatever sympathetic engagement the reader has with these secondary characters may still be worthy of consideration, but this consideration would fall beyond the the main parameters of the narrative. Put another way, while one may certainly pause to recognize the full humanity of these marginalized figures, it is not strictly necessary for following the overarching biblical narrative. At worst, if one takes election narratives as testaments to the comparative value of the elect, then one could extend this logic to conclude the inverse: that the non-elect, and other narratively marginalized figures such as women, are inherently and essentially inferior.

However, as I aim to demonstrate in the analysis to follow, the structuring of narratives of election, as they are first introduced in the series of reversals of primogeniture in Genesis, carefully mitigates against the aforementioned readerly assumptions. Specifically, I argue that the story of Cain in Genesis 4— the reader's first encounter with the motif—places not the experience of the elected Abel at the heart of the narrative, but rather Cain's experience of being unchosen. Thus, the reader is asked to prioritize Cain's subjective experience when attempting to understand the story. To be sure, the Bible is rarely read as though it were a novel in which the reader begins at the beginning. From a narratological perspective however, the way in which these stories are arranged within the canon commands attention. Thus, I contend that, because the particular treatment of election offered in Genesis 4 is placed at the beginning of both the book of Genesis and and the Bible as a whole, it conditions the reader to attend to the experience of the non-elect throughout the rest of the Genesis' cycle of reversals of primogeniture—a reminder that will continue to reverberate even and especially in subsequent stories when the the rationale for divine election is much clearer. In demonstration, I will explore how a hermeneutic of empathy for the marginalized, first established in Genesis 4, resounds in the narrative of Jacob and Esau and Joseph and his brothers, as well as in the rivalries among women such as Sarah and Hagar. With this, I ultimately aim to show that the narrative's persevering interest in the ever-present (if mostly untold) experiences of the non-elect can be seen to parallel gender dynamics. Even if the overarching

story is primarily about the dominant brother—or the dominant gender—the narrative manifests an awareness that the subjectivities and experiences of marginalized parties are no less real or poignant simply because they may not occupy center stage. In doing so, the narrative prompts the reader to remember the same.

II. A Narratological Study of Genesis 4

a. The Significance of the Mystery of God's Preference for Abel

The event that propels the plot of Genesis 4 is God's regard for Abel instead of his elder brother Cain. It is this preference that incites Cain's jealousy and ultimately induces him to murder his competition, but despite this event's pivotal role in the development of the plot, the text remains silent about God's preference for Abel. It merely states that "the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had none" (Genesis 4:4–5). The absence of an explanation has been taken by several interpreters as a yawning narrative gap that demands to be filled, prompting them to focus their interpretive efforts on supplying the missing rationale. Perhaps Abel's offering was favored because he furnished an animal sacrifice,[77] the firstlings of the flock and therefore more

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[77] As discussed, for example, by Bruce Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 366–367; Joel Lohr, "Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2009): 492.

meaningful and appropriate for paying homage to God.[78] And perhaps, on this reading, Cain's negative reaction is that much *less* understandable, placing him doubly in the wrong: not only did he fail to produce a maximally reverential offering, but he compounded his failure by refusing to see the situation as an opportunity to learn more about God and ideal modes of worship. He succumbed to ego rather than self-reflection, making this story about his own altogether avoidable failure to recognize the intelligibility of God's motivations.[79]

This preoccupation with God's reasoning is certainly justified if one approaches the reversals of primogeniture in Genesis such that this first primogeniture story may be glossed by analogous narratives to follow. If God's preference for Abel and his offering seems inscrutable within the confines of Genesis 4 itself, then hints as to Esau's inferiority abound in the next riff on the theme. Once stripped of both birthright and blessing, Esau's thoughts turn to murder just as Cain's did (Genesis 27:41) and Joseph's elder brothers' would a generation hence (Genesis 37:20, 26). If it once looked like it was divine prerogative, pure and simple, to elevate the younger son in the first place, then the rivalries between Jacob and Esau and Joseph and his brothers make no mistake that the non-elect were never meant to have the divine favor that they

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[78] As discussed, for example, by Kenneth Craig, "Questions Outside Eden [Genesis 4:1–16]: Yahweh, Cain, and Their Rhetorical Interchange, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 86 (1999): 111; Frederick Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 61; Lohr, 492.

[79] Such is Theodore Perry's argument in "Cain's Sin in Gen. 4:1–7: Oracular Ambiguity and How to Avoid It," *Prooftexts* 25 (2005): 258–275.

were denied. And if God's choice of these younger sons is not so enigmatic after all, then the same might be said of God's preference for Abel—that Cain's lack of divine favor *must* have been warranted. When read through the retroactive lenses of other election narratives in Genesis, one might assume that these divine motivations are indeed there, even if they are not explicitly stated.

It is a perfectly natural function of reading, especially of reading a closed canon, to go back and rethink previous episodes in light of new information, to fill old gaps in knowledge and to seek a wholistic coherence with what has come before.[80] This could offer a rather satisfying solution, a way of closing the hermeneutic circle of Cain and Abel's puzzling story. One must ask, however, whether this first intimation at the theme of divine election, at very beginning of an overarching narrative, can be read according to a hermeneutic that has yet to be fully solidified within that broader narrative. The narratological method recognizes story sequencing as crucial to how a narrative communicates with its reader: "It is a means of drawing attention to certain things, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of an event, to indicate the subtle difference between expectation and realization, and much else besides."[81] The fact that the story of Cain and Abel is placed at the beginning of a sequence of ultimogeniture narratives is not to be ignored, for only when its placement is taken seriously can the effect of this particular story—those readerly

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[80] As noted in Kaminsky, 44–45.

[81] Bal, *Narratology*, 82.

expectations that it both conjures and frustrates—be appreciated and assessed. The narratological method demands that each movement in a narrative be taken as it comes, that the interpretive questions posed by a given episode are presented to the reader at a particular moment in the narrative for a particular reason, and that the reader's encounters with later episodes will be colored by her encounters with what has come before. Although reversals of primogeniture are undoubtedly related, their placements within the broader narrative, and the details of how these individual stories are structured, engage the reader in distinctive ways. To conflate this earliest reversal of primogeniture with the iterations to follow is to obscure the particularity of this story—and the ways in which it mediates the relationship between the reader and the characters specific to this story.

If a pattern will eventually emerge according to which God's preferences for younger sons are elucidated and justified (even if indirectly), it has not emerged yet. In Genesis 4, no firm answer is given as to why God prefers Abel and his offering, and the text's silence on this matter is significant. In biblical narrative, the narrator rarely operates by weighing in with interpretive statements extraneous to the story's fabula (the basic elements that make up a story, such as the events that move the plot, settings, characters, etc.). That is, the narrator does not overtly *tell* the reader what meaning to make of the events he recounts, but he nevertheless shapes the reader's experience of the text in more subtle ways. These ways become evident when one attends to the manner in

which the narrator deliberately arranges the fabula into a coherent story, and then into a broader narrative.[82]

The narrator of Genesis 4 is of the third-person, omniscient type. He knows of the private interactions that take place between Cain and Abel and Cain and God, and he knows the inner thoughts and motivations of the characters (Genesis 4:5). In fact, this narrator is more omniscient than God himself: he has already relayed the murder of Cain to the reader, while God still needs to ask what has happened (Genesis 4:8–9). This narrator therefore knows the "whole story" in all its fullness, and so what he decides to share with his reader is strategic. It is within his means to disclose more or different information, and by attending to what the narrator opts to include—or, perhaps more tellingly, what he opts to exclude—one can discern what information he wants the reader to know and, thus, how he wants the reader to react. By withholding the rationale for God's lack of regard for Cain, the narrator wordlessly, but in no uncertain terms, suggests that seeking a reason for Cain's rejection is not where he intends his readers to focus their interpretive energies.

In fact, it seems that the narrator acknowledges the reader's natural tendency to wonder why Cain was rejected, if only to reject that line of reasoning instead. To conclude that Abel and his offering were inherently superior, and

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[82] There is a distinction to be made between the author—the real person composing the text—and the narrator who is an element of the text itself. This distinction is especially meaningful when the narrator is also a character in the story, who may or may not be reliable and whose perspective may or may not align with that of the actual author. In the case of this narrative, there is no such characterized narrator, so one may liken the activities of the narrator to the compositional choices that the author himself is making.

Cain inherently inferior, would lead to the assumption that Abel is the hero of this story, the one one on whom the reader's attentions should be focused. The story's structure, however, precludes the reader from withdrawing her attention from Cain despite his lack of preference.

Even before the plot's central conflict is introduced, the narrator unequivocally places the reader's focus on Cain, rather than his brother Abel. The circumstances of Cain's birth are reported in full: Eve knew her husband, conceived, bore her first son, and declared his name "Cain" because she "produced" him (4:1).[83] The account of Abel's birth, on the other hand, lacks these details, reading only, "and again she bore his brother Abel" (4:2). Abel's name does not receive any independent etymological treatment; rather, he is referred to as "his"—Cain's—brother. At the very moment of birth, Abel is only introduced to the reader in relation to his brother Cain. Moreover, the name "Abel" is the same as the word הבל, meaning "vanity," "nothingness," "vapor," or "breath"—something without substance that disappears into the air at the very moment it emerges. Already the reader is clued in to the fact that Cain will be the focal point of the narrative to come, and that Abel will dissipate in service to the development of what will ultimately be Cain's story. Abel is a name that means its own erasure, and several scholars have proposed that the name itself, and the lack of an attendant etymology, prefigures Abel's fate and foreshadows his

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[83] The name קין is etymologically linked to the verb קנה, to fashion or create.

imminent disappearance.[84] It is also, however, significant in terms of how the narrative guides the reader's further engagement with the story, when Cain's worthiness of the reader's attention is no longer so assured.

The significance of these preliminary moves to focus the reader on Cain becomes crucial when the brothers bring their first offerings to God. In these following verses, one encounters a complex structural interplay between the names of Cain and Abel, suggesting that Cain's initial primacy—both as the firstborn and in terms of narrative attention—are being unsettled. Abel now comes first when he is reintroduced as a shepherd, and Cain second when he is reintroduced as a tiller of the ground (4:2). In a second reversal, Cain is the first to make an offering to God, and Abel follows (4:3–4). Finally, Abel pulls ahead again when the reader learns that God had regard for his offering, but for Cain's he had none (4:5). Through this series of reversals, it is no longer so clear to which brother this story primarily belongs: if none other than God himself has a special preference for Abel and his offering, then it stands to reason that Abel will supplant his brother both in terms of the narrative and in terms of the social hierarchy that is beginning to be established. With this, the reader is tempted to go back and reimagine the narrative according to this new information about Abel as the divinely preferred brother, seeking an answer to how Abel is

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[84] Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco: Word, 1987), 102; Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 16; Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 32; Bruce Waltke and Cathi Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 97.

demonstrably superior. She may, for example, seize upon the notice that Abel

offered an animal sacrifice,[85] "the firstlings of the flock and their fat portions"

when Cain's vegetable sacrifice receives no comparable descriptors.[86]

Upon closer examination, however, the narrator sets up and anticipates

this readerly impulse only to occlude it. It does supply just enough information to

open the possibility that there may be something inherently superior about Abel

and his offering. However, the inclusion of this information makes the fact that

the narrator refuses to pursue this line of reasoning that much more noteworthy.

He declines to follow up with any "because," refusing to establish any clear cause

and effect relationship between the nature of Abel's offering and God's preference

for it. In fact, rather than saying that Cain and his offering were in and of

themselves disappointing or unworthy, the text simply states that "the Lord had

regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard

(לא שעה)" (4:4–5)—a mere reaction rather than a commentary on the inherent

qualities of the grain and its offerer. Thus, though the narrator may gesture

toward a rationale for God's lack of regard for Cain and his offering, he does not

develop that rationale. He tempts the reader to evaluate the worth of these

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[85] As discussed, for example, by Bruce Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 366–367; Joel Lohr, "Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2009): 492.

[86] As discussed, for example, by Kenneth Craig, "Questions Outside Eden [Genesis 4:1–16]: Yahweh, Cain, and Their Rhetorical Interchange, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 86 (1999): 111; Frederick Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 61; Lohr, 492.

characters only to thwart that very same temptation. In this way, the narrator conveys that there is no meaningful link between the divine preference for an offering and the inherent worth of its offerer.

This becomes all the more clear when one considers God's reaction to Cain's fallen countenance: "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (4:6–7). These words indicate true confusion on God's part as to why Cain would take his lack of regard so personally. Clearly, God himself did not intend his reactions to the offerings as pronouncements about either party's intrinsic merit. Quite to the contrary, God asks Cain *not* to react as though this were a wholesale rejection of his person.

This disclosure to the reader is as much about what God says as it is about what he does *not* say. It is crucial to note that when God says, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" he does not say that if Cain had been somehow better, more deserving, he would have been favored instead of Abel. That is, God is not here validating the possibility that Cain warranted his own marginalization. Rather, God is cautioning Cain against reacting as though he had been divinely pronounced as less-than, such that the only option for claiming is own place is to eliminate the "better" brother entirely. Given that the narrator gives these words to be voiced by none other than the divine, they indicate to the reader in no uncertain terms that she is moving in the wrong interpretive direction if she

imagines the essence of this story to hinge upon how Cain deserves his trivialization.

As the above analysis suggests, the narrative structuring of Genesis 4 recognizes the natural readerly impulse, represented in so many scholarly explorations of the text, to seek an explanation for that which is not explained. However, the composition of Genesis 4 uses this recognition to tell the reader how this story is *not* intended to be read: the exclusion of a rationale for God's regard prevents the reader from overdetermining a connection between the preference and the intrinsic worths of the preferred and non-preferred, as well as their worthiness of the reader's attention. As such, to be preoccupied with rationalizing God's regard for Abel and his offering is to stretch the story in two unnatural directions. First, it defines the story as one primarily about Abel, despite the fact that Abel's character is introduced as subsidiary to his brother's and he speaks no lines throughout the entire episode. As Frederick Greenspahn puts it, "The text has no interest in the meaning of Abel's name, much less any sympathy for its bearer. Even the chosen line bypasses him, continuing instead through his brother Seth."[87] Second, a preoccupation with rationalizing God's preference defines the narrative as one about the essential inferiority of Cain and how his marginalization is objectively justifiable, despite the fact that not even the divine voice within the narrative is interested in entertaining the possibility of Cain's fundamental inferiority.

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[87] Greenspahn, 133.

Herbert Schniedau also maintains that the narrative insists upon the arbitrariness of God's choices, but for a theological purpose:

> The Bible insists that man is answerable not to his culture but to a being who transcends all culture. Even in his most nationalistic or tribal conceptions, the Old Testament God associates himself with the Children of Israel arbitrarily; he does not choose them because of their merits, nor does he embody their institutions as do other national gods. Instead of praising their culture, he insists that it be reformed; reproaches to Israel are interspersed even among the recounting of the triumphs of Gideon and David.[88]

One may assume that this arbitrary view of divine election would better lend itself to grappling seriously with the subjective experiences of the non-elect, for if God's decisions are truly impossible to rationalize, then it is less tempting to disregard the non-elect as not up to God's standards and therefore relatively inconsequential instruments of the narrative. However, if one concludes, as Schneidau does, that the theme of divine election is really about the divine—and not about the individuals who find themselves wrapped up in it—then to appreciate human experiences of or responses to it is little more than a diversion, ancillary to the true point. If the real story is about God and God alone, then the reader's empathy with the human characters who must negotiate their circumstances is expendable. The reader may choose to engage with the experiences of the human characters subject to a system of divine election, but she would not "miss the point" if she overlooked them.

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[88] *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 3-4.

This, I argue, diverges widely from the narrative structuring of Genesis 4 and its consistent centering upon Cain. This respect for the non-elect that Genesis 4 cultivates, and the call to the reader to continue to take Cain seriously despite his marginalization, is further illustrated through the story's focalization. This I will discuss in the following section.

b. Focalizing on Cain, Focalizing through Cain

Another narratologically compelling explanation for why Genesis 4 refuses to explain God's preference for Abel is that, although the omniscient narrator may know the reason and could divulge it to the reader, Cain does not. Even if the reader of Genesis may have recourse to other ultimogeniture stories that could elucidate the first, Cain's character enjoys no such benefit. He is not in a position to use this information as he processes his own present circumstances, and his character is taking it on the bounce as he attempts to make sense of his divine disfavor. By blocking the reader's temptation to use the hermeneutic advantage of retrospection, Genesis 4 ensures that the reader stands in solidarity with Cain as he attempts to make sense of his own fortunes.

Indeed, all of the narrated events in Genesis 4 are carefully aligned with Cain's perspective; no information is given that falls beyond Cain's point of view and base of knowledge. Cain knows that he and his brother are engaged in different occupations and that they each offered to God the commodities of those respective occupations. Given his negative reaction, Cain is also evidently aware

that God held his brother's offering in higher regard. He may have an inkling

about why Abel's offering was superior, since he would be able to observe that

Abel brought the firstlings and fat portions of his flock, but this information is

apparently neither compelling nor definitive to him—hence his anger and fallen

countenance. Because the reader's perspective has been so closely aligned with

Cain's, we may assume that the text's impenetrability on question of why Abel

was preferred owes to the fact that this question is not Cain's primary concern.

Likewise, the reader is denied the narrative room to pursue a reason for Cain's

lack of preference, as the very next piece of information she receives concerns

Cain's emotional reaction to his rejection. Cain does not know why he was

rejected, and neither does the reader. But Cain *does* know that the rejections was

painful, and the reader joins him in encountering the emotional consequences of

being less preferred.

The cut to Cain's emotional response suggests that what matters to him is

not a rationale for why he deserves his disfavor, but rather the profoundly

destabilizing challenge to his worth as a person in God's eyes. If the reader

pursues another line of questioning, she is stepping outside of the narrative

structure of Genesis 4, as the immediate notice of Cain's emotional reaction

ensures that the reader remains focused on Cain's experience, rather than parting

ways with his perspective to consider the externalized and depersonalized logic of

whose offering was objectively better and why. In this way, the narrator subtly

tells the reader how she should encounter this story: not as a cool accountant of

either party's merits, but as an empathetic witnesses to Cain's distress. The narrative thus acknowledges the reality of the new social order which has emerged—one in which certain parties are subordinate to others for no apparent reason—but by asking the reader to sit with Cain's subjectivity, this social reality is divorced from any suggestion of the intrinsic worthiness or unworthiness of those who find themselves subject to it.

It is further significant that in orchestrating the characters' interactions within the story, the narrator uses the character of God himself as a model of this empathetic witness with which the reader is also tasked. Despite the fact that God has just established a hierarchy between the brothers, with Abel at the top, the narrator discloses no direct interactions between Abel and God. God does not strike up a personal relationship with the chosen brother, as one would expect if they are familiar with other reversals of primogeniture throughout the rest of Genesis. Rather, God has a personal conversation with the very brother the reader would expect to have been displaced in both the narrative and in God's attention. Moreover, it is Cain's emotional reaction that occasions the first of two narrated dialogues between Cain and God. It is precisely Cain's emotional reaction which the divine speech addresses: "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:6-7). With these words, God validates Cain's anger and implicitly acknowledges its legitimacy. He does not tell Cain that his anger is unfounded

and that he should stop feeling it, only that he must not act on it in a detrimental way. The narrator could well have employed God's character to delegitimize Cain's jealous anger and refocus the narrative on the preferred brother and his preferred offering. Cain could have been rebuked for his failure to willingly assent to his demoted place in this new hierarchy, for his failure to recognize that God's choices are always justified even if human beings are not privy to his logic. This, however, is not the case. God's response does not erase the reality that Cain is now subordinate to his brother in God's estimation, which makes it all the more noteworthy that God's speech does not identify Cain with any rung on a hierarchy. Rather, he meets Cain at the level of his own subjective experience of his situation. God consequently validates that experience, and because none other than the character of God centers Cain's subjective experience in his interactions with him—the same God who instituted the new social order in which Cain is subordinated—the reader's obligation to do the same is highlighted.

c. Genesis 4 as a Critical Voice against Systems of Marginalization

Nevertheless, Cain's conversation with God fails to assuage the pain of his new marginalization. His intrinsic value as a human being before God is at fundamental odds with his social reality, and he cannot reconcile it. In order to reassert his sense of worth, to make his own subjective understanding of himself triumph, he feels he has no choice but to assert his personhood in the most conclusive way imaginable. If he has been robbed of his right to see his self-

understanding and sense of self-worth reflected in the social world around him, then he will seize a modicum of control by utterly robbing his brother of the same subjectivity he feels he has been denied.

Cain and the reader know of this outcome even before God does (Genesis 4:8), again reinforcing the fact that Cain's point of view is where the heart of this story resides. God has to ask where Abel has gone, and while Cain denies that he is his brother's keeper, the reader joins him for a moment as the sole keeper of this information (Genesis 4:9). It is striking that even in murder, the reader's perspective never departs from Cain's. Of course, the reader is not expected to take Cain's side in his murder of Abel. She has been told clearly that this is a sin (Genesis 4:7), and she is soon to discover that this sin will be punished. However, this choice to let the reader in on Cain's secret emphasizes the demand to continue to see the situation from Cain's point of view, even as she must condemn his horrific actions. At this point, the story may be read as an incisive critique of the consequences of arbitrarily marginalizing certain parties. God has warned Cain of the consequences of lashing out, but this is a difficult—perhaps even unfair—thing to ask. Cain is tasked not only with bearing the emotional burden of his rejection, but also with staying in line and ensuring that the very social system that trivializes him can continue to function without consequence.

Nevertheless, murder cannot go unpunished, and Cain's punishment is permanent rootlessness. As a tiller of the ground, his livelihood depends upon the spatial stability of nurturing a plot of fertile land, and the ground will no longer

yield to him (Genesis 4:12). His punishment is not altogether trivial. It is, however, surprisingly lenient. God even goes so far as to promise sevenfold vengeance upon anyone who murders Cain and to give him a special mark to prevent attack (Genesis 4:15). This curiously lenient response suggests strongly that, although Cain's violent actions are certainly condemnable, they are, at least to some degree, mitigated by the injustice of his situation. He was wrong to turn to violence, but he was not wrong to have been so aggrieved in the first place.

According to Joel Kaminsky, "That Cain and God are having an intimate conversation suggests that the non-acceptance of Cain's offering does not mean that Cain is utterly alienated from God or somehow cursed, but only that he is not especially blessed."[89] Kaminsky's reading mitigates the demoralizing effect of Cain's being "not especially blessed," but it allows that God's lack of preference for Cain is simply an objective reality with which Cain must come to his own terms. I, however, would go a wide step further. By continuing to focalize the story through Cain, and by having none other than God focus on Cain—even in his most unsympathetic moment—the narrator refuses to allow the divine mechanism of Cain's disenfranchisement to stand unquestioned. The narration of Cain's distress serves as an acknowledgment that God's lack of preference for Cain entails very real and profound social and psychological consequences that extend beyond an individual moment of blessing (or lack thereof). As such, the narrator's call to the reader to empathize with Cain is that much more urgent: the

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[89] Kaminsky, 24.

reader must remember to take Cain's subjectivity seriously precisely because his apparent loss of stature in society and before God makes it so easy to forget. Cain is the perpetrator of violence, but he is also the victim of violence of a different sort. By narrating God's refusal to supply a reason for Cain's subordination, including not one but two intimate conversations between Cain and God, and relating God's relative clemency in punishing Cain, the narrative suggests in no uncertain terms that although God may have instituted this new social hierarchy, even he is aware of and sensitive to its deleterious effects. It may now be an objective reality, but it is not an uncomplicated one. By rendering Cain's marginalization as arbitrary, and by refusing to part ways with Cain's subjective responses to it, this narrative tacitly indicts any reader who would feel absolved of recognizing the full humanity of the socially disenfranchised—regardless of the fact that God himself appears to have instigated this disenfranchisement.

III. The Narrative Afterlife of Genesis 4

a. The Story of (Jacob and) Esau

To summarize so far, the narrative structuring of Genesis 4 takes great care to encourage the reader's empathy with Cain, refusing to entertain any questioning of Cain's inherent worth. A close narratological analysis suggests that the text of Genesis 4 possesses a keen awareness of the messiness and complexity of a reality in which one brother is disfavored by the mysterious favor of another: it is a reality in which the unchosen remain full and fully human subjects even if

they are expelled from the center of their social units and exiled in the broader

narrative to follow. Genesis 4 is also critically aware of the new ethical questions

raised by the introduction of a system according to which some members are

elevated by none other than God himself. There may be a temptation to overlook

or even despise the unchosen, but the text's presentation mitigates this

temptation by unequivocally re-focalizing on the experience of the

disenfranchised character. In this way, it insists that the reader take seriously

Cain's subjective experience of the events that befall him—even and especially

because he has been marginalized. Within the narrative, Cain's experience of his

marginalization *matters;* the reader encounters it as the most important set of

data with which to engage story.

This hermeneutic of the marginalized, once developed, extends beyond its

own original narrative context in Genesis 4. Because Genesis 4 represents the

very first introduction of what will become a pervasive biblical theme, the

hermeneutic it instantiates—and the ethical call it makes upon the reader—will be

carried forward to later iterations of the theme. Another of these iterations is the

story of the brothers Jacob and Esau, which contains several conspicuous

parallels to the story of Cain and Abel. First there is the possibility that, like

Jacob and Esau, Cain and Abel may have been twins.[90] Genesis 4:1 recounts the

full process of Eve knowing her husband, conceiving, and bearing Cain. The next

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[90] James Kugel, for example, floats this possibility in *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

verse follows immediately from this process to mention simply that Eve "went on to bear Abel," perhaps suggesting that the same acts of intercourse and conception applied to both brothers who were then born in quick succession.[91] Second, both sets of brothers are distinguished by their occupations, with Abel and Esau producing meat and Cain and Jacob engaged in more pastoral pursuits.[92] These resonances, though superficial, cue the reader to recall Cain and Abel as she later encounters Jacob and Esau.

A more evocative parallel is the divine oracle that foretells Jacob's fated ascendancy over his brother. Here again, the promotion of one brother over another has divine provenance, and here again, there are no explicit value judgments made about either child. God simply states, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you will be divided; one will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:24). Much like in Genesis 4, the elder brother will indeed be marginalized in favor of the younger, but at this point, the narrative withholds the suggestion that this objective reality is consequentially tied to the inherent worth of either brother.

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[91] It is possible that the word I have rendered above as "to bear," ילד, could also mean "to beget," thus suggesting separate conceptions. However, when the subject of the verb is masculine, it typically means "to become the father of" while "bearing" a child is an exclusively female activity. Moreover, in Genesis 4:1, the same verb ילד follows a separate verb that more explicitly denotes conception (הרה), so there is no reason to assume that the term ילד would be used differently a mere six words later.

[92] As noted by Joel Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 44-45.

Nevertheless, and unlike the story of Cain in Genesis 4, the reader is treated to a higher degree of perspicacity than the characters of Jacob and Esau. She stands above both of these characters, her perspective aligned with that of the omniscient narrator. She knows from the oracle what the brothers do not,[93] and so she is positioned to look *at* the characters rather than *through* their eyes. She is primed to look for evidence of Esau's inferiority and Jacob's superiority, and indeed, the following chapters are peppered with information to suggest that Esau validates the oracle by rendering *himself* undeserving of his father's blessing and the continuation of the Israelite lineage that this blessing entails. He rashly sells his birthright for a cup of stew, while Jacob is clever enough to use his brother's hunger to manipulate the birthright out of him (Genesis 25:29-34); Esau marries two Hittite wives who "made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah" (Genesis 26:34), while Jacob, like his father before him, will honor his family's lineage by taking a wife from his ancestral kin (Genesis 29). As the theme of divine election expands, the initial inscrutability of God's choices slowly begins to be dispelled. Esau becomes the object of the reader's judgment, and his character appears as that much less sympathetic.

But even so, the narrator weaves in threads of Esau's subjective experience that are not strictly necessary for carrying the plot forward. Upon realizing

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[93] The Jacob and Esau cycle includes no direct evidence that either brother knew of their oracular futures, but some suggestion that they did *not*. For example, when Rebekah conscripts Jacob into her plan to snatch Isaac's blessing from Esau, she says, "Only obey *my* word" (Genesis 27:14), making no appeal to the divine oracle to cajole him into participating in the plot.

Jacob's ruse, "[Esau] cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father 'Bless me, me also, father!'" (Genesis 27:34). In Hebrew, the depth and bitterness of Esau's cry is doubly stressed with the emphatic adjective גדלה ("great") which is further magnified by the adverbial phrase עד מאד ("exceedingly), which communicate the high emotional intensity of his reaction. The reader knows well that Esau's emotional reaction, no matter how painful and intense, is impotent in the face of a divine oracle that has just been brought to fruition. Nonetheless, she is still confronted by it, reminded that a thinking, feeling human being has suffered a profound loss of place in his own family unit. Moreover, the reader is brought face to face with Esau's anguish not once, but thrice. With increasing desperation, Esau asks a second time for a blessing of his own (Genesis 27:36), and then a third: "'Do you only have one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!' And Esau lifted up his voice and wept" (Genesis 27:38). That this passage is so repetitive, and that the repetition does nothing to move the plot forward, suggests that its narrative function is to increase the pathos of the scene, to induce the reader to recognize the real, personal, painful effect of an economy of scarcity when it comes to divine election—even when the rationale of God's choice of Jacob is not nearly as mysterious or arbitrary as it was with Abel.

As with Cain, the aftermath of election carries with it the threat of bloodshed. Esau too resolves to kill the brother who supplanted him (Genesis

27:41), but Esau's character does not depart from the reader's view with the permanent memory of villainy. The story does resume with the adventures of Jacob, the chosen son and protagonist of the narrative cycle to come, but Esau is reintroduced when Jacob plans to return to his homeland. Both Jacob and the reader know that Esau had hated his brother and had been plotting his demise. Because the entirety of Genesis 32 is dedicated to describing Jacob's trepidation and exceedingly elaborate plans for appeasing his brother, the reader's expectations are aligned with Jacob's in the assumption that reencountering Esau will be life-threateningly dangerous. This expectation, however, is upended when Esau "ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him" (Genesis 33:4). In this way, the narrative acknowledges that Esau has continued to grow and develop as a character, even though the narrative withdrew its focus from Esau's individual story. That Esau is surrounded by a full retinue, and that he is so well off that he refuses to take from the resources Jacob offered, suggests that he has gone on to experience a fully realized life beyond what is told in the pages of Genesis. Although his life may not be the primary subject of the present story, the narrative takes time to show that Esau continues to experience, to feel and forgive and reckon with his relationships and his place in society in ways that are no less real now that he has been estranged from the dominant narrative of Israel's early national development. Jacob's fear upon encountering Esau again may also be read as an admission that Esau had been

grievously wronged and his anger not misdirected, a narrative detail functioning much like God's relative leniency in punishing Cain.

However, despite the fact that Esau rises above the violence to which Cain succumbed, and despite the fact that the story of Jacob and Esau ends on a relatively positive note, the ugliness and pain of its beginning can hardly be erased. Regina Schwartz trenchantly describes this "pernicious principle of scarcity":

> According to the biblical myth, the origins of hatred and violence among brothers is scarcity. If there is not enough to go around, then Jacob must literally impersonate Esau to get what is his, and Cain must destroy his rival to seek the favor that was Abel's. Scarcity, the assumption that someone can only prosper when someone else does not, proliferates murderous brothers and murderous peoples. And it seems that even God, the very source of blessings, does not have enough to go around: "Bless me, me too, my father!...Do you have only one blessing, my father?"[94]

But we must ask to what extent the biblical text is an unequivocal champion of a system that harms those denied of the blessing. Schwartz is right that hatred and violence are the natural consequences of a world in which one must necessarily prosper through someone else's loss. As the above analysis illustrates, however, the biblical text laments the ramifications of this system even as it literarily develops it. As the theme of divine election receives further development, as the rationale for God's choice to elevate one brother over another receives more clarity, and as the reader is distanced from the characters by the benefit of knowledge that the characters themselves do not possess, the hermeneutic of the

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[94] Schwartz, 83.

marginalized first introduced through Cain remains present in the story of Jacob and Esau and crucially informs the reader's engagement with it. Her prior experience with Cain cues her to look to the experience of the marginalized even when Esau, unlike Cain, is not the primary subject of the story.

c. The Story of (Sarah and) Hagar

These tales of sibling rivalry and the reversal of primogeniture is further echoed in the treatment of half-brothers Isaac and Ishmael—or, more accurately, Sarah and Hagar. Their sons are no older than young children in this narrative cycle and can hardly be considered its primary subjects, and it is Sarah and Hagar who compete for primacy and negotiate the economy of scarcity in God's blessings through children. Unlike Cain and Abel and Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael are half-brothers and are not originally born in equal standing: Isaac is born in wedlock to Sarah and Abraham, while Ishmael is born to Abraham's Egyptian slave and concubine Hagar. Although the parallel may not be perfect, however, the story of Sarah and Hagar adds provocative dimensions to the issue of marginalization: Sarah is a woman, and, as such, she enjoys limited agency in her social unit. Hagar is thrice marginalized as a woman, a slave, and a foreigner at that.

Hagar's marginalization in the house of Abraham is narratively very well established. First, Sarah instructs her husband Abraham to impregnate Hagar. Hagar's perspective on the event is not related, while Sarah's motivations are

communicated clearly: Hagar is to be the surrogate for a child that will belong to

her mistress Sarah (Genesis 16:1-2). In this instance, Sarah is acting out of her

own marginalization. Susan Niditch notes:

> The identity of these women, their sociological existence in a sense,
> depends upon their bearing their husband's children...Her children are a
> visible statement of her connection to the clan...If a woman has not born
> [her husband's] children, however, she has never fully become a member
> of his family.[95]

Thus, the inability to bear children would have been a devastating social blow,

and accordingly, Sarah's reasons for proposing these measures are related

through a first person speech that has everything to do with Sarah's personal

concerns and nothing to do with bringing about the fulfillment of God's promise

of offspring to Abraham: "It may be that *I* shall obtain children by her" (Genesis

16:2). So far, Sarah's perspective has been made intelligible. The reader

acquainted with the social straits of ancient Israelite women is already primed to

sympathize with Sarah, and the insight into Sarah's mind further encourages this

sympathy. The narrative privileges Sarah's position, and even though Sarah

experiences her own threat of marginalization, she is still the advantaged

character: she is Hagar's direct social superior and the wife of the first individual

recipient of a divine covenant. In these ways, the reader has been acquainted with

much information that displaces Hagar's perspective: she knows that Hagar is

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[95] "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," *The Harvard Theological Review* 72, no. 1 (1979): 144-145. See also Jo Ann Hackett, "Rehabilittating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel,* ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fotress Press, 1989), 13.

but an ingredient in the much larger story of God's covenant with Abraham, a potential instrument for bringing about God's promise to this central character.[96] As such, the reader also knows that Sarah's proposal—and the exploitation of Hagar that goes along with it—may contribute to the fulfillment of this promise. It is striking, though, that the text does not attribute this motivation to Sarah. It supplies her own personal reasons for wanting Abraham to take a concubine, and Abraham immediately acquiesces. These two narrative choices implicitly validate Sarah's experience of the social constraints of being a woman in a patriarchal society without overwriting it with the lofty language of covenant.

Though Sarah is marginalized in her own right, Hagar remains the most marginalized of all of the characters, which up until this point, is matched in her lack of significant narrative treatment. In the following verses, she continues to be the object of several sexually exploitative verbs: "Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife" (Genesis 16:3), and "Abram went in to Hagar, and she conceived" (Genesis 16:4). As a slave, Hagar is the property of her masters and can be given and taken as they see fit. As a slave *and* a woman, her womb is treated as a resource that can be exploited for the sake of the household and at the will of its more powerful

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[96] Hagar is a *potential* instrument for bringing about God's plan, because Abraham, Sarah, and the reader are yet to learn that the child of this covenant will be born to none other than Abraham and Sarah. The drama with Hagar increases suspense by delaying this revelation. See Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 92.

members.[97] Only after Hagar conceives is she granted a measure of narrative focus: in light of Hagar's new stature as the bearer of Abraham's children, Sarah became less in Hagar's eyes (Genesis 16:4).[98]

After this exceedingly brief mention of Hagar's point of view, the narrative focus returns to Sarah. She is enraged by Hagar's impertinent attitude, and commentators have judged her harshly for her apparently unreasonable and unjust reaction.[99] The text, however, withholds this judgment, and other commentators have noted the severity of the social consequences for the barren wife,[100] which are made that much more poignant when she is daily confronted with the fact that an enslaved member of her household exceeds her own capacities as a wife to her husband. The fact that Sarah reacts to her situation from a place of marginalization is reinforced when her husband attempts to assuage her by reminding her of her perduring social superiority over Hagar:

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[97] For discussions of the womb as resource, see Carol Myers, "Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel" in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader,* ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999) and Lyn M. Bechtel, "What if Dinah Is not Raped?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 62 (1994): 19-36.

[98] Translations tend to strike a harsher tone when describing Hagar's reaction to Sarah. The NRSV and ESV translate it with some variation of "She looked with contempt on her mistress,"; the NEB, KJV, and NIV translate it with some variation of "She despised her mistress." However, contempt and loathing are unnecessarily severe renderings of what Hagar feels. The verb קלל in the qal suggests merely that Sarah's status over Hagar has been somewhat diminished.

[99] John Skinner, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 286; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 120; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1904), 181.

[100] Hackett, 13; Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis,* rans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 192; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977), 192.

"'Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her" (Genesis 16:6).

Sarah's treatment of Hagar is hardly sympathetic; it was apparently so harsh that Hagar felt the need to flee for her safety. But although her treatment of Hagar was exceedingly severe, it is not altogether without reason. The narrator supplies enough information about Sarah's experience to suggest that her reaction was not petty, but rather a response to the social constraints imposed upon Sarah as a woman in a patriarchal society. With the knowledge of Sarah's looming trivialization, the reader is equipped to recognize that the patriarchal system multiplies marginalization and abuse. That Sarah is simultaneously sympathetic and unsympathetic indicates a critical awareness of how ethically fraught this patriarchal system is. Its victims victimize others in order to assure their tenuous places in the social order: a realization opened wide through the text's arrangement of complex intersections of marginalization.

It is important to note that Abraham, the most socially dominant of all of the characters, recedes far into the background in the episodes that revolve around Sarah and Hagar. It is especially noteworthy that Hagar, in her triple marginalization, receives more direct divine communication than any other character embroiled in this particular drama. The first time she flees to the wilderness to avoid Sarah's abuse, an angel of the Lord speaks to her. While he does recommend that she return to Sarah and submit to her, he also offers a covenant that closely mirrors Abraham's: "I will so greatly multiply your

offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude" (Genesis 16:10). With this, the multiply marginalized Hagar is independently granted a divine attention that rivals only Abraham's. Additionally, Hagar becomes the first to name the divine: "So she named the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi'; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?'" (Genesis 16:13).

When Hagar returns and both Isaac and Ishmael have been born, Sarah's bitter rivalry with Hagar continues. The mere fact of Ishmael's existence poses a threat to Isaac's stature in the family, a sign of the instability of an ideology according to which the divinely preferred son should easily and automatically supplant the non-preferred. Hagar and Ishmael are driven out of the household and into the wilderness for the final time. The suffering of mother and son is narrated with a high degree of pathos:

> When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. (Genesis 21:15–16)

Hagar's experience of her maltreatment is lent a great deal of credence and narrative attention, which is then reinforced when God asks after Hagar's emotional wellbeing for the second time:

> The angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him. Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. (Genesis 21:17–19)

This second excursion in the wilderness is a doublet with the first: Genesis 16 is attributed to the Yahwist source, and Genesis 21 is attributed to the Elohist. The redactor, then, is functioning as the narrator, who arranges the plot—in this case, through arranging the sources—and thus orchestrates the reader's experience of the text. It is therefore noteworthy that, in the text's final arrangement, Hagar's experience is brought to the fore and acknowledged by the divine voice each time she is dealt with unjustly because of her marginalization. The reality of her marginalization remains, but time and again, the reader is called to experience the events from Hagar's perspective, and the divine voice confers upon her perspective a high degree of dignity. It is also noteworthy that, just as God refused to rewrite Cain's emotional experience with an alternative narrative about why Cain was objectively unworthy of God's regard, the divine voice similarly declines to situate Hagar's expulsion from the family (and her looming expulsion from the narrative) by explaining that the Abrahamic covenant requires a son between Sarah and Abraham. Thus, the narrative does not subsume Hagar's story under the more significant story of Abraham's covenant. Rather, the divine voice addresses Hagar's experiences on the level at which she experiences them: not as an instrument, now used up, in service to some other divine plan for her masters, but as an independent subject who is undergoing her own tribulations that would be no less personally distressing if she had known about the priority of the Abrahamic covenant.

Quite to the contrary, Hagar is momentarily elevated to the status of Abraham himself. Both are independent parties in covenants with God according to which they are promised sons who will become the fathers of great nations, and both face the untimely losses of those sons that are averted at the last moment through a miraculous intervention from God.[101] These parallels persist despite the fact that Abraham is a man and Hagar is a woman, and despite the fact that Hagar is a slave and Abraham a wealthy householder. Within the narrative, these social differentials have no bearing on the worthiness of either individual to receive direct attention from God.[102]

In sum, although clear demarcations are drawn between the socially marginalized and the socially empowered throughout the story of Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham, these boundaries are time and again troubled through narrative attention to the experiences of the marginalized. In fact, the more marginalized a character, the more narrative focalization they receive: Abraham's perspective on the events is scarcely noticed, Sarah's receives considerably more attention than Abraham's, and Hagar's receives the most by far. It is as though each time the narrator recognizes that a character is vulnerable to losing the reader's focus, he

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[101] Kaminsky, 34; S. Nakaido, "Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures: An Intertextual Study," *Vetus Testamentum* 51, no. 2 (2001): 219–242.

[102] Yielding to the pattern of younger sons supplanting the elder, scholars have tended to focus on the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael rather than on their parents (Kaminsky, 34; Levenson, 61ff; Larry Lyke, "Where Does 'The Boy' Belong? Compositional Strategy in Genesis 21:14," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56, no. 4 [October 1994]: 637–648). While this is certainly a very worthwhile pursuit, my interest in this chapter lies with the agents who move the story further and whom the reader encounters as active subjects.

amplifies that narrative focus all the more. Thus, Hagar is not only a strong complement to Cain, be she represents a narrative intensification of Cain's story. Even though the reader is now very well aware of why Hagar is marginal both in terms of her social status and in terms of her ancillary status in relation the Abrahamic covenant that will form the basis of Israel's unique place as God's chosen people, the focus on Hagar's story and her personal experience of it is all the more striking.

d. The Story of (Joseph and) Judah

In the stories of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, and Hagar and Sarah, it is clear that the elect have been elevated by divine fiat—even if the divine rationale is withheld or decentralized in the narrative's mediation of the reader's engagement with the characters. As these stories of familial rivalry unfold within the broader narrative, divine choices appear less mysterious, and the narrative interest in the unchosen more crucial. However, in the story of Joseph and his brothers—the longest and most complex meditation on election in the book of Genesis—the divine voice recedes completely. The characters are left entirely to their own devices as they attempt to make sense of the unequal conditions of their lives, and the reader, too, is denied the advantage of knowing the divine will in advance. In the story of Joseph and his brothers, the stability of the hierarchy between elect and non-elect is also profoundly unsettled, further suggesting that divine election is not a reflection of the inherent value of either party. Quite to the

contrary, the Joseph cycle may be understood as a sharp indictment of the assumption that the elevation of one party necessarily equates to their personal (and divinely justified) superiority.

To begin, the reader is introduced to Joseph by learning that he was preferred by his father—not God—and that Jacob preferred him for very human reasons: "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age" (Genesis 37:3). Jacob's partiality is in no way linked to any particular quality that Joseph possessed and his brothers did not, but only the coincidental timing of his birth. Jacob is also singularly responsible for sowing the seeds of enmity among his sons by giving Joseph overt preferential treatment: "He had made him a long robe with sleeves. And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him" (Genesis 37:3–4). Here, the text makes clear that the brothers' negative reaction to Joseph is a direct consequence of their unequal treatment by Jacob, and so their reaction reads as unfortunate but understandable.

Joseph, puffed up by his father's favoritism, fans the flames of his brothers' jealousy. He tattles on them to their father (Genesis 37:2) and despite the fact that his brothers "hated him even more" after he reported a dream in which all the family's empty sheaves bowed down to his upright one (Genesis 37:5–7), he went on to report a second dream in which celestial symbols of his family bowed down to him again (Genesis 37:9–10). With this second dream,

even Jacob objects to the implication that Joseph will personally reign supreme within the family: "His father rebuked him, and said to him, 'What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?'" (Genesis 37:10).

The narrative does not include Joseph's point of view on these dreams. It does, however, relay several of his family's reactions to the dreams, aligning the reader's perspective with theirs and thus suggesting that their offense at Joseph's pretensions to greatness is justified. Indeed, in keeping with the pattern established in Genesis 4 and continued with Esau, the only inner thoughts the narrative discloses are not the chosen son's, but the emotional reactions of his now subordinated brothers. Sympathy for Joseph is withheld, and despite his chosenness, he is thus far painted as a flawed, problematic figure who implicitly assumes that his elect status bespeaks his own personal advantage. The brothers' subsequent sale of Joseph into Egyptian slavery (Genesis 37:19–20), while certainly cruel, is hardly groundless given the reader's knowledge of the unfortunate family dynamic that Joseph's behavior perpetuated.

In the grand scheme of the narrative, Joseph's first dreams serve to build dramatic irony: the brothers' empty sheaves of wheat will quite literally bow down to Joseph's full sheaf when there is a famine in Israel and they must beg Joseph for food from the Egyptian stores (Genesis 42). In retrospect, the reader will come to appreciate these first dreams and their aftermath in the light of divine providence: they foretell Joseph's future role in saving his family from

starvation, and selling Joseph into Egyptian slavery would make their salvation possible. By deferring this revelation, however, the narrative asks the reader to evaluate the brothers' actions on their own terms—and the only terms initially made available are the brothers' justifiable (though undoubtedly extreme in their cruelty) reactions to Joseph's pretensions. During the narration of Joseph's time in Egypt, the reader will learn that Joseph does indeed possess the special, divinely-endowed ability to interpret dreams (Genesis 41:16, 39). It is significant, then, that this skill is initially narratively suppressed. The reader's introductory encounter with Joseph and his brothers is not informed by the divine rectitude of Joseph's elevation, but by the human toll exacted in needlessly ennobling one individual over others. Moreover, the non-elect brothers are just as instrumental in bringing about the providential divine plan as Joseph is—and both Joseph and his brothers bring it about through poor behavior. The brothers commit the physical cruelty of selling Joseph, while Joseph commits the emotional cruelty of reminding them that they are denied an equal share of their father's love and status within the family. While I would maintain that the brothers' cruelty is greater, it suffices to say that the chosen one is hardly portrayed as the hero, and while the reader may condemn the brothers' actions, the narrative does not invite the reader to ignore the experiences that led the brothers there.

Indeed, the emphasis on divine providence at the end of the story further troubles the assumption that the election of an individual translates to a statement of the individual's personal merits. Joseph's successes in Egypt are

ultimately not for his own sake, but for the sake of the bigger picture of his family: "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors" (Genesis 45:7). The fact that the narrative's focus is not on Joseph himself, but on Joseph's family unit, is further evidenced by the parallel development of the characters of Joseph and Judah. During his trials in Egypt, the reader witnesses Joseph tempering his tendencies toward self-aggrandizement. Rather than brandishing the gift of dreams as he did in Canaan, he reminds Pharaoh that the ability to interpret dreams belongs to God alone (Genesis 41:16). Joseph is indeed the central character throughout the last thirteen chapters of Genesis, and much of these chapters is dedicated to the narration of Joseph's growth into maturity and his providential rise in Pharaoh's court. Nevertheless, Judah's concomitant personal development is interspersed throughout Joseph's story. Just as Joseph initially understood his chosenness as a personal reward, Judah assumed that he and his brothers could profit personally from Joseph's disposal "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." (Genesis 37:26–27). Here, familial blood stops Judah from bloodshed, but his concern for personal gain remains paramount. By the end of the story, however, Judah reverses his position, going so far as to offer his own life in place of his youngest brother's: "Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not

with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father" (Genesis 44:33–34). Judah thus demonstrates his evolution from brutal and selfish to mature and willing to sacrifice his own well-being for the good of his family.

In fact, Judah's evolution is directly instrumental in securing sustenance for his family. Joseph was not initially moved by his family's plight; he was still designing a plan to exact vengeance upon his brothers by holding Benjamin captive. It is ultimately Judah's words which occasion the poignant reunion of the family. In this complex convergence of divine will and human agency, the narrative provocatively leaves the question open as to who should be considered the human hero of the story: when both characters lack direct knowledge of the divine will, their actions and decisions obtain equal significance regardless of their status as chosen or unchosen within the family.

Additionally, much like the notice of Esau's life beyond his parental family unit, the interpolation of Judah's affair with Tamar (Genesis 38) near the beginning of the Joseph cycle reminds the reader of Judah's centrality within his own story, even as the narrative is primed to pursue the continuation of Joseph's story once he is sold into Egypt at the close of Genesis 37. Much of the scholarly debate concerning the placement of Genesis 38 within the Joseph cycle concerns the provenance of the story and the significance of the tribe of Judah in the monarchical period and beyond, generally considering Genesis 38 as literary retrojection from the time of the monarchy and an inner-biblical commentary on

the figure of David through his patriarchal ancestor Judah.[103] From the narratological perspective, however, the placement of Genesis 38 in its *own* narrative context is worthy of consideration, as it destabilizes the reader's expectation that because Joseph is chosen, his story must be of exclusive interest. As discussed above, Judah's impact at the close of the book of Genesis rivals his brother Joseph's, and the interjection of a story about Judah wholly independent of Joseph's story reinforces the narrative's overall posture with respect to these two brothers.

In sum, the cycle of stories concerning Joseph and his brothers pulls back even further from the tendency to assume that the elect are inherently more worthy or more narratively affective because of their election. The push and pull for narrative primacy between the chosen and unchosen, reduced to an echo in the story of Jacob and Esau, returns with full force in the Genesis narrative's final and most sustained visitation upon the theme of divine election. This complexity and ambiguity is where the reader finally departs from the Genesis narrative, having received the narrative's repeated insistence that those who have been socially elevated are no more intrinsically capable or worthy of the reader's attention and empathy than those who are not.

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[103] See, for example, J. A. Emerton, "Judah and Tamar," *Vetus Testamentum* 19, no. 4 (1979): 403–415; David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 249–250; Craig Ho, "The Stories of the Family Troubles of Judah and David: A Study of their Literary Links" *Vetus Testamentum* 49, no. 4 (1999): 514-531; Paul R. Noble, "Esau, Tamar, and Joseph: Criteria for Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions," *Vetus Testamentum* 52, no. 2 (2002): 219-252; Gary A. Rendsburg, "David and His Circle in Genesis XXXVIII" *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 4 (1986).

IV. Conclusion

The story of Cain in Genesis 4—the first in Genesis's series of ultimogeniture stories and the first biblical story of divine election of any kind—communicates that, although Cain's offering fails to obtain God's favor and he is jettisoned from the ensuing narrative, the structuring of Genesis 4 takes pains to privilege his perspective and to align the reader's perspective with it. These narrative moves suggest that, even though God's mysterious rejection of Cain's offering may prefigure Cain's rejection from the fold of Israel's ensuing history, the focus on Cain's humanity initiates the reader into an ongoing ethical relationship with the marginalized. Even as the rationale for the election of subsequent younger sons becomes more and more apparent, and even as the ideology of divine election becomes more and more entrenched, the initial sympathy cultivated for Cain remains implicitly operative.

I certainly do not dispute that ultimogeniture narratives in Genesis serve the primary function of telling the familial history of Israel through the elevated younger son. In fact, in recognizing this primary function, one is better able to appreciate the significance of these stories' attention to the ever present, if sometimes only intimated, experiences of the non-elect. This narrative awareness transfers to the awareness of the reader, who is urged to empathize with the parties not chosen—perhaps especially *because* they are not chosen.

Moreover, this narrative interest in the subjectivity of the non-elect offers a new lens for reading gender dynamics. Just as the narrative invites the reader

to pursue detours into the subjectivities of the unchosen brother, so too does it open paths to the subjectivities and experiences of women on the margins. This is clearly evidenced in the narrative treatment of Hagar and Sarah, whose stories parallel the rivalries between brothers. Ultimately, these narrative invitations complicate what the "dominant narrative" entails. The due given to the the marginalized admits that the borders of the dominant narrative are not so clean. Although any narrative may have an ultimate endgame—in this case, that reversals of primogeniture flow into a broader theme of divine election that extends to none other than Israel itself—this particular narrative not only leaves its dangling threads unwoven, but it introduces those threads in the first place. In this way, it whispers to the reader that the dominant narrative is something of a heuristic fiction. Reality is more complex by a sight, and it teems with other stories no less rich and compelling simply because they may not serve the broader narrative's immediate ends.

CHAPTER 4
THE HERMENEUTIC EDUCATION OF THE BOOK OF JOB

I. Unity and Disunity in the Book of Job

As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, time, physical setting, actors,

and events (both the concrete events that move the plot and the speech-acts of

the characters), comprise the fabula of a narrative: the cluster of elements that

will ultimately be arranged into the story that the reader experiences. The

deliberate manipulation and arrangement of the elements of the fabula

determine how the story elicits the intended response from the reader—how it

convinces, surprises, disgusts, moves, and excites. Such choices serve as an

implicit means of communication between the reader and the story's shaper.

The book of Job poses unique difficulties in attempting to assess the role

and activity of this "shaper," as it interweaves different sources, genres, and

literary and philosophical modes of discourse. Noting the stark generic, stylistic,

and theological differences between the book's poetic discourses and its prose

envelope, source, historical, and form critics tend to conclude that the prose

represents an independent, familiar tale adopted by either the author of the

poetry or by the book's redactor as a framework—a handy traditional narrative

that could be conscripted to introduce the poetry's critique of the classical wisdom tradition.[104]

Others, though, have argued for the unity of the book. For instance, Edouard Dhorme contends that there is no reason to assume that the same author could not adopt different genres or approach a similar set of philosophical and theological questions from different angles.[105] However, although Dhorme raises a compelling point in argument for a single author, he shrugs off the question of how the poetry and prose might be meaningfully related to one another. For Dhorme, the poetic dialogues comprise the true book of Job—the exploration of human suffering that the author sincerely intends to pursue—while the prose prologue and epilogue are merely "accessory narrations…no more than its entrance and exit."[106] In the words of Bruce Zuckerman:

> Like oil and water, the Prose Frame Story and the Poem naturally tend to disengage from one another despite all efforts to homogenize them. The book of Job therefore appears to be at odds with itself; and however one may attempt to resolve its contradictory picture, the result never seems to be quite successful.[107]

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[104] Karl Budde, *Das Buch Hiob* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939), xii–xiv; Bernhard Duhme, *Das Buch Hiob* (Freiburg: J. C. B. Mohr, 1897), vii–viii; D. B. Macdonald, "The Original Form of the Legend of Job," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 14 (1895): 63–71; Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis,* trans. C. Muenchow (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981)*,* 7; Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent: A Study in Historical Counterpoint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 14.

[105] Edouard Dhorme, *Commentary on the Book of Job,* trans. H. Knight (London: Nelson, 1967)*,* lxv.

[106] Dhorme, lxiv.

[107] Zuckerman, 14.

Both Zuckerman and Dhorme suggest that, single author or not, finding a substantial, meaningful relationship between the prose and the poetry can only be a fool's errand.

Deconstructionist readings of Job dexterously sidestep the question of the book's unity. They take for granted that, whatever the history of the book's development, it is now encountered as a single text. Those same contradictions and instabilities in meaning that have so vexed historical critics are the very lifeblood of deconstructionist readings, which interrogate the bases of various claims to truth. Edwin Good, for instance, concludes that the apparent disunity of the book is the text's way of reveling in the ultimate indeterminacy of meaning,[108] a reading in which the book of Job emerges as nothing less than a partner in the project of deconstruction. David Clines concludes that the poetry and prose, with their opposite answers to the question of how one should should respond to suffering, undercut one another's respective claims to be rooted in a transcendental signified.[109]

Carol Newsom, however, finds both historical critical and deconstructionist approaches wanting. Historical criticism "was never able...to give a persuasive account of the final form of the book. It had no theory of the whole, no way to account for the purpose or effect of the juxtaposition of genres

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[108] Edwin Good, *In Turns of the Tempest: A Reading of Job with a Translation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 181.

[109] David J. A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 123.

and styles."[110] She writes regarding the deconstructionist approach, "Though immensely clever, this type of reading funds its cleverness at a high cost. Meaning is not generated merely through propositions but also through the textures of language, through the invocations of styles and forms of speech that themselves have histories and resonances."[111] In answer, Newsom proposes a Bakhtinian reading according to which each movement in the book of Job is representative of a particular genre, and each genre is suited to give voice a particular "moral imagination." In the language of Bakhtin, these moral imaginations, though distinct in their own rights, come together to form a "polyphonic" text. This means that a sense of truth will be conveyed not through a discrete, singular literary voice, but dialogically—through the reader's dynamic engagement the various moral voices that the text contains. In this way, polyphonic texts naturally resist definitive closure, and the discrepancies within the book of Job may be appreciated as the text's native means of producing a dialogic meaning.[112]

I am wholly persuaded by Newsom's claim that the juxtaposition of these voices is an indispensable feature of how the text intends to impact the reader, and that, regardless of the historical vicissitudes of its development, the readerly impact of its final form assuredly yields to analysis. I do, however, note one crucial limitation to Newsom's approach. Citing Bakhtin, Newsom describes the

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[110] *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

[111] Newsom, 10.

[112] Newsom, 21ff.

polyphonic text as one in which "the author gives up the type of control exercised in monologic works and attempts to create several consciousnesses that will be truly independent of the author's and interact with genuine freedom."[113] While the author's own position may be represented in the text, it is not privileged above any other.[114] Newsom uses the term "author" to refer to the architect of the book as a whole, and "narrator" only with respect to the voice that relates the prose. Mieke Bal's distinction is more nuanced:

> The idea that a narrative text is "uttered" by a narrator is inferred from the communicative nature of the text: if a text can be conveyed, some agent must be doing the conveying...I will rigorously stick to the definition of narrator as "that agent which utters the (linguistic or other) signs that constitute the text."[115]

Although the narrator's voice may recede in the poetic dialogues, his shaping hand is nonetheless recognizable in his ordering of the literary movements of the book. As my analysis throughout this chapter will show, this ordering plays a crucial role in arousing and orchestrating the reader's responses to Job's experience. As such, the narrator's viewpoint is eminently discernible, and it does obtain a privileged status among the other moral imaginations represented. The fact that Job's friends are patently incorrect—and that the reader has already been equipped to make this determination—will corroborate as much.

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[113] Newsom, 23.

[114] Newsom, 21.

[115] Bal, *Narratology,* 62.

The point that the narrator influences the reader's experience throughout the text is not trivial. As discussed in the first two chapters of this dissertation, feminist biblical criticism has to some extent been impaired by the want of establishing that its hermeneutic strategies are condoned by the biblical text itself. As I will demonstrate throughout the present chapter, the book of Job firmly establishes a hermeneutic that privileges the subjectivity of the oppressed in the telling of their stories—and that it invokes other hermeneutic stances in order to launch an implicit but trenchant critique of them. To fail to acknowledge that Job's narrator champions a hermeneutic so advantageous for the enterprise of feminist biblical criticism is to inadvertently discount the book's potential to act as a powerful biblical ally in that enterprise.

In this chapter, then, I will employ the method narratology to offer a fuller account of the reader's experience of moving through the book of Job, assessing how this experience is effectuated by the narrator throughout. Specifically, I argue that the book introduces and then critiques two types of readerly engagement to set the stage for a hermeneutical climax that compels the reader to privilege Job's subjective understanding of his own experiences. The first critique is embedded in the narrative structure of the prose prologue, which, with its didacticism and rapidly unfolding plot, distracts the reader from considering Job's own personal experience of his suffering. The second critique comes with the poetic dialogues, in which Job's friends attempt to impose upon his experience the neat metanarrative supplied by traditional wisdom: one does not

receive divine punishment if one does not transgress. However, both Job and the reader know that this is not the case, and as the poetic dialogues reach an impasse, the reader comes to recognize the insufficiency of external ideologies for doing justice to one's personal experiences. A third hermeneutic emerges—this one championed by the text—in which the reader is aligned with Job himself as he attempts to center his own experience in understanding his story. When the prose tale returns in the epilogue, the restoration of Job's fortunes—which would have been a satisfying conclusion had the poetry not introduced the depth of Job's suffering—now strikes the reader as unsatisfying and hollow, an affront to the integrity of Job's subjective experience and an occasion for the reader to recognize the proper, ethical way to hermeneutically engage with the experience of the oppressed. I conclude by suggesting that this clear call to center another's subjective experience in turn calls the reader's attention to the experiences of suffering and unjustly oppressed biblical women whose subjectivities, like Job's in the prose, are suppressed in service to some other narrative aim.

II. The Prose and the Poetry: Hermeneutics in Dialogue

The prose prologue and epilogue constitute a brief, seemingly straightforward story operating in the in idiom of a fable. The prose narrative initially reads as rather simple, rendered in a folkloristic style accessible to learned and less learned audiences alike.[116] However, several critics have noted

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[116] Newsom, 39.

that, while the prose appropriates a folklore aesthetic, it does so self-consciously.

Its subtle artistry and high stylization of folkloristic elements suggests that it is

pretending at naïveté and using this pretension to manipulate the reader's

assumptions and expectations.[117]

Newsom, seeking a more robust generic designation for the prose, follows

Hans-Peter Müller in categorizing it as a didactic tale:

> Such tales...are character-based stories in which the ethical quality of the
> main character is critical. The action of the story provides some sort of
> antagonist for the hero, or at least contrasting figures who represent the
> opposite of the hero's virtue. Helper figures often appear to assist the
> hero. Significantly, in this type of story something happens to the hero
> that appears to be out of joint with the cultural affirmation of the moral
> values the hero represents. The moral coherency of the world is
> threatened. Thus, the hero is a suffering hero whose virtue is proved
> through the way he or she deals with conflict. The declining action serves
> to confirm the virtue represented by the hero, as virtue and the world
> order are again realigned. The reward of the hero often concludes the
> story.[118]

True to generic form, the question of Job's righteousness lies at the crux of the

story's drama. He is antagonized by treatment wholly incommensurate with his

righteousness, which introduces a rupture in the moral coherency of the world in

which Job and the reader believed they lived. He proves his virtue in the way that

he responds to this rupture, doubling down on his contested devotion to God. In

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[117] Susan Niditch, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993)*,* 9; David J. A. Clines, "False Naivety in the Prologue to Job," *Hebrew Annual Review* 9 (1985): 127–136. Newsom calls it a "perfecting of the trait of repetition (and other features of traditional storytelling)" (39).

[118] Newsom, 40; Hans-Peter Müller, "Die wiescheitliche Lehrerzählung im Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt," *Die West des Orients* 9 (1977): 77–98.

the epilogue, Job's righteousness is recognized and he is rewarded for it, thus tidily repairing the breach in the world's moral coherency.

As the word "didactic" suggests, such stories are explicitly directed toward the moral formation of the reader: they are ultimately about how the reader will apply "the moral of the story" to her own life and in her own world. Newsom suggests that such tales achieve their didactic purpose by causing the reader to identify with the hero: "Even if the reader is not already enlisted by the values of the text, the habit of identification with the apprentice and the hero in such plot structures provides a powerful rhetorical incentive to cooperate with the program of the text."[119] While I follow Newsom's conclusion that the prose represents the didactic genre, I diverge from her assessment that the moral imagination of the prose obtains through the reader's identification with Job. A narratological exposition suggests that the opposite is the case: in the structuring of the prose narrative, the reader's empathetic identification with Job's character is impeded. As I will argue below, this disjunct between Job's perspective and the reader's intentionally emphasizes the disparity between what counts as a restoration of moral coherency for the reader of the prose, and what counts as a restoration of moral coherency for Job—that Job, in his own subjective experience of his suffering, would tell a very different story if only the reader were invited to engage with it. With the arrival of the poetry, the insufficiency of the didactic

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[119] Newsom, 44.

narrative's capacity to account for Job's subjectivity will be exposed and critiqued.

a. A Narratological Sketch of the Prose

The prose of the book of Job operates within what Roland Barthes terms "the proairetic code." This narrative mode associates most closely to what one typically associates with the word "plot": it builds suspense by introducing an action that anticipates another action, and another, so that one is compelled to continue reading in order to discover the final outcome. Much like an action film, proairetic narratives are less focused on the interior lives of the characters and more focused on the question of what will happen next. The reader need not necessarily pursue the thoughts and feelings of the characters in order to appreciate this type of narrative.[120]

True to proairetic form, Job's interior life is not explored in the prologue. The reader is first introduced to the character with an external pronouncement of his righteousness and an accounting of his fortunes, all described by the narrator to the reader in the third person (Job 1:1–5). The effect of this introductory move is twofold. First, Job is presented to the reader as an object of observation rather than a subject with whom the reader is expected to empathize. Second, the terms are supplied for the reader's further engagement with the story: prosperity, piety, and the relationship between the two. Job merely supplies the context for an

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[120] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 17.

exploration of this dynamic, as is further evidenced when God and *hassatan* discuss their own observations concerning Job. With this the plot is set into motion: Job will be tested in order to determine whether piety can in fact exist without reward.

These events are set in the heavens, and although Job is the topic of discussion, he lacks access to this heavenly space and the conversation that takes place between God and the divine council there. The reader, however, is invited to witness the scene by the omniscient narrator, who situates the reader over and above Job both spatially and in terms of the advantage of knowledge. When the reader hears of Job's loss of his fortunes, family, and flesh, there is no mystery over which to puzzle: she already knows exactly why these events have befallen Job, while he enjoys no such privilege. By focalizing these events through the heavenly perspectives of God and *hassatan,* Job—the one who experiences his ordeal on the ground—is made the object of the reader's bird's-eye observations. His subjective experience of these events exists outside of the reader's purview and the immediate interests of the plot. The reader naturally wonders how Job will respond, but not for Job's own sake. Rather, the question set up by the narrative is whether God or *hassatan* will win the wager.

The reader is then rapidly shuttled through Job's trials. In the span of just seven verses, all of his property and all of his children are destroyed (Job 1:13–19). Job's reaction is disclosed just as quickly. A single verse is spent describing his gestures of grief (Job 1:20) before his total and unquestioning acceptance is

narrated, deftly resolving the reader's question of who will win the wager. The same pattern is then repeated a second time. *Hassatan* gambles that Job will curse God if his own health is threatened (Job 2:4–5), and Job reacts simply by sitting upon the ashes and quietly scraping the sores on his skin (Job 2:8). Only when his wife voices her desperation is the reader treated to a verbalization of Job's acceptance: "'Should we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (Job 2:10).

The reader is engaged with the recent events of Job's life in a way that does not depend upon Job's insights concerning them. The narrator does not disclose whether Job is interested in the justice or injustice of his afflictions, and he declines to mention whether Job would like some recompense. Whatever closure the reader expects, she does not expect it because she stands in solidarity with Job and wants whatever suits him; she couldn't possibly if the narrator declines to tell her what it is that Job wants. Rather, the reader expects Job's restoration because of information to which Job himself is not privy: she knows that God destroyed Job's family and property without just cause—indeed, that they were destroyed *precisely because* he did not deserve for them to be. Thus, the narrative is structured such that the only satisfying ending would involve the restoration of Job's fortunes. Job may very well share this hope for closure, but for all of the privileged information the narrative gives to the reader, this he withholds. As it is, the reader's desire to find out what will happen next, fomented by the proairetic mode of the prose, is what conditions the reader's desire for this

particular type of closure. Sympathy for Job may exist alongside it, but it is not overtly encouraged by the narrative.

The hermeneutical stance encouraged by the prose narrative, however, is not allowed to stand unchallenged. The book's critique of it becomes clear when one attends to the juxtaposition of how the prose and the poetry distinctively orient the reader toward the character of Job and his experience. The prose narrative had always been marked by an egregious lack of interest in Job as a subject, but in attending to Job's own voice in the poetic dialogues, the reader finds the hermeneutic key that had been missing.

c. Hermeneutics in Dialogue: The Overlapping of the Prose and Poetic Dialogues

Linguist Emile Benveniste theorizes about the peculiar linguistic status of the pronouns "I" and "you"—how they can only perform their function as linguistic signs when they are enacted in dialogue. Unlike other types of nouns, they do not refer to definite, fixed people, objects, or concepts. Rather, they are blank spaces that can only be filled when two parties appropriate them during a particular moment of discourse: "Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced in contrast. I only use *I* when I am speaking to someone who will be a *you* in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of person."[121] In other words, the co-presence of an *I* and a *you,* standing in relation,

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[121] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami, 1971), 224–225.

confirm one another as subjects. The most fundamental function of discursive language, then, is less its capacity to deliver thoughts from one mind to another, and more its *a priori* capacity to link subjectivities in the first place. Without this linking, true intersubjective communication cannot take place at all.

In the prologue, the *I* is the narrator and the *you* is the reader. Even if the narrator does not announce himself in the text, he is still the agent who conveys information to his *you:* the reader.[122] Thus, the text of the prologue is the discursive meeting space for the narrator and the reader, with the narrator choosing what information to convey, when to convey it, and at what pace. Although this story is about Job, God, and *hassatan,* the reader does not meet them as subjects directly—only as mediated through the narrator's presentation. With the shift to sustained direct speech in the poetry, however, the narrator ceases mediating the reader's encounter with Job. Job becomes the *I,* and there are two *yous* whom he addresses: his friends as parts of the fabula, and the reader because the narrator has created the literary conditions for her to hear his speech.

This shift to a direct encounter between the reader and Job is marked clearly. The prologue ends with silence: "[Job's friends] sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (Job 2:13). The narrative has already begun to transition the reader toward a different hermeneutic posture, one in which she

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[122] Bal, *Narratology,* 61–62.

cannot continue to read Job's story apart from his own account of his experiences. This transition is completed, and the poetic dialogues begun, in the following verse: "After this Job opened his mouth" (Job 3:1).

Previously, the reader had observed Job's external gestures of mourning through the narrator's eyes, and she heard his words as the narrator relayed them. Given the structuring of the prose's plot, the reader does not encounter Job's grief for its own sake, but for the sake of its bearing on the wager between God and *hassatan*. When Job says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be blessed" (Job 1:20–21), the narrator immediately tells the reader what to take from this speech: "In all this Job did not sin and did not ascribe wrongdoing to God" (Job 1:22). In that context, and in light of the editorial comment about Job's successful avoidance of sin, his expressions of grief appear to function as additional emphasis on Job's persisting devotion—i.e., he is genuinely overtaken with grief, but *even then* he does not curse God.

Now, however, Job opens his mouth and his reaction can be accessed in his own terms and at his own pace. It goes without saying that narrated events take less time to read than they would take to experience in real time. This is especially apparent in the prose narrative, in which Job loses his wealth, family, and skin in less than one printed page. In the case of dialogue, on the other hand, narrative time and real time align. The reader joins Job in the pace that he sets through his speech. The narrator is no longer rushing her through Job's story,

since he cedes control of both speech and pacing to Job. This, in turn, invites the reader directly into Job's perspective and temporal space. No longer is the reader positioned *above* Job, enjoying the God's- and narrator's-eye view, but when she departs the narrative of the prologue, she is on the ground *with* Job, anxious for his account. It is worthy of note, too, that in the prologue neither the narrator nor God knew the contents of Job's heart. According to this narrative logic, Job himself is the sole keeper of this information, and the only one with the agency to convey it.

Thus, if the prose narrative created distance between the reader's perspective and Job's, leading her to breeze past the personal experience of the story's subject, then the introduction of Job's speech achieves the opposite. When Job finally breaks his seven days of silence, he curses the day he was born—that same day he came naked into the world. When Job said, "Naked I will return there," he certainly did not mean "there" (שם) to be his mother's womb. Rather, he refers to the realm of the dead—a euphemism echoed in his first poetic speech: "There the wicked cease their turmoil, and those who are weary rest. Prisoners are at ease together; they do not hear the voice of the oppressor." (Job 3:17–18). The connection between birth and the realm of the dead is further enumerated: "Why was I not hidden as a stillborn, like children who never see the light?" (Job 3:16).

Here, however, it is painstakingly clear that death is something for which Job desperately longs. The striking parallels between these two moments of

speech, and the equally striking change of tone between them, spur the reader to recognize the superficial, facile nature of the first notice of Job's mourning. The same symbols of birth and death that once read as effortless acceptance are now imbued with a melancholy depth—an anguish only introduced when Job is able to speak without narratorial mediation. The possibility is also introduced that the reader might have recognized Job's pain all along, if only her attention hadn't been focused on a different kind of narrative than the one Job himself would tell. With this, the reader who stands as the *you* to Job's *I* is asked to acknowledge Job's subjectivity and draw it from the periphery and into the center of the narrative.

Having been supplied with the necessary information to empathize with Job's emotional torment, and having now been introduced to Job's personal perspective, the reader is all the more aware of the extent to which Job's friends disconfirm his status as the subject of his own story. Job kicks off the cycle of dialogues by posing a series of questions: "Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and perish?" (Job 3:11); "Why should one give light to the sufferer, and life to those bitter of soul, who await death but it does not arrive, and dig for it more than hidden treasures?" (Job 3:20–22). With these impossible questions, Job conveys the abject torment he is experiencing in the aftermath of his trials—so abject that he considers it a cruelty that he yet lives. Eliphaz, however, responds neither to Job's questions nor to the powerful sentiment and painful loss that leads Job to ask them. Instead, he insists that Job must have

done something to warrant this divine maltreatment: "Think: who that is innocent has perished, and where was an upright man destroyed?...Surely anger kills the fool, and jealousy slays the simple. I have seen a fool taking root, but suddenly I cursed his dwelling. His children are far from safety; they are crushed at the gate, and no one delivers them." (Job 5:2–4). Eliphaz has no interest in hearing Job's lament—only in passing judgment on his justified anger and finding an explanation for why he was apparently punished. As though his utter lack of empathy were not cruel enough, Eliphaz's inhumanity is compounded by his intimation that Job is the fool of which he speaks, and that fools lack the means to properly raise and protect their children from the consequences of their foolishness. It can hardly be a coincidence that Eliphaz's hypothetical children are crushed at the gates of their cursed home, just as Job's children were crushed under *his* house (Job 2:19).

Although the reader is technically also the *you* whom Eliphaz addresses, her knowledge of Job's rectitude places her squarely on Job's side. The privileged information relayed in the prologue now achieves a new narrative purpose: it positions the reader to confirm Job's subjectivity, while Eliphaz, as his proximate interlocutor, utterly fails in this capacity. The reader remembers from the prologue that Eliphaz is blatantly incorrect. Job did *not* earn his maltreatment; quite to the contrary, the fact that he had never sinned was what occasioned the wager between *hassatan* and God in the first place.

d. Competing Hermeneutics in the Poetic Dialogues

Having thus aligned the reader with Job, the poetry introduces a new

mode of engagement with Job, one which positions the reader to be in lockstep

with her narrative surrogate in his personal quest for understanding. The poetic

dialogues thus function according to what Barthes terms the "hermeneutic code,"

which dwells in the realm of unanswered questions. In a hermeneutic narrative,

the reader's task is no longer to anticipate what will happen next, but to follow

the protagonist's efforts to retrospectively construct a narrative to satisfactorily

explain a mystery from the past. Job's questions will become the reader's

questions, and it is from Job's point of view that the reader must now see.

Throughout the dialogues, as Job's friends accuse him of smearing God by

refusing to admit his iniquity, Job's hermeneutic quest revolves around the issue

of how a God who would cause or even allow the innocent to suffer could possibly

be considered just. The reader, having encountered the prologue, already knows

the proximate reason for Job's suffering, but even though Job was not privy to

the conversations between *hassatan* and God, he knows very well that he suffered

innocently. Job is evidently unconcerned with the concrete circumstances that

led to his maltreatment, and Job's inquiries into the nature of God are something

about which the reader knows no more than Job himself.

Job's hermeneutic effort accrues as the dialogues progress, but the first

questions he raises in the poetry are of a different sort: he wants to know how one

can possibly integrate such momentous losses (the loss of family, material wealth,

and especially the loss of of his life's moral calibration) into the life that he is now left to lead. The key to Job's torment lies at the climax of his first speech: "Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, and whom God has hedged in?" (Job 3:23). The concept of being "hedged in" by God is first introduced in *hassatan's* challenge in 1:10. The word שוך (its nominal form משוכה) leans in two directions: either it functions as a safeguard against misfortune,[123] or it functions as an impediment.[124] As *hassatan* uses it, it leans in both directions at once: God is protecting Job, but in this protection, he is also obscuring Job's potential to be truly righteous. In 3:23, the same concept is echoed, but a different word is used to suggest what *Job* thinks of God's hedging: סכך, which connotes shade or covering—something that obscures vision. With this thematic resonance but shift in language, Job suggests that God's hedging has not protected him, but has cast a shadow that obscures any path forward. The word "path" or "way" (דרך) is also evocative: in the classical wisdom tradition, דרך refers to a rewarding life lived in harmony with divine prescriptions for righteous conduct.[125] With this, Job diagnoses his fundamental problem as caused by God himself: by treating Job in a manner that does not reflect his adherence to a righteous lifestyle, God has utterly voided Job's understanding of how the world works. Job can no longer

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[123] E.g., "And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge (משוכתו) and it will be devoured" (Isaiah 5:5).

[124] E.g., "The way of the lazy is like a hedge of thorns (כמשכת חדק), but the path of the righteous is a highway (Proverbs 15:19).

[125] See Proverbs 4:10–19.

conceive of how his life might meaningfully continue, now that he knows from experience that the classical doctrine of punishment and reward[126] has been irrefutably negated and the rightful correspondence between cause and effect nullified.

Regarding this, Newsom's suggestion that "Job's comforters" actually *are* comforters is promising. She notes that what Job calls "turmoil" (רגז) is the mind boggling pain of experiencing events with no coherent meaning.[127] His suffering is so profound that he considers it non-narratable (hence his longing for the oblivion of death) and so incomprehensible that it can scarcely be processed. According to Newsom, his friends are merely attempting to restore narratibility to his experience, to fit it into a meaningful pattern.[128] She states at the outset that her aim is to rehabilitate the negative impression that Job's friends tend to make,[129] a necessary move for her argument that each moral imagination represented in the book attains equal footing. Newsom does an exemplary job of portraying the moral coherency of the friends as impassioned representatives of the classical wisdom tradition and the importance of righteous, devout behavior in full submission to the authority of God. This goal, however, leads her to read the friends' contributions to the dialogue selectively. One wonders, for instance,

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[126] See, e.g., Deuteronomy 7:12–16.

[127] Newsom, 94ff.

[128] Newsom, 101ff.

[129] Newsom, 90–91

how she might address Zophar's harsh and unsympathetic retort: "Should a multitude of words not be answered, and a man of empty words be right? Should your boasting silence men, and when you mock, should no one should shame you?...Know that God exacts from you less than your guilt deserves" (Job 11:2–3, 6). These words suggest that Zophar's principle motivation is not to provide Job's story with a narrative coherence, but to insist upon *his* right to speak on Job's experience at the expense of *Job's* right to speak on his own behalf. He takes personal offense at Job's insistence upon an experiential knowledge that challenges the friends' ideology, calling it "mocking" that deserves to be "shamed."

Again, the reader joins Job in the knowledge that his profound cognitive dissonance is objectively rooted in the truth of his experience, and so the friends contravene the hermeneutic narrative that Job initially introduces: how the overwhelming and destabilizing truth of his experience be integrated into a life that must go on. Eliphaz, for instance, refuses to acknowledge the reality of this experience. He hears Job's conclusion that the doctrine of punishment and reward can no longer be trusted, but he uses that same doctrine to conclude that Job's suffering must be a sure sign of his wickedness (Job 4:7). Eliphaz further claims that his own experiential knowledge should have more bearing on interpreting Job's circumstances than *Job's* experiential knowledge: "*As I have seen,* those who sow trouble reap it. By the blast of God they perish, and by the

breath of his anger they are consumed" (4:8–9).[130] Job articulates the

insufficiency of such a rhetorical move in his first response to Zophar: "All this I

have seen with my own eyes, I have heard it with my own ears and understood it.

What you know, I also know…now listen to my arguments and attend while I

make my case." (13:1–2, 6).[131] As Matitiatu Tzevat ably puts it:

> [Job's] misery is no evidence for sin on his part because he did not sin.…
> The friends' argument rests on doctrine; his argument is grounded in his
> life, his experience, his person. And since he knows himself, and since the
> course of his life lies open before everyone, he is compelled to affirm that
> the cause of the terrible atrocities that God has unleashed against him lies
> not in him but in God.[132]

Why, then, are Job's friends are so insistent about something that Job's

experience proves false—and so willing to resort to cruelty for the sake of their

insistence? The friends' loyalty lies not with Job's quest to integrate his past

experience into the possibility of a future, but to protect themselves from the

same ideological rupture that Job does not have the luxury of ignoring. Rather

than applying a hermeneutic that centers Job's experience, they read—or, rather,

misread—his experience according to the doctrinal principles of the safe,

comfortable classical wisdom tradition. Toward the end of Eliphaz's first speech,

his personal motivations for insisting upon Job's wickedness begin to emerge. He

maintains that his uncomplicated view of divine justice—a neat cause-effect

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[130] See also Job 5:3–5.

[131] See also Job 12:3; 21:3, 5.

[132] Matitiahu Tzevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966): 76.

system of punishment and reward—would prove true if Job would only admit his iniquity, and this argument is accompanied by a florid doxology of God (5:8–16). The friends would prefer that their familiar assumptions about the world remain unchallenged, and they dig their heels into these clearly insufficient assumptions at the cost of invalidating Job's self-understanding. Job speaks with the authority of his personal experience and his knowledge of himself, but his friends speak past him, interpreting his story not in light of the information that Job alone can provide, but according to whatever ideology provides *them* with the most comfort. With their non-responses, they are carrying on a conversation *about* Job but *without* him, and they rationalize Job's oppression in whatever way will reassure *them*.

I must reiterate that the reader, Job, and God himself know that Job is correct and that his friends are incontrovertibly wrong.[133] Not only do they make incorrect claims about the reason for Job's suffering, insisting on his wickedness despite Job's personal testimony to the contrary, but they multiply the already intolerable injustice of Job's treatment by refusing to countenance his perspective. Job, with whom the reader has been allied, interweaves his justified insistence upon his innocence with poignant pleas for empathy from his friends: "He who withholds kindness from his friend forsakes faith in the Almighty. My

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[133] See Job 10:7, in which Job imagines what he would say to God: "You know that I am without guilt."

brothers have been treacherous as a torrent bed running dry" (Job 21:15).[134] Job had asked for a way to integrate his experience into his life going forward, but more than that, he asks for his friends' support in his independent efforts to do so. He also asks that his friends at least take his account seriously, to allow themselves to face his suffering before they speak overtop of it: "Listen to my words, do listen, and may this be your comfort to me...Turn to me and be appalled, and place your hand upon your mouth, for when I remember, I am terrified, and shuddering seizes my flesh" (Job 21:2, 5–6).

With this, Job articulates with a high degree of clarity what a truly ethical hermeneutic engagement would look like. It is not to affirm an ideological system that stands over and against reality as it is experienced by the oppressed, but rather to sit with the oppressed, heed their words, trust their self-understanding above all else, and use this as the basis for reconfiguring an understanding of the world that better accounts for this reality. As Wayne Booth notes in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction,* narratives can be likened to friends who draw the reader into their company. The narrative company that the reader chooses to keep influences the reader's ethical formation. Narratives create opportunities for the reader to test out different ways of being in and engaging with their own worlds and the real people they come upon therein.[135] In the

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[134] Lit. "forsakes the fear of the Almighty."

[135] Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 201.

dialogues between Job and his friends, the reader is presented with a choice between two options: either they choose the company of Job's friends, or they choose the company of Job. In the narrative's invocation of these two positions, one is presented as incontestably better, while the other is built upon an unsympathetic and ultimately inhumane fallacy. At Tzevat puts it, "Neither logic nor clever dispositions of commonly held opinions nor glib talk can produce what does not exist: his iniquity."[136] What does exist within the narrative, and what the reader is equipped to verify, is the reality of Job's version of his story and the legitimacy of his anger at both an ideological system that would negate his experience and the so-called friends who leverage this ideological system to shore up an idea of justice that only affords *them* comfort. The reader may choose to keep the company of the narrative that the friends are constructing overtop of Job's, but as the overarching narrative of the book makes clear, this reader would be implicated in the friends' cruelty.

III. On Endings

As narratologist Peter Brooks explains, "The sense of a beginning must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending. We might say that we are able to read present moments—in literature, and, by extension, in life—as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of

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[136] Tzevat, 76.

the structuring power of endings."[137] Endings allow the reader to see how

individual events culminate into a meaning more significant than the sum of its

parts. Thus, the experience of a narrative is fundamentally a function of desire—

not only the simple desire for the satisfaction that closure brings, but the deeper

desire to step into the bounded space of a story when our own stories never

unfold so neatly, and never toward an orderly and definite end. The artistry of a

narrative, then, lies in how it arrives at its ending, what steps it takes to stimulate,

indulge, or frustrate the reader's desires. Does it arrive directly at the resolution

promised when the groundwork of the plot was laid, or does it take a more

circuitous route? Does it introduce a particular desire to the reader only in order

to frustrate it, to have the reader question what it was about herself that made her

become that kind of desirer in the first place?[138] The book of Job contains two

endings, each gratifying or frustrating the reader's desires in its own way. One is

the ending of the prose, and one the ending of the poetry. Like the hermeneutic

choice with which the reader was faced in the dialogues between Job and his

friends, she must now evaluate two endings—and in this evaluation, she must

decide what kind of reader she wants to be.

 If the prologue and epilogue are read as a single unit, then Job's

restoration is the perfect ending to this type of narrative. But while some vestiges

[137] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 94.

[138] Booth, 201.

of Job's subjectivity whispered in hushed tones in the prologue, such as his gestures of mourning, then his subjectivity is entirely erased in the epilogue's exclusively third-person description of the amount of his new wealth, the number of his new children, and the length of years he lived. If this ending belongs to anyone, it is the prose reader's rather than Job's. By preventing this reader from diverting her attention away from the next plot point and toward other ways of experiencing Job's story, Job is little more than the instrument of a plot that moves the reader toward the type of closure she had been told to want in the same terms that she had been given at the beginning: if Job's losses were to test his piety, then in passing the test he ought to be—and now is—restored. Whether or not this restoration brings any comfort to Job himself is beside the point, as the prose narrative's structure first orchestrates and then delivers on the reader's desire for a particular kind of resolution to a particular kind of plot, irrespective of Job's feelings on the matter. The satisfaction of the prose ending is accordingly measured numerically and by volume—it is not weighed emotionally, neither by Job's feelings nor by the reader's.

Elie Wiesel despairs of this ending, calling it "a sad metamorphosis, inexplicable in literary terms."[139] With these words, Wiesel gives voice to the feeling that this ending should by all rights be a happy one, but that it nevertheless leaves the reader feeling hollow and unfulfilled. I suggest, though,

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[139] Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends,* trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Summit Books, 1976), 233.

that this feeling is indeed explicable in literary terms—and that it is the intended narrative result. The reader gets the ending that she *thought* she wanted, that she was told to want, only for this ending to be thrown in her face and for her temptation toward it to be roundly critiqued. It is also the only suitable ending for the didactic narrative that Newsom describes. Job's external circumstances again match his deserts, and the balance between righteousness and reward has apparently been restored. The hollowness of this resolution constitutes a criticism of the tendency of didactic narratives to overlook the subjectivity of the characters in favor of making a moralistic point, and to privilege the abstract "moral of the story" over a subjective experience of suffering.

According to Brooks, "The narrative must tend toward its end, seek illumination in its own death. Yet it must be the right death, the correct end. The complication of the detour is related to the danger of the short circuit: the danger of reaching the end too quickly, of achieving the improper death."[140] A long detour is taken with the interjection of the poetic dialogues, which throw the spuriousness of the prose ending into high relief. The dialogues reintroduce the reader to a protagonist who is not interested in having his fortunes restored, but cares only that his subjective experience of life be validated. The prose narrative, taken on its own, reaches an improper end too quickly, but the reader only realizes this because of the poetic detour.

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[140] Brooks, 103–104.

Throughout the dialogues, Job rejects a facile ending for his story. Time and again, his friends thrust an easy answer upon him: if he would only just ignore his truth and believe in the system of retributive justice, then he could dissolve the pain of his cognitive dissonance. If only he would just call himself a sinner, whether he truly believed it or not, then the reader, like the friends, could return with relief to a world that retains its illusion of rationality. But Job and the reader both know that this easy answer not only fails to account for the truth of Job's experience, but would nullify his right to lay claim to this experience.

Job's demands a different kind of ending, and he precipitates it himself by calling for an explanation from God. At his wit's end after so many frustrating stalemates with his friends, Job refuses to stand condemned by the false witness of the disasters that he never deserved. At last taking matters into his own hands, he directly calls upon God to state the case against him (Job 31:35–37). Ironically, he answers with a series of questions to the effect that Job has no right to demand anything of the Almighty in the first place, and the Almighty has no obligation to deign to answer—but answer he does: "Who is this that darkens counsel with words lacking knowledge?" (Job 38:2); "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:4); "Do you know the statutes of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth?" (Job 38:33).

Job, of course, has no experience of these things; he can only absorb these questions and their message that God is God and is not beholden to narrow human imaginings of divine justice. This barrage of questions serves to remind

Job of his utter insignificance in the cosmic scope of creation. It is all the more

impactful, then, that God responds anyway and dignifies Job with a face-to-face

encounter. The fact of God's response wholly validates Job's subjectivity. At no

point does he suggest that Job deserved his suffering, because it would not be

true. Job was right all along, and by implicitly confirming this, God himself

confirms the injustice of the friends' approach to Job's story. If there is a

character within the fabula who emerges as the *you* confirming the *I* of Job, it is

God. This affirmation lies not simply in the fact that God speaks to Job, but in the

content of his speech as well. Norman Habel assesses it as follows:

> God enters into the very dispute of the book about himself. He becomes
> involved in the struggle to grasp what the mystery of God is all about...
> More important, however, than any intellectual answer to the dilemma of
> life and the apparent injustice of God is Job's personal experience of
> God...For Job the possibility of a new beginning grows out of his deep
> experience of the beginning of all things.[141]

Although God has not answered Job's immediate demand for an explanation of

his suffering, he does resolve the original quest that Job introduced in his very

first poetic speech: how he can possibly live again after all that he has endured.

Then, he wished he could return to a state before he had ever been born. Now,

God brings him back even further, to the very beginning of the cosmos. Through

language, Job has symbolically been taken back to a time before he ever existed,

and having personally encountered God and experienced God's sweeping

perspective of the cosmos, Job reemerges from the experience not quite the same

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[141] Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 200.

man that he was before. Job is shown the way to his new beginning, one no longer determined by the issue of retributive justice or the lack thereof. God's rejection of the system of retributive justice releases Job from his labors under an ideology that he cannot reconcile with the events of his life.

Job's final words read in Hebrew, על־כן אמאס ונחמתי על־עפר ואפר (Job 42:6). These final words, these most important words, are notoriously difficult to translate. The NRSV, among others, renders אמאס as "I despise myself," yet it is not rendered as a reflexive verb, nor is it accompanied by an objective pronoun. In the qal, it means "to reject" or "to refuse." A more viable translation, then, would be "I recant," signaling some revolution in perspective in light of novel point of view God has just provided.

It may also be read as the moment at which Job moves on from his hermeneutic narrative, ceasing his role as the interpreter of his own story and fully transitioning into being the subject of it. According to Brooks, narratives work as a "binding of textual energies that allows them to be mastered by putting them into serviceable form…within the economy of the narrative." In other words, the bounded space of a narrative filters and limits the messiness of real experiences. It holds them at a distance from which the reader can gain some objectivity, and it organizes these experiences in a logical progression that builds toward a finite conclusion. Put simply, narrative provides an opportunity for readers to process events in a more manageable way. Freud describes the goal of

psychoanalysis in a similar manner: "The doctor tries to compel [the analysand] to fit emotional impulses into…his life history, to submit them to intellectual consideration." As Brooks describes it, the goal is "to lead the analysand to understanding that the past is indeed past, and then to incorporate this past, as past, within the present, so that the life's story can once again progress." Thus, the creation of a personal narrative of trauma is a first step toward ultimately dispelling the need for that narrative. Job's hermeneutic narrative becomes his therapeutic narrative of trauma, and there is only one ending to these: that one must at some point dispense with the narrative and integrate the past into an ongoing present if one is to continue living in it.

The second component of Job's final utterance is also difficult to decipher. The verb נחמ in the niphal either means to comfort oneself or to repent. So, Job either repents on dust and ashes or comforts himself on dust and ashes. Another issue is purely interpretive: do the "dust and ashes" serve as symbolic representations of Job's mortality, or does Job return to the world in the same place where he left it: on the ashes. Narratively speaking, both possibilities are powerful. If they are symbols of the cycle of life and death, then they further signal the conclusion of the hermeneutic quest upon which Job embarked in his first poetic speech. If they are the literal ash heap upon which he sits, then Job and the reader together exit the story in the real world. Job has found his validation as a subject and is able to carry on, while the reader has been inculcated in an ethic of engagement with the story of the oppressed: not by

trusting the appearance of external circumstances in evaluating them, but by experiencing their stories with and through them.

According to Paul Ricoeur, "seeing-as"—that is, the temporary adoption of the world of a narrative and its characters—"could be the revealer of a 'being-as' on the deepest ontological level."[142] Narratives and their plots do more than simply describe. The experience of occupying a narrative space can transform the reader who will leave that space and enter into real ethical engagements. As Job's narrative efforts come to an end, the reader too looks up from the story and and begins to consider how the ethical formation it encouraged could impact the ways in which we interacts with her own world and its inhabitants.

IV. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have insisted, contra Newsom, that the narrator does encourage a particular ethical stance with respect to the story of Job. Although the overarching narrative of the book of Job is full of dialogue, it is not a true dialogic text as Mikhail Bakhtin defines the concept.[143] It does weigh different modes of ethical engagement, and it deems all but one wanting. However, it would neither be accurate to classify the book of Job as a monologic text. It is not, in Bakhtin's words, made up of "no-man's thoughts."[144] The truth

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[142] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* vol. 1, trans. K. McLaughlin et. al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), xi.

[143] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.

[144] Bakhtin, 6–7.

on which it ultimately lands is not a disembodied one; it does not exist independently of the utterer. The truth of the book of Job lies in its assertion that the only sound, ethical way to read someone's story is to engage in a hermeneutic that centers their subjective experience—and the narrator, in conversation with the reader, builds up this truth. Even when the narrator recedes as the *I* who speaks to the reader's *you,* the communicative relationship between the two parties is always present in the narrator's self-conscious arrangement of the text that the reader encounters. It is the narrator, who exists within biblical text, that draws the reader in line with the perspective of the oppressed, encouraging her at every turn to trust in his self-witness and to reject any hermeneutic that does not.

The Bible is not known for probing psychological depths. The internal, emotional states of its characters are rarely disclosed, and then only briefly. In a narrative as fraught and traumatizing as the aqedah, for instance, neither Abraham's nor Isaac's feelings on the matter are disclosed. The prose prologue of the book of Job, taken on its own, does appear to be a self-sufficient narrative, conveying all of the information required to access the type of story that it tells. But the prologue, like the aqedah, is "fraught with background."[145] Embedded within it are gestures toward the real, personal impact of the afflictions visited upon Job and his family. It is in his wife's vexed plea that he find a way to stop the barrage of tragedy (Job 2:9); it is in Job tearing his robe and shaving his head

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[145] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 12.

in gestures of mourning (Job 1:20); and it is in his retreat to sit upon the ashes (Job 2:8). The narrator draws this background into the foreground when the poetry begins, and this sustained attention to the psychological aftermath of trauma serves an important function within the canon: it draws attention to the very thing that readers of the Bible have grown accustomed to not knowing. With the deep, extended treatment of Job's subjective experience of his story, juxtaposed uneasily with with a type of narrative that privileges everything but, the book of Job makes explicit that such subjective experiences are always there— even when the narrative skates upon their surfaces, and even when the reader is habituated to their absence. It is there when Tamar weeps through her exit from the narrative stage, as the story of her rape yields to the drama between her rapist and their brother (2 Samuel 13:19–20). It is there when Bathsheba is pulled into the king's bed, her husband consequently murdered and her child sacrificed for David's sin, even though her immediate narrative purpose is to occasion David's character development (2 Samuel 11). And it is there with the Levite's concubine, raped to death by a violent horde of Benjaminites to whom her master had given her. As though she were not objectified enough, her dismembered corpse is used as a rallying cry for war (Judges 19). The book of Job's narrative juxtapositions ultimately chastise the reader for yielding to the temptation to overlook the subjectivity of characters incidental to more immediate narrative ends.

I have refrained from weaving feminist analysis throughout the preceding exposition in order to allow the book's hermeneutic logic to assert itself in its own

terms. I hope, though, that the book of Job's powerful parallels with feminist hermeneutics have already begun to emerge. Just as Job's external, observable circumstances suggest to his friends that he must deserve to be laid low, the external, observable circumstances of biblical women naturalize a gendered hierarchy which finds them at the bottom. Women's subordination makes their stories and experiences appear to be less significant and less worthy of societal and readerly attention, which, in a vicious cycle, further justifies and contributes to their social subordination. The narrative structuring of the book of Job, however, insistently divorces external appearances from intrinsic integrity and worthiness. Through this narrative structuring, the friends are roundly criticized for assuming that the outward signs of Job's subjection should absolve them from attending to Job's subjective experience and self-estimation. Moreover, as with Cain and Hagar, the face-to-face encounter that God arranges with Job divinely legitimates Job's right to be heard, disavowing the assumption that the social oppression enacted by the friends is reflective of divine attitudes. However God's response from the whirlwind may or may not answer Job's inquiries, it certainly asserts that God is not bound to narrow human ideologies and that the friends' view of retributive justice is human artifice. This proposition easily extends to comment upon the gender hierarchy as well. Finally, the friends' insistence upon their insensitive reading of Job's story is explained by their need to cling to a world order in which their position is secured and on which they can speak with unchallenged authority. Within this system as they present it, they can maintain

their moral and social superiority, and so they naturally want to keep it. But despite their constant undermining of Job's experiential knowledge, and despite their claims to the authority of their own experiential knowledge over and against his, they cannot erase what Job knows to be true about himself. The very existence of Job's subjectivity poses an immanent challenge to the spurious basis of the friends' authority, just as women's subjectivities—the way they understand themselves, the way they would tell their own stories if they were only given the chance—poses an immanent challenge to patriarchal denials of women's self-representations. The impact of a woman telling her own story, and how the exposure of her subjectivity undercuts the edifices of the patriarchy that would silence her, will be explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5
THE SONG OF SONGS AS AN IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF BIBLICAL PATRIARCHALISM

I. Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I have sought to unearth a "biblical hermeneutic of the marginalized," suggesting that signal biblical treatments of marginalized figures prevail upon the reader to engage sympathetically with the subjective experiences of the oppressed. In order to establish that these biblical treatments amount to a hermeneutic that is native to the biblical text, and which may be extrapolated to apply to other texts within the canon, I have focused on examples that speak to the relationship between social marginalization and the subjectivities of the marginalized in terms more general than feminist criticism. I proffered this as a way to locate the potential for feminist-style readings to be encouraged by the biblical text itself—even when explicit biblical treatments of gender tend to reflect the social realities of women's marginalization and oppression at the hands of the patriarchy in the biblical world. In the present chapter, I now apply these same methods to a text that does deal explicitly with gender, to see if the application of this hermeneutic might shed new light on a text whose gender politics have, perhaps surprisingly, been the subject of much unresolved debate: the Song of Songs.

Indeed, the Song of Songs has served as a biblical cornerstone among feminist critics. While the Hebrew Bible as a whole is almost exclusively dominated by male authors, male characters, and male perspectives, it is the

voice of the Song's female speaker that bookends the text. The reader is invited to see her world through her eyes, and it is for such reasons that Phyllis Trible has celebrated the Song as a proclamation of gender equality in which there is "no male dominance, no female subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex."[146] Athalya Brenner goes so far as to say that "[t]here is no equality of the sexes in the Song…There is female superiority."[147]

And yet, another subset of scholars recognizes the patriarchalism that persists within this text. Donald Polaski, for example, focuses on those tense and, at turns, violent moments when the Shulammite encounters the city guards. From this he concludes that the Song is yet another example of patriarchal hegemony: far from liberating the female character from the reach of male control, the Song constantly re-inscribes her within it.[148] David J. A. Clines goes a step further, classifying the Song as the product of a thoroughly androcentric literary economy within which the Shulammite is but a pornographic fantasy constructed by the male gaze: by patriarchal standards, she is an "ideal" woman who does nothing but remain inside the home and dream about a lover who, in this male imagination, comes to her only at his own convenience. Because of this,

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[146] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 161.

[147] "To See Is to Assume: Whose Love Is Celebrated in the Song of Songs?" *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 3 (1993), 273.

[148] "What Will Ye See in the Shulammite? Women, Power, and Panopticism in the Song of Songs," *Biblical Interpretation* 5, no. 1 (1997), 64-81.

on Clines' view, the Song of Songs is little more than the "stuff of pornography."[149]

This debate concerning the Song's representations of gender—and particularly of the female gender—tends to be framed in stark either/or terms: either this text is an indisputable manifesto for female equality, or it is a mere reinforcement of the Bible's patriarchal status quo. I contend, however, that this eagerness to arrive at the Song's fundamental "point" about gender leads to ultimately unsatisfying readings of the text, for two primary reasons.

First, as discussed in the initial chapter of this dissertation, feminist critics must ask not only whether their interpretations adequately account for the richness and complexity of a given text—as any interpretation should—but also whether and to what effect the interpretation might be utilized by women whose lives are negatively impacted by patriarchalism in very real ways. On the one hand, while the gynocentrism of the Song of Songs is certainly striking, and certainly refreshing amid dozens of androcentric biblical texts, to focus solely on the Song's atypical gynocentrism may not be the most generative way to place the authentic experiences of women within biblical discourse. If the Song of Songs is seen as a representation of women completely free from the dominant biblical patriarchal convention, then this text—and the women who seek representation in it—in fact remain siloed. It is tantamount to admitting that, when it comes to

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[149] "Why is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

gender, this text is wholly unlike any other in the biblical corpus, and while it may

be sought as a feminist refuge, it remains on the ideological margins with the

women who read it. On the other hand, to subsume the Song's pronounced

gynocentrism under the dark cloud of its accounts of female oppression may offer

readers an opportunity to inspect and give name to the analogous forces of their

own oppression, but it also denies the liberatory potential of a text which, against

all odds, does find itself speaking with a woman's voice in a canon otherwise

impoverished of sustained female perspectives.

Second, this debate is premised on the question of whether or not the

Shulammite remains under the oppressive thumb of the patriarchy. I suggest,

however, that this question is not one upon which the text itself means to dwell.

That patriarchalism pervaded the biblical world is an inescapable fact, just as it is

today. The text of the Song of Songs witnesses a woman negotiating this world in

a strikingly relatable and realistic manner. Then as now, the notion of gender is

imbricated in a number of often conflicting ideologies and realities. For example,

a female CEO has, by virtue of the position she has achieved, been acknowledged

for the superiority of her skill despite the fact that she is a woman in a man's

executive world. But she may nonetheless, consciously or unconsciously, tailor

her behavior according to the cultural expectations of her gender as a means of

fortifying her position among her male colleagues. For instance, she may issue

her directives to her male subordinates more gently than would a man in her

position, so as to evade the negative female stereotypes (e.g., "ballbuster") that

would trouble her authority and her ability to lead effectively. In other words, she

may embrace the personal and professional power she has earned while at the

same time modulating the experience in and through patriarchal social mores. At

the very least, then, the persistence of such widely divergent (indeed, completely

opposed) readings of the Song's gender dynamics testifies both to the complexity

of the issue of gender itself and to the Song's underlying awareness of this

complexity.

Therefore, if the Song of Songs appears to have contradictory attitudes

about the gendered status of its female character, such that biblical critics can

offer equally compelling cases for both possibilities, then I suggest that this

apparent irresolution should not be regarded as a problem to be solved on the

way to settling on a neat answer to whether the Song is or is not patriarchal.

Rather, it may be regarded as a virtue of the text, enhancing its realism and

accurately reflecting the lived experiences of women as subjects navigating their

own patriarchal societies. Just as the Shulammite will emerge as a full subject in

her own right, even as she is literarily placed squarely within a patriarchal world,

so too must the contemporary female reader manage her society's ideological

expectations while at the same time interpreting and laying claim to her own

lived experiences. Thus, to reduce too readily the Song's contribution to the

biblical conversation to a single, unambiguous "point" about gender risks

obscuring the Song's vivid engagement with the dynamic interplay between

ideologies of gender and the ways in which that ideological world is navigated by

the gendered actors enmeshed within it. I submit, then, that the Song's seeming

ambivalence on the issue of gender is not only an essential feature of how the text

itself negotiates the issue, but also of how it invites its readers to negotiate it.

Here again, narratology offers a viable method for reconciling the poles of

female liberation and patriarchal oppression between which the Song of Songs

vacillates—a method for tracing the ways in which the text moves between the

perspectives of the male and female characters, when and to what affect it grants

each character the narrative agency of direct speech, etc. I argue that these

narratological features render the Song of Songs uniquely capable of capturing

the richness of the gender-inflected experiences of the Shulammite, while also

allowing this text to do more than simply offer an exposition of gender. By using

the Shulammite's and bridegroom's perspectives to show movement between the

poles of gynocentrism and the androcentric norm—and, in particular, by using

the Shulammite's voice to push toward the former while never completely leaving

the realism of the latter behind—the Song is able to offer a provocative and

nuanced *critique* of the patriarchal world in which the Shulammite finds herself.

By privileging the subjectivity and voice of the Shulammite *even as* she is

subjugated by the edifices of the patriarchy, the Song of Songs crafts a

hermeneutic stance for the reader according to which the forces of her subjection

—both the overt and the more subtle—must be first acknowledged so that they

can be addressed with a critical eye. In other words, the persistence of

patriarchalism in the Song, which has troubled feminist critics' efforts to claim

this text as an unambiguous feminist ally, may be regarded as the scaffolding upon which this text mounts a critique of the patriarchy, in ways remarkably similar to the work that feminist critics do when they expose and assess the effects of patriarchalism in their own societies.

More specifically, I propose that a narratological analysis will reveal the Song engaging in a form of *ideological criticism*, a mode of discourse that exposes and shines light on embedded dominant ideologies while at the same time discovering the competing views that the dominant ideology would mute. In the case of the Song, patriarchalism continues to function as the dominant ideology in the Shulammite's world, while the Shulammite herself—her own subjective experiences, and her efforts to re-narrate and redefine those experiences in her own terms—emerges as the discursive means by which the ideology of the patriarchy is questioned. To read the Song as a form of ideological criticism offers a way to reconcile the text's gynocentric subversiveness with the patriarchal conventions that continue to operate within it. Only by acknowledging the patriarchalism in the Song is it possible to appreciate the trenchancy of the text's critique of the same—and how it calls upon its readers to join it in thinking critically about an ideology that would mute the Shulammite's voice.

II. The Persistence of Patriarchalism: A Preliminary Exposition of the Male Gaze

In order to execute this type of reading, of course, it is necessary first to acknowledge the extent to which the Song continues to function within a patriarchal idiom. As mentioned above, feminist critics have resisted this step, opting instead to highlight the extent to which the Song seems to be liberated from that patriarchal idiom. To be sure, this tendency is not unwarranted. The majority of the Song's content is spoken in the first-person voice of a female narrator. This would seem to be a sure sign that the typical literary protocol of the Hebrew Bible—in which male characters and implied male narrators do most if not all of the looking, telling, and explaining—is not at play here. The Shulammite's frequent dialogues with the daughters of Jerusalem seem to promote a sense of female community unchaperoned by men, and the mention of "the mother's house" is suggestive of a matriarchal rather than patriarchal family unit.[150] By no means do I intend to downplay these compelling gynocentric elements; I mean only to suggest that such gynocentrism is far from absolute within the text, and that it stands in productive tension with the patriarchal elements that still persist within it.

One of the most prominent ways in which the Song invokes a patriarchal gender ideology is through its pervasive interest in the gaze. In psychoanalysis,

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[150] For a full treatment of the maternal kinship unit in the Hebrew Bible, see Cynthia R. Chapman, *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

the act of looking is associated with power: the pleasure of looking, or scopophilia, is derived from the feeling of mastery that comes with being the subject of the verb of looking over and against the object of the subject's gaze. The object of the gaze is vulnerable, exposed, while the subject of the gaze is protected from this vulnerability, therefore occupying a position of relative power.[151] In other words, the gazer means to assert some degree of control over the gazed-upon, while the gazed-upon is in an objectified position.

In the Song, the roles of beholder and beheld fall neatly along gendered lines. Although much of the text is structured as though it were a true dialogue between the Shulammite and the bridegroom—alternating their descriptions of one another's physical attributes as though they enjoy equality within the dynamic of a loving gaze—a closer look reveals that this is not the case. Throughout the text, there is a consistent pattern according to which the bridegroom addresses the Shulammite directly, referring to her in the second person, while the Shulammite describes the bridegroom indirectly, referring to him in the third person. For example, in the first of these quasi-dialogues, the bridegroom says, "I compare *you,* my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots" (1:9). The Shulammite replies, "*My beloved* is to me a bag of myrrh that

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[151] Freud was the first to theorize scopophilia with respect to childhood erotic development: the child seeks access to, and therefore mastery over, the private and forbidden by observing his parents' genitals and bodily functions. See *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 58-60. Jacques Lacan, who further developed this psychoanalytic theory, is the name most often associated with scopophilia, and Laura Mulvey employs it at length in her discussions of culture and aesthetics—both of whom will be discussed at length below.

lies between my breasts" (1:13). This pattern holds throughout the text.[152]

Moreover, at several points throughout her third-person descriptions, the

Shulammite vocalizes her sense of impotence in being able to visually, and

physically, access her lover. She frequently expresses her desires in wishful

language, aware of her limited agency to conjure him in the flesh: "O that his left

hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!" (2:6).[153] The

consistency with which the bridegroom employs the second person in speaking *to*

his lover, while the Shulammite employs the third person in speaking *about* her

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[152] For the bridegroom's second-person address, see also 1:15-17, 4:1-15, 6:4-10, and 7:1-9. For the Shulammite's third-person address, see also 2:3-4, 5:10-16. This is not to say that the Shulammite never addresses her lover directly—she does in 1:2–4, 7:11–12, and 8:1–2. In these instances, however, she does not describe her lover.

[153] See also: "Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits" (4:16); "O that you were like a brother to me, who nursed at my mother's breast! If I met you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me" (8:1).

It is also possible to render 2:6 (שמאלו תחת לראשי וימינו תחבקני) in the simple present tense as "His left hand is under my head and his right hand embraces me," because it lacks the typical particle expressing a wish (cf. 8:1, מי יתנך כאח לי). In context, however, the expression of a wish is strongly implied. First, the bridegroom is spoken *of* here in the third person, while in the verse immediately following, the daughters of Jerusalem are spoken *to* in the second person. This suggests that, in the narrative present, she is in the company of the daughters of Jerusalem rather than the bridegroom (2:7). This present tense, imperative address to the daughters of Jerusalem contrasts with the perfect tense used to describe her past experience in the bridegroom's house of wine, during which she also refers to him in the third person (2:3–4). This context therefore points to a conversation taking place between the Shulammite and the daughters of Jerusalem when the bridegroom is not among them. Second, although the plea, "Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love" (2:5) seems to be directed toward the bridegroom himself, this description of lovesickness is conventionally employed in Egyptian analogues to describe the feeling of being apart from one's lover (Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985], 109). Identical phrasing is used later in the Song when it is clear the bridegroom is not there ("I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved tell him this: I am faint with love" [5:8]).

lover, suggests that the bridegroom is verbally protected from the vulnerability that attends being the object of the gaze, even in the context of mutual love.

The Shulammite's availability to the gaze, and the bridegroom's ability to evade the gaze, is reinforced by their respective physical emplacements within the world of the Song. The bridegroom is frequently associated with the language of open spaces and free movement:

> "Tell me, you whom I love, where you pasture your flock." (1:7)

> "Look, he is coming, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag." (2:8-9)

> "Upon my bed at night, I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him; I called him, but he did not answer." (3:1)

> "Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow upon my garden so that its fragrance may be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits" (4:16)

> "Where has your beloved gone, O fairest among women? Which way has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you?" (6:1)

Because the poem associates the bridegroom with the open, public domain, one might assume that he would actually be the more visually available of the pair. However, when viewed against the broader backdrop of gender dynamics within the Song, the opposite is the case: the bridegroom's association with free movement contrasts with the Shulammite's association with enclosed spaces. The implication of this language of free movement is that the bridegroom uniquely possesses the freedom of choice to decide when and if he would like to be seen. This gendered social dynamic is recognized through the Shulammite's frequent

acknowledgment of his evasiveness to her: he becomes available for view only when he makes himself available by his approach, and so often does the Shulammite wonder at his whereabouts and wait for him to scale the countryside to make himself visually available to her.

The Shulammite, on the other hand, is consistently available to her lover's gaze. She and her female companions can dependently be found in bounded, designated locations, such as the family's private vineyard (1:6), the bridegroom's banqueting house (1:4), within the walls of the home (2:9), or in the bedroom (5:2-6). The Shulammite's physical enclosure extends to the more fanciful, figurative expressions of her relationship to her lover: she has been brought into the king's chambers (1:4), and she is herself likened to a garden enclosed (4:12).[154]

Two things are striking about the locations associated with the female characters. First, the fact that each location is variously designated as private implies that they are owned, such that the Shulammite finds herself occupying spaces that belong to someone other than herself. It is also worth noting that she is frequently the direct object of actions or decisions made by male characters with respect to the spaces that they own. The king *brings* her into his chambers

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[154] In 1:17, the bridegroom imagines their home as one they share together, and as the forest itself: "The beams of *our* house are cedar, *our* rafters pine." In continuation of this metaphor, however, the Shulammite talks of the bridegroom bringer her to the banqueting house. As discussed below, the bridegroom frequently enjoins her to follow him, but she as a woman, having internalized the prescribed boundaries of her physical spaces, is not described as entering male spaces into which she was not brought. (The exception is her ominous encounters with the watchmen in the city.)

(1:4), her lover *brings* her into his banqueting house, and her brothers *make* her

keeper their vineyards because they are angry with her (1:6).[155] When she herself

is figuratively likened to "a garden locked, a fountain sealed," (4:12), it is because

her lover declares her so. As this falls in the middle of a long speech idealizing the

Shulammite, the comparison suggests that the bridegroom relishes in imagining

his lover in these terms: her confinement, here extending metaphorically to her

sexuality,[156] is precisely what makes her a viable romantic and sexual female

partner.

Second, even when she is within spaces that she claims as her own ("*our*

wall" [2:9], *her* bedroom when her lover calls [5:2]), her limited agency within

those spaces is emphasized. Although she is behind her wall, the bridegroom

peers through her windows and lattices (2:9),[157] and although she is behind the

bolted door of her bedroom, her beloved "thrust his hand into the opening" (5:4).

These instances speak of the Shulammite's ideological place as a woman in the

text's gendered cartography. She cannot exercise ownership, and therefore

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[155] The Hebrew simply reads "the vineyards" with no pronominal suffix to mark the vineyards the property of the brothers specifically, but the point remains that the brothers are dictating her place and occupation there.

[156] "Garden" and "fountain" are frequent metaphors for female sexuality. See, for example, Proverbs 5:15-17, in which the same metaphor appears in the context of a discussion of sexual purity and fidelity: "Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well…Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth."

[157] It is possible to imagine that, in this episode, the Shulammite is standing outside and watching the bridegroom approach the house from afar. However, given that the Shulammite is so often associated with enclosed spaces, this interpretation strikes me as rather unlikely. And nonetheless, the fact remains that the bridegroom is peeping in to where he expects the Shulammite to be.

control, over the spaces which her body occupies. Her ability to exercise control

over the visual availability of her body within those spaces is therefore limited.

Moreover, all of these places—the walls of one's own home, the inner chambers of

the king's house, a secluded vineyard, and a fenced-in garden—imply a

reasonable expectation of privacy, where the occupants would assume that they

are not being watched. Within the text, however, these spaces function as static

points on a map for finding and beholding the Shulammite. That she is enclosed

within them means not that she can find privacy there, but that she is available to

be viewed by freely moving men there.

It is beside the point whether the Shulammite, if imagined as an actual

historical personage, was literally physically confined. In the figurative world of

the text, her description of her relationship with her lover is deeply inflected by

this gendered cartography—and in a way that her bridegroom's has the luxury not

to be. He asks her to come away with him more than once (1:8, 2:13), but there is

no indication that she follows. This suggests that while the bridegroom has not

internalized the ideological expectations of how and where women should and

should not be seen, the Shulammite is so keenly aware of them that they

profoundly inform the way she speaks about her love story.

As such, Michel Foucault's discussion of the panopticon offers an

accessible conceptual framework for understanding the psychological effect of

this visual economy. The panopticon is a theoretical prison cell; it has a window

facing a central observation point by which the prisoner is always available to the

visual scrutiny of the observer. But while the observer remains safely beyond the prisoner's view, the prisoner never knows when she is being watched, and so she conducts herself always with the knowledge she may well be. The observer's gaze and the authority that attends it are virtually inescapable,[158] and indeed, the Shulammite is almost always available to the male gaze, even when by all rights she should not be. Everywhere the Shulammite finds herself, she is in a panopticon: a bounded place where she must anticipate the possibility of being watched at any given moment. Male figures, on the other hand, are not only the implied overseers of those spaces and the people occupying them, but they are also free to leave these spaces at will.

The contrast—and the punitive affect—between the bridegroom's unfettered movement and the Shulammite's enclosure is most keenly felt in those episodes in which the Shulammite does attempt to transgress her prescribed boundaries. She describes the first of these excursions:

> Upon my bed at night,
> I seek the one I love;
> I seek him, but I do not find him.[159]
> "Let me rise and go about the city,

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[158] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 195ff.

[159] The sense of the tenses of these verbs are difficult to render. Habitual action is an unusual translation for the perfect verbs "to seek" (בקשתי—lit. "I sought") and "to find" (לא מצאתיו—lit. "I did not find him"). That לילות is plural, however, seems to indicate that this seeking is a habitual occurrence, and a similar episode is recounted more than once throughout the Song (see discussion of chapter 5 below). The question of tense is relevant to the discussion of the bridegroom's customary unavailability to the Shulammite, and so, given the context and the weight of the evidence, I here use the habitual sense.

> in the streets and in the plazas.
> Let me seek the one I love."
> I seek him, but I do not find him.
> The watchmen found me,
> going about in the city.
> "The one I love—have you seen him?"[160] (3:1-3)

Here, the bridegroom's elusiveness to the Shulammite is thrice emphasized, both by her words and in contradistinction to her own visual accessibility to male figures. She had no sooner bemoaned her trouble in finding her lover than she herself is found instead: "I seek him, but I do not find him. The sentinels found *me*" (3:3). In this case, the ending is a happy one. She does find her lover, and with no serious consequence. Nevertheless, the specter of male authority and the Shulammite's subjection to it loom large. The sentinels do nothing to either help or hinder her search, but their presence is still felt. What matters is that they are there, that they remind us of the boundaries and the gendered power dynamics to which the Shulammite is unavoidably subject.

The watchmen's wordless presence in the texts denotes the omnipresence of the dominant power structure by which men wield the objectifying power of the gaze. In abstaining from answering the Shulammite's question about her lover's whereabouts, the sentinels tacitly act against the interests of the Shulammite and in favor of the bridegroom's right to avoid her gaze. Though they

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[160] Lacking a word such as לאמור to explicitly introduce direct speech, it is possible that the watchmen don't answer because she did not speak aloud to them—that she only wondered to herself whether they might have seen her beloved. However, the question "Have *you* seen him?" is addressed to a second-person masculine plural audience, when one would expect an internal musing to read, "Have *they* seen him?" Additionally, direct speech throughout the Song of Songs is rarely denoted with a verbal marker. See, for example, 5:2: "Listen! My beloved is knocking. 'Open to me my sister, my love...'"

may be the watchmen of the city, they decline here to be the watchers of its male citizens, indicating that the bridegroom, in his maleness, transcends this system of visual discipline.[161]

With the Shulammite's second excursion into the city, it becomes clear that the only reason she found her lover the first time was that she was given implicit consent by the male watchmen, who chose not to actively interfere with her search. The full significance of their authority is realized with the Shulammite's second attempt to find her lover. This time, though, the outcome is not so fortunate. Again she seeks the bridegroom in the city but cannot find him, and again she is found instead: "The watchmen found me, making their rounds in the city. They beat me, they bruised me, they stripped me of my mantle, those watchmen of the walls" (5:7). Here, the Shulammite is physically exposed at the watchmen's discretion. They not only control who she sees, but how much of *her* is seen. When the watchmen do choose to enforce the hegemony of the male gaze over and against the Shulammite's ability to see her lover, her search is brought to a brutal and violent end.

Suggestively, the watchmen's actions are neither condoned nor condemned within the text—neither by the implied poet nor by the victim of their violence. Their presence, it seems, is taken as a given, their authority left unquestioned and their violence perhaps even expected. One of the

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[161] With respect to this point, Polaski makes his only explicit mention of the watchmen as enforcing agents of the male gaze. He notes briefly, "While the watchmen are occupied with keeping an eye on the Shulammite, the man eludes their gaze" (75).

distinguishing features of an ideology is its ability to become naturalized, to appear so commonsensical and obvious that it need not even be named and is simply accepted as "the way things are."[162] With this silence—perhaps even resignation—comes the surest the sign that a deeply rooted ideology of gender is at play in the Song, and that it is thoroughly and savagely patriarchal.

In sum, the male gaze, and the control that attends it, serves as one of the primary means by which the Song establishes itself and the Shulammite within a patriarchal world. The question, then, is whether the text's integration of this patriarchal ideology is meant to condone it, or whether a critique of this patriarchalism may be unearthed through a narratological study of the text.

III. The Song of Songs as Ideological Criticism: A Narratological Study

a. Ideological Criticism

Ideological criticism, as a method, analyzes texts as cultural "artifacts" which, implicitly or explicitly, offer windows into the dominant ideologies of their day. The production of an ideological artifact requires certain resources, such as education and the social clout and financial means necessary for the dissemination of the artifact. As such, ideological artifacts more often than not reify an ideology that protects the interests of dominant parties. The ideological critic discerns what ideology is represented by the artifact, and from there

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[162] Gale Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Women as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 15.

analyzes the rhetorical moves made by the artifact in service to shoring up that ideology. Ideological artifacts will often manifest an awareness of the weaknesses and contradictions within a given ideology, nodding to these challenges in order to rhetorically defeat them, to resolve the contradictions in such a way that the dominant ideology will be reinforced all the more.[163] The ideological critic looks to the ways in which the artifact attempts to resolve its rhetorically contrived challenges in order to reconstruct the real problems that moved the generator of the artifact to dispel them.

It is possible, however, for an ideological artifact to contradict and subvert the dominant ideology more overtly. In a sense, a subversive ideological artifact can perform a type of ideological criticism of its own.[164] It will insist that there is a better ideology, one which more adequately accounts for the actual needs and experiences of the people who find themselves subject to it.

The Song of Songs certainly does describe a patriarchal gender ideology, presenting this ideology as fully naturalized. However, if it were in fact an artifact tacitly supporting the ideology of gender it describes, then it would emerge as "a symbolic solution of real contradictions, inviting imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolved ideological dilemmas."[165] In other words, it would introduce the "problem" of the Shulammite being violently oppressed within the patriarchal

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[163] Yee, 24.

[164] Yee, 22.

[165] Yee, 25.

ideological system, only to resolve that problem in such a way that her oppression would emerge as right and just. If the Song were functioning as a reaffirmation of the dominant gender ideology it presents, then we would expect to find the Shulammite "learning her lesson," becoming more forcefully inscribed in her female place within the ideological system. This, however, is not the case. As the following narratological analysis of the Song will show, it is more accurate to see the text as performing an ideological critique of its own: it uses the Shulammite to point to the fissures within the established patriarchy, but instead of leading her to reaffirm it, the text witnesses her finding her own measure of empowerment in her subjective reclamation of her experiences.

b. An Initial Narratological Sketch of the Song of Songs

To be clear, the Song of Songs is not, strictly speaking, a narrative. Although it consists of a series of interconnected events and speech-acts, it lacks a plot with a clear beginning, middle, end, and resolution. As J. Cheryl Exum beautifully puts it, "Its progression is not linear, but rather meandering. It surges forward and circles back upon itself, continuously and effortlessly repeating its acts of conjuring and reissuing its invitation to the reader…The prolonging of desire and of fulfillment stretching across the span of the poem plays an essential part in the Song's effectiveness."[166] Nevertheless, despite its resistance to plot

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[166] J. Cheryl Exum, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 11-12.

development, the Song readily yields to the narratological method. I adopt Mieke

Bal's basic definition of what a narrative text entails:

> A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee ("tells" the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A *story* is the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and "colouring" of a fabula. A *fabula* is a series of logically or chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors.[167]

The Song of Songs easily meets this threshold. It builds a literary world, and it

contains those artfully structured literary elements that direct the reader's

attentions and sympathies in deliberate ways. For instance, there is an implied

author behind the text who ultimately manages its arrangement, handing off

points of view and direct speech. There is an embedded narrator in the

Shulammite, who takes the fabula that makes up her experiences (places, times,

characters, etc.) and communicates them to the embedded audience represented

by the daughters of Jerusalem. There are protagonists (the lovers seeking union)

and antagonists (the watchmen, the Shulammite's brothers) who present

obstacles. Because the gendered world of the Song of Songs is built, explored, and

opened to the reader through these literary features, the narratological approach

offers a practicable means for unpacking the text's discourse and appreciating

how it impacts the reader—even without the element of an overarching plot that

is so often associated with narrative.

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[167] Bal, *Narratology,* 5.

In the Song, there are two narrative agents who arrange the fabula—the raw materials of the narrative—into a cohesive story: the implied author, and the Shulammite as embedded narrator. The implied author, unnamed in the text, acts as its conductor. He orders and arranges the dialogues of the characters and makes choices about who speaks, when, and through whom the narrated events and experiences will be focalized. If any feature of the narrative would represent the interests of the dominant ideology, it would be the implied author: the force who ultimately controls the flow of information to the reader. If this text were interested in resolving the conflicts within a patriarchal ideology so as to reinforce that ideology, then the invisible hand of the implied author would be the one to do it. However, this implied author opts out of his own capacity to weigh in authoritatively on the gender ideology exhibited. Instead, he cedes this narrative power to the Shulammite by allowing her extended intervals of direct speech. He makes it so that what the audience hears is the Shulammite's own subjective understanding of her experiences—and not a third-party representation of the interests of the patriarchy. Indeed, nearly the entirety of the Song is focalized through the eyes of the Shulammite, the embedded narrator. She, unlike the bridegroom, is paired with a narratively embedded audience in the daughters of Jerusalem, the party to whom she recounts her experiences. As an embedded audience, the daughters of Jerusalem stand in for the actual audience of the reader, who hears these same recollections along with the daughters. A relationship is thus mediated between the Shulammite and the

actual audience: the actual audience is positioned as a friend to her, in her confidence, and it is her version of the story that the audience hears.

This narrative choice is highly significant. It is widely acknowledged both within the field of narratology and in theories pertaining to other more visual mediums, such as film and art, that the audience naturally adopts the main protagonist as the surrogate eyes through which to take in the events narrated.[168] In this way, the Song encourages its audience to identify with the Shulammite and with her subjectivity as she recounts her experiences. This choice is especially striking because there is a male character, readily available in the fabula, who could easily function as the focalizer and who, according to the ideology of the gaze which the Song presents, *should* be the primary owner of the gaze into the narrative as it unfolds. Laura Mulvey notes that the male figure in a narrative is typically "the bearer of the look of the spectator": "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence."[169] Given that the Song thoroughly establishes a norm according to which the woman is the image and the man is the bearer of the look, the choice to focalize the narrative through the eyes of the female character is already an

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[168] Bal, *Narratology,* 8, 132–153. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010), 2084ff.

[169] Mulvey, 2089.

indicator of the Song's subversive posture with respect to the gender ideology it displays. The expectation that the main male character should act as the audience's surrogate eyes is upended. This agency is granted to a female character instead.

For instance, the bridegroom speaks three *wasfs*, or encomia to his lover's body.[170] They are addressed directly to her in the second person, indicating that she is in his presence and physically available for his view. The *wasf* in chapter 7 is the most explicit of these: it lingers on her exposed navel, which is likely a euphemism for her genitalia.[171] Thus, the bridegroom's visual access to his lover's body is total, and he is able to project his sexual desires upon that screen.[172] The Shulammite, on the other hand, speaks only one full *wasf* to his three, and it is related in the third person as an imaginative recollection.[173] This again reinforces the pattern that the Shulammite, as a woman in a patriarchal society, does not enjoy the same visual access to her lover, and that even on the level of close interpersonal interactions—even in the context of mutual love—the right to the direct gaze remains firmly within male territory.

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[170] 4:1–15, 6:4–10, 7:1–9.

[171] Ariel and Chana Bloch, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 617-618.

[172] See also the discussion above about his likening her to a garden enclosed and a fountain sealed.

[173] 5:10–16.

On the one hand, it is true that, because the bridegroom delivers his *wasfs* in the second person directly to his lover, the audience is engaging with his present moment of gazing at the Shulammite. On the other hand, however, the fact that the Shulammite's *wasf* is in the third person, addressed directly to her audience, more acutely aligns the audience's perspective with her own: the audience's literary "gaze" at the male form is completely mediated through the Shulammite's perspective. In terms of the socialized economy of the gaze within the world of the Song, the Shulammite is enclosed, passive, and beheld. In terms of narrative agency, however, it is she who holds the power of the gaze: it is her audience, and she is the one who directs its gaze at the bridegroom's male body.

Moreover, because the bridegroom delivers his *wasfs* in the second person, directly to his lover, the audience is being granted access to a private moment between the two lovers. And, because the Shulammite is established from the outset as the embedded narrator—the only of the two to relay information about her lover in the third person—it is entirely possible that, even here, she is controlling the flow of information to her audience and *choosing* to grant her audience the perspective of her lover's gaze at her.

This possibility is all the more compelling when one considers the several instances when the Shulammite openly attempts to control the way she is visually perceived. Each time the Shulammite addresses her female status as the beheld, she vocally refuses the ideological standards imputed to her by the implied male

ideological authority. The first of these instances appears at the outset of the poem:

> I am black but beautiful,
> O daughters of Jerusalem,
> like the tents of Kedar,
> like the curtains of Solomon.
> Do not gaze at me because I am dark,
> because the sun has gazed on me. (1:5-6)

Although there is some debate about whether to translate the first *vav* as conjunctive ("I am black *and* beautiful") or contrastive ("I am black *but* beautiful"),[174] it is amply clear from the context that she is drawing a contrast between her sense of her own beauty and the negative connotations of sun-darkened skin: "Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me." The pairing of these phrases connotes a tone of insistence: although she has been laboring outdoors under the sun, which is the mark of a peasant rather than a socially desirable and conventionally beautiful woman[175]—she acknowledges these standards only to reject them, insisting that her audience appreciate her beauty apart from the expectations set by an ideology of class.

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[174] J. Cheryl Exum argues that the particle אַל in אַל־תִּרְאוּנִי should be taken in its rare asseverative sense to read, "Indeed look at me that I am black," as a statement of pride in her darkened skin, in which case the conjunctive *vav* in שְׁחוֹרָה אֲנִי וְנָאוָה would make sense ("Asseverative 'al in Canticles 1:6?" *Biblica* 62 [1981]: 416-419). This, however, is a rather unconventional translation of a very common particle meaning "not," and the majority of translators agree both with אַל as introducing a negative command and with the disjunctive *vav*. See, for example, Elie Assis, *Flashes of Fire: A Literary Translation of the Song of Songs* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 40; Fox, 101.

[175] Andre LaCocque, *Romance, She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on the Song of Songs* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 41.

What's more, by likening her complexion to the tents of Kedar and the curtains of Solomon, she attempts to redefine the context in which her dark appearance is evaluated. The phrase "Do not gaze at me because I am dark" is qualified with "because the sun has gazed on me," suggesting that her skin is not to be appraised according to the cultural connotations of its color. Instead, she advocates for the darkness of her skin being appreciated in the context of exoticism and opulence, implied by her likening her darkness to the tents of Kedar[176] and the curtains of Solomon.[177] As Othmar Keel puts it, "The combination of the poor, exotic, and terrifying world of Kedar with the equally exotic and fascinating luxury of Solomon makes the blackness of the speaker at once frightening and fascinating; she is mysteriously different."[178] In this way, the Shulammite calls out the insufficiency of the daughters' initial, socially conditioned way of viewing her, and she insists that they instead adopt the lens that *she* provides.

Although this argument is addressed to a female audience, the daughters of Jerusalem here function as representatives of the patriarchal ideology so thoroughly established as dominant throughout the Song. One of the most salient features of an ideology is its ability to cause its subjects to consent to and

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[176] The tents of Kedar were typically fashioned from the wool of black goats, and throughout the Bible, Kedar is associated with opulence. See Isaiah 21:16, Jeremiah 49:28-29, Ezekiel 27:21. (Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], 140).

[177] Likely an image of royal splendor. See Bloch, 140, and Exum, 105.

[178] *The Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 47.

internalize their subordination.[179] When a patriarchal ideology is as deeply entrenched as the Song represents it, then one expects even female parties to judge themselves and each other according to it. And indeed, in several instances throughout the text, the daughters of Jerusalem are assigned masculine pronouns despite the fact that they are clearly a group of women.[180]

Most notably, the voice of the bridegroom censures other onlookers for their impertinent gazes: "Why should you look upon the Shulammite as upon a dance before two armies?" (6:13). Although the daughters of Jerusalem may be implied as the onlookers here, they are not named in this instance, and the bridegroom's question is directed toward either a male or a mixed-gender audience demanding to behold the Shulammite. To an ear attuned to the Hebrew gendering of verbs, this complaint suddenly lodged against a previously unknown group of (male?) voyeurs is conspicuous, causing the reader to pause with piqued attention over the critique and, perhaps, to reconfigure its understanding of the role of the daughters of Jerusalem: either they have so internalized the male gaze that they employ it themselves, or the role of the daughters of Jerusalem as an embedded audience encompasses the actual audience of the Song of Songs. This may be a moment when the fourth wall is broken, when the actual reader is censured for employing the male gaze to objectify the Shulammite.

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[179] Yee, 17.

[180] See 2:7, 3:5, and 5:8.

I grant that one may alternatively read this moment as an effort on the bridegroom's part to control who can and cannot behold the Shulammite, to keep her as his own "fountain sealed." But it is nonetheless striking that the male tendency to visually "own" the female body is directly, and sharply, questioned.

As the poem opens with the Shulammite's resistance to being visually appraised by standards other than her own, so does it close. In the final chapter, her brothers say, "We have a little sister, and she has no breasts," to which she replies, "My breasts were like towers; then I was in his eyes as one who brings peace" (8:8-9). Here again, the Shulammite rejects the way a male group sees her. In this case, she specifically rejects their assumptions about her sexuality: that she is sexually immature and therefore falls under the authority of her birth family. When they figure her as a "wall" that they must reinforce, or a "door" that they must board up (8:9), they infantilize her and assert their rights as male relatives to control who sees their unwed kin and in what capacity. The Shulammite, however, responds by declaring how she sees herself: as fully sexually mature, and as one who has willingly allowed herself to be gazed upon by her lover. Although she does rejoin by appealing to the gaze of another male figure, she is clearly making a choice about which gaze best fits her own image of herself as a woman.

If an ideology finds its strongest legitimation through the implicit consent of those it subordinates—when they judge their own comportment and behavior

according to the standards enforced by the ideology[181]—then the voice granted

the Shulammite is a clear critique of the patriarchal ideology of the gaze. To

reiterate, if the Song were an ideological artifact meant to reinforce this

patriarchal ideology, then one would expect a development throughout the course

of the poem wherein the Shulammite comes to capitulate to that ideology. If the

implied author were interested in maintaining the ideology in the interests of

those whom it benefits and at the expense of those whom it subordinates, then

one would expect the implied author to deny the Shulammite the narrative

privilege of direct speech in these instances. But there is no omniscient third-

person narrator to guide the reader toward this conclusion over and against the

Shulammite's own appraisals of her appearance. Instead, because her resistance

to—and efforts to reclaim—various masculine gazes bookends the poem, the

overall structure controlled by the implied author proves that the Song is not

interested in furthering the patriarchal status quo. The Shulammite's resistance is

not introduced at the beginning only to be quelled at the end, as one would expect

of an artifact attempting to shore up the patriarchal norm. On the contrary, by

allowing the Shulammite to have the uncontested last word with her direct

speech, her voice stands as the primary means by which the text critiques the

patriarchal ideology that would have her compliant, and the object of male

pleasure on male terms. Donald Polaski argues that the Shulammite has so

internalized the male gaze that she becomes a self-policing subject, always

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[181] Yee, 15; Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 56.

beholden to it.[182] However as the above narratological analysis demonstrates, the opposite is the case. While the Song does show how the male gaze may be internalized by female subjects, the Shulammite time and again refuses it.

c. Subjectivity as Hermeneutic

Thus far, I have illustrated how the Song incorporates a patriarchal ideology, and I have illustrated how its narratological features pave the way for a critique of that ideology. Despite her resistance, however, the Shulammite's responses are still very much bound by the discourse of an ideology of the male gaze. In the examples above, she remains mired in the question of how and by whom she is seen, suggesting that the structure of her thought is still profoundly beholden to the terms set by the dynamic of the male gaze. In other words, even as the Shulammite attempts to redefine it, the deep roots of this patriarchal ideology remain undisturbed.

The full heft of the Song's ideological critique, then, only becomes clear when one attends to the extent to which the patriarchal ideology fails to penetrate the Shulammite's subjective accounting of her experiences. An ideology is as successful as its ability to penetrate into the self-conception of its subjects, and this, incidentally, is also how the panopticon works to oppress its prisoners. The prisoner is controlled not so much by virtue of her physical confinement, but by virtue of the fact that, when the possibility of being scrutinized is always present,

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[182] Polaski, 70.

she assumes the responsibility of moderating her own behavior even when she is not actively being watched. The prisoner internalizes the policing gaze (in this case, the male gaze) to such an extent that she perceives even her own private actions through that lens. That is, the most pernicious effects of both an ideology and the panopticon are found at the level of the interior.

Because the Shulammite has been granted the narrative agency of communicating and interpreting her own experiences, the reader is afforded a glimpse into her interior life. Thus, the reader has the means to assess the Shulammite's resistance to those systems. Although her body may be physically subject to the oppressive rules of the panopticon/male gaze, she chooses to tell a different story and to endow these experiences with her own meaning. Time and time again, the Shulammite implicitly acknowledges the reality of her oppression while offering the reader her own hermeneutic for understanding her experiences: she refuses any implication that her negative experiences within this panopticon should reflect her social and personal worth, She chooses instead to present them as obstacles along the way to the culmination of her love story—the story that she does choose to tell.

The failure of the panopticon to penetrate the Shulammite's subjective understanding of her experiences is most evident in her accounts of her interactions with the city watchmen, the most obvious representatives of the punitive patriarchal power structure. Although her first encounter with them takes place relatively early in the poem (3:1-5), it has already been well

established that the Shulammite, by virtue of her female status, is emplaced

within private, confined areas.[183] She has also beseeched her lover several times

to come to her, suggesting that she—and now the reader—is keenly aware of the

gendered mores that prevent her from accessing her lover at will.[184] Accordingly,

she begins by seeking him in her own bed—one of her designated, confined

locations—and when this effort naturally proves futile, she transgresses her

prescribed boundaries to "rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the

squares" (3:2). Given the patriarchal ideology in place, this episode is imbued

with tension, as it is not just a passerby she encounters, but the city's sentinels

who wield a disciplinary authority. This tension is amplified by the fact that even

though she is the one doing the seeking, she does not find the sentinels, nor do

the sentinels simply bump into her. Rather, *they find her* (3:3). But nevertheless,

she expresses no fear and in no way acknowledges their disciplinary power. In

her telling of the event, she has framed the experience as a romantic quest to

unite with her lover: "I sought the one I love…I will seek the one I love…I found

the one I love. I held him and would not let him go" (3:1-4).[185] The threat posed

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[183] See 1:4 ("The king has brought me into his chambers"), 1:6 ("[My mother's sons] made me keeper of the vineyards"), 2:4 ("He brought me into the banqueting house"), and 2:9 ("Look, there he stands behind our wall").

[184] See 1:4 ("Draw me after you, let us make haste"), 1:7 ("Tell me, you whom I love, where you pasture your flock"), and 2:6 ("O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!").

[185] רפה (let go) is in the imperfect tense, which is often translated as simple present or future ("I do not let him go" or "I will not let him go"). At its most basic, however, the imperfect tense denotes incomplete action, and because the verbs both directly preceding and following it are in the perfect, past tense, I render it here with the modal "would" ("I *would* not let him go").

by a hegemonic patriarchy remains very real, but it does not effect her actions or self-understanding. As far as her own subjective experience of the event is concerned, this episode is about nothing more than love at last requited, and she chooses to frame it in this manner at the expense of allowing the threat of the patriarchy to color the meaning she makes of it. It is also worth noting that, when she does find her lover, she "held him and would not let him go, until [she] brought him into [her] mother's house" (3:4). This is a rare instance within the text when the bridegroom is the direct object upon which the Shulammite acts. Her willful disregard of the patriarchal rules meant to delimit her agency is thus roundly rewarded, and the love story advances. None of the language she employs in narrating her experiences with the watchmen suggests that she interprets this encounter as due punishment for transgressing her prescribed boundaries. To the contrary, she inscribes these events within the established tropes of the love story she is telling. She does not take the fact that her lover eludes her as a lesson in female confinement and compliance. Instead, it only enflames her desire to requite their affair, yielding to a brief moment of satisfaction when she can finally draw her lover into one of her spaces.

One might argue that this episode invites the reader to be critical of the Shulammite's lack of shame, that even though she fails to internalize the punitive lesson the sentinels mean to teach her, the reader should take it as a cautionary tale and internalize the consequences of bucking against the patriarchy's authority. However, the narratological structure of the episode, and of the poem

as a whole, diminishes such an argument. First, as has been discussed at length

above, when the implied author opts to relate direct speech rather than third-

person reports, he transfers his own narrating function over to the speaking

character. Because the text is bookended by the Shulammite's voice, the implied

narrator completely recedes into the background in service to allowing the

Shulammite to narrate her own story. The story that *she* fashions of the fabula of

this episode is the story which the text of the Song of Songs passes on to its

readers. Her version of the story is the one which Song of Songs tells, and it is

evident at every turn that, as far as the Shulammite is concerned, hers is a love

story in which she is an active and equal participant. One can hardly forget the

stirring climax of the poem:

> [L]ove is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.
> Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.
> Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.
> If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly
> scorned. (8:6-7)

The Shulammite has been granted the narrative agency of setting the terms with

which her audience is to interpret her experiences, and by allying the audience

with the Shulammite's perspective, the narrative mitigates against a readerly

stance of judgment against the Shulammite's failure to play according to the

patriarchal rules.

Moreover, because the Song is at its most basic a love poem, presenting

love as as the highest of all pursuits, it suggests that the Shulammite's choices on

behalf of love are commendable—even when they violate the hegemonic terms of

the patriarchy. In no way does the text suggest that the Shulammite would be better off, more content in her relationship, if only she would accept her place and remain at home in wait for her bridegroom. If she did not strike out and take action on her own terms, then she would still be waiting, her desires unsatisfied. Her love and desire—powerful, unruly emotions—compel her to break the rules. When it comes to love, the highest of pursuits and the ultimate subject of the Song, her decisions cannot be dictated by the staid rules of a patriarchal ideology. This ideology, this panopticon in which she finds herself, fails to contain the intensity of her experience of love; love is an ideal more compelling than any ideology, and in service to love, the Shulammite unapologetically rejects the behavioral prescriptions imposed upon her. Because the narrative only exposes the reader to the Shulammite's own romantic interpretation of her punishment at the hands of the watchmen, the reader assumes that the Shulammite's way is the better way and perceives that the ideology fails to obtain when confronted with the power of love—or, rather, the power of her subjectivity that experiences the emotion.

Moreover, even her bridegroom—a male character who clearly enjoys the benefits of this patriarchal system of female confinement and visual availability—frequently encourages his lover to transgress its rules. For example:

> If you do not know,
> O fairest among women,
> follow the racks of the flock,
> and pasture your kids beside the shepherds' tents. (1:8)

> Arise my love, my fair one, and come away. (2:13)

> Come with me from Lebanon, my bride;
> come with me from Lebanon.
> Depart from the peak of Amana,
> from the peak of Senir and Hermon. (4:8)

Even though he, as male, is implicated in the patriarchal system of the male gaze by beholding his lover when by all rights he should not, he addresses the Shulammite in the terms of a close, interpersonal relationship rather than an object of the panopticon's discipline as represented by the city watchmen. The poem thus contains two male modes of engaging with women: an authoritative, prescriptive one that depersonalizes women, and one that refuses to lend credence to this depersonalization. The reader is therefore presented with an implicit choice between these two modes, and when coupled with the hermeneutic framework of love as recommended by the first-person narration of the Shulammite, the preferred choice is apparent.

In her second encounter with the watchmen, it becomes even clearer that the Shulammite is consciously aware of the power differential that attends the male gaze, but that she chooses to reinterpret this dynamic both in terms that befit her own subjective account of the events she experiences, and in terms that suggest her resistance to being coerced into internalizing the power differential in such a way that she becomes a self-policing subject in conformity with the ideology. Although the male gaze is certainly construed as an oppressive force within the Song, and although the expectation that the Shulammite should

internalize it is certainly there, the text plays upon this expectation in order to subvert it, at every turn displaying the Shulammite's implicit resistance to the coercive effects of the ideology.

For example, the second time that the watchmen find the Shulammite in the city, the tension does erupt as they violently assert their power to police her body and expose it for view at their will: "Making their rounds in the city, the sentinels found me; they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls" (5:7). Here again, however, the Shulammite admits no sign that the disciplinary power they wield within the patriarchal system effects here subjective understanding of herself or her present situation. Again, she chooses to inscribe the event within the framework of her star-crossed romance: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him this: I am faint with love" (5:8). Note that she defines her physical weakness not as a consequence of the traumatic experience she had just undergone at the hands of the sentinels, who had punished her self-exposure in the city by non-consensually exposing her completely. Rather, she figures it as a consequence of the romantic pursuit she chose for herself: it only stokes her need and desire to be united with her lover. This—rather than any internalization of the ramifications of living in a gendered panopticon—is how she subjectively understands the event.

Tellingly, this episode is closely juxtaposed with a different type of disrobing—a juxtaposition which further impacts the reader's appraisal of the

watchmen's actions. A mere three verses before they brutally and non-consensually expose her body, the Shulammite coyly remarks, "I had taken off my garment, how could I put it on again?" (5:3). She says this when her lover requests entrance at her bedroom window, adding that her "inmost being yearned for him" (5:4). Although narrated with flirtatious language, this scene may be somewhat troubling: her lover catches her in a private moment, peering through her bedroom window while she is alone and in the process of undressing. Again, she does not appear to have any control over when the men in her story can see her naked body, and again, her lover is able to move freely through the Song's terrain and can therefore dictate when he sees her. There is no mistake in this instance, however, that the Shulammite consciously responds to the intrusion by interpreting it in such a way that she can reclaim some agency for herself. She is initially without choice, but she answers with her belated choice to volunteer her vulnerability and the sight of her body in the name of the yearning of her inmost being. By adding her own internal perspective on the event, she opts to read the situation as romantic, as a shy game between two mutually enamored lovers and not the coercive kind of play initiated by the one who holds the social capital of the gaze. This example demonstrates the extent to which she remains internally unbeholden to an ideological system in which the male gaze is a crucial function of its power to control female behavior. Instead, she reimagines her lover's intrusion as a choice that *she* makes, together with her lover.

I am aware that this same scene can be read in a far less liberating and far more problematic way. It is possible that the Shulammite is so thoroughly imbricated in the male gaze that she completely overlooks the troubling implications of a man peeping at her naked form through the window of her private chambers. This is a compelling possibility, and one well worth entertaining. The simple point still stands, however, that the Shulammite is making a conscious choice about what meaning with which to endow the situation. This choice is not one that the operative ideology of the male gaze, or the panopticon as its crystallization, would expect her to make. It is significant that, while the watchmen ostensibly punish her for the immodesty of being a woman alone in the public space of the city—and while they externalize that immodesty by stripping her naked—she does not respond with modesty when her lover sees her naked in her chamber. She does not hasten to cover herself, as one might expect of a subject who has internalized her place in the panopticon; rather, she remarks that she will remain naked. She may have had no initial agency in this encounter, but she does have the agency of choosing what she will make of it, and whether she will allow her lover to continue to behold her naked form.

The close juxtaposition of these two different instances of disrobing serves as a narrative cue for the reader to contrast the valences of each episode. The text may not tell the reader whether or to what extent the Shulammite is effected by the watchmen's violence—indeed, as I have suggested, the point of this episode is

the watchmen's inability to penetrate the Shulammite's psyche—but the reader

certainly holds the difference between these two episodes in mind, and,

importantly, each episode is reflected through the Shulammite's own perspective.

The takeaway from this juxtaposition is that a visual vulnerability that the

Shulammite chooses is a good thing, both to her and to the reader, and so it

follows that a visual vulnerability she does *not* choose is an implicit object of

criticism within the text. In sum, by privileging the Shulammite's perspective,

and by drawing the reader in to her subjective understanding of her experiences

—an understanding which does not support the hegemonic goals of the

established patriarchal ideology—the insufficiencies of that ideology are subtly

but trenchantly critiqued.

c. Ideological Criticism at the Personal Level

Although the power differential is much the same in the bedroom scene as

it is with the watchmen, the most important contrast lies in the fact that, in the

bedroom scene, the Shulammite invites her listeners into her interior life,

offering a glimpse of her subjective experience of love and desire. This is only

possible because the implied narrator has ceded his control over the story to the

Shulammite, allowing her to stand as a fully realized character whose thoughts

and feelings are allowed to dominate the pages that might be shared with her

male counterpart. Because the poem is focalized in this way, the reader is

reminded on a personal, visceral level that a woman can and does think and feel,

and that she does it even if it is not a part of the regnant picture of gender relations. Although the Shulammite does not explicitly voice her dissent against the forces that oppress her, she herself is offered up by the text as a living mode of ideological critique. The vividness of her thoughts and feelings first provokes the reader to notice the power structures that would have silenced her if not for the narrative space the poem creates for her—and exposure of the dominant ideology is the first step in any form of ideological criticism. Second, the fullness of the Shulammite's interior experience spurs the audience to think critically about the legitimacy of the power structures that would oppress her: they function effectively at policing her physical existence, but their ultimate insufficiency is exposed through their inability to affect her subjectivity and sense of self.

In all of this, the structure of the Song supports the text's function as ideological criticism, with the Shulammite herself acting as the element that destabilizes the ideological system at its core. In this way, the text recommends its own hermeneutic: a hermeneutic according to which external expressions of an ideology must be judged according to the subjective experiences of those whom the ideology is meant to govern. Hence, the Shulammite herself is the new element that complicates and calls into question the ideological gender system represented in the Song. Sympathy is cultivated for the Shulammite by allowing the reader into her interior life, and her subjectivity stands in conflict with the patriarchal power structure, portrayed as business as usual through the

watchmen and the gaze of her lover. Thus, the hermeneutic recommended within the Song is one in which the reader is asked to measure ideologies that are externalized in the realm of social experience against the self-articulated subjectivities of those affected by the ideology—and to prefer the latter as the key to the text's meaning.

Although the Song functions as ideological criticism at the societal level, it manifests its awareness of the depths to which an ideology can penetrate, governing even the most personal of human interactions. Ideologies are implicated, too, in the very ways that individuals cultivate their senses of self as members of their ideological worlds. To illustrate this point—and to further explore the implications of reading the Song as a form of ideological criticism—I turn now to a detailed discussion of one particular, personal moment between the bridegroom and the Shulammite. This moment is one in which the power dynamics of the male and female gazes shift, a moment when the usual order— the dominance of the male beholder and the vulnerability of the female beheld— is subtly but incisively called into question when it is the bridegroom, and not his bride, who finds himself in the uncomfortable position of being beheld. It culminates in his exclamation, "Turn your eyes away from me, for they overwhelm me!"

As Carolyn Sharp reminds us, "Embodied women characters stand out as implicit sources of conflict with masculine notions of self."[186] Thus far, we have seen the extent to which the Song continues to engage conventional modes of authority with respect to gender, and we have noted the conflict that signals the reader to question this authority and to recognize that such gender conventions fail to account for the empathy one can feel for a fully realized female character. But we must still ask how this particular embodied woman challenges the very notions of masculine self on which patriarchal authority is based—not just through her discourses, but through her embodied self. This challenge lies in the simple fact that, although the ideological nature of men is to be able to elude the female gaze, women are nonetheless capable of gazing back, and to gaze back is to see the seams in oft unquestioned constructions of masculinity.

It is well established now that the bridegroom is the one who normally does the gazing. There is, however, one instance in which the Shulammite does look back at her lover, and he responds by indelicately demanding that she stop: "Turn your eyes away from me, for they הסבי עיניך מנגדי שהם הרהיבני—overwhelm me!" (6:5). It is important to note that the bridegroom does not implore her to avert her eyes in order to censure her for transgressing some social precept. The reason that he gives is explicit: her eyes "overwhelm" him, causing him a visceral sense of unease. The verb רהב in the hiphil, which I have

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translated as "overwhelm," can also denote alarm, awe, disturbance, or confusion. Each of these possible translations imply some loss of composure or a state of being incapable of managing the circumstances. After this curt request, the bridegroom immediately proceeds to describe the Shulammite, which signals an effort to reclaim the sense of comfort and control that attends being in the position of the beholder. The bridegroom attempts to recoup his usual position as a way of coping with the threat to his composure that her eyes affect.

Here, he betrays the disruptive effect that the female gaze bears upon male self-understanding. Up until this point, I have been operating with a roughly Foucaultian definition of the gaze, according to which the beholder maintains a position of power over the beheld by virtue of the simple fact that the beholder is the subject of the looking action while the beheld is its object. To be watched, to be made an object of scrutiny in this way, is to be in a position of vulnerability. But while the tables of the objectifying gaze have certainly been turned here, there are other, more elemental dynamics of the gaze, and they do much to explain the bridegroom's somewhat puzzling offense at simply being seen by his lover.

According to Jacques Lacan, the power of the gaze is operative during the earliest stages of human development. Children leave what he terms "the real," the state of nature that infants occupy completely, and they begin their transitions into the "symbolic order," the world of intersubjective relationships and ideological conventions. In other words, the child enters a world in which

one's identity is defined and conditioned by how one subscribes to the rules that govern society.[187] Of necessity, one must deny "the real"—the meaner, messier truth of the self—in order to affirm the contrived reality of the symbolic order and to shore up one's place within that order. But the real never disappears. According to Lacan, we labor under the illusion that the social, constructed self *is* the self, but reality has a way of intruding in those unsettling instances when we realize that someone may be looking back at us and seeing the truth behind the construction. When some other subject comes close enough to peer back, we are forced to remember that the identity we have constructed is just that: constructed, an assembly of moving parts with no sure grounding in the real.[188]

With this in mind, we come closer to understanding what it means that the Shulammite's eyes overwhelm her lover. When the gaze is turned back on him, his composure is threatened in both senses of the word. His sense of male self and the foundations upon which it is built risk being subsumed when confronted by her eyes. The conventions of the social order, by which women are the gazed-at objects and men the gazing subjects, cannot accommodate the reality that the object of his gaze is the subject of her own. The redeployment of the male gaze by a female character finds the ideological criticism offered by the Song at its most subversive. What the reader thinks it knows about gender norms, what it has

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[187] Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," Ibid., 65ff.

[188] Lacan, "Of the Gaze as Objet Petit A," *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1977), 92ff.

been conditioned to believe is reflective of some ultimate truth, can be undone with a simple look. The pretense unravels, but what is more important is the acknowledgment that there was a pretense to begin with: naturalization, the ability to appear so self-evident as to hardly need to even be named, is where an ideology's strength lies. But with these few words, the text nudges its reader to consider the provocative possibility that, so to speak, there is more to the picture of male dominance and female subordination than meets the eye. Other, better truths are teeming beneath the surface, and this narrative moment brings those truths up for air with the hushed insistence that the reader not only can, but should move beyond a gender ideology that fails to suit the complexity of subjective experience.

It is also noteworthy that the Shulammite's eyes are assigned the masculine pronoun הם as opposed to the feminine הן as grammar would have us expect. Donald Polaski interprets this as the text's way of saying that there is really no such thing as a female gaze, that if a gaze is strong enough to make a man feel violated, it certainly cannot be figured as feminine, not even grammatically. In this way, Polaski suggests, both the bridegroom and the text stanch any possibility that women as women can have an effect on male subjectivity.[189] The text, however, is unequivocal about who is looking. Female eyes are doing what male eyes do.

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[189] Polaski, 71–76.

As an ideological critic, the Song exploits normative assumptions and conditioned expectations, presenting them earnestly and transparently such that the reader may initially believe that those assumptions stand unchallenged. But at the same time, the text deftly subverts those assumptions, calling attention to the instability of their foundations and reminding the reader that the conventions that structure and filter her perceptions of the world are in fact fallible, constructed, and open to critique. The pervasiveness of an ideology may give the illusion of stability, of an objective reality on which to base the ideology, but underneath this illusion lie untold perspectives. These perspectives are so often silenced because they do not conform to the expected norm, but they bubble to the surface through the cracks in the foundation that the text exposes.

At their most basic, ideologies are discourses, and as such, they are functions of human communication, simultaneously growing out of human experience and perpetuating themselves by offering a grammar with which to make sense of that experience. And yet the work of ideological criticism is to lay bare an ideology for what it is. When an ideology is thus exposed, it becomes possible to hold it up as an object of discourse, and when this is accomplished, it in turn becomes possible to suggest a different ideology that is less insufficient or less damaging.[190] By exposing the sheer irreality of an ideological system according to which women cannot possess gazes of their own, the Song accomplishes this critical work.

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[190] Yee, 17-18.

Ideological criticism's task is first and foremost to ask the questions—or, more profoundly, to remind us that there are questions to be asked. If the Song does not provide the answers, it certainly gestures toward the conflict between a worldview that is experientially unreliable with something that is truer. In the Song, this critical work is accomplished through the way the narrative elements of the poem are structured, Thus, to approach the Song as an example of ideological criticism is to attend to the reader's experience of the text. It is up to the sensitive reader to perceive this clash between the assumed norm and the deeper reality that persists regardless of our ignorance of it.

IV. Conclusion

In sum, I have argued that the Song of Songs may be read as an example of ideological criticism, on the grounds that it does internalize male-dominated power dynamics, but that it does so in order to problematize them. It accomplishes this by introducing an embodied, fully fleshed female character who engenders the reader's alliance by acting as the primary narrator. It is thus her perspective that the audience adopts as its own, and by granting her gaze a palpable reality formidable enough to overwhelm a man's gaze, the reader's own gaze is directed toward what Carolyn Sharp aptly describes as "deep anxieties and overcompensatory denial about power dynamics that are virtually by definition out of the control of the male narrator."[191] Indeed, the Song's implied narrator

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[191] Sharp, 87.

entirely cedes control of the narrative to its female protagonist. The text spurs the

reader to recognize that the foundations of female subordination are not as

secure as they may appear, provoking the reader to admit that women too can

assert themselves in ways that an ideology cannot anticipate or control.

I have at turns painted a far less liberated picture of gender in the Song

than have other feminist interpreters. I chose to begin the discussion by

emphasizing the extent to which patriarchal authority remains present, while

other feminist readings emphasize the extent to which the male and female lovers

are represented as equals. I hope that the ensuing analysis has shown that, within

this pervasive patriarchal perspective, the Song offers a refreshing alternative to

the repression of female experiences in biblical narratives. The text suggests that

readers both can and should seize upon this alternative.

I would, however, like to emphasize that revolutionary ideological

possibilities afforded by the text are only possible because it invokes those

ideologies so faithfully as to look to scholars such as Polaski and Clines like yet

another ideological artifact of a patriarchal world. To swing too far in the other

direction and claim that the Song is unequivocally liberating for female readers is

to risk alienating this text from the larger body of literature of which it is a part.

The claim that the Song is in no way beholden to patriarchal ideology is actually

to restrict its liberating voice from reverberating throughout its literary matrix. I

suggest, then, that to understand the Song as an example of ideological criticism

is a way to bridge the gap between the competing elements of liberation and

oppression. The Shulammite may not be completely free from male hegemony, but by making a case for why male hegemony is not as absolute as it may seem, the Song encourages the reader to recognize women as the autonomous subject they are—over and against a socially constructed system of gender that would have the audience believe otherwise. Moreover, the text recommends a hermeneutic that privileges the subjectivity of the marginalized, and by providing this hermeneutic equipment from within the context of a patriarchal narrative world, the Song of Songs can be embraced as a relevant and productively subversive commentary on gender imbalance as it pervades the biblical canon.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

I. Summary of the Arguments

In the first chapter I offered a survey of the possibilities and limitations of contemporary feminist biblical criticism, demonstrating the need for feminist biblical criticism to find a method that will allow the reader and the text to become true interlocutors with one another. This methodological move is crucial, since the Bible is so often received as a source of both religious and cultural authority that continues to impact women's lives in real ways. If the practical goal of feminism is to improve the condition of women in society, then the most effective feminist approach will find the biblical text in meaningful conversation with feminist concerns—even if the text does not anticipate contemporary feminist concerns *per se.*

In the following chapter, I proffered narratology as the approach that best achieves these goals for feminist criticism. Unlike New Criticism, which regards the text as an inert deposit of meaning for the reader to objectively excavate, and unlike reader-response criticism, which locates a text's meaning entirely in the subjective mind of the reader, narratology bridges the objective and subjective by seeing the structuring of a narrative as the common ground where the text's intentions and the reader's responses meet. This approach ensures that the reader and the text are engaging one another as partners in conversation. By carefully attending to the ways in which certain narratives are structured, it is

possible to discern how the text does indeed condition the reader to respond with empathy to the experiences of marginalized figures, such as women.

The third chapter accordingly offered a narratological analysis of the development of the theme of divine election that begins with Genesis 4, wherein Cain must reconcile his own sense of self worth with a new ideology of election that would subordinate him to his brother both socially and in his standing before God. Although Cain's response ends in tragedy both for himself and for his brother, my analysis suggested that God's interactions with him throughout the episode consistently validate and legitimize his subjective experience, even as he is shuttled outside of the ensuing narrative of Israel. The experience of reading Cain will be carried throughout later iterations of the theme, reminding the reader that the value of a person is not commensurate with the value of his/her arbitrarily determined social standing.

The fourth chapter examined the book of Job as a narrative about the ethics of reading the experiences of another. This text introduces several readerly orientations toward Job's suffering, and it critiques them all in turn before finally reaching a climax at which reader's perspective is unequivocally aligned with Job's own efforts to read his tragic experiences. First, the prose prologue is structured so that the reader seeks simple gratification in the resolution of a rapidly unfolding plot, a structure which intentionally tempts the reader to overlook Job's subjective experiences of suffering. Next, Job's friends introduce an ideologically-driven interpretation of Job's experiences, attempting to impose

a classical wisdom paradigm upon his story in order to make handy and ideology-affirming sense of the events that have befallen him. When these dialogues eventually break down, it becomes clear that hermeneutic employed by Job's friends also fails to do justice to the deeply personal poignancy of Job's suffering. All that is left is for the reader to read *with Job* and to see that recognizing his subjectivity is the only responsible way to encounter the singular experiences of another.

The fifth chapter at last turned to the ways in which this established imperative to privilege a character's subjectivity can be applied specifically to gender dynamics. This chapter will attend to the extent to which patriarchal ideologies continue to remain in play as oppressive forces in the Song of Songs, while at the same time attending to the bride's strategies for internal resistance by appropriating her social oppression as elements of a love story that she imaginatively rewrites. The Shulammite's interpretations of her experiences stand in direct opposition to the external reality of her oppression. The narrative that she writes for herself troubles the ability of a patriarchal ideology to pervade a woman's sense of self and mastery over her internal life.

Throughout these chapters, I have argued that several key examples of biblical literature retain a consistent and impactful interest in the subjectivity of the marginalized. I have chosen texts as my case studies that span a number of genres and literary contributions to the biblical canon (the narrative Yahwist and Elohist sources in the book of Genesis, representatives of the wisdom tradition in

the poetry and prose of the book of Job, and the erotic poetry of the Song of Songs). Grounding my analysis in the method of narratology, I have sought to demonstrate that this interest in the marginalized is sufficiently pervasive, empirically measurable, and communicable to the reader: the narrative structuring of these texts facilitates the reader's encounters with marginalized characters such that the reader is called to place the subjectivity of the marginalized at the center of her interpretive grapplings with those characters. Drawing on the knowledge of ideological criticism, I have further argued that each of these texts actively interfaces with regnant ideologies that would justify the marginalization of some for the elevation of others, but that the narratives' attentiveness to the ideologically disenfranchised constitutes a form of ideological criticism in itself. "Since it must somehow recognize the 'Other'"—that is, the 'Other' whom the ideology means to render powerless for the advantage of the more powerful—"ideology inscribes this Otherness as a potentially disruptive force within its own discourses."[192] In other words, ideologies are subconsciously aware of own their fragility and limited capacity for control when confronted with a messier human reality. By embracing this messier human reality, rather than conveniently overlooking it, the biblical texts discussed above call into question the stability and rectitude of ideologies that would erase the subjectivity of those whom they disadvantage.

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[192] Yee, 13, drawing on Eagleton, *Ideology,* 45–46.

While women are the ones marginalized by a patriarchal ideology, my discussions of texts such as Cain and Job have focused on how a biblical hermeneutic of the marginalized is generated through male characters. I am well aware that some may see this as working against feminism's aim to recenter discourse around the experiences of women, and I acknowledge this important potential criticism. It is an unavoidable fact, however, that biblical literature was produced in a patriarchal culture, and as a matter of course (and with the notable exception of the Song of Songs), it rarely provides extended treatments of women's experiences and perspectives. If the biblical text develops a hermeneutic of the marginalized, then it does so through its more extended treatments of male experiences. But once it is established, it becomes a native orientation toward the text that can extend outward and inform the reader's engagement with the less developed stories of women. To illustrate, I will end where I began, with an analysis of how the hermeneutic established with Cain can inform a reading of Eve after her definitive subordination at the close of Genesis 3.

II. Eve: The Other Character in Genesis 4

As I discussed at length in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, the narrative structuring of the story of Cain in Genesis 4 carefully articulates a hermeneutic according to which the reader is called to align herself with the subjectivity of the disenfranchised Cain. Cain, however, is not the first character to have been marginalized in the Genesis narrative, nor is he the first character to appear in

Genesis 4. The seeds of this hermeneutic, brought to flourishing with the more extended narrative treatment of Cain, have already begun to be sown with the story of his mother Eve.

At the close of Genesis 3, Eve's punishment for eating the forbidden fruit bears directly upon her status and function as a woman, and it directly subordinates her to her male counterpart: "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you will bring forth children, and your desire will be for your husband, but he will rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). Unlike the punishments of the serpent (Genesis 3:14–15) and Adam (Genesis 3:17–19), Eve's punishment is explicitly gendered: she is exclusively identified by the necessarily female role of mother, and accordingly, Adam names her "Eve" (חוה) because "she was the mother of all the living" (Genesis 3:20). Eve's is also the only punishment of the three that introduces a direct power differential between herself and another character. To be sure, the serpent is laid low, cursed to slither on his belly (Genesis 3:14), but he is not given over to anyone else's power. There will be enmity and alienation between serpents and human beings from henceforth, but even in this enmity there is a certain equality and reciprocity: "He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). Eve, on the other hand, is cursed with subordination to her husband (Genesis 3:16). Just as a social hierarchy was introduced based upon God's preference for Abel over Cain, Eve's divine punishment introduces a gendered hierarchy. Woman is at the bottom, and, in Mieke Bal's estimation, her "imprison[ment] in motherhood" is sealed by

Adam's exercise of his new control by giving her a name meant to determine her essence.[193] And just as the story of Cain and Abel commences the theme of the reversal of primogeniture and divine election more broadly, which will reverberate throughout biblical narrative, Eve's punishment commences a long and pernicious tradition of marginalizing women.

As Ilana Pardes aptly notes, however, this is not the final stroke of Eve's story. Chapter divisions are artificial to the original Hebrew text, which presents a continuous narrative that resumes immediately with Eve's birthing and naming of Cain.[194] Up to this point, Eve's role as mother has been characterized either by God or by Adam. Perhaps in reflection of her new subordination to men, Eve's thoughts on the matter are not initially reported, nor is she given a voice throughout the end of the episode. But it is telling that, while Eve has been squarely marginalized in the creation of a gendered hierarchy, the narrator chooses to focus the first human birth through Eve's experience of it: "Genesis 4:1 presents another phase in the formation of the first woman's relation to God and Adam as it offers a glimpse of her own perception of motherhood and (pro)creation."[195] If Adam's superiority amid creation is indicated through his power to name both animals and his wife, and if Eve's subordination is indicated

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[193] Bal, *Lethal Love,* 128.

[194] Pardes, 40.

[195] Pardes, 42.

by her being named by her husband like the animals,[196] then the narration of Eve

naming her son resists the assumption of her inferiority: first because she now

wields the power of naming, and second because the narrator grants her the

privilege of direct speech in naming Cain. As I have mentioned throughout, direct

speech represents a ceding of the narrator's control, allowing the character to

speak for herself in ways that may or may not comport with the dominant

ideology. It also represents a narrative moment when the reader's perspective is

focalized through the speaking character, when the character's perspective is

presented to the reader directly and undiluted. In Eve's naming speech, the

reader encounters her daring personal rejection of the inferiority conferred by

her punishment. She boldly states, "I have created a man together with the

Lord" (Genesis 4:1).

The word קניתי, which I have rendered above as "I have created," often

appears in translations as some version of "I have acquired,"[197] but the verb קנה

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[196] Pardes rightly notes that Adam's acts of naming are exceptions to a rule according to which women typically name their children. From this she concludes, "Adam's naming of woman, which has been taken to be representative of male dominion in language, turns out to be the exception to the rule; it is meant to single out and glorify the creation of the first woman, while allowing Adam to play the (m)other's part" (49). However, she fails to mention that Adam's naming of the animals. Because each animal's name attends the animal's rejection as a companion, coupled with the sheer fact that Eve is hardly the first creature Adam has named, it is difficult to argue the Eve is being glorified and celebrated for her role maternal role.

[197] For example, in the ESV and KJV, "I have gotten"; in the JPS, "I have acquired"; in the NJPS, "I have gained."

frequently appears in conjunction with God's creative activity.[198] The phrase את

יהוה, which I have rendered as "together with the Lord," is often translated as

"with the help of,"[199] but את has the vastly more common meaning of "with" or

"together with." Thus, translations tend to accord Eve's speech with a pious

deference that strains against the Hebrew and humbles Eve in the process. It is as

though translators wouldn't dare to countenance the scandal of Eve claiming

procreative power for herself.[200] As Umberto Cassuto astutely puts it, however,

"[I]n her joy at giving birth to her first son, [Eve] boasts of her generative power,

which approximates in her estimation to the Divine creative power…*I stand

together (i.e. equally) WITH HIM in the rank of creators.*"[201] Eve chooses to

reinterpret her given role as mother not as a life of obligated suffering, as her

earlier punishment would suggest, but as a source of power within the system

that subordinates her. So understood, Eve's subordination to both God and

human man in the previous verses has failed to obtain in her subjective self-

understanding.

When recognized as a continuous narrative, the reader encounters Eve's

institutionalized marginalization, but then immediately encounters a self-

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[198] Genesis 14:22, Psalm 139:13, Proverbs 8:22. For fuller discussions of this word, see Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I* (New York: Magnes Press, 1961), 200-203; Pardes, 44-46.

[199] As does the NRSV and ESV, to take but a few examples.

[200] See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 290.

[201] Cassuto, 202.

appraisal that challenges that same institutionalized marginalization. Eve recasts her capacity to bring life into the world as something profoundly related to God's own creative agency. To boot, she sees herself not as a partner with her husband in creating life, whom she is supposed to desire and who will rule over her. She rather sees herself as a partner to God in creating life, despite the fact that, in the previous verses, she has been doubly alienated from both God and the now-dominant masculine gender.

In terms of narratology, it is especially significant that Eve is granted the narrative space to voice a position that squarely contradicts the one implied by her punishment: she makes a strong statement about her procreative power independent of her husband, while her punishment in the previous verses clearly indicated that her life would be marked by her relationship with a husband who would answer her desire with domination. Like the narrative treatment of her son, the return to Eve's perspective after the garden serves as a critical reminder to the reader that her subjectivity, and the reader's ability to engage with it, does not fall away simply because of her obvious marginalization in the emerging social order. Thus, it also serves as an acknowledgment that ideologies, though they may structure the social order in very real ways, cannot control the internal lives and subjectivities of their unwilling participants.

III. Concluding Remarks

To be sure, this hermeneutic of the marginalized does not obtain in every biblical text. Legal materials, for a conspicuous example, are almost exclusively androcentric ("You shall not covet your neighbor's *wife*" [Exodus 20:17]), and narrative examples of the erasure of women's subjectivities abound: Bathsheba is no more than an object of David's desire (2 Samuel 11), Dinah's sexuality is completely absorbed by the story of men's diplomatic negotiations (Genesis 34), and wives are thrice passed off as their husbands' sisters and taken as concubines by foreign kings, with not so much as a hint of their feelings on the matter (Genesis 12, 20, and 26).[202] This is a far, far cry from an exhaustive list. As a feminist, I lament this distressing biblical phenomenon, and I have no interest in apologetics. But the Bible is a multifarious and multi-vocal text. I hope to have shown that the canon is threaded through with voices self-consciously aware of the critical importance of taking seriously the experiences of the marginalized, aware that social marginalization is by no means an indicator of inherent worth, and active in encouraging the reader to recognize the same. If such a hermeneutic is demonstrably cultivated within the biblical text itself, and if a method such as narratology can assure its presence in the biblical text, then feminist readers can in turn be assured that the questions, concerns, and interpretive strategies they bring are indeed intrinsic to biblical tradition—even and especially when other

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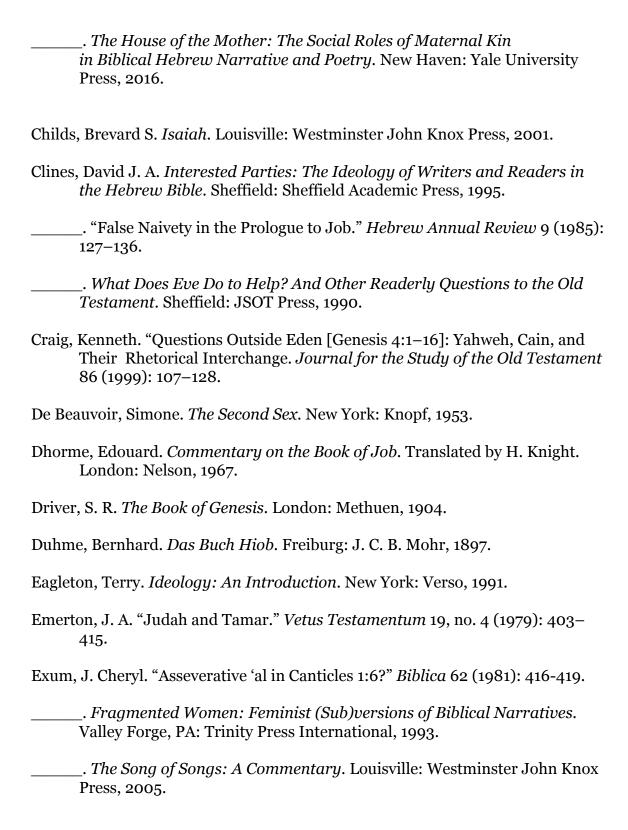[202] See J. Cheryl Exum, "Who's Afraid of the Endangered Ancestress?" in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible,* ed. J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1993): 91–113.

voices within that traditions suggest otherwise. Feminist interpreters need not consign themselves to reading from the outside in if the tradition saves a space for them to read from the inside out.

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