Disarming the “Bible-bashers”:
Claiming the Bible for Australian Abuse Survivors

Fiona D. Hill
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Acknowledgement Declaration

This thesis submitted for assessment is the result of my own work, and no unacknowledged assistance has been received in its planning, drafting, execution or writing. All sources on which it is based have been acknowledged in writing, as has the supervision which I received in the process of its preparation.

Name: Fiona D. Hill

Signature: 

Date: 22 February 2008
Abstract

This study seeks to develop a biblical hermeneutic of abuse to increase the reading agency of people who have been assaulted or sexually abused within Australian religious institutions by drawing particularly on South African Contextual Bible Study and a form of narrative therapy developed through the Dulwich Centre in South Australia. The hermeneutic encourages survivors to “disarm” the “Bible-bashers” of their own contexts by resisting the isolation that contributes to abuse; placing individual stories of abuse into wider social, political and historical context; critiquing dominant discourses; and identifying resistance strategies that can be used for social and personal transformation.

The hermeneutic is applied to four Hebrew Bible texts in which ancient women are abused: Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21); Dinah (Genesis 34); Tamar – the daughter-in-law of Judah (Genesis 38); and Tamar – the daughter of King David (2 Samuel 13). Textual analysis reveals that, although these abuse survivors initially appear as isolated figures within the biblical texts, they all show signs of being linked to support networks and demonstrate resistance strategies which open up their stories to life-giving alternatives. These incidences of abuse are part of wider patterns of greed and lust for power by key religious and political figures in the Hebrew Bible. Tactics include perpetrators, accomplices and narrators co-opting God’s support. The study concludes that, while God is never actually on the side of abusers, the deity is often implicated in abusive acts. In such circumstances contemporary survivors are challenged to call God to justice through intercession, resistance, expressing anger and claiming the power to “re-name” God. A hermeneutic of abuse maintains hope that, even in the face of death and destruction, possibilities will emerge that lead to healing and restoration.

Key words: Abuse; Australian churches; biblical hermeneutics; narrative therapy; Contextual Bible Study; Hagar; Sarah; Dinah; Tamar; Bathsheba.
Acknowledgements

This project is about transformation. It has transformed my life and it is my sincere hope that it will open many life-giving options for people who share similar journeys. I am very grateful to my supervisors Dr Mark Brett and Dr Merryl Blair for their wisdom, guidance, patience and persistence. It has been an emotionally draining journey and I am grateful to Mark and Merryl for helping me stick with it during some tough times. Most of all I am grateful for their role in imparting to me a love for the Hebrew Scriptures and other ancient writings – for being part of my journey as I discovered that, even though the Bible has been implicated in violence throughout the centuries, it still possesses the marvellous and joyous quality of being the living Word of God. Thank you for helping me to discover the blessing that comes with:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:5-9).  

Thanks to the Melbourne College of Divinity for research support and the Australian Postgraduate Award scholarship that funded my research for three years; and also to Whitley College principal Dr Frank Rees and postgraduate research co-ordinator Dr Simon Holt for encouragement, use of office facilities and the 2003 Ruth Sampson Scholarship that enabled me to finish my Bachelor of Theology studies in Hebrew Bible and Sociology. I have also been helped along the way by some fantastic librarians, particularly Kerrie Burn (Hunter), Lorraine Mitchell and Robin McComiskey of Geoffrey Blackburn Library at Whitley College, Ann Raouf at the Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre Library in Collingwood and Carol Pikos at the new Dalton McCaughey Library in Parkville.

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1 All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.
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Last but not least, thanks to Balaam’s donkey for creating much inspiration within our home that God gives voice to those who are abused by religious figures. This voice continues to be heard throughout the generations: “Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, ‘What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?’” (Numbers 22:28).
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<tr>
<td>ABR</td>
<td><em>Australian Biblical Review</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ACSSA</td>
<td>Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault</td>
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<td>ADFVC</td>
<td>Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearing House</td>
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<td>AJCP</td>
<td><em>Australian Journal of Community Psychology</em></td>
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<td>BI</td>
<td><em>Biblical Interpretation</em></td>
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<td>BR</td>
<td><em>Biblical Review</em></td>
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<td>BTB</td>
<td><em>Biblical Theology Bulletin</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>CASA</td>
<td>Centre Against Sexual Assault</td>
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<td>CBQ</td>
<td><em>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>CFT</td>
<td><em>Contemporary Family Therapy</em></td>
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<td>DCJ</td>
<td><em>Dulwich Centre Journal</em></td>
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<td>DCN</td>
<td><em>Dulwich Centre Newsletter</em></td>
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<td>DVIRCN</td>
<td><em>Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre Newsletter</em></td>
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<td>ET</td>
<td><em>Expository Times</em></td>
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<td>HTR</td>
<td><em>Harvard Theological Review</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>IJNTCW</td>
<td><em>International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td><em>Journal of Biblical Literature</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>JETS</td>
<td><em>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</em></td>
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<td>JPC</td>
<td><em>Journal of Pastoral Care</em></td>
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<td>JSOT</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</em></td>
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<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint (Greek Translation of the Hebrew Bible)</td>
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<td>MF</td>
<td><em>Ministerial Formation</em></td>
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<td>MST</td>
<td><em>Ministry, Society and Theology</em></td>
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<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible</td>
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<td>NAB</td>
<td>New American Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NJB</td>
<td>New Jerusalem Bible</td>
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<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version of the Bible</td>
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<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
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<td>RE</td>
<td><em>Review and Expositor</em></td>
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<td>REB</td>
<td>Revised English Bible</td>
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<td>VE</td>
<td><em>Vox Evangelica</em></td>
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<td>WAV</td>
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Introduction

This study *Disarming the “Bible-bashers”: Claiming the Bible for Australian Abuse Survivors* attempts to break new ground by developing a biblical hermeneutic of abuse, specifically for application among sexual abuse and domestic violence survivors within Australian religious communities. Despite the high number of abuse revelations in Australian church communities, schools and institutions, particularly since the early 1990s, there has been little attempt in Australian contexts to study systematically how experiences such as rape, sexual assault and domestic violence impact on Bible reading practices.

In 2001, Australian researcher Beth Crisp, in response to evidence that abuse affects all aspects of survivors’ lives including religious experience and interpretive practices, identified the need for a biblical hermeneutic of rape but did not actually proceed with its development.¹ Some work has been done in this area overseas, in countries such as South Africa, and I will particularly draw on the Contextual Bible Study model largely developed by Hebrew Bible scholar Gerald O. West who is the director of the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research, previously known as the Institute for the Study of the Bible, at the University of Natal in Pietermarizburg.² South African Contextual Bible Study, along with a form of narrative therapy developed through the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, South Australia,³ will become major conversation partners in a bid to develop this hermeneutic of abuse.⁴

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³ The Dulwich Centre identifies itself as “a gateway to narrative therapy” (www.dulwichcentre.com.au, accessed 7 April 2006). The Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre (www.dvirc.org.au, accessed 30 March 2006) library in Melbourne features a narrative therapy collection that includes many Dulwich Centre publications. The story of how the Dulwich Centre works to give marginalised people a voice is told in Cheryl White and
While the terms “narrative therapy”, “narrative practice”, “narrative psychology” and “narrative analysis” are used to describe a wide range of clinical and research techniques in psychology and other social sciences, the Dulwich Centre School of Narrative Therapy and Community Work satisfies my need to ground a hermeneutic of abuse, specifically developed for application within Australian contexts, in resources that have been largely developed and already applied within this country. From the early 1990s, this form of narrative therapy gained popularity among family therapists, including those who work with abuse survivors, largely due to the pioneering work of two Australians Michael White and Cheryl White, and their New Zealander colleague David Epston. Building on social constructionist theory, this form of narrative therapy is grounded mainly in the work of French historian-philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). From this point on, where the term “narrative therapy” is used, it mostly refers to the Dulwich Centre approach.


4 The mutual benefits of an inter-change between biblical studies and community psychology for the purposes of social transformation have been previously articulated. For example, community psychologist Julian Rappaport outlines how Phyllis Trible’s literary-feminist analysis of biblical texts informs his efforts to change dominant and oppressive narratives in communities which include gay people, people with mental illness and children who experience economic and educational deprivation. Julian Rappaport, “Community Narratives: Tales of Terror and Joy,” AJCP 28 (2000): 1-24.


8 See Freedman and Combs, Narrative Therapy, 14, 37-39; White and Epston, Narrative Means, 1, 19-32; White, Re-authoring Lives, 12, 42-45.
It is necessary to note that South African Contextual Bible Study developed as part of a continuum of biblical studies being applied to more general social and political struggles arising from experiences of apartheid and colonialism. For a number of social, cultural and ethical reasons, including the fact that this overseas material was not generated specifically to meet the needs of sexual abuse victims/survivors per se, it cannot be automatically transferred for application among survivors in Australian religious communities. This however is not so much a criticism of Contextual Bible Study as a warning to Australian groups that they cannot simply import overseas material and focus on the abuse occurring in other parts of the world while continuing to deny the violence intrinsic to our own context. Indeed, the underlying principals of Contextual Bible Study require us to wrestle with the specifics of our context, even though Australia is a country of great geographical, cultural and linguistic diversity resulting in a range of attitudes and responses to violence. For example, while some Australian communities, most notably Australian Indigenous women and migrants from some African countries, tend to parallel trends evident within South African communities by continuing to emphasise community solidarity in response to violence,9 there is also evidence that suggests, more generally, Australian communities tend to individualise the nature of abuse and their responses by insisting it remain private.10

9 Australian Indigenous women tend to emphasise that family violence has roots in colonialism, racism and their people’s loss of land, identity, culture and power. Their approaches to family violence tend to contextualise problems by emphasising a link between “private pain and public trouble”. See Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, Attitudes to Domestic and Family Violence in the Diverse Australian Community: Cultural Perspectives (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), 25-33; Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, The Safe Living in Aboriginal Communities Project: Whyalla (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2002), 7, 11-12, 22-25, 77.

A different approach, but still emphasising community solidarity over individual need, was found among African migrant women living in Melbourne’s western suburbs in 2006. The “Encouraging Family Harmony” health project found that women from African communities often find the more individualistic approaches of Australian family violence response services to be culturally insensitive and they were distressed by the refuge system that often requires survivors to move away from community supports. Robyn Gregory and Munira Adam, “Encouraging Family Harmony in African Communities in the Western Region,” DVIRCN 2006 (winter): 17-18.

10 Older Australians and people living in regional areas tend to be more conservative and regard family violence as a “private matter”. Women from non-English speaking backgrounds are often isolated by lack of money, transport, cultural support and interpreters. Such women often report feeling shame that their lives in Australia have not worked out as planned. Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, Attitudes to Domestic and Family Violence, 1-20, 38-42;
Another significant difference between Australia and South Africa is differing attitudes toward the Bible and what is perceived as associated with institutionalised religion. While the social and political struggles in South Africa have been traumatic and violent there still remains some semblance of solidarity that can be mustered for the purposes of resistance and contributes to a call for biblical scholarship to prophetically inform social resistance with biblically-based resources.\(^{11}\) In Australia biblical resources are more likely to be seen as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.\(^{12}\)

**Australia’s Denial of Its Abusive History**

Australia has been particularly thorough in denying its violent history.\(^{13}\) While there is ample evidence to suggest that abuse within Australian religious communities has at times been politically motivated, such abuse is typically individualised by survivors believing that their experiences are isolated incidents for which they are personally to blame. As a result survivors typically experience feelings of abandonment, loneliness and isolation.\(^{14}\) Indeed, it is only in relatively recent years that there has been any acknowledgment that abuse survivors even exist within Australian religious communities.\(^{15}\) The acknowledgement of abuse

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\(^{12}\) For example, a high number of Australians believe that churches are ineffective educators and that few sermons are ever preached on domestic violence. Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, *Attitudes to Domestic and Family Violence*, 20.


\(^{15}\) Abuse survivors and their advocates began to exert pressure on Australian churches from the late 1980s. However, University of Sydney legal professor Patrick Parkinson (1997) was the first person to write a book seriously raising child sexual abuse as a major issue for Australian churches. Muriel Porter’s *Sex, Power and the Clergy* is still the only systematic attempt to
survivors’ presence within Australian religious communities came only when court cases against Australian churches started to come to light in the early 1990s, creating an unpalatable situation for church hierarchies because denial was no longer an option.

Chapter 2 of this study, as part of entering into conversation with South African Contextual Bible Study, will make some connections between Australian church-based abuse and this country’s wider political, social and historical backdrop. Analysis derived from selected writings of Foucault, in particular his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, will be used to argue that, although abusers and their accomplices attempt to present incidences of abuse within Australian religious communities as isolated incidents, they are in fact intrinsically linked to violent trends in Australian history and British Imperialism.

I will argue that abuse experiences within Australian religious communities cannot be articulated simply in terms of domination that occurs as a result of binary oppositions such as male-female, black-white, rich-poor or clergy-pastorally subordinate. Rather, abuse experiences within Australian religious communities reveal that oppression is multi-faceted. Factors contributing to oppression include sexism, heterosexism, racism, class exploitation, colonialism and abuse of pastoral power. The inter-relationship between these factors is complex and cumulative. Also in Chapter 2, I therefore suggest Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concept of “kyriarchy”, which emphasises the inter-related and cumulative nature of oppressive forces, is a useful resource for Australian survivors to more effectively articulate abuse experiences within religious communities.

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16 This approach is consistent with biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza who insists that abuse must be “understood and explored in systemic terms.” Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Introduction,” *Concilium* 1 (1994): x, xviii.


As much work still needs to be done to even acknowledge the presence of abuse survivors within Australian religious communities, the work of generating biblical and theological resources for the purposes of resistance and reconciliation remains almost untouched. While Australian churches in quite recent years have begun to establish internal forums to hear abuse survivors’ complaints, there remains a strong tendency for abuse survivors and their advocates to be excluded from consultative processes, and at the same time there is an unwillingness for the “experts” involved to grapple with the faith issues that emerge as a result of sexual abuse and violence. Churches have tended to appoint lawyers, psychologists, insurance advisors and even public relations experts to consultative committees, rather than survivors or theologians.\footnote{For example, the Board of Inquiry that led to the resignation of Australian Governor-General Peter Hollingworth in 2003 included a legal expert (Peter Callaghan) and a child development expert (Freda Briggs) but no ethicist or theologian. Howard Munro, “The Brisbane Diocesan ‘Board of Inquiry’: Neither Fish nor Fowl”, SMR 194 (2003): 13, 19. See also Porter, Sex, Power and the Clergy, 7, 85; Muriel Porter, “Sexual Abuse in the Churches – An Issue of Power,” SMR 194 (2003): 22; Trevor L. Jordan, “Titular Trespasses: An Applied Ethics Reflection on the Hollingworth Controversy,” SMR 194 (2003): 30; Hill, “Churches as Partners,” 10-11.} In subsequent chapters, I will use Foucauldian analysis to raise questions about the control exercised by these disciplines and ways this isolates abuse survivors and pathologises their experiences.

Australian religious institutions’ historical denial of their own involvement in abuse perpetration seems to have created an endemic cynicism among Australian people that makes it extremely difficult for biblical scholarship to separate itself from the institutionalised church for the purposes of developing a prophetic voice and locating itself within social resistance. In contrast to South Africa where biblical scholars are invited into communities to resource resistance and reconciliation,\footnote{West, “Contextual Bible Study in South Africa,” 597; West, “Reading the Bible Differently,” 23; West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 71-72.} Australian abuse survivors are likely to be either apprehensive about biblical scholarships’ ideological links with the institutionalised church or simply disinterested.

Before there can be any hope of biblical scholars joining in conversation with Australian abuse survivors, much work needs to be done to break down the isolation of survivors through trusting relationships that cultivate awareness that biblical scholarship can in fact play a role in challenging dominant discourses and unmasking abusive ideology, even when the Bible reports such ideology flowing from the very mouth of God. Biblical scholars, in order to cultivate the trust necessary for such relationships to develop, must be also willing to critique their position of privilege among the Western scholarly elite. Abuse survivors, particularly those denied access to education and conceptual resources, are likely to experience difficulty entering into hermeneutical conversations if biblical scholars dictate dialogical frameworks that are exclusive and incomprehensible to ordinary readers. There is also a risk that powerlessness and inequality could be reinforced by academics’ tendency to privilege texts that are culturally biased, alienating and inaccessible.

**Turning the Tables: Disarming the “Bible-bashers”**

History tragically shows us that the Bible can be used to oppress and even justify the abuse of subordinate groups such as women, homosexual groups, ethnic minorities, Indigenous populations, and socially and economically disadvantaged classes. A powerful book, the Bible has often been interpreted by ruling elites, including the Christian church and others interested in perpetuating dominant ideologies, to claim divine sanction for agenda that relegate others to subordinate

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Biblical interpretations have also contributed to the cultural, philosophical and legal structures that perpetrate abuse.\(^24\)

Within Australia, the Bible has been particularly implicated in the subjugation of our Indigenous peoples, the destruction of their culture and the perpetration of institutionalised abuse. For example, the United Aborigines’ Mission, an interdenominational body that removed Indigenous children from their homes as far north as Alice Springs in the Northern Territory and accommodated them in the Colebrook Homes at Quorn and Adelaide in South Australia,\(^26\) claimed that its work was based on “The Divine Inspiration and Final Authority of the Scriptures.”\(^27\)

Pastor and biblical scholar Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, in her work specifically highlighting issues faced by survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, argues that “the Bible is part of the fabric of oppression of battered women”.\(^28\)

Biblical texts have been traditionally co-opted to condition women to accept that they are inferior to men and to foster a belief that God expects women to be passive and non-resistant to violence.\(^29\)

Documents prepared by Australian churches and community agencies along with abuse survivors’ published autobiographies, creative writings and websites, give ample evidence that the Bible and religious ideology is frequently co-opted in support of abusers’ agenda.\(^30\)

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\(^{28}\) Thistlethwaite, “Every Two Minutes,” 97. See also Ringe, “When Women Interpret the Bible,” 4, 7.

\(^{29}\) Thistlethwaite, “Every Two Minutes,” 97-100.

\(^{30}\) The website of Broken Rites, a non-denominational support group for people who have been abused sexually, physically or emotionally in religious institutions is one depository for such material (www.brokenrites.alphalink.com.au, accessed 15 September 2005). Autobiographical and creative writings by abuse survivors include: Joy Ford, *A Very Normal Family* (Canberra:
Against Sexual Assault (CASA), a survivor describes how her abusive father used the Bible to evoke guilt and fear. She says:

My father used to use scripture as a weapon. He led me to believe that women were unequal in the sight of God – there to service the needs of men. I believed that he had God on his side so he must have been right. I also knew that I had to respect my father because the Bible said so. … I know now that my father was not being “Christ like” and that Christ would not misuse authority and power in the way my father misused it. But I still believe deep down that I am a bad person, that I will go to hell.31

Another survivor, who was assaulted by a Marist brother when she was nine years old, describes on the Broken Rites website how Jesus’ instruction to “turn the other (cheek)” (Matthew 5:39) created within her fears of eternal punishment and unforgivable sin.32

While biblical texts have been historically co-opted to support abusive agenda, problems are not merely restricted to (mis)interpretation. Large portions of the Bible are intrinsically violent and oppressive.33 The Bible has both fuelled and sanctioned the dominant discourses that continue to silence, isolate and pathologise abuse survivors within religious communities of faith. Given the Bible’s influential role in abuse perpetration within Australia, biblical scholarship can no longer shirk its need to acknowledge the injustice that deeply scars our history, nor deny its responsibility to devote resources to processes of reconciliation and reconstruction.


31 CASA House in collaboration with The Women, Church and Sexual Violence Project Advisory Group, A Pastoral Report to the Churches on Sexual Violence Against Women and Children of the Church Community (Melbourne: Centre Against Sexual Assault, 1990), 9.


Establishing Safe Bible Reading Practices

A commitment to breaking silence and enabling abuse survivors to find their own voice within biblical interpretation is however more difficult than it initially seems. Many victims of violence and sexual assault will only break free from oppressive circumstances by joining in solidarity with others to speak their stories but systemic power structures have vested interests in maintaining isolation and silence.\(^{34}\) Abuse survivors face the dangerous complexity that any attempt to form supportive alliances and disclose details of their situations might place them at risk of further violence, psychological trauma or even death.\(^{35}\) Social taboos and institutional pressures that insist violence must not be publicly discussed, combined with the fact that victims often find their experiences of violence so traumatic that they are unable to articulate what has happened to them, conspire to reinforce isolation and perpetuate silence.\(^{36}\)

While I acknowledge the need for safe-guards to ensure abuse survivors are not re-traumatised through participation in biblical discussions, I argue that the methodologies proposed by this study offer protection against survivors re-telling their stories in ways that are most likely to re-traumatise. In mounting this argument I draw on the work of various narrative therapists. For example, Jacqui Morse and Alice Morgan argue that when abuse survivors are safely linked to support and referral networks, before placing their personal stories into wider social and political context, the risk of traumatic consequences is lessened. As abuse survivors observe how wider factors in social and political history typically contribute to abusive situations they realise that they are not personally to blame


\(^{36}\) Riessman, *Narrative Analysis*, 3-4.
for the violence they have experienced. Narrative therapy techniques enable survivors to tell their stories while consciously resisting isolation through building safe social support and the use of subjugated knowledges to explore possible alternatives. Narrative therapist Michael White emphasises that techniques which encourage survivors to merely “re-visit” abuse and “re-experience” what happened are highly suspect. Such techniques return survivors to powerlessness, dispossessing them of all support and choice. In contrast, White says that social and political contextualisation allows survivors opportunities to reinterpret their experiences by using knowledges, strategies and techniques that are empowering.

My work particularly emphasises that when narrative techniques are applied to Bible study, there is need for survivors to continue resisting their own isolation by meeting in groups with interdisciplinary support. Narrative and contextual methodologies extend protection to survivors’ support networks, which includes professionals such as biblical scholars involved in group work where personal stories of abuse and texts describing violent acts will be discussed. However, as West and his colleague Phumsile Zondi-Mabizela warn from their South African experience, when people find “sacred space” and begin to share what has previously been unmentionable “professional counselling is required in many such situations and it is irresponsible to proceed without it.”

40 Narrative therapist Sue Mann argues that distress experienced by professionals in response to hearing abuse stories can be minimised through safe work practices. Feelings of despair, burn out and fatigue can be counteracted through discussing commitments and values, and celebrating work achievements with supportive colleagues as well as in formal supervision. See Mann, “How Can You Do This Work?,” 17.
Resources for Developing a Hermeneutic of Abuse

This thesis explores issues from a framework of biblical hermeneutics rather than psychology but it takes advantage of a recent trend for biblical scholars to engage in interdisciplinary discussions and draw resources from fields such as psychology, literary theory and cultural theory to propose a hermeneutic that creates hope that Australian abuse survivors will find their voices amid the diversity that is now possible in the arena of postmodern biblical interpretation.42

Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy along with South African Contextual Bible Study both create opportunities for systemically oppressed people to resist isolation and move into solidarity with others through critiquing the political, social and historical forces that lead to oppression. Both models resist dominant discourses through the exploration of subjugated knowledges as resources for social and personal transformation. While automatic transfer of either method for the purposes of biblical interpretation with Australian abuse survivors would be inappropriate, both are particularly suited as major partners in a hermeneutical conversation that establishes connections with other contextual methodologies such as liberation theologies, feminisms, womanisms, African theologies and other forms of ideological criticism.

Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy finds hope in Foucault’s insistence that the effects of centralised power, operating through organised scientific discourses can be destabilised through struggles that result from an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges”.43 For Foucault, there are two forms of subjugated knowledges. The

42 As the proposed hermeneutic gives opportunity for contemporary survivors to use their own personal experience in the reading process, the role of psychology cannot be ignored. This study specifically attempts to develop interpretive resources for use among survivors who have reached a point in their recovery from abuse where they are ready to participate in activities which promote personal and social transformation. It is, however, possible that some people wishing to participate will still be experiencing high levels of crisis and anger. Care needs to be taken to ensure that such people are adequately supported with counselling and other networks to ensure that they do not inappropriately process their trauma or take action, such as confronting perpetrators and family members, before their physical and psychological safety is secured. For analysis of stages of recovery from abuse and particular precautions that need to be taken at each stage see Judith Lewis Herman, Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 155-236; Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 57-169.

first, historical knowledges that are present but disguised within systematic theory, can be exposed through scholarly research and criticism.\textsuperscript{44} The second also known as local or naïve knowledges, includes whole domains of knowledge that have been disqualified as inadequate by dominant discourses because they are perceived to be beneath the required level of cognition and scientificity.\textsuperscript{45} Such knowledges are based on experience and, for Foucault, they include the local and naïve knowledges possessed by marginalised groups such as psychiatric patients, ill people and delinquents.\textsuperscript{46}

A biblical hermeneutic of abuse utilises both forms of subjugated knowledges. Textual analysis exposes knowledges that are present but disguised within systematic theory by applying scholarly skills and methods in ways that extract new meanings from biblical texts. The inclusion of abuse survivors in interpretive conversations also provides opportunities for people who might have previously under-estimated their own subjugated knowledges, or had them devalued by others, to now muster them for the purposes of resistance. Interpretive conversations also provide opportunities for survivors to explore how these subjugated knowledges can contribute to critique of abusive forces, the disruption of dominant discourses and the living out of alternative, more life-giving options.\textsuperscript{47} I emphasise here the need for abuse survivors and their supporters to resist the tendency of experts, particularly in fields such as medicine, psychiatry, law and religion, to pathologise and label survivors’ personal experiences whilst ignoring these rich sources of inner knowledge.\textsuperscript{48} Dulwich Centre Narrative


\textsuperscript{45} Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 82.

\textsuperscript{46} Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 82; Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace, \textit{A Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power and the Subject} (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1993), 15-16.


\textsuperscript{48} Psychological labels often applied to abuse survivors include “co-dependent”, “enmeshed” and “dysfunctional”. Morse and Morgan, “Group Work with Women,” 39; Coral Trowbridge, “From Files of Depression to Stories of Hope: Working with Older Women Who Survived

**Reading Hebrew Bible Texts from a Hermeneutic of Abuse**

This study tries to avoid a repeat of historic scenarios where dominant groups impose biblical messages on abuse survivors. It proposes a Bible reading method that encourages contemporary abuse survivors, safely supported by interdisciplinary networks,\footnote{A similar interdisciplinary approach for African women’s contextual readings is proposed by Nyambura J. Njoroge, “The Bible and African Christianity: A Curse or a Blessing?” in Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 232-233. There are difficulties associated with immediately implementing this approach in Australia. See further pp. 64-6 below.} to increase their own agency by using subjugated knowledges to develop communal resources as they study the stories of four Hebrew Bible women who were all abused by key political and religious figures.\footnote{I identify these texts as containing resources particularly suited to survivors who are ready to participate in activities which promote personal and social transformation. In addition, in a section entitled “Ethics of Reading” in Chapter 1, I suggest that selected psalms, particularly those classified by Walter Brueggemann as “psalms of disorientation,” are a useful resource when working with survivors who experience anger and/or want to blame God for the abuse they have suffered. See Walter Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 51-122; Walter Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms (Winona: Saint Mary’s Press, 1993), 13-21; Walter Brueggemann, Spirituality of the Psalms (Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 2002), 25-45.} To my mind, these women all qualify to be classified as “eternal survivors” because they never actually die within the biblical texts. This study
finds hope in Athalya Brenner’s insightful recognition that characters who do not die in biblical text remain, in a literary sense, immortal.\footnote{Brenner, \textit{I Am}, xiv.}

My choice of Hebrew Bible texts is partly motivated by my own resistance to a rather widespread Christian idea that the Hebrew Bible is violent but the New Testament is not. I share the commitment of Hebrew Bible scholar Phyllis Trible who says “Ancient tales of terror speak all too frighteningly of the present” and “the evidence of history refutes all claims of the superiority of a Christian era.”\footnote{Phyllis Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), xiii, 2. See also Charles S. Hawkins, “Galatians 5:22-23 and 2 Samuel 13 – Remembering Tamar,” \textit{RE} 93 (1996): 541.}

My choice of texts is also partly influenced by the potential for dialogue with Jewish and Muslim abuse survivors.\footnote{My interest in inter-faith dialogue has been nurtured through participation in inter-faith forums at the WellSpring Centre in Melbourne, Australia. I am also influenced by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, eds., \textit{Hagar, Sarah and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).}

Texts chosen for analysis are:

- Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21)
- Dinah (Genesis 34)
- Tamar – Daughter-in-law of Judah (Genesis 38)
- Tamar – Daughter of King David (2 Samuel 13)


- Resist the isolation that contributes to the abuse of biblical survivors by probing textual gaps and silences in ways that identify and build up possible
support networks within the narrative. Contemporary survivors, and others involved in Bible reading are also encouraged to develop and document their own support networks.

- Further resist the isolation of biblical survivors by placing their stories into wider social, political and historical context thus establishing that they are not personally to blame for the abuse they experience. Contemporary survivors are also encouraged to place their own stories of abuse into wider context.

- Critique dominant discourses and unmask abusive ideologies that sanction violence and exploitation within biblical narratives and continue to do so within contemporary contexts. Contemporary survivors are particularly encouraged to challenge characters, editors and narrators who implicate God in abusive acts.

- Analyse the resistance strategies used by biblical abuse survivors and allow opportunities for contemporary survivors to identify points in both biblical texts and their own stories where alternative courses of action become possible, opening the way for personal and social transformation.

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57 While this reading strategy is inspired by Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy and Contextual Bible Study, it also draws on the work of psychologist Carol Gilligan which demonstrates that women can be particularly gifted in developing support networks. Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2-17.


60 Family therapist Allan Wade argues that in western contexts resistance to oppression is often defined in terms of the obvious physical retaliation evident in male combat. Meanwhile, ingenious resistance strategies that abuse survivors courageously exhibit to critique and undermine their abusers are largely ignored. Such resistance is often subtle, disguised and expressed in ways that seek to protect survivors from further harm. Allan Wade, “Small Acts
My commitment to placing biblical stories of abuse into wider political, social and historical contexts has resulted in large sections of text having to be analysed. For example, I argue that it is impossible to understand Hagar’s story without following how her life is entwined with Sarah’s life in a narrative that extends from Genesis 12 to 23. Similarly, Judah’s abandonment of his daughter-in-law, Tamar, in Genesis 38 is illuminated by analysis of his wealth and the callous attitudes that he often expresses towards extended family and friends. I therefore trace Judah’s attitudes toward wealth, family and friends from his suggestion to sell his brother Joseph into slavery (Genesis 37:26) until a point where he has obviously mellowed and pleads on behalf of his younger brother Benjamin before Joseph in the Egyptian court (Genesis 44:18-34).

While the story of Dinah in Genesis 34 has been traditionally interpreted as a rape story, I argue that, by reading it against a land agreement that Jacob seals with the Shechemites in Genesis 33:18-20 and by analysing the deceit and hypocrisy that her brothers demonstrate in various situations, it can be interpreted as a story in which Dinah’s brothers brutally renege on cultural agreements. In placing Dinah’s story into its wider context, I explore the possibility that the Shechemites, as a result of negotiating a land deal with Jacob, might expect that marriage reciprocity is now practiced between the two people-groups. Similarly analysis of the rape of Tamar, the daughter of King David, cannot be restricted to the events of 2 Samuel 13 but rather must be set in the wider context of David’s long-term pattern of acquiring women and territory to boost his political prowess and also the violent rivalry that occurs over monarchical succession throughout large parts of 1 and 2 Samuel.

Abusive religious and political leaders, especially those who enlist God’s support in the perpetration of abuse, pose particular dangers for survivors seeking

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61 While this may have also led to a more historical-critical approach, that methodological option has limited value within the narrative therapy paradigm and would require survivors to engage directly with “expert” knowledge. See further, Chapter 1 below.
Contemporary survivors, through careful analysis of biblical narratives in which people are abused, can peel away layers of traditional biblical interpretation, challenging dominant discourses and unmasking abusive ideology in bids to reveal afresh what biblical texts do and do not actually say. Such work will be particularly enlightening where texts have been traditionally (mis)interpreted and then over-laid with dangerous ideology that has historically legitimated violence and abuse. Such careful analysis will help to identify points where, at a superficial level, incidents of abuse seem to be sanctioned within the biblical text and closer scrutiny of various characters, narrators and editors reveals the likelihood that political strategies are also insidiously working to isolate and even devastate the biblical victims.

The proposed hermeneutic of abuse encourages contemporary survivors to “re-author” biblical narratives and their own experiences by identifying points in stories where alternative courses of action might have been possible, or where resistance resulted in more life-giving outcomes than would otherwise have been so. At times, recourse will be made to Jewish Midrash, the Koran, extra-biblical sources and some popular literature to demonstrate various ways in which biblical narratives have been re-shaped at different points in history to suit different ideological agenda thus yielding a plethora of alternatives to the version that appears in the Hebrew Bible text. This recourse to extra-biblical material is also in keeping with feminist and other methods of ideological criticism which seek to recover voices previously excluded from official records by extending the canon and incorporating a range of cultural resources and subjugated knowledges into the interpretive process.

63 For example, P. Kyle McCarter argues that biblical narratives were written to sway public opinion and that readers need to be “cautious in accepting the narrator’s interpretation of events and comments about human motives.” P. Kyle McCarter, “The Historical David,” Interpretation 40 (1986): 118-119. Similarly Charles Conroy, emphasising narrators’ capacity to assume an all-seeing, privileged position warns that narrators can manipulate readers’ reactions by giving greater or less knowledge. Charles Conroy, Absalom, Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Sam 13-20 (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978), 22-24.
64 For example feminist theorist Silvia Schroer says: “we can choose to have other treasures in our house: pictures and icons, apocryphal writings, the classic myths and sagas, the history of the ‘indigas’ or slave stories, poems by Audre Lorde and so on.” Silvia Schroer, “We Will Know Each Other by Our Fruits: Feminist Exegesis and the Hermeneutic of Liberation,” in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation, ed. Silvia Schroer and
For too long the existence of abuse survivors within Australian religious communities has been denied. A biblical hermeneutic of abuse protests this institutional denial by insisting that survivors and their supporters disrupt the dominant discourses that render them non-existent. This feat can only be achieved through solidarity and the use of critical methods that muster hope that life can be different. This study presents contemporary survivors with options. They are supported to break the silence that surrounds abuse and “disarm” the “Bible-bashers” within their own contexts.

Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy’s appeal as a resource for the development of a biblical hermeneutic of abuse becomes more obvious through exploration of its theoretical grounding in the work of Foucault. A strong theme in Foucault’s work is the dominating classes’ use of practices of punishment and discipline, across a whole range of institutions, to hinder development of horizontal solidarity particularly between poor and disadvantaged classes of people.1 These practices include physically partitioning individuals, in terms of time, space and achievement, in ways that objectify human experience and isolate it for the purposes of observation, examination and surveillance.2

Foucault argues that this compartmentalisation of human experience made possible human sciences, such as economics, medicine, psychology, psychiatry, sociology and criminology, by essentially producing the “objects” necessary for observation and examination,3 and the historical conditions conducive to the emergence of those with power to observe and formulate discourse – the “subjects”.4 Foucauldian theory’s capacity to address this power differential in human communication, where aspects of experience are objectified and observed by “experts” who then produce dominant and pathologising discourses, is inspirational for both narrative therapy and the development of a biblical

1 Dreyfus and Rabinow, Michel Foucault, 153.
3 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 223-224; Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic, xv, 58-62, 65, 87; Dreyfus and Rabinow, Michel Foucault, 143-144, 194-195.
4 Foucault, The Order of Things, 386-387; Foucault, “Afterword,” 208-216; Dreyfus and Rabinow, Michel Foucault, 168-207; Brown, On Foucault, 59-61; McHoul and Grace, A Foucault Primer, 91-125.
hermeneutic of abuse. Both seek to challenge abusive rhetoric by resisting the objectification of abuse survivors’ experience and exploring opportunities for them to work cooperatively with supporters to find their own voices and articulate alternative scenarios that create possibilities for personal and social transformation.\(^5\)

Foucauldian analysis highlights how, through language and its performance of the “art of naming”, objects are defined and enclosed for further examination and assessment.\(^6\) Objects can be numbered and supervised. Objects are spoken about, but they do not speak.\(^7\) Academic disciplines, assuming the status and respectability of “science”, are empowered by the knowledge they accumulate to then pose as custodians of truth.\(^8\) Foucault argues that, while human sciences pose as the “very foundation of society” and the “concrete form of every morality”, they are essentially “a set of physio-political techniques”.\(^9\)

Such unmasking of dominant discourses forms the basis of sociologist S. Caroline Taylor’s work. Taylor, in her analysis of dominant narratives that emerge during court trials of intrafamilial sexual abuse of children, argues that while law, medicine and psychiatry are traditionally perceived as objective and incorruptible sources of knowledge, within the courtroom they can be unmasked as male-dominated disciplines which both control what counts as “evidence” and espouse theories that connect female reproduction and sexuality with physical pathology, dishonesty and madness.\(^10\) Through analysis of complete court trials Taylor seeks to challenge such dominant legal narratives, which in time become precedents for other cases. Similarly my study seeks to challenge dominant rhetoric and unmask abusive ideology. Without such disruption to dominant discourses, there is a risk

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5 This approach is consistent with challenges articulated by biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in “Introduction,” xviii-xxi.


7 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.


10 S. Caroline Taylor, *Court Licensed Abuse: Patriarchal Lore and the Legal Response to Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Children* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 4-10. See also Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 2-17.
that people who have been classified as “objects” and exposed to physio-political techniques will, over time, be conditioned to monitor their own behaviour and become complicit in their own subjugation.\(^{11}\)

However, Foucault distinguishes *power* as exemplified by physico-political techniques from *overt violence* by insisting that within confinement an observed “object” must still have freedom to respond in a number of ways.\(^{12}\) For Foucault, power is exercised through a “net-like organization” with individuals circulating between its threads. He argues that individuals are not only the “consenting targets” of multi-directional power but also its vehicles.\(^{13}\) He says: “what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action.”\(^{14}\) For Foucault, even when power is exercised over a person, he or she still has options to react in a variety of ways, creating possibilities for numerous responses, reactions, results and interventions to emerge.\(^{15}\) It is this aspect of Foucault’s work, with its emphasis on potential for personal and social transformation, which inspires narrative therapists including those who work with abuse survivors.

Foucault’s work emphasises an historic shift from public displays of execution and physical violence, popular during the Middle Ages, to modernity’s more covert tactics of surveillance and social control.\(^{16}\) He maintains that, even though practices of modernity have increasingly compartmentalised, observed and confined human experience, people still experience degrees of freedom which

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\(^{13}\) Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 89; McHoul and Grace, *A Foucault Primer*, 21-22; Gutting, *Foucault*, 87-88.

\(^{14}\) Foucault, “Afterword,” 220. See also Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 184-188.

\(^{15}\) Foucault, “Afterword,” 220.

allow them a range of responses. While this potential for transformation is inspirational, I however believe that Foucault fails to acknowledge the extent to which overt forms of violence continue within modern institutions, including religious communities. While I am eager to emphasise that abuse survivors, after they have begun recovery, possess a range of previously unrealised resources that can be utilised for transformation, I also acknowledge that victims in situations where violence is still being threatened or enacted are devoid of such choices. To insist that people in dangerous situations could have exercised choice or acted differently comes dangerously close to blaming the victim. For abuse survivors, the freedom to exercise choice is possible only when safe and sacred spaces are secured and there is ongoing protection from the threat of overt violence.

**Foucault as an Inspiration for Narrative Therapy**

Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy finds hope in Foucault’s notion that dominant and pathologising discourses are essentially political techniques that are socially constructed and can be resisted through struggles that draw individuals out of isolation and highlight alternative courses of action. While traditional approaches to psychology and psychiatry typically objectify marginalised people, and thus elevate therapists to the status of “experts”, narrative therapists seek to move into partnership with their clients by rejecting elitist notions of objective assessment and diagnosis. Narrative therapists Jill Freedman and Gene Combs emphasise that elevating therapists to the status of scientific observers, with the power to label and define, denies clients agency over their own life stories. They say: “When people are approached as objects about which we know truths – their experience is often that of being dehumanized.” Instead, narrative therapists are committed to a postmodern world-view that insists realities are socially

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17 Foucault, “Afterword,” 221. See also Brown, *On Foucault*, 1-2, 11-12.
constructed through language and organised through narrative, giving rise to the possibility of multiple meanings.\textsuperscript{20}

Narrative therapists work with abuse survivors to critique political, social and historical forces that contribute to abuse and to recognise their own subjugated knowledges or power. Abuse survivors’ subjugated knowledges are then used to resist dominant and pathologising discourses in the task of “re-authoring” or transforming life stories.\textsuperscript{21} Foucauldian notions of power and knowledge shift emphasis from the dehumanising violence that dominates abuse survivors’ lives to exploration of their own power in the form of possible resistance strategies. Abuse survivors are then able to discover that subjugated knowledges can resource them for “power with” others (solidarity in the struggle), “loving power” (community) and “power with purpose” (transformation).\textsuperscript{22} Such alternatives enable narrative therapists to reject theories that survivors are biologically or chemically damaged for life and seek responses that are not pathologising or re-traumatising.\textsuperscript{23}

Narrative therapist Amanda Kamsler says: “The goal of therapy is to invite clients to access aspects of their experience which have been edited out of the dominant story.”\textsuperscript{24} Jill Freedman and Gene Combs say:

> A key to this therapy is that in any life there are always more events that don’t get “storied” than there are ones that do – even the longest and most complex autobiography leaves out more than it includes. This means that when life narratives carry hurtful meanings or seem to offer only unpleasant choices, they can be changed by highlighting different previously un-storied events or by taking new meaning from already-storied events, thereby constructing new narratives.\textsuperscript{25}

The usefulness of Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy, including its theoretical foundations in the writings of Foucault, has been criticised particularly by


\textsuperscript{22} Muller, “Journeys of Freedoms,” 114-116.


\textsuperscript{24} Kamsler, “Her-story in the Making,” 61.

\textsuperscript{25} Freedman and Combs, \textit{Narrative Therapy}, 32-33.
American psychologist and family therapist Alan Parry who has a background in religious studies. Parry argues that the “ideologically informed pessimism of Foucault” is not the best theoretical basis for narrative therapy. Parry, drawing on biblical hermeneutics, particularly the work of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), proposes an alternative to Foucault-based narrative therapy, which he dubs “clinical hermeneutics”. In work that obviously alludes to Gadamer’s “fusion of two horizons” metaphor, Parry states that the main task of psychological practice in a postmodern world is to increase understanding between people who increasingly inhabit “different worlds”. He says:

> when family members tell their stories to one another, each is granted a glimpse into the sheer mystery of another person. When the members then use their imaginations and relate to others’ told experiences of themselves, the sharing of stories can provide a bridge of compassion across which that mystery can be, in those moments, breached, and hitherto alienating differences can be found to contain similarities in one of each member’s own multitude of stories.

Although Parry points to useful resources for the development of a biblical hermeneutic of abuse, which will be revisited later in this chapter, in his dismissal of Foucault as a suitable theoretical base he fails to give any alternative analysis of the role of power and knowledge in the formulation of alternative stories. While Parry claims his “clinical hermeneutics” is more suited to postmodern contexts than models based on the work of Foucault, his work is in fact more limited. He hardly acknowledges power and knowledge differentials in emphasising the potential for aggrieved parties to reach shared understanding and

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26 For a professional profile on Alan Parry see www.familytherapy.org/staff.html (accessed 28 September 2006).
view each other as “fellow sufferers”. In contrast, Foucauldian theory provides a good basis for understanding how power can circulate in ways that isolate and silence marginalised people, thus making it extremely difficult for them to even articulate their own stories.

**A Hermeneutic of Abuse:**

*Positioned against Developments in Biblical Studies*

Options to include marginalised voices such as abuse survivors in biblical interpretation is only possible due to increased historical pressure to critique paradigms of scholarship, unmask dominant ideology and create space for alternative points of view. As has already been discussed, the emergence of “objective sciences” traditionally allowed dominant voices from various disciplines to assume the power to define and label abuse survivors’ experiences. However, as evidenced by the emergence of narrative therapy, these disciplines are no longer immune from postmodern pressures that question their neutrality, ideology and ways of defining reality. These pressures are however part of a much wider hermeneutical crisis across natural sciences, philosophy, history, social science, education and theology. They also impact on biblical studies and must be positioned against the wider history of ideas.

New methods and thought paradigms typically emerge from intellectual crises that occur when existing conceptions of the world can no longer be perceived as plausible. While scriptural interpretation has been practiced in various ways since late antiquity, it was not until the Renaissance and Reformation that biblical hermeneutics began to emerge as a distinct discipline. Gaining impetus

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33 Parry and Doan, *Story Re-visions*, 29.
35 Charles H. Cosgrove emphasises that ancient Christians were much more comfortable with textual ambiguity because they regarded sacred texts as “sematically extraordinary” and expected them to yield multiple meanings. Charles H. Cosgrove, “Toward a Postmodern Hermeneutica Sacra: Guiding Considerations in Choosing between Competing Plausible Interpretations of Scripture,” in *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminancy and the Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Charles H. Cosgrove (London: T. and T. Clark, 2004), 40.
from the collapse of an existing world-view, and fuelled by Protestant reformers
reacting against Catholic insistence on church authority and tradition, divine
revelation was increasingly linked to human language, necessitating developments
in biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. Such developments, however, were not
simply confined to the realms of theology. Running parallel to an increased
emphasis on Scripture, were other cultural movements seeking meaning through a
renewed interest in classic literature. This gave way to the Renaissance with its
revival of antiquity and the development of literary, philological, philosophical,
legal and cultural interpretation. Therefore, the Enlightenment not only opened
the way for an emphasis on scientific method and technological rationality, but
also created environments where the desire to systematise all human knowledge
generated the need for the discipline of hermeneutics. The development of
historical-critical method within biblical scholarship, and more generally within
literary studies, therefore reflected trends in motion within philosophy and other
disciplines. Like the natural world, texts came to be considered as stable,
objective and examinable realities.

While scientific method and interpretive understanding were initially able to co-
exist in modernity, that co-existence eventually gave way to various protests
against positivist science. For example, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), a leading
figure in the foundation of so-called Geisteswissenschaften (human sciences or
humanities), aimed to develop a philosophical and methodological alternative to
positivist science with a focus on internal, psyche experience in contrast with the
laws of Naturwissenschaften (natural sciences). Dilthey, however, struggled to let
go of the objectivism that he attacked, and his insistence that Geisteswissenschaften
remained “sciences” resulted in psychology emerging as an
empirical science during his lifetime. Max Weber (1864-1920), one of
sociology’s pioneers, endeavoured to examine social phenomena in terms of

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37 Dallmayr and McCarthy, Understanding and Social Inquiry, 1-2; Mueller-Vollmer,
38 Mueller-Vollmer, “Introduction,” 2-3; Regina M. Schwartz, “Adultery in the House of David:
cultural meaning. Weber’s impact on social theory was profound but responses to his work were mixed. In biblical studies, Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner correctly argue that historical-critical methods initially promoted a revival of interest in the Bible and opportunities to critique church dogma. However, quests for authorial intention soon led to an emphasis on one, universal meaning that could be reconstructed by scientific methods.

The work of Gadamer opened the way for a fundamental shift in European hermeneutics with his insistence that authority and tradition need not be discarded in response to the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason. Gadamer’s claim, that classic and eminent texts continued to convey truth and authority beyond the original contexts in which they were written, contributed to an awareness that hermeneutics and philosophy could become relevant and make differences in the lives of real people in contemporary situations. Within biblical studies, Gadamer’s emphasis on the historical position of the interpreter pre-figured a shift to more contextual, reader-response methodologies.

In Gadamerian terms, a text’s authority is not forced but rather comes through communal consensus in relation to what is considered true and valid. Gadamer proposes a filtering process in which bad traditions, or those that are no longer socially useful, die away thus allowing classic works to emerge as deposits of tradition that continue to demonstrate authority through changes in time, taste and criticism. For Gadamer, if a text does not continue to prove itself in this way, there remains no need to privilege it and it simply ceases to be considered classic or authoritative.

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that the consensus on which authority is founded can arise and develop free of force. This stance proved contentious for Gadamer, particularly in a well-documented interaction with German social theorist Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929). Habermas, highly influenced by the politics of post-war Germany, including his own reaction to discovering the horrifying realities of Auschwitz and the Nuremberg trials, argues that Gadamer sidesteps the possibility that texts can be formed, and remain powerful, not because they contain essential and communal truths, but as a result of power abuse – distorted communication practices in which the powerful dominate the weak by destroying all record of minority traditions and alternative stories. Gadamer, however, strongly maintains that ideological critique essentially occurs during the filtering process that he describes. If texts are shown to be the result of violent force, or can no longer prove their truth, they die away, ceasing to be classic and authoritative.

For Gadamer, the merging of “two horizons” is considered basic to all interpretation. Understanding is not so much an occurrence of individual psychology but an historic event in which interpreters become consciously aware of their own prejudices and contexts and move into conversation with tradition, revising and correcting bias and allowing the horizons of the present and past to constantly fuse together. Stressing temporal distance between reader and text, Gadamer argues that it is impossible for interpreters to leave their own contexts and journey back into the past to view texts solely on their own terms. Interpreters’ horizons are not fixed frontiers, but rather move with them, inviting them to be transformed by texts as they demonstrate a willingness to consciously

49 Finlayson, Habermas, preface.
52 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 267-274. See also Thiselton, The Two Horizons, 16, 304-319; Brett, Biblical Criticism in Crisis?, 135-148; Bleicher, Contemporary Hermeneutics, 111-112.
53 Bleicher, Contemporary Hermeneutics, 109-110; Brett, Biblical Criticism in Crisis?, 135, 141; Thiselton, The Two Horizons, 305-306.
become aware of their own pre-understandings, or prejudices, and then proceed to revise and correct them.\textsuperscript{54}

Habermas, in a bid to democratise distorted communicative practices, proposes a theory of communication based on what he perceives to be universally applicable rules of rational discourse and critique.\textsuperscript{55} In more recent discussions of hermeneutics, a range of postmodern interest groups have challenged what they see as modernist and objectivist assumptions in Habermas’ work by insisting that the very procedures he proposes for fair and rational discourse are biased toward the culturally dominant and therefore susceptible to the very power abuses that he seeks to avoid.\textsuperscript{56} While Habermas attempts a democratisation that guards against powerful forces distorting communicative processes, his recourse to universal principles risks reinforcement of imperialism, denial of particular identity to marginalised voices and lack of acknowledgement that historic inequalities continue to interfere with the establishment of fair process in present situations.\textsuperscript{57}

Habermas argues that democracy demands that the formal institutions which make decisions, pass laws and make policy must be responsive to input from more informal communicative (aesthetic and expressive) arms of politics such as communal interest groups, lobbyists, protesters and artists.\textsuperscript{58} However, he privileges formal procedural politics, which he regards as based on the principles of rational discourse, over the more informal communicative politics, which he classifies as chaotic and resistant to restraint and regulation.\textsuperscript{59} This differentiation has been seen as exclusive by groups such as feminists and postcolonial critics who argue that the life experiences and commitments of their constituency are

\textsuperscript{54} Thiselton, \textit{The Two Horizons}, 16, 303-306.


\textsuperscript{56} Finlayson, \textit{Habermas}, 13.

\textsuperscript{57} Brett, “The Implied Ethics,” 8-12.


more likely to involve them in informal, expressive, aesthetic and indigenous forms of communication and that such practices can be a form of resistance against domination. Responses to Habermas’ social critique have increasingly emphasised the need for communication processes which encourage cross-cultural dialogue but also show respect for the particular identities of marginalised voices.

The realisation that observers are essentially guided by their own points of view and interests began to threaten the positivist criterion of unbiased neutrality. There was increased awareness that language and theory precede observation and indeed are preconditions of observation, rather than its neutral outcome. Along with the more philosophical critiques of modernism, liberation critics increasingly forced open intellectual space for alternative stories and traditions by arguing that so-called “scientific” methods claim ahistorical certainty in order to mask economic, social, political and cultural inequalities. The realisation that language, symbolic frameworks and cultures, including ideologies such as capitalism, patriarchy and liberal humanism, are social constructions, rather than naturally given and unchanging orders, inspired feminists, liberationists and other oppressed minorities from places such as Africa, Asia and Latin-America to seek social transformation through the reconstruction of discursive practices.

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62 West, Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation, 10-12; Rowland and Corner, Liberating Exegesis, 38.
63 West, Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation, 11, 63-68; Brenner, I Am, ix-xviii.
Biblical Studies: Demonstrating Trends Evident in Other Disciplines

In disciplines such as psychology and psychiatry, the realisation that language and ideology are socially constructed rather than naturally given, created intellectual environments conducive to approaches such as Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy. Similarly, with the movement away from so-called “objective” methods, influences such as womanisms, feminisms, liberation theologies, African theologies and various forms of ideological criticisms have increasingly called on biblical studies to consider methods that acknowledge the role of life experience and perspective on the reading process. As a result, biblical scholars are increasingly challenged to broaden their horizons through dialogue with other disciplines such as literary studies, sociology, psychology and anthropology (while being aware of their constructed nature), thus making possible the interdisciplinary exchange that this study proposes between South African Contextual Bible Study, Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy and other conversation partners.

No longer is the discipline of biblical studies pre-occupied almost solely with authors and the contexts in which texts were written, but rather, new ways of accessing texts allow for the exposure of androcentricism and ideological domination as scholarly attention shifts to the relationships between text and reader. Increased awareness that biblical interpretation should not simply be an elitist domain of scholars, dissecting texts for the purposes of academic research and publication, gives readers a new freedom to interpret texts according to the norms and expectations of their own contexts. Scholars have chosen a range of labels when seeking to explain and categorise the plethora of interpretive tools that have emerged as a result of these changes.

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67 For examples see Craig C. Broyles, ed., *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 20-62; Fernando F. Segovia, “And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues: Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism,” in *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, vol. 1 of *Reading from this*
West has attempted to make different modes of reading accessible to poor and marginalised readers in his context by using three labels: *behind the text, in the text* and *in front of the text.* For West, *behind the text* modes of reading are primarily interested in the historical and sociological world that produced the text. *In the text* approaches focus on the literary and narrative forms which can be read from the surface of the text, while *in front of the text* methods focus on metaphors, themes and symbols projected from the text, drawing them into conversation with contemporary experience.

Alternatively Fernando F. Segovia, now a postcolonial critic writing for academic audiences, engages more with history of interpretation complexities to develop his four labels: historical-critical, literary criticism, cultural criticism and cultural studies. In Segovia’s terms, cultural criticism views texts as evidence that reflect the contexts in which they were produced. This method of analysis asks questions about social class, class conflict, social institutions, roles and behaviour. Segovia claims that cultural criticism, with its emphasis on texts as ideological products or cultural phenomenon, is more interested in economic, social and cultural aspects of biblical texts, rather than their theological or religious characteristics. Risking confusion with his “cultural criticism” category, Segovia labels his reader-response mode of reading as “cultural studies” and defines it as “a joint critical study of texts and readers, perspectives and ideologies”. This fourth category parallels what West classifies as *in front of the text* methods and literary criticism parallels West’s *in the text* approach.

West emphasises that there is no single “best way” to read the Bible but that each mode of reading offers advantages and disadvantages. A hermeneutic of abuse would see none of the methods as mutually exclusive, and follows the lead of

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68 West, *Contextual Bible Study,* 26-49.
69 West, *Contextual Bible Study,* 26-49.
70 Segovia, “And They Began to Speak,” 1-2, 5-28.
71 Segovia, “And They Began to Speak,” 22-27.
72 Segovia, “And They Began to Speak,” 29.
73 West, *Contextual Bible Study,* 28, 47-49; Gerald O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 64, 70-72, 77-78.
other pluralists who have developed ways to use an eclectic mix of methods as is appropriate. Such a strategy takes seriously Charles H. Cosgrove’s advice that contemporary exegetes need to develop ways of working in a pluralistic, postmodern world without totally destroying all that has come to us through modernity. Although a hermeneutic of abuse seeks to interrupt dominant discourses and challenge the assumed superiority of dominant readings it does not for instance walk away from the commitment it shares with other critics of ideology such as feminists, new historicists and postcolonial critics to raise questions about how history has been constructed. As will be outlined below, the only methodological option conclusively ruled out is (perhaps ironically) the relatively new autobiographical criticism.

However it is articulated, the movement beyond the so-called objectivism of the historical-critical method, to options of postmodern plurality, creates opportunities for a diversity of voices to be drawn into interpretive conversations, including some who were previously silenced. Among the most prominent of these voices are liberation theologians from the Third World, feminist theologians from the First World and minority theologians living in the First World.

**Sifting Methodological Options: Identifying Conversation Partners**

Within this arena of expanded methodological options, liberation hermeneutics, feminisms, womanisms, African theologies, new historicism, postcolonial theory and South African Contextual Bible Study all seem suited to contribute to the development of a hermeneutic of abuse. While personal voice criticism, also known as autobiographical criticism, seems initially promising, it ultimately

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75 Cosgrove, “Toward a Postmodern *Hermeneutica Sacra*,” 43.


78 West, *The Academy of the Poor*, 12.
proves inadequate. I will now survey this range of methodological approaches and highlight why South African Contextual Bible Study, a model developed in dialogue with liberation and feminist hermeneutics, emerges as one of biblical studies’ most useful resources for the development of a hermeneutic of abuse.

Liberation hermeneutics has risen in response to the needs of the poor and oppressed in the colonised world. Third World theologians deserve much of the credit for its foundational work. The approach is, however, also compatible with developments in European philosophy and cultural tradition. Taking advantage of biblical studies’ movement away from historical-critical method, liberation hermeneutics perceives the biblical world, not as alien territory accessible only through excavation and reconstruction of the past, but rather as a partner in a conversation process that is potentially transformative.

Intentionally feminist biblical hermeneutics first emerged in the 1970s in response to perceived injustice that women’s experiences had been previously denied in biblical interpretation. Feminist exegetes refuse to suspend women’s present concerns in bids to interpret Scripture, but rather interpret one in the light of the other. They insist that human history will remain distorted if experiences of women remain undervalued. They argue that while it is important for biblical scholarship to uncover patriarchal bias and andocentric ideology that contributed to the production of ancient texts, it is also imperative to acknowledge how women’s contemporary experiences and contexts shape interpretation.

A particularly painful aspect of feminism is a tendency for its conversations to be

dominated by white, Eurocentric women who assume their experiences are universal, thereby denying existence to women of different cultures, classes and ethnic groups.\(^{85}\) In more recent years, it has become more usual to refer to feminisms (plural) in a bid to acknowledge the particularities of context in women’s experiences, thus encouraging white, Western women in particular to examine their role in world-wide inequality and power discrepancy, rather than assuming their own experiences are universal.\(^{86}\)

Womanist theology, emerging amongst women in African American communities, reacts against both white, Western conceptions of feminism and black, male liberationist thinking by intentionally articulating the particularities of being female and Black.\(^{87}\) Similar differentiations are articulated from African women’s perspectives, particularly by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.\(^{88}\) Renita Weems stresses that womanist hermeneutics challenges the Bible with regard to its historic legitimisation of the dehumanisation of people of colour and the sexual exploitation of women of African ancestry in particular. She says that the Bible: “must be understood as a politically and socially drenched text invested in ordering relations between people, legitimating some viewpoints and delegitimizing other viewpoints.”\(^{89}\) Weems says that the main aim of womanist biblical scholarship is to empower African American women to uncover abusive

and vested interests embedded within biblical texts and to challenge those same interests and ideologies in contemporary contexts.  

New historicism is a methodological option of particular interest to the development of a hermeneutic of abuse because, similar to Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy, its theoretical tendencies favour the social constructionist perspectives of Foucault. New historicism draws on Foucault’s rejection of a simple linear model of history, in which events are explained in terms of one-dimensional economic or political forces, in favour of a more complicated view in which history is made up of numerous discourses which include medicine, economics, biology, sexuality, illness, madness, crime, punishment, power and so on. New historicism, in contrast to “old historicism” which over time became a quest to “objectively” reconstruct the past, pays particular attention to how these representations are constructed, questions whose interests are served by dominant discourses and seeks to identify voices that have been excluded from official accounts. New historicism seeks to identify the impact that dominant social and political discourses have had upon texts, and to document the impact of texts on contemporary contexts. The commitment to recover voices that have previously been excluded also opens the way for extra-biblical sources, cultural resources and subjugated knowledges to be included in the interpretive process.

Postcolonial biblical criticism seeks to discern and expose colonial domination and power within biblical texts and interpretations, and to develop alternative hermeneutics while dismantling colonial perspectives. Postcolonial critics acknowledge that the Bible has been implicated in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, unequal distributions of power and destructive ideologies of “chosenness” and white supremacy. They seek new methods of analysis which explore the inter-related issues of empire, nationhood, ethnicity, migration and

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91 Hens-Piazza, The New Historicism, 10-12.
93 Hens-Piazza, The New Historicism, 12.
language. Musa W. Dube emphasises that when connections are established between biblical texts and colonising practices, it is imperative to interrogate the ideology of the text and to also question how the Bible is to be read in a postcolonial era by both former coloniser and the formerly colonised. Postcolonial critics share the commitments of other ideological critics to probe texts for silences, gaps and absences in a bid to recover historical perspectives and alternative stories that have been suppressed or distorted.

**Risky Business: The Dangers of Autobiographical Methodology**

“Autobiographical criticism” is a relatively new approach that has infiltrated biblical studies after making its presence felt in the wider sphere of literary studies. In contrast to liberation hermeneutics and other forms of ideological criticism which emphasise social location, autobiographical criticism emphasises the role of the individual, using personal stories as a heuristic lens to interpret texts. Inspired in part by postcolonial enthusiasm to highlight personal voices as a “democratic enterprise”, autobiographical criticism’s entrance into biblical studies has been controversial, and some would say that its emphasis on the personal voice is nothing more than self-indulgent. This method remains marginal within biblical studies but, at first glance, it would seem that its commitment to personal stories, and acknowledging the body as an essential

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100 Kitzberger, ed., *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism*, 5-6.
aspect of self and identity, would offer abuse survivors opportunities to reflect on their own experiences in relation to biblical texts. While some survivors might find such opportunities liberating and healing, when ethical, safety and psychological issues are considered, together with the fact that many abuse survivors find it impossible to articulate their experiences, this method starts to look problematic.

Significantly, the power imbalances and social deprivation intrinsic to abuse and violence are essentially indicative of relationships that extend beyond the individual, tying many into webs of social interaction (or inaction). Mary Ann Tolbert emphasises that, just as history makes us conscious that people in the past were fully situated in cultural assumptions and conditions which influenced their thoughts, actions and power relations, so present patterns of thought are “socially located and culturally constrained”. Richard L. Rohrbaugh similarly stresses that thought is a social act and urges autobiographical critics to reconsider their emphasis on the individual and pay more attention to the concept of “social location”. He says it is important that there be shared understanding in social systems about the way things work, what is real, how things are ordered and how they fit together so that individuals can “be on the same page with (at least some) other people in order to keep plausibility structures glued together.”

Rohrbaugh’s comments pinpoint challenges for the development of a hermeneutic of abuse. For biblical interpretation to be socially transformative, abuse survivors need to move beyond their individual perceptions that can all too easily be dismissed as “crazy” or “off the page”. As has already been discussed in the introduction to this study, one of the biggest challenges to the development of a hermeneutic of abuse is that people who have been assaulted within religious institutions typically suffer high levels of isolation. This is reinforced within the Australian context by the general population’s highly individualistic attitudes

104 Crisp, “Reading Scripture,” 29-30.
towards abuse and violence. Autobiographical criticism risks further isolating abuse survivors.

The prospect of introducing autobiographical criticism to abuse survivors also poses many ethical dilemmas. The commitment to using personal experience as a heuristic lens risks vulnerable and isolated people becoming involved in reading practices that increase psychological trauma.\(^\text{108}\) Autobiographical criticism asks to be taken at face value, making it difficult to assess the extent to which the “self” presented as interpreter is a fictitious construction, self-delusion or conscious deception.\(^\text{109}\) The approach poses particular risks that pathological individuals could claim the sanction of Scripture for their own messianic hopes and destructive agenda.\(^\text{110}\) The risks cannot be simply pushed aside by appeals to democracy such as Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger attempts:

> Let everyone speak with his/her own tongue and let every reader listen with his/her own ears and respond in their own ways!\(^\text{111}\)

Such democratic enterprise must be balanced with ethical strategies to protect the vulnerable.\(^\text{112}\) Given that attempts by abuse survivors to disclose personal story details can place them at risk of further physical and psychological harm, and also their particular vulnerability to having dangerous or deceptive interpretations imposed on them, ethically responsible approaches to biblical interpretation must acknowledge survivors’ needs for interdisciplinary support networks. Attempts at biblical interpretation with abuse survivors, rather than focusing on individuals, must find ways of reading from a social location of abuse, drawing whole

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\(^{108}\) Methods that encourage abuse survivors to re-experience abuse risk re-traumatisation by triggering feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability. White, Re-authoring Lives, 85-89.


\(^{111}\) Kitzberger, ed., The Personal Voice, 5.

networks into conversation. Such an approach offers the potential for the unique experiences of individuals to be acknowledged and transcended as commonalities in community experience are identified.\textsuperscript{113}

**Ethics of Reading**

While the increased range of methodological options initially created within biblical studies fears of “exegetical anarchy”,\textsuperscript{114} there is also awareness that increased choice brings greater responsibility in relation to reading ethics. As Cosgrove says, biblical texts are not open to an infinite range of interpretations in which they can be stretched to mean absolutely anything, but rather responsible exegesis respects bounded options and needs to become self-aware of criteria used to privilege one interpretation above another.\textsuperscript{115} Awareness that observers are essentially guided by their own contexts and cultural biases increases interpreters’ responsibility to recognise and declare considerations and commitments which influence their interpretative practice. Interpreters need to acknowledge alternatives and refrain from imposing one dominant reading.\textsuperscript{116}

Cosgrove suggests four guiding considerations to assist exegetes in choosing between various reasonable interpretations of Scripture. He labels these considerations as theological, moral, correlational and ecumenical.\textsuperscript{117} Theological considerations intentionally interpret selected biblical texts in the light of wider Scripture and consciously consider how our ideas about God’s nature influence our interpretations.\textsuperscript{118} When reading from a hermeneutic of abuse, such considerations come into play in texts where God is seemingly implicated in violent acts (for example when Nathan, in a prophetic oracle in 2 Samuel 12:10-12, quotes Yhwh as promising that violence will always be manifest in King David’s house and that the king’s wives will be publicly raped) or is described as being overtly violent (for example when Yhwh is accused in Genesis 38:7-10 of

\textsuperscript{113} Crisp, “Reading Scripture,” 26, 30-31.
\textsuperscript{114} Rowland and Corner, Liberating Exegesis, 36.
\textsuperscript{115} Cosgrove, “Towards a Postmodern Hermeneutica Sacra,” 40.
\textsuperscript{116} Cosgrove, “Towards a Postmodern Hermeneutica Sacra,” 40-42; See also Brett, “Canto Ergo Sum,” 248, 255; Brueggemann, The Book that Breathes New Life, 20-33.
\textsuperscript{117} Cosgrove, “Towards a Postmodern Hermeneutica Sacra,” 44-59.
\textsuperscript{118} Cosgrove, “Towards a Postmodern Hermeneutica Sacra,” 45.
killing Er and Onan). An interpreter reading from a hermeneutic of abuse must consider whether such claims are in accordance with what is known about God’s nature from other sources, including their own personal experience, or whether characters, editors or narrators are working in ways that co-opt divine sanction for violence.

Interpreters wishing to challenge God being co-opted into abusive scenarios can read such biblical texts against other texts in which God is portrayed as committed to the welfare of vulnerable people. (For example, see Deuteronomy 10:17-18; 14:28-29; 24:17-18; Jeremiah 49:11; Proverbs 15:25; Malachi 3:5.) However, the potential for contemporary survivors to incorporate their own experience into the reading process leaves open the option that they might hold God responsible for the abuse that occurs in both biblical texts and present day experiences. I suggest that selected psalms, particularly those classified by Walter Brueggemann as “psalms of disorientation,” may be useful resources for biblical scholars working with survivors who experience anger and wish to hold God accountable.\(^\text{119}\) Brueggemann claims that these psalms provide liberation through their ability to honestly name and speak life’s darkest experiences in a way that feels no obligation to protect God or “tone down” human agony.\(^\text{120}\) He cites Psalm 88 as an “audacious” speech in which the blame for suffering is laid squarely on God.\(^\text{121}\) Contemporary survivors might find liberation through the reassurance that they are free to rant and swear with an expectation that God is big enough to receive their speech in all its anger and honesty. Such expression, however, needs to be carefully monitored and safely supported to ensure that survivors do not proceed to use this energy in ways that harm themselves or others. While expression of anger can play an important role in healing processes, survivors are encouraged to use it in ways that honour commitments to community life and transformation.


\(^{121}\) Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 80.
Cosgrove also adopts an Augustinian emphasis on “love”, defined in terms of personal experience and a synthesis of biblical teachings, as a moral consideration for biblical interpretation.\footnote{Cosgrove, “Towards a Postmodern \textit{Hermeneutica Sacra},” 47. See also Brueggemann, \textit{The Book that Breathes New Life}, 22, 35-36.} Drawing love into conversation with emancipatory commitments, he argues for liberative possibilities to be privileged over those that reinforce hierarchy, marginalisation and the rejection of “Otherness”.\footnote{Cosgrove, “Towards a Postmodern \textit{Hermeneutica Sacra},” 50-53; See also Brett, “Canto Ergo Sum,” 255.}

Cosgrove, by incorporating “correlational” criteria into biblical interpretation, encourages contextual readings which highlight the Bible’s relevance to contemporary situations and hold interpreters responsible for their own roles in the co-production of meaning.\footnote{Cosgrove, “Towards a Postmodern \textit{Hermeneutica Sacra},” 54-56.} He then extends interpretive responsibility, setting up safeguards against universalism, by emphasising the need for ecumenical considerations to be incorporated. He states that it is not enough for each interpreter to merely interpret the Bible for their own context. Interpreters must responsibly engage in cross-cultural dialogue which acknowledges and shows respect for difference and diversity.\footnote{Cosgrove, “Towards a Postmodern \textit{Hermeneutica Sacra},” 57-59. See also Brett, “Canto Ergo Sum,” 255; Schroer, “We Will Know Each Other,” 3-6; Brueggemann, \textit{The Book that Breathes New Life}, 32.}

Such guiding considerations do not so much establish a “method” as an “ethos”. They allow previously silenced voices to read biblical texts from their own context while also building respect for alternative points of view. They therefore potentially cultivate interpretive environments particularly suited to the development of a hermeneutic of abuse which challenges abusive ideology and the co-opting of God onto the side of abusers. In Chapter 2, I will further explore opportunities for a hermeneutic of abuse to facilitate contextual readings among survivors who have been abused within Australian religious communities while also widening horizons through conversation with South African Contextual Bible Study and other relevant dialogue partners.
Chapter 2

Entering into Conversation
with Contextual Bible Study

The Melbourne Diocese of the Anglican Church, when launching its *Public Face, Private Pain* report on violence against women in church communities in 1994, admitted that biblical interpretations had been historically used to justify oppression in situations such as apartheid in South Africa and the subjugation of women in violent situations. The Archbishop of Melbourne Keith Rayner said:

> It was scandalous that a particular biblical interpretation was used by some Christians to justify apartheid in South Africa. It is appropriate that a sound and balanced biblical interpretation has played such a significant part in the break-down of that system.¹

We must acknowledge that comments such as Rayner makes here have been used within Australia to deny the violence inherent in our own history and to shift focus to places such as South Africa. Regrettably, the limitations of this study make it impossible to engage at length with the many voices that have struggled with these issues in their own contexts and have published valuable resources. Particular acknowledgement must however be given to resources such as the *Tamar Campaign* developed by the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa,² the World Council of Churches’ *On the Wings of a Dove*, a worldwide campaign to overcome violence against women and children,³ and the World Alliance of

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¹ West, “Contextual Bible Study in South Africa,” 605-608; West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 73-75, 80; West and Zondi-Mabizela, “The Bible Story,” 4-12.
Reformed Churches’ *Created in God’s Image, From Hierarchy to Partnership*, a program of gender awareness and development for church leaders.⁴

Gerald West, director of the Ujamaa Centre, is keen to point out that South African Contextual Bible Study is not a formula or set method developed by one biblical scholar, but rather a process that has evolved as a result of “grassroots” practice,⁵ and in dialogue with South African and Black contextual theologies, Latin-American liberation theology, feminist theology, womanist theology and “ordinary”, poor and marginalised local readers.⁶ He documents in detail how South African Contextual Bible Study grew directly out of that country’s struggle with apartheid. He describes how black and white biblical scholars, already involved in bids for justice, were further called to work alongside ordinary people struggling to hear the voice of God in violent and life-threatening situations.⁷ These biblical scholars, known for their pre-existing commitments to social struggle, gained the trust of ordinary people, many of whom were illiterate. These biblical scholars were asked to share the resources of their specialised training in ways that would help ordinary people hear the voice of God speaking into their local situations and facilitate social transformation.⁸

In the mid-1980s, the South African *Kairos Document*, prepared by a group of racially mixed, but mainly black, theologians called for a “prophetic theology” that contrasted with the “state theology” of the apartheid administration and “church theology” which advocated prayer but not political action. These social, political and theological struggles, combined with a restructuring of theological education in South Africa, provided opportunities for the role and methods of academic biblical studies to be reassessed in relation to the local communities it was increasingly being called to serve. Since the early 1990s, West and his

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⁵ West, *Contextual Bible Study*, 11.

⁶ West, “Contextual Bible Study in South Africa,” 596.

⁷ West, *The Academy of the Poor*, 35.

colleagues have been endeavouring to develop biblical studies curricula that answer this call for prophetic and liberative engagement with local contexts.  

West highlights the life-threatening intensity of his country’s struggle when he explains that the term “Contextual Bible Study”, rather than “Liberation Bible Study”, was used because under apartheid talk of liberation was dangerous and incurred bans, physical violence and other consequences. The label “Contextual Bible Study”, while still resulting in violent opposition, communicated a commitment to read the Bible in solidarity with poor and marginalised people, who amid their struggles of race, class, culture and gender, were trying to gather resources for life and survival.  

**Defining “Contextualisation”**

West outlines four ways in which the term “contextualisation” is applied within biblical studies:  

- All interpretation is influenced by context.
- Biblical texts should be read against the context of their production.
- Texts speak to present situations.
- Readers should have contextual commitments such as standing in solidarity with the poor and marginalised in both biblical texts and contemporary experience.

West argues that most biblical scholars would not find the first three points on this list particularly contentious but the fourth, inspired by liberation theology, challenges traditional scholarship’s claims to objectivity and neutrality. Contextual Bible Study moves beyond acknowledging that contexts influence biblical interpretation to consciously embracing context by intentionally focusing

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9 West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 71.
10 West, “Contextual Bible Study in South Africa,” 595-596.
11 West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 72.
12 West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 73.
on who is reading and from where they are reading.\textsuperscript{13} Contextual Bible Study openly declares that social and biographical factors, such as race, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status, influence biblical interpretations.\textsuperscript{14}

West, as a result of practicing Contextual Bible Study over many years in South African church and community groups, has identified four central concerns or commitments.\textsuperscript{15} Given West’s acknowledgement that Contextual Bible Study in South Africa emerged as a result of scholars being called to practice “prophetic theology” it is not surprising that these commitments are similar to those expressed by liberation theologians. Sharon D. Welch says that liberation theology attempts to correlate theory and practice through participation in the resistance struggles of the oppressed; solidarity with the oppressed (community); commitment to critique; and commitment to constructive political action (social transformation).\textsuperscript{16} These commitments, expressed by West in relation to South African Contextual Bible Study are:

- A commitment to read the Bible from the perspective of the poor and marginalised.
- A commitment to read the Bible in community with others.
- A commitment to read the Bible critically.
- A commitment to individual and social transformation.\textsuperscript{17}

Each of these commitments and their relationship to a biblical hermeneutic of abuse for application within Australia will be discussed in more detail below. It is however first necessary to consider the suitability of contextual methodologies for

\textsuperscript{13} West and Dube, “An Introduction,” 7-8; West, “Contextual Bible Study in South Africa,” 595.

\textsuperscript{14} West, \textit{Contextual Bible Study}, 12.


\textsuperscript{16} Welch, \textit{Communities of Resistance and Solidarity}, 46. See also, Chopp, \textit{The Praxis of Suffering}, 22-27.

\textsuperscript{17} West, \textit{Contextual Bible Study}, 12-24; West, \textit{The Academy of the Poor}, 25-25, 63.
such a task and to develop some understanding of the nature of oppression within Australian religious communities.

**Are Contextual Methods an Option for Australian Abuse Survivors?**

The feasibility of developing a “contextual” Bible study method for application amongst abuse survivors in a country as large and culturally diverse as Australia obviously requires some clarification, particularly in light of the definitional ambiguity and methodological stalemate in the development of Australian Contextual Theology.\(^{18}\) While it is necessary to question whether the term “contextual” can be applied on a national scale in a country so hugely impacted by great distances and diversity of interests, a range of postmodern methods of biblical interpretation have demonstrated an ability to embrace difference and plurality in their struggle to define what it means to be Australian.\(^{19}\) Indeed, it makes sense to talk about a range of Australian contextual *theologies* and to follow the leads set out in Chapter 1 of this study in relation to the ethics of reading in pluralistic contexts.\(^{20}\)

Respect for particularity can be demonstrated through opportunities to generate contextualised interpretations in small groups and local communities. These can then be enriched, while being protected from universalism, through wider ecumenical and cross-cultural conversation. Such a respectful balance between particularity and wider community is likely to be significant for the development of a hermeneutic of abuse, given that abuse survivors will need to be supported in the reading process. Although survivors are likely to experience a sense of “community” with other survivors through shared experiences, they are also likely to be still impacted to some extent by the social isolation and deprivation that

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\(^{18}\) For example Frank Rees outlines different views on the significance of “context” for theological work. He says that each of these views imply different approaches to the nature and tasks of contextual theology. He also highlights that development of Australian Contextual Theology has been hampered by a stalemate in debate over methodology. Frank Rees, “Beating Around the Bush: Methodological Directions for Australian Theology,” *Pacifica* 15 (2002): 266-293.

\(^{19}\) Brett emphasises the diversity of Australian Indigenous cultures and other groups, such as Asian Australians, in his call for a “postcolonial ecclesia” which recognises, rather than erases, cultural differences. See Brett, “Canto Ergo Sum,” 256.

\(^{20}\) Such an emphasis on plurality is consistent with overseas experiences of contextual reading, for example the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians published in Njoroge and Dube, eds., *Talitha Cum! and Dube*, ed., *Other Ways of Reading*. 51
placed them at risk of abuse in the first place. Survivors in any group are likely to be drawn from across the socio-economic spectrum, from diverse cultural groups, different religious affiliations and a range of geographical locations. They are also likely to be at different stages of abuse recovery.

Survivors who have experienced abuse within Australian religious communities share much in common with other communities producing contextual readings. There are very specific issues for survivors within their religious experience and interpretive practices. Contextual methodologies give Australian abuse survivors opportunities to join with other ideological critics in the task of challenging abusive ideology and seeking more life-giving alternatives.

Understanding Oppression in Australian Religious Communities

It is possible that Australian abuse survivors and the biblical scholars who work with them will contribute significant resources to help break through the more general malaise and lack of direction in Australian Contextual Theology. A starting point for this task could well be acknowledgement that Australia’s religious identity, or lack of it, is grounded in our largely denied violent history.

Not only must we acknowledge the role that Australian religious institutions have played within our country’s violent history but we must also grapple with the complexity and inter-relatedness of oppressive forces within our context. We must move beyond notions that abuse experiences within Australian religious

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23 Crisp, “Reading Scripture,” 25-26, 31, 42.

24 This largely denied history of violence begins with our Indigenous peoples being classified as less than human, thieves and even trespassers on their own land. Indigenous land was converted to Crown Land under the myth of *terra nullius* (land of no people or a country without a Sovereign recognised by European authorities). Indigenous Australians were further denied existence and identity under Section 127 of the Australian Constitution (1901) which stated that they were not to be counted as part of the Australian population. They were not granted Australian citizenship rights until 1967. Anne Pattel-Gray accuses churches of knowingly receiving “stolen property” from the British Government in the form of Crown Land Grants and never making any attempt to compensate Indigenous Australians for the loss. Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 1, 15-17, 39, 136-140, 149-150. See also Max Griffiths, *Aboriginal Affairs: A Short History 1788-1995* (Kenthurst, NSW: Kangaroo Press, 1995), 99-111; Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, 2nd ed. (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1992), 1-14.
communities can be articulated in terms of simple binary oppositions such as male-female, black-white, rich-poor or clergy-pastorally subordinate.

Australian history certainly has a racist character which impacts on experiences of abuse within Australian religious communities. It is therefore necessary for Australian abuse survivors to participate in the task of unmasking Australian churches’ history of collusion in strategies that attempted to eradicate, institutionalise and oppress Indigenous Australians.\(^{25}\) Racism, however, is one factor among many in a complexly inter-related web of issues that contribute to church-based abuse and violence in this country. Overlapping this racist oppression is a strong historic practice, dating back before Australian white settlement, for poorer classes in Europe to be confined in work-houses and other institutions since the 16\(^{th}\) century.\(^{26}\) Such control and surveillance of the poor resulted in extreme over-crowding and slum conditions in lower socio-economic groups and was a factor in Australia being founded as a penal colony. In early Australia, elite propertied males and Protestant clergymen had enormous powers, including rights to assign convict and indentured labour, whip, punish, isolate and even execute their subordinants.\(^{27}\) While Australia has traditionally prided itself as


an egalitarian country complete with a “mateship” myth, such concentrations of officially sanctioned power compound class, ethnic and religious oppression. In Australian colonies, the poorer classes dominated the convict populations. One third of convicts transported to Australia were Catholic but Protestant ascendency initially tried to dictate “conversion” by granting Church of England monopoly in religious service provision. Such cumulative forces of oppression led to resentment and uprising, particularly among Irish Catholic convicts, and contributed to ongoing Protestant-Catholic tensions until quite recent times.

During the era of the first and second world wars, German Lutherans living in Australia found themselves particular targets for ethnic and religious oppression. Following the world wars, church collusion in white supremism, particularly sanctioned by the nation’s White Australia Policy, found expression through church involvement in child migration schemes which transported 40,000 British children to Australia. The schemes, fuelled by xenophobic fear, particularly in relation to Australia’s Asian neighbours, attempted to provide an influx of white children to boost Australian’s labour and defence forces. Many of these children were from poor families and separated from their parents on the pretext that they would be given a better life in Australia. The children, however, mostly believed


31 Country newspaper editor Allan Lockwood details persecution against people with German names or Lutheran Church affiliation in the Wimmera region of Victoria, Australia, during the war years. Lockwood’s mother, Ida Dorothea Klowss, was targeted even though she had been born in the district and actively involved in community service activities. Allan Lockwood, Ink in His Veins (Horsham: Wimmera Mail-Times, 1985), 81-92.


33 The Catholic newspaper The Record announced the arrival of a shipload of children from Britain in its 11 August 1938 edition: “if we did not supply from our own stock we were leaving ourselves all the more exposed to the menace of the teeming millions of our neighbouring Asiatic neighbours.” The history of British Child Migrant Schemes to Australia is recorded in Margaret Humphreys, Empty Cradles, Empty Cradles (London: Doubleday, 1994) and Philip Bean and Joy Melville, Lost Children of the Empire: The Untold Story of Britain’s Child Migrants (London: Urwin Hyman, 1989).
that they were abandoned or orphaned. Their early lives in Australia are typically documented as experiences of abuse, even slave labour, within church-run children’s homes and orphanages.\textsuperscript{34}

Abuse within Australian religious communities is further complicated by the hierarchical structure of ecclesiastical institutions and traditional assumptions about pastoral power.\textsuperscript{35} Foucault emphasises the strength of pastoral power by noting it assumes the right to focus on each individual and to know the minds and inner-most secrets of parishioners through confession. Pastoral power follows people through their entire lives and even assumes to impact on their eternal futures.\textsuperscript{36} Inherent inequalities, which are often assumed to be divinely sanctioned, have contributed to the ongoing creation of physical and ideological spaces conducive to systemic abuse. While imprisonment without sanction of a qualified judicial system would be generally regarded within this country as an infringement of basic human rights, church agencies have continued to maintain control and isolate whole groups of vulnerable people in ways that increase potential for abuse.\textsuperscript{37} Australian churches have traditionally had high involvement in maternity hospitals for single mothers, adoption processes, children’s homes, juvenile justice programs, schools and other forms of institutionalised care as well as pastoral programs such as choirs, camps and youth events which provide opportunities for individuals to be isolated and abused.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{34} Survivors’ stories include Lionel P. Welsh, \textit{The Bindoon File: Boys Town, Bindoon, 1947-1954} (Como, WA: P. and B. Press, 1990) and Kate Davies, \textit{When Innocence Trembles: The Christian Brothers’ Orphanage Tragedy, A Survivor’s Story} (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1994).


\textsuperscript{36} Foucault, “Afterword,” 214; Foucault, \textit{The Will to Knowledge}, 18-26, 61-68, 116.

\textsuperscript{37} Foucault argues that despite legal reform “extra-penal incarceration was never abandoned.” Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, 297, 301-302. See also Dreyfus and Rabinow, \textit{Michel Foucault}, 5.

\textsuperscript{38} Media commentary in Australia has mostly focused on abuse within Anglican and Catholic churches. Incidents of abuse are, however, spread across the denominational spectrum. For example, The Salvation Army was named in Queensland State Parliament’s Forde Report for abuse of children. They were responsible for more than 30,000 children between 1950 and 1970. An ABC \textit{Four Corners} program, broadcast on 18 August 2003, detailed many instances of assault in institutions. (www.abc.net.au/4corners/2003/transcripts/s926706.htm, accessed 17 June 2004). For details of Salvation Army involvement in maternity hospitals and related
When social commentary finally made it acceptable for survivors to speak out about abuse within Australian religious institutions a floodgate was opened. At least 80 Catholic priests and brothers were convicted of sexual offences in Australian courts between 1993 and 2002, with more than 60 receiving jail sentences.\textsuperscript{39} Public outcry focused on the high number of clergy abuse cases coming before courts and also the complicity of church officials who persistently “covered up” complaints.\textsuperscript{40} Outrage over abuse scandals in the Australian Anglican Church eventually led to the resignation of Peter Hollingworth as Australia’s Governor-General on 29 May 2003.\textsuperscript{41} Hollingworth, prior to his appointment as Governor-General, was Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane but when a commission investigating past handling of sexual abuse claims within that diocese criticised him for inaction, he resigned.\textsuperscript{42}

The Hollingworth saga highlights a possible perception within the Australian general population that abuse within religious institutions is inter-related with other forms of oppression and British Imperialism in our national history. Trevor Hogan and Tom Frame both question whether Hollingworth’s history as an Anglican Archbishop as well as his appointment as Governor-General cast him as both religious and political scape-goat for the sins of the British Empire.\textsuperscript{43} Hogan says that Hollingworth’s demise was seen by many Australians as “bringing down the embodiment of the ‘established Church of England’ and all it represents vis-à-vis four centuries of British Empire.”\textsuperscript{44} It remains possible that such endemic cynicism, with regard to the established church’s historical association with violence and its tendency to act as a voice for British Imperialism, continues to

\textsuperscript{39} Porter, \textit{Sex, Power and the Clergy}, 95.
\textsuperscript{40} Porter, \textit{Sex, Power and the Clergy}, 86-87.
\textsuperscript{41} Governor-General is Australia’s highest vice-regal office.
\textsuperscript{42} Porter, \textit{Sex, Power and the Clergy}, 17-36.
\textsuperscript{43} By contrast, Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa has often been seen as a symbol of liberation.
jeopardise biblical scholarship’s potential to constructively build relationships with Australian abuse survivors.

**Commitment to the Perspective of the Poor and Marginalised**

While abuse survivors within Australian religious institutions certainly have much in common with other groups who are silenced and oppressed, “the poor and marginalised” label is too abstract. Assault within religious communities, particularly given its tendency to be related to institutionalisation and the violation of trust in primary and sacred relationships, shares many parallels with domestic violence and incest. Such violations occur without regard to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, or social, professional and educational status.\(^{45}\) In fact, survivors from high status, well-educated backgrounds can find it more difficult to seek help for fear of not being believed or risk that disclosure will result in higher levels of social embarrassment. Survivors from higher socio-economic groupings can be denied personal access to finances and experience their autonomy limited in other ways, such as hindrances in attempts to gain independence, a driver’s licence, further education, employment or crisis intervention services.\(^{46}\)

While experiences of Australian abuse survivors cannot be neatly correlated with poverty or other indicators of socio-economic status, they share much in common with other forms of oppression through the theme of “captivity”.\(^{47}\) Psychiatrist Judith Herman establishes connections between institutionalised abuse, ongoing domestic violence, repeated sexual assault and other forms of captivity. She says that repeated assaults can only occur in institutionalised situations, such as

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prisons, concentration camps, labour camps, religious cults, brothels and families, when victims are unable to escape.48 Australian abuse survivors often use images of captivity when telling their own stories.49 For example one woman, writing for a collection published by Broadmeadows Women’s House in Melbourne, entitles her article “Hostage” and begins “My house is like a concentration camp”.50 Another woman uses poetry to explore similar themes:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fear of being trapped inside</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of being overpowered</td>
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<td>Fear of everlasting pain and</td>
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<td>Shame and grief</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of anger and disbelief</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear I’m being sacrificed.51</td>
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Images of captivity also appear in stories of people who have experienced enforced institutionalisation. For example, in an ABC Television program that explores reactions to the British Child Migrant Scheme, survivor Dr Ron Sinclair describes being stripped of identity as a form of captivity:

The search for identity is very important. If you look at the sort of techniques used in concentration camps, they were designed to take away people’s identity. It is the ultimate indignity.52

Anna Haebich, in her book *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*, describes a range of institutional processes that were used to deny Aboriginal children in missions and compounds access to their own identities in a

49 Writings published by the Williamstown Women’s Support Group in Melbourne include images such as “Breaking the Chain of Domestic Violence” and “The Great Escape”. See Williamstown Women’s Support Group, *Breaking the Chain*. Similarly abuse survivor Patricia Hughes, in her book *Enough*, likens herself to a trapped animal. In a subsequent book, she describes how a foster father used shame to socially isolate her. Hughes, *Enough*, 118-135; Hughes, *Daughters of Nazareth*, 77.
52 Humphreys, *Empty Cradles*, 165.
bid to transform them into the image of their “captors”. She says that these processes are central to the concepts of “Christianising” and “civilising”.  

Australian survivors who have been assaulted within religious institutions will need to compare their own experiences of violence, exploitation, marginalisation and captivity with those of other Australians and develop terminology appropriate to their particular experiences of abuse and oppression. Such naming of experience will facilitate ecumenical and cross-cultural dialogue with other oppressed people in contemporary situations and also open the way for the recognition and critique of abusive acts in biblical texts.

The multi-faceted nature of abuse within Australian religious communities, demands that we more rigorously explore the inter-relatedness of a range of contributing factors. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concept of “kyriarchy” is a useful resource to move Australian survivors beyond an emphasis on binary oppositions to more effectively articulate their experiences of oppression.

Fiorenza, a New Testament scholar and liberation theologian, introduced the concept of kyriarchy into her work after finding that attempts to define oppression according to traditional interpretations of patriarchy caused a distorted emphasis on binary male-female domination and ignored the complex and cumulative effects of oppression functioning through factors such as heterosexism, racism, class exploitation and colonialism. Fiorenza presents kyriarchy as a pyramid of political domination in which elite, usually white, propertied males have power over women, other men who are subordinate to or dependent on them in various ways, and also children. In turn elite, usually white, propertied women exercise power over both men and women of lower socio-economic status, often people of colour who have been relegated to inferior status, and also children. She

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53 Haebich, _Broken Circles_, 345.

54 For example Carlos Mesters, a Brazilian Catholic priest and biblical scholar, often uses the concept of captivity to analyse experiences of ancient Israelites in exile and also contemporary experiences of Brazilians. Carlos Mesters, _The Mission of the People Who Suffer: The Songs of the Servant God, The Book of the Prophet Isaiah_ (Cape Town: Theology Exchange Program, 1990).

55 Fiorenza, _But She Said_, 114-117, 123; Fiorenza, ed., _The Power of Naming_, xxxvi.

emphasises that women of colour have typically rejected mainstream feminist definitions of patriarchy which view men as oppressors and women as victims. She acknowledges that black women are more often oppressed by elite, white women than men of their own class, race and culture.\textsuperscript{57} Australian Indigenous scholar Anne Pattel-Gray presents similar conclusions with her “Australian Social Hierarchy” which extends from white men and women, through migrant groups, refugee groups to Aboriginal men and finally Aboriginal women.\textsuperscript{58}

Fiorenza’a kyriarchal pyramid shares much in common with Foucault’s view that history is not simply the linear tracking of one-dimensional economic or political forces but a complex inter-relationship of numerous discourses such as medicine, economics, biology, sexuality, illness, crime, punishment, power and so on.\textsuperscript{59} It also shares much in common with postcolonial methods which seek to explore the inter-relatedness of factors such as empire, nationhood, ethnicity, migration and language.\textsuperscript{60} The concept of kyriarchy potentially enhances a hermeneutic of abuse to join with other ideological criticisms in the task of probing texts for silences, gaps and absences in bids to recover historical perspectives and alternative stories that have been suppressed or distorted. Its significance becomes even clearer as we move beyond Western feminist assumptions that sexual abuse is typically male violation of women and acknowledge that reported experiences of church-based abuse within this country include incidents such as: male clergy and church workers abusing both male and female children in pastoral, residential and educational settings;\textsuperscript{61} male church leaders abusing women within their own families and congregations;\textsuperscript{62} nuns and leaders of female governed institutions

\textsuperscript{57} Fiorenza, \textit{But She Said}, 14.
\textsuperscript{58} Pattel-Gray, \textit{The Great White Flood}, 162-185.
\textsuperscript{62} Victorian Council of Churches’ Commission: Churches in Solidarity with Women, \textit{Naming Violence Against Women in Our Church Communities: Sexual Harassment, Incest, Rape and Other Forms of Violence: Women are Speaking Out} (Melbourne: CASA House, 1992); Women, Church and Domestic Violence Project, \textit{Public Face}, 17-37, 57-59.
abusing children;\textsuperscript{63} white women abusing Indigenous people;\textsuperscript{64} missionaries, such as Catholics and German Lutherans, abusing Indigenous people in response to their own experiences of religious and ethnic oppression;\textsuperscript{65} and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander missionaries abusing other Indigenous people in response to their own experiences of family separation.\textsuperscript{66}

A commitment to stand in solidarity with oppressed people is not simply an act of charity that so-called economically privileged “haves” can bestow upon the mutually exclusive “have nots”. Rather, it is a pledge to wrestle with the cumulative forces of oppression and interpret history and texts in ways that empower all survivors, but particularly those at the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid.\textsuperscript{67} This commitment demands solidarity in the real life struggles for oppressed people’s right to human dignity and participation in the processes that shape their lives.\textsuperscript{68} Such solidarity can be dangerous and life-threatening, therefore potentially rendering Contextual Bible Study as risky as other forms of emancipatory action and social resistance.\textsuperscript{69} Oppressed people are aware that their attempts to articulate suffering, resist oppressors and bring about social change are likely to result in violent backlash. Hence they only speak when they feel safe to do so.\textsuperscript{70} The South African experiences of Contextual Bible Study, along with experiences of liberation theologies in other parts of the world, have shown that oppressed people can be empowered through the sharing of stories and resistance strategies as this draws them out of isolation and equips them for social action but such action is often squashed by the threats of dire consequences from

\textsuperscript{63} Parkinson, \textit{Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches}, 40-42; Humphreys, \textit{Empty Cradles}, 94-96; Bean and Melville, \textit{Lost Children of the Empire}, 113-114; Porter, \textit{Sex, Power and the Clergy}, 90-91; Hughes, \textit{Daughters of Nazareth}.

\textsuperscript{64} Haebich, \textit{Broken Circles}, 367-369; Pattel-Gray, \textit{The Great White Flood}, 173-174.

\textsuperscript{65} Haebich, \textit{Broken Circles}, 367-369.

\textsuperscript{66} Haebich, \textit{Broken Circles}, 367-369.

\textsuperscript{67} Fiorenza, \textit{Bread Not Stone}, 154.

\textsuperscript{68} Chopp, \textit{The Praxis of Suffering}, 22-23.

\textsuperscript{69} West, “And the Dumb Do Speak,” 190.

\textsuperscript{70} West, “Contextual Bible Study in South Africa,” 599-601; West, “Reading the Bible Differently,” 29-32.
oppressors. Such evidence is consistent with the fears and threats of retaliation reported by Australian abuse survivors.

It is significant that poor and marginalised communities, in contexts such as South Africa and Brazil, where there has also been a strong swing to “grassroots” community Bible study, continue to invite biblical scholars to share their specialised skills and training. Such invitations are, however, only extended to intellectuals with a known and trusted track record. Such experiences might herald a warning in Australia, where abuse survivors are seemingly more apathetic and cynical toward institutionalised religion. There is need for Australian biblical scholars and other religious professionals to become known within support, advocacy and education forums, clearly signalling that, in the struggle against abuse in religious communities, they are on the side of survivors rather than seeking to protect the reputations of offending churches.

A commitment to the perspective of oppressed people involves more than merely listening to their point of view or assuming the right to speak on their behalf. Rather, South African Contextual Bible Study advocates a more respectful and mutual process of biblical scholars and trained Bible study facilitators “reading with” marginalised people. West argues that merely “listening to” oppressed people carries the risk that their contributions to biblical interpretation will be idealised without inherent ideological assumptions being challenged and that “speaking for” them denies them voice. Contextual Bible Study does not impose a language on oppressed people or treat them as consumers of pre-packaged products. It acknowledges that, while power inequalities can never be totally

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73 West, “Reading the Bible Differently,” 28; West, “And the Dumb Do Speak,” 179; Mesters, Defenseless Flower, 23-24, 36.
74 West, “Reading the Bible Differently,” 25; West, The Academy of the Poor, 49-55.
75 West, “Reading the Bible Differently,” 25; West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 73-75.
eradicated, both biblical scholars and oppressed people bring valued resources to the reading process.\textsuperscript{76}

\textbf{Commitment to Read the Bible in Community}

Emphasis on community encourages people to share ideas and resources, therefore challenging Western civilisation’s tendency towards domination through emphasis on individualism, wealth accumulation and self-fulfilment.\textsuperscript{77}

Following the lead of South African Contextual Bible Study, and also Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy, a biblical hermeneutic of abuse must commit to the development of community by encouraging abuse survivors to resist the isolation that contributes to abuse by building their own support networks and reading the Bible in groups where they are safely supported by interdisciplinary networks.\textsuperscript{78}

Community also functions as a hermeneutic lens for interpretation as abuse survivors and their supporters are encouraged to probe gaps and silences in texts in ways that identify possible support networks for ancient survivors.\textsuperscript{79}

Community is also cultivated through efforts to guard against universalism by bringing the localised readings of Australian abuse survivors into wider ecumenical and cross-cultural dialogue.\textsuperscript{80} To a large extent, this study is an exercise in community building as it identifies potential partners for local and cross-cultural biblical discussions.

Marginalised readers might be unaware that others in their group share similar experiences. They might have had previous experiences where the worth of their world-view, ideas, resources and contributions were denied. They might even

\textsuperscript{76} West, “Contextual Bible Study in South Africa,” 599; West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 72; West, \textit{The Academy of the Poor}, 26.


\textsuperscript{78} See West and Zondi-Mabizela, “The Bible Story,” 5-7.


\textsuperscript{80} Sharon H. Ringe advocates biblical interpretation as a community project when she says: “With the involvement of many voices… interpretation can begin to convey the rich texture of the biblical traditions themselves.” Ringe, “When Women Interpret the Bible”, 7.
believe that their perspectives and contributions are worthless and that their life choices are limited to those dictated by dominant discourses. The isolation which fosters such oppression can only be broken down through community consciousness that comes through the sharing of personal stories and the pooling of resources. As Brazilian social scientist Luis Gomez de Souza argues, stories of injustice only become powerful when they are arranged into communal patterns. Then, the extent of exploitation that has occurred at specific places and at specific times throughout history becomes apparent. He says: “If personal or lived experiences are not situated in a broader context, they remain isolated, they do not acquire any meaning and they disappear without leaving a trace.”

South African Contextual Bible Study has provided such opportunities for poor and marginalised people to narrate their own stories and identify wider social, political and historic patterns in ways that increase communal resources, allow the legitimacy of dominance to be questioned and cultivate hope in the restoration of life and dignity. Communal co-operation also gives individual group members a certain level of anonymity, enhancing their ability to speak out whilst also being protected by the group.

The Ujamaa Centre in South Africa, as part of its review of biblical studies education in the early 1990s, honoured its commitment to reading the Bible with poor and marginalised communities by developing academic curricula which actively encourages and supports student involvement in those communities. Through six major programs and two annual campaigns students are provided with opportunities for placement and engagement with local communities. This emphasis, on the interface between emancipatory theory and practice, is consistent

81 West, Contextual Bible Study, 16.
83 West, Contextual Bible Study, 18-19; West, “Contextual Bible Study in South Africa,” 602; West, “Reading the Bible Differently,” 32; West and Zondi-Mabizela, “The Bible Story,” 7.
84 West, “And the Dumb Do Speak,” 177-178.
85 West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 73.
86 Worker Sunday Campaign provides local churches with resources and materials to address issues of economic injustice and unemployment and Campaign Tamar provides resources and materials to address issues of violence against women. West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 73-75; West, The Academy of the Poor, 114-117; West and Zondi-Mabizela, “The Bible Story,” 4.
with experiences in countries such as Brazil where liberation theology’s impact includes community recognition that the Bible contains resources for survival and social transformation and biblical scholars are called to work at a “grassroots” level in church and community projects. In contrast to countries such as South Africa and Brazil, it seems ironic that biblical scholarship within Western cultures has become a highly privatised activity. Western biblical scholars often carry out research in relative isolation with little or no connection to “grassroots” communities of faith or real-life reading contexts. Such scholars need to develop strategies that enable them to move beyond isolationist work practices if they are to work safely and responsibly in community settings that include survivors of violence and sexual abuse.

Highly individualistic attitudes to abuse and responses to it, as evidenced in the Australian general population, also highlight another reason why South African Contextual Bible Study cannot be automatically transferred to Australian abuse survivor contexts. Bible study facilitators associated with the Ujamaa Centre in South Africa will only accept invitations to run Contextual Bible Study workshops from groups which are organised and have some basis on which to contribute to a community reading process. In Australia, although there are some support and advocacy groups, such as In Good Faith and Associates, which could coordinate survivors’ participation in biblical interpretation workshops, by and large much groundwork still needs to be done to draw survivors out of isolation and ensure they are safely supported by interdisciplinary networks before proceeding with reading attempts.


89 For development of safe, community-based work practices when working with survivors of sexual assault see Mann, “How Can You Do This Work?,” 11-22.


91 In Good Faith and Associates are based in Melbourne, Australia. They provide services associated with advocacy, justice and healing for survivors of clergy and religious abuse. Their interdisciplinary network includes pastoral advocates, counsellors, a minister of religion, a resource and education consultant, a psychologist and two lawyers. See www.igfa.com.au (accessed 18 November 2007).
These factors impacted on the design of this study. The Melbourne College of Divinity’s Human Ethics and Research Committee would have required a complex series of consents and safety precautions before reading groups involving abuse survivors could have been set up. In consultation with my research supervisors I decided that the risk of “experimenting” on people who were particularly vulnerable to traumatic reactions was unacceptable. Therefore Chapters 3 to 6 of this study highlight options and resources to assist abuse survivors at some future time to apply the proposed biblical hermeneutic to the stories of Hagar, Dinah, Tamar of Genesis 38 and Tamar of 2 Samuel 13. Much work needs to be done to build trusting relationships and safe interdisciplinary networks before this preparatory textual work can actually be used in survivor groups.

Commitment to Read the Bible Critically

Contextual Bible Study, in committing to read the Bible critically, challenges the nature of social relationships and seeks to unmask powers and structures that perpetuate exploitation. Biblical scholars, in order to be involved in such critique, need experiences that familiarise them with how mechanisms of oppression function in the communities where they live and work. Then, in solidarity with oppressed people, they need to apply critical skills to both biblical texts and their current reality. As an example, West explains how South African Contextual Bible Study participants, in a study of the Lord’s Prayer, not only articulate the

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93 In contrast, Andrew Curtis, in his 1998 PhD thesis, set up Bible reading groups of people drawn largely from poor and disadvantaged suburbs in Sydney, Australia. He states that invitations to join the reading groups were a mixture of verbal and written communication as illiteracy was an issue in target communities. No details of ethics clearance procedures are given. Andrew Curtis, “Re-reading the Gospel of Luke Today: From a First Century Urban Writing Site to a Twentieth Century Urban Reading Site” (PhD diss., Open University and Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, 1998), 37, 47-53.

94 For example, Meiss highlights how abuse survivors can be pressured to exchange personal stories of abuse for help and the hope of contributing to social transformation. She describes a project in which battered women in need of emergency accommodation were expected to reveal their stories, consent to them being tape recorded, written into case notes and shared in group discussions. See Maria Meiss, “Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research,” in Theories of Women’s Studies, ed. Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 134.
reality of food shortages but also question the social structures that contribute to such inequality.\(^95\) He says:

Giving the poor food is good, but we need to do more. We must be critical. So we must not simply accept that the poor have no food; we must probe beneath the surface of this reality; we must be suspicious of the status quo.\(^96\)

A commitment to reading the Bible critically challenges religious rhetoric which has traditionally supported control and confinement of poor and marginalised classes. It demonstrates solidarity with other critics from across a range of disciplines committed to unmasking abusive ideologies, often grounded in biblical interpretations that support notions of white supremacy and propertied class domination. Traces of such abusive ideology can be found within paradigms such as the Protestant work ethic and liberal economics and also in cultural stereotypes which assume certain categories of people, such as poor or Indigenous people, are lazy and to blame for poverty.\(^97\) South African Contextual Bible Study, in its commitment to critique, joins company with a range of ideological critics, such as liberation theologians and feminists, who have worked to shift focus away from the tendency to blame victims, to addressing the powerful institutions, structures, systems and cultural practices that cause oppression.\(^98\)

West, noting that biblical studies has been heavily influenced by a Western elitism that seeks to both define and exert ownership over the concept of criticality, has called for a reassessment of what it means to think critically and for greater acknowledgement of the critical resources that ordinary people bring to Bible reading conversations.\(^99\) Biblical scholarship in Western academic tradition categorises sets of structured and systematic questions under headings such as historical-critical, socio-historical, literary and semiotic. West acknowledges that it is such structured and systematic questioning that separates academic readers from ordinary readers of the Bible.\(^100\) He points out that Western academia does

\(^{95}\) West, *Contextual Bible Study*, 17-19; West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 72.

\(^{96}\) West, *Contextual Bible Study*, 19.


\(^{98}\) Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*, 48.

\(^{99}\) West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 76-81.

\(^{100}\) West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 77.
not have a monopoly on structured and systematic questioning and that other traditions’ critical resources, although different, have been undervalued.\footnote{West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 79. See also, Welch, \textit{Communities of Resistance and Solidarity}, 43-44.} For example, African biblical scholar Musa W. Dube notes that her training in the structured and systematic questions of Western and “textual-centric” biblical scholarship differentiates her in attempts to read Scripture with women in Botswana. Nevertheless, the participatory methods of African women, which include narration, songs, dramatisation and the repetition of key words and images to emphasise meaning, demonstrate persistent patterns.\footnote{Dube, “Readings of Semoya,” 115-121; Dube, \textit{Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation}, 186-192.} West argues that ordinary readers have tended to become alienated from their own communities and resources as they internalise the tools of Western scholarship.\footnote{West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 79; West, \textit{The Academy of the Poor}, 35.} He therefore calls for a more integrated approach to biblical interpretation by the “dismantling of the curtain that divides the academy from the community”.\footnote{West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain,” 80.}

Although this call to dismantle the “critical” curtain has been a more recent development in West’s writing, he has demonstrated a long-term commitment to acknowledging that the traditional and cultural resources of marginalised people can be utilised in biblical interpretation.\footnote{West, \textit{The Academy of the Poor}, 93-94, 98.} These resources include art, storytelling, poetry, songs, genealogy, knowledge of how land is passed from one generation to the next, as well as experiences of poverty, oppression and community solidarity.\footnote{West, \textit{Contextual Bible Study}, 69-70. See also Carlos Mesters, “The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People,” in \textit{The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities}, ed. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981), 201, 203.} West also uses analysis by social scientist James C. Scott to argue that marginalised people do in fact engage in forms of social critique.\footnote{West, “And the Dumb Do Speak,” 175-176, 181.} They develop safe spaces, which are unknown to the dominant culture and beyond what is openly obvious (the public transcript) where power is critiqued (the hidden transcript).\footnote{Scott, \textit{Domination}, xi-xii, 17-28; West, \textit{The Academy of the Poor}, 44-49.} This hidden critique of power can often be detected in cultural exchanges such as rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes and
Such communications artfully convey that the power of dominant classes can be questioned and even subverted through subtle ideological critique. Scott acknowledges Foucault as a key influence, and this aspect of his work certainly resounds with Foucauldian notions of power and the potential for transformation through an insurrection of subjugated knowledges. The subtle nature of such critique means that it can be easily withdrawn if recognised in ways that pose a risk to safety. Marginalised people, in addition to these methods of ideological insubordination, are also known to engage in disguised acts of resistance. Together these two strategies make up what Scott describes as “the infrapolitics of the powerless.”

Anthropologist Deborah Rose has noted resources of ideological critique in her work amongst Aborigines from the Yarralin and Lingarra communities in the Northern Territory, Australia. She found that Indigenous people engaged in discursive critique in response to fear of being shot by Europeans, the threat of watching their children die of malnutrition, seeing their people taken away to institutions and memories of indignity. This ideological critique included advice about how to respond to Europeans in threatening situations and cultural stories featuring characters such as Captain Cook and Ned Kelly that undermined Europeans’ moral credibility and humorously insinuated that white people could not even recognise key events in their own religion and culture.

Family therapist Allan Wade has also used Scott’s work in research into the impact of violence and oppression, including among survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. He finds that, while victims’ behaviour is not based on expectations of immediately overturning the power of oppressors, it

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109 Scott, Domination, xiii; West, “And the Dumb Do Speak,” 176; West “Contextual Bible Study in South Africa,” 600.
110 Scott, Domination, xv.
111 Scott, Domination, 33, 133, 137-138; West, “And the Dumb Do Speak,” 176.
112 Scott, Domination, xiii.
demonstrates remarkable courage.\textsuperscript{114} Strategies include: “playing the game”, “laying it on thick”, “telling him what he wants to hear”, “stringing him on a line” as well as various forms of mind games, unconventional use of resources, feigning illness, sneaking food, use of subversive facial expressions, parody, and exaggerated forms of compliance.\textsuperscript{115}

Identification of such ideological resources, critical skills and resistance strategies enables abuse survivors to begin the task of challenging dominant discourses and unmasking abusive ideology that sanctions violence and exploitation within biblical texts and contemporary contexts. As critical consciousness is developed, the store of communal resources increases and is enriched through contributions and conversations that incorporate the more specialised skills of biblical scholars and other professionals.\textsuperscript{116} Traditionally there has been unwillingness in churches to analyse Christian theology’s contribution to oppressive ideologies and the perpetration of violence.\textsuperscript{117} As Scott points out, in a way that echoes Foucault, both secular and religious authorities have resisted tendencies for subordinate groups to gather and share resources by implementing strategies that ensure isolation and surveillance.\textsuperscript{118} It is now important for survivors and their supporters to resist such isolation with the establishment of safe and sacred spaces in which they can build up stocks of critical resources, catalogue resistance strategies and unmask exploitative discourses.\textsuperscript{119} These resources should include the specialised skills of biblical scholars offered in solidarity with the struggle against violence in religious communities.

\textit{Commitment to Individual and Social Transformation}

South African Contextual Bible Study commits not only to critiquing power structures, but also to life-giving alternatives through transformative action. While

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\item \textsuperscript{114} Wade, “Small Acts,” 23-39.
\item \textsuperscript{116} West and Zondi-Mabizela, “The Bible Story,” 8.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Welch, \textit{Communities of Resistance and Solidarity}, 4-6, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Scott, \textit{Domination}, 125, 128.
\item \textsuperscript{119} West and Zondi-Mabizela, “The Bible Story,” 4, 7-9; West, “Contextual Bible Study in South Africa,” 608.
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some churches have traditionally stressed individual transformation, Contextual Bible Study’s commitment is to both individual and social transformation which includes existential, political, economic, cultural and religious aspects of life. For example, transformative action taken in response to of South African Contextual Bible Study workshops includes: political lobbying to improve women’s health services; development of Bible studies to help men in churches become more aware of the structures and attitudes that oppress women; development of strategies to make changes within churches and local communities; and support for women in pain. The commitment to establish Campaign Tamar throughout South Africa came as a result of an action plan developed at a Contextual Bible Study workshop. While Contextual Bible Study seeks to foster individual healing, there is also an emphasis on the transformation of church, community and social structures in ways that acknowledge past abuse and prevent future occurrences.

Abuse survivors, particularly those impacted by trauma that continues throughout their whole lifespan, are disadvantaged by skewed Christian emphasis on aspects of individual transformation or personal triumph over adversity. Such approaches include an over-emphasis on personal salvation, healing and miracles. In contrast, prophetic theologies do not limit definitions of sin and salvation to individualistic concepts or “another world” eternity but commit to “here and now” political practice that wrestles with real-life oppressive forces such as racism, sexism and capitalism. Prophetic and contextual theologies, committed to transformation in specific historic and social locations, endeavour to value and dignify life before death by discerning the presence of God in all acts of struggle and justice.

120 West, Contextual Bible Study, 24.
123 Such long-term impact of abuse is noted in Olsson and Chung, Report of the Board of Inquiry, 4.
124 Welch, Communities of Resistance and Solidarity, 50.
125 Welch, Communities of Resistance and Solidarity, 47, 49-50, 54.
However, biblical scholars and others seeking to emphasise social transformation in Western abuse survivor contexts are likely to meet opposition, not only from theological perspectives more orientated toward individualism, but also from health professionals who privilege the risk of re-triggering individuals’ trauma over the benefits of social action. Indeed feminist research and other forms of social activism have demonstrated the need for ethical safeguards to ensure that abuse survivors are not further exploited by pressure to participate in social action and the inherent inequalities between them and the “helping professionals” involved in liberative projects.

Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez stresses that transformation, like evangelism, is not a blessing that the rich can benevolently bestow upon the poor but a process that occurs first and foremost in the experiences of exploited people. He says that the lived experience of such people possesses power to change those who are privileged to share their story. He says: “Working in the midst of the poor, exploited people, whom we were supposedly going to evangelize, we came to realize that we were being evangelized by them.” This parallels West’s South African experience of biblical scholars being called and converted by marginalised communities. It also heralds a reminder that Australian churches do not monopolise salvation. Given their historic involvement in abusive practices, churches cannot assume the power to “fix” abuse survivors, or even insist that they “forgive”. Biblical scholars and other supporters who can be trusted to share abuse survivor’s stories will discover, however, that they possess a largely hidden capacity to resist ongoing abuse and to empower change.

127 Psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman argues that while social action can be healing for abuse survivors, it can also result in them being prematurely pressured to participate in resistance before it is safe for them to do so. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 170-174, 214-221.


129 Gutiérrez, “The Irruption of the Poor,” 120.


Conversation with South African Contextual Bible Study highlights specific challenges for a biblical hermeneutic of abuse within Australian contexts. The most obvious issue remains that, despite the high rate of abuse in Australian church communities, there is still little in the way of organised support structures that can be easily utilised for the purposes of biblical interpretation. While South African biblical scholars are being invited to share their resources with organised groups, it remains debatable whether Australian abuse survivors have much interest in religious matters, or can even see relevance in pursuing conversations with biblical scholars. If there is any hope of future dialogue, biblical scholars need to demonstrate solidarity with survivors, their advocates and supporters; and play some role in the establishment of safe and sacred spaces where trusting relationships can grow.

Australian biblical scholars and theologians also need to commit to ongoing dialogue about the development of “home-grown” contextual methodologies and apply their skills to better defining experiences of oppression with Australian contexts. Such developments will be particularly important for abuse survivors whose experiences often include layers of cumulative oppression. Resources such as South African Contextual Bible Study, Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concept of kyriarchy are all excellent resources to advance discussions. However, much “grassroots” work needs to be done, particularly in relation to exploring the links between Australia’s largely denied violent history and the impact this has had on Australian religious identity. It is still very early days for the proposed biblical hermeneutic of abuse.

In Chapters 3 to 6, the proposed hermeneutic of abuse is applied to the biblical stories of Hagar, Dinah, Tamar of Genesis 38 and Tamar of 2 Samuel 13. I however acknowledge that these readings are essentially my own informed readings. The additional step of actually opening interpretive discussions to Australian abuse survivors will only proceed when, or if, appropriate support structures are established and ethical responsibilities are satisfied.
The following textual analysis chapters reveal that each of the four biblical abuse survivors featured in this study are linked into forms of community support. None of these ancient survivors passively accept the abuse meted out to them by religious and political figures. They all courageously demonstrate ingenious resistance strategies which have the potential to inspire and resource contemporary survivors in their own resistance. These biblical incidents of abuse are part of much wider patterns of greed and lust for power. Perpetrators, accomplices and narrators demonstrate repeated attempts to co-opt God’s support for abusive actions and ideology. The readings contest the notion that God is actually on the side of abusers but concede that God is often implicated in violent acts. In such circumstances, contemporary survivors are challenged to call God to justice through intercession, resistance, expressing anger and claiming the power to “re-name” God in accordance with what they know of God’s nature from other biblical texts and their own experience. While space is maintained for survivors who wish to vent anger, a hermeneutic of abuse continually probes to uncover signs of new life, particularly in situations where the biblical survivors face death and other forms of destruction. The readings maintain an irrepressible hope that, no matter what, possibilities for healing and restoration are about to emerge.
Chapter 3

Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21)

Hagar is marginalised in biblical text and forgotten, particularly throughout centuries of Christian biblical interpretation. She is over-shadowed by her mistress Sarai, the wife of Abram.\(^1\) However, it is precisely this marginality, combined with Hagar’s own resistance, which allows contemporary abuse survivors to reclaim her as an inspiration. The complexity of Hagar and Sarai’s relationship within patriarchal family structure creates many opportunities for contemporary survivors to explore issues such as the potential for abuse survivors to become oppressors, the potential for some women to abuse other women and the propensity for abuse to occur regardless of socio-economic status. Contemporary Australians affected by this country’s history of forced separation of Aboriginal children from their families, and the involvement of religious figures in institutionalised abuse, might feel resonances between Hagar’s story and their own.

Hagar, an Egyptian woman cast into the role of a slave, suffers abuse within the home of Abram and Sarai. Abram and Sarai later become the patriarch and matriarch of Israelite religion and culture. The abuse that Hagar suffers can only be understood by reading it against all-too-frequently occurring wider cycles of abusive practice that haunt Abram and Sarai’s family. The stories of Hagar and Sarai are so entwined that it is impossible to read the story of one woman without the story of the other.\(^2\) In my reading, I therefore map abusive practices from the time when Sarai is introduced into the biblical text in Genesis 11:29 through to Genesis 22:1-14, when Abraham attempts to sacrifice Isaac the son finally born to her, and then on to Sarah’s death in Genesis 23. As Abram and Sarai’s names are


changed to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17:9-16, I will generally use the names Abram and Sarai when referring to events prior to that point and Abraham and Sarah when referring to events that come after.

**Hagar: An Inspiration for Contemporary Women**

Hagar, as an Egyptian, has a natural association with the continent of Africa and her story has become a focal point for black women and their communities throughout the contemporary world. These women find inspiration in Hagar’s story because it captures the oppression of their own lived realities.³ Hagar, bearing scars of racism, sexism and economic disadvantage, signifies all too terrifyingly the oppression that many abuse survivors continue to face.⁴ Her story exemplifies the cumulative nature of oppressive forces.

Hagar suffers abuse at the hands of Sarai who, although economically privileged, is also a victim of abuse.⁵ On two occasions Abram abandons Sarai to sexual danger in scams that richly reward him economically (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:2-17). Sarai is positioned first and foremost within the text as a barren woman and Abram’s abusive treatment of her raises suspicions that he is attempting to rid himself of her in ways that resource him for children with other women.⁶ In spite of Abram subjecting Sarai to sexual danger, her experiences of being exploited do

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not make her compassionate towards Hagar. As the cycles of abuse unwind, Abram, in addition to placing Sarai in sexual danger, also attempts to sacrifice her son, Isaac (Genesis 22:1-22). Despite all this Sarai treats Hagar harshly and, on two occasions, her behaviour leads to Hagar suffering in the wilderness where the life of her son, Ishmael, is also at risk (Genesis 16:6b-14; 21:9-19). The rush for land, children and power also leads to other women in their family being abused (for example the wife and daughters of Abraham’s nephew Lot in Genesis 19).

The biblical text does not specifically state how Hagar came to be part of Sarai and Abram’s household but it is likely that Hagar was among slaves given to Abram by the Egyptian Pharaoh (Genesis 12:16). Such an occurrence is strange when, within the world-view of the narrative, Egyptians are more likely to be considered socially and culturally superior to wandering Arameans. As Hagar’s story progresses, she becomes powerless with no control over her own body or any rights over children born to her. Her story has many points of connection with contemporary women who perform demeaning and soul-destroying work; are used and discarded; forcibly separated from their children; or must watch their children die.

Hagar’s story provides opportunities for contemporary survivors marginalised by mainstream religions or abuse by religious figures to engage in dialogue beyond traditional faith boundaries. Contemporary Muslims trace their ancestry back to Abraham through Hagar’s son Ishmael therefore honouring her as the matriarch of Islam. This creates potential for inter-faith dialogue amongst contemporary

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Jewish, Muslim and Christian abuse survivors. Hagar’s story also demonstrates her capacity to resist violence, cater for her own needs and encounter divinity in her bid to become matriarch of a great nation (Genesis 16:10; 21:18).

Resisting Hagar’s Isolation

While Hagar initially seems isolated within the home of Sarai and Abram, a closer reading indicates possible support networks. Abram and Sarai, in the course of their travels, acquire male and female slaves at Haran, Egypt and Gerar (Genesis 12:5, 16; 20:14) which means there are people living close to Hagar. As already noted, it is possible that the Pharoah of Egypt included Hagar as part of an extravagant gift he gave to Abram when taking Sarai into his harem (Genesis 12:16). Midrashic sources Genesis Rabbah 45:1 and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis 16:7 even state that Hagar was Pharaoh’s daughter, raising the possibility that she is given as a companion to Sarai rather than as a slave. Savina J. Teubal uses these midrashic sources and translates the Hebrew word שפע as handmaid / companion to argue that Hagar is given to Sarai with the higher status of a friend but both Sarai and God subsequently denigrate her, in Genesis 21, to the status of a אֲשה (slave). In contrast, Naomi Steinberg argues that it is likely that אשה is of lower status and that Hagar’s status increases to a אשה (slave-wife) on the birth of her son, Ishmael. Steinberg also warns against these terms being translated too literally as a means of determining Hagar’s status without reference to other social factors. Whatever Hagar’s status, the midrashic sources point to a possibility that she had networks and resources in Egypt. This is supported later in the biblical narrative when she obtains an Egyptian wife for her son Ishmael (Genesis 21:21).

14 Teubal, Hagar the Egyptian, 46, 52-59, 131.
15 Steinberg, Kinship and Marriage, 63.
Sarai is the only woman listed when Abram, his father Terah and nephew Lot leave the land of Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 11:31). Lot’s father, Haran, has died (Genesis 11:28) but there is no mention of whether Lot is now responsible for his mother and whether she is part of the travelling party. Nor is it clear at what point Lot takes a wife but, by the time Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed, Lot has a wife and daughters (Genesis 19:8, 14-16, 26, 30-37). It is therefore plausible that Sarai and Hagar have links with women through family networks that extend through Egypt, Canaan and Mesopotamia.

**Sarai is Barren but Abram Focuses on Wealth and Progeny**

Sarai enters the biblical text as a barren woman with no genealogical identity (Genesis 11:30).\(^\text{16}\) She is married to Abram, the son of Terah. Abram is presumably Terah’s eldest son, followed by Nahor and then the deceased Haran (Genesis 11:27). This highlights a problem. Abram, who, under a system of primogeniture, would most likely be Terah’s heir, is married to a woman described as barren. No consideration is given to the possibility that Abram could be infertile or that their marriage is sexually dysfunctional.\(^\text{17}\) Meanwhile, his youngest brother, Haran, is dead but had at least one son, Lot, and possibly also two daughters (Genesis 11:29). Abram’s other brother, Nahor, is married to Milcah, who in contrast to Sarai, is granted genealogical identity.\(^\text{18}\) While there is no certainty that Milcah’s father and Abram’s brother were the same person, it remains possible that she is Lot’s sister and Nahor has married his own niece (Genesis 11:29).\(^\text{19}\) Nothing is said at this point about Milcah’s ability to bear children but she is later identified as one who bears many children (Genesis 22:20-21).


\(^{17}\) Genesis Rabbah 45:1 considers it possible that Sarai would have had children had she been married to another man. See also Rulan-Miller, “Hagar,” 69.


\(^{19}\) This pattern of endogamous marriage continues in the next generation, when Sarah and Abraham’s son, Isaac, marries Rebekah, the granddaughter of Nahor and Milcah (Genesis 24). Rebekah is instrumental in her son, Jacob, marrying the daughters of her brother Laban (Genesis 29).
Abram’s two brothers, even the one who is deceased, seem better placed for progeny than he is even though he is presumably Terah’s primary heir. Sarai is positioned as a threat to Abram’s progeny. As the narrative unfolds, it seems that Abram would prefer to rid himself of Sarai. Her lack of genealogical identity provides him with opportunities to exploit her. Abram, on two occasions, abandons Sarai to sexual risk by identifying her as his sister (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-17). When King Abimelech of Gerar rebukes Abraham for this despicable behaviour, Abraham defends himself:

Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife (Genesis 20:12).

If Sarai is Abram’s half-sister it seems strange that her connection to Terah is not established in the Genesis 11:26-30 genealogy, particularly when genealogical details for her sister-in-law Milcah are included. Such a union would be contrary to “later” Israelite law (Leviticus 20:17; Deuteronomy 22:27). However, regardless of whether Sarai is actually a daughter of Terah, Abram’s conduct is highly suspect. By publicly declaring Sarai as his sister and suppressing the detail of his marriage to her, Abram reaps financial rewards through presenting his wife as sexually available to other men. Another possibility is that Abram, like Nahor, has married his niece and that Sarai is actually Lot’s sister, a daughter of the deceased Haran.

Terah sets out from Ur with Abram, Lot and Sarai and although he wants to go to Canaan, they end up settling at Haran until after his death (Genesis 11:32). Abram, despite Sarai’s barrenness, is then assured of divine blessing and greatness. He sets his sights on other land:

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20 Steinberg, _Kinship and Marriage_, 49; Trible, _Texts of Terror_, 9.
21 Flavius Josephus, in _The Antiquities of the Jews_ 1.8.8 and 1.12.1, says that Abram pretends that Sarai is his sister and asks her to go along with the pretence. Sharon Pace Jeansonne suspects that Abram is lying when he claims that Sarai is his half-sister. Jeansonne, _The Women of Genesis_, 26. See also Walter Brueggemann, _Genesis_ (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 127.
22 Brett, _Genesis_, 52-53.
23 Josephus, in _The Antiquities of the Jews_ 1.6.5, says that Lot, Milcah and Sarai were all offspring of Haran and that Nahor and Abram both married their nieces. Orson Scott Card uses this idea in his novel _Sarah: Women of Genesis_ (New York, Forge Press, 2000), 336.
Now the LORD [Yhwh] said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing (Genesis 12:1-2).

Yhwh does not specify direction or place but instructs Abram to set out for “the land that I will show you”. Abram, perhaps influenced by Terah’s unfulfilled dream to see Canaan, heads in that direction. The blessing, while promising to make Abram “a great nation,” gives no specific details about offspring. Yhwh however specifically instructs Abram to separate from his kindred and his father’s house. Abram immediately disobeys by taking Lot.\textsuperscript{24} It seems obvious that Lot should stay in Haran, a location where his family continue to have connections for generations.\textsuperscript{25} Abram however might view Lot as a substitute for his own son.\textsuperscript{26} Alternatively, if Sarai is Lot’s sister, Abram might regard Lot as Sarai’s kin, rather than his own. Lot quite possibly has flocks and slaves previously owned by his father Haran. He is also the one most likely to add to family numbers through fathering children. The text indicates that Abram calculates the economic benefits of prolonging his association with Lot.

Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:5).

Despite the possibility that Abram economically benefits from Lot accompanying him to Canaan, on catching a glimpse of the promised land, he has another vision that essentially renders Lot superfluous: “To your offspring I will give this land” (Genesis 12:7). Abram is now 75 years old and married to a barren woman but sets his sights on land far greater than would be available at Haran. A new criterion is set so that Lot cannot inherit Abram’s growing fortune. There is no acknowledgement that wealth accumulated by Abram in Haran could be in part the result of Lot’s inheritance and labour. There is only a stipulation that land to be acquired by Abram will go to his own offspring. Abram then attempts to


\textsuperscript{25} Genealogical evidence indicates that Lot would have had significant family support networks, particularly nephews and cousins, had he stayed at Haran. See Steinberg, \textit{Kinship and Marriage}, 49.

\textsuperscript{26} Steinberg, \textit{Kinship and Marriage}, 48-51; Turner, \textit{Announcements of Plot}, 62-63.
abandon Sarai in the first of the two scams that blur the distinction between wife and sister. The narrator claims that a famine in Canaan forces Abram, Sarai and Lot into Egypt.  

**Abram: Accumulating Wealth by Sacrificing Family Members**

As Abram and Sarai enter Egypt, he hatches a plot that shows no concern for her welfare:

> I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, “This is his wife”; then they will kill me, but they will let you live (Genesis 12:12).

Abram seemingly compliments Sarai by acknowledging her beauty but then objectifies her with the prediction that the Egyptians will say (this is his wife). He risks Sarai’s abduction by asking her to identify as his sister, insinuating that she is sexually available (Genesis 12:11-13). He presents as opportunistic, focusing totally on himself: “Say that you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account” (Genesis 12:13). There is nothing to indicate that Abram’s life is in fact at risk but his dishonesty certainly places Sarai’s sexual purity, and quite possibly her life, at risk.

Sarai does not actually identify herself to the Egyptians as Abram’s sister but is taken into Pharaoh’s house. Abram, assuming the role of her brother, is given what seems to be a bride-price in return for handing her over. The booty includes sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, and camels (Genesis

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29 *Jubilees* 13.12-13 plays down Abram’s culpability by portraying Sarai as torn away from Abram as Pharaoh seizes her.


Abram trades the sexual services of his wife to boost wealth. According to Israelite law, if a man realises that he has been duped into believing that a woman is available for marriage, but there is no evidence of her virginity, she could be stoned (Deuteronomy 22:13-21). Alternatively, if a married woman commits adultery, both she and the man with whom she has sex are liable to be sentenced to death (Deuteronomy 22:22). Abram treats Sarai more like a slave or a prostitute than a wife whose honour should be protected.

Abram’s despicable behaviour risks social and cultural damage through the violation of honour. Abram brings shame upon himself as Sarai’s husband but, as the story of Dinah in Genesis 34 indicates, a woman’s brothers and father are also shamed through sexual impropriety. If Sarai is really Abram’s half-sister, his exploitation renders him shameful on a number of levels. He is shamed as both husband and brother and has stupidly created a situation in which he shames his whole family, including his deceased father. If Sarai is Lot’s sister, Abram has particularly shamed Lot.

Pharaoh realises that Sarai is married to Abram when Yhwh afflicts the royal residence with great plagues (Genesis 12:17). Pharaoh, in responding to the plagues, implies that he has actually had sexual relations with Sarai:

> What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, “She is my sister” so that I took her for my wife? Now here is your wife, take her, and be gone (Genesis 12:18-19).

At this point, Abram makes no attempt to explain that Sarai is his half-sister as well as his wife, nor that he fears for his life. Pharaoh gives no indication that Abram’s life is in danger. Abram, since arriving in Egypt, has not referred to the divine blessing or made any attempt to consult Yhwh about fears and risks to destiny. Pharaoh is more concerned about the consequences of adultery than Abram, but is also self-centred, focusing on the damage done to himself.

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33 Berquist, *Reclaiming Her Story*, 43.
Pharaoh does not claim back the goods given earlier to Abram but royal officials “sent him [Abram] on the way, with his wife and all that he had” (Genesis 12:20). While the manner in which Abram is escorted from Egypt underscores shame, he departs with slaves, quite possibly including Hagar, and an abundance of wealth. Abram has made a tidy profit in a deal that violated his wife but he must take her with him when he leaves Egypt.

Abram’s tendency to place wealth before family loyalty continues into Genesis 13 when he instructs Lot to separate from him due to economic concerns (Genesis 13:6-7). Abram’s wealth is presented disproportionately to Lot’s. Abram is “very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold” (Genesis 13:2) while Lot has “flocks and herds and tents” (Genesis 13:5). Abram gives Lot no say in whether separation is a good idea, only in which direction he will choose land. Abram offers Lot the choice of land in northern or southern Canaan (Genesis 13:9) but Lot opts for an alternative. He sees that the Jordan plain is “well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD” (Genesis 13:10) and claims for himself all of the Jordan plain, leaving the land of Canaan to Abram (Genesis 13:12). There is some hint that Lot’s separation from Abram might have left him vulnerable with an unsustainable flock. He seems to subsequently become absorbed into city life in Sodom and there is no further mention of him as a pastoralist. In Genesis 14, this sense of vulnerability increases when the cities of the Jordan Plain rebel against their overlord Chedorloamer. With support of allies, Chedorloamer retaliates and captures Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot is taken captive (Genesis 14:1-12). While Abram rescues Lot, he shows no interest in re-establishing a close relationship. In Genesis 15:2, Abram makes it clear that he no longer considers Lot as a possible heir. He identifies Eliezer of Damascus, a slave born within his house, as his heir. Contemporary survivors, by systematically working through the text, analysing Abram’s attitudes towards family and wealth, can unmask

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39 Brett, acknowledging that commentators often view Lot’s choice of land as greedy, points out that the text’s emphasis on Abram’s wealth and self-interest call the patriarch’s motives into question. Brett, Genesis, 53. See also Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 34.
40 Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 48.
41 Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 45.
underlying economic motives. They can reveal Abram as more interested in wealth, power and territory than the welfare of his relatives.

**Hagar, the Egyptian: Used and Abused**

In Genesis 15:4-17, Yhwh uses a strange animal ritual to seal a covenant forged in response to Abram’s anxiety about inheritance and the seeming impossibility of an heir. The covenant, while promising that Abram’s own offspring will inherit large land holdings, does not specify that these descendants must be born of Sarai. Nor is there anything to indicate that Abram ever discusses this covenant with her. Sarai’s anxiety at not being able to produce children, however, reaches crisis point. Hagar is introduced into the biblical text only because Sarai resorts to using her as a surrogate (Genesis 16:1-3).

Sarai now interprets her infertility as a signal of divine disfavour: “The LORD has prevented me from bearing children” (Genesis 16:2). In a strange twist Yhwh, without Sarai’s knowledge, has promised Abram an heir but Sarai continues to see Yhwh as the cause of infertility and insecurity. Abram and Sarai have now been married for more than 10 years (Genesis 16:3). This reference to 10 years might allude to a time period after which it is socially acceptable for a husband to abandon a barren wife. Sarai has already experienced one attempt by Abram to deceitfully abandon her and might now fear that her ongoing barrenness places her at further risk. In Genesis 16:3, Sarai facilitates Hagar’s transformation from נַעַר (handmaid) to רָאָת (wife). Interestingly, there is no reference to Hagar’s status being that of מִלָּה (concubine). Sarai, in viewing Hagar as a solution to her

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44 In the Book of Ruth, Naomi desperately tries to sever responsibility for her two daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah after they have been married to her sons for about 10 years but are left as childless widows (Ruth 1:4-18). Genesis Rabbah 45:3 says that a man who has been married for 10 years and has no children should not “stay sterile”, the inference being that he should take another wife.

own desperation, focuses only on herself and shows no sign of gratitude to Hagar.\textsuperscript{46}

Hagar’s response at being offered to Abram is not recorded. While she might have felt sexually exploited,\textsuperscript{47} it is perhaps more likely that she recognises an opportunity for her own status to increase by becoming Abram’s second wife.\textsuperscript{48} Hagar, unlike Sarai who has not become pregnant after years of marriage, conceives immediately: “He went in to Hagar and she conceived” (Genesis 16:4). The pregnancy however causes social implications that Sarai has not anticipated.\textsuperscript{49} Much to Sarai’s dismay, Hagar’s pregnancy does little to improve Sarai’s status but rather improves Hagar’s!\textsuperscript{50} Hagar responds emotionally: “when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress” (Genesis 16:4). Hagar’s behaviour, although seemingly insubordinate, functions as a form of resistance.\textsuperscript{51} In arousing Sarai’s anger, Hagar effectively assumes control over her own body and unborn child. Sarai, amid the anger of being slighted, gives up her notion that Hagar’s children will be her children.\textsuperscript{52}

Sarai, feeling denigrated by the unexpected impact of Hagar’s pregnancy, complains to Abram:

\begin{quote}
May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD [Yhwh] judge between you and me! (Genesis 16:5).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{46} Fischer, “‘Go and Suffer,’” 78; Westermann, \textit{Genesis 12-36}, 237; Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 10.

\textsuperscript{47} Fewell, “Changing the Subject,” 183.


\textsuperscript{49} Rulan-Miller, “Hagar,” 72.


\textsuperscript{52} Jeansonne, \textit{The Women of Genesis}, 21, 44-45.
When Sarai says this, it is unclear whether she is blaming Abram for Hagar’s reaction, referring to his abandonment of her to Pharaoh’s harem, or venting economic and social insecurity that she continues to experience as a barren wife. Nina Rulan-Miller, raising the possibility that Sarai’s inability to conceive might be the result of sexual dysfunction in her marriage to Abram, wonders whether Sarai’s anger is due to Abram having had a successful sexual encounter with Hagar. Sarai demands that Yhwh adjudicate between Abram and herself. In doing so, she indicates that the problem is located within their marriage rather than in conflict between her and Hagar.

Abram offers Sarai no reassurance that her position within his family is secure. There is no sign of repentance for his behaviour toward Sarai and he proceeds to cowardly deny Hagar protection as a pregnant wife. Abram is aware of his Genesis 15 covenant with Yhwh but does not consult Yhwh before placing his unborn child at risk by classifying Hagar as Sarai’s property: “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please” (Genesis 16:6). Sarai deals harshly with Hagar, resulting in Hagar running away. This results in the first of Hagar’s two wilderness experiences. She runs to a spring in the wilderness on the way to Shur (Genesis 16:7).

**Hagar: Positioned as Matriarch but Abused in the Wilderness**

During Hagar’s first wilderness experience, a “messenger of Yhwh” (נַעֲרֵה נְאֻ הַיָּהָוֶה) approaches her near the spring of water on the way to Shur and displays behaviour that is both protective and abusive (Genesis 16:7-12). Contemporary survivors

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53 In Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis 16:5, Sarai emphasises that Abram is responsible for her pain because she gave up her country and heritage to be with him, saved his life by naming him as her brother, appeared with him before Pharaoh and Abimelech, and also gave Hagar to him as a wife.


55 Gerhard von Rad points out that Sarai, in turning to Abram rather than speaking immediately to Hagar, emphasises that Hagar now belongs to Abram. von Rad, *Genesis*, 192. See also Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 241.


57 Genesis Rabbah 45:6 claims that Abram returns Hagar to Sarai’s control because, according to Deuteronomy 21:14, he is unable to treat her as a slave after having had intercourse with her.

58 Fischer, “Go and Suffer,” 79.

will be aware that abusive behaviour is harder to recognise when mixed with dashes of niceness and that moments of blessing can create false hopes that the mistreatment will cease. Those who have been abused within religious settings might also see parallels between Hagar’s interaction with the messenger in the wilderness and their own struggles to accept that religious figures can be abusive.

The spring of water provides sustenance for Hagar and the child within her womb.\(^6\) There are four scenes in Genesis that depict women at a spring or well and these are all strongly linked to marriage and childbirth imagery.\(^6\) Two of these scenes (Genesis 16:7-14; 21:8-21) feature Hagar. The other “woman at the well” scenes are the wooing of Rebekah in Genesis 24:10-27 and Rachel in Genesis 29:1-12. In positioning Hagar by a spring of water, the narrator indicates that, although her status within Abram’s family is ambiguous and she is not favoured with the courtship rituals that befit Rebekah and Rachel, she is still comparable to great matriarchs.

Blessing is mingled with abuse when the messenger speaks. Hagar is labelled as Sarai’s personal property when the messenger calls her a תָּרִיס (slave): “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai” (Genesis 16:8).\(^6\) The messenger instructs Hagar to return to Sarai’s control and fails to acknowledge that the child within her womb is promised by Yhwh. When Hagar admits that she is running away from her מִשְרָה (mistress/lady), the messenger urges her to return and to submit to Sarai (Genesis 16:9).\(^6\) Sarai and Abram have abused Hagar and a messenger of the deity is now implicated in the perpetration of that abuse by insisting on Hagar’s return to their household, not with the dignity of a mother bearing a promised child, but as a chastised person of inferior status.

The messenger’s “nasty-nice” behaviour continues. Immediately following the instruction for Hagar to return to Sarai’s control comes a blessing of fruitfulness:

“I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.” And the angel of the LORD [messenger of Yhwh] said to her, “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael for the LORD [Yhwh] has given heed to your affliction” (Genesis 16:10b-11).

Hagar becomes the first woman in biblical text to experience an annunciation. She is instructed to name her son Ishmael which means “God hears” and she is assured that Yhwh “has given heed to your affliction” (Genesis 16:11). Yhwh, however, has heard but essentially does nothing in the shorter term. Hagar remains at risk of servitude and inferiority. There is no call for Abram to reinstate her or grant her dignity and resources. There is no acknowledgement of Sarai’s cruelty or Abram’s cowardice. Despite the promises of progeny, the messenger predicts that Hagar’s suffering will increase rather than be eliminated. Hagar will give birth to a man of conflict:

He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him and he shall live at odds with all his kin” (Genesis 16:12).

There is an implication that the abusive tensions that Hagar now experiences in her relationships with Abram and Sarai will continue within the generations of her own family. The “wild ass” image, which has traditionally been interpreted both violently and negatively, hints that Ishmael will live at odds with this own mother as well as the descendants of Sarai. Danna Nolan Fewell rejects the translation “wild ass” in favour of “free” to argue that Ishmael will not cower to slavery. This, however, does nothing to alleviate Hagar’s suffering or assure her of liberty.

**Hagar Claims to See God**

The “nasty-nice” nuances within the annunciation to Hagar make it a warped declaration but also provide a key to recognising her resistance to abuse. Hagar listens to the messenger, hears grand promises but no offer of liberation. She

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64 Phyllis Trible argues that Hagar, as the first woman in biblical text to experience an annunciation, becomes a prototype for mothers in Israel. Scott K. Nikaido reads Hagar’s story intertextually with the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1-2 to emphasise that Hagar is entitled to inclusion among biblical matriarchs. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 17; Scott K. Nikaido, “Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures: An Intertextual Study,” *VT* 51 (2001): 221, 240. See also Teubal, “Sarah and Hagar,” 245-246, 250.
makes no response. While Devora Steinmetz has interpreted Hagar’s lack of reaction as “blindness”, such an interpretation fails to recognise that Hagar then moves assertively to reinterpret her interaction with the messenger. She picks up on imagery embedded in the messenger’s words to accentuate her own status. She swiftly recasts “the messenger of Yhwh” (my translation) as Yhwh, the deity. In doing so she effectively upstages Moses, the great male biblical character who carries the message of liberation to the enslaved Israelites in Egypt. She positions herself as the only person in biblical text to name God, and possibly the only person in biblical text to actually see God: “So she named the LORD [Yhwh] who spoke to her, ‘You are El-roi’” (Genesis 16:13). El-roi means “God of seeing”. In very obscure Hebrew Hagar then offers an explanation for her choice of name: “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” (Genesis 16:13).

Hagar’s astonishing response to the divine messenger gives incredible resources to contemporary abuse survivors whose experiences are often pathologised by “experts” who claim the power to observe, diagnose and label. Here, Hagar moves from object to subject. She becomes the one who “sees” and the one with the power to “name”. To use Rulan-Miller’s description of Hagar, she presents as a “woman with attitude”, creating a hermeneutical precedent of great value. Whenever contemporary survivors find God implicated in abusive acts, they can now exercise the power to call the deity to justice by “re-naming” God in light of what they themselves “see” God to be through Scripture and experience.

68 Steinmetz, From Father to Son, 77.
70 As will be discussed below, Moses in Exodus 3 asks for the divine name to be revealed. He does not actually choose it himself. There is ambiguity in Exodus 3 and Exodus 33 with regard to the extent that Moses actually “sees” God. See also Teubal, Hagar the Egyptian, xxxvi; Greifenhagen, Egypt, 32.
73 This hermeneutical strategy takes inspiration from Cosgrove’s recommendation that theological principles be used as guiding considerations for exegesis by “interpreting Scripture in the light of Scripture”. Cosgrove, “Toward a Postmodern Hermeneutica Sacra,” 45. I suggest that contemporary survivors, who wish to “re-name” God by challenging the deity’s involvement in abusive acts, read such texts against other texts in which God is portrayed as committed to the welfare of vulnerable people. For example, see Deuteronomy 10:17-18;
Hagar effectively turns the tables on Yhwh who, through a messenger, is said to hear her suffering but does nothing to actually alleviate her pain. She in effect “re-authors” her own story by implying that she has had the extraordinarily rare experience of actually seeing God, at the point where she would otherwise be returned to slavery. When Yhwh appears to Moses at the burning bush, the deity claims to have heard the cry of Israelites and responds with a plan for their deliverance (Exodus 3:7-8). Hagar, however, while assured that Yhwh hears her affliction, is not offered liberation. Moses is given a plan to lead the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to freedom in Canaan but Hagar, an Egyptian slave in Canaan, takes matters into her own hands. Moses, in trying to gain support for his own authority, asks for the divine name to be revealed. The deity then speaks the name to Moses:

“I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you” (Exodus 3:14).

Hagar, in no position to seek confirmation of her own authority, usurps authority by claiming the power to name God. She chooses a name that means “God of seeing” even though she has only had indirect reassurance that Yhwh hears. There is nothing to indicate that Yhwh sees Hagar. Hence she sures up her own power by labelling Yhwh as one who is been seen by Hagar. She then goes a step further, revealing that she boldly pronounces the divine name while only claiming that she might have seen the deity. Once again, Moses’ experience at the burning bush gives some insight into what an audacious move this is. When Moses tries to see Yhwh in the burning bush, he is warned: “Come no closer! Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). On this occasion, Moses does not succeed. He hides his face “for he was afraid to look” (Exodus 3:6). Later, there is ambiguity about what parts of the

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deity Moses actually does manage to see. Exodus 33:11 says “the LORD [Yhwh] used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” but then Yhwh tells Moses: “you cannot see my face for no one shall see me and live” (Exodus 33:20). Yhwh then positions Moses in the cleft of a rock and passes, granting Moses a back view (Exodus 33:20-23). Hagar’s mischievous inference that she actually sees Yhwh is subsequently played down in history. The well where this miraculous encounter takes place is named Beer-Lahai-roi which means “The well of the One who lives and sees me”.

Ultimately, God is credited as the One who sees Hagar, rather than Hagar being remembered as the woman who sees and names God. Contemporary survivors, however, now have the option to reclaim Hagar’s daring attempt to rewrite her own life-story by ensuring that her voice and perspective are not lost.

**Hagar: Comparable with Abram the Patriarch**

While well imagery presents Hagar as a matriarch, the words of her annunciation give status comparable only to Abram, the patriarch. In Genesis 16:10, the messenger of Yhwh says to Hagar: “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.” In an ancient culture where descendents offer women security, Hagar is assured that she will birth the son within her womb and experience future increase. While Hagar remains at risk of slavery this promise causes ambivalence because she is denied all rights and control over her own body and offspring. The value of this message, however, is that it bears an uncanny resemblance to the promise that Yhwh gives to Abram in Genesis 15:5: “Look toward heaven and count the stars. So shall your descendents be.” This promise is later reiterated to Hagar, but with direct reference to her son Ishmael, when she returns to the wilderness and fears that Ishmael will die. God (Elohim) opens her eyes to see a well: “Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him” (Genesis 21:18).

79 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 22-23.
Hagar obviously remains vulnerable to abuse but there are also hints that she successfully implements strategies of resistance.\(^80\) The text does not say that Hagar returns and actually submits to Sarai.\(^81\) There is only reference to Hagar bearing Abram a son (Genesis 16:15-16).\(^82\) This leaves open the possibility that Hagar returns to Abram’s house as his second wife.\(^83\) This idea gains credibility with Abram naming his son. The messenger of Yhwh gives Hagar power to name Ishmael but it is significant that Abram, rather than Sarai, takes this right.\(^84\) When Leah and Rachel, the wives of Jacob, instruct their maids to bear children on their behalf, they name the sons (Genesis 30:6, 8, 11, 13). The fact that Sarai does not exert her power to name Ishmael indicates that Hagar, although constantly at risk of having her rights eroded, has some success at resisting Sarai’s abuse. Sarai’s plan to obtain children by Hagar has failed.

**Sarah Will Also Bear a Son**

Thirteen years pass between Ishmael’s birth and when Yhwh appears to Abram, changing his name to Abraham, and the name of Sarai to Sarah (Genesis 17:1-16). Once again, Yhwh promises prosperity to Abraham:

> As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you (Genesis 17:4-6).

God then reveals that the sign of covenant will be male circumcision and this ordinance is inclusive of all male offspring of Abraham: “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: *Every male* among you shall be circumcised” (Genesis 17:10). It is only at this point, more than thirteen years after the Genesis 15 covenant and the annunciation

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\(^{81}\) Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 73, 78.

\(^{82}\) Devora Steinmetz notes that Hagar does not return to Sarai but she bears a child only to Abram. Steinmetz however sees this as Hagar removing herself from the cover of covenant, rather than as a sign of resistance against abuse. Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 78.

\(^{83}\) There is no indication that Hagar performs menial manual tasks in accordance with slave status. For example, she is not involved in errands when the three visitors appear at Abraham’s tent in Mamre (Genesis 18:1-15). Nor does she play any role, other than that of Ishmael’s mother, at Isaac’s weaning festivities (Genesis 21:1-7). Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian*, 52-59.

promises to Hagar in Genesis 16, that God makes it explicitly clear that Sarai is also destined to become a matriarch through her own body: “I will give you a son by her [Sarah]. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” (Genesis 17:16). Ishmael, born under the covenant of Genesis 15 and covered by the annunciation promises in Genesis 16, now seems excluded in favour of the newly promised Isaac.\(^8\) I will however argue that, rather than excluding Ishmael, Genesis 17 is a new covenant which seeks to include Isaac.

The area of land promised under the covenant of Genesis 15 is equivalent to the territory of 10 nations and extends beyond Canaan but land promised under the Genesis 17 covenant is a smaller portion simply defined as “all the land of Canaan”. The Genesis 15 covenant states that the land promise will not be fulfilled until after Abraham’s descendants have been in slavery for 400 years (Genesis 15:13-14). The Israelites, after their release from slavery, are however promised only a proportion of land specified in the Genesis 15 covenant. Exodus 23:23 and Exodus 34:11 both define the land promised to the Israelites with reference to the territory of six nations, while Deuteronomy 7:11 does it with reference to seven nations, thus supporting the notion that the land offered to the descendents of Isaac is in fact smaller than that stipulated under the Genesis 15 covenant.\(^6\) The difference in the quantity of land specified in the two covenants is land beyond Canaan. The ambiguity associated with the status of this portion of land might therefore suggest that Ishmael, born under the earlier covenant that

\(^8\) R. Christopher Heard argues that “Yahweh pointedly cuts Ishmael out of the covenant though making a sweeping and generous provision for Ishmael’s welfare.” Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 75.

\(^6\) In a forthcoming *JBL* article, Rachel Havrelock traces two different sets of maps of Israel’s topography. One set of maps extends from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Jordon River in east, while the other set spans from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River in the east. Havrelock argues that the Jordon River maps correspond with the area identified as Canaan under Egyptian provincial rule rather than the borders of Israel at any particular historical moment. She says that, in constrast, the Euphrates maps are reminiscent of mythical conceptions particularly related to the rule of Solomon and “offer a glimpse of an unfulfilled vision of military strength and imperial influence”. She says ideological tension renders the space between the two maps as “ambiguously both Israel and Other”. Rachel Havrelock, “The Two Maps of Israel’s Land,” *JBL* (forthcoming).
does not specify Abram’s heir must come through Sarai’s body, is not to be totally denied birthright and blessing.  

In Genesis 17 God (Elohim) does not speak directly to Sarai but rather delivers a message of blessing for her through Abraham. Sarah herself remains ignorant of this promise for some time and indeed might never become fully aware of the extent to which Yhwh intends to bless her. She is only informed that she will bear a child when she later overhears three visitors, one of whom is identified as Yhwh, in conversation with Abraham as he sits outside his tent at Mamre (Genesis 18:9-15). Sarah’s reaction indicates that Abraham has not shared with her details of divine promise, even though there is no instruction for him to keep these details secret. Even when Sarah finds out that she will have a son, she is not granted the security of knowing that, through this son, she is to become the mother of “nations” and “kings”. Indeed Abraham might have good reason to keep such details secret, particularly if he fears a covenant covering a child from Sarah’s body will exclude Ishmael.

When Sarah learns that she is to have her own child, she responds with laughter (Genesis 18:12). Although her reaction is sometimes interpreted as lacking in faith, it is little different from Abraham’s reaction when he first heard the news. Initially Abraham assumes that Elohim is mistaken and that it is ludicrous for Sarah, a woman of almost ninety, to bear him a child when he is nearly 100 years old. Abraham falls “on his face and laughed” (Genesis 17:17). He immediately assumes that Ishmael must surely be his only heir and even petitions God in favour of this outcome: “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” (Genesis 17:17-18). Abraham seems quite happy with Ishmael as his chosen heir and indeed, as Ishmael was born under the covenant of Genesis 15, there seems little need for Abraham to have another son. It remains ambiguous whether Abraham doubts

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87 I argue that the tension between land specified in the Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 covenants represents the difference between territory covenanted to Isaac and blessing overflowing to Ishmael. F.V. Greifenhagen, in analysing the fluctuating southern boundary between Israel and Egypt, draws on Genesis 25:18 to conclude: “Ishmael is destined to become a people inhabiting a liminal and intermediary region between Israel and Egypt.” Greifenhagen, Egypt, 33.


89 Davidson, Genesis 12-50, 65; Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 268; Rulan-Miller, “Hagar,” 71.

90 Steinberg, Kinship and Marriage, 67; Nikaido, “Hagar and Ishmael,” 234.
that a subsequent child will actually come through Sarah’s body or if he is resistant to that option for fear it will disadvantage Ishmael.

Elohim insists that Sarah will bear a son who will be named Isaac (Genesis 17:19), and, in a move that has been traditionally interpreted as setting the scene for Ishmael’s disinheriance, commits to Isaac being the bearer of covenant. Ishmael, however, maintains blessing because of Abraham’s petition:

As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year (Genesis 17:20-21).

God’s blessing is never withdrawn from Ishmael. While Genesis 17 is inclusive of Isaac, it need not obliterate earlier promises to Ishmael.

Abraham immediately spots an inconsistency between God’s ordinance, that the sign of covenant will be the circumcision of all males within his household, and the risk that Ishmael could now be excluded. Seemingly demonstrating resistance through exaggerated compliance,91 he immediately circumcises Ishmael and all the male slaves of his household. He then undergoes the procedure himself (Genesis 17:23-27).92 Ishmael, although seemingly at risk of exclusion, is therefore the first to receive the mark of covenant.93 This large-scale ritual takes place without Sarah knowing that she will give birth to her own son and presumably at this point she is also unaware of the covenantal significance of circumcision.

Abraham makes a hurried but lavish display of hospitality when three visitors arrive at his tent in the heat of the day at Mamre. Sarah, previously denied information about her future pregnancy, remains excluded as the men eat but they are aware that she is within earshot (Genesis 18:9). One of the men reveals that Sarah will bear a son and the narrator adds commentary on the inner workings of her body: “it had ceased to be with Sarah the manner of women” (Genesis 18:11).

91 Exaggerated compliance is a strategy often used by marginalised people who need to resist in ways that are disguised. Allan Wade, “Small Acts,” 30-31; Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 28-37; Scott, Domination, ix-x, 18-20, 23-28, 136-140.

92 Heard, arguing that Yhwh excludes Ishmael from covenant in Genesis 17, raises the possibility that Abraham might circumcise him in resistance. Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 76.

93 Brett, Genesis, 63; Turner, Announcements of Plot, 78.
Presumably, Sarah’s menstrual periods have stopped, rendering her incapable of pregnancy. Sarah responds with laughter, saying: “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” (Genesis 18:12).

Sarah’s words here might indicate that, not only is she beyond menopause, but also that she and Abraham have ceased, or never had, sexual relations. Abraham and Sarah might have ceased intimacy due to old age or because Abraham has discarded her as “barren”. Yhwh demands to know why Sarah laughed. This is the only time that Yhwh speaks directly to Sarah who, unlike Hagar, does not experience an annunciation. There is no explanation for her behaviour but Sarah reacts as if she has been rebuked. She denies her laughter (Genesis 18:15). Sarah responds like an abuse survivor, denying any emotional reaction.

More Abuse: Lot’s Wife Dies and His Daughters Suffer

It is important that our bid to understand the abuse of Hagar does not simply focus on what happened to her but rather sets her experience into context with the many abusive incidents that occur within Abraham’s family. This wider context includes a long narrative interlude, mostly about Abraham’s association with Lot’s family, that occurs between Sarah’s laughter in Genesis 18:12 and the announcement that she has conceived in Genesis 21:1. The consequences of Abraham’s separation from Lot reach their climax in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:12-26. Lot is abusive toward his own daughters, even offering them up for pack rape (Genesis 19:8), and culpable in the death of his wife (Genesis 19:15-26). Abraham, despite being assured that an heir is still to come through Sarah’s body, once again makes money by claiming that she is his sister and abandoning her to sexual risk (Genesis 20:1-18).

After the three visitors leave Abraham’s tent at Mamre, they head toward Sodom. Abraham accompanies them for part of the way and Yhwh reveals to Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah are likely to be destroyed due to wickedness (Genesis

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94 Genesis Rabbah 48:17. See also Jeansonne, The Women of Genesis, 23; Davidson, Genesis 12-50, 64; Steinberg, Kinship and Marriage, 74; Rulan-Miller, “Hagar,” 69-70.

95 The messenger of Yhwh used the annunciation of Ishmael’s birth to assure Hagar that “the LORD has given heed to your affliction” (Genesis 16:11). There is however no scene in which Yhwh assures Sarah that the cry of her barrenness is heard or that her future is secure. See Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 249-250, 279; Trible, Texts of Terror, 19.
Abraham is responsible for Lot separating from him (Genesis 12:9) and rescues Lot when Sodom is taken captive in Genesis 14:1-16. Abraham now, however, demonstrates no sense of urgency about Lot’s presence in the area. Two of the visitors continue on, toward Sodom, but Abraham detains Yhwh in extended conversation (Genesis 18:22-32).

Abraham does not specifically plead for the safety of Lot’s family but challenges Yhwh’s sense of justice. Abraham attempts to determine how many righteous people would need to be found in the city in order for Yhwh to revoke its destruction: “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” (Genesis 18:23). Yhwh, after much banter back and forth, finally agrees that the city will not be destroyed if as few as 10 righteous people are found there (Genesis 18:32). Abraham makes no attempt to find out whether Yhwh considers Lot righteous nor how likely it is that there are, in fact, 10 righteous people in Sodom. He returns home before there is assurance that Lot and his family are safe.

That evening, Lot, sitting in the gateway of Sodom, sees two visitors (Genesis 19:1). While readers are aware that these visitors were earlier with Yhwh and Abraham, Lot is not privileged with this information. Lot and the people of Sodom are unaware of this latest threat to destroy their town and as Lyn M. Bechtel points out, there is nothing to indicate that the visitors present as anything other than ordinary humans. Given that Sodom was seiged, and Lot was among those taken captive in Genesis 14, it is understandable that the people of Sodom might suspect the visitors are spies or kings planning another attack. Lot, as soon as he sees the strangers, reacts as if they are high-status dignitaries without showing caution or allowing time to assess how others in the town might react. He immediately stands, bows low and insists that the strangers spend the night at his

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The visitors do not immediately accept Lot’s offer: “No; we will spend the night in the square” (Genesis 19:2). Ambiguity is heightened by the fact Lot positions himself in the gateway of Sodom. Bechtel argues that Lot’s position identifies him as a marginal sojourner and that this explains why the people of Sodom respond as if he is at risk of allowing threatening influences into their town. However, given that the town gate is a traditional place for the negotiation of legal and business matters (Deuteronomy 25:7; Ruth 4:1), and Lot is father to daughters later identified as being promised to men of the city (Genesis 19:14), it is also possible that Lot is at the town gate because he is negotiating marriage and other business deals which grant him status, assets and responsibilities within the town.

The narrator has already emphasised that the people of Sodom are wicked (Genesis 13:13). Lot’s ambiguous position at the town gate now raises the possibility that he has sealed deals which effectively turn him into a Sodomite. While the visitors, after further persuasion, accept Lot’s offer of hospitality, they hardly have time to finish their meal before the men of Sodom gather outside Lot’s house, demanding that his visitors be handed over “so that we may know them” (Genesis 19:5). Bechtel points out that the townsmen’s desire to “know” the visitors is intentionally ambiguous. The verb יָדַע covers a broad spectrum of options, including intellectual, experiential and sexual knowing. Hence, the townsmen might just want to know the strangers’ purpose for visiting their city. If their intentions are sexual, however, this suggests aggressive homosexual rape for the purposes of degrading the strangers, stripping them of all dignity, honour and pride, and thus rendering them incapable of military action against the city. An example of such sexual aggressiveness for the purposes of military incapacitation occurs in 2 Samuel 10:4-5 when the Ammonite king Hanun seizes Israelite troops,

98 Paul Tonson, instead of interpreting Lot’s actions as rash, argues that Lot’s persistence with the strangers presents him affirmatively, emphasising that he is “a most hospitable person.” Paul Tonson, “Mercy Without Covenant: A Literary Analysis of Genesis 19,” JSOT 95 (2001): 98.
100 Bechtel, “A Feminist Reading,” 113-114. Anthropologist Mary Douglas also argues that marginal figures are considered dangerous, particularly in vulnerable groups that consider boundary violations a threat to survival. Douglas, Purity and Danger, 98-124, 134.
102 Bechtel, “A Feminist Reading,” 111, 117-118
shaving off half their beards and exposing their genitals by cutting their garments at their hips. The disgraced Israelite soldiers are too ashamed to return home before their beards grow.\textsuperscript{103}

Modern commentators often interpret the Sodomites’ evil simply in terms of homosexuality.\textsuperscript{104} Bechtel however emphasises that while homosexuality is typically viewed negatively in group-orientated agrarian societies because it does not produce children and increase other community resources, it is not necessarily regarded as immoral.\textsuperscript{105} She states that the desire for sexual pleasure through homosexual intercourse is clearly not the key issue in Genesis 19 but rather the “wickedness” is evidenced in the power, control and illusions of superiority that threaten to destroy vulnerable people. Bechtel, along with Brett, argues that Genesis 19 is not narrowly limited to issues of sexuality but includes concerns of ethnocentrism and power abuse.\textsuperscript{106}

Lot shows himself as an abuser when he responds to the townsmen by offering to hand over his own daughters:

\begin{quote}
I beg of you my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please (Genesis 19:7-8).
\end{quote}

These words indicate that Lot knows that the men of Sodom are wicked but he addresses them as “my brothers”. This suggests that he also shares their wickedness and is probably not included among the 10 righteous people needed to

\begin{footnotes}


\item[105] Bechtel, “A Feminist Reading,” 120.

\end{footnotes}
save the city.\textsuperscript{107} It is possible that Lot’s wife and daughters were raped during the siege of Sodom in Genesis 14:1-16. However, unlike the townspeople’s request to “know” the strangers, there is nothing ambiguous about Lot’s offer of his daughters. He specifically emphasises the sexual dimension of his offer, insisting that his daughters are virgins: “I have two daughters who have not known a man” (Genesis 19:8a). Lot reveals himself as wicked enough to offer female members of his family for the purposes of pack rape, even though there is a possibility his daughters have already been raped and he is responsible to protect the honour of women within his household. His abuse extends further as he offers to bring the women out of his house and personally hand them over.\textsuperscript{108}

The visitors pull Lot back into his house and it is then revealed that Lot’s offer of his daughters is even more suspect. Lot is in no position to offer his daughters as sexually available because they have been promised, if not actually married, to Sodomite men whom Lot regards as his sons-in-law (Genesis 19:14-15). Lot, in offering daughters who have been promised in marriage, commits dire offences against his Sodomite sons-in-law. Under Deuteronomistic law, if a virgin woman is engaged to be married, but has sex with another man within town limits, she is at risk of being stoned, along with the man who had sex with her (Deuteronomy 22:23-24).\textsuperscript{109} While it is unclear that Lot’s daughters actually are virgins, he stupidly shames himself on a number of levels.

Commentators such as Rashkow and Betchel note that modern interpretations of Genesis 19 often admonish the men of Sodom for threatening violence against the visitors but gloss over Lot’s treatment of his own daughters by claiming female life was less valuable in ancient contexts and that Lot is bound by hospitality conventions.\textsuperscript{110} For example, Paul Tonson portrays Lot’s decision to offer his daughters to the men of Sodom as representative of patriarchal power in an act that is misguided rather than morally corrupt. He says: “The moral aspect of Lot’s


behaviour must be considered with the understanding that Lot put his duty as host above his duty as father.”

Even more horrifying is Bruce Vawter who, demonstrating an appalling misunderstanding of ancient shame-honour codes and arrogance in regard to the levels of violence continuing in contemporary Christian communities, states:

We shall be inclined to think that Lot showed himself a better host than father in the proposal he made to the Sodomites. Female virtue, however, was not prized in that age as it has become through Christian teaching. A Hebrew of Lot’s day would have found little to praise in his proposal, but neither a great deal to blame. He was bound, it was thought, by a superior obligation.

Bechtel, particularly emphasising the vulnerability of the Sodomites in light of their captivity in Genesis 14, argues that Lot tries to diffuse aggression by offering his daughters but does not expect his offer to be actually accepted. She claims the desired effect is achieved when the men of Sodom are then offended by his suggestion. Although Bechtel’s work shifts focus from unwarranted prejudice against homosexuality to social analysis of ethnocentrism inspired by vulnerability, it does little to address the horror that women’s bodies continue to be offered as bargaining chips in the battles of men.

The lack of 10 righteous people in Sodom is never specifically articulated. The visitors, however, having observed threats to their own safety and Lot’s appalling disregard for his daughters, reveal that they are on a mission on behalf of Yhwh to destroy the city (Genesis 19:13). The visitors warn Lot to leave but they say nothing to indicate that he is counted among the righteous. Lot once again places the welfare of his family at risk. He fails to share the news of pending doom with all of his family, only telling his sons-in-law who assume he is joking (Genesis 19:14). The sons-in-law would no doubt have serious reservations

112 Vawter, A Path through Genesis, 154. See also Davidson, Genesis 12-50, 72; Fritsch, Genesis, 68.
113 Bechtel, “A Feminist Reading,” 122-125. See also Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 53-55.
114 Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 41-42.
115 Brett, Genesis, 66; Davidson, Genesis 12-50, 75; Turner, Announcements of Plot, 81.
116 In constrast, Paul Tonson argues that Lot, in warning his sons-in-law of the coming doom, shows that he is “a person who speaks up when necessary, and indicates that he has perceived the role of Yhwh in the person of his guests.” Tonson, “Mercy Without Covenant,” 100.
about Lot’s credibility given that, just hours before, he publicly violated their marriage agreements.

Lot, perhaps influenced by a desire to save property,\textsuperscript{117} continues to linger in Sodom into the next day even though the visitors have specifically instructed him to protect his wife and two daughters (Genesis 19:15). He is thrown out of the city by the visitors and reluctantly flees to the nearby city of Zoar (Genesis 19:15-23). The land that Lot once thought good and fertile (Genesis 13:10) is now devastated in a mighty rain of sulphur and fire (Genesis 19:24-25). Lot escapes with his daughters but his wife looks back toward the exploding city and is turned into a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26). Had Lot taken adequate measures to protect his wife, rather than lingering in Sodom, she would have been a greater distance from the city and beyond danger of harm.

Abraham, early on the morning after Sodom is destroyed, returns to the place of his extended conversation with Yhwh (Genesis 19:27). Having failed to explicitly tell Yhwh and the other messengers that Lot was at risk in the city, he now sees that Sodom, Gomorrah and all the plain are destroyed. While the narrator briefly notes that Lot is saved because “God remembered Abraham” (Genesis 19:29), the patriarch himself did not specifically evoke divine favour on Lot’s behalf, check on the safety of Lot’s family or encourage Lot to act responsibly.\textsuperscript{118} Paul Tonson argues that the reference to Lot being saved because of Abraham diminishes the quality of divine mercy, making Lot’s deliverance dependent on Abraham’s intercession and portraying Lot as not worthy of mercy for his own sake.\textsuperscript{119} It remains possible however that God’s remembrance of Abraham demonstrates generosity of divine mercy, honouring Abraham’s attempt to call the deity to justice in spite of his failure to seek specific assurances on behalf of Lot’s family and Lot’s own lack of demonstrated righteousness. Contemporary abuse survivors can take hope that intercession can make a difference.

\textsuperscript{117} Speiser, \textit{Genesis}, 143; Westermann, \textit{Genesis 12-36}, 303.

\textsuperscript{118} Steinmetz, \textit{From Father to Son}, 68-69.

\textsuperscript{119} Tonson, “Mercy Without Covenant,” 95-96.
Lot’s daughters must believe that the world, as they know it, is totally destroyed. Their future husbands are now presumably dead. Lot, after fleeing to Zoar, where it seems likely that some other people still live, then further isolates his daughters by moving them into an impoverished existence in a cave. Lot makes no effort to locate Abraham or seek protection from extended family. The daughters presumably fear they have no hope of marriage and children. They are described as getting their father drunk so that they can incestuously conceive by him (Genesis 19:30-38). The daughters’ action could be interpreted as turning the tables on the father who has persistently neglected their welfare. It is possible that their action is a bid to “re-author” their desperate circumstances by claiming autonomy and securing their futures through pregnancy. They claim the right to name their children and go down in history as mothers of two people-groups – the Ammonites and the Moabites (Genesis 19:34-38).

Alternatively, this story could be yet another “blame the victim” incest story. Guarding against such a possibility Rashkow reads “against the grain”, arguing that Lot, who previously exerted sexual ownership over his daughters by offering them to the men of Sodom, now in an inebriated state penetrates them himself whilst claiming no knowledge of events. Whatever the explanation for events in Lot’s cave, his daughters would never have been subject to such abuse and desperation if Abraham had not disobeyed Yhwh by removing Lot from Haran (Genesis 12:1) and then increased the vulnerability of Lot’s family through separation (Genesis 14:8-9). Nor would the daughters have been in such a situation if Abraham had shown some interest in their welfare on hearing that Sodom was at risk of destruction. They are also victims of Lot’s failure to place...

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120 Rashkow, “Daddy-dearest,” 103; Speiser, Genesis, 145; Steinmetz, From Father to Son, 69; Steinberg, Kinship and Marriage, 72.
122 For example see Brett, Genesis, 68-69; Steinberg, Kinship and Marriage, 72-73.
123 For example Paul Tonson argues that “Lot is the victim of his daughters’ strategy, and his intoxication to the point that he knew nothing excuses him from culpability.” Tonson, “Mercy Without Covenant,” 109.
124 Rashkow, “Daddy-dearest,” 105-106. Melissa Jackson points out that while Leviticus chapters 18 and 20 forbid various forms of incest, there is no specific condemnation of sexual contact between a man and his daughters. She states that this gap in biblical incest laws might emerge as a result of father/unnamed daughter incest not being considered a violation of sexual ownership. Melissa Jackson, “Lot’s Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives of Feminist Theology,” JSOT 98 (2002): 31, 41.
their welfare before his own interests in Sodom. They would never have been driven to the desperation of incest if Lot had more responsibly sought family support rather than obsessively isolating them in a cave. Contemporary survivors can claim the opportunity to “re-author” the stories of Lot’s daughters by considering how their fates might have been different, if only Abraham and Lot had acted differently.

Sarah is Abandoned Again

In Genesis 20, Abraham once again attempts to abandon Sarah by repeating his wife-sister scam, even though they have both been assured that an heir is still to come through her body (Genesis 17:15-21; 18:9-12). Abraham becomes an alien resident. His conduct again creates expectations that Sarah is available for marriage and King Abimelech of Gerar takes possession of her. The narrator humorously emphasises that Abraham is now about 100 years old and Sarah 90 (Genesis 17:17; 18:12-13).

No reason is given for Abraham’s presence in Gerar, unlike his earlier trip to Egypt that was motivated by famine. The narrator creates suspicion by giving no details of Abraham’s plan and motives. Hence it is possible that Abraham might again be hopeful of making a tidy profit through unethical treatment of his wife. He might also be motivated by a desire to protect Ishmael’s rights. If Sarah is already pregnant when Abraham abandons her into Abimelech’s harem, he is guilty of dumping both mother and child. If she is not pregnant, Abraham compromises the paternity of her promised child.

This time, when Sarah is abandoned, there is no reference to her beauty. Abimelech, seemingly oblivious to her age or perhaps influenced by potential for political alliance with Abraham, takes possession of her. God then reveals to Abimelech that Sarah is married (Genesis 20:1-4). It is ambiguous whether Abimelech actually has sexual relations with Sarah. The narrator states that Abimelech “took Sarah” (Genesis 20:2) and then God (Elohim) says to

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125 Jackson, “Lot’s Daughters and Tamar,” 34.
126 Steinberg, Kinship and Marriage, 76; Steinmetz, From Father to Son, 65-66.
128 Kidner, Genesis, 116-117.
Abimelech in a dream: “You are about to die because of the woman that you have taken” (Genesis 20:3). This statement, resonating with Israelite law that men who commit adultery are also liable to the death penalty (Deuteronomy 22:22), suggests that Abimelech has had intercourse with Sarah.129 Elohim however then creates ambiguity by claiming to Abimelech: “I did not let you touch her” (Genesis 20:6).130 The deity instructs Abimelech to return Sarah to Abraham because “he is a prophet and he will pray for you and you shall live” (Genesis 21:7). Abraham, although presenting as a flawed character, has demonstrated some capacity to impact on future events through his attempts to call God to justice (Genesis 17:18-20; 18:23-33; 19:29). Elohim therefore provides Abimelech with an opportunity to “re-author” his circumstances and thus avoid death. The deity however fails to directly address the injustice to Sarah, particularly the risk to her reputation in light of her predicted pregnancy.

Abimelech, in justifying himself before God, claims that he acted with integrity after Abraham told him that Sarah was his sister, and Sarah herself identified Abraham as her brother (Genesis 20:5). Sarah knows that she will conceive and bear a son,131 but does not obviously protest against about being handed over to Abimelech, even though she has previously experienced similar exploitation. Her claim, that Abraham is her brother, might be inspired by fear. Perhaps the reality of abandonment strips her of resources to resist. Or alternatively, her claim might indicate complicity in her own abuse. Her admission raises the possibility that she is aware that a repeat of the wife-sister ruse could be financially beneficial. However, it is a high risk strategy if Sarah knowingly cooperates with Abraham. She has no guarantee that she will be returned to him or granted a share of any wealth that is generated.

Abimelech, like Pharaoh, on realising that Sarah is married, shows respect for Abraham and Sarah’s union. He rebukes Abraham saying: “You have done things to me that ought not to be done. … What were you thinking of, that you did this

129 Davidson, Genesis 12-50, 81.
thing?” (Genesis 20:9, 10). Abraham responds: “I did it because I thought, There was no fear of God (Elohim) at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife” (Genesis 20:11). Abraham’s excuses are already rendered invalid because God has worked to protect Sarah from abandonment by appearing to Abimelech in a dream. So, there obviously is fear of God in this place. There has never been any suggestion that Abraham’s life is at risk in Gerar. Abraham then offers information that he did not previously offer to Pharaoh:

Besides she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And when God [Elohim] caused me to wander from my father’s house, I said to her “This is the kindness you must do to me; at every place to which we come, say of me, ‘He is my brother’” (Genesis 20:12-13).

Abraham’s confession hints at a standing arrangement with Sarah to identify him “at every place” as her brother. This could indicate that, ever since he left Haran, Abraham has repeatedly tried to abandon his barren wife and is lining his pockets by claiming multiple bride-prices as her brother or compensation as her aggrieved husband. Whereas Pharaoh, in Genesis 12:16, gave goods to Abraham in a manner similar to paying a bride-price, Abimelech hands over goods as if he is offering compensation to an aggrieved husband, even though he does not specifically confess to having had sex with Sarah and Abraham’s behaviour proves him undeserving of compensation. Abimelech gives Abraham sheep and oxen, male and female slaves and land access (Genesis 20:14-15). He speaks directly to Sarah, telling her that he has given Abraham a thousand pieces of silver to exonerate her so that she might be completely vindicated (Genesis 20:16). The enormity of this gift, on top of the compensation already paid to Abraham, fuels suspicion that Abimelech is aware that Sarah is pregnant and is offering resources in lieu of inheritance to cover the possibility that he is the child’s father. This suspicion deepens when Abimelech, instead of shaming Abraham, grants him land access: “My land is before you, settle where it pleases you” (Genesis 20:15).

Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 325-326.

Driver, The Book of Genesis, 208; Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 327; Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story, 43.

Abimelech continues to see a link between the actions of Abraham and the welfare of his own offspring after Isaac is born. In Genesis 21:23, Abimelech seeks a commitment from Abraham: “swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity”. These words suggest that Abimelech knows that Abraham has banished Ishmael to the wilderness and wants assurance that he will not similarly harm Isaac.
In a strange narrative twist, the sneaking possibility that Abimelech has impregnated Sarah is then challenged by a claim that Yhwh “had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife” (Genesis 20:18). There is an implication that, even if Abimelech has had sexual relations with Sarah, Yhwh took the precaution of closing all wombs within the household, making conception from his sperm impossible. Abimelech’s gifts and this closure of wombs would, however, be unnecessary if Abimelech had not touched Sarah. The strength of the defence suggests an attempt to whitewash the unthinkable.

Abraham, in response to Abimelech’s lavish gift, prays and restores fertility to the foreign king’s household (Genesis 20:17). Ambiguity, however, remains. Abraham increases personal wealth through a deceitful ruse that knowingly risks paternity of a promised heir. The subtle hint that Abraham has long ceased sexual relations with Sarah (Genesis 18:12) and his vested interest in ensuring Ishmael’s future (Genesis 17:18, 23), favours Abimelech as Isaac’s father. Notably, while there is a direct admission that Abram “went in to” Hagar in Genesis 16:4, there is nothing to say that he actually “went in to” Sarah. Rulan-Miller emphasises this when she says:

> The Bible explicitly states that Sarah’s impregnation was accomplished by Yahweh, not Abraham: “And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived” (Genesis 21:1-2).\(^{135}\)

Perhaps the laughter that surrounds Isaac’s conception and birth (Genesis 17:17; 18:12-13; 21:6-7) is generated by the intimate knowledge that Abraham and Sarah have ceased sexual relations.

**Sarah Gives Birth**

The news that Sarah is indeed pregnant (Genesis 21:2) immediately follows on from the narrator’s claim that Yhwh closed the wombs of the women in Abimelech’s house “because of Sarah” (Genesis 20:18-21:2). The announcement that Sarah bears Abraham a son therefore continues to be coloured by Abraham’s abandonment of her into Abimelech’s harem. Abraham accepts Isaac as a son by

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\(^{135}\) Rulan-Miller, “Hagar,” 74.
naming him and circumcising him into the covenantal community (Genesis 21:4). Sarah laughs at the idea that she is a mother, and others in her community laugh as well (Genesis 21:6). If part of the joke is that Sarah suspects or knows that Abimelech is Isaac’s father, she places responsibility only upon Abraham who attempted to abandon her: “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet, I have born him a son in his old age” (Genesis 21:7).  

Abraham hosts a feast on the day when Isaac is weaned. Sarah uses the occasion to express anxiety that Ishmael should not inherit along with Isaac. Her words reveal that she knows Ishmael is a rightful heir. His entitlement raises concerns about Isaac’s future and her security. Sarah’s unsuccessful bid to be “built-up” through Hagar is now confirmed as she worries that, in the event of Abraham’s death, Ishmael will inherit as firstborn son and she is likely to be denied resources in favour of Hagar. There is no doubt that Abraham is Ishmael’s father (Genesis 16:4) but Sarah’s time in Abimelech’s harem casts doubt on Isaac’s paternity. Abraham is privy to the covenants of Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 but Sarah is most likely still unaware of Yhwh’s commitment to bless her and provide for Isaac’s future.

**Hagar and Ishmael are Banished**

The narrator describes Sarah, at the weaning festivities, spotting Ishmael at play with Isaac. The narrator identifies Ishmael as “the son of Hagar the Egyptian” (Genesis 21:9), indicating that Sarah is not Ishmael’s official guardian and that Hagar has quite possibly assumed status as Abraham’s second wife. Sarah finds

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136 While arguing that Genesis 20:4 and 6 leave little doubt that Abraham is in fact Isaac’s father, Megan Warner concedes that the Genesis 17 covenant is more ambiguous. It remains unclear whether the child promised through Sarah’s body will be born for or to Abraham (וָּיֶלֶךְ). Warner, “Genesis 20-22,” 22.

137 Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 86.


139 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 27.

140 Genesis 21:9 has been variously interpreted as Ishmael “playing with” or “mocking” Isaac. Nina Rulan-Miller raises the possibility that Sarah accuses Ishmael of masturbatory play or sexual interference with Isaac. Rulan-Miller, “Hagar,” 81.

it necessary, when speaking to Abraham, to denigrate Hagar by describing her as a "slave." She does not claim personal power over Hagar but instructs Abraham to take action: "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac" (Genesis 21:10). Sarah, fixated on family wealth distribution, ruthlessly denigrates Hagar's status in relation to her own. This time, Sarah's insistence distresses Abraham "on account of his son" (Genesis 21:11). Abraham, however, gives in when God seemingly supports Sarah:

But God [Elohim] said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring will be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring” (Genesis 21:12-13).

Elohim, in emphasising Hagar’s status as a “slave woman”, seemingly supports Sarah but significantly attributes ownership of Hagar to Abraham. Sarah’s authority comes only as a result of Isaac’s position in relation to covenant but any suggestion of exclusivity is subverted. Ishmael, although he will be cast out as Sarah demands, has been circumcised. Circumcision is the sign of covenant (Genesis 17:9-14) with banishment reserved for those who refused this mark: “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:14). Despite this, Ishmael is cast out.

There is legal provision that Sarah, if she is dissatisfied with Hagar, can grant her freedom but not sell her (Deuteronomy 21:10-14). It is, however, unlikely that Sarah has any right to insist on Ishmael’s disinheritance. The biblical material makes it clear that Ishmael is recognised as Abraham’s legitimate son (Genesis 16:15; 17:23-26; 21:11) and Sarah’s commitment to being “built up” through Hagar in Genesis 16:2 would presumably have given Ishmael a degree of legal

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142 Davidson, Genesis 12-50, 86.
144 Fischer, “Go and Suffer,” 80-81.
standing. Ishmael is acknowledged as Abraham’s son when burying him (Genesis 25:9) and Ishmael’s own genealogy states that he is a son of Abraham (Genesis 25:12-18). Deuteronomistic law suggests that, rather than being at risk of disinheritation, Ishmael should be entitled to a share twice the size of Isaac (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

God’s ethics are seemingly compromised through the support of Sarah’s bid to banish Hagar and disinherit Ishmael. Abraham, who pleaded on behalf of Ishmael in Genesis 17:18-20 and questioned Yhwh’s justice in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, now does nothing obvious to challenge divine involvement in the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. On the day of Hagar and Ishmael’s banishment, he rises early in the morning and gives Hagar some bread and water, before sending her out, with Ishmael, to wander in the wilderness of Beer-sheba (Genesis 21:14). Abraham makes no obvious offer of resources to support Hagar and Ishmael’s future. This lack of obvious financial support is particularly pointed, given that Abraham accumulated a good proportion of his wealth in Hagar’s homeland, Egypt, and also in contrast with Abimelech’s lavish gift to vindicate Sarah. Abraham’s meagre allocation to Hagar and Ishmael makes it appear that he is sending them into the wilderness to die.

Hagar, when her small quantity of water is gone, believes that Ishmael will die. She casts him under a bush and moves “about the distance of a bowshot” away (Genesis 21:16). She lifts up her voice and cries: “Do not let me look on the death of the child” (Genesis 21:16). On the surface of the story, it seems that Abraham allows Ishmael to be sacrificed to Sarah’s economic insecurity. I will however argue, later in this chapter, that there are hints within the text to suggest that Abraham helps Hagar and Ishmael by secretly digging a well for them in the

147 Nikaido, “Hagar and Ishmael,” 224; Fischer, “Go and Suffer,” 80.
149 Brett, *Genesis*, 74; Fischer, “Go and Suffer,” 80-81.
wilderness.\textsuperscript{150} The text also leaves open the possibility that a portion of land promised under the more inclusive Genesis 15 covenant remains part of the divine blessing accorded to Ishmael. Such disguised methods of resistance are typically used by marginalised people when it is not safe or wise for them to openly protest against injustice.\textsuperscript{151}

\textit{Hagar Learns to Look after Herself}

When Hagar cries out in the wilderness, believing that Ishmael is about to die, God does not respond directly to her but rather to \textit{his} cry:

\begin{quote}
And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven. “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” (Genesis 21:17-18).
\end{quote}

There is no direct comfort for Hagar, but neither is there any identification of her as a slave.\textsuperscript{152} Elohim speaks to her through a messenger without acknowledging that she suffers along with Ishmael. The focus is on the elimination of Ishmael’s pain and promises for \textit{his} future.\textsuperscript{153} God opens Hagar’s eyes and she sees a well. This is the well that I argue Abraham secretly digs for Hagar. In contrast to the biblical text, which only hints that human intervention enables the survival of Hagar and Ishmael, post-biblical and Islamic sources give more details. In Islamic tradition, Abraham and Ishmael are covenanted to make a Holy House at Mecca and God gives territory for this to happen. Although Hagar’s name is not specifically mentioned in the Koran, Abraham prays for the family he places in the desert near the Holy House at Mecca. He prays that nearby people will treat them kindly and that the deity will “bestow on them all sorts of fruits” (the Koran 2 and 14).\textsuperscript{154} Contemporary survivors can use these extra-biblical sources to

\textsuperscript{150} I develop this argument from an obscure conversation between Abraham and Abimelech in Genesis 21:22-34. Full details are set out in the section of this chapter entitled “Abraham Attempts to Sacrifice Isaac.”


\textsuperscript{152} Jeansonne, \textit{The Women of Genesis}, 50.

\textsuperscript{153} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 26-27; Rulan-Miller, “Hagar,” 78.

\textsuperscript{154} Similarly Josephus in \textit{The Antiquities of the Jews} 1.12.3 says that shepherds assist Hagar in the wilderness.

In Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis, Abraham plants an orchard at Beersheba. He gives away food to passersby and lives in the region for many years. See also Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis
recover traditions and options for liberation that are absent from the dominant biblical tradition.\textsuperscript{155}

Hagar, during her first wilderness experience, acquires power by implying that she sees God, even though God does not grant her liberation. During her second wilderness experience, Hagar sees a source of sustenance and moves to action: “She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink” (Genesis 21:19).\textsuperscript{156} This time, Hagar receives no direct assurance of progeny as God focuses on Ishmael:

\begin{verbatim}
God [Elohim] was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, he became an expert with the bow (Genesis 21:20).
\end{verbatim}

Ishmael is protected by the divine presence, supporting the notion that the blessing he receives through Genesis 15 is never actually withdrawn. Meanwhile, Hagar learns to act in her own interests:\textsuperscript{157}

\begin{verbatim}
He [Ishmael] lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt (Genesis 21:21).
\end{verbatim}

Hagar maintains autonomy and does not bow to slavery.\textsuperscript{158} She either returns to Egypt to negotiate a wife for Ishmael, or uses networks within Canaan and her newly formed wilderness community. In obtaining an Egyptian wife for Ishmael, Hagar ensures family continuity, caters for her own cultural needs and preserves her ethnic heritage.\textsuperscript{159} Although we hear nothing more about Hagar after she chooses a wife for Ishmael, her status as matriarch is reinforced in Genesis 25:12-18 where she is listed in a genealogy that documents Ishmael’s 12 sons, fulfilling

\begin{verbatim}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{155} Riffat Hassan argues that Hagar emerges in Islamic traditions as a matriarch “of exceptional faith, love, fortitude, resolution and strength of character.” She says that Islamic tradition remembers how Hagar led the way in the establishment of a new civilisation. Hassan, “Islamic Hagar,” 154-155.

\textsuperscript{156} Although God is given credit for opening Hagar’s eyes, transformation comes through Hagar’s own action. This reading, in taking seriously the possibility that Abraham secretly digs a well for Hagar and Ishmael, disputes that the well mysteriously appears through divine intervention. In contrast, however, Dozeman classifies the appearance of the well as a “divine rescue.” Dozeman, “The Wilderness,” 28. See also Russell, “Children of Struggle,” 194-195.

\textsuperscript{157} Jeansonne, \textit{The Women of Genesis}, 51-52; Rulan-Miller, “Hagar,” 76; Williams, \textit{Sisters in the Wilderness}, 32.


the promise that she will have a multitude of descendants. Ishmael’s destiny is here paralleled to that of Jacob, Isaac’s younger son, who also has 12 sons and at least one daughter. Hagar, by claiming status as a matriarch and resisting slavery, survives without being absorbed into Israelite society.

**Abraham Attempts to Sacrifice Isaac**

Sarah’s role in banishing Hagar and Ishmael does little to resolve her problems. An obscure conversation between Abimelech and Abraham hints that Abraham secretly digs a well at Beer-sheba but Abimelech’s servants seize it (Genesis 21:25). The fact that it is Abimelech’s servants who take this action suggests that Abraham could be supporting Hagar and Ishmael on land owned by Abimelech. Abraham gives Abimelech seven ewe lambs as a token that he dug the well himself (Genesis 21:25-30). It is unclear whether Abimelech is claiming to have no knowledge of the well’s existence or whether he does not know that his servants have seized it. He says to Abraham: “I do not know who has done this; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today” (Genesis: 21:26).

Abraham’s desire to clarify that he dug the well himself comes in response to Abimelech requesting that Abraham make an oath to treat Abimelech and his offspring fairly (Genesis 21:22-24). It may be that Abimelech, knowing that Abraham has banished Ishmael to the wilderness, seeks assurance that nothing similar will happen to Isaac whom he might suspect is his own son. As Abimelech gave Abraham land access as part of a gift to exonerate Sarah (Genesis 20:15), Abraham’s use of the land per se cannot be at issue. Abimelech however might question Abraham’s use of the land to support Hagar and Ishmael, rather than for Isaac’s benefit. Abraham, in revealing that he dug the well himself, might be trying to deflect implied criticism that he has treated Ishmael harshly by emphasising that, although it was previously not obvious, he in fact did provide for the branch of his family now living in the wilderness.

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160 Genesis 37:35 and 46:15 indicate that Jacob had several daughters; but only one, Dinah, is named in biblical text (Genesis 30:21; 34:1-31; 46:15). Ishmael’s daughter, Mahalath, marries Esau in Genesis 28:9.

161 Megan Warner argues that Abimelech is claiming no knowledge of the well prior to Abraham’s complaint. Warner notes that the only other time a well is referred to in this narrative is when Ishmael and Hagar are provided with sustenance but she fails to consider the implications of Abraham claiming to dig the well himself. Warner, “Genesis 20-22:19,” 24.
In Genesis 21:24, Abraham and Abimelech swear an oath. Presumably Abraham swears to treat Abimelech’s offspring fairly and Abimelech swears to acknowledge Abraham as the one who dug the well. If Isaac is however Abimelech’s natural son, then Abraham proceeds to break this oath with his attempted sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Unfortunately, Abraham makes no promise to Sarah that he will treat her offspring fairly. He attempts to sacrifice Isaac without even hinting his intention to her. However, the attempted sacrifice of Isaac might be seen as an act of faith. If Isaac is a male child, his potential role as a future leader is threatened by his potential death. If Isaac is a female child, her potential role as a future leader is threatened by her potential death. The legitimacy of Abraham’s attempt to sacrifice Isaac can be contested through recourse to a combination of historical-critical and literary methods. Child sacrifice was obviously practiced in ancient Israel up until the sixth century BCE but there is contention regarding the extent to which Yhwh found this practice acceptable, and the extent to which its occurrence resulted from religious syncretism. Jewish scholar Jon D. Levenson argues that there was an ancient tradition of child sacrifice in which practitioners “thought that Yhwh did indeed ordain the rite”. He contends that child sacrifice practices, strongly condemned by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, were more likely the result of this older Yhwh tradition continuing into late monarchical and early exilic times, rather than simply being the result of popularist and pagan influences.

Leviticus 18:21 and 20:2, while categorically forbidding the sacrifice of children to the foreign god Molech on the grounds of idolatry (placing other gods before

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162 Carol Delaney argues that Abraham would have had a “monogenetic” world-view, a belief that a male seed encapsulated the future child as a whole and the female body only nurtured its growth until birth. Delaney argues that Abraham would therefore see no reason to consult Sarah about the sacrifice of Isaac because he would see the child as totally “his”. Carol Delaney, “Abraham and the Seeds of Patriarchy,” in Genesis: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series), ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 136-147.

In contrast, I raise the possibility that Abraham and Sarah’s sexual relationship has ceased and Abraham knows it is impossible for Isaac to be his son. For commentators critical of Abraham’s lack of consultation with Sarah see Nikaido, “Hagar and Ishmael,” 224; Trible, “Ominous Beginnings,” 50; Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story, 47.


164 Levenson, The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, 5-7.
Yhwh), do not explicitly state that Yhwh rejects child sacrifice per se.\textsuperscript{165} Similarly, Jeremiah 19:3-6 strongly condemns children being sacrificed to Baal:

\[\ldots \text{they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent, and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind} (Jeremiah 19:5).\]

Levenson argues that it is obvious that Yhwh would not command or decree that the Israelites sacrifice to Baal; and that Jeremiah must therefore be reworking an older tradition in a way disassociates Yhwh with child sacrifice.\textsuperscript{166} The idea that prophets transformed an older tradition, in which people believed that Yhwh actually accepted child sacrifice, into one which distances Yhwh from such an horrific practice is supported in the writings of eighth century Micah. The verse Micah 6:8 is often quoted in contemporary contexts as a mandate for Christian commitment to stand in solidarity against injustice:

\[\text{He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?}\]

Micah 6:8, even when isolated from its literary context and quoted as a single verse, heralds an enormously powerful message. The message of what the LORD requires is however even more powerful when juxtaposed against the preceeding verse which is a question regarding what the LORD does \textit{not} require and that is child sacrifice:

\[\text{Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Micah 6:7).}\]

While there is little textual and archaeological evidence to support the idea that there was ever a time when all firstborn Israelite male children were actually sacrificed,\textsuperscript{167} prophetic attempts to distance Yhwh from such acts would not have been necessary without the assumption that some people at least thought that Yhwh accepted such sacrifice. Exodus 22:29-30 points to such a tradition:

\[\text{You shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. \textit{The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me.} You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.}\]

\textsuperscript{165} See also 2 Kings 23:10.

\textsuperscript{166} Levenson, \textit{The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son}, 4-6.

\textsuperscript{167} Levenson, \textit{The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son}, 8, 15.
In a similar way Exodus 34:19 emphasises that “All that first opens the womb is mine” but this is then quickly qualified in the next verse with the statement: “All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem” (Exodus 34:20). A redemption stipulation would only be necessary if an older tradition viewed child sacrifice as acceptable. The transformation of child sacrifice from an acceptable option into a redemption practice also raises the possibility that male circumcision on the eighth day of life, the instruction given to Abraham in Genesis 17:12 as the sign of covenant, might at some time have functioned as the means of redeeming males otherwise at risk of being sacrificed on their eighth day (according to Exodus 34:30). The story of Moses’ wife, Zipporah, circumcising her son in Exodus 4:24-26 is obscure but lends some weight to circumcision functioning as the means of redeeming sons from sacrifice. The possibility that circumcision at some stage functioned as the means of redeeming sons from sacrifice might also be validated by the Exodus 12:48 stipulation that men who are not circumcised cannot celebrate the Passover, the annual ordinance in which the paschal lamb takes the place of firstborn Israelite males otherwise at risk of death prior to their departure from Egypt.

Jon L. Berquist argues, in relation to Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of Isaac, that it seems ludicrous that God would cover Isaac, before his birth, with the Genesis 17 covenant of land and progeny, only to request his death before he grows to adulthood. This is particularly pertinent if the story’s early audience knew that circumcision functioned as a means of redeeming sons from sacrifice, as well as a sign of covenant. Isaac is circumcised in Genesis 21:4. Therefore it is possible

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169 Zipporah’s action is juxtaposed against a threat by Yhwh to kill all Egyptian firstborn sons (Exodus 4:23) and a strange episode in which it is unclear whether Yhwh tries to kill Moses or his son (Exodus 4:24). Zipporah diverts Yhwh’s attack by taking a flint and cutting off her son’s foreskin. Then, she “made [it] touch his feet” (לָמָת עַל לְוָדֵי בָהֵן). The Hebrew is obscure and it is unclear whether “his feet” refers to Moses or to the son; and whether Zipporah does the “touching” with the flint or with her son’s foreskin. However, as the word “feet” can function as a euphemism for male genitals, it is possible that Zipporah touches Moses’ penis with the flint after first circumcising her son. The narrative leaves open the possibility that Moses, like his son, is not circumcised and that Yhwh’s attack is an attempt to claim one, if not both, of them.

170 Ezekiel 20:21-26 strangely claims that Yhwh did demand the sacrifice of firstborn male children but as a humiliating punishment for the Israelites’ rejection of his ordinances during their time in the wilderness. Joshua 5:2-9 acknowledges that the Israelites did not practice circumcision in the wilderness.

that Abraham and the narrator are both using pious devotion to God as a guise for a more sinister agenda. The unmasking of ulterior motives and abusive ideologies at this point in the narrative is clearly assisted by a pluralistic interpretive approach which combines both historical (behind the text) and literary (in the text) methods.\footnote{West, Contextual Bible Study, 29-49; Brett, “Reading the Bible,” 48-55.}

The narrator claims that Elohim is testing Abraham with the instruction: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (Genesis 22:2). These instructions are not only abusive but dishonest. Isaac is not Abraham’s only son.\footnote{In Islamic tradition, Ishmael is believed to be the “only son” who Abraham attempts to sacrifice because in the Koran this event occurs prior to the promise of Isaac’s birth. The Koran 37: “Those Who Rank Themselves.”}

Ishmael is still out in the wilderness and he is the only son that Abraham can be absolutely sure is from his own seed.\footnote{Megan Warner, while arguing that the biblical text makes it clear that Sarah and Abimelech did not have sexual relations, says that neither of them actually make this clear to Abraham who could be left questioning the paternity of Isaac. Warner, “Genesis 20-22,” 19, 22.} Nor is there evidence that Abraham necessarily loves Isaac.\footnote{I however argue that the narrator’s report, in Genesis 20:6, that God prevented Abimelech from touching Sarah, is contested by the surrounding narrative. If Abraham has not had sexual relations with Sarah, he would definitely know that he is not Isaac’s father. Resentment that Ishmael is outcast while Isaac, of suspect paternity, remains the child of promise could provide a motive for Abraham’s bid to kill Isaac.}

In contrast to when Ishmael was banished (Genesis 20:11) there is nothing to suggest that Abraham is at all distressed on behalf of Isaac. He passively surrenders to killing him.\footnote{Although commentators sometimes assume that Abraham loved Isaac and is distressed by the call to sacrifice him, this is not actually supported in the text. Naomi Steinberg is among those who sentimentalise the relationship between Abraham and Isaac. She says: “the narrative bears witness to the emotion of love. Abraham loves Isaac.” Steinberg, Kinship and Marriage, 82. See also Kinder, Genesis, 142-143; von Rad, Genesis, 240-241. For alternative perspectives see Warner, “Genesis 20-22:19,” 16-17; Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 92.}

In contrast to when Ishmael was banished (Genesis 20:11) there is nothing to suggest that Abraham is at all distressed on behalf of Isaac. He passively surrenders to killing him.\footnote{Turner, Announcements of Plot, 89; Nikaido, “Hagar and Ishmael,” 224; Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story, 46.}

Abraham, in his attempt to kill Isaac, is dishonest with Isaac and the two servants travelling with them.\footnote{In Josephus’ The Antiquities of the Jews 1.13.3-4, Abraham explains to Isaac in a lengthy speech that he is going to sacrifice him and Isaac goes immediately to the altar to be sacrificed.} Abraham travels for three days before leaving his donkey with his servants while he and Isaac continue up a mountain. He says to the servants: “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there, we will
worship, and then we will come back to you” (Genesis 21:5). Abraham has no intention of returning to the servants with Isaac. At this point, Abraham refers to Isaac as בְּנוֹ (more appropriately translated as “the youth” or “the young man”), rather than referring to him as בֵּן (my son). Abraham is once again dishonest when Isaac, carrying wood for his own pyre, asks: “Father… where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (Genesis 22:7). Abraham says that Elohim “himself will provide the lamb, for a burnt offering, my son” (Genesis 22:8). Does Abraham here misleadingly refer to Isaac as בֵּן (my son) while trying to create false expectations about the sacrifice? While Isaac, after being bound to the altar, is granted a last minute reprieve, there is nothing to indicate that Abraham, when walking up the mountain, is actually anticipating this alternative course of action. Abraham engineers the near sacrifice through deceit and then throws responsibility onto God by stating that Elohim “himself will provide” (Genesis 22:8).

The deity, through a messenger (נֵבֶן), then calls a halt to the execution and a stray ram is provided (Genesis 22:11-13). The deity however fails to specifically denounce child sacrifice or categorically state that, despite opinions to the contrary, this is a practice that God does not require. Contemporary survivors can, however, claim this responsibility to speak out. One of the most horrifying aspects of family violence is that economic, political and religious forces can drive people to the point of killing or “sacrificing” their own children and other vulnerable people close to them. The time has come for survivors to challenge this dominant rhetoric.

“Nasty-nice” imagery once again emerges as Abraham’s attempt to kill Isaac is softened by words of blessing delivered by a divine messenger:

Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice (Genesis 22:16-18).

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178 Turner, Announcements of Plot, 90.
179 Sarna, Understanding Genesis, 159.
180 See Cooper, “Some Place to Cry,” 186, 189.
This blessing echoes imagery in the Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 covenants. The blessing of Yhwh upon Abraham is therefore not dependent on his attempted sacrifice of Isaac. Promises of progeny and blessing were in place before the birth of Ishmael. They were confirmed with animal ritual in Genesis 15 and the circumcision of all males in Abraham’s household in Genesis 17. The only need for reiteration in Genesis 22 is that risk has been persistently generated through abusive acts such as the repeated abandonment of Sarah, the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael and the attempted sacrifice of Isaac.

**Beer-sheba: A Place of Hope for Both Ishmael and Isaac**

Abraham, after attempting to sacrifice Isaac, returns to Beer-sheba and lives there (Genesis 22:19). In doing this, he takes Isaac to the place where Ishmael and Hagar live after being banished from the patriarchal home. If Abraham dug a well at Beer-sheba for Hagar and Ishmael, he now takes Isaac, who he tried to kill, to the place where he conversely provided life for Ishmael. Abraham appears to be trying to provide Isaac with safety and sustenance. Given the way that blessings and abuse are entwined throughout the Abrahamic cycle, safety can never be taken for granted.\(^{181}\) Abraham’s choice of Beer-sheba seems however to acknowledge the importance of life and blessing for both sons, regardless of the ambiguity surrounding Isaac’s paternity.

When Sarah dies, Abraham buys land so that she can be buried in a cave (Genesis 23:1-20). Sarah dies before Isaac marries and has a chance to produce offspring. It is possible that Sarah never knew that Yhwh blessed her with a promise that “nations” and “kings” would come from her body (Genesis 17:16). It is through Sarah’s death that Abraham becomes a landowner in Canaan. In contrast to the promises of great territory, Abraham dies owning a paddock with a burial cave. He is later buried there with Sarah. The man whose patriarchal drive led him to abuse other men, women and children is finally laid to rest by his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, suggesting that they maintain contact with each other and find ways to respect each other as brothers.

\(^{181}\) The safety of Isaac can only be viewed as temporary. His descendants are still to face the oppression of slavery in Egypt (Genesis 15:13-14; Exodus 1-14).
Future Options: Continuing the Journey with Hagar

Hagar’s story provides contemporary survivors with opportunities to resist the social isolation that is conducive to abuse by emphasising possible community networks within the world of her story, and also the legacy of community for which she is remembered in both Islamic and womanist traditions. She is remembered in Islamic tradition as a matriarch with great pioneering spirit who establishes relationships with wilderness peoples and founds a community near the House of God at Mecca. Womanist readers acknowledge Hagar as the first “sister in the wilderness”. They resist Hagar’s isolation by highlighting parallels between her experience and their own stories of oppression. Hagar and Ishmael’s story can be used to turn the tables on such oppression with its insistence that divine blessing flows beyond ethnic, class and gender boundaries.

Survivors can continue to resist Hagar’s isolation by probing biblical texts and extra-biblical sources to reconstruct her support networks. Abram and Sarai obviously own a number of slaves and it is likely that Hagar has extended family links throughout Egypt, Canaan and Mesopotamia. In finding an Egyptian wife for Ishmael she strengthens links with her Egyptian homeland and heritage.

Hagar’s story provides contemporary survivors with many opportunities to explore how abuse is politically, socially and economically motivated. Survivors, in working to unmask greed and power abuse, can reveal how Hagar’s experiences are part of a patriarchal rush to accumulate wealth, land and children with little regard for vulnerable people. Hagar’s story exemplifies the complex inter-relatedness of cumulative oppression. There is still much work that contemporary survivors can do to explore the relationships between characters and how abuse might be avoided if only some of them had acted differently. Sarah is an economically privileged woman who is abused but she also abuses Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham abuses women within his family but also his male relatives, Lot and Isaac. He contributes to Ishmael’s suffering and takes economic advantage of Pharaoh and Abimelech, both of whom are of higher socio-economic status. Abraham’s character, however, is not totally bad. Although he has a track record of abuse and manipulation, he shows signs of resisting the marginalisation of Ishmael, reallocating resources in favour of Hagar and calling on God to act
justly. Meanwhile Lot is introduced into the story as a vulnerable male who is abused by Abraham but then abuses his daughters and fails to protect his wife from death.

While it is distressing that Abraham and Sarah, as key figures in Israelite religion, both act abusively toward others, it is even more distressing that on occasions God seems to support abusive acts and divine messengers present as ethically compromised. Contemporary survivors can resist the “nasty-nice” proclamations of divine messengers through exerting their power to name and label abuse wherever it occurs, including within religious hierarchies and texts. Survivors of abuse within Australian religious communities will probably not be surprised that it is a divine messenger who instructs Hagar to return to an abusive situation (Genesis 16:9) and also a divine messenger who halts Isaac’s execution but does nothing to confront the systemic evil which contributes to the assault (Genesis 22:10-18). These incidents echo all too well the reported incidents of abuse within Australian religious communities. Hagar however grants tremendous power to contemporary survivors as she claims the power to both “see” and “name” (Genesis 16:13). This is a most powerful resource and survivors can use it to resist their own victimhood by claiming the power to similarly “re-author” their own lives.

Survivors can also resist attempts by characters and the narrator to co-opt God onto the side of abusers by working to show that God’s apparent support for Hagar’s banishment in Genesis 21 and subsequent involvement in the attempted sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 can be contested through reading biblical texts and extra-biblical sources intertextually and by using methods which combine historic and literary techniques. This chapter has demonstrated the potential for survivors to powerfully use such strategies to highlight that there are sacrifices (or abusive practices) that the LORD most certainly does not require. In this way the proposed hermeneutic of abuse utilises Cosgroves’ suggestion that theological considerations be used as a guide for biblical interpretation. Contemporary survivors are encouraged to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture and all they know about God’s nature from other sources, particularly when specific texts quote God as instigating violent abuse (Genesis 22:1).
Abraham’s intercession on behalf of Ishmael in Genesis 17:18-29 and his attempt to call Yhwh to justice in the light of the predicted destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:16-33, provides abuse survivors with options for resisting divinely sanctioned injustice. Like Abraham, they can also call God to justice with confidence that they might impact on divine action and influence future events in more positive directions.

Hagar leaves a powerful legacy of resistance strategies. This includes reacting in ways that deter Sarai from actually claiming maternal rights over Ishmael. Although Sarai treats Hagar like a slave, Hagar subtly resists conforming to this classification. Her most audacious move is to recast the “messenger of Yhwh” (who fails to grant her liberation in Genesis 16:9) as the deity in need of a name! During her second wilderness experience, she refuses to suffer in silence and joins a tradition of biblical women who resist the death of their own offspring with loud lament: “Do not let me look on the death of this child” (Genesis 21:16). Hagar is a woman with attitude. She is a woman of vison and action. She opens her eyes, sees a well and provides Ishmael with life-preserving sustenance (Genesis 21:19). She maintains autonomy and carves out a life for herself without being absorbed into the dominant Israelite society. Options for her future are numerous and life-giving.
Chapter 4

Dinah (Genesis 34)

Throughout large portions of Dinah’s story, she seems isolated from other women. Genesis 34:1 identifies Dinah as the daughter of Leah, but Leah is notably absent when Dinah has her first sexual encounter with an indigenous prince of her local area, named Shechem, and both suffer dire consequences.\(^1\) Details of Leah’s death are not described in the biblical text but Jacob, just prior to his own death, retrospectively reveals that he buried Leah in the cave that Abraham purchased for Sarah’s burial (Genesis 49:31). While Leah might have died prior to Dinah’s meeting with Shechem, it seems strange that, if this were so, the narrator does not mention Leah’s death at the start of Genesis 34, particularly when Leah is alive in the proceeding chapter when Jacob is reunited with Esau (Genesis 33:2).

From elsewhere in Genesis we can extrapolate that other women might influence Dinah’s life. These include Jacob’s other wife, Rachel, and his two secondary wives, Zilpah and Bilhah (Genesis 29-31; 33:1-3; 35:16-26; 46:8-27). While Genesis 34 makes no mention of the whereabouts of these women, the following chapter mentions that Rachel and Bilhah are still active within Jacob’s family at this time. Rachel’s death in childbirth is recorded in Genesis 35:16-21 and Jacob’s eldest son, Reuben, has sexual relations with Bilhah in Genesis 35:22. There is no mention of Zilpah’s death but, as she was a maidservant to Dinah’s mother, Leah, it is reasonable to assume that if she is alive during the events of Genesis 34, she might show interest in Dinah’s welfare. Genesis 37:35 and 46:15 both refer to other unnamed daughters of Jacob. Such textual fragments indicate that, although Dinah is presented as a rather lonely figure who is dominated by her brothers, she must have links with other women.

Anita Diamant, in a popular novel based on the life of Dinah, uses Jacob’s polygamy to create a caring network of mothers for Dinah. In *The Red Tent*, Dinah says:

\(^1\) Brenner, *I Am*, 27.
I had four mothers, each of them scolding, teaching, and cherishing something different about me, giving me different gifts, cursing me with different fears. Leah gave me birth and her splendid arrogance. Rachel showed me where to place the midwife’s bricks and how to fix my hair. Zilpah made me think. Bilhah listened. No two of my mothers seasoned her stew the same way. No two of them spoke to my father in the same tone of voice – nor he to them.2

Athalya Brenner, in work that also incorporates much imagination, rejects Diamant’s attempt to reconstruct a community of women for Dinah by insisting that Dinah “grew up as a motherless child” and that The Red Tent makes Dinah’s life “look so rich in female camaraderie as to perhaps reflect Diamant’s reality or utopia.”3 I however argue that Diamant’s work, although unashamedly fictional, provides a useful reading strategy to draw Dinah out of textual isolation.

Indeed, I would go even further than Diamant in considering the possibility that Dinah not only had female companions within her family of origin but also within her wider local community. In the story world, it is quite possible that Dinah is not the first member of Jacob’s family to have sexual relations with people indigenous to Shechem’s district. Dinah has six full-brothers and four half-brothers who are older than her. According to details given later in Genesis, Dinah’s full-brothers Simeon and Judah both end up having relationships with Canaanite women, and her half-brother Joseph marries the daughter of an Egyptian priest (Genesis 38:2; 41:45; 46:10), but no specific details are given in relation to the sexual experiences or marriages of Dinah’s elder brothers prior to her liaison with Shechem. It would not be unreasonable, given the number and age range of Jacob’s sons, that at least some of them have married, or had sexual relations with, local women. In stepping out to visit to the women of the land (Genesis 34:1), Dinah could therefore be visiting her own sisters-in-law, their families and friends.

3 Athalya Brenner mixes large doses of imagination with biblical scholarship in a book that has female characters, who never actually die in biblical text, coming together to present their own stories as papers at a scholarly conference. For her rejection of Diamant’s attempt to position Dinah in a community of women, see Brenner, I Am, 27.
What if Dinah is not Raped?

Dinah’s story was routinely interpreted as a rape report until the 1980s when scholarly opinion started to differ. The majority of commentators however still regard Dinah as a rape victim. Such an assumption necessarily positions Shechem as a perpetrator. My reading claims that it is potentially liberating for contemporary abuse survivors if the ideas that Dinah is necessarily abused, and that Shechem necessarily violates her, are challenged from the outset. While I acknowledge that attempts to deny and cover up abuse cultivate environments where violence thrives, I also contend that tendencies to falsely label situations as abusive are similarly diminishing. I therefore claim inspiration for liberating alternatives from Bechtel and other commentators who consider the possibility that Dinah is not raped.

Most obviously if contemporary abuse survivors consider the possibility that Dinah is not raped they open up opportunities for the exploration of alternative

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interpretations. They not only have opportunities to “re-author” traditional interpretations of Dinah’s story but also their own contemporary experiences. Such alternatives might include Dinah consenting to Shechem’s sexual advances, the potential for love, mutuality and attraction in their relationship and the possibility that, throughout the history of interpretation, Shechem is falsely accused. The possibility that Dinah is not necessarily raped illuminates the possibility that her brothers are out of line with their disproportionately violent reaction to news that their sister had been intimate with Shechem.7

My reading highlights that, just as the violence of Dinah’s brothers escalates in response to the news that she has been intimate with Shechem, risks remain in contemporary contexts for violence in the name of religion and morality to tragically gain momentum. Harsh social sanctions continue to destroy lives, communities and families in ways that exceed the significance of initial events.8 In some contemporary contexts, consensual sex outside particular social, religious and ethnic boundaries still trigger out-of-proportion, pseudo-religious reactions. Homosexual relationships are particularly vulnerable to such over-reactions.

Sexual contact, even outside of socially approved boundaries, need not necessarily be abusive. I hope that my insistence about this will be healing for people who have been violated and subsequently locked into an expectation that all future relationships will be similarly abusive. When trust is eroded through abuse, there can be a tendency for survivors to universalise personal experiences, coming up with conclusions such as: “All men are bastards!” In claiming that Dinah is not necessarily raped and that Shechem is not necessarily a “bastard”, my reading attributes agency to Dinah by acknowledging that in assertively stepping out to visit the women of the land she demonstrates a certain level of autonomy and control over her own life. I also lay claim to a fair trial for Shechem, insisting that he is more likely to be a victim rather than a perpetrator.

7 William H. Propp emphasises that biblical incidents of rape are not limited to forcible sex with an unwilling partner but also include any incidents of sex between a man and the female ward of non-consenting male guardians. Such acts include marriage by elopement. William H. Propp, “Kinship in 2 Samuel 13,” CBQ 55 (1993): 41.

As Dinah’s story begins she is one who acts, rather than one who is merely acted upon. Her life is tragically diminished, not as a result of her sexual union with Shechem, but rather by her brothers’ outrageously violent reaction. I take particular exception to commentators who can find no liberating options within Genesis 34 beyond an insistence that Dinah is raped. For example, Susanne Scholz argues that commentators who do not support the view that Dinah is raped “mirror a culture that minimizes rape, sympathizes with a rapist and blames victim-survivors.” My reading, far from minimizing rape and other forms of violence, offers a liberating alternative. Sexual encounters that test social boundaries are not necessarily abusive.

While there is a strong tradition in the Hebrew Bible of would-be grooms negotiating with the relatives of a potential wife, typically in the vicinity of a well, my reading also notes traces of an alternative tradition which links the right for a man to “take” a wife from a people-group with whom he has already negotiated a land deal. Fundamental to my reading, which privileges the final form of the text, is an insistence that Dinah’s story in Genesis 34 cannot be separated from slightly earlier verses, Genesis 33:18-20, in which Jacob arrives in the district of Shechem and purchases land from the descendents of Hamor. I argue that Genesis 34 expresses tension between Dinah’s brothers assuming that as her guardians, they will be consulted before any marriage proceeds, and an alternative tradition which links marriage reciprocity with land access. Jacob, by purchasing land and pitching his tent on Shechemite territory, effectively signals his desire to live among the local people and even his willingness for the

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9 Scholz, “Was it Really Rape?,” 195. See also Scholz, “Through Whose Eyes?,” 151; Brenner, I Am, 26-36.
10 Tikva Frymer-Kensky also follows this line of thinking. Frymer-Kensky, “Virginity in the Bible,” 87.
12 See Camp, Wise, Stange and Holy, 284.
Shechemites to consider his daughters as potential marriage partners.15 Dinah, closely following her father’s cues, steps out to visit the women of her area in circumstances where she is likely to be perceived as available for marriage.

Shechem, after having sexual relations with Dinah, offers to marry her but her brothers show no respect for the land agreement that their father has already negotiated between the two people-groups. They respond with deceit and outrageous violence, demanding that all Shechemite men be circumcised before they will agree to Dinah’s marriage to Shechem. They proceed to kill all Shechemite men debilitated by the mass operation, plunder their city, capture all women and children and abduct Dinah back into their possession (Genesis 34:13-30).16 While I reject the idea that Shechem necessarily rapes Dinah, I retain her status as an abuse survivor by arguing that the blood-curdling violence she witnesses at the hands of her brothers is more likely to be a source of devastation, than her sexual contact with Shechem. I also highlight that Shechem, as a male victim, suffers at the hands of Dinah’s brothers, as do the whole Shechemite community.

The significance that I place on the land deal that Jacob negotiates with the Shechemites is not without historical precedent. More than 400 years after Jacob, when Joshua returns the Israelite people to Canaan after their escape from slavery in Egypt, reference is made to this land deal, indicating its cultural significance:

The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of money; it became the inheritance of the descendents of Joseph (Joshua 24:32).

This reference to Jacob’s land deal, while underlining its cultural significance in Israeliite memory also highlights a legal anomaly. For, according to Deuteronomistic law, the Israelites, on their return to Canaan are instructed to


16 Significantly Josephus in The Antiquities of the Jews 1.21.1 omits the circumcision requirement, perhaps in a bid to cover up the brothers’ atrocious misuse of this sacred rite. Jubilees 1-4 also makes no reference to the circumcision ruse but claims that the brothers killed all the men of Shechem because they captured Dinah, when she was a “little girl” of 12 years, and took her to the house of Shechem. The account continues with a long tirade that Israeliite women should not marry uncircumcised men because of what the Shechemites did to Dinah.
keep themselves religiously pure by totally destroying the people of the land, avoiding intermarriage and refusing to make covenants with the local residents (Deuteronomy 7:1-5). In Joshua, however, they hold up Jacob’s agreement with Hamor’s descendents, as a precedent for their claim on this land. There is no reference to Deuteronomistic law, commentary on the legality of Jacob’s agreement with the Shechemites or any acknowledgement of the violence that Jacob’s sons have already committed on this site. Instead, Joshua and the returning Israelites make a covenant at Shechem to serve Yhwh and put away foreign gods (Joshua 24:19-28).

It therefore seems likely that Jacob’s purchase of land at Shechem is actually a peaceful acquisition.\(^\text{17}\) Joshua and the returning Israelites do not mention previous violence at Shechem, because there is no collective memory of this city previously being annihilated by Israelite force. Their only memory is of peaceful land acquisition, curiously suggesting that Dinah is not raped and that the carnage attributed to her brothers is the result of later reconstructions. Tales of Simeon and Levi attacking Shechem seem to have emerged later as a means of retrospectively creating a historical precedent for violent rejection of intermarriage.\(^\text{18}\) However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, when these tales became embedded into Genesis’ final form, the violence of Simeon and Levi is presented as outrageous and beyond all reasonable proportion. This suggests that redactors of the final form might have been resisting ethnocentric violence by exposing it as unrealistic and hypocritical.\(^\text{19}\)

The sexual liaison between Shechem and Dinah remains cloaked in mystery. Readers are kept at a distance and narration detail is minimal. Shechem sees Dinah while she “went out to visit the women of the region” and he then takes her, lays with her and does something that results in family shame (Genesis 34:1-

\(^{17}\) Yamada, “Dealing with Rape,” 155.

\(^{18}\) Such analysis accords with the work of Ita Sheres who argues that politically motivated redactors inserted a rape scene into what was otherwise a story of “innocent love between two young people who were ready to merge culturally, politically, and religiously”. Sheres, *Dinah’s Rebellion*, 89-96. See also Brett, *Genesis*, 4-5; Alexander Rofé, “Defilement of Virgins in Biblical Law and the Case of Dinah (Genesis 34),” *Biblica* 86 (2005): 371.

\(^{19}\) Brett argues that Genesis was edited into its final form in the Persian period and that the redactors were undermining the ethnocentrism found in Ezra and Nehemiah, particularly the concept of “holy seed” and the attack on foreign marriage. Brett, *Genesis*, 5; Brett, “Politics of Identity,” 2-3.
7). While we might assume that Shechem initiates relations with Dinah in some isolated field, it is also possible, given his status as a prince of his region, that the women of the area know that Dinah is to be received by Shechem and that this union is intended to forge a political alliance between two people-groups.²⁰

**Definitions of Rape: Ancient and Modern**

Analysis of Dinah’s story is complicated by the fact that, while experiences consistent with what modern societies would generally accept as rape are described in the Hebrew Bible, there is no specific term “rape” in biblical Hebrew. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the Hebrew verb יָכַף, often translated into modern English as “rape,” is more obviously associated in ancient contexts with illicit acts that violate social boundaries in ways that cause familial shame. Ancient legal codes stress the unacceptability of illicit sexual encounters, such as adultery and incest, which violate existing social obligations.²¹ In contrast, modern definitions of rape stress that sexual violence is a crime against a person.

In the Hebrew Bible, sexual crime is defined in terms of violation of a female as family sexual property.²² Therefore, penalties for illicit sexual contact with a betrothed woman (considered as property promised to her future husband) are more severe than for an encounter with a virgin who is not promised to anyone. Adultery is classified as the most serious crime, because it threatens property rights, destabilises community organisation and violates husbands’ rights to legitimate children.²³ In the Hebrew Bible, women’s complicity in this crime is measured by their seeming lack of resistance. For example, when adultery occurs in situations where cries for help could be heard but there is no evidence of force or struggle, both parties are sentenced to death. The woman is sentenced because she did not protest and the man is sentenced because he violated another man’s

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²⁰ This analysis is in line with Victor H. Matthews who argues that sexual relationships in the Hebrew Bible are not simply private matters but forge social and economic relationships between households. Matthews, “Honor and Shame in Gender-related Legal Situations in the Hebrew Bible,” in Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 97.


²² Streete, The Strange Woman, 31; Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story, 63.

²³ Thistlethwaite, “You May Enjoy the Spoil,” 63-64, 72; Rofé, “Defilement of Virgins,” 269.
sexual property (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). However, when a betrothed woman is attacked in an isolated area, where no one can hear cries for help, allowances are made for the fact that she might have cried out, and so only the perpetrator is sentenced to death (Deuteronomy 22:25-27). While intercourse with an unbetrothed woman does not immediately place her at risk of death, this becomes a possibility if her parents then deceitfully marry her off to another man who becomes aggrieved on discovering that she is not a virgin. The young woman is then liable to be stoned outside her father’s home (Deuteronomy 22:20-21).

In Hebrew Bible terms, sexual contact with an unbetrothed woman is therefore less problematic when marriage is a possibility because this mitigates the possibility that rights of a present or future husband are violated. The Hebrew Bible scenario that most closely matches Dinah’s situation stipulates that a man who has sex with an unbetrothed virgin must pay her father fifty shekels, marry the woman and never divorce her (Deuteronomy 22:28-29; Exodus 22:16-17). The course of action is the same, regardless of whether the woman is seduced or violently attacked because women, within the patriarchal world-view of the Hebrew Bible, with the exception of prostitutes, are typically viewed as the sexual property of husbands, fathers or brothers. They therefore have no right to consent on their own behalf. Of course the risk that a woman could be legally and inescapably bound in marriage to a man who has violently attacked her is abhorrent to postmodern readers. Influenced by our assumptions about women’s rights to agency and autonomy over their own bodies, we are also likely to be offended by Hebrew Bible assumptions that married women are the sexual property of their husbands and that sexual encounters (or violations) should be judged in terms of audible struggle. It is, however, necessary to acknowledge that patriarchal values, which stress male sexual rights over women, rather than the immorality of sexual violence per se, are fundamental to the world-view in which the Dinah material was generated and redacted.

25 Streete, The Strange Woman, 40.
Modern definitions of rape, although subject to legal and cultural ambiguity, generally acknowledge that rape is not primarily motivated by desire for sexual pleasure, or even sexual release, but is essentially an act of violence – an exploitative act which silences the perpetrator’s feelings of inferiority and lack of control by creating the illusion of power, control, dominance and superiority. In the modern world-view, rape therefore essentially involves force and violence, typically causing victims to experience ongoing traumatic psychosocial consequences. In recent years, parallels between the long-term trauma experienced by rape survivors and people who have experienced other forms of captivity and torture, such as domestic violence, sexual slavery, war and imprisonment, have been acknowledged. The level of violence that Dinah experiences at the hands of her own brothers, and also witnesses them inflicting on others, could therefore leave her with devastation consistent with rape trauma.

It is also now recognised that men, as well as women, can be sexually abused and that the impact of such dehumanising violence often follows a similar pattern, whether or not a penis is inserted. When this principle is applied to the Dinah narrative, the trickery against the men of Shechem, who agree to be circumcised and are then killed while still in pain, can be acknowledged as a form of sexual violence. The fact that these men, along with all of the women and children in their community, are subject to violent assault to the point of annihilation, further

30 Rousseaux, “The Psychological Impact of Sexual Slavery,” 4-13; Herman, Trauma and Recovery, 74; Taft, “Promoting Women’s Mental Health,” 11-12.
31 The biblical character Joseph is male and there is no mention of penile penetration when his brothers assault him. The degradation that he experiences through being stripped of his robe and thrown into a cistern is however consistent with rape experience (Genesis 37:23-24). The Israelite soldiers who are shaved and stripped in 2 Samuel 10:4-5 obviously perceive their experience as a form of sexual assault because they are ashamed. For material on men as survivors of sexual assault see: Kerrie James, “Truth or Fiction? Men as Victims of Domestic Violence,” in Challenging Silence: Innovative Responses to Sexual and Domestic Violence, ed. Jan Breckenridge and Lesley Laing (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999), 153-162; Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre, Men as Victims of Domestic Violence: Some Issues to Consider (Collingwood: Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre, 2001). It is necessary to note that not all commentators agree that men can be victims of sexual assault and that other acts of violence can parallel rape, even without insertion of a penis. For example see Linda A. Fairstein, Sexual Violence: Our War against Rape (New York: William Morrow, 1993), 14.
highlights that men’s experiences of violence can parallel rape experience, including threat to life. Such a reading strategy resists rape being analysed simply in terms of male-female power imbalance and encourages contemporary survivors to engage in critique that acknowledges the overlapping complexities of cumulative oppression.

For it to be established that Shechem necessarily rapes Dinah it must be acknowledged that rape is defined in terms of a contemporary world-view and evidence must be presented to show that Shechem uses violent force to overpower Dinah. In the biblical text, however, Shechem does not act like someone committing an act of violent hostility in a bid to create an illusion of his own superiority. After sexual contact with Dinah, Shechem does not embark on a course of behaviour that stresses her degradation by treating her with disgust, as does Amnon when he rapes his half-sister Tamar in 2 Samuel 13. Rather, Shechem immediately shows love and tenderness toward Dinah. My reading argues that Shechem, while not behaving violently toward Dinah, has not specifically consulted her father and brothers in advance. In speaking tenderly to Dinah, Shechem indicates that he is aware that their intimacy has placed her in a vulnerable position and that the relationship needs to be formalised. He then asks his father Hamor to make arrangements so that they can be married. In contrast, Dinah’s brothers are obviously incensed, and at a later stage, even claim that Shechem has treated their sister as a prostitute, that is a woman who is able to make decisions about her own sexuality because she is socially beyond the protection of family (Genesis 34:31).

Traditional readings, grounded in the assumption that Shechem in fact rapes Dinah, translate and interpret an ambiguous series of verbs in Genesis 34:2-3 as

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34 Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis 34:12 has Dinah’s brothers saying that Shechem “would have treated our sister like a prostitute, a harlot who has no avenger, if we had not done this thing [attack the Shechemites]” Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis, trans. Michael Maher (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1992). Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis 34:31 describes Shechem treating Dinah: “Like a woman who has not a son of man, avenging humiliation, thus was it done to Dinah our sister: like a lost woman, a prostitute.” Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis, trans. Martin McNamara (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1992). See also Frymer-Kensky, “Virginity in the Bible,” 87-89.
necessarily involving violent force. The verbal sequence under examination is: He saw her (גָּ֫בְרָל), he took her (קָנָה), he laid her (שָׁבָּע), and he debased her (לֹא). Bechtel has demonstrated, by analysing this verbal sequence, the assumption that Shechem rapes Dinah emerges when modern readers with individualistic value systems fail to recognize the role of shame/honour codes in group-orientated societies. She says that the verb “to take” (קָנָה) is frequently used in the Hebrew Bible to describe an interplay between people-groups that is intended to foster bonding and cooperation through the “giving and taking” of wives. Bechtel also highlights that the verb in Genesis 34:2 that usually points scholars to the rape conclusion is קָנָה in the Piel. This verb in the Qal means to “to put down” or “to humble” and in the Piel could be translated as “to humiliate intensely.” While these verbs do not indicate that Shechem necessarily acts violently toward Dinah, a feeling of shame after pre-marital intercourse is consistent with Israeli shame/honour social codes which maintain social control and family stability. In situations that obviously do not describe sexual violence, the verb קָנָה is used in Genesis 16:6 to describe Sarah’s dehumanising treatment of Hagar and in Genesis 16:9 when the messenger of Yhwh instructs Hagar to return to Sarah and “bow under her hand”. It is used in 2 Samuel 13:10 when Tamar pleads with Amnon not to “lower” her. Quite significantly, the verb (לֹא) “to overpower” does not appear in the description of Shechem’s liaison with

35 For example, Shechem’s advance toward Dinah in Genesis 34:2 is translated as: “lay with her by force” (NRSV), “lay with her, and violated her” (REB and NAB) and “forced her to sleep with him” (NJB).


37 For example Susanne Scholz argues that the verb should be translated as rape in Genesis 34. Scholz, “Through Whose Eyes?,” 166-167.


Dinah but is the most obvious indicator of force and violence in the rape of Tamar.41

Susanne Scholz, disagreeing with Bechtel, is not only adamant that לאהב signifies an act of violence, but also points to the fact that the verb לאהב (to lie down) is connected to the object marker ל instead of the expected preposition א(ו) (with). Scholz argues that this designates Dinah as the object of the verb, signifying her lack of consent, and resulting in a meaning of “Shechem laid her”.42 While this grammatical structure certainly identifies Shechem as the instigator of sexual contact, it does not necessarily follow that he acts with force. Indeed, Ellen van Wolde argues that the phrase means nothing more than “Shechem had sexual intercourse with her.”43

After sexual contact with Shechem, Dinah’s liminal status, between virgin and wife, leaves her socially vulnerable and at risk of death, even without the assumption that he necessarily acts violently. Gerhard von Rad, while going along with the idea that Dinah is raped, translates the verb לאהב as “humble” stating that this indicates “the moral and social degrading and debasing by which a girl loses the expectancy of a fully valid marriage”. 44 So, even if Dinah ventures into her wider community as part of ritual pre-empting marriage with social expectations that she and Shechem will become intimate, the actual sexual contact is likely to leave them conscious that social obligations must be honoured to make their relationship respectable.45 Dinah’s loss of virginity and the possibility that she is pregnant, without the security of marriage, threatens disgrace upon her father and risks her being labeled and punished as a prostitute (Genesis 34:31; Deuteronomy 22:13-17). 46 Indeed, it is in response to such social vulnerability that King David’s

44 von Rad, _Genesis_, 331.
45 Anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that liminal states are dangerous, both for individuals and communities. Danger is controlled by processes which separate people from old states and then publicly integrate them into new status. Douglas, _Purity and Danger_, 96-98, 134.
daughter, Tamar, reacts so strongly when she realises that Amnon is going to abandon her after raping her (2 Samuel 13:14-16). In contrast, Shechem shows understanding of such vulnerability when his soul is drawn to Dinah: “he loved the girl and spoke tenderly to her” (Genesis 34:3).  

As there is no evidence to suggest that Dinah is promised to another man, and Shechem immediately demonstrates willingness to marry her, it would seem that resolution of Dinah’s vulnerability is straightforward. With his offer of marriage, Shechem protects both Dinah and her father. However, Jacob’s sons deny their father the respect of this solution. They instigate further shame by rapaciously destroying the city of Shechem (Genesis 34:30) and comparing Dinah’s liminal status to that of a prostitute (Genesis 34:31).

*Rape Victim or Prospective Bride?*

It has been traditionally assumed that Dinah, in stepping out to visit women of her area, demonstrates unacceptable and risk-taking behaviour. The idea that Dinah’s visit to local women should be read against Jacob’s land agreement with the Shechemites has not been explored by commentators and there is no acknowledgement in commentaries that Dinah’s visit might occur after her brothers set precedents by having relationships with local women. Shechem and his father Hamor, although they do not specify the exact nature of existing relationships, indicate that these are in place when they say: “These people are friendly with us” (Genesis 34:22). If the Shechemites assume that Jacob’s land agreement entitles Dinah to marriage within their community, by visiting local women, she could be attempting to claim her due right. Such an interpretation raises interesting parallels with other biblical women who are similarly assertive.

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47 Scholz resists such an interpretation arguing that Genesis 34:3, in the aftermath of rape, presents Shechem as clinging to Dinah, lustfully desiring her and speaking in a way that attempts to make her compliant. Scholz, “Through Whose Eyes?,” 170.


50 Dinah, an Israelite, might be claiming her right to marriage and financial security within a foreign community. Tamar (Genesis 38:12-19) and Ruth (Ruth 3:6-14) are two foreign women who proactively seek sexual contact with Israelite men in bids to claim marriage rights and security.
The possibility that Shechemite women are preparing Dinah for marriage is supported by allusions in other biblical texts that older women, particularly mothers, play influential roles in first sexual experiences and marriage preparation.\textsuperscript{51} For example Isaac, just prior to consummating his marriage to Rebekah, takes his bride to the tent of his mother Sarah (Genesis 24:28). Isaac’s movement of Rebekah into “women’s space” prior to their marriage consummation remains significant in the text, even though Sarah has died by this point in the narrative.\textsuperscript{52} Later in Genesis, after Jacob unknowingly consummates his union with Leah, he agrees to “complete the week” with her (Genesis 29:27-28). This could be a reference to a tradition that encourages newly married couples to focus on each other while food and other supplies are discreetly left outside their tent.\textsuperscript{53} Sources such as Deuteronomy 22:17, which alludes to family members displaying a blood stained sheet as proof of a woman’s virginity at marriage, also suggest that families and communities took an active interest in supporting (or monitoring) first sexual experiences. Contemporary abuse survivors could continue the task of identifying fragments of marriage preparation tradition in biblical texts and drawing them into conversation with Dinah’s story. Such a reading strategy helps to reclaim female voices and traditions at risk of being overshadowed by dominant male discourses, which all too often degrade women to the status of male property.

By the time Dinah becomes intimate with Shechem, she could have been living in his district for years. As Claus Westermann points out, it seems that much time elapses between Jacob’s land purchase at Shechem and the commencement of the Dinah story.\textsuperscript{54} After Jacob separates from his father-in-law, Laban, in Genesis 32 and is reunited with Esau in Genesis 33, he settles for an unspecified time at

\textsuperscript{51} For example Song of Songs 3:4 and 8:2 refer to a woman bringing her lover into the house of her mother as part of a courting ritual. In Genesis 24:28 Abraham’s servant recognises Rebekah as a suitable marriage partner for Isaac and she then runs and tells “her mother’s household”. Similarly, when Naomi instructs Ruth and Orpah to each return to the house of their mother in Ruth 1:8, it is possible that she is expressing hope that marriage preparation will once again be possible for them.

\textsuperscript{52} Sarah’s death and Abraham’s purchase of land for her burial is recorded in Genesis 23.

\textsuperscript{53} Anita Diamant, in her novel \textit{The Red Tent}, creatively expands this idea to describe ancient community support in the seven days after weddings. Diamant, \textit{The Red Tent}, 39–42, 44, 209-213.

\textsuperscript{54} Westermann, \textit{Genesis} 12-36, 537.
Succoth. When Jacob speaks with Esau, before selecting land at Succoth, he describes his children as frail and stresses his need to walk at their pace (Genesis 33:13-14). Following chronology internal to the Jacob cycle, Jacob meets Esau after spending 20 years on Laban’s property. Leah’s eldest child, Reuben, would be under 13 years of age and Dinah, Leah’s seventh child, much younger.

Depending on how long Jacob stayed at Succoth before purchasing land at Shechem, Dinah could have grown from a child to a woman at or near Shechem, allowing time for her to form relationships within the community. This scenario also allows time for Dinah’s brothers to establish their own relationships. By this point in the narrative, it seems that Jacob is no longer a wandering herdsman but has permanent fields (Genesis 34:5) where his children have grown to maturity.

Jacob might expect that Shechem will soon signal his intention to marry Dinah. Indeed, Jacob demonstrates no surprise or urgency when he hears they have been intimate. His sons are out in the field and Jacob simply keeps the news to himself. It is significant that a few chapters after the Dinah story, in Genesis 38, Jacob’s son, Judah, separates from his brothers and settles on Canaanite land. In a manner very similar to that attributed to Shechem, Judah sees a local woman, the daughter of Shua, and without further discussion, marries her and produces offspring (Genesis 38:1-4). There is no evidence to suggest that Judah rapes the daughter of Shua or that his treatment of her is inappropriate. An intertextual reading of Genesis 33:18-34:2 and Genesis 38:1-4 lends weight to land selection, marriage reciprocity and the right to legitimate offspring being inter-related.

We are not told how Jacob hears that Dinah is no longer a virgin (Genesis 34:5). This gap in the narrative occludes whether Shechem visits Jacob with the news, whether Dinah makes some disclosure, whether Jacob hears a rumour, or whether Jacob recognises Dinah’s visit to local women as part of marriage ritual. Similarly, it is unclear how Dinah’s brothers get to hear the news, whether it is while they are in the field or when Jacob and Hamor discuss issues in Genesis 34:6. Jacob’s lack of reaction has been interpreted in various ways, but I am partial to the idea that Jacob does nothing because he expects that Shechem will

marry Dinah. In contrast, Fewell and Gunn, accepting that Dinah is raped, interpret Jacob’s waiting as a sign of wisdom: “he deliberately waits to consult with his sons, or at least to act when all the men are present.” Meir Sternberg, on the other hand, emphasises that Jacob’s “do-nothingness” characterises him as a patriarchal failure and emotionally indifferent.

Shechem’s father Hamor, in this initial conversation with Jacob, makes no reference to Shechem committing a violation against Dinah. The biblical text does not specify whether Dinah is present when the two fathers discuss marriage prospects, nor do we know how many discussions take place. While Hamor seems to go by himself to speak to Jacob in Genesis 34:6, Shechem vocalises his own desires in Genesis 34:11-12, indicating that he might continue negotiations on a subsequent occasion. As Shechem seeks to establish respect for his relationship with Dinah, he is increasingly positioned within the text as acting with honour, while her brothers are portrayed as instigators of violence and shame.

The narrator attributes the anger of Jacob’s sons to their belief that Shechem has “committed an outrage in Israel” (Genesis 34:7). Significantly, although Jacob is informed that his name will be changed to Israel after his wrestle at Jabbock (Genesis 32:27-28), it is not until after the Dinah story that God promises Jacob: “a nation and a company of nations will come from you” (Genesis 35:9-13). When Shechem asks to marry Dinah, the Jacobites are still sojourners within his family’s territory. Hamor, in spite of the brothers’ insulting rejection of local hospitality, persists in linking marriage reciprocity and land access:

The heart of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it (Genesis 34:8-10).

59 There is no need for Hamor to comment on Shechem’s behavior if a land agreement creates the expectation of marriage reciprocity. Robin Parry however argues that Hamor is remiss in not offering an apology for Shechem’s rape of Dinah. Parry, *Old Testament Story*, 158-159. Mignon R. Jacobs argues that Shechem’s offer to pay a high bride-price is in itself an acknowledgement of wrong-doing. Jacobs, “Love, Honor and Violence,” 14.
60 Niditch, “Genesis,” 27. See also Sheres, *Dinah’s Rebellion*, 58.
Hamor’s words indicate not only a marriage opportunity for Dinah, but also that such reciprocity benefits Jacob’s sons and other daughters. Jacob and his sons however remain strangely silent about how the sons are satisfying their sexual needs; creating the illusion that Dinah’s situation is their first encounter with such issues. Shechem potentially increases Jacob’s honour by urging him to set Dinah’s bride-price as high as he likes, indicating that money is no obstacle and that he is eager to do the right thing by Jacob’s family. He does not offer money as restitution for a crime but rather as a bride-price that, if appropriately negotiated and accepted, could bring great honour to Jacob’s family.\(^{61}\) If the brothers are concerned with restoring family honour, while at the same time preventing exogamous marriage then, according to Exodus 22:16-17, they can take a bride-price but still refuse permission for Dinah to marry. The narrator however gives insight into their ulterior motives by explicitly revealing that they are speaking “in deceit” (כָּלָה).\(^{62}\) Their direct speech commences with a negative and Shechem is positioned as an uncircumcised outsider.\(^{63}\) They fail to acknowledge that they are already living on his family’s land and probably also helping themselves to women of his district:

> We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live among you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, we will take our daughter and be gone (Genesis 34:14-17).

The brother’s claim, that they will only live among the Shechmites if the requirement of circumcision is fulfilled, is clearly untrue. Their threat to “take our daughter and be gone” might hint that they have already taken Shechemite daughters and are now unwilling to honour them with reciprocity. It also blurs whether Dinah is physically present. She might be at Shechem’s house and the brothers are threatening her abduction. All we know is that, even after the circumcision requirement is fulfilled, the brothers once again fail to honour an agreement with the Shechmites by abducting Dinah from Shechem’s home. Whether Dinah remains in his home from the time of sexual contact, or whether


\(^{63}\) Sheres, Dinah’s Rebellion, 45.
she takes up residence there after the circumcision requirement is satisfied, she obviously becomes Shechem’s wife at some point. The brothers’ escalating deceit and violence therefore violates Shechem’s rights as husband and Dinah’s rights to marital security. The brothers’ threat to “take our daughter” also usurps Jacob’s authority and portrays him as increasingly irrelevant in their eyes.\(^{64}\)

The brothers, clearly motivated by a desire to seize land and assets, intend to misuse mass circumcision to render the Shechemites vulnerable to attack. They deceitfully present their demand as a dictatorial form of cultural assimilation which will make every Shechemite man eligible to marry an Israelite woman.\(^{65}\) Clearly Jacob’s sons have no intention of living peacefully with the Shechemites or respectfully honouring any agreements made between the two groups.\(^{66}\) While they are already benefiting from Shechemite land and being “one people”, they deceitfully claim that they will only consider this option after extracting the pain of circumcision from the whole male community, knowing that they intend to proceed with annihilation rather than reciprocal hospitality. The brothers’ deception and hypocrisy sharply contrasts with Israelite law that stipulates an alien wishing to participate in the Passover can do so and be granted other rights within the community as long as all males in his household are circumcised (Exodus 12:48).

In response to the Jacobites’ request, Shechem is immediately circumcised and goes with his father, Hamor, to speak with men at their city gate – a location typically associated in the Hebrew Bible with marriage and other legal negotiations (Deuteronomy 25:7; Ruth 4:1). It seems incredible, given that Jacob already lives on Shechemite land and is concerned about the small size and political vulnerability of his own family (Genesis 33:19; 34:30), that all the men of Shechem would envisage economic benefits great enough to concede to such a condition en masse. For it appears that it is the Jacobites who stand to gain most,

\(^{64}\) Sheres, *Dinah’s Rebellion*, 72.

\(^{65}\) Parry, *Old Testament Story*, 162.

particularly in terms of marketing outlets for their agricultural products, through an alliance with an urban settlement.  

When Shechem and Hamor speak to the men of their city they do not individualise and specifically highlight Shechem’s love for Dinah, but rather present their case as community business. Once again land access is linked with the expectation of marriage reciprocity but they gloss over the fact that Jacob’s sons have failed to show respect for the land agreement already in place. They present the Jacobites as friendly rather than deceitful and confrontational:

> These people are friendly with us; let them live in the land and trade in it, for the land is large enough for them; let us take their daughters in marriage and let us give them our daughters. Only on this condition will they agree to live among us, to become one people; that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised (Genesis 34:21-22).

Robin Parry highlights that, from the time when Jacob learns that Shechem has been intimate with Dinah until when Hamor and Shechem address the men of their city, there are three wife exchange speeches (Genesis 34:9, 16, 21) and two references to the Shechemites and the Jacobites becoming “one people” (Genesis 34:16, 22). While Hamor and Shechem honestly indicate that they perceive a link between land access, marriage reciprocity and trade, there is nothing to indicate that Jacob’s sons acknowledge their responsibility to such agreements. The Shechemite men’s acceptance of circumcision is implausible. It is indeed surprising that they do not loudly protest that Jacob already has land access and there is already an expectation of intermarriage without this newly added burden. While Jacob’s family is small and politically vulnerable, Shechem and Hamor still see some economic benefit in proceeding: “Will not their livestock, their property, and all their animals be ours?” (Genesis 34:23a). It is, however, likely that the Shechemites mass acquiescence is intended to be hyperbolous thus exposing the ridiculousness of the Jacobite demand. The Jacobites are a vulnerable minority group whose economic survival depends on external relationships and trading opportunities. It is most unlikely that regional political powers would actually bow to their conditions of cultural assimilation.

Meir Sternberg argues that Shechem and Hamor are motivated by a deceitful desire to economically control Jacob’s family. Shechem and Hamor, however, make no pretense about circumcision having any religious significance for them and Hamor has been consistent in his expectation that land acquisition and intermarriage will be economically beneficial. In contrast, Jacob’s sons are well aware of circumcision’s covenantal significance but persist in using religious purity and its associated ritual, as a guise for acquiring Shechemite assets by violent force. In doing this, Jacob’s sons disrespect their own honour and also the significance of covenants in ancient Israel. Such bizarre behaviour however supports Frank Crüsemann’s assessment that, in Genesis, “the worst enemies are not the ones who are markedly strange or different, as every racism perceives it; they belong to the closest relations”.

What’s Love Got to Do with It?

The likelihood that marriage between Shechem and Dinah formalises a political allegiance between two people-groups, does not rule out the possibility that love and mutuality are also present. Indeed, there are hints that love could be a motivating factor, not only in the relationship between Dinah and Shechem, but also in the relationship between Dinah and her father, Jacob. A subtle hint of this in both cases is when Dinah is identified in Genesis 34:1 as the daughter of Leah. As Claudia Camp notes, Shechem’s love for Dinah causes comparison with her mother’s unhappy experience as the unloved wife of Jacob. Some commentators, seeing Dinah as the unloved daughter of Jacob’s unloved wife, claim that Jacob presents as indifferent towards Dinah but passionate about

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71 Robin Parry highlights that in ancient Israel it was a very serious crime to break covenants and alliances. For example, in Joshua 9, the Israelites could not break a covenant with the Gibeonites even though they were tricked into sealing it. Parry, *Old Testament Story*, 164.


the welfare of Rachel’s children, Joseph and Benjamin. Sharon Pace Jeansonne raises the possibility that Dinah’s visit to the women of Shechem might be motivated by Jacob’s lack of concern for her. In contrast, I argue that Dinah’s independent action could be motivated by love, or at least concern, for her father and family of origin. She might believe that her acceptance of exogamous marriage will grant her family access to greater resources and increased political security. After all, Jacob indicates when his sons have decimated Shechem’s community, that his own household is politically vulnerable (Genesis 34:30). Against this threat, it seems incredible that Jacob has not previously required his sons act in a manner appropriate to securing Shechemite wives to increase family numbers. Dinah could be motivated by a love that acknowledges her father’s vulnerability and takes action to serve his best interests. Given that Shechem obviously has resources to offer Dinah security, there seems no reason to rule out the possibility that she welcomes his interest.

In contrast to Jacob, Shechem presents as having a high level of economic resources that afford him some choice in political affiliation and wife selection; a man who can afford to let his heart have some sway. Although Shechem’s love for Dinah is not mentioned until after their sexual relations, there is nothing to indicate that he might not also have felt this way earlier. Alternatively, while modern Western expectations stress that love precedes sex, the notion that love might emerge as a relationship progresses is consistent with the Hebrew Bible’s world-view and that of other non-Western cultures.

Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, although ascribing to the view that Shechem rapes Dinah, amazingly find Shechem’s character redeemed through the tender words that he speaks to Dinah after the sexual act. They claim that his words in Genesis 34:3 are terms of courtship and marriage and indicate not only his changed attitude but also a positive response in Dinah.

74 Wenham, Word Biblical Commentary, 308; Sheres, Dinah’s Rebellion, 82-85; 90; Jeansonne, The Women of Genesis, 91; Parry, Old Testament Story, 136.
76 Camp, Wise, Strange and Holy, 287.
77 Fewell and Gunn, “Tipping the Balance,” 196. Meir Sternberg and Paul Noble deny that there is evidence in the text on which to base conclusions about Dinah’s feelings toward Shechem.
However one views the rape, one must acknowledge that the narrator tips the balance in Shechem’s favor: Shechem moves from raping an object to loving a woman and seeking to make restitution for the wrong he has done her. If sympathy is accumulated, it seems to us to be sympathy for Shechem. Even our concern for Dinah is lessened as we view Shechem’s resolve to take care of her.  

Fewell and Gunn conclude that marriage to Shechem is in Dinah’s best interest and that her brothers are culpable for denying the only option available to her. They conclude by admitting that their reading is not without risk:

To advocate a woman’s marrying her rapist might itself seem to be a dangerous and androcentric advocacy. And so it would be if the story world offered other liberating alternatives.

But for there to be a whole other way there would have to be a whole other world.

The story, however, does offer another liberating alternative. Fewell and Gunn’s analysis would be more convincing if they had been willing to contemplate possibilities that emerge when Shechem and Dinah’s liaison is analysed in terms of marriage reciprocity rather than rape. Contemporary survivors can resist interpretations that hold them captive within worlds of abuse by insisting that sexual contact outside proscribed social boundaries need not be abusive. The possibility that contemporary survivors can “re-author” their own stories by choosing loving relationships in contrast to past abusive experiences remains particularly liberating.

**Dinah: Empowered by Silence?**

While it is possible to identify liberating options within Genesis 34, there remains frustration that Dinah never actually speaks for herself. This lack of voice, combined with an absence of detail about her reactions, is often interpreted as signs of her objectification. In Genesis 34:3 the narrator claims that Shechem loves Dinah and in Genesis 34:8 Hamor articulates that Shechem’s heart longs for her. Shechem comes close to articulating love for Dinah when he declares that a

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78 Fewell and Gunn, “Tipping the Balance,” 197.

79 Fewell and Gunn, “Tipping the Balance,” 211.


high bride-price will not diminish his desire to marry her (Genesis 34:12). Dinah has no opportunity to vocalise her own experience but, when her silence is read in the light of resistance strategies used by oppressed people, the possibility emerges that it could signify resistance against her brothers’ domination.82 This reading is counter-intuitive and highlights that silence can function in various ways in abuse contexts. For example, earlier chapters of this study particularly stressed that abuse can isolate and silence victims, creating the need for them to resist by speaking out. This reading now raises an alternative possibility that survivors can use the expectation that they will be silent as a tool for their own empowerment.

Dinah, by remaining silent and not offering any comment on her liaison with Shechem, maintains control of her own story. Only Dinah, and perhaps some of her women friends, know the exact details of her liaison with Shechem. If she steps out, intentionally taking advantage of a social situation that supports her marriage, her silence might indicate an assertive decision not to pursue conversation with her brothers, thus sidelining their opinions and refusing to seek their permission. If Dinah chooses to stay in Shechem’s home after sexual contact, her absence from marriage negotiations could signal empowerment rather than passivity, indicating that there is no need to discuss matters further. Perhaps, as far as she is concerned, her relationship has been consummated and she waits, ready to assume her role as wife within the home of a regional prince and to access the benefits of her new status. It is also possible that Dinah does not discuss marriage preparation with her father and brothers simply because it was not considered culturally appropriate for women to divulge such information to men. Anita Diamant, in The Red Tent, raises the possibility that in ancient Israelite culture certain menstruation and marriage preparation traditions were shared only among women and that men’s acquisition of such knowledge led to control and ultimately the loss of women’s traditions.83

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82 This analysis draws on Scott’s insight that dominated people do express resistance to oppression but this is typically done subtly, using strategies such as silence, evasion and deception to ensure safety. Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 28-37; Scott, Domination, ix-xiii, 18-20, 23-28, 136-140.

Dinah’s silence might also indicate that there is no need for her to struggle against Shechem. In the Hebrew Bible evidence of female struggle and cries for help are particularly relevant when married women are found in compromising situations. As we have seen, a married woman who does not scream and struggle in response to extra-marital attention risks death (Deuteronomy 22:23-27). When King David’s virgin daughter, Tamar, is raped and abandoned by her half-brother, Amnon, in 2 Samuel 13:11-19 she is very vocal in her distress and grief.\textsuperscript{84} While Tamar sees marriage as an appropriate solution to her crisis, Amnon’s move to abandon her results in screams of horror and desolation. Dinah, on the other hand, does not vocalise any distress in association with sexual contact or risk of abandonment.\textsuperscript{85} While Tamar’s full brother Absalom attempts to silence her overwhelming grief (2 Samuel 13:20), Dinah’s brothers are never placed in such a position. If Dinah is present at family discussions to negotiate her marriage, she does not cry out in horror consistent with rape. If she remains in Shechem’s home, her brothers do not indicate that they are concerned for her welfare or suspect that she is distressed.

\textit{Is Exogamous Marriage an Option?}

The extremely ethnocentric reaction that Dinah’s brothers demonstrate toward Shechem is particularly surprising given that other parts of the Torah support more inclusive and tolerant attitudes toward foreigners.\textsuperscript{86} Fear of foreigners is exposed as misplaced when Abraham and Isaac quite willingly place their wives, Sarah and Rebekah, into sexual jeopardy by handing them over to foreign royalty. Abraham commits this misdemeanour twice and Isaac once (Genesis 12:14-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-11). Ethnocentrism is contested as the foreign monarchs rebuke

\textsuperscript{84} Yamada, “Dealing with Rape,” 152.
\textsuperscript{85} Yamada, “Dealing with Rape,” 152.
\textsuperscript{86} Christine E. Hayes argues that there was no universal ban on Israelites marrying Gentiles until the Restoration period when such a prohibition is promoted by Ezra and Nehemiah. She argues that, prior to the Restoration, there were concerns that intermarriage could lead to idolatory but there are numerous biblical cases of exogamy being accepted because non-Israelite partners join in as a members of the community and do not lead their Israelite partners into abhorrent practices. Hayes gives several examples, including those of foreign men taking on the mark of circumcision and Israelite men taking captive women as wives, to emphasise that marriage to foreigners was not universally prohibited in the Torah. Christine E. Hayes, \textit{Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21-34.
Abraham and Isaac for compromising their wives’ sexual integrity by suppressing their marital status. The monarchs’ reaction indicates that they are more respectful of sexual purity and marital fidelity than the patriarchs themselves and that Abraham’s fears in Genesis 20:11 that foreigners have no respect for Elohim (God/gods) are unfounded. In these episodes, the sense of wrongdoing is linked to the patriarchs’ breach of marital fidelity rather than the women’s contact with foreigners per se. When these principles are transferred to Dinah’s situation, Shechem breaks no marital bonds in his advance toward her and precedents in previous generations of her family indicate that religious respect can extend beyond ethnic boundaries.

Dinah’s brothers, by abusively denying her economic resources and condemning her to ambiguous status, severely limit her life options. They regard Shechem’s claim on Dinah as an affront to their own rights as sexual property owners. In refusing to accept him, they confine Dinah to their own family. Fewell and Gunn emphasise:

> the prevention of an exogamous marriage is absurd in this context. How are the members of this family supposed to marry, if not exogamously? The brothers have no problem about this themselves (see Genesis 38; 41:45); why impose such a stipulation on Dinah?\(^87\)

Sternberg disputes that Jacob’s offspring have no option but to marry exogamously, arguing that the pattern for appropriate marriage was set by the patriarchs who select wives from amongst Sarah and Abraham’s relatives in Mesopotamia. He says:

> After all, the family has long had kinfolk and roots in Mesopotamia where the brothers themselves were born. So they need not even marry exogamously at all – and the patriarchs never did.\(^88\)

Sternberg’s conclusion, however, does not consider that Jacob never declares a strategy to ensure endogamous marriages for his 12 sons. Sternberg also ignores that Abraham, in sending a servant back to Mesopotamia to select a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24) and Jacob’s return to Mesopotamia for marriage (Genesis 29), failed to take seriously God’s instruction to Abraham in Genesis 12:1 to forego old

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\(^87\) Fewell and Gunn, “Tipping the Balance,” 206.

allegiances and kinship networks. Abraham deceptively gets around this instruction by sending a servant to relatives in Mesopotamia with the intention of acquiring a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:1-61). His deception, however, is unmasked when he stresses that Isaac himself must not return to old family networks (Genesis 24:7a) but then proceeds to implicate God in a ploy to bring a wife from Mesopotamia: “The LORD, the God of heaven… he will send his angel before you and you shall take a wife for my son from there” (Genesis 24:7).

Sternberg, in his insistence that Dinah and her brothers should continue endogamous marriage practices, emphasises that such unions are easily achievable as Jacob’s sons were born in Mesopotamia. This conclusion ignores that Jacob’s 20-year stint on Laban’s property in Mesopotamia is triggered by his need to seek refuge from his brother Esau. Although Jacob marries and fathers children in Mesopotamia, his time there is constantly disrupted by extended family conflict. Sternberg, in elevating the significance of endogamous marriage among the patriarchs, fails to grapple with the incestuous and illegal overtones of these marriages. Abraham’s claim that Sarah is his half-sister is contrary to Israelite law (Leviticus 18:9; 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22), as is Jacob’s marriage to two sisters (Leviticus 18:19). Family divisiveness between Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Jacob and Laban, also contests the feasibility of Dinah being offered in marriage within her tightly inter-related web of cousins.

So Dinah might assertively broaden her options beyond restrictions imposed by extended family conflicts and incestuous precedents. Her brothers’ violence deny her exogamous marriage and place her at risk of unpalatable options such as perpetual widowhood, slavery, prostitution, death and even an incestuous relationship with one of them. The inappropriateness of intra-familial sexual unions is emphasised in Genesis 35:22 when Jacob’s eldest son, Reuben, has sexual relations with his father’s secondary wife, Bilhah. In line with Israelite law

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89 Brett, Genesis, 50; Crüsemann, “Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity,” 71.
92 Genesis Rabbah 80:11 claims that Simeon marries Dinah after she protests about being removed from Shechem’s home. See also Camp, Wise, Strange and Holy, 291-292, 301; Graetz, “Dinah the Daughter,” 314.
that forbids a man “to uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife” (Leviticus 18:8), Jacob feels betrayed until the day he dies. He says to Reuben: “Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up onto your father’s bed; then you defiled it – you went up onto my couch!” (Genesis 49:4).

**Dinah’s Brothers: Motivated by Religious Purity or Manic Greed?**

When Simeon and Levi sneak up on the unsuspecting city of Shechem, after all the men have been circumcised, their seeming obsession with religious purity is exposed as a sham. Wielding swords, they kill Shechem, his father Hamor, and all the other Shechemite men, before removing Dinah from Shechem’s home and taking women, children, livestock and property as spoil (Genesis 34:25-29).

That such atrocious violence could occur after commitments of family bonding, including land access and the covenantal sign of circumcision, drastically demonstrates the Jacobites’ disrespect for God, their Shechemite hosts and their own obligations to community and covenant (Genesis 17:9-14; Joshua 5:2-7; Exodus 12:43-48).\(^93\) Walter Brueggemann is right when he stresses that the brothers use circumcision as a means of exploitation and have “no serious interest in religious scruple”.\(^94\) Similarly Claus Westermann comments that references to God are notably absent in Genesis 34.\(^95\) As the two main protagonists of this outrageous violence are Simeon, who at some stage fathers a son by a Canaanite woman, and Levi, an ancestor of the priestly tribe, this ethnocentrism and desecration of the sacred sign is particularly hypocritical and heinous.\(^96\)

While the most obvious explanation for the Jacobites’ rejection of Shechem seems to be concerns that his contact with Dinah will impinge on Israelite religious purity, they also shows signs of being motivated by sexual jealousy as well as greed for status, land and other property.\(^97\) In light of Jacob’s land agreement, Deuteronomistic law is subtly contested as the Shechemites and the Jacobites

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\(^93\) In the Testament of Levi 6:6, Levi acknowledges that Jacob was angry and grieved when he heard that his sons had killed the men of Shechem after they had all received the mark of circumcision.

\(^94\) Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 277-278.

\(^95\) Westermann, *Genesis* 12-36, 545.


\(^97\) Sheres, *Dinah’s Rebellion*, 14; Berquist, *Reclaiming Her Story*, 63.
have ongoing discussions about land and reciprocal marriage throughout Genesis 34. While Dinah and Shechem’s story has been traditionally read against Deuteronomistic law that forbids intermarriage between Israelites and foreigners (Deuteronomy 7:1-5), such analysis typically ignores that the same section of law also forbids land deals between Israelites and foreigners: “Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them” (Deuteronomy 7:2). Abraham’s purchase of land to bury Sarah in Genesis 23 is just as illegal as exogamous marriage. This portrayal of Jacob and Abraham as law-breakers suggests that Genesis is subtly contesting aspects of Deuteronomistic law and particularly its reinterpretation, during the Restoration period, as a polemic against intermarriage with foreigners.\(^9^8\)

It remains plausible that concerns about religious purity function as a guise, rather than a motivating factor, for Jacob’s sons. The smell of hypocrisy is certainly evident as the circumcision ruse proceeds but then the brothers have no qualms about taking Shechemite women captive and claiming “all that was in the houses” (Genesis 34:28-29). While the likelihood that Jacob’s sons had sexual relations with local women prior to Dinah’s liaison with Shechem is open to debate, there is absolutely no doubt that they help themselves to local women in the wake of the violence.\(^9^9\) Religious purity as an authentic motive is then further undermined when, after the city of Shechem is decimated, foreign gods are found in Jacob’s household (Genesis 35:1-4).\(^1^0^0\)

The violence of Dinah’s brothers seems to be motivated more by manic greed and sexual jealousy than genuine commitment to religious purity. The brothers show willingness to destroy even their own sister to ensure she does not accumulate more wealth than them.\(^1^0^1\) As males, the most they can expect to gain through marriage is generous dowries, while still having to satisfy their in-laws’ bride-price expectations. Dinah on the other hand is set to move into a family well-endowed with land, assets and other resources. This creates potential for Dinah

\(^1^0^0\) Josephus in *The Antiquities of the Jews* 1.21.2, in a bid to distance Jacob from idolatory, says that this is when Jacob realises that Rachel stole gods from her father’s household.
\(^1^0^1\) Sheres, *Dinah’s Rebellion*, 45, 75, 95.
and her children to assume greater status than that of Jacob’s sons. By violently attacking the city of Shechem, Jacob’s sons accumulate property that would have otherwise gone to Shechem’s descendents. They also impose on Dinah a situation where her sexual and maternal status remains unresolved. The tactics that Dinah’s brothers use to remove her as an economic and political rival echo those used by the male members of King David’s family in 2 Samuel. I argue in Chapter 6 that Tamar’s potential for a politically strategic marriage poses a threat to the political ambitions of her brothers and as a result it is in their interests that she is rendered desolate. Both of these stories contain rich resources for contemporary survivors to move beyond self-blame and more accurately articulate their abusers’ underlying political and economic motives.

Economic and political prospects for Jacob’s family turn sour after the attack on Shechem. In Genesis 35, the outfall of the brothers’ violence necessitates Jacob moving his family from Shechem, thus giving up all benefits of the community there. Genesis 37 reveals that the brothers do not modify their behaviour after Dinah’s demise. They continue to place material wealth and status before commitment to family relationships by selling Joseph into slavery. As Genesis continues the Jacobites are reduced to the status of “detestable shepherds” in Egypt, setting in motion a downhill slide that eventually leads to them becoming slaves (Genesis 46:34; Exodus 1:8-14).

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102 Genesis 48 details how Jacob leaves a double share of property to Joseph’s descendants. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan 48:21-22 identifies this property as including the city of Shechem and Jewish legends expand further, stating that Joseph has prior claim on this territory because it was a gift to Dinah from Shechem and Joseph later marries Asenath, the daughter conceived by Dinah to Shechem. This scenario, while acknowledging Dinah as grandmother to Joseph’s sons, absorbs her lineage and property into Joseph’s. Joshua 24:32 says that when the Israelites bring Joseph’s bones from Egypt they bury them at Shechem. See also Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, vol. 2, 2nd ed., trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1948), 138-139; Sheres, Dinah’s Rebellion, 45, 58, 75; Ellen Frankel, The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman’s Commentary on the Torah (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), xxii, 85.

103 Parry, Old Testament Story, 171.

104 In Chapter 5 I argue that, throughout Genesis 38, Judah continues this tendency of placing wealth and status before a concern for family relationships.
In an ironic twist, Dinah’s brothers decimate the Shechemites, to whom they are bonded as family, by using a strategy that is uncannily similar to ancient Israelite defence conventions for the declaration of war against a far-off town when peace cannot be negotiated:\textsuperscript{105}

When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you then, all the people in it shall serve you as forced labor. If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it, and when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you which are not towns of the nations here (Deuteronomy 20:10-15).

Analysis of ancient legal codes, while ringing a host of ethical alarm bells, demonstrates that Jacob’s sons operate within a mindset of war and continually violate their own community’s social conventions.\textsuperscript{106} As Jacob’s family is already living on Canaanite land, there is no way that his sons could classify the city of Shechem as a far-off town. Their land is purchased peacefully and there is no evidence to suggest that the Shechemites perceive any need to declare war against Jacob’s family.\textsuperscript{107} Jacob’s sons obviously have a cattle herd large enough to keep them busy (Genesis 34:5, 7) and Hamor is eager to extend their land use and trading networks (Genesis 34:10, 21, 23). Hence there is no suggestion that the Jacobites’ food supplies or income is at risk.

Jacob’s sons apply defence conventions for war on foreign territory to domestic violence in gross proportions. This is particularly tragic considering the conditions for Israelite participation in war indicate that family harmony, peace and prosperity are higher priorities than participation in battle; even to the point that newly engaged men are exempt from war, allowing time for them to marry and enjoy the company of their new wife (Deuteronomy 20:5-9). Jacob’s sons violently deny Shechem such courtesy and as we have seen their persistence in killing all of Shechem’s kin further violates Dinah’s rights to future security.

\textsuperscript{105} See also Deuteronomy 21:10-14; Jacobs, “Love, Honor and Violence,” 14.


\textsuperscript{107} Yamada, “Dealing with Rape,” 154-156.
Under Israelite law, childless widows are entitled to the protection of levirate marriage, meaning that on the death of a husband, his brothers become responsible for providing offspring to her on his behalf (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

There is nothing to indicate whether Dinah conceives during her initial encounter with Shechem, but if she does the child is part of Shechem’s clan and entitled to care and protection. If Dinah remains childless, given that the Shechemites have become “one people” with the Jacobites through the sign of circumcision, it is feasible that Dinah is entitled to levirate marriage protection. Simeon and Levi however, in killing all of Shechem’s kin, make it impossible for any of the Shechemite men to assume this responsibility. The ways in which Dinah’s brothers constantly violate Israelite laws suggest that they are motivated by greed. The guise of religious purity is an ideological mask that contemporary abuse survivors also need to peel away in their own contexts to challenge abusive discourses. All too often, pious and moral obsessiveness still serves as a guise for self-seeking domination. Abuse survivors need to develop the skills and strategies necessary to expose such underlying motives.

Cycles of Violence and Abuse Continue

Dinah’s brothers abduct her from Shechem’s home in Genesis 34:24. Presumably, she is alive when this happens and returns to her family of origin as a widow. Genesis 46:8 and 15 leave open the possibility that Dinah moves with the rest of Jacob’s family to Egypt when famine strikes Canaan. Jewish legends expand on Dinah’s story, claiming that she becomes pregnant during the few days she spends in Shechem’s home. Popular literature has also explored such alternatives.

108 In Chapter 5 I outline how Dinah’s brother, Judah, in Genesis 38, undermines his daughter-in-law Tamar’s right to levirate marriage when two of his sons die, leaving her childless.


111 For example Dinah, in the novel The Red Tent, gives birth to a son named Bar Shalem. He is educated in Egypt by his paternal grandmother’s rich relatives and unknowingly becomes a scribe to Joseph in the Egyptian court. Diamant, The Red Tent, 264, 272-280, 354-363.
Lack of resolution in regard to possible pregnancy in the biblical text is significant because in the Hebrew Bible, the return of a childless widow to her family of origin marks destitution and despair.\textsuperscript{112} It remains incomprehensible that this shame is instigated by the violent frenzy of Dinah’s own brothers.

It is highly revealing that, even after Shechem’s death and Dinah’s abduction, the brothers’ lust for violence is still not satiated. Ambiguity in Genesis 34:27 leaves it unclear whether “the other sons of Jacob” climb over the dead men of Shechem and plunder the city, or if Simeon and Levi return to the site by themselves.\textsuperscript{113} Regardless of the precise identity of the perpetrators, this second wave of bloodthirsty violence is inexplicable and totally out of control.\textsuperscript{114} The involvement of Jacob’s other sons at this point would take the heat off Simeon and Levi, suggesting that they are not the only ones to behave offensively. However, such a scenario seems out of place given that, in the following verses, Jacob lays the blame squarely with Simeon and Levi. Sternberg, leading up to his declaration that Simeon and Levi are true heroes, differentiates between their killing the men of Shechem “because they will stop at nothing to do right by Dinah” and the other brothers making a subsequent raid to plunder the city.\textsuperscript{115} Sternberg, in a move fraught with ethical dilemma, classifies Simeon and Levi as the story’s “intricate, colorful and attractive characters”.\textsuperscript{116} I however take exception to murderers being elevated to hero status and am more sympathetic with Fewell and Gunn’s assessment that “two people who are willing to kill so many for the sake of one are hardly likely to be above plundering the possessions and raping the families as well.”\textsuperscript{117} I argue that Simeon and Levi most likely return to the site of destruction, continuing to fuel this irrational spiral of violence.


\textsuperscript{113} In the Testament of Levi 6:4-5, Levi claims that he killed Shechem and that Simeon killed Hamor, and then the other brothers came and attacked the city with swords.


\textsuperscript{115} Sternberg, \textit{The Poetics of Biblical Narrative}, 469.


\textsuperscript{117} Fewell and Gunn, “Tipping the Balance,” 205.
Jacob’s reaction to Simeon and Levi, after all the plundering violence, also highlights that they shame him by undermining his land agreement and hopes of political alliance.\textsuperscript{118} He said to them:

\begin{quote}
You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household (Genesis 34:30).
\end{quote}

Jacob’s shame conveys abhorrence which he associates with foul odour or stench.\textsuperscript{119} Commentators have criticised Jacob at this point for focusing on his own security rather than demonstrating concern for Dinah as a victim of rape or making a stand against intermarriage.\textsuperscript{120} If, however, Jacob expects that his land agreement opens the way for Dinah to intermarry within an expanded and peaceful community, such criticisms are superfluous.

Simeon and Levi dismiss Jacob’s horror by bluntly demanding: “Should our sister be treated like a whore?” (Genesis 34:31). Jacob obviously remains unconvinced that their behaviour is justified. His ill-will toward them continues until the time of his death in Egypt:

\begin{quote}
Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. May I never come into their council; may I not be joined to their company – for in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel (Genesis 49:5-7).
\end{quote}

Significantly Jacob never mentions religious purity as a motivation for his sons’ behaviour. He instead stresses the magnitude of their cruelty and anger. Simeon and Levi, the ones who accumulated wealth through violence, are cursed with their own destruction.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{118} Yamada, “Dealing with Rape,” 155.
\end{flushright}
Jacob’s scathing tirade at the time of his death does not however go down in history as the final word on the violence at Shechem. Sternberg is among contemporary interpreters who dismiss Jacob’s dying words as moralistic and egocentric. Further examples of how the violence of Simeon and Levi has been reinterpreted and attributed hero status include the deuterocanonical Book of Judith, a historical novel written in the second century BCE, and the philosophical writings of Philo of Alexandria (20BCE-50CE).

Judith glorifies the violence of Simeon and Levi as necessary retribution against threats to Israel’s continuity and religious purity. Set in Bethulia, a small town north of Jerusalem, in 587 BCE, the novel describes how Judith, an otherwise unknown rich widow, goes against local authorities to deliver her people. Faced with the prospect that all of Judea is about to be captured and plundered by enemies, she finds comfort by visualising God instigating the violence at Shechem by giving Simeon a sword (Judith 9:2). As she idealises the violence perpetrated by Jacob’s sons, she seems unaware of the irony evident in her claim that God gave Shechemite wives, daughters and property as booty to men whom she claims “abhorred the pollution of their blood” (Judith 9:4). In graphic detail, she paints a picture of Dinah being stripped, exposed and violated (Judith 9:2b). Judith reworks material preserved in cultural memory to suit the ideological needs of a new situation. She interprets the violence of Simeon and Levi as defensive action by a minority group at risk of annihilation and uses it to stir up hope that God sides with those who are oppressed. In doing so, she declares a hope that God will act in favour of those being laid to waste (raped) in her own situation: “O God, my God, hear me also, a widow” (Judith 9:4c).

It is understandable that Judith, in desperate circumstances, perceives in Dinah’s story a glimmer of hope that God will act with force on behalf of those who suffer

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122 Philo of Alexandria in two of his works, *The Migration of Abraham* 223-225 and *On the Change of Names* 193-200, allegorises Genesis 34 so that Shechem is presented as an irrational being, the son of a man whose name means “ass” or “fool”. Simeon and Levi are portrayed as “pupils of sound sense” and “champions” who repel profanity and impurity with a “zeal for virtue”.

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abuse. Genesis 34 however does not detail what actually happened between Shechem and Dinah, or implicate God in the violence perpetrated by Jacob’s sons. The only biblical reference to God, in relation to Dinah’s story, appears in Genesis 35:5 when God is said to protect Jacob’s family from retribution after the destruction of Shechem by causing the surrounding cities to be frightened. While Judith’s community is threatened with violent attack, the Shechemites and the family of Jacob negotiated a peaceful land agreement. Judith, in using the Dinah story to suit her own ideological purposes, strays from the original text and compares situations which are in fact quite different.

Contemporary abuse survivors need to challenge Judith’s attempt to position God as the instigator of violence against the Shechemites. It is hard to imagine how the violence wreaked on Shechem could be perceived as justifiable retribution, or in keeping with the purposes of God, particularly when its aftermath is examined. The death and destruction at Shechem offers little hope for regeneration. Dinah, present in Shechem’s home when he is murdered, is a witness to widespread carnage. She is likely be even more traumatised as she is abducted and quite possibly watches as her brothers abuse other women and children, and divide among themselves property that would have gone to her descendents.

**Future Options: Continuing the Journey with Dinah**

Contemporary survivors can continue to resist Dinah’s isolation by remembering her as Leah’s daughter (Genesis 34:1) and connected to a wide network of other women through Jacob’s other wives, her sisters and women of her brothers’ households. Dinah, in stepping out to visit local women, could be resisting isolation; insisting that she is not separated from female networks and traditions; and decisively claiming security that is her due. If her brothers were not so destructively violent, Dinah’s marriage to Shechem could provide Jacob with exactly what he needs: expanded networks; trading opportunities; and protection against vulnerability. Contemporary survivors need to develop ways to celebrate Dinah’s resistance and resourcefulness. Honouring her assertive attempt to visit women of her area, contemporary survivors can continue recovering female

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124 Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story, 63.
traditions of marriage preparation and other practices of solidarity from biblical texts, so that these are not eradicated by dominant discourses of violence, rape and murder.

The most liberating aspect of Dinah’s story is its potential for contemporary survivors to “re-author” traditional interpretations to the point of challenging whether Dinah is in fact raped. Survivors can use their own subjugated knowledges, their own intimate knowledge of how rape survivors and perpetrators act and react, to scan Dinah’s story for consistency and possible alternatives. The possibility that Dinah experiences love, rather than rape, gives hope to contemporary survivors that their own relationships need not conform to patterns of abuse. Potential for love and liberation should not be ruled out.

Survivors, who may be locked into dominant narratives that insist they are permanently damaged as a result of the abuse they have experienced, can use Dinah’s story to claim more life-giving outcomes. They can resist the violence of Genesis 34, and the risk that they will also be denied future options, by writing alternative endings for Dinah’s story. They can identify and claim alternatives to Dinah remaining in perpetual desolation. While Dinah, like many women who have experienced horrific domestic violence, might continue to live as a frightened prisoner, her story’s lack of resolution also flags hope that she accesses resources to empower survival.

The fact that Dinah’s death is never recorded in biblical text creates opportunities for contemporary survivors to creatively suggest a range of alternatives. They can choose whether to leave Dinah languishing under the domination of her brothers, whether she gives birth to Shechem’s child or whether she musters other resources to live a fulfilling life. They can explore the possibility that Dinah accompanies

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125 This approach is in line with Naomi Graetz who urges contemporary writers to use the Dinah story to generate new alternatives by continuing the process of Midrash. She says that contemporary women, who might see themselves as marginalised and sitting silently on the sidelines of life, can be inspired by this ongoing process of story interpretation and revision to come through their own sufferings in ways that muster resources for liberation. Graetz, “Dinah the Daughter,” 317.

Pamela Cooper-White similarly highlights the power of such rewriting and reinterpretation through her retelling of the story King David’s daughter Tamar (2 Samuel 13) through the eyes of the niece who is named after her in 2 Samuel 14:27. Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 1-3.
Jacob’s family to Egypt (Genesis 46:8, 15) and imagine the new networks that this might offer her.

Dinah’s silence presents another opportunity for contemporary survivors to reject attempts to classify their responses as pathological or evidence of victimhood. While Dinah remains silent after her liaison with Shechem, it is possible that she is exercising resistance against her brothers’ domination. Through silence Dinah manages to preserve something of her intimate relationship with Shechem by not divulging details to those who seek to dominate her. Contemporary survivors might see the relevance of Dinah’s silent resistance by thinking about their own experiences such as feeling violated when abuse perpetrators gain access to the most intimate details of their lives through counselling and medical reports they are often obliged to supply as part of legal proceedings.126

The events at Shechem show that abuse can occur regardless of social, economic or gender status. While Hamor and Shechem are male, and have the highest socio-economic status in their region, their position does not exempt them from abuse and death. The Jacobites’ lust for power, expressed through fanatical ethnocentrism, dominates above all other social factors. Dinah, however, is afforded no protection as an Israelite. The possibility that Dinah, though marriage to Shechem, could become wealthier or more politically powerful than her brothers, immediately identifies her as a female threat to be curtailed. The brothers’ manic obsession with religious purity is unmasked as a guise when they are willing to destroy even their own sister in the stampede for property and other assets. In a shocking display of male-to-male abuse, they debilitate and then kill the men of Shechem. The most vulnerable members of the community, the women and children, are then taken captive. All pious talk of religious purity is totally hypocritical in light of their deceitful circumcision ruse, rapacious treatment of Shechemite women and entrapment of the city’s children. Contemporary survivors need to work with biblical texts, traditional interpretations and in present day contexts to ensure that innocent people do not

stand accused of crimes they did not commit while rapists and murderers are exalted to the status of heroes.

Dinah, although devastated by the events of Shechem, still has the option to link up with mother-figures, sisters and the women of Shechem whom her brothers take captive. As contemporary survivors continue to peel away guises and expose underlying political motives, they will expose ethnocentricism, greed and moral hypocrisy for the outrageous blood-letting atrocity it is. In the process, survivors are likely to discover within themselves a strong and silent Dinah who, even in the face of rape and massacre, maintains hope that she will once again step out “to visit the women of the region…”. 


Chapter 5

Tamar – Daughter-in-law of Judah (Genesis 38)

The Hebrew Bible records details of three females named Tamar. I will devote a chapter each to two of these characters. This chapter focuses on the Tamar of Genesis 38 who is the daughter-in-law of Jacob’s fourth son, Judah.¹ The name Tamar means “date-palm”, which is a symbol of fertility and fruitfulness.² The Tamar of Genesis 38 however is a childless widow who, according to the narrator, is abused by God and men. Although she eventually comes to bear twin sons and provide a vital link in the Davidic line,³ her story exemplifies how widows in ancient contexts could become outcasts, denied economic resources and social influence, when living without the protection of a husband, son or other male guardian.⁴

As her story progresses, Tamar becomes the victim of social, economic and sexual abuse. The ancient custom of levirate marriage, that is the impregnation of a childless widow by her late husband’s brother, as described in Deuteronomy 25:5-10,⁵ along with Yhwh’s charter to particularly care for widows, orphans and outcasts should provide Tamar with additional security. However, the narrator portrays neither Yhwh nor Judah as particularly compassionate or protective toward her. Against this background of abandonment by God and family, Tamar’s

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¹ In Chapter 6, I will analyse the story of Tamar, the daughter of King David, who is raped by her half-brother Amnon in 2 Samuel 13. This Tamar, after being raped, is left desolate and childless within the household of her full-brother, Absalom. 2 Samuel 14:27 makes reference to a third Tamar, stating that Absalom gave this name to his daughter. This Tamar is described as “a beautiful woman” but no other details are recorded.


³ Tamar becomes an honoured matriarch in both Jewish and Christian tradition in the genealogies of King David and Jesus Christ (1 Chronicles 2:3-4; Matthew 1:3). See also Jeansonne, The Women of Genesis, 101.


circumstances only take a turn for the better when her survival skills kick in, and despite great risks, she begins to act for herself.

As Tamar is threatened with economic ruin and even death she demonstrates an uncanny capacity to take advantage of circumstances as they present and to quickly change tack. I argue that Tamar’s survival is dependent on an ability to implement quick thinking strategy on the run, rather than the result of premeditated planning and calculated deception. I therefore read her as a “survivor” rather than a “trickster”. She demonstrates survivor instinct, following her impulses and intuition and using wit to protect herself. Tamar’s story therefore has potential to provide resources for contemporary abuse survivors who must also be ready to act quickly whenever opportunities for freedom emerge and to also cover their backs for safety.

Tamar dramatically “re-authors” her story by raising her voice and publicly calling her father-in-law, Judah, to justice at the moment she is to be burned to death by fire (Genesis 38:25). This life-changing vocalisation is however the last of only four sentences that Tamar speaks in biblical text (Genesis 38:16, 17, 18, 25). She fades into silence as the perspective of her story shifts to that of an anonymous midwife, effectively reducing Tamar to a womb from which twins are delivered.

**Judah Places Wealth before Kinship**

Tamar’s story, positioned as it is in Genesis, seems almost out of place as it interrupts the Joseph narrative. Gordon Wenham notes that if Genesis 38 was omitted “the narrative would progress from 37:36 to 39:1 very smoothly”.

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8 van Wolde, “Intertextuality,” 434.

Genesis 37, the sons of Jacob sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites and then falsely report his death to their father. Genesis 37 ends with a report that the Ishmaelites take Joseph to Egypt and sell him to Potiphar, an officer for the Egyptian Pharaoh. After the detour into Tamar’s story, Genesis 39 then begins with a repeat of the report that the Ishmaelites sell Joseph to Potiphar. However, as commentators such as Alter, Menn and Brett argue, Genesis 38 is inter-connected with the chapters that proceed and follow it. The economic self-interest and lack of concern that Judah demonstrates toward Tamar in Genesis 38 is foreshadowed in chapter 37.

Judah’s predisposition to place economic concerns before the lives of family members becomes apparent when the sons of Jacob see a caravan of Ishmaelites coming up from Gilead on their way to Egypt (Genesis 37:25). Judah is obviously taken with this opulent image that includes camels laden with gum, balm and resin. He unknowingly over-rides a plan of his brother Reuben to secretly rescue Joseph and suggests that Joseph be sold to the Ishmaelites:

Then Judah said to his brothers, “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 37:27).

Judah twice refers to Joseph as “our brother” (брата) but he does not honour brotherly commitment with his recommendation that Joseph be sold into slavery. By implicating the Ishmaelites in this abusive ploy, he also highlights that the Jacobites interact with these not-so-distant cousins for economic purposes but trust and family loyalty are notably absent. Judah’s proposal extends beyond family dysfunction to violation of life and community to such an extent that the death penalty is warranted under Israelite law (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7). It is therefore not surprising that in Genesis 38 Judah’s shallow appreciation for human life is once again evident through his denial of support to

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Tamar, his cruel willingness to burn her to death and lack of care for his dead sons’ legacy.

The positioning of Genesis 38 amid the flow of the Joseph narrative indicates that Judah’s selection of his own land, his marriage and separation from his brothers occurs at a time when his father is deeply grieving the loss of Joseph.13 Having proposed the devious plan to sell Joseph, Judah watches as Jacob tears his clothes, wraps sackcloth around his loins and declares that he will go to his death mourning for Joseph (Genesis 37:34-35). While the narrator claims “All of his sons and all of his daughters” offer comfort to Jacob (Genesis 37:35), this is however doubtful. At this point in Genesis, Jacob’s relationship with Simeon and Levi is strained as a result of their murderous violence in Shechem (Genesis 34:30). No mention has been made of Jacob’s daughter Dinah since her removal from Shechem’s home in Genesis 34:26. Adding further insult, the show of comfort must be substantially a charade to veil the brothers’ abusive treatment of Joseph, who is still alive but forcibly absent. Judah insensitively chooses this moment to separate himself from Jacob and the rest of his extended family.14

**Judah: Selecting Land and Choosing Women**

As Judah leaves his own kin, there are allusions to a connection between land selection and the responsibilities of marriage that echo the Dinah and Shechem story of Genesis 34. Judah settles near “a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah” (Genesis 38:1). Similar to Shechem, who saw Dinah after Jacob had purchased land in Shechemite territory (Genesis 33:18-34:2), Judah now sees “the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua”. In 1 Chronicles 2:3, this woman is referred to as Bath-shua. I will use the name Bath-shua as a way of according dignity to this woman but acknowledge the name reveals nothing more than the name of her father. While Shua is named, there is nothing to suggest that Judah even consults him prior to marriage. Bath-shua bears three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah (Genesis 38:3-5).

13 Lambe, “Judah’s Development,” 53-54, 68.
14 Genesis Rabbah 85:2 says Judah recommends that the sons of Jacob separate at this point to lessen the chances of retribution in the wake of selling Joseph.
When Tamar’s story begins, she is notably absent. The narrative skips immediately from the birth of Judah’s three sons to him selecting Tamar as a wife for Er, his firstborn (Genesis 38:6). Once again, there is no record of inter-family discussion in relation to marriage. The name of Tamar’s father is not even mentioned. While, on one level, Tamar’s father is portrayed as an anonymous person with whom Judah cannot even be bothered speaking, another possibility emerges when her story is read intertextually with that of Dinah and Shechem in Genesis 34. I argue in Chapter 4 that Jacob enters into a land agreement with the Shechemites in Genesis 33:19 and that this generates an expectation that there will be intermarriage between the Jacobites and the Shechemites. When Judah settles near Hirah the Adullamite, there is similarly mention of a “daughter” and a marriage (Genesis 38:2). We know that Judah’s wife is the daughter of Shua, rather than Hirah. There is however nothing to exclude the possibility that Bath-shua is Hirah’s sister and that her marriage to Judah is linked to the land deal between Hirah and Judah. If Judah and Hirah have linked their families in this way, there could be an expectation that their children will intermarry. Hirah could be Tamar’s father.

There is nothing in the text to indicate that Judah resumes contact with his own relatives when choosing a wife for Er. So it seems Tamar is chosen from among young women in the community where Judah now lives. As Tamar is never identified with any Israelite tribe this further suggests that, like her mother-in-law, she is an indigenous resident. It is also possible that Judah, following his own family’s matrilineal traditions, chooses Tamar as a wife for Er because she is a relative of Bath-shua. Earlier in Genesis, patriarchs set a trend of endogamously supplying wives from maternal families. Even though Judah breaks with endogamous tradition by marrying Bath-shua, a Canaanite, it seems feasible that,

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16 Athalya Brenner identifies Hirah as Tamar’s father in a creative book in which she has female Bible characters presenting their own stories at a scholarly but imaginary conference. She gives no reasons for her supposition that Hirah is Tamar’s father. Brenner, I Am, 136.
18 I describe the matrilineal marriage practices of the patriarchs in Chapter 4 in a section entitled “Is Exogamous Marriage an Option?”
when selecting a wife for his son, he could be influenced by matrilineal practices, particularly if this is the expectation of his new community.

The idea that Tamar is from an indigenous family is also supported by the fact that, when Judah abandons her to her family of origin in Genesis 38:11, she remains within close proximity to his property. She is close enough to receive information about Judah’s movements and he is connected to networks that give him information about her (Genesis 38:13, 24). If Hirah is however Judah’s brother-in-law, there are sad echoes between the way in which Judah treats his brother Joseph and the new family relationships that unfold throughout Genesis 38. The fact that ethnic and genealogical information about Tamar is so obviously absent from the text is consistent with the way in which her identity, support networks and social status remain ambiguous, posing risks to both her life and the honour of her father.

**Tamar: Victim of Social and Economic Abuse**

There is no indication of how long the marriage between Tamar and Er lasted, or if the relationship was even consummated. The text only indicates that Er dies suddenly without offspring. It is possible that Tamar is very young and although selected as Er’s wife, has never actually left the home of her father. The narrator claims: “But Er, Judah’s firstborn was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death” (Genesis 38:7). This attempt by the narrator to implicate Yhwh in the death of Er raises considerable ethical questions. Er’s wickedness is not specifically defined and it is difficult to imagine what he might have done to deserve death. After all, his father, uncles and various other ancestors manage to

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19 Targum Pseudo-Jonathan 38:7 claims that Er was evil because he did not have intercourse with his wife. Jubilees 41:1 says that Er refused to have sex with Tamar because Judah brought her from Aram and Er wanted a wife from among his mother’s Canaanite relatives. See also Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 20.

survive despite involvement in scenarios that include deceptive plots, murderous violence and an array of suspect sexual practices.\textsuperscript{21} It cannot be concluded that Yhwh killed Er as punishment for an exogamous marriage. Biblical narratives and genealogies provide ample evidence that intermarriage was common from the beginning of Israelite history through to post-exilic times.\textsuperscript{22} Er’s father Judah and his uncles Joseph and Simeon all took foreign wives without there being any record of divine retribution (Genesis 38:2; 41:45; 46:10).\textsuperscript{23} While the prospect of Jacob’s daughter Dinah forming an exogamous marriage with Shechem in Genesis 34 has been traditionally interpreted as the cause of her brother’s violent destruction of his city, I argue in Chapter 4 that such a stance is at the very least hypocritical given the extent to which Jacob’s sons marry foreign wives and take foreign women captive.

It seems particularly bizarre that Yhwh should be implicated in the death of Er, thus rendering Tamar a childless widow, when throughout the Hebrew Bible the deity acknowledges the particular vulnerability of widows and promises them care and protection (Deuteronomy 10:17-18; 14:28-29; 24:17-18; Jeremiah 49:11; Proverbs 15:25; Malachi 3:5). Indeed, it would seem that the only justification for Yhwh to intentionally make a woman a widow would be if her husband is guilty of the gross injustice of mistreating other widows and orphans:

\begin{quote}
You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives will become widows and your children orphans (Exodus 22:22-24).
\end{quote}

It is therefore possible that Er’s “wickedness” included acts of gross injustice toward the most vulnerable members of his community and by participating in these practices he failed to adequately protect Tamar from bearing the cost of Yhwh’s unrelenting drive for justice.

\textsuperscript{21} Havea, \textit{Elusions of Control}, 164-165.

\textsuperscript{22} Menn, \textit{Judah and Tamar}, 51. See also footnote 86 in Chapter 4 of this study on Hayes’ analysis of exogamous marriage in \textit{Gentile Impurities}.

\textsuperscript{23} Richard J. Clifford, however, mounts an unconvincing argument that Judah’s problems are the result of divine retribution in the wake of foreign marriage. See Richard J. Clifford, “Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob Story,” \textit{CBQ} 66 (2004): 524-525.
Tamar: Sexually Abused as Onan Spills His Semen

Tamar, as a childless widow, is a drain on Judah’s resources and offers him no potential to increase family income. The ancient Israelite practice of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-7) provides her with some protection. The hope of conception increases Tamar’s security through continuing the name of her dead husband and providing sons to care for her in her old age.24 Judah will also benefit from increased labour to support his agricultural pursuits.

Judah makes no attempt to comfort Tamar and shows no concern for her rights and needs. He focuses solely on her potential fertility.25 In stark contrast to Jacob’s reaction when Joseph disappeared, Judah does not grieve for Er.26 Failing to even mention Tamar’s name or show any concern for whether her relationship with Er was actually consummated, Judah callously instructs his second son Onan: “Go into your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law for her; raise up offspring for your brother” (Genesis 38:8).

Onan, although interested in sexual activity with Tamar, does not commit to honouring her rights.27 Here Onan’s deceitful behaviour mirrors Judah’s tendency to be more concerned about finances than family responsibilities. Menn highlights links between Onan's behaviour toward Er and Judah's behaviour toward Joseph:

> It is especially appropriate that Judah's son Onan should refuse to act charitably toward his dead brother by providing him with descendants, since Judah himself fails to act charitably toward his own live brother when he advocates selling him into slavery (Gen 42:21). Like his father before him, Onan acts to consign his brother to oblivion, and in both cases monetary gain appears to have been a consideration.28

While Onan does not want to jeopardise his own inheritance by granting Tamar heirs in the name of his dead brother, he also stifles Judah’s income earning

28 Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 38.
capacity by passively refusing to produce more labourers. Onan no doubt believes that it will be more lucrative if Judah’s wealth is divided only between his younger brother, Shelah, and himself.  

His calculations fail to consider the possibility that overall family wealth could be greater if Tamar provides offspring with the capacity to tend more flocks.

Onan is not the only Israelite man concerned that levirate marriage will cause him financial disadvantage. An anonymous kinsman in the Book of Ruth declines to act as a redeemer for Ruth on the grounds that it will affect his own inheritance (Ruth 4:6). Deuteronomy 25:5-10 describes a widow’s right to publicly humiliate a brother-in-law who denies her levirate marriage indicating that the practice must have been resisted, particularly by men. Onan does not even allow Tamar her right to publicly humiliate him for rejecting her. Demonstrating behaviour that equates to sexual abuse, he manipulatively engages in sexual intercourse but withdraws from her, spilling his semen on the ground.

If Er and Tamar had not previously consummated their marriage, Onan's behaviour not only denies her future security within Judah’s family but also robs her of the opportunity to be offered as a virgin in marriage to another man. Alternatively, if Judah immediately abandons Tamar back to her father’s home as soon as Er dies and Onan feels no responsibility for her welfare, his deception places her at risk. Levirate marriage provisions specifically provide for impregnation of a widow rather than commitment-free sexual play. Tamar might be unaware of Onan’s deception and perceive no reason to retaliate against him. It is however possible that she realises he is sexually exploiting her but, with the

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31 van Wolde, “Intertextuality,” 442.

32 Devora E. Weisberg argues that there is little information on levirate marriage in the Hebrew Bible and that the few references to it provide conflicting descriptions. She says that these conflicting accounts, however, express discomfort with the practice, particularly on the part of men. Women seem more willing, even eager, to promote levirate unions. Weisberg, “The Widow of our Discontent,” 403, 405.

uncertainty that surrounds her marital status, feels powerless to act without implicating herself in compromising practices (Leviticus 18:16; Deuteronomy 22:22). The narrator indicates that Onan’s sexual play is a deliberately selfish and repeated practice:  

But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother’s wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother (Genesis 38:9).  

Then, Onan suddenly drops dead. Like Er’s death, Onan’s death is attributed to divine retribution but this time there is slightly more detail: “What he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also” (Genesis 38:10). It can only be inferred that Er’s “wickedness” was exploitation of vulnerable people. Onan, however, in his treatment of Tamar, most obviously exploits a particularly vulnerable widow. It is possible that Yhwh, in killing Onan, intervenes to help Tamar when she is unable to tell anyone else that she is being sexually exploited. Contemporary survivors however need to challenge unethical assumptions inherent in this divine action. While Yhwh’s violent action might contain a kernel of justice, it does little to empower Tamar, enable her to speak in her own voice or address the systemic evil that contributes to the abuse she experiences. At this point in Tamar’s story, contemporary survivors can lay claim to resistance strategies gleaned from Hagar’s story in Chapter 3. They have every right to challenge divine injustice through intercession, resistance and even summoning the power to “re-name” God in light of who they know God should be from other sources, including their own experience (Genesis 16:13-14; 17:18, 23-27; 18:16-33). Alternatively, survivors might view this as an opportunity to express anger toward God.  

Tamar, in spite of all that goes against her and even after Onan’s death, is still not without options. She retains the right to offspring by Judah’s remaining son, Shelah. After Onan’s death, Judah once again makes no effort to comfort Tamar and does not grieve for his dead sons.  

He however becomes fearful that, if he continues to honour levirate marriage obligations to Tamar, Shelah might also die. Given Judah’s failure to grieve for Er and Onan, his concern over Shelah’s  

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survival seems motivated more by a realisation that loss of Shelah would devastate his own economic security. In denying Tamar access to Shelah, Judah blames her for his elder sons’ deaths, even though the text explicitly states that Er died because of his own wickedness (Genesis 38:7) and Onan died because Yhwh is displeased with his treatment of Tamar (Genesis 38:9-10). Judah fails to acknowledge that his sons contributed to their own demise.

**Judah Abandons Tamar**

Judah, in a move tinged with irrational fear and economic anxiety, abdicates responsibility for Tamar and frees himself from the cost of her upkeep. He instructs her to *remain* in her father’s home as a widow (Genesis 38:11). Judah’s use of the imperative singular second-person female form of the verb שָׁיָה (which means “to sit, remain, dwell or live”) rather than “return” (שָׁיָה), leaves open possibilities that Tamar was promised in marriage to Er but never actually left her family of origin to consummate the marriage or that Judah abandoned her immediately after Er’s death. The possibility that Tamar is already abandoned by Judah is strengthened when the verb שָׁיָה appears for the second time in Genesis 38:11: “And so Tamar went to *remain* in her father’s house” (my translation). If Judah has already withdrawn resources from Tamar, or never actually included her in his family, her relationship as his daughter-in-law is nonexistent in all but title.

For Tamar, abandonment to her father’s house might be a shameful public signal that she has failed to become a successful wife and mother. Judah’s dictatorial language shows no interest in the consequences that Tamar will face as a result of abandonment. In a throwaway consolation, he leaves her with a cruel glimmer of hope that her abandonment will only be “until my son Shelah grows up” (Genesis

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36 Berquist, *Reclaiming Her Story*, 73.
39 Susan Niditch highlights that childless widows occupy ambiguous social territory in the male-centred world of the Hebrew Bible where virgins are transferred into the care of their husband’s family and are no longer covered by the resources and protection of their own families. Niditch, “Genesis,” 25. See also Niditch, “The Wronged Woman,” 146; Streete, *The Strange Woman*, 45; Wildavsky, “Survival,” 46.
If Shelah is not that much younger than his brothers, Judah’s emphasis on Shelah’s age is merely a fabricated excuse to avoid responsibility. When the births of Judah’s sons are recorded at the start of Genesis 38, it is not specifically stated that Shelah is much younger than Er and Onan. Indeed, as Gordon Wenham notes, the rapid sequence of verbs meaning “conceived”, “bore” and “called” suggest that Bath-shuah gives birth to Judah’s three sons in quick succession.\(^41\) In relation to Shelah’s birth there is, however, specific reference to a birthplace: “She was in Chezib when she bore him” (Genesis 38:5). This additional information could indicate that enough time elapsed between the arrival of Onan and Shelah for the family to move to a new location. It is however likely that a man willing to abandon his destitute daughter-in-law could also be guilty of fabricating the rationale for that abandonment. Commenting on Tamar’s abandonment, Gerhard von Rad says: “Judah’s wrong lay in considering this solution as really final for himself but in presenting it to Tamar as an interim solution.”\(^42\)

Tamar, in being abandoned to her father’s home, assumes uncertain status.\(^43\) Even if her relationship with Er was not consummated, Onan's sexual play makes it clear that she is no longer a virgin. Her return to her father's home prohibits her from functioning as a widow or a wife within Judah's family. Not only is Tamar forced into a precarious position, but the rights and responsibilities of her father are also unclear. Judah accentuates this ambiguity by inferring that Tamar’s return to her family of origin is subject to time constraint when he has no intention of giving her to Shelah. In the meantime, Tamar’s father is not free to negotiate her marriage to anyone else and risks dishonour if anyone takes advantage of Tamar’s unresolved position. Such a tragedy occurs in Judges 15:1-8 when Samson’s father-in-law, assuming that Samson has abandoned his daughter, gives her to one of his friends. The dispute comes to its climax with both father and daughter being burned to death. In Tamar’s case, such a possibility is particularly sinister if her father is Judah’s friend, Hirah, and if her marriage to Er was not consummated before Onan had sexual access to her. Judah could be risking the honour a close

\(^{42}\) von Rad, \textit{Genesis}, 358.
\(^{43}\) Niditch, “Genesis,” 25.
friend, or even brother-in-law, but he has already proved himself capable of selling his own brother into slavery.

**Taking Stock of Judah’s Resources**

The narrator of Genesis 38 indicates that some time passes after Judah’s abandonment of Tamar by saying: “In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua’s daughter, died” (Genesis 38:12). After Judah finishes mourning for his wife, he goes to Timnah to his sheep-shearers with his friend Hirah (Genesis 38:12-13). This suggests that Judah’s personal wealth includes flocks and marketable produce of a level large enough to support employment of additional labour, granting Judah freedom to visit rather than having to constantly tend his sheep.44

Judah’s relationship with Hirah functions as an indicator of his changing social status. When Judah first arrives in this area, he is in a position of vulnerability. He presumably gains access to land because Hirah allows him to settle as a neighbour (Genesis 38:1). Judah benefits from the area’s resources, including the right to choose a wife and daughter-in-law. While it is not specifically stated that Hirah accepts Judah into his own family through intermarriage, the text concedes that Judah’s relationship with Hirah takes on a personal dimension that is classified as friendship (Genesis 38:12). By positioning Judah and Hirah amongst sheep-shearing activity, Genesis 38:12 also hints at a link between Judah’s obviously expanding resources and their friendship. However, a little later in the story, Hirah is suddenly portrayed as someone who runs errands on behalf of Judah (Genesis 38:20). Judah’s social status and resources seem to have increased to the point where the indigenous owners of the land now serve him.

Judah’s conversation with Tamar, when he unknowingly meets her on the road to Timnah, also includes references that give insight into his changing social status. He mentions a kid (יָבֹא) from his flock (Genesis 38:17). Although this word could be translated as “lamb”, 45 it could indicate that Judah keeps goats as well as sheep and that his marketable products include wool, skins, meat, milk and other dairy

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products. Tamar’s request that he hand over his signet, cord and staff as a pledge (Genesis 38:18), most certainly hints at socio-economic status consistent with a man who seals business deals with a mark and has property valuable enough to warrant identification.\(^{46}\)

Judah’s flocks have probably expanded as he takes over animals previously bred by Er and Onan. However, with only one surviving son, he must now rely on local men to tend his flocks. While the text indicates that Judah, in his relationship with Hirah, moves from newcomer status to that of a master, there is no explicit detail about Judah’s relationship with other local men, such as his father-in-law, Shua. It is not unreasonable however to consider the possibility that these men find their relationship with Judah results in subservience. Hirah could be Tamar’s father but he and his male relatives could now be relegated to the status of Judah’s workers.

**Tamar Survives by Seizing Opportunity**

Tamar’s chance to resist Judah’s abandonment comes when an anonymous person supplies her with information: “Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah” (Genesis 38:13). This information empowers Tamar to intercept Judah at a strategic location. The source of this information could be someone still inside Judah’s household or someone connected with Tamar’s family of origin. Again, it seems reasonable that Judah’s workers, who know about his flocks and personal movements, could also be Tamar’s relatives or that kinship links create an ongoing association between Judah’s household and the household of Tamar’s father.

Tamar’s propensity for action increases. She begins to move with determination.\(^{47}\) Still within the confines of her father’s home, and perhaps with the knowledge of the person who tells her about Judah’s movements, Tamar exchanges her widow’s clothes for a veil and wrap.\(^{48}\) She then positions herself “down at the entrance to


Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah” (Genesis 38:14). At this point, the narrator comments: “She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage.” It is unclear whether Tamar can actually see Shelah, perhaps tending his flocks in a nearby field, while she waits for Judah, and realises that during the years of her abandonment he has grown to manhood, or whether she retrospectively realises that Shelah was grown up at the time of Onan’s death. Either way she has been duped. Shelah never speaks for himself, leaving open the possibility that, like his brother Onan, he has no interest in preserving the family line through Tamar.49

The text does not specifically say that Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute, only that Judah, seeing her waiting near the entrance to Enaim, considers it possible that she is one (Genesis 38:15).50 Tamar, forced to endure a perpetual state of widowhood, like prostitutes and divorcees, occupies a marginal and ambiguous social position that is neither virgin nor wife. This ambiguity brings with it considerable risk. It would seem that Tamar’s chief concern at this stage is to resolve her marital status in a way that affords security and protection from danger. I therefore argue that Tamar positions herself at the entrance to Enaim with the intention of speaking to Judah about her right to a child from Shelah. It is only after Judah raises the possibility that she could be a prostitute that her survival skills kick in and she seizes an opportunity to conceive by him.51 This reading differs from commentators such as Robert Alter who assume that Tamar goes to the entrance of Enaim with a bold plan which takes advantage of Judah’s “state of sexual neediness” and “Judah takes the bait”.52

51 This view is in line with Brenner who claims that Tamar enters into the spirit of the game when she has opportunity. Brenner, I Am, 136.
As Tamar prepares to meet Judah, it seems more likely that she dons a veil and positions herself at the entrance to Enaim as an assertive statement that it is time for her marital status to be reassessed. Tamar, by changing her clothes, creates an element of surprise that increases the likelihood of Judah pausing for conversation. Had Tamar come to this place in her widow’s clothes, Judah might have ignored or avoided her. Although little has been written on the attire of ancient widows, it seems that they wore no head-covering or jewellery and might have gone without sandals, suggesting that they were totally confined to domestic space. They might have left their hair uncombed as a sign of grief and emphasised their status with an outer layer of sackcloth. In contrast, there is evidence to suggest that virgins and married women wore more beautiful clothes, sandals and jewellery and were veiled. For example, Abraham’s servant adorns Rebekah with a nose ring, bracelets and other jewellery, as well as giving her garments, as part of his bid to entice her into becoming Isaac’s wife. She covers herself with a veil just prior to meeting and marrying Isaac (Genesis 24:47-65).

Jacob’s experience of finding that he had unknowingly married Leah, rather than her sister Rachel (Genesis 29:21-25), also suggests a tradition of veiling brides to the extent that their personal identity is not obvious.

Since prostitutes’ attire was specific to local and regional custom, we cannot know for certain what such women wore in Canaan/Israel, but there is evidence to


53 The Book of Judith gives some insight into widow’s clothing when Judith stops crying, removes her widow’s garments and an outer layer of sackcloth. She then dresses herself in beautiful clothes that she used to wear when her husband was alive, including a headpiece. She combs her hair, anoints her body and puts on sandals and jewellery as if widows did not practice such grooming and accessorising (Judith 10:1-10). After Tamar, the daughter of King David, is raped she immediately tears her gown, reducing it to a garment that makes obvious her distress. She also puts ashes on her head, perhaps in an effort to create the unkempt look associated with desolation and widowhood (2 Samuel 13:19). When David stops grieving for Bathsheba’s first child, he washes, anoints himself and changes his clothes, suggesting that such things were not done during mourning (2 Samuel 20). See also von Rad, Genesis, 359; Tarlin, “Tamar’s Veil,” 178; Soggin, “Judah and Tamar,” 282.

54 Genesis Rabbah 85:7 highlights the themes of marriage and progeny by emphasising that Rebekah and Tamar both wrap themselves in veils and both become mothers to twins. Jewish women, even in contemporary times, preserve a link with Rebekah by veiling brides in the bedekin ceremony before they meet the groom beneath the huppah, the marriage canopy. To strengthen their connection with Rebekah, the women veiling the bride recite the blessing that Rebekah receives from her family before leaving home: “O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads!” (Genesis 24:60). Frankel, The Five Books of Miriam, 36.
suggest that they were not necessarily veiled.\textsuperscript{55} It is therefore plausible that Tamar comes to this place intending to impress upon Judah her readiness for a new relationship and that she intends the veil to be interpreted as a signal that she is no longer willing to live as a widow.\textsuperscript{56} It seems more reasonable that Tamar would choose to wear one of her own garments, reminiscent of a time in her life when her status was less ambiguous and something she yearns to routinely wear again, than purposely acquire prostitutes’ garb. Judah, however, seeing only a woman who is without male protection, misses the cue that this is Tamar dressed in preparation for marriage to his son Shelah. Instead he assumes, because she is unaccompanied, that she is available for sexual service.\textsuperscript{57} While one possible translation for the entrance to Enaim (הָעֲמִיָּם) is “the opening of the eyes”,\textsuperscript{58} the eyes of Judah have not been opened. He fails to recognise Tamar and his responsibility to act in ways that facilitate her marriage and security.

Tamar chooses a place of public significance that might be either an entrance gate to a small village or a fork in the road.\textsuperscript{59} As noted in earlier chapters, in the Hebrew Bible, town gates are typically places where community elders gather to deal with complaints, legal issues and marriage negotiations (Genesis 34:20; Deuteronomy 25:7; Ruth 4:1). In line with this reasoning, the place name Enaim can also be translated as “spring” or “double spring”.\textsuperscript{60} As I argued in Chapter 3, in relation to Hagar, there is a repeated tendency in the Hebrew Bible for marriage negotiations of women destined to become great matriarchs to occur at a well or spring. Richard J. Clifford argues that Tamar, by positioning herself in such a

\textsuperscript{55} Michael Astour, although arguing that Tamar was posing as a cultic prostitute, cites evidence from ancient Babylon and Assyria to argue that both common and cultic prostitutes were not necessarily veiled when in public places. While cultic prostitutes were known to marry, their veil was more a symbol of marital status than an indicator of their cultic role. Michael C. Astour, “Tamar the Hierodule: An Essay in the Method of Vestigial Motifs,” JBL 85 (1966): 187, 192. Jeremiah 3:3 refers to the forehead of a prostitute, similarly suggesting that they were not necessarily veiled. See also Bird, Missing Persons, 200, 204.

\textsuperscript{56} Tarlin, “Tamar’s Veil,” 178.

\textsuperscript{57} Tarlin, “Tamar’s Veil,” 175-179.

\textsuperscript{58} Tarlin, “Tamar’s Veil,” 175.

\textsuperscript{59} Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 53; Davidson, Genesis 12-50, 228.

\textsuperscript{60} Clifford, “Genesis 38,” 529. See also Robinson, “bêpetah ’&ayim,” 569.
location demonstrates that she “no less than Rebekah and Rachel, is a fruitful ‘wife’ of an ancestor”. 61

Judah, who seemed so hard-hearted after the deaths of his two sons, does mourn the death of his wife (Genesis 38:12), but his own experience of widowhood does not cause him to reassess his attitude toward Tamar.62 While he has sentenced Tamar to widow’s garb for years, he now moves quickly to ensure that his own sexual needs do not remain unsatisfied.63 Judah, in seeing an accompanied woman, has a fleeting thought that is typically translated as him considering Tamar to be a common prostitute, zonah (תועז). However, as the Hebrew verb זונא encompasses a range of non-marital relations including fornication and adultery, it is possible that Judah thinks of her as an unaccompanied woman and therefore considers her sexually available.64 He makes no attempt to clarify whether she is in fact a prostitute, whether her veil indicates that she is married or why she is waiting alone. By failing to clarify these matters, Judah places himself at risk of adultery and possible death. Showing no concern for the woman’s safety, or his own, he immediately jumps to: “Come, let me come in to you” (Genesis 38:16). These words, which request sexual intercourse but make no reference to payment, suggest Judah might know that he is propositioning a married woman rather than striking up a business deal with a prostitute. Such a scenario becomes even more plausible when it is revealed that Judah has brought with him nothing that could be used as immediate payment for sexual services, indicating that he was not planning to engage a prostitute and might see the veiled woman as an unpaid alternative.

While Judah proposes a quick fix to sexual urge, Tamar recognises an opportunity to be worked to her own advantage.65 She reacts on impulse. Rather than immediately identifying herself and risking Judah punishing her for being unaccompanied in a public place, she quickly changes tack and plays along with the ambiguity that he has created. Contemporary victims of oppression are likely

61 Clifford, “Genesis 38,” 529.
64 Tarlin, “Tamar’s Veil,” 176.
to recognise Tamar’s survival strategy of “making a run for it.” She seizes an unexpected opportunity as soon as it presents. No doubt Tamar is aware that she is venturing into dangerous territory. Her survival is dependent, not only on her capacity to seize opportunity but also her ability to ensure safety. The ingenuity of Tamar’s survival strategy is that she does not simply move to claim offspring from Judah but also protects herself by insisting on measures that will later identify him as the father of her children.66

It is significant that Tamar speaks her first words at the entrance to Enaim.67 She comes to voice as she seizes an opportunity to make a run for her own survival: “What will you give me, that you may come in to me?” (Genesis 38:16). Tamar who has been acted upon, now positions herself as a person to be acknowledged and with whom Judah must negotiate. She courageously asks what will be “given” to her.68 In return for sexual intercourse, Judah offers to send her a kid from his flock. Tamar, legally entitled to offspring who will inherit a large slice of Judah’s total wealth, shows little interest in this token concession but uses Judah’s promise of the kid to obtain indicators of his identity: his signet, cord and staff. From Tamar’s perspective, neither the kid nor Judah’s insignia function as payment for sexual intercourse but rather provide life protection in her bid to survive and continue the family line.

**Just Kidding Around: Has Anyone Seen a Prostitute?**

Tamar places herself a step ahead of Judah by getting up immediately after intercourse and leaving him. By moving quickly, she allows no opportunity for discussion, discovery or retaliation. Tamar places herself further ahead by removing the veil and returning to her widow’s garb (Genesis 38:19). Sensing that danger will result if she lingers in Judah’s company or continues to wear the veil, she quickly takes action.

Judah, although he is eager to have his insignia returned, has no hope of keeping up with Tamar’s pace. While he has denied Tamar resources for years, he now

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moves to honour an agreement that he made with a woman who responded to a request for sex by reacting as if she was a common prostitute. The narrator however states that Judah sends Hirah with the promised kid to recover the pledge from (the woman) which can also be translated as “the wife”. Perhaps this subtly indicates that, while Judah treats the veiled woman as a prostitute, he does not exclude the possibility that she is married.

For an Israelite man like Judah, sex with a common prostitute was not a dishonourable or illegal action, because such a woman is outside the protection of a husband or father, posing no threat to another man’s sexual property. The ambiguity that Judah might have had sex with a married woman is, however, particularly problematic to the point of placing him at risk of death. Hirah, when trying to identify the woman with whom Judah has had sex, so that she can be given the goat owed to her, seemingly tries to add a touch of discretion by describing her as a cultic prostitute, qedeshah ( qedesh). He might do this out of fear or embarrassment at the compromising situation in which Judah has become entangled. For, as some commentators have argued, intercourse with a (cultic prostitute) was socially acceptable in Canaanite society and was even attributed great religious significance. It is also possible that in substituting (cultic prostitute) for (the woman) Hirah is endeavouring to mock Judah by feigning a search for woman that everyone in the community knows does not exist. Whatever Hirah’s reason for changing the nomenclature, in doing so, he creates problems for Judah who lives in Canaan but is forbidden to participate in activities of cultic prostitution (Deuteronomy 23:17-18; Hosea 4:13-14).

If the woman at the entrance to Enaim was married, she would not place herself at risk of death by coming forward to claim Judah’s goat. Judah’s own reaction indicates that if the woman near Enaim was a (common prostitute), his honour might not actually be at stake, but community knowledge that he is now

71 Davidson, Genesis 12-50, 229.
73 Menn, Judah and Tamar, 69-73.
experiencing problems in trying to pay for his liaison places him at the brunt of ridicule. When Judah realises that Hirah, with goat in tow, has been seeking to identify “the woman” by questioning the townspeople about the presence of a נְבוֹת (cultic prostitute), he claims that he is at risk of being mocked. Perhaps fearing consequences even worse than public ridicule, he immediately seeks to distance himself from what is rapidly turning into a fiasco by referring to the woman only by the third person feminine singular pronoun. He states: “Let her keep the things as her own.” (Genesis 38:23). By now, Judah knows that whoever the woman is, he is being played for a fool.

The townspeople’s conclusion that there was no prostitute at the village entrance does not mean that no one saw נְבוֹת (the woman) wearing a veil and standing in a place where justice is administered and marriages negotiated. It is possible that, in their response to Hirah, the townspeople enjoy the humour and fine shades of meaning evident in his question. Their answer that they had not seen a נְבוֹת (cultic prostitute) still leaves open the option that they might have joked between themselves about Judah liaising with נְבוֹת (the woman/wife) or a חַטָּאת (common prostitute). Alternatively, if Hirah is Tamar's father, or if he knows Tamar was beneath the veil, his question about a נְבוֹת (cultic prostitute) is a red herring. He, and possibly members of the wider community, could know that there was no prostitute, only Tamar, in the area at the time in question. The suspicion that the townspeople know more than they are prepared to publicly declare suggests dynamics similar to Scott’s differentiation between the hidden and public transcripts and the possibility that feigned ignorance is being used as a tool of resistance.

Death Sentence Pronounced: Who is Guilty?

About three months after Judah's meeting with the veiled woman, it once again becomes evident that close links remain between his household and the household of Tamar’s father. Information about Tamar is transmitted to Judah by an anonymous person who is close enough to Tamar to pick up on signs of early

74 Menn, Judah and Tamar, 66.
75 Scott, Domination, xi-xii, 17-28, 136-140; Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 28-37.
pregnancy. Judah is told: “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom” (Genesis 38:24). As the Hebrew verb מֵעָשָׂה encompasses non-marital relations, including fornication and adultery, Tamar is not necessarily being accused of having worked as a common prostitute, although her economic situation certainly places her at risk of this.⁷⁶ Judah sees no connection between his abandonment of Tamar and his unresolved debt to the woman at the entrance of Enaim.⁷⁷

Judah immediately pronounces the death penalty upon Tamar, and within the space of two Hebrew words, dictates that this be administered in a most horrific form – by fire (הָשָׂרְתִּים).⁷⁸ Although Judah has not shown any interest in affording Tamar protection, he does not hesitate to take advantage of her now ambiguous status within her father’s household by jumping instantly to the death penalty. He asks no questions but assumes her complicity in illegal liaison. In acting so rashly, he demonstrates not only patriarchal dominance and lack of compassion, but also endangers his own progeny secretly hidden within Tamar’s womb.⁷⁹ While at first glance it seems that the person who transmits information to Judah about Tamar's pregnancy is yielding power to him, it is also possible that someone in league with her could be purposely triggering circumstances to call Judah to accountability.

Tamar’s death would be a very convenient solution to Judah’s unresolved responsibilities and he does not seem particularly interested in the details that lead to her being accused of illicit conduct.⁸⁰ Walter Brueggemann notes that this scene presents a striking contrast between a man who has status in the community, and a woman who is outside the law and denied recourse to protection.⁸¹ Gerhard von Rad notes inconsistencies in that Tamar’s offence occurred due to Judah banishing her from his family but she is sentenced on his word as patriarch, banishing her from his family but she is sentenced on his word as patriarch, banishing her from his family but she is sentenced on his word as patriarch.

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⁸⁰ Havea, *Elusions of Control*, 175.
⁸¹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 310.
without the right of appeal to a community hearing at the town gate. In ancient Israel, even common prostitutes had this right. For as Bird, Brenner and Menn all point out, a common prostitute in ancient Israelite society was an outcast but not an outlaw. They were despised, because they were not under male guardianship but tolerated.

The ambiguity of Tamar’s marital status and the risk this poses to the honour of her father becomes strikingly evident. It is Judah, rather than Tamar’s father, who passes judgment on her (Genesis 38:24). There are parallels between Tamar’s predicament and Deuteronomistic law that allows a groom to complain when he suspects that a woman offered to him in marriage is not a virgin. In such circumstances, the onus then falls on the bride’s parents to produce evidence of her virginity to the elders at the town gate (Deuteronomy 22:15). If no evidence is produced, the bride is brought “to the entrance of her father’s house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father’s house” (Deuteronomy 22:21). In Genesis 38:24, Tamar is brought out from the house of her father to be burned. Judah did not talk to Tamar’s father about either her marriage to his son or his subsequent abandonment of her. His act of abandonment and pronouncement of the death sentence, however, identify her father’s home as a site of dishonour.

It is unclear whether Judah sentences Tamar for “prostituting herself in her father’s house” or as a married woman accused of adultery (Deuteronomy 22:13-22). Technically Tamar cannot be sentenced for the former because she has not been deceitfully presented to a groom as if she is a virgin. If the charge that Judah brings against Tamar is adultery, he hypocritically claims familial rights over her after having abandoned her. In order for Tamar to be charged with adultery, she must be either Er’s widow or Shelah’s future wife. If she is Er’s widow, she is denied care and offspring. If she is Shelah’s future wife, she is denied access to

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him. In bringing a charge of adultery, Judah also unwittingly pronounces a death sentence upon himself (Deuteronomy 22:22).

Tamar is granted no time to explore legal complexities or lodge a plea of mercy. As soon as Judah pronounces the death sentence, she is brought forth to be burnt (Genesis 38:25). Once again, she manages to save herself by acting quickly with survivor instinct. On the brink of death, she sends word to Judah that she is pregnant by the man who owns the signet, cord and staff. She bravely raises her voice in public space: “Take note, please, whose these are, the signet, the cord and staff” (Genesis 38:25). As Westermann notes, there is nothing to explain how Tamar manages to communicate with Judah after the death sentence is pronounced. This however is the third time in Genesis 38 that strategic information has been transmitted between people with knowledge of Judah and Tamar, suggesting that Tamar’s bid for justice has a high level of support. The crowd that gathes in response to the announced execution also functions as a form of resistance. Judah, on seeing his personal possessions held up to public view, instantly recognises Tamar as the woman at the entrance to Enaim. He proceeds to implicate himself by claiming ownership of the items and declaring that Tamar, who is sentenced to death, is “more right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah” (Genesis 38:26). Judah, who assumed the role of judge, now proclaims that he is more to blame than Tamar. It is a most astonishing role reversal that places Judah at risk on a number of counts.

86 Wenham, Word Biblical Commentary, 370; Streee, The Strange Woman, 53.
87 Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 54. See also von Rad, Genesis, 361.
89 Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 54. See also von Rad, Genesis, 361.
90 In his history of public executions Foucault notes a tendency for communities to gather in solidarity, often using trickery or other resistance methods to free an accused person. Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 3-5, 9-15, 47-57, 67, 259-264; Dreyfus and Rabinow, Michel Foucault, 146-147.
Judah’s open admission that he is the owner of the items presented by Tamar might indicate that he has a level of moral scruple. Westermann jumps to Judah’s defence: “Judah, an honourable man, shows himself equal to the difficult and somewhat humiliating situation.” It is however more likely that Judah is socially cornered with no option but to admit responsibility. The townspeople witnessed Hirah's efforts to locate a prostitute. They might have been secretly joking for months about the loss of Judah’s signet, cord and staff. Tamar, who had the right to publicly humiliate Judah’s sons for their failure to honour levirate marriage, chooses this moment, when Judah is most vulnerable, to publicly call him to justice. Judah did not see his sons’ culpability and did not recognise Tamar on the road to Timnah. He has persistently failed to acknowledge his own wealth and responsibilities toward his own kin. Now, in a public place, he is faced with symbols that identify him as central to the plot. Just as Tamar took matters into her own hands at the entrance of Enaim, forcing an encounter which paralleled legal complaint and marriage negotiation, she once again “re-authors” her story by avoiding death and claiming her rights. Judah is cornered.

When disguises are peeled away, Judah’s liaison with Tamar contravenes the Israelite laws that forbid adultery and sexual contact between fathers-in-law and daughters-in-law (Deuteronomy 22:22; Leviticus 18:15). Judah has no choice but to release Tamar from the fate of execution. He risks this punishment being applied to himself, both in relation to his sexual advance on Tamar and his role in selling Joseph into slavery (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7). Although Judah’s two sons were reportedly killed for offending Yhwh, he is now spared forthright divine intervention but is compelled to offer Tamar a life-giving alternative. Perhaps Judah escapes being seized by community uprising due to his willingness to release Tamar. He might also be spared because the community is reliant on him for employment, or because the community is more respectful of family links than he is.

93 Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 55.
95 In Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis 38:25-26 Judah makes a public speech when he sees his cord, signet-ring and staff, claiming that it is better for him to suffer death and embarrassment in this present world than before his fathers in the world to come. He confesses to dipping Joseph’s coat in blood, to deceiving his father Jacob and also to treating Tamar unjustly. See also Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis 38:25.
Tamar's assertive efforts reap some rewards. She gives birth to twin sons, Perez and Zerah, and also succeeds in securing some rights, such as family inheritance through legitimate offspring and protection from further sexual abuse within Judah’s family. Judah, having previously created a situation in which Onan could take sexual advantage of Tamar without granting her security, now publicly declares her righteousness in a way that grants her some security without further sexual expectation. The narrator emphasises that Judah never again has sexual relations with Tamar (Genesis 38:26). Although Judah does not specifically claim paternity of Tamar’s sons, or publicly commit to materially providing for Tamar during her pregnancy, she herself attributes paternity to him by saying: “It was the owner of these who made me pregnant” (Genesis 38:25).

Tamar’s ability to speak out in her own voice is all too briefly confined to just four sentences (Genesis 38:16, 17, 18, 25). While Jione Havea argues that Tamar also speaks during childbirth (Genesis 38:28), I argue that the labour is reported from the perspective of an anonymous midwife. Tamar, previously positioned as a receptacle for Onan’s sperm, now becomes a nameless womb from which twin boys emerge (Genesis 38:27). When Tamar is in labour, readers assume the view of the midwife, watching for babies to emerge from the birth canal. Although Tamar is side-lined during childbirth, there are allusions connecting her experience to that of the great Israelite matriarch Rebekah. Tamar and Rebekah are the only biblical women who give birth to twins. Both deliveries emphasise twins struggling within the womb, the colour red and the hand of one twin being forced forward (Genesis 25:22-26; 38:27-30).

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96 Jubilees 41:19-27 emphasises that Judah never again has sex with Tamar. He acknowledges that he has been evil to lie with his daughter-in-law. He receives divine forgiveness but the narrator issues a strong warning that any man who lies with his daughter-in-law or mother-in-law will burn by fire.


98 Havea, Elusions of Control, 176-177.

99 van Wolde, “Intertextuality,” 434; Menn, Judah and Tamar, 33.

100 van Wolde, “Intertextuality,” 434; Menn, Judah and Tamar, 34.

During Tamar’s labour, the midwife makes no effort to establish a personal connection. One of the twins, Zerah, presents hand-first and then retracts. The midwife, focusing on the male twins and eager to document the birthright of the elder, matter-of-factly ties a crimson thread on Zerah’s emergent hand and declares: “This one came out first” (Genesis 38:28). When Zerah's hand is retracted and the other twin, Perez, is born the midwife once again focuses on the child without acknowledging Tamar: “What a breach you have made of yourself!” (Genesis 38:29). Westermann interprets these words as the midwife admonishing the baby Perez for being violent.102

The violence, reflected in the choice of Perez’s name, which means to breach or rupture, could extend beyond his pushing in front of Zerah to also tearing his mother’s perineum,103 and even upstaging Tamar on the pages of history.104 From this point, Tamar becomes the mother of Perez who grows up to head the Judahite clan into which Boaz is born. Generations later, when the people of Bethlehem pronounce a blessing on the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, Tamar’s name is linked with matriarchs of Israel but she is remembered only in relation to Perez: “may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah” (Ruth 4:11-13).105

Tamar does not even actively name her sons but rather this task is performed by some anonymous male person: “and he called his name Perez” (Genesis 38:29) “and he called his name Zerah” (Genesis 38:30, my translations). At the beginning of Genesis 38, Judah names his firstborn son, Er, but then Judah’s wife, Bath-shua, assumes the right to name her next two sons, Onan and Shelah (Genesis 38:3-5). Tamar, however, fades into silence amid uncertainty over who actually

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102 Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 55.
103 Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 55.
105 Both Perez and Zerah are mentioned in Genesis 46:12 and Numbers 26:20. The importance of Perez’s line is emphasised but there is no mention of Tamar. There are several references to the clan of Zerah in Joshua but all are associated with Achan who is stoned to death in the Valley of Achor for illicitly helping himself to the spoils of war (Joshua 7:1, 16-18, 24; 22:20). The name Zerah also appears in Edomite genealogies in Genesis 36:33.
names her children.\textsuperscript{106} Genealogical material documenting the origins of Davidic kingship in 1 Chronicles 2:3-4 records that Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law and that she bore to him Perez and Zerah and her name is also preserved in the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew 1:3. She does not however rate a mention in Judahite genealogies in Genesis 46:12, Numbers 26:19-22 and Ruth 4:18-22. The genealogy at the end of Ruth simply begins: “Now these are the descendants of Perez” (Ruth 4:18). Tamar is at risk of fading from history.

Genesis remains silent on whether Judah subsequently gives Shelah to Tamar as a husband.\textsuperscript{107} Chronicles 4:21 interprets Genesis in a way that suggests Shelah did subsequently honour levirate marriage obligations with Tamar because the name of his first son is listed as Er. However this text, like Numbers 26:19-22, which indicates that Shelah becomes a clan leader within the tribe of Judah, does not name the mother of his children. Although Genesis 38:8-9 emphasises the need for Tamar to conceive in Er’s name, there is no evidence that this actually happens, despite the assumptions of some commentators.\textsuperscript{108} Later generations never trace their ancestry back to Er.\textsuperscript{109} Some genealogical references bluntly state that Er and Onan died and make no subsequent reference to clans in their honour (Numbers 26:19; Genesis 46:12; 1 Chronicles 2:3).\textsuperscript{110} Shelah, Perez and Zerah all become clan leaders according to Numbers 26:19-22 but the genealogical material as a whole awards particular status to Perez above his older half-brother Shelah and twin brother Zerah. In keeping with the overall thrust of Genesis, the law of primogeniture is overthrown as a younger brother usurps status and continues the

\textsuperscript{106} Menn, Judah and Tamar, 34.
\textsuperscript{107} von Rad, Genesis, 361; Havea, Elusions of Control, 178; Jeansonne, The Women of Genesis, 106; Schaberg, “Before Mary,” 14; Soggin, “Judah and Tamar,” 282. Taking a different perspective, Brett assumes that Judah does give Shelah to Tamar in marriage. However, the basis for Brett’s reasoning is unclear. Brett, Genesis, 127.
\textsuperscript{108} Westermann is among commentators who assume that Tamar’s twins were conceived in Er’s name. Commenting on Genesis 38:27, he says: “It is presupposed that Tamar has been received back into her family with honor. The twins that she is expecting are legitimate, i.e. they are recognized as children of her deceased husband, fathered by a member of the family of this house.” Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 55.
\textsuperscript{109} Luther, “The Novella of Judah and Tamar,” 92.
\textsuperscript{110} Weisberg, “The Widow of our Discontent,” 416.
family line. This pattern is consistent with Judah, the fourth son born to Jacob, becoming ancestor to the kings of Israel.

**Judah’s Amazing Transformation**

When Judah next appears in biblical text he has accompanied nine of his brothers to Egypt to buy grain in a bid to protect Jacob’s extended family from famine. Judah’s life-changing confrontation with Tamar, and possibly also a reversal of personal circumstances caused by scarcity of food within the region, might have served as a catalyst for a reunion with his father and brothers. In Egypt, the brothers come before Joseph who has risen to a position of power within the Egyptian court, but they do not recognise him (Genesis 42:8). Joseph accuses his ten brothers of being spies and insists that one of them be detained in Egypt while the others go and fetch their younger brother Benjamin (Genesis 42:9-24). Jacob, still grieving the loss of Joseph and now fearing that he has also lost Simeon, is adamant that Benjamin will not go to Egypt but lack of food eventually forces the issue.

Judah negotiates with Jacob when it seems that family deaths will be unavoidable if Jacob continues to refuse permission for Benjamin to go to Egypt. Perhaps the arrival of Perez and Zerah contribute to a softening in Judah that enables him to look beyond jealousies of the past. He expresses concern for overall family survival with particular reference to provision of food for children:

> Send the boy [Benjamin] with me, and let us be on our way, so that we may live and not die – you and we and also our little ones. I myself will be surety for him; you can hold me accountable for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever (Genesis 43:8-9).

The sensitivity that Judah now shows toward Jacob, and the protection that he offers Benjamin, is an amazing contrast to his previous hard-heartedness. It suggests that his public encounter with Tamar has forced him to consider the fragility of his own existence. Judah is lucky to be alive and has descendents through the persistence of a woman he exploited. The famine has most likely jeopardised flocks he built up during years of separation from his family. He now

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111 Jackson, “Lot’s Daughters and Tamar,” 44.

seems more conscious of extended family networks. For the first time, he moves beyond a focus on his own needs to articulate that the survival of various generations is at risk, and that the actions of one generation impact on the others.¹¹³

When the brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin, Joseph makes a show of his own power by framing Benjamin as a thief and threatening to separate him from the other brothers (Genesis 44:1-17). Judah then honours his commitment to Jacob by stepping forward to protect Benjamin with a plea for mercy (Genesis 44:18-34). He admits something of the family’s past pain and seems eager to rectify some of the wrongs that he has committed.¹¹⁴ Judah has turned a radical about-face. Having once proposed Joseph’s sale into slavery, he now offers himself to Joseph as a slave in return for Benjamin’s freedom (Genesis 44:22). Having previously abandoned his father at time of inconsolable grief, he now shows unprecedented empathy and compassion: “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 44:34).

Future Options: Continuing the Journey with Tamar of Genesis 38

Contemporary survivors need to guard against the possibility that Judah’s amazing transformation will be used to justify the abuse inflicted on Tamar. They need to critique dominant discourses that hold abuse survivors responsible for perpetrators’ salvation. Judah, although drastically changed by his encounter with Tamar, is still responsible for his own abusive actions. Tamar must be credited for her courageous resistance in leaving her father’s house and positioning herself at the entrance to Enaim; and again in speaking out when she is brought out for execution. She cannot again be banished to silence.

Tamar’s story illustrates that resistance to abuse can be resourced through community solidarity. Although she is widowed and subsequently abandoned, she seems particularly well connected to local networks probably as a result of


¹¹⁴ Wenham, Word Biblical Commentary, 364; Brett, Genesis, 127.
belonging to an indigenous family. Even when Judah abandons Tamar, she remains within close proximity and information is transmitted between Judah and herself in ways that support her resistance (Genesis 38:13, 24, 25). Like the local townspeople, who seem to know much more than they let on when Hirah tries to locate “the woman” to whom Judah owes payment (Genesis 38:20-23), contemporary survivors can use their own subjugated knowledges to explore the differences between hidden and public transcripts, in both biblical texts and their present situations. They can explore ways in which information continues to be a source of power. They can also experience the strength of solidarity to empower resistance and provide opportunities for transformation by building and documenting their own support networks.

Tamar’s isolation can be further resisted by strengthening her connection to other great women in Israelite history. Tamar, in giving birth to twins, who battle with each other even before they emerge from her womb (Genesis 38:27-30), is linked to the matriarch Rebekah who also births warring twins (Genesis 25:22-26). Tamar’s name is remembered, generations later, in the blessing that is recited when Ruth the Moabite marries Boaz (Ruth 4:11-12) and both of these women are later identified as key links in the family line of King David and Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:1-17). As a foreign woman, Ruth, like Tamar, contests theologies of ethnocentric exclusionism to continue the Judahite line after emerging from abandonment and poverty. These biblical women create precedents that can inspire contemporary survivors to share stories and note overlapping patterns of experience. Abandonment and the consequences of abuse do not have to be passively accepted but rather survivors can work in solidarity to claim what is rightfully their due. After all Tamar, a foreign woman who is used and abused, proves more righteous than Judah, the great tribal ancestor (Genesis 38:26).

Contemporary survivors, by reading Genesis 38 against the so-called Joseph narratives, can unmask the self-interest and callousness that Judah demonstrates toward Tamar and other members of his family. Judah demonstrates a persistent pattern of being more interested in building wealth than honouring family responsibilities. This is evident in his proposal to sell Joseph into slavery, his lack of compassion for Jacob’s grief, his failure to respond effectively to the deaths of
Er and Onan, and his mistreatment of Tamar. His failure to give Shelah to Tamar seems motivated more by fears of the economic implications if Shelah should die rather than a sense of love. Judah abandons Tamar to her family of origin without any sign of concern for her welfare, even though he is obviously endowed with flocks and other economic resources. Onan exacerbates Tamar’s vulnerability by placing his own economic considerations before respect for her security. Contemporary survivors can unmask the ulterior motives of Judah and Onan and read these against their own subjugated knowledges to assess the multiple forces and underlying motives that continue to contribute to abuse in present day situations.

Survivors cannot ignore the ethical bind of Yhwh being implicated in the deaths of Er and Onan (Genesis 38:7, 10). Such divine violence, even when it is defined as an act of justice, needs to be challenged. Whenever contemporary survivors identify divine violence in biblical texts, or when God is co-opted in support of the violence meted out in present day contexts, they can exercise their right to resist by calling on the deity to act justly. Or alternatively, as the tradition of the “psalms of disorientation” show, they are free to vent their anger and lay the blame squarely on God.

Tamar’s legacy to contemporary survivors includes her amazing capacity to transform death into new life. When she throws off her widow’s garb and veils herself to meet Judah (Genesis 38:14), she deliberately rejects his attempt to abandon her and insists that she will not spend the rest of her life as a desperate, childless widow. In acquiring Judah’s signet, cord and staff, she demonstrates survivor instinct that is ready to “make a run for it” but wise enough “cover her back” for safety. She knows that there are life-giving alternatives to her present reality and she takes action to claim them. She “re-authors” her own life at the precise moment when she faces the flames of death.
Chapter 6

Tamar – Daughter of King David (2 Samuel 13)

At first glance, the story of the rape of Tamar, the daughter of King David, in 2 Samuel 13, offers little in the way of hope and redemption. As male members of the Davidic household scheme and manipulate, in bids to obtain the royal throne, their politics becomes inscribed on Tamar’s grief-striken body, seemingly rendering her forever desolate (2 Samuel 13:20).1 The story is a prime illustration of the feminist saying: “the personal is political.”2 However, despite the tragedy of Tamar’s experience, including the lack of resolution to her suffering, contemporary abuse survivors continue to find within her story resources for restoration and healing.3

Pamela Cooper-White, in urging survivors to reclaim the “subversive memory” of Tamar's story, says two things are necessary to ensure that such abuse does not continue in contemporary contexts. Stories need to be heard and the power abuse that contributes to such violations needs to be critiqued.4 Abuse survivor Tracy Hansen attributes the power of Tamar’s story to the fact that her name, feelings and words have been remembered when survivors have been traditionally silenced and ignored:

An incident that could easily have been dismissed in the patriarchal culture as a minor domestic tragedy has been preserved and handed down in the biblical tradition, and is there for us today.5

Hansen highlights that Tamar, like many contemporary survivors, is assaulted in surroundings that are familiar to her and that her fate could have been different, if only her father David had opened his eyes to provide her with adequate care.6

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2 Commentators who emphasise “the personal is political” as a key feminist statement include: Zikmund, “Feminist Consciousness,” 28; Squires, “In Different Voices,” 129.
3 West and Zondi-Mabizela, “The Bible Story,” 4-12; Hansen, “My Name is Tamar,” 370-376; Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 10-14.
4 Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 1, 14.
5 Hansen, “My Name is Tamar,” 374. Tamar’s name is also remembered in 1 Chronicles 3:9 where she is listed as the sister of King David’s sons.
6 Hansen, “My Name is Tamar,” 371.
Hansen, in spite of all the devastating details in Tamar’s story, claims hope from it that contemporary survivors will rise above abusive experiences to new life. She says:

The name Tamar itself is a symbol of this, for it means “palm tree”, and in Scripture the palm is a symbol of victory and rejoicing. This story is a story of hope and promise for victims of sexual abuse: whoever they are, wherever they are…

Survivors can be united through sharing Tamar’s story. Her story is also their story, as poet Rachel M. Srubas expresses through her search to find Tamar amongst veiled women, tourists and fears of violence on the streets of present-day Jerusalem:

Tamar, I remember
the animal howl of your voice,
your violated body in a torn gown.
Outside your brother’s bolted door,
your forehead smeared with ash…

Let me recollect you.
Let me remember your life,
storied, brief and sisterly.

Let me stop for a supper of falafel;
fried like the last meal you cooked,
and gather the strength to keep looking for you,
and pray that I’ll find you,
somewhere in Jerusalem,
tomorrow, Tamar.

Placing Tamar’s Story into Wider Context

The story of the rape of Tamar needs to be read against the wider succession narratives of 2 Samuel. For, by the time Tamar is raped in 2 Samuel 13, she is not the first person in David’s family to find that he does nothing to guarantee her...
rights or protect her safety. By then, abusive patterns are well-entrenched as a result of David’s illicit liaison with Bathsheba while his troops are away at battle. David kills a number of his own soldiers, including Bathsheba’s husband Uriah, in a bid to cover up his dirty dealings (2 Samuel 11). Cycles of war and Davidic family violence continue well beyond the point where Tamar fades into obscurity (2 Samuel 13:20). The horror of Tamar’s experience is linked to the narrator and prophet Nathan presenting Yhwh as an abusive character who precipitates the violence against her through pronouncement of judgement which has particularly dire consequences for the female members of David’s family (2 Samuel 12:7-14).

However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, although Tamar is ultimately silenced, she demonstrates traits of resistance that reveal great strength.

Events immediately preceding the rape of Tamar emphasise that David, in order to maintain his position as king of Israel and Judah, must straddle a shaky tension between seeking political alliances with other kingdoms and violently acquiring as much foreign territory as possible. His marriages are politically motivated and he shows little concern for the feelings of women in his household, even demonstrating a willingness to kill relatives of his wives in order to satisfy political ends and acquire territory. There are also indicators that two of David’s marriages might be incestuous. If David’s wife Ahinoam was previously married to King Saul, David could be guilty of having sexual relations with his own mother-in-law, given that he is also married to Saul’s daughter Michal. Under Israeliite law such relationships are offensive to the extent of all parties being condemned to death by burning (Leviticus 20:14). David might also have

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13 Ahinoam is only directly mentioned twice in the Hebrew Bible. In 1 Samuel 14:50 she is the wife of Saul and there is nothing to indicate that she is not the mother of Saul’s five children, including Jonathan and Michal, listed in the previous verse. Ahinoam appears in 2 Samuel 3:1-4 as David’s wife. Saul gives his daughter Michal to David as wife in 1 Samuel 18:27.
14 Jubilees 41:27 also issues a strong warning that any man who lies with his mother-in-law will burn by fire.
married his sister, Abigail, after the death of her first husband (Nabal, a nickname meaning “fool”, but also known as Ithra or Jether). Such a marriage would be politically strategic, increasing David’s wealth and influence particularly in the Calebite regions of Judah, but contrary to Israelite law (Leviticus 18:9; 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22).  

**Brutality on the Battlefield and Violence at Home**

The possibility that David’s ambition and quest for territory implicates him in killing relatives of his own wives is alluded to in 2 Samuel 10 in a battle which flares after Nahash the king of the Ammonites dies and is succeeded by his son, Hanun. The Ammonites prepare for battle by forming alliances with neighbouring people-groups (2 Samuel 10:6). The king and men of Maacah join forces with the Ammonites against David, hinting that he is at war with relatives of one of his own wives – Maacah, the mother of Absalom and Tamar (2 Samuel 3:3). While 2 Samuel 3:3 identifies Maacah as the daughter of King Talmai of Geshur, her name strongly suggests additional family connections to the king of Maacah.

The defeat of the Ammonites is alluded to in 2 Samuel 10:14 where David’s military commander, Joab, seems satisfied enough with the battle result to return to Jerusalem. Despite this seeming victory, references to Israeliite military action against the Ammonites continue into 2 Samuel 11 and 12. These additional references frame David’s illicit liaison with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1; 12:26-31). The latter reference also creates a narrative bridge between the birth of David and Bathsheba’s second child, Solomon, and the account of the rape of Tamar which begins at the start of 2 Samuel 13.

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15 For more on the likelihood that Abigail is both David’s sister and wife, and that he marries her to boost political clout, see Levenson and Halpern, “The Political Import,” 511-512; Spanier, “The Queen Mother in the Judean Royal Court,” 188-189.


The narrator directly links the violence against the Ammonites to David’s illicit liaison with Bathsheba by explicitly stating that David sends troops to war, under the command of Joab. David, however, remains in Jerusalem. He takes an afternoon stroll on the palace roof-top and his eyes settle on the bathing body of Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-2). David, in neglecting official duties, violates the Israelites’ expectation that their king will “go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Samuel 8:20). When the Israelites originally called for a king, Yhwh instructed the priest and judge Samuel to warn them that a human king would place them at risk of death and slavery through military obsession and economic exploitation (1 Samuel 8:4-17). This forecast is now violent reality. David is not a king who defends his people, but rather one who risks the lives of his people and takes from them whatever he wants to satisfy his own ends.

David’s lack of loyalty to his own troops becomes even more obvious when he asks the identity of the bathing woman. He is told: “This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite” (2 Samuel 11:3). Although readers might be momentarily duped by the foreign status attributed to Uriah, David knows that Uriah is in fact one of his own long-standing and loyal soldiers who is presently out on the battlefield fighting the Ammonites. Uriah and Eliam are both listed among David’s inner “circle of thirty” and Eliam is the son of David’s trusted advisor Ahithophel (2 Samuel 15:12; 16:23; 23:34, 39). David is now set on a course that leads to the intentional deaths of loyal soldiers, several deaths within his own family and also the rape of his daughter Tamar. In David’s kingdom, battlefield violence is family violence.

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18 Such exploitation is particularly disturbing in light of Israelite laws which state that reduction of countrymen to slavery is an offence that warrants death (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7).
19 Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story, 113; Goldingay, Men Behaving Badly, 235.
21 David Daube, “Absalom and the Ideal King,” VT 48 (1998), 322. Peter Ackroyd, arguing in a way that fails to take all relevant material into account, states that there is inadequate evidence to necessarily argue that, in taking Bathsheba, David violates the trust of three of his most loyal supporters, Uriah, Eliam, and Ahithophel. Ackroyd, The Second Book of Samuel, 100-101, 162. See also Cartledge, 1 and 2 Samuel, 498-499.
David Takes Bathsheba from Her Bath

Bathsheba is traditionally accused of bathing in an obvious spot as a means of trapping David into sexual activity. Sternberg speaks of Bathsheba’s “infidelity” and “adultery”. Lillian R. Klein presents a more manipulative Bathsheba by reading her as actively seeking a child fathered by the monarch to increase her social standing. My reading, while acknowledging ambiguities present in the text, views Bathsheba as a victim of power abuse. The text notes that Bathsheba is both bathing and beautiful (2 Samuel 11:2), conjuring up images of her nakedness and vulnerability, but it does not say that Bathsheba makes any attempt to seduce David. In contrast, David is portrayed as a powerful figure with political clout to send troops to war and economic resources to build a “king’s house” which affords a roof-top view.

In ancient Jerusalem, bathing spots were mostly likely points along the river with the palace advantageously situated on the city’s highest ground. It would be almost impossible for any common person to bathe without the risk of being seen from the palace roof-top. This point is particularly significant as the account of David sending for and having sex with Bathsheba includes an aside that “she was purifying herself after her period” (2 Samuel 11:4). If Bathsheba is in a place

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28 My reading differs from that of Tikva Frymer-Kensky who argues that ritual purification after menstruation was not practiced during the biblical period. Frymer-Kensky uses Leviticus 15:18 to argue that the reference to Bathsheba’s purification in 2 Samuel 11:4 describes her participation in an additional post-coital cleansing in David’s home rather the bath she is
where women traditionally gather to bathe after their periods, or if David stares long enough to recognise the specifics of her actions, he is abusing his powers as king and owner of prime real estate.\textsuperscript{29}

Any action David takes immediately implicates his underlings and poses consequences, usually ill-fated ones, for them. His staring at Bathsheba draws others into a voyeuristic gaze that pre-empts destructive action. Readers are also drawn into this perverse staring as they imagine the focus of David’s attention.\textsuperscript{30} David asks an anonymous person with him on the palace roof-top to identify Bathsheba. This person, in order to identify Bathsheba, must firstly invade her privacy by looking at her.\textsuperscript{31} The number of men observing Bathsheba is then further increased when David sends המלך (messengers – male plural) to fetch her.\textsuperscript{32} The exact number of male messengers is not mentioned but the grammatical form makes it clear that Bathsheba is now out-numbered by David and at least two other men. Bathsheba’s experience parallels that of contemporary abuse survivors, who often find themselves objectified by those who “observe” and assert power to “label” and intervene.\textsuperscript{33} While Bathsheba, at this point in the narrative, seems powerless to resist, a hermeneutic of abuse gives contemporary survivors opportunities to articulate possible alternative scenarios.

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\textsuperscript{29} My reading leaves open the option that ancient Israelite women did practice menstruation ritual and that a fragment of such tradition is preserved in Bathsheba’s story. Although Mikveh rituals are not fully documented in the Hebrew Bible, texts such as Genesis 31:33-35 hint that menstruation ritual, in some form, was practiced. For example when Laban pursues Jacob’s family in search of “stolen” family idols, Rachel hides the gods in her saddlebag, sits on them and prevents Laban from searching her private space by saying: “I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me” (Genesis 31:35). This text raises the possibility that Laban, by entering his daughters’ tents, commits a similar offence to David staring from his palace roof-top. Both illegitimately venture into women’s territory. I encourage contemporary survivors to preserve fragments of such female tradition as a means of resisting dominant discourses and ensuring that the perspectives and voices of the less powerful are not totally lost.

\textsuperscript{30} Frymer-Kensky, \textit{Reading the Women of the Bible}, 144-145; Bach, \textit{Women, Seduction, and Betrayal}, 128-129.

\textsuperscript{31} George G. Nicol disputes that David necessarily draws an additional person into gazing at Bathsheba. He claims that David could discreetly inquire about her identity at some later time. Nicol, “The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba,” 48, 52.

\textsuperscript{32} Exum, \textit{Fragmented Women}, 172-174; Bach, \textit{Women, Seduction, and Betrayal}, 128-140.

\textsuperscript{33} Freedman and Combs, \textit{Narrative Therapy}, 21.
For Bathsheba, the transition from bath to king’s palace probably occurs in a blur, thus explaining what seems to be an out of sequence reference to menstruation purification in 2 Samuel 11:4.\textsuperscript{34} Naked and outnumbered by men, she is in no position to resist the king who employs her husband, father and grandfather.\textsuperscript{35} Bathsheba comes to David only as a result of being subpoenaed. She does not articulate her feelings before or after intercourse.\textsuperscript{36} There is nothing to indicate that David feels love or concern toward Bathsheba.\textsuperscript{37} Nor is there anything to indicate she desires intimacy with David.

David, in bringing Bathsheba to the palace, is obviously motivated by factors other than a desire for sexual pleasure. By the time of David’s move from Hebron to Jerusalem, he has seven wives (1 Samuel 25:42-43; 2 Samuel 3:2-5, 13-16). He then accumulates more wives and concubines after establishing himself in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:13-16). David’s knowledge of Bathsheba’s marital status and family connections should immediately signal that she cannot be automatically added to his harem.\textsuperscript{38} His persistence suggests a desire to show power rather than merely satisfy sexual urge.\textsuperscript{39}

David makes no effort to hide his interaction with Bathsheba. The events unfold “late one afternoon” when there is still ample light for David to see Bathsheba bathing (2 Samuel 11:2). David’s actions do not surprise his servants and people around the royal compound might see Bathsheba being brought to the palace.

\textsuperscript{34} In contrast to Frymer-Kensky who argues there are time lags between David spotting Bathsheba in the bath, their sexual contact and a subsequent post-coital cleansing, I argue that the reference to purification in 2 Samuel 11:4 refers to Bathsheba’s actions when David sees her from his roof-top. Its insertion at a later point in the narrative serves to blur time, communicating the bullied way in which Bathsheba is treated. Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible, 147-148.
\textsuperscript{35} Robinson, I and 2 Samuel, 206; Sakenfeld, Just Wives?, 73-75; Brueggemann, David’s Truth, 50; Walter Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 273-274.
\textsuperscript{38} Yee, “Fraught with Background,” 245; Hens-Piazza, “Terrorization,” 172.
\textsuperscript{39} Goldingay, Men Behaving Badly, 239.
While no one intervenes to resist David’s advance upon Bathsheba, reports might spread throughout the community and even reach soldiers on the battlefield. In the story of Tamar of Genesis 38, community networks seemingly transmit information in ways that support Tamar’s resistance against Judah. In the same way, it is possible that Bathsheba’s community transmits information in a bid to support her marriage to Uriah.

**What Does Uriah Know?**

The only words that Bathsheba utters in response to her encounter with David are הָרַע, “I am pregnant” (2 Samuel 11:5). There is nothing to indicate how she feels about the pregnancy but her minimal speech suggests she is distressed rather than triumphant. The power differential between David and Bathsheba is again emphasised as David tries to deny paternal responsibility. Bathsheba’s revelation, without a socially acceptable explanation for her pregnancy, might as well be “I am dead!” Again, David shows no concern for Bathsheba’s feelings or needs. He calls Uriah home from the front line without even consulting her. Uriah could use Bathsheba’s pregnancy as evidence of adultery and seek to have her killed, just as Judah tries to do on hearing that his daughter-in-law Tamar is pregnant in Genesis 38:24. David, preoccupied with attempts to manipulate Uriah, demonstrates hope that Uriah will sleep with Bathsheba and assume paternity of her child (2 Samuel 11:6-13) but he makes no effort to protect Bathsheba should Uriah be infuriated.

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46 Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 175; Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 210-211.
Uriah responds to David in an unexpected manner. He refuses to have contact with Bathsheba, thus resisting David’s attempt to cast doubt on the paternity of her child (2 Samuel 11:8-13). While Uriah makes no attempt to kill Bathsheba, the text remains curiously silent on whether he is aware of David’s crime. Sternberg highlights that there is evidence within the text to support two hypotheses – on one hand that Uriah does not know that David has been with Bathsheba or alternatively that Uriah does know that David has been with Bathsheba. Sternberg shows partiality for the affirmative hypothesis when he says: “If the narrative wished to establish his [Uriah’s] ignorance, finally, it would resort to some formula like ‘and Uriah did not know’.” Similarly, I take the view that Uriah does know. Uriah’s resistance toward David and lack of retaliation toward Bathsheba suggest that community information networks have informed him that David took Bathsheba when she is most vulnerable: when her husband is unable to protect her and she needs to bathe after her menstrual period.

Uriah, a so-called foreigner, artfully resists David with a strategy of exaggerated compliance. He claims authority for his decision to abstain from sexual relations by meticulously adhering to Israelite battle conventions which prohibit him from having sexual relations while his colleagues remain on the battlefield (2 Samuel 11:8-13). While Uriah is unlikely to succeed in a vengeful attempt to kill the king, and is quite possibly too loyal to take such action, he resists by fully embracing cultural conventions that David openly flouts. In doing so, Uriah proves himself more loyal to Israel and its laws than the king.

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47 McKane, 1 and 2 Samuel, 230; Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story, 113.
49 Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 201.
50 Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 202. See also 206-207.
51 Others who favour of this view include Daube, “Absalom and the Ideal King,” 322; Weingreen, “The Rebellion of Absalom,” 265.
52 In Genesis 17, Abraham uses a similar strategy of exaggerated compliance when he meticulously follows God’s ordinance to cover all males of his household with the covenantal sign of circumcision, even though Ishmael is seemingly excluded from covenant. Exaggerated compliance with socially accepted conventions is a disguised resistance strategy that Scott identifies among powerless people. Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 28-37; Scott, Domination, ix-xiii, 18-20, 23-28, 136-140.
53 Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story, 117; Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel, 275.
Uriah must be suspicious of David calling him from the battlefield to ask routine questions and proceeding to shower him with gifts and privileges. Uriah, in choosing to sleep at the entrance to David’s house, publicly demonstrates his sexual abstinence. There is obviously no privacy at the entrance of the palace because David hears that Uriah has slept there. When David asks Uriah why he did not go down to his own house, Uriah responds:

The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing (2 Samuel 11:11).

Uriah’s response seems too calculated for him to be unaware of David’s misconduct. David has failed to accompany his soldiers to war and has also violated military sexual conduct conventions by preying on the unprotected wife of a soldier while her husband is at war (1 Samuel 21:5; Deuteronomy 23:10-15). Uriah’s speech subtly shifts his loyalty from David to Joab: “my lord Joab and the servants of my lord”. The cumulative effect of Uriah’s words is to label David’s actions as despicable and unworthy of loyalty. He then emphasises that he will not “do such a thing” (have sex with Bathsheba) while David is alive. Uriah is both subverting and hyperbolising his loyalty to David. His words subtly communicate that he is aware that David has claimed Bathsheba. Uriah also registers his intention to now abstain from sex with Bathsheba for as long as David lives. The uncomfortable irony is that David has had sex with Bathsheba while Uriah is still alive; an offence that would normally be punishable by death (Deuteronomy 22:22; Leviticus 20:10). After this interchange, David’s deceit is further stressed when he commits to return Uriah to the battlefield the next day but then gives him so much to eat and drink that he becomes drunk (2 Samuel 11:12-13). David, when this further attempt is unsuccessful, literally hands

54 McKane, 1 and 2 Samuel, 232; Mauchline, 1 and 2 Samuel, 249; Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 200.
55 Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story, 113; Yee, “Fraught with Background,” 246.
56 Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 204-205.
57 Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible, 151-152. See also Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 207.
58 McKane, 1 and 2 Samuel, 230.
Uriah his own death warrant: a letter that enlists Joab’s co-operation in a plan to have Uriah killed (2 Samuel 11:14-15).  

Joab realises that, for murderouls tracks to be covered, he must instigate action that results in the deaths of several soldiers (2 Samuel 13:14-25). Once again, David is an enemy to his own supporters. When Bathsheba hears that Uriah is dead, she laments for him. It is unclear whether she sees a link between her pregnancy and Uriah’s death but she shows no sign of wanting to be with David. Just as David sent and brought Bathsheba from her bathing spot to the palace, when her mourning is over, he sends for her. Bathsheba does not voice her thoughts about her pregnancy, her husband’s death or her marriage to David. In silence, she becomes David’s wife and bears him a son.

**Yhwh: Complicit in Rape?**

In 2 Samuel 12:1-4, the prophet Nathan presents to David a parable about a wealthy man who exploitatively kills and eats a lamb, the only and much loved possession of a poor man. David sees the point of the story but does not realise the message is targeted at him. He quickly announces that the rich man deserves to die but then, as if he is adjudicating a legal trial, says that the wealthy man shall “restore the lamb fourfold” (2 Samuel 12:6). Natham declares: “You are the man!” and immediately launches into an oracle which presents Yhwh as having generously bestowed upon David kingship, protection, assets, prestige, women and power and yet, in spite of all this, David chooses to do evil (2 Samuel 12:7-9a). The oracle’s repetitive use of the word (sword) indicates that David, in rebellion against Yhwh’s graciousness, follows the ways of violence and must now accept the consequences of that choice:

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60 McKane, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 230-231; Berquist, *Reclaiming Her Story*, 113.

61 Bernhard Luther, expressing an alternative point of view, white-washes David’s involvement in the murder of Uriah, claiming that circumstances pushed David into taking this action. Luther argues: “Later he [David] acknowledges his sin, humbles himself before Yahweh and accepts his verdict.” Luther, “The Novella of Judah and Tamar,” 103.


64 Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 281.
You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and you have taken his wife to be your wife; and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me [Yhwh], and have taken the wife of Uriah to be your wife (2 Samuel 12:9b-10).

Nathan, in delivering the oracle, however, does not distinguish between the natural consequences of David’s choice for violence and Yhwh’s vengeance. Nathan attributes to Yhwh a prediction that David’s wives, who have no direct involvement in the Bathsheba incident, will be publicly raped as part of punishment visited on the Davidic family:65

Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun (2 Samuel 12:11-12).

As it stands, the oracle grants no space for assessing the impact that such a prediction will have on Bathsheba and other women entangled in Davidic family violence and retribution.66 Commentators traditionally fail to question the trustworthiness of Nathan and also his ethical portrayal of Yhwh on whose behalf he claims to speak.67 Nathan’s reliability, however, needs to be contested. For, as James L. Crenshaw points out, Nathan demonstrates that his credibility is suspect with an about-face, in 2 Samuel 7:3-5, in relation to David’s desire to build a temple and his subsequent affirmation, in verse 16, that David’s throne would be established “forever”.68 Hugo Gressman also notes, in a now classic essay, that Nathan is not beyond deceit and political manipulation when, in 1 Kings 2:15-40, he assists Bathsheba to have Solomon named as David’s successor.69 In assessing the ethical dilemma inherent in Nathan’s oracle, readers also need to differentiate between the role of prophecy as “future prediction” and “call to repentance”.70

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67 Bach, Women, Seduction and Betrayal, 151-153, 156.
70 Biblical texts that indicate prophetic predictions of doom might be averted through repentance include 2 Kings 17:13-18, Jeremiah 18:7-11, Jonah 3:1-10 and 4:2.

Jonathan Magonet notes that prophecy’s central focus is its warning to repent rather than its accuracy as future prediction. He says that prophecy essentially heralds a warning: “if you do not change your ways then God will inevitably bring about this form of punishment.” Jonathan
David, on hearing that his choice to kill Uriah will precipitate further acts of violence within his own household, repents: “I have sinned against the LORD” (2 Samuel 12:13a).71 Nathan assures David of Yhwh’s gracious forgiveness. Just as David waives the death sentence on the wealthy man in Nathan’s parable, Yhwh also grants the king a reprieve: “Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die” (2 Samuel 12:13b). David, although admitting that he has done evil, does not fully embrace Yhwh’s statutes and laws in future decision making. He continues to deny vulnerable members of his family appropriate care and protection, thus placing them at risk of violence and rape (2 Samuel 13:7; 15:16).

The mass rape predicted in Nathan’s oracle tragically occurs in 2 Samuel 16:22 when David’s son Absalom, in a bid to usurp political power, publicly rapes ten concubines from David’s harem in a tent on the palace roof-top in Jerusalem.72 These rapes occur in the same location where David first spots Bathsheba bathing. Even more staggering, Ahithophel, Bathsheba’s grandfather, is the one who instructs Absalom to commit these rapes (2 Samuel 11:3; 16:20-22; 23:34).73 Immediately following these sexual assaults, the narrator links Ahithophel’s instruction to God with the statement: “Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if on e consulted the oracle of God” (2 Samuel 16:23a). Ahithophel’s authority, however, is subverted in the next chapter with the declaration: “For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel” (2 Samuel 17:14). Ahithophel’s instruction that Absalom rape David’s concubines is therefore subverted within the text, opening the way for contemporary survivors to contest the claim within Nathan’s oracle that Yhwh actually sanctions David’s acquisition of Saul’s wives (2 Samuel 12:7). Given David’s persistent choice to live according to the ways of “the sword” – to “take”

71 Brueggemann, David’s Truth, 59-60; Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel, 282.
72 John Mauchline is among commentators who fail to see the ethical horror of this mass rape when he says: “The open shame which is to fall on David’s wives is fit penalty for the secret act of shame that he committed against Bathsheba.” Mauchline, 1 and 2 Samuel, 254; See also Cartledge, 1 and 2 Samuel, 517-518, 583; Ackroyd, The Second Book of Samuel, 155.
73 Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible, 155-156; Gressmann, “The Oldest History Writing,” 39.
women and kill men – it is not at all surprising that his sons follow in his footsteps with Amnon raping his half-sister Tamar and Absalom attempting to seize power by raping his father’s concubines.\textsuperscript{74}

Nathan, after pronouncing that Yhwh will allow David to live, seems eager to emphasise that, even with God’s gracious forgiveness, evil still has consequences. He makes a further heart-wrenching prediction: that the child, born as a result of David’s liaison with Bathsheba, will die because of what David has done (2 Samuel 12:14). The narrator then implicates Yhwh in horrific injustice by saying: “The LORD struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore to David and it became very ill” (2 Samuel 12:15). The idea that God would strike dead a child as punishment for a parent’s sin is however strongly contested in Ezekiel 18 where God instructs the Israelites to dispense with such thinking: “Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parents as well as the life of the child is mine; it is only the person who sins that shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4).\textsuperscript{75}

\textit{The Child Dies and the War Continues}

David seeks a reprieve from Nathan’s prediction that the child will die with an elaborate ritual of intercession, grief and fasting.\textsuperscript{76} Notably, he makes no such intercession on behalf of the women in his family who are at risk of being raped. On the seventh day, the child dies. David’s servants, having seen the intensity of his grief while the child is still alive, fear his reaction to the news of its death (2 Samuel 12:16-18). He surprises them by proceeding to wash, anoint, change his clothes, worship and eat (2 Samuel 12:20). Only after all this action by David does the narrator give any indication that Bathsheba is in grief: “Then David consoled his wife Bathsheba” (2 Samuel 12:24a). The action moves quickly from David consoling Bathsheba to him laying with her and once again impregnating her.\textsuperscript{77} Significantly, the birth of David and Bathsheba’s second son in 2 Samuel 12:24b is then narratively bridged to the rape of Tamar with a report of the war

\textsuperscript{74} Bach, \textit{Women, Seduction, and Betrayal}, 153.
\textsuperscript{75} See also Jeremiah 31:29.
\textsuperscript{76} Brueggemann, \textit{First and Second Samuel}, 283.
\textsuperscript{77} Bach, \textit{Women, Seduction, and Betrayal}, 157.
against the Ammonites. This child’s name, Solomon, a derivation of shalom, seems strangely at odds with the violent context into which he is born.\textsuperscript{78}

The war against the Ammonites continues for at least 18 months after the death of Uriah.\textsuperscript{79} During this time Joab seems to tire of David absenting himself from battle. Joab emphasises the constant threats of political rivalry within the Davidic kingdom by flagging his intention to claim power and territory in his own name, rather than in David’s name, if the king does not become actively involved in battle (2 Samuel 12:28).\textsuperscript{80} David, in claiming the Ammonite victory, cements his image as a powerful oppressor by setting the people of Rabbah to work as brick-making slaves (2 Samuel 12:26-31).\textsuperscript{81}

\textit{Meeting Tamar and Her Power-hungry Brothers}

David begins building his family at Hebron at a time when he is at war with the House of Saul. David’s family grows strongly while Saul’s becomes weaker. In a bid to consolidate his political position in Judah, David acquires six wives at Hebron, including Ahinoam, the mother of Amnon, and Maacah, the mother of Absalom (2 Samuel 3:1-5). When he later claims Jerusalem and becomes king over all Israel, he takes more concubines and wives and at least 11 more sons are born to him (2 Samuel 5:13-15). David, in fathering various groups of children to different wives, creates political and military factions even among his own offspring.\textsuperscript{82}

As it was customary for political competitors in ancient contexts to claim women of a king they were attempting to replace,\textsuperscript{83} it is not surprising that both Saul and

\textsuperscript{78} Brueggemann, \textit{David’s Truth}, 44.
\textsuperscript{79} There is time for Bathsheba’s first child to be born and die; and then for Solomon to be born (2 Samuel 11:25-12:25).
\textsuperscript{80} In contrast Peter Ackroyd argues that Joab does not want to name the city after himself out of loyalty to David. H.W. Hertzberg argues that Joab is inspired by concern for the king’s prestige. Ackroyd, \textit{The Second Book of Samuel}, 116; Hertzberg, \textit{1 and 2 Samuel}, 319. See also Robinson, \textit{1 and 2 Samuel}, 215.
\textsuperscript{82} Propp, “Kinship in 2 Samuel 13,” 43; Conroy, \textit{Absalom}, 27; Levenson and Halpern, “The Political Import,” 516.
\textsuperscript{83} For other examples of would-be rulers attempting to usurp power by claiming women from kings’ harems see: 2 Samuel 3:6-10; 16:20-23; 1 Kings 2:13-23. See also Jo Ann Hackett, “1
David have a wife named Ahinoam (1 Samuel 14:50; 2 Samuel 3:2). As discussed above, the prophet Nathan in an oracle to David, refers to wives that David acquires through his defeat of Saul (2 Samuel 12:8). Saul, in some earlier and rather heated remarks to his son Jonathan, shows awareness that Jonathan’s loyalty shifts to David and that this contributes to Ahinoam (Jonathan’s mother) being sexually claimed by David:

Then Saul’s anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness? (1 Samuel 20:30).

Amnon, as Ahinoam’s son, might therefore see his succession to the throne as compensation to the remnant House of Saul or at least in terms of reclaiming Queen Mother status for his mother. Throughout David’s reign, a remnant House of Saul continues to be a source of political and military tension (2 Samuel 9:1-4; 16:1-5, 5-14; 19:16-23).

David’s third son, Absalom, is born to Maacah, the daughter of King Talmai of Geshur (2 Samuel 3:3). As already discussed, Maacah’s name and social status suggest that she is possibly also related to the king of Maacah mentioned in 2 Samuel 10:6. Such family connections make it extremely likely that David marries Maacah to expand political alliances. Absalom’s desire for the throne could include factors such as loyalty to his grandfather King Talmai of Geshur and other political alliances formed through Maacah.

At this point in monarchical history, no precedent is set in regard to the eldest son succeeding his father as king. David, as a son-in-law of Saul, came to power through military acquisition and political alliances established through marriage.

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84 If Amnon’s mother is the same Ahinoam as previously married to Saul, she would have been denied Queen Mother status when David, rather than Jonathan, becomes king of Judah. For analysis on the role of the Queen Mother see: Zafrira Ben-Barak, “The Status and Right of the Gebîrâ,” in A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 170-185; Spanier, “The Queen Mother in the Judean Royal Court,” 186-195; Susan Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult of Ancient Israel,” JBL 112 (1993): 385-401.

85 In terms of political clout, Absalom fares better than David’s second son Chileab who is born to Abigail but plays no significant role in the narrative. The name of Abigail’s son is listed as Chileab in 2 Samuel 3:2 but Daniel in 1 Chronicles 3:1.

86 Hackett, “1 and 2 Samuel,” 98-99; Cartledge, 1 and 2 Samuel, 490-491.
It is therefore possible that Amnon, while desiring practices of primogeniture might be fearful that, if history repeats, the throne could go to Tamar’s husband rather than to one of David’s own sons. Tamar, a virgin sister with potential to form her own political alliances is therefore rendered desolate as the interests of her brothers collide.

While Amnon will physically rape Tamar, he is upstaged in the opening sentences of 2 Samuel 13 by references to other family members. David’s name is mentioned twice, Absalom’s once and there is even a reference to Tamar herself. Only then is Amnon’s interest in the drama revealed: “Amnon fell in love with her” (2 Samuel 13:1). Although these opening sentences describe both Amnon and Absalom as sons of David, the text never specifically identifies Tamar as David’s daughter. Rather, Tamar’s relationship with David must be deduced from the genealogical description: “David’s son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar” (2 Samuel 13:1). The text positions Tamar in relation to Absalom, rather than David. While this suggests that Absalom is Tamar’s official guardian and will exert influence in relation to her marriage prospects, an alternative tradition considers it possible that Absalom is actually Tamar’s father. If this is so, then Absalom is a man who is prepared to sacrifice anything, even his own daughter, in bids to claim the throne.

The narrator, in describing Amnon’s obsession with Tamar, concludes that it is Tamar’s status as a virgin that makes her unobtainable to him: “for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her” (2 Samuel 13:2). It is pertinent that Tamar’s virginity is presented as the obstacle, suggesting that she is unavailable to Amnon because she is under male guardianship; rather than it being explicitly stated that Amnon is forbidden a

88 Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 5.
91 Trible, Texts of Terror, 38.
sexual relationship with Tamar because she is his half-sister. While the word “virgin” can be expected to indicate that Tamar has not had previous sexual experience, it also conveys that she is not yet bonded in marriage to her future husband and is therefore under strict supervision of her male guardian. Violation of a virgin was viewed as a political attack on the integrity of her father and other male relatives, as well as a threat to her family’s land and progeny. So, in raping Tamar, Amnon essentially mounts an attack on the House of David, and more specifically on the House of Absalom.

Absalom, whether he is Tamar’s father or brother, must also consider implications that Tamar’s future marriage might pose for his own political career. Tamar is a prize marriage candidate for any political leader due to the links she provides to David (king of both Israel and Judah), King Talmai of Gesher and quite possibly also to the king of Maacah. While such genealogy and heritage promise great resources to Tamar’s future husband, her marriage could be extremely problematic for both Amnon and Absalom. While Tamar’s marriage could help Absalom establish alliances conducive to succeeding David, it could also dash his chances by introducing an additional male competitor. When Amnon rapes Tamar and then refuses to marry her, he jeopardises Tamar’s marriage and political prospects but it is unclear whether this helps or hinders Absalom’s personal ambition. Tamar’s desolation could well function as a political development that suits both Amnon and Absalom.

While it is often assumed that a young woman who was seduced or raped in biblical times had no marriage prospects beyond union with the man who violated her, Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that such a view is not actually substantiated in biblical texts. She says that in an age when many women died in childbirth, and when polygamy was permitted, most women were able to find husbands but those

93 Jenny Smith argues that incest taboos forbid Amnon from pursuing a relationship with Tamar but that David’s court is known to break Israelite laws for its own benefit. Smith, “The Discourse Structure,” 25, 35. See also Daube, “Absalom and the Ideal King,” 315.
with unsavoury sexual histories were no longer eligible to command bride-prices.\(^95\) While it might initially seem that Tamar, after being raped, is no longer eligible to command a high bride-price and form a politically strategic marriage with a man of high socially standing, this does not hold sway in the competitive realities of political life. David is not concerned about Bathsheba’s sexual history nor the costs associated with obtaining her as a wife. Hence it seems likely that Tamar’s own family and their reluctance to risk her marrying a political competitor are the biggest impediments to her future security.

Amnon’s refusal to marry Tamar after he rapes her must also be analysed in terms of political strategy. While marriage to Tamar could be potentially advantageous for Amnon,\(^96\) his abusive treatment of her corners him into a dead-end situation that renders power to Absalom. It is unlikely that Amnon can claim the political benefits of marriage to Tamar without Absalom launching a counter-attack. Cultural practices documented in Exodus 22:16-17 indicate such an attack could include Absalom extracting a high bride-price whilst also refusing Amnon permission to marry Tamar. Alternatively, Absalom could gain the upper hand by insisting on a bride-price with potential to ruin Amnon. No doubt Amnon is aware of precedents within his own family for bride-price negotiations to risk life by forcing potential suitors into danger.\(^97\) Amnon might decide that awarding Absalom such power is humiliating and unpalatable. Amnon is locked into a destructive course of action and renders Tamar desolate. She is of no political value within the household of either brother.

\(^95\) Frymer-Kensky, “Virginity in the Bible,” 80.
\(^96\) Propp, “Kinship in 2 Samuel 13,” 45.
\(^97\) Examples include King Saul’s offers to David in 1 Samuel 18. Saul offers his elder daughter, Merab, to David on the condition that David fights for him in battle. Saul assumes that David will be killed by the Philistines (1 Samuel 18:17). When David survives, Saul reneges on the agreement (1 Samuel 18:19) and subsequently risks David’s life again, this time in a bid to marry Saul’s younger daughter, Michal. This time Saul sets a bride-price of one hundred Philistine foreskins, the assumption being that David will have to kill the Philistines before extracting the gruesome booty (1 Samuel 18:25). David satisfies Saul’s request and receives Michal as his first wife (1 Samuel 18:28; 19:11-14).
While Amnon physically rapes Tamar, he does not act alone. King David, along with David’s nephew, Jonadab, and also Absalom are partners in crime. Amnon’s obsessive preoccupation with Tamar leads him to become ill (2 Samuel 13:2) and this alerts Jonadab to a problem within the royal household. Jonadab is described as Amnon’s “friend” but, as he is the son of David’s brother Shimeah, he is also first cousin to Amnon, Absalom and Tamar. As the plot progresses, Jonadab’s loyalty toward Amnon is called into question and it seems that he shifts allegiances between Amnon, David and Absalom according to what suits his own opportunistic interests. The text prefaces this possibility with “And Jonadab was a very crafty man” (2 Samuel 13:3).

Jonadab uses Amnon’s emotional turmoil as an opportunity to manipulate family politics in a way that directly leads to the rape of Tamar. Jonadab’s opening words identify Amnon in relation to David’s throne and also assume his own role as confidante and adviser: “O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?” (2 Samuel 13:4). Amnon declares: “I love Tamar, my brother Absalom’s sister” (2 Samuel 13:4). It is unclear whether Amnon is emphasising his love for Tamar or an obsession that she is Absalom’s sister. While the narrator earlier identifies Tamar’s virginity (quite possibly meaning guardianship) as a factor prohibiting Amnon from claiming Tamar, Amnon now presents Absalom as coming between them.

Jonadab does not pause to consider implications of a relationship between Amnon and Tamar but immediately urges him to take action by unveiling a plan that will enable him to be alone with her.98

Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill; and when your father comes to see you say to him, “Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand” (2 Samuel 13:5).

While it is not clear whether Jonadab expects that Amnon will actually rape Tamar, the way he engineers circumstances to isolate her renders him an

98 Andrew E. Hill argues that Jonadab maliciously borrows a ploy from Egyptian love poetry in a way that demonstrates his familiarity with court relationships and knowledge of the expected outcome. Hill, “A Jonadab Connection,” 387-389. See also West and Zondi-Mabizela, “The Bible Story,” 7.
accomplice. As Jo Ann Hackett says: “Jonadab’s advice stops short of suggesting rape but if his recommendation were in any way innocent there would be no need for deception.” Jonadab’s subtle manipulation of language also helps Amnon to make a personal claim upon Tamar. While Amnon identifies Tamar as Absalom’s sister, Jonadab suggests that Amnon refer to her as “my sister” when speaking with David. (2 Samuel 13:5).

My reading also renders David culpable in the abuse against Tamar, taking exception to interpretations that view him as unsuspecting or unwitting. Primarily, David knows from Nathan’s oracle that his own violence predisposes his family to violence, including predicted rapes of women. While David, in 2 Samuel 12:16-17, pleads with Yhwh to spare the life of the first child born to Bathsheba, there is no record of him interceding for the protection of other family members. When Amnon makes his request for Tamar to visit, there is cause for suspicion: “Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand” (2 Samuel 13:6). Amnon blatantly requests a level of intimacy with Tamar, detailing his intention to be hand-fed by her, and possibly also his desire to partake of foods with erotic connotations. David must be aware of political rivalry between Amnon and Absalom. His failure to question Amnon’s motives in the sickbed ruse and his failure to protect Tamar when it seems obvious her safety is at risk, render him culpable in creating an environment conducive to rape.

David is further implicated when he sends a message to Tamar that undermines Absalom’s authority as her guardian. Esther Fuchs says: “The real victimization

101 Trible, Texts of Terror, 41.
102 For example Frymer-Kensy, Reading the Women of the Bible, 159; Smith, “The Discourse Structure,” 31, 40; Conroy, Absalom, 24; Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel, 287.
103 Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes argues that Amnon implicitly lets David know his intentions and might even seek David’s permission. van Dijk-Hemmes, “Tamar and the Limits of Patriarchy,” 73. See also Gray, “Amnon,” 43; Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 6; Daube, “Abalsom and the Ideal King,” 322.
of Tamar does not begin with her rape by Amnon but with David’s ordering of her to go to Amnon’s house and prepare food for her would-be sick brother.”106 David presents Amnon as Tamar’s brother and instructs her to enter Amnon’s domestic territory: “Go to your brother Amnon’s house and prepare food for him” (2 Samuel 13:7). It is possible that David favours Amnon by taking advantage of Tamar’s naïve perception that she is safe within relatives’ houses. Tikva Frymer-Kensky says that Tamar, like many abuse survivors, probably thinks she can trust her own relatives. The fact that rapes do occur in such circumstances is a particularly horrifying aspect of her experience.107 Contemporary abuse survivors might find this a useful point to draw their own subjugated knowledges into conversation with Tamar’s story.108

David’s action, in sending Tamar to Amnon’s house, smells of impropriety given that the narrator has already revealed that Amnon should not have access to her (2 Samuel 13:2). David does not hear about the rape of Tamar until she is confined to Absalom’s house (2 Samuel 13:20). David, despite having personally contributed to Tamar’s isolation, is angry (2 Samuel 13:21). Phyllis Trible raises pertinent questions about the source of David’s anger asking: “Is David angry with Amnon for what he had done to Tamar, or is David angry about what has happened to Amnon?”109 David might be angry that Absalom has resumed guardianship of Tamar or that Absalom is likely to seek revenge against Amnon. This would be of particular concern if Absalom is actually Tamar’s father.

The MT mentions only David’s anger and makes no reference to the possibility of David punishing Amnon. This makes the anger even more ambiguous than the LXX that claims: “And he [David] did not rebuke Amnon his son because he loved him, since his firstborn was he.” The admission that David loves Amnon


107 Frymer-Kensy, Reading the Women of the Bible, 159. See also Hansen, “My Name is Tamar,” 371-372; Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 4-5.

108 For examples of contemporary survivors particularly identifying with Tamar because she is raped within the home of a close relative see: Hansen, “My Name is Tamar,” 371-372; Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 4-5.

109 Trible, Texts of Terror, 53.
because of his “firstborn” status might indicate David’s preference for Amnon to be his successor. Commenting on the Greek Bible version Phyllis Trible says:

David’s anger signifies complete sympathy for Amnon and total disregard for Tamar. How appropriate that the story never refers to David and Tamar as father and daughter! The father identifies with the son; the adulterer supports the rapist…

It is of course possible that David favours Amnon and shows little interest in Tamar because she is Absalom’s daughter rather than his own.

Ambiguity makes it impossible to determine exactly how Tamar’s relatives should react to the news of her being raped and what punishment should be extracted from Amnon. Leviticus 20:17 indicates cultural convention that a man who has sexual contact with his sister, regardless of whether she is a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, must be punished, although the form of such punishment is not specifically stated. Similarly Deuteronomy 22:27 states that a man who lies with his sister will be cursed but the nature of that curse is not stated. Thus it seems that brother-sister incest, while despised, is not a capital offence. Deuteronomy 22:28-29 gives insight into the situation where a man seizes a virgin who is not engaged to another man and has sexual relations with her. Such a man is to pay the young woman’s father fifty shekels of silver, marry her and never divorce her. Exodus 22:17 allows the possibility that in such circumstances, the woman’s father can demand a bride-price but still refuse to give the woman in marriage. While biblical sources indicate a taboo on brother-sister incest, they remain unclear whether marriage is an appropriate form of restitution if such violation occurs, as it is when a man forcibly seizes an unbetrothed woman to whom he is not necessarily related. What is clear is that Tamar and her father are entitled to some form of compensation as a result of Amnon’s assault on her. David, in failing to address the issue of compensation, increases suspicion that he is not actually Tamar’s father. Having abandoned her to physical assault by Amnon, he also casts doubts on her lineage and contributes to her being left desolate (2 Samuel 13:20).

Tamar’s Resistance within Amnon’s Chamber

Tamar immediately complies with David’s instruction for her to go to Amnon’s house and to prepare food for him:

So Tamar went to her brother Amnon’s house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. She then took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat (2 Samuel 13:8).

Amnon, in his request to David, asks that Tamar hand-feed him (2 Samuel 13:6). David, when instructing Tamar, however, makes no reference to Amnon’s expectation to be hand-fed. Perhaps David edits out this information to distance himself from sexual connotations while still sending Tamar to prepare the food (2 Samuel 13:7). Amnon reacts as if he is cheated when Tamar, following David’s instructions, bakes cakes and sets them out before him. At this point Amnon does not know whether David has conveyed only part of his request or whether Tamar is actively resisting him. If Tamar suspects Amnon’s motives, her decision to follow precisely David’s instructions, whilst denying Amnon further intimacy, is a form of resistance through exaggerated compliance.112 Her strategy is similar to Abraham’s decision to circumcise Ishmael in Genesis 17 and Uriah’s decision in 2 Samuel 11 to precisely follow Israelite conventions which prohibit soldiers from participating in sexual activity while their colleagues remain on the battlefield.

Tamar, in taking the pan and setting out cakes before Amnon, indicates the terms of their interaction. She states non-verbally that he is to position himself in a certain part of the chamber and feed himself, while she maintains socially appropriate distance from him. Tension builds as Amnon angrily reacts to Tamar's boundaries. In a bid to strip Tamar of all social support and protection he instructs one of his underlings to clear the room, with the cry: “Send out everyone from me” (2 Samuel 13:9).113 It is not explicitly stated who the characters are who depart at this point but they most likely include Amnon’s servants and women who accompanied Tamar from the women’s quarters. All of these unidentified characters fail to, or feel unable to, exercise social responsibility. They would

112 For exaggerated compliance as a resistance strategy often used by relatively powerless people, see: Wade, “Small Acts”, 30-31; Scott, Weapons of the Weak, 28-37; Scott, Domination, ix-x, 18-20, 23-28, 136-140.

113 Gray, “Amnon,” 47.
however be aware of social conventions that Amnon should not be alone with Tamar (2 Samuel 13:2). They have seen his inappropriate reaction to Tamar serving his food. Amnon, who also knows it is socially unacceptable for him to be alone with Tamar, has forcibly isolated her.\textsuperscript{114}

Amnon immediately disputes the spatial boundaries that Tamar stipulates by insisting on the intimacy of being hand-fed: “Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand” (2 Samuel 13:10). This directive suggests either that Tamar previously served the cakes in an alcove area that could be seen from Amnon’s bed or that she grabs the cakes and recoils into such a space when Amnon violently clears his quarters. Either way, there is evidence to suggest that Tamar is actively working to maintain distance from Amnon and his bed. In response to his directive, she takes the cakes into the chamber and approaches him but there is no indication that she concedes to actually hand-feeding him (2 Samuel 13:10-11). Tamar has now, on two occasions, fallen victim to the patriarchal order that compels an unmarried woman to obey her father and brothers. She is in Amnon’s house because she was compelled to obey David’s instruction and she must now enter Amnon’s chamber because she is compelled to obey his instructions.\textsuperscript{115} The patriarchal order sacrifices Tamar to abuse but she is unable to conceive of a reality beyond that order. The patriarchal order both victimises her and forms her identity.\textsuperscript{116}

Amnon grabs Tamar and pleads: “Come, lie with me, my sister” (2 Samuel 13:11). Tamar comes to voice, breaking a chain of command in which she always obeys male relatives.\textsuperscript{117} A well-worded and lengthy speech flows from her mouth. Unlike Bathsheba who uttered no words before or immediately after sexual contact with David, Tamar surrounds the sexual act with voice, making her resistance obvious.\textsuperscript{118} Speech is not her only resistance strategy, for she has been actively resisting Amnon throughout their interaction and will continue to do so.

\textsuperscript{114} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 39.
\textsuperscript{115} Fuchs, \textit{Sexual Politics}, 205, 208; Gray, “Amnon,” 43.
\textsuperscript{117} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 45; Ridout, “The Rape of Tamar,” 80.
long after Amnon casts her from his presence. Tamar’s vocalisation makes it clear that she understands what Amnon has in mind and that she is aware of the implications for Amnon, herself and their wider community. She has insight into social and legal complexities and the wisdom to pose an alternative.

No my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you (2 Samuel 13:12-13).

While Tamar’s speech contains wisdom that contrasts with Amnon’s stupidity, her words are also coloured by naïvety. Her own patriarchal world-view prevents her from acknowledging that Amnon’s violation extends beyond social devastation to physically and psychologically damaging her as a person. Her suggestion, that Amnon ask “the king” for permission to claim her in marriage, highlights the possibility that David’s family, like other ancient royal families, is not adverse to incestuous marriage for political gain. If brother-sister incest is taboo within her context, she voices a belief that David will turn a blind eye in favour of Amnon. She might be aware of incestuous innuendo surrounding David’s marriages to Ahinoam and Abigail or that, in regard to Bathsheba and Uriah, David bends adultery and murder prohibitions in favour of himself. Whatever her reasoning, Tamar predicts that David, who does not withhold her from danger when Amnon asks for her to be sent his chamber, will equally not refuse Amnon the right to marry her if he makes such a request. As far as she is concerned, marriage is now her entitlement and Amnon has no right to impede her

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120 Mark Gray argues that Tamar tries to talk herself to safety by appealing to reason and stressing that it is in Amnon’s own interests to take an alternative course of action. Gray, “Amnon,” 49-50.


security through divorce or abandonment. However, in referring to David as “the king” she acknowledges his superiority in a way that emphasises her servitude rather than his obligation to protect her rights.

Tamar is insightfully aware that, as an assault victim, she will be socially penalised. Her speech makes excellent use of cultural shaming conventions. She emphasises that both of them will be disgraced if Amnon persists. However, it is her status, rather than his, that is immediately and most obviously diminished. Her fear of being overwhelmed by shame becomes reality as soon as Amnon ejects her from his presence. She demonstrates her grief and humiliation by tearing her clothes (2 Samuel 13:17-18). James Poling points out that Tamar’s faith in the way things are done in Israel is in fact unfounded. As we have seen “things”, such as rape and abandonment, are indeed done in Israel! Abuse and murder in particular are common in David’s family. Tamar’s attempt to “re-author” her life by trying to reason with Amnon and suggesting an alternative is violently denied.

Amnon, in proceeding to rape Tamar, allows violence to flare beyond his ability to reason: “he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her” (2 Samuel 13:14). Immediately after the rape, the narrator comments on Amnon’s emotional response: “Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her” (2 Samuel 13:15). No concern is shown in relation to the impact that Amnon’s violence has on Tamar. She is left to channel her response into grief over her lost position within the patriarchal order.

Amnon and Tamar both find their realities reversed as a result of the rape. Amnon forces Tamar into intimacy but then wants to be distanced from her. Tamar moves

129 Trible, Texts of Terror, 45.
130 Fuchs, Sexual Politics, 214.
133 This emphasis on Amnon’s emotional reaction accords with Cooper-White’s assessment that the rape of Tamar has been written from the perpetrator’s perspective. Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 7.
from establishing spatial boundaries between Amnon and herself to resisting his abandonment of her by again insisting that she is entitled to marriage, albeit an incestuous one.\(^\text{135}\) “No my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me” (2 Samuel 13:16).\(^\text{136}\) Amnon responds by treating Tamar as less than human. Phyllis Trible is correct in emphasising that, contrary to some translations, Amnon does not say “Send away this woman from me.” Rather, he refers to her as נשים (which is best translated as “this (thing)”). Amnon uses only the feminine, singular demonstrative pronoun this which degrades Tamar to the status of a disposable object.\(^\text{137}\)

Amnon calls one of his servants to cast Tamar out of his presence and “bolt the door after her” (2 Samuel 13:17). If this servant left the chamber when Amnon earlier cleared the room, he remains within earshot and might hear Tamar’s words and struggle. If this servant did not actually leave the room, he witnesses the rape but makes no effort to intervene. One of the most difficult issues that rape survivors face is that rapes usually occur in isolated places without witnesses, meaning that victims’ testimonies are pitted against the testimonies of attackers. The rape of Tamar is unusual because there might have been witnesses. Even if everyone actually leave Amnon’s chamber when he instructs them to do so, it remains likely that at least some of these people remain within earshot. Contemporary survivors who are resisting Tamar’s isolation by documenting her support networks might note these possible witnesses and consider how Tamar’s story might be different if any of them had intervened to stop the violence against her or to respond to her grief in its aftermath.

Prior to Amnon’s servant actually forcing Tamar from the chamber, the narrator emphasises that Tamar is wearing a special garment known as a חננה פור البرلم and says: “for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times” (2 Samuel 13:18). This comment indicates that Tamar is not David’s only daughter and that recognisable customs bind the king’s virgin daughters into

\(^{135}\) Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, 12.

\(^{136}\) Gerald Hammond argues that Tamar describes Amnon’s rape of her as “the other thing that you did to me” because she is unable to bring herself to name what has actually happened. Hammond, “Michal, Tamar, Abigail,” 65.

solidarity with each other. The words לְמַעַן פָּנֵי have been translated in various ways including “a long robe with sleeves” (NRSV). Adrien Janis Bledstein notes that this garment appears 29 times in the Hebrew Bible, including when Jacob makes one for his favourite son, Joseph, in Genesis 37:3. After studying each of these references, Bledstein concludes that Tamar’s special garment appears to indicate both aristocratic and sacred status. She argues that Tamar is a priestess within the royal court and that her duties include healing rituals. This possibility further illuminates Tamar’s social networks and the extent of her horror at being raped. Cut off from her position in the king’s household, she suffers loss of social and political privilege and, perhaps more painfully, is expelled from religious duties. She is alienated from the king’s other daughters and from all who have previously shared her social standing. She experiences what Pamela Cooper-White describes as the “cultural terror” of being shamed.

Tamar’s Resistance Continues with a Public Demonstration of Grief

In bolting the door against Tamar, the servant underscores that Amnon formally rejects Tamar. Violent force prevents her return but her resistance does not wane. While Amnon expells Tamar from his presence, he is now the one isolated and bolted inside his chamber. Tamar is thrown into the public area of the royal compound and immediately acts to take advantage of her audience. She refuses to be silenced, launching into a ritualised public lament: “Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went” (2 Samuel 13:18b-19).

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139 Bledstein, “Tamar,” 73, 78.
140 Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 7. See also Conroy, Absalom, 34; Matthews and Benjamin, Social World of Ancient Israel, 184-185.
141 Fuchs, Sexual Politics, 202; Trible, Texts of Terror, 47; West and Zondi-Mabizela, “The Bible Story,” 7.
142 Conroy, Absalom, 33.
143 Brenner, I Am, 141.
144 Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 13.
19). Amnon has tried to block out Tamar’s voice but she sends an audible signal that he has not won.\textsuperscript{145} She makes herself heard from her place of banishment.

Tamar’s public lament prolongs her resistance through time and space. As she moves through the royal compound, her dramatic actions create time for people previously unaware of events in Amnon’s chamber to witness the magnitude and physical intensity of her distress.\textsuperscript{146} Her actions turn established social practices into a mobile protest. Tamar holds up the injustice committed against her to public scrutiny by meticulously adhering to socially accepted conventions.\textsuperscript{147} Tamar’s public grief parallels the resistance of Saul’s concubine, Rizpah, in 2 Samuel 21. A key difference between Tamar’s protest and that of Rizpah however is that Rizpah elicits a more satisfactory response from David. When David hears of Rizpah’s protest against his involvement in the deaths of her sons, he grants dignified burials to men of Saul’s household (2 Samuel 21:11-14) but when he hears about what has happened to Tamar he does nothing (2 Samuel 13:21).\textsuperscript{148} Just as Tamar’s attempt to “re-author” her life by proposing marriage as an alternative to abandonment is blocked by Amnon (2 Samuel 13:14-17), her attempt to change her circumstances through protest is now blocked by David and others who fail to respond to her in an effective way.

\textsuperscript{145} Trible, \textit{Texts of Terror}, 46.


\textsuperscript{147} This is another example of resistance through exaggerated compliance. See Wade, “Small Acts,” 30-33; Scott, \textit{Weapons of the Weak}, 28-37; Scott, \textit{Domination}, ix-xiii, 18-20, 23-28, 136-140.

\textsuperscript{148} Rizpah bears Saul two sons (2 Samuel 21:8). David, after he comes to power, abuses Rizpah by asking the Gibeonites whether the deceased Saul committed “bloodguilt” against them (2 Samuel 21:1-6). David then surrenders Rizpah’s sons to be killed as compensation. David also gives to the Gibeonites five nephews of his childless wife Michal (the sons of her older sister Merab). While Merab’s reaction to David’s callousness is not recorded, Rizpah exposes this injustice to public view with a prolonged ritual of lament. Spreading sackcloth on a rock near the dead bodies, she keeps vigil for several months. She chases away birds by day and wild animals by night (2 Samuel 21:10). By ensuring that the men’s decaying bodies remain on public display she reminds all who observe the gruesome sight, or breathe the stench, of the social injustice causing her distress. See Njoroge, “A Spirituality of Resistance and Transformation,” 66-82; Gerald O. West, “Reading on the Boundaries: Reading 2 Samuel 21:1-14 with Rizpah,” \textit{Scriptura} 63 (1997): 527-537; Walter Brueggemann, “2 Samuel 21-24 – An Appendix of Deconstruction?” in \textit{Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text}, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 237-239.
Is Absalom Just as Abusive as Amnon?

Absalom meets Tamar some time after she is evicted from Amnon’s house: “crying aloud as she went” (2 Samuel 13:19). It is unclear at what point in the plot Absalom realises that Tamar is in danger. He seems to have prior knowledge of the reason for her distress when he first speaks to her: “Has Amnon your brother been with you?” (2 Samuel 13:20).\(^{149}\) If Absalom’s assessment of Tamar’s situation is based solely on seeing her dishevelled appearance, it is surprising that he is not shocked.\(^{150}\)

There are several points in the narrative where information, suggesting that Tamar is at risk, could be passed to Absalom. Time must elapse between Amnon asking David to send Tamar to him and her actual arrival in his chamber (2 Samuel 13:6-7). A messenger sends word from David to Tamar, instructing her to visit Amnon. It is possible that someone like Jonadab assumes this role and also informs Absalom. Such a conversation, between Jonadab and Absalom, would explain why, when the news of Amnon’s death reaches David in 2 Samuel 13:32, it is Jonadab who reveals a motive.\(^{151}\) It is also possible that David, after sending Tamar to Amnon, tells Absalom. While there is no reference to anyone from the women’s quarters accompanying Tamar to Amnon’s house, it seems strange, given the narrator’s emphasis that Amnon thought it impossible to be alone with Tamar (2 Samuel 13:2), that she would walk to his house without supervision.\(^{152}\) Perhaps women accompany Tamar to Amnon’s house and then fetch Absalom when they are thrown out of his chamber. Perhaps Jonadab alerts Absalom when Amnon turns violent. Such possibilities leave open the option that, even though no one makes an obvious attempt to rescue Tamar, community information networks might attempt to save her.

Just as it is unclear how or when Absalom finds out that Tamar has been raped, his response to her grief is also ambiguous.\(^{153}\) He abruptly silences Tamar’s


\(^{153}\) McKane, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 240.
anguish with an insensitive imperative “Be quiet” (2 Samuel 13:20). He emphasises his own relationship to her by addressing her as “my sister”, but then positions Amnon as her brother: “Be quiet for now, my sister: for he is your brother.” Absalom might be instructing Tamar not to make a public issue of her situation, because it should be dealt with as a family matter. The text however undermines this position by directly stating that Absalom and David take no immediate action on hearing that Tamar has been raped (2 Samuel 13:21-22). While some commentators argue that Absalom’s bidding Tamar to be quiet is an expression of care and a signal that he, at the right time, intends to act on Tamar’s behalf, there is nothing to indicate that Tamar can trust Absalom to fulfil brotherly obligations any more than she can trust Amnon. This reality is particularly horrifying when balanced against the possibility that removal of Tamar’s marriage stakes stands to politically benefit Absalom as much as Amnon.

My reading views Absalom as just as abusive toward Tamar as is Amnon. While Amnon’s abuse of Tamar is obvious, Absalom’s is subtle but none the less effective. When Absalom instructs Tamar to be quiet, he delivers a final blow that achieves what Amnon is unable to achieve; the breaking down of Tamar’s resistance. Tamar, throughout her ordeal in the chamber, creatively finds new ways to resist domination but when Absalom tells her to be quiet, she immediately fades into silence. Absalom, failing to respond to Tamar in a way that accords dignity to her protest, undermines her efforts. She is finally reduced to nothing.

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155 For commentators who ascribe to the view that Absalom cares about Tamar see Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 51-52; Robinson, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 222; Hansen, “My Name is Tamar,” 374.
157 William H. Propp argues that Absalom emphasises to Tamar that Amnon is her brother and urges her to be silent in a bid to dissuade her from marriage which is her right. Propp notes that while Absalom presents incest as a concern, his objections are in fact politically motivated. Propp, “Kinship in 2 Samuel 13,” 45. See also Hill, “A Jonadab Connection,” 387-389.
158 Fuchs also takes this view. Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 205.
159 Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 217.
Amnon discards Tamar from his premises but Absalom discards her from her own story. The narrator notes that Absalom hates Amnon because “he had raped his sister Tamar” (2 Samuel 13:22). However, in silencing Tamar and allowing her to remain desolate, Absalom shows that he is not so much concerned about her welfare as manipulatively using the rape as an excuse to launch a political attack against Amnon.

**Murdering and Raping: Absalom’s Bid for the Top Job**

It is tempting to finish Tamar’s story at the point where Absalom takes her into his home (2 Samuel 13:20) and interpret that action as an act of care. However, when Absalom’s subsequent political manoeuvres are tracked, his care of Tamar is constantly called into question.

Absalom waits two full years after the rape of Tamar and then moves to kill Amnon. Absalom, in what could be either a lavish display of hospitality or a bid to wipe out the king and all contenders for the throne in one foul swoop, invites David and all of the king’s sons to sheep-shearing festivities (2 Samuel 13:23-24). David politely declines, insisting that he does not want to burden Absalom with so many guests. Absalom presses David but the king remains firm in his refusal, suggesting that he suspects foul play. In a bid to distance himself from Absalom’s pressure, David gives Absalom his blessing (2 Samuel 13:25), but it is not clear what David is actually blessing – Absalom’s sheep-shearing efforts or his bid for the throne.

Absalom, having failed in his attempt to lure David and all of his sons to his celebrations, then asks David to allow Amnon to attend in spite of the fact that Absalom has not spoken to Amnon for two full years (2 Samuel 13:22, 26). David’s questioning of Absalom at this point implies that he is suspicious of Absalom’s motives: “Why should he go with you?” (2 Samuel 13:26). However,

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161 Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 204; Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, 1, 5.
in a bizarre twist, after being pressed further by Absalom, David gives permission for Amnon and all of his other sons to go as well (2 Samuel 13:27). If David suspects Absalom of foul play, he responds by acting to save his own life while placing all of his sons in danger. Just as David endangers Tamar’s life by sending her to Amnon’s house, he now endangers the lives of all of his sons by sending them to Absalom’s festivities. Absalom then prepares a “feast like a king’s feast” (2 Samuel 13:27). This metaphor begs questions given that “the king” (David) is obviously not attending. Perhaps the feast is symbolic of Absalom fancying himself as monarch.

Absalom wastes little time on the pretence of the feast and cuts to his main concern. He commands his servants: “Watch when Amnon’s heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you ‘Strike Amnon’, then kill him” (2 Samuel 13:28). Absalom makes no attempt to set his aggression toward Amnon into the context of the rape of Tamar. He only urges his servants not to be afraid, making a feeble attempt to dispel such fear by saying: “have I not myself commanded you? Be courageous and valiant” (2 Samuel 13:28). These words suggest that Absalom is wary that his men will question his authority but he has started to behave in ways that assume he is already king.

When Amnon is killed, the other sons of the king do not respond with shock or grief. They mount their mules and flee (2 Samuel 13:29). This action indicates that they immediately perceive their own lives to be in danger as well. However, before they arrive back in Jerusalem, someone else tells David that Absalom has “killed all the king’s sons and not one of them is left” (2 Samuel 13:30). This report sounds suspiciously like it came from someone who has prior knowledge of Absalom’s intention to kill all of the king’s sons and proceeds to deliver that message even though the other sons escaped. David, who needlessly sends all his sons into danger, shows no sign of disbelief and begins to grieve for all his sons (2 Samuel 13:31).

166 Gunn, The Story of King David, 99.
167 Ackroyd, The Second Book of Samuel, 125.
168 Goldingay, Men Behaving Badly, 272; Cartledge, 1 and 2 Samuel, 541; Daube, “Absalom and the Ideal King,” 318.
The sons’ suspicion that their own lives are at risk and David’s unquestioning acceptance of their deaths increases the likelihood that Absalom is motivated by desires for the throne rather than a need to avenge Tamar’s rape.\(^{169}\) It is only after the unidentified person informs David that all of his sons are dead, that Jonadab intervenes, connecting Absalom’s attack on Amnon with the rape of Tamar two years before.\(^{170}\) As in the case of the unidentified person who delivered the first message to David, it is unclear how Jonadab comes by the information he delivers. Jonadab’s involvement here, like his earlier involvement with Amnon prior to the rape of Tamar, smells of self-centred manipulation. It seems particularly convenient for Jonadab that he is able to position himself as the one who tones down the original report to David with a claim that only Amnon is dead and then offer an explanation for the death. It is unclear where Jonadab’s loyalties lie. What seems likely is that he is manipulatively vacillating between Absalom and David in the hope of securing favour with whoever happens to be king.

Amnon is dead but Jonadab shows no grief or any loyalty to his interests. If Jonadab is now in league with Absalom and a bid to kill all of the kings’ sons has failed, it would be advantageous to play down what happened in the hope of avoiding retaliation from the sons who survive. Jonadab’s linking of Amnon’s death with the rape of Tamar could therefore be nothing more than a red herring that averts attention away from Absalom’s bid to usurp the throne through a mighty massacre. If this is so, Tamar’s story is being manipulatively used to suit the political ends of Absalom and Jonadab.\(^{171}\) Alternatively Jonadab could have set up the initial exaggerated account in the hope of gaining David’s favour by scaling back the tragedy to emphasise one death.

Just as Absalom urges Tamar not to take the assault of her body to heart in 2 Samuel 13:20, Jonadab now comforts David with similar words: “do not let my lord the king take it to heart, as if all the king’s sons were dead; for Amnon alone

\(^{169}\) Smith, “The Discourse Structure,” 41. In contrast Hugo Gressmann sees Absalom’s killing of Amnon as justified and states that Amnon deserves death under Israelite law. Such a conclusion is however debatable given that Deuteronomy 22:28 says that a man who has sex with a virgin must pay a bride-price of fifty shekels and never divorce her. See Gressmann, “The Oldest History Writing,” 34.


is dead” (2 Samuel 13:32). When the king’s sons are spotted on the road, making their approach toward Jerusalem, Jonadab uses their appearance as an opportunity to emphasise his own worth as a royal adviser: “See, the king’s sons have come; as your servant said, so it has come about” (2 Samuel 13:35). In efforts to position himself favourably before David, Jonadab trivialises the impact of Amnon’s death, the scheming and disappearance of Absalom, as well as David’s fear that all his sons are dead.

Absalom’s response to Amnon’s death is not that of a brother protecting family honour. He instead responds like a fugitive who fears retaliation from his surviving brothers. Absalom, taking advantage of the political resources that are available through his mother’s family, flees to his grandfather Talmai, the king of Geshur, and stays there for three years (2 Samuel 13:37-38). Similarly, David’s reaction to Amnon’s death is not related to Tamar. David is said to have “mourned for his son day after day” (2 Samuel 13:37) but it is not clear whether this is a reference to Amnon who is dead or to Absalom who has fled. While ambiguity is maintained during the three years that Absalom is fugitive in Geshur, David thinks about both sons: “the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom; for he was now consoled over the death of Amnon” (2 Samuel 13:39). There is, however, nothing to indicate that David ever thinks of Tamar. Nor is there any comment on the implications of Amnon’s death for Tamar’s future. As Fuchs says, it remains unknown whether Tamar “is doomed to perpetual desolation, or whether her rapist’s death has released her from imposed isolation at Absalom’s house.” Further, there is nothing to indicate who cares for Tamar while Absalom is in Geshur.

When Absalom eventually returns to Jerusalem, the interaction between him and David is consistent with Absalom returning after having made a premature bid for the throne. Absalom makes no attempt to gain favour or understanding by placing

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173 Charles Conroy notes that no time limit is given in relation to Tamar dwelling in Absalom’s home and it seems that her desolation is indefinite. Conroy, Absalom, 35.

174 Fuchs, Sexual Politics, 217.
the death of Amnon into the context of the rape of Tamar. As the story
progresses, there are subtle hints that Absalom has pressured David’s military
commander, Joab, into arranging his return from exile to facilitate his ascension to
the throne.

David gives no indication that he perceives Absalom’s exile as an effort to avenge
Tamar’s rape and protect family honour. David instead imposes a form of exile
upon Absalom within his own city: “Let him go to his own house; he is not to
come into my presence” (2 Samuel 14:24). Even though David tries to contain
Absalom’s influence, Absalom gains ground through a mixture of his own
attractiveness, his willingness to take what does not belong to him and a
propensity for violence. The narrator exaggeratedly declares: “Now in all Israel
there was none to be praised so much for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of
his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him” (2 Samuel 14:25).
Absalom who “had a beautiful sister” (2 Samuel 13:1) both silences and upstages
Tamar. Now there is none more beautiful in all Israel than Absalom himself!
This might indicate that Tamar has died or that the experience of being raped
leaves her so distraught that she can no longer be classified as beautiful.

Ambiguity in the relationship between Absalom and Tamar continues as he gives
her name to his daughter: “There was born to Absalom, three sons and one
daughter whose name was Tamar; she was a beautiful woman” (2 Samuel 14:27).
Trible argues that Absalom’s naming of his daughter functions as a redemptive
moment within the text. If this reference to Absalom naming his daughter
Tamar is merely a misplaced introduction to the rape narrative, it is difficult to
see anything redemptive about the way Absalom proceeds to treat his “beautiful”
daughter. This act of naming could, however, support the idea that the older
Tamar has died. While this alternative heightens the tragedy of the older

177 Trible, Texts of Terror, 55. See also Hansen, “My Name is Tamar,” 375.
Robinson, 1 and 2 Samuel, 227; Cartledge, 1 and 2 Samuel, 352.
179 Cooper-White argues that, at least in some later Jewish traditions, such naming was only done
in memory of a deceased relative. Cooper-White, The Cry of Tamar, 9. See also Hansen, “My
Name is Tamar,” 375.
Tamar’s story and does not excuse Absalom’s violence and lack of care of her, it
does guarantee her, like Uriah, a place in Israel’s perpetual memory. Walter
Brueggemann argues that Uriah’s inclusion, as the last name on the list of 30
hereos in 2 Samuel 23:24-39, is an assertion that Israel does not forget David’s
sacrifice of the loyal Uriah. Similarly, the preservation of Tamar’s name and
story indicates Israel’s determination not to forget the injustice suffered by a
young princess within its royal family. According to Tracy Hansen, this also
functions as a symbol of hope and new life for contemporary sexual abuse
survivors. She says: “We are told only one thing about the new Tamar: that she is
a beautiful woman.”

Absalom deceitfully builds support among the people of Jerusalem and mounts a
conspiracy against David (2 Samuel 15:2-12). He capitalises on David’s lack of
involvement with the people by positioning himself near the gate and listening to
their grievances. While Absalom acquires some popularity in Jerusalem (2
Samuel 15:6), he only manages to become king through deceitfully seeking
David’s permission to travel to Hebron, the capital of Judah, for the purposes of
worship (2 Samuel 15:7-9). Absalom makes a big show of travelling to Hebron by
inviting 200 men who, according to the narrator, know nothing of his plans, to
accompany him. He fuels the conspiracy by having secret messengers infiltrate
the tribes of Israel with the proclamation: “Absalom has become king at Hebron!”
(2 Samuel 15:10-12). Absalom has strategically chosen Hebron as the site of his
rebellion because it was his own birthplace, and also quite possibly a place that
feels cheated by David’s move to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 3:2-5; 2 Samuel 5:1-10).

A messenger informs David that: “The hearts of the Israelites have gone after
Absalom” (2 Samuel 15:13). David, not being aware of the extent to which
Absalom has fabricated political success, flees Jerusalem, leaving his ten

180 Karel van der Toorn highlights that ancient Israelites placed considerable emphasis on the
importance of perpetual memory through invoking the names of the dead. See Karel van der
Toorn, Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of
182 Hansen, “My Name is Tamar,” 375-376.
183 McKane, 1 and 2 Samuel, 249; Eddy, “My Son,” 338; Weingreen, “The Rebellion of
Absalom,” 264.
184 Hertzberg, 1 and 2 Samuel, 337.
concubines to tend his house (2 Samuel 15:14-17). David’s decision to leave these ten women in Jerusalem, when the oracle of Nathan specifically warns they are in danger of being raped (2 Samuel 12:11-12), is totally unacceptable.\textsuperscript{185} Just as David delivers Tamar into the hands of Amnon, he delivers his ten concubines into the hands of Absalom (2 Samuel 16:20-23).\textsuperscript{186}

\textit{Absalom Dies as David Loses Grip on Power}

David’s troops demonstrate reservations about his leadership by refusing to take him to war against Absalom. David also undermines his own authority by saying to his troops: “Whatever seems best to you I will do” (2 Samuel 18:4). Left behind, as his armies march out to war, David is no longer the sexual conqueror who spotted Bathseba from the palace roof-top but a displaced, aging man who is losing his grip on power. David articulates awareness that battlefield violence and the violence within his home are intrinsically linked. He seems to realise, for the first time, that he has so blurred the boundaries between “enemy”, “friend” and “family” that he risks killing his own son. He orders his military commanders: “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom” (2 Samuel 18:5). A bloody battle sees 20,000 men killed on one day (2 Samuel 18:6-8). Absalom does not meet his death in battle but rather comes to grief as a result of riding his mule under the thick branches of an oak tree.\textsuperscript{187} When Absalom’s head becomes stuck in the branches of the tree, the mule keeps going and Absalom is left hanging (2 Samuel 18:9). One of David’s supporters sees Absalom hanging in the tree but declines to kill him because of David’s command to treat Absalom gently (2 Samuel 18:11-13). Joab and ten of his armour-bearers are not so generous. Joab thrusts three spears into Absalom’s heart and the armour-bearers surround him, strike him and kill him (2 Samuel 18:14-15).

Absalom’s story ends strangely. His body is dumped into a pit in the forest and then it is revealed:

\textsuperscript{185} Daube argues that David, fleeing to safety himself, would have known that these women stand no chance against Absalom and his supporters. Daube, “Absalom and the Ideal King,” 319.

\textsuperscript{186} McKane, \textit{1 and 2 Samuel}, 257; Goldingay, \textit{Men Behaving Badly}, 281; Daube, “Absalom and the Ideal King,” 320; Levenson and Halpern, “The Political Import,” 514.

\textsuperscript{187} The mule was a royal mount. Absalom’s loss of his mule symbolises the loss of kingdom. Conroy, \textit{Absalom}, 60.
Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself a pillar that is in the King’s Valley, for he said, “I have no son to keep my name in remembrance”; he called the pillar by his own name. It is called Absalom’s Monument to this day (2 Samuel 18:18).

In contrast to 2 Samuel 14:27 which states that Absalom has three sons and a beautiful daughter named Tamar, this portion of text claims that Absalom has “no son”. Karel van der Toorn explains that ancient Israelites were deeply concerned that the names of the dead be invoked by those who survived them and that it was normally a son’s duty to erect a funeral pillar to honour his father. However, when a man had no sons, he would take action himself to ensure that appropriate rites of commemoration would still occur in the event of his death. 188 Perhaps Absalom’s sons all died or are killed in battle by the time Absalom himself dies. 189 Perhaps family conflict leaves Absalom feeling abandoned by his sons and doubting that they will appropriately honour him after death. Indeed, no one protests at Absalom’s body being unceremoniously dumped into an unmarked forest pit. If Absalom’s sons ever existed, their names are not preserved. This sad tale of Absalom preparing for his own burial and the lack of detail accorded to his nameless sons suggests that ultimately no one really remembers them. In contrast, the notion that Tamar’s memory is kept alive by the niece who is named after her begins to look redemptive. 190

David grieves extravagantly for Absalom: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I have died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:33). As his grief focuses on Absalom, David forgets that he has sons, daughters and wives who are still alive. Joab uses David’s grief as an opportunity to confront him with what has been previously alluded to but not formally articulated. David is an enemy to his own family and supporters 191:

Today you have covered with shame the faces of all your officers who have saved your life today, and the lives of your sons and your daughters, and the lives of your wives and your concubines, for love of those who hate you and for hatred of those who love you. You have made it clear today that commanders and officers are nothing to you; for I perceive if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. So go out at once and speak kindly to your servants; for

188 Toorn, Family Religion, 208.
189 Goldingay, Men Behaving Badly, 286; Hertzberg, 1 and 2 Samuel, 334.
190 Trible, Texts of Terror, 55.
191 McKane, 1 and 2 Samuel, 270.
I swear by the LORD, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night (2 Samuel 19:4-8a).

Joab voices what David’s soldiers have known from the moment David plotted to kill Uriah: “commanders and officers are nothing to you” (2 Samuel 19:6). David has never expressed concern for the way that his political ambitions and violence shatter the lives of his daughters, wives, concubines and loyal supporters. David has persistently taken whatever he wanted, from whomever he wanted, without regard for their pain and suffering. His marriages, inspired by opportunistic grabs at strategic alliances, have bred violence within his own family. Joab confronts David with a reality that no one else dares to articulate: Absalom was a son but he was also an enemy; David is a king but also a traitor. David has learnt at horrendous cost that “the personal is political”. His propensity for selfish violence has cost him the lives of Amnon and Absalom, the desolation of Tamar, the stability and fruitfulness of whole branches of his family and also the respect of his military forces and people.\(^{192}\)

**Future Options: Continuing the Journey with Tamar of 2 Samuel 13**

Tamar’s story highlights that social class is no guarantee against abuse. She is raped and left desolate even though (or quite possibly because) she is a royal princess with the potential to build her own political alliances through marriage. Her social networks quite possibly extend through four kingdoms and she is likely to be connected to the women of her father’s court through his polygamous marriages, other daughters and servants. She is entitled to the protection of supervision and guardianship and yet she is still isolated and left vulnerable to attack.

The isolation that makes it possible for Amnon to rape Tamar can be resisted by contemporary survivors by emphasising how her fate might be different if family and supporters had moved to protect or assist her. People within the royal compound might hear Amnon raping Tamar although, in his bid to force physical contact, he has cleared his chamber of people (2 Samuel 13:9). Tamar, after being raped, resists being socially ostracised by endeavouring to share her pain with a prolonged public lament. At points throughout Tamar’s story, alternatives are

possible but relatives and others within the royal compound do not heed warning signs or respond to her cries for help.

Survivors can intentionally call characters such as David, Absalom, Amnon and Jonadab to accountability by unmasking underlying political motives and exposing how their various quests for power are achieved through strategies such as war, rape and murder. The rape of Tamar, like the experiences of contemporary survivors, is not an isolated event, but rather occurs as part of a persistent pattern in which vulnerable people are violated and sacrificed to satisfy political ends. By identifying and critiquing such violent forces, survivors can challenge destructive behaviours and explore alternative courses of action.

Survivors can also challenge the narrator and the prophet Nathan in their bids to implicate Yhwh in horrific violence. Such ideological unmasking powerfully challenges present day abusers in their bids to claim God’s support in abusive acts. Nathan’s prophetic credibility and his portrayal of Yhwh as precipitating the violence against David’s family (2 Samuel 12:7-14) needs to be exposed as suspect. The narrator’s pronouncement that Yhwh contributes to the death of Bathsheba’s first child (2 Samuel 12:15b) needs to be strongly contested. Recourse to other biblical texts such as Ezekiel 18 and Jeremiah 31 suggest that the baby dies because it is sick, not because Yhwh strikes it dead as punishment for David’s sins. Contemporary survivors can also highlight David’s lack of intercession and action on behalf of the women in his family as a basis for stirring present day authority figures and communities to social action. David, even though he is warned through Nathan’s oracle that women in his family are at risk of being raped, does nothing to ensure their safety. Contemporary survivors can now claim the power to totally “re-author” Tamar’s story through socially transformative action that seeks to ensure people are safe within their own homes, families and communities.

Much can be gained through contemporary survivors cataloguing Tamar’s resistance strategies. She attempts to create physical space between herself and Amnon and, in several incidences, uses exaggerated compliance as a form of resistance. She also comes to speech, demonstrating acute awareness of her social
rights and legal entitlements. She masterfully presents her attacker with possible alternatives and if he had listened, the outcomes for both of them might have been more conducive to restoration. Tamar, even after physical attack, continues her resistance by publicly airing her agonising pain. Contemporary survivors can participate in her tradition of resistance by refusing to forget her story. As Tracy Hansen argues the name of Tamar lives on, through generations of survivors, who continue to discover their capacity to rise above the devastation of abuse and reclaim their lives as “beautiful”.  

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193 Hansen, “My Name is Tamar,” 376.
Conclusion

This study has aimed to develop a biblical hermeneutic of abuse to increase the reading agency of people who have been assaulted or sexually abused within Australian religious institutions. Insights gained from our journey through hermeneutical history and theory, Australian history and the four Hebrew Bible texts in which ancient women are abused will now be interpreted in light of this proposed hermeneutic. As has been previously stated, the hermeneutic encourages survivors to “disarm” the “Bible-bashers” of their own contexts by resisting the isolation that contributes to abuse; placing individual stories of abuse into wider social, political and historical context; critiquing dominant discourses that contribute to abuse; and identifying resistance strategies that can be used to generate personal and social transformation.

The Time is Ripe but Challenges Remain

The time is ripe for the development of a hermeneutic of abuse for application in Australian contexts. Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy and South African Contextual Bible Study are identified as major partners in a hermeneutical conversation which particularly takes advantage of biblical studies’ movement away from a preoccupation with authorial intention and historical-critical methods. The proposed hermeneutic benefits from biblical studies’ relatively new found freedom to engage in interdisciplinary discussion with fields such as psychology, literary theory and cultural theory. It draws on resources developed by other contextual methodologies such as liberation theologies, feminisms, womanisms, African theologies and ideological criticisms. Access to such a resource base is only possible due to changes in intellectual paradigms in the last 35 years which have opened up space for previously silenced voices.

The proposed hermeneutic utilises a pluralistic approach to biblical interpretation in an attempt to support contemporary abuse survivors to join hermeneutical discussions. In its bid to destablise dominant discourses and recover the voices and traditions of less powerful groups, it does not step away from historical questions. A hermeneutic of abuse, in acknowledging that all language and narrative is socially constructed, challenges vulnerable people to constantly
question how versions of history are constructed and whose interests are served by them.

Difficulties still remain in terms of applying a biblical hermeneutic of abuse within Australian religious communities. Much biblical and theological reflection remains to be done in terms of what it means to practice contextual methodologies in a country as geographically large and culturally diverse as Australia. Links between Australia’s largely denied history and its religious identity, or lack of it, need much exploration. This study recommends, in Chapter 2, that there is a particular need for analysis of violence within Australian religious communities to move beyond emphasis on simple binary oppositions, such as male-female domination, to more inclusive frameworks, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s kyriarchal pyramid, which acknowledge and map the complexity of cumulative oppressive forces. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the history of abuse within Australian religious communities demonstrates not only the impact of sexism, but also the complex inter-relatedness of factors such as heterosexism, racism, class exploitation and colonialism.

The increased exegetical freedom which makes possible the development of a hermeneutic of abuse also increases biblical scholars’ responsibility for the ethics of reading. While the expanded range of methodological options within biblical studies creates options for multiple meanings and the choice of alternatives, readers need to be particularly clear about the intentions and commitments that lead them to choose one meaning above another. This study, in Chapter 1, recommends Cosgrove’s guiding considerations for ethical biblical interpretation as a basis for articulating such choices. Cosgrove suggests that interpreters intentionally declare theological, moral, correlational (contextual) and ecumenical considerations when choosing between possible meanings.

A biblical hermeneutic of abuse supports abuse survivors to exercise choice between possible meanings and to identify points in texts where alternative scenarios become possible, or would have been possible, if only characters had acted differently. It is however acknowledged that survivors can usually only exercise such choice when safe and sacred spaces complete with counselling, referral and back-up support are secured. Much work still remains to be done.
within Australian religious communities to break down the isolation experienced by abuse survivors and to draw them into the well-supported, interdisciplinary networks that will be necessary for biblical conversations to proceed. For such networks to be established biblical scholars need to commit to solidarity with Australian abuse survivors, and even demonstrate willingness to engage with survivors’ cynicism and disinterest, if they are to have any hope of building the trusting relationships necessary to read the Bible from survivors’ perspectives.

Resisting Isolation by Building Support Networks

All four of the biblical survivors featured in this study show signs of being connected to support networks, even though surface readings of their stories initially present them as rather lonely characters. Contemporary survivors, throughout the reading process, are encouraged to resist their own isolation by meeting in safe and supportive groups and documenting their own sources of support.

Hagar’s isolation can be resisted with an insistence that she has contact with other slaves, within the home of Abram and Sarai, and that other networks are available to her through their rather large extended family. When Hagar is positioned near a well in the wilderness she is connected with the great Israelite matriarchs Rebekah and Rachel. Her wilderness experiences grant her status comparable with the great male biblical figures Abraham and Moses. Hagar, in finding an Egyptian wife for Ishmael, renews her links with Egypt and becomes matriarch to a large family of descendants. The history of interpretation in both Islamic and womanist traditions further resists Hagar’s isolation by remembering her as the woman who pioneered the community near the House of God at Mecca and as the first of many womanist “sisters in the wilderness”.

Dinah’s potential to resist isolation begins with connection to her own mother, Leah. Her networks expand further through her assertiveness to step out and visit the women of Shechem’s community as well as through her connections with Jacob’s other wives, her sisters and quite possibly the wives of her brothers. If Dinah planned to marry Shechem, her decision resists isolation through expansion of her own social networks, and the expansion of her family’s trade networks. Her
marriage would have also offered her family some protection from political vulnerability.

Tamar in Genesis 38 obviously has strong community networks, possibly as a result of belonging to an indigenous family. She particularly takes opportunities to “re-author” her own story as a result of information passed through community networks. There are hints that Tamar’s community gather in solidarity to resist Judah’s attempts to locate the veiled woman who appeared at the entrance to Enaim and again to protect her from execution. Contemporary survivors can further resist Tamar’s isolation by strengthening her connection with other women throughout Israeliite history such as Rebekah and Ruth, and also by emphasising her pivotal role in the lineage of King David and Jesus Christ.

Tamar of 2 Samuel 13 quite possibly has family connections, particularly through her mother Maacah, into four kingdoms. Tamar might experience a sense of community with David’s other daughters through her royal position, duties and dress. She is a virgin under supervision, suggesting that she is surrounded by other women, including servants, who live with her in community. It is possible that some of these companions accompany her to Amnon’s house and remain within earshot while she is raped. Others within the royal compound become aware of her distress during her prolonged public lament. There are hints to suggest some of these witnesses might attempt to help Tamar by passing on details of her distress to her brother Absalom.

**Placing Personal Stories into Wider Context**

None of the four biblical survivors featured in this study are personally to blame for the abuse that they experience. When each of these women’s stories is placed into wider social, political and historical context it becomes obvious that these personal experiences are part of much greater, and extremely complex, abuse patterns.

The intricate web of greed and lust for power that contributes to the abuse of Hagar stretches beyond boundaries of gender, ethnicity and social class. Hagar, as a black female slave, is abused by both Abraham and Sarah. Abraham abuses Sarah who, within the world of the story is of a higher social class to Hagar, and
manipulatively takes advantage of both Pharaoh and Abimelech, underlining that social class is no protection against abuse. Ishmael, Isaac and Lot are all male but their economic dependency on Abraham renders them vulnerable to abuse. Sarah and Lot, although they are both abuse victims, also emerge as oppressors. The inter-related complexity of power relationships is also evidenced with the “nasty-nice” characterisation of both Abraham and the messenger of Yhwh. Although Abraham is abusive toward a string of people throughout his Genesis cycle, he also acts constructively in resisting Ishmael’s marginalisation through circumcision, possibly reallocating resources in favour of Hagar and Ishmael and in calling on God to act justly in relation to Sodom and Gormorrah. The messenger of Yhwh, while he instructs Hagar to return to an abusive situation, also positions her as a great religious figure on par with the Israelite patriarchs, Abraham and Moses.

The abuse of Dinah occurs within a pattern of her brothers being aggressive and violent, even though they are relatively new to the district of Shechem, and are a politically and economically vulnerable minority group. Analysis of their dealings with both the Shechemites and their own father repeatedly shows them failing to honour covenants and agreements. While a marriage between Dinah and Shechem grants to the Jacobites privileges and expanded networks, they place lust for property and power above respect for family unity and their own integrity. Their murderous and rapacious violence shows that they are so driven by greed that they are willing to destroy a whole city, to which they were now related through the sign of circumcision and marriage, and risk devastation of their own sister.

The abandonment and abuse of Tamar of Genesis 38 occurs against the wider backdrop of Judah’s callous betrayal of his brother Joseph to slavery and his father Jacob to inconsolable grief. Judah persistently demonstrates that his first priority is to his own interests and wealth, even if this means treating his own family with gross insensitivity and preying on the vulnerability of his wider community. He shows no grief when two of his sons die and no respect for the honour of Tamar’s father. His immediate call for Tamar to be burned, even though he knows she is pregnant, highlights his commitment to self-centred agenda regardless of the consequences. Yet, when Tamar’s story is read through a
wide lens, even Judah proves that he is not totally irredeemable. He publicly admits that Tamar is more righteous than he is and experiences a life-changing transformation which makes him more sensitive to the needs of his most vulnerable family members.

The rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is far from an isolated incident of abuse. The assault that she experiences is connected to a long-standing trend of her father, King David, to be so caught up with his own power and privilege that he fails to honour and respect those who are most loyal to him. David, in choosing to live by the ways of violence, sets up spirals of war, rape and murder that risk devastation of his own family and supporters. The political quests for his throne constantly destroy life and honour. David, after the gruesome death of Absalom, makes no direct reference to the sacrifice of Tamar for political gain; but his sad and sorry demeanour indicates his lust for power, and his son’s propensity to follow in his violent footsteps, has horrendous personal costs.

**Critiquing Dominant Discourses**

A biblical hermeneutic of abuse, taking its lead from Foucault, seeks to provide opportunities for dominant and abusive discourses to be destabilised through an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges”. The hermeneutic commits to this process through both systematic, scholarly analysis to recover “lost” or subjugated meanings hidden within texts and by creating opportunities for abuse survivors to use their own inner resources (or subjugated knowledges) for the purposes of critique and transformation. Arguably, this study’s best contribution to increasing the reading agency of abuse survivors is its commitment to challenging both contemporary and biblical rhetoric which seeks to implicate God in abusive acts, or to co-opt God’s support for perpetrators’ abusive agenda.

A most effective strategy that contemporary survivors can use to challenge God’s involvement in abusive acts is to claim their own power to react according to a number of choices, creating opportunities for alternative outcomes to emerge. Contemporary survivors can critique dominant discourses that portray God as abusive by honestly naming what they see. They can choose to call God to justice through intercession. Then, by using theological and moral principles as guiding
considerations for interpretation, they can present an image of God that is more in accordance with what they know of God’s nature and compassion from other biblical and extra-biblical sources, as well as their own experience. This of course raises the possibility that survivor’s experiences of God might be particularly negative. In such cases the Psalter provides ample resources to dispense with dominant discourses, controlled emotions and denial of agony. Survivors are free to vent their anger.

Survivors can challenge the credibility of those claiming to be religious intermediaries, such as the divine messengers of Yhwh in Hagar’s story, the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12, and religious professionals in contemporary contexts. They can differentiate between predictions of punishment and calls to repentance. They can also unveil religious piety where it functions as a guise for power and wealth. Most powerfully, they can intervene and take social action to move circumstances in new and positive directions.

Dominant discourses can also be challenged by recovering lost voices and marginalised traditions. The four texts featured this study create particular opportunities to reconstruct to some extent lost female traditions such as the menstrual bathing practices depicted in Bathsheba’s story, courtship rituals near wells as alluded to in Hagar’s story and marriage preparations hinted at in the stories of Dinah and Tamar of Genesis 38. Tamar’s story in 2 Samuel 13 also creates opportunities for practices specific to the King’s daughters and for women’s roles in public lament to be reconstructed. Such reconstructive work insists that dominant stories are not the “only” stories and that alternatives can be discovered through preservation of minority traditions.

Dominant discourses within contemporary contexts, such as those which insist that survivors are damaged for life, can also be critiqued as part of a biblical hermeneutic of abuse. As contemporary survivors come to see that they are not merely objects to be examined, diagnosed and labelled, they can begin to explore opportunities in their own life narratives for critique, resistance and the emergence of alternatives. In community and through co-operation with others, they can become the ones who “see”, “name” and choose how to respond.
Identifying Resistance Strategies and Transforming Lives

Hagar demonstrates an amazing capacity to resist oppression by transforming it into constructive power. When the messenger of Yhwh fails to grant her liberation and instructs her to return to an abusive situation, she claims power by refusing to act like a slave. While she returns to Sarai and Abram, there is nothing to indicate that her role in their home is anything other than second wife to the patriarch. Hagar diffuses the messenger’s power by claiming her own power to actually “see” and “name” God. Hagar, in contrast to Bathsheba, who is seen by David and is labelled by his anonymous acquaintance, seizes an opportunity to move into the subject position. She effectively “re-authors” her own narrative by opening up new options only available to a “woman with attitude” who is audacious enough to “see” and “name” one of life’s most extraordinary experiences. Later, she resists death by opening her eyes and seeing a well. Hagar, in supplying her son with water and a wife, also claims life and a future for herself.

Dinah resists isolation by assertively stepping out to visit the women of her region. Through silence she maintains control of her story’s intimate details. Dinah seems to know that information is power and she resists surrendering details of her sexual experience to her abusers. Contemporary abuse survivors are now able to resist her rape through “re-authoring” strategies that claim love and liberation as viable options over violence and destruction. They can also resist Dinah’s banishment to ongoing desolation by writing an end to her story that is life-giving and inspirational. Just as Hagar, in Islamic tradition, makes a new life for herself among wilderness people near Mecca, so might Dinah find new life in Egypt or wherever she lives out her days.

Tamar’s story in Genesis 38 demonstrates the role of community solidarity in resistance strategies that powerfully transform death into new life. Tamar is able to discard her widow’s garments, a symbol of a deathly life, only because information is somehow passed onto her through a community network. She dons a veil, a garment traditionally associated with marriage, and meets Judah at a place where marriages are traditionally negotiated. Tamar, who has previously been used and discarded, now asks what will be given to her. She claims Judah’s identity markers, which essentially guarantee her a “name” for her children, and,
with an humorously ingenious strategy, she also claims his biological seed. At the point where Judah sentences Tamar to death by fire, she once again turns death into new life when, in front of a gathering crowd, she reveals the identity of the man who impregnated her. Judah is obliged to grant a reprieve and let her live.

Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 valiantly resists her rape before, during and after the tragic event. Her strategies include creating physical distance, exaggerated compliance, knowledge of her legal rights and responsibilities, use of cultural shaming rhetoric, physical resistance and a prolonged public lament. At each point along the way, Tamar bravely attempts to “re-author” her story but her efforts are quashed by those who prove more powerful. Her story, however, is not without hope and redemption. Contemporary survivors can explore how Tamar’s story might be different, if only her relatives and others aware of her plight had reacted differently. Survivors can stir present day communities to socially transformative action by setting up awareness and safety programs that ensure cries for help do not continue to be ignored. Most importantly, survivors can resist their own abuse by taking a lead from the Tamar tradition and insisting that they are now transformed into “beautiful” people.

It has been demonstrated that a biblical hermeneutic of abuse weaves back and forth between biblical text and contemporary experience: linking isolated figures into community; placing personal stories of abuse into wider context; critiquing dominant discourses; and identifying resistance strategies to generate personal and social transformation. A biblical hermeneutic of abuse maintains audacious hope that, even in the face of death, possibilities will emerge that lead to life in all its fullness.
Bibliography


