

**WEAPONS UPON HER BODY:  
THE FEMALE HEROIC IN THE HEBREW BIBLE**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2009

The established interpretations of four biblical narratives—Lot’s daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba—often reduce the women to stock characters who inform our ideas about biblical Israel (Rendsburg; Frymer-Kensky) or the line of David (Menn). When read for their gender information, however, one finds women who employ individual strategies of deception and trickery, motivated by self-interest, to successfully maneuver within the system to their benefit. Such initiative is valorous: they save themselves through their own pluck and ingenuity. The title of this dissertation evokes an argument that heroic biblical women carry their essential weapons upon and within themselves.

This study begins by considering the historiographical background to the Hebrew Bible. Next, the four narratives are placed in context by presenting some of the major textual theories behind Genesis through Kings, the books where these stories appear. The women are incorporated into the Bible’s larger civic themes by subsuming them under the heading of “Israel,” thus deflating the characters’ gender and initiative. The action which marks these stories—women motivated by self-interest coupled with deception and an incidence of Wendy Doniger’s “bedtrick,” an instance of sexual trickery that challenges the text’s power and gender dynamics—puts these characters in league with female heroes from folk tale and legend. Folklore methodologies are then applied in order to highlight their robust action. A structuralist

frame adapted from Vladimir Propp and Mary Ann Jezewski is applied to several biblical stories, testing their common motifs and actions with traits established by other non-biblical female heroic narratives. Strong heroic themes are found in all four narratives. A collective approach to the four narratives then uncovers the allusions, parallelisms and language which links them together and offer a trait list for the female biblical heroic. This work concludes by critiquing previous discussions of women in the Bible as well as conjecturing on the stories' origins and their role as religious models. The dissertation argues for the efficacy of women as an analytic category as suggested by Ortner and Heilbrun and suggests how this new identification of heroic women in the Bible affects further interpretation of the Bible.

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## PREFACE

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

*A woman [carries] her weapons about her.* B. Yevamot 115A<sup>1</sup>

*Two daughters and their newly widowed father narrowly escape the destruction of their hometown—a calamity which claimed their sisters, their mother, and apparently their father's senses. Living in a cave and feeling that their world has ended, the daughters get their father drunk and have sex with him, hoping their resulting pregnancies will secure a place in whatever society they find...*

*A woman's husband dies; in keeping with tradition, her father-in-law sends the late husband's brother to marry the new widow. But the brother shirks his duty, and so is struck dead. The father-in-law promises to send another son but has no intention of following through. The woman is now without husband or security; knowing that her newly widowed father-in-law will be passing through her town, she disguises herself as a prostitute and successfully catches his eye. The "prostitute" asks nothing in payment from the unaware widower—merely his ring and staff as a token of payment. Months later, she is pregnant and her father-in-law is scandalized. He sends for his wayward daughter-in-law. He demands to know who did this deed; the woman shows the father-in-law his ring and staff. Realizing his error, he acknowledges his failing and restores honor to both his daughter-in-law and her offspring...*

At first blush, it is hard to imagine these stories of incest and harlotry are in the Hebrew Bible, but there they are—along with other equally troubling tales of deceptive women. How can we account for their inclusion, especially when they fail to explicitly emphasize God's protection or Israelite religion in any sort of way? Why are these tales of trickery and female intrigue in the Bible? Clearly later editors could reform and reshape the stories of Lot's daughters, Tamar of

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<sup>1</sup> All English translations of the Talmud from the Soncino edition of the Babylonian Talmud (London, 1934-1939).

Genesis 38, Ruth and Bathsheba—but they chose not to. Why did they retain these challenging characters? Are we simply to read them as moral teachings on the evils of women?

Other stories of women in the Bible are not nearly as problematic. Judith, Deborah, Michal, Abigail and Yael all appeal to God and in certain cases, carry out trickery on behalf of the greater community. But Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba do not. They act out of their own self-interest for their own ends. We would be hard pressed to read these four narratives as stories celebrating God's providence since God appears obliquely in their stories. They do not reflect Israelite religious practices. The stories demonstrate neither an active prayer life nor ritual observances anywhere in their narratives. The goal which they strive for—access to a male who will eventually provide them with a son—seems to mark them as successful characters even though they employ trickery and/or deception to achieve that end. They work for themselves and are motivated out of their own personal concerns in order to achieve their individual objective.

But, that is not how these stories are understood. Instead, later critics reinterpret the story of Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth as well as Bathsheba in light of Israel's larger destiny. Now we see them as enriching our notion of Israel as a nation under God's special care or as symbolic of Israel's broader civic or nationalist agenda.

Biblical scholars often view women in the Bible primarily as representative examples of communal, dynastic or religious concerns. Women serve as important vessels in fulfilling the covenant. Sarah and Rebekah's problematic pregnancies point to God's intervention in fulfilling the promises of fertility and greatness. Without their annunciation stories, we would not fully realize the interplay of covenant promise and divine providence. Women's significance also rises with their ability to exemplify the hope of Israel's later exiled communities as a powerless,

landless people. Queen Esther's story illustrates how one clandestine Jew in a foreign court can make a difference in the lives of thousands of her countrymen. Women can symbolize the group as a whole or can provide a foretaste of great men to come. For instance, the ancestresses of David—which includes Lot's daughters (Genesis 19), Tamar (Genesis 38) and Ruth—help point the way to David. This is important since together they form the line of Davidic ancestresses and Bathsheba completes the circle of women directly around him. By recognizing the ambiguous nature of these female characters, we can more fully appreciate the richly paradoxical figure of David. In addition, we more fully grasp the artistry behind biblical composition when we look at the lush and varied characterization of someone like David.

The Davidic ancestress connection is an important one since it links us to some of the most vibrant stories of women in the Bible. In Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth (as well as some of the women immediately around David, like Michal, Abigail and Bathsheba), we have women of intrigue, initiative and resolve. These women also put us in mind of Yael, Esther, Judith and Deborah, women marked more for their physical bravery than their sexual intrigue. Our four stories, marked by women who resist the limitations of their circumstances through strategies of deception and trickery, are subsumed within a larger epic story that showcases God's role in Israel's history. But before developing a notion of these women as instrumental to David and national concerns, before glossing over them as part of a greater institutional representation, we return to the question: why are these stories here? What if these stories are not read as examples of Davidic ancestresses or representation of Israel? If we limit ourselves to these traditional interpretative frames, what do we miss? We fail to read these stories for what they communicate about women, choosing instead to valorize women for their success in informing our notions about men and male concerns in the text. Taken on their own merits, we find that these female

characters exemplify dynamic characteristics that no biblical male does. Furthermore, they are contained in a sacred text even though there is nothing overtly sacred about their stories.

I argue that these are popular stories that arose separately from Israel's religious or cultic concerns but were adopted into its epic theological narrative. This claim privileges *gender* as the defining feature of these stories. By gender, I do not mean the simple measurement of male characters vs. female characters along traditional metrics of "hero." Such comparison across genders often asks how female characters compare to male characters (a one-way conversation at best). This contrast can only enhance our vision of how well women can act like men or, in a more negative vein, how men fail their gender by acting like women.<sup>2</sup> Typical cross-gender comparisons fail to impart anything new about the women as women. Reading for gender means that we limit our vision to same gender narratives as our field of study. This is an effort to posit women as their own analytic category which accomplishes this by assessing female characters against other female characters.

I treat the stories of Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba as *gender narratives*.<sup>3</sup> A gender narrative is a story where the gender of a character defines how we identify a text as well as read a character and their gender-specific actions in that text. Such a narrative categories a text according to gender in order to further analyze its contents. This distinction is a cultural, not a biological, one: gender represents the culturally-constructed identity of persons. For instance, the Bible offers very clear and distinctive ideas regarding how the two genders are to

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<sup>2</sup> This is the perspective that Boyarin takes in explaining the invective against male-male genital relations in Leviticus; see Daniel Boyarin, "Are there any Jews in the 'History of Sexuality'?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5:3 (1995): 333-355.

<sup>3</sup> There exists a wide array of gendered expressions beyond the dichotomy of male and female. For example, a gender narrative can inform how we read stories of saints where they deny their gender through celibacy and self-denial; we can also read stories of men living as women (or vice versa) as gendered narratives in order to place them within a larger continuum of female narratives or, if appropriate, male narratives. However, the Bible recognizes only two genders—male and female. So, for the sake of this discussion, we limit our subset to male and female narratives with awareness that there exist a greater number of gender expressions than just these two.

act with very detailed laws outlining the acceptable expression of gender (for example, women are not to wear male clothing and vice versa [Deuteronomy 22:10]; men alone are to be circumcised [Genesis 17:10; Leviticus 12:3]). Therefore, we expect a certain set of gendered character traits to follow. The fulfillment of those actions (or the failure to manifest particular gendered traits) forms the basis of the analysis of the story. Once we isolate a text according to its gender designation, we can then apply further standards or analyses in order to test how well a character fits that gender designation. In this context, comparison of female narratives to other female narratives produces rich results that help us understand women in the text.

To accomplish this new analysis, I focus on the actions of these four gender narratives. In doing so, I identify traits, actions and motifs which correspond to attributes of the female hero as developed by folklorist Mary Ann Jezewski. These do not find resonance with male heroic character traits, a completely separate standard. Furthermore, I find that female heroes in the Bible have nothing to do with institutional or cultic Israel. Rather, the identification of female heroes in the biblical context helps to inform our reading of these characters as women. It puts them in league with other female hero narratives from a variety of settings and cultures, thus adding to our appreciation of them as gendered characters. In addition, when this distinctive picture of the female biblical heroic emerges, we are able to trace these traits across the narratives and thus develop a female heroic type or trait list based on our four stories.

We find that typological similarities link these stories not because they inform our appreciation of David or as stock figures in the epic narrative of Israel. They are not held to a standard that demands their loyalty or fidelity to the faith. Nor do we read them as examples

only of levirate procedures.<sup>4</sup> The usefulness of this heroic identification increases our appreciation for these as stories about women. We see them acting in profoundly gendered ways: they are using individual ingenuity and trickery, motivated out of their own self-interest, as part of a successful strategy that manipulates the system to their benefit. We grow in our appreciation of them as symbolic representatives of female action and initiative. And it is this action that links previously unrelated stories together: under the rubric of the heroic designation, Bathsheba becomes related to the cycle of Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth.

It is my contention that these stories have been put in service to the public and political ambitions of Israel, a justification that overshadows other interpretations of these narratives. I believe these female narratives arose as part of Israel's feminized domestic culture. Their gendered message has been textually overwhelmed by the sacred and political ambitions of Israel. Later editors and redactors reworked them not to valorize the women, but to valorize the line of David or Israel or both. I want to consider what is being communicated to the canonical community by linking these female narratives to a national storyline, and examine what we *fail* to see by only viewing them as emblematic of Israel itself.

"Heroine" seems to be a title often applied without fully defining that concept (other than merely being female). This applies as well to the related term, "female hero," often the generic designation of a female lead character. In this study, I use this in a narrow and specific way. A female hero refers to a female literary character that fulfills a set of narrative actions that include individual initiative, deception and the use of the bed-trick. This initiative represents a non-

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<sup>4</sup> Levirate refers to the legal process of raising up a son for a man who dies without issue: "If a married man died without children, his brother was to cohabit with the widow for several reasons: to prevent the widow from marrying an outsider (exogamy), to perpetuate the name of the deceased, and to preserve within the family the inherited land of the deceased. The first son borne by the widow was to be considered the offspring of the deceased husband," Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 56.

coordinated strategy that seeks to challenge the distribution of resources (in this case, available males to provide them with sons) to the female character's advantage. The female hero mitigates the prevailing social and economic structures that we find in the text in order to help herself. She uses the bedtrick, an instance of sexual deception that contests the power and gender dynamics encoded within the story. These subversive and covert actions represent what James Scott calls the weapons of the weak.<sup>5</sup> This cadre of actions marks female heroes as exemplary for their gender and not an imitation of male heroism. Some female characters that one might previously have identified as heroic will now fail to fit the model of the female heroic. Furthermore, I do not assert that biblical women aspire to act like biblical men or that they are capable of fulfilling a man's heroic requirements. My task is to analyze this unique subset in order to discover an identifiable female heroic within the biblical corpus.

My contribution to the field of biblical studies is to read gendered narratives in the Bible and apply established folklore methodologies to the Bible in order to develop new conceptualizations of women in the text. The focus is not to critique existing methodologies but to apply a structuralist approach to the Bible through the prism of gender in order to reconsider female narratives. A structuralist approach such as trait patterning is not new; others have

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<sup>5</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xv-xviii. Scott's book, whose title closely mirrors this one, provides some important language that supports my argument regarding biblical women and individual initiative. Scott identifies ingenuity and resourcefulness as part of the skill set used to great effect by subalterns. In his study of Malaysian peasants, Scott calls these "low-profile techniques" admirably suited to the peasantry. These include individual, non-coordinated strategies primarily focused on the redistribution of resources for their own benefit. In that particular aspect, Scott's language provide a significant perspective for my argument. However, my justification for this argument is not based in Marxist ideology and, in that aspect, *Weapons of the Weak* is less applicable to my thesis since I do not see biblical women resisting elite forms of domination through non-coordinated strategies of foot dragging, non-compliance, sabotage or desertion in order to overthrow or dethrone the existing power structures. Scott raises important and challenging questions regarding these so-called low-profile resistance techniques. However, many of them are outside the larger argument that I offer here. Therefore, I leave aside his larger Marxist perspective and instead emphasize Scott's tone and language regarding how powerless individuals assert themselves within an existing system and use their initiative and ingenuity, motivated by self-interest, to achieve successful strategies where they manipulate the system to their benefit.

already used it to further understand biblical narratives. However, my goal is to add gender to the critical matrix to see how we might develop a more robust notion of women in the text. In charting their traits and comparing women to other women (both inside and outside of the Bible), Through this process, I establish women as an analytic category in the Bible. This allows me to draw some conclusions about the gendered information they offer rather than reducing them down to their efficacy in representing Israel or the cult or both.

### **1.1 THE STORIES: LOT'S DAUGHTERS, TAMAR, RUTH AND BATHSHEBA**

Reading about Lots' daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba, one is struck at how subtly unusual the stories are. The women act in autonomous ways and are largely independent of masculine oversight or divine intervention. Unlike matriarchs like Sarah or Rebekah, we do not see them pray to God. They make no appeals to God, like the barren mothers Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah. In fact, barrenness is not the problem; lack of an appropriate male partner is the true issue at hand. They do not participate in the established religious hierarchies or public religious practices of ancient Israel. In context, these narratives exhibit a remarkable social independence such as claiming the right to have a child for themselves.

We will consider these four stories in detail. I will present their stories and some of the ideas that scholars have about them, as stories and in the greater context of the Bible. But in the background of that discussion, I want to keep some particular questions in mind: what do we miss when we view them only as representatives of larger political, historical or social causes?

When we uncover their common cause, is that idea necessarily one that accords with the aims of Israel, or might we also see something of an independent nature that has been overwritten by later epic or dynastic concerns? Is there an effort afoot by later readers to subtly wed these structural elements together? If so, can we conjecture as to why? Do we have understated clues here that might allow another reading or will the structural relatedness of these stories confirm already held ideas about the nature and purpose of these stories?

### 1.1.1 Lot's Daughters

The story of Lot and his unnamed daughters appears in Genesis 19.<sup>6</sup> Here, Lot willingly offers his daughters to a violent crowd of men only to have himself and his family saved by angels, who had come to warn him of impending doom. As the story progresses, we see Lot emotionally disintegrate as Sodom burns. Holed up in a cave, the daughters trick Lot into sleeping with them when it appears that all is lost and they are left to repopulate their numbers on their own. The ensuing sons, Moab and Ammon, become the traditional enemies of Israel.

The story of Lot's daughters cannot be separated from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Global as well as personal devastation abound in this narrative. One of the earliest conceptions of the Lot tale casts this story as a moral tale against male-male genital relations.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars argue for linking the Lot saga of Genesis 19 with Judges 19 as a story about

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<sup>6</sup> All biblical references are to the Revised Standard Version (1977) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901); George Wesley Coats, "Widow's Rights: a Crux in the Structure of Genesis 38," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 (1972): 461-466; Claus Westermann, *Genesis: an Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

hospitality and sacrifice of nameless women.<sup>8</sup> Robert Alter and, to some extent Anne Michele Tapp, see in Lot's story a parable on family values that is forcefully supported through textual and thematic links to the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34) and the rape of David's daughter, Tamar (2 Sam. 13).<sup>9</sup> Randall Bailey argues for the use of sex in the Bible as a polemic against political or economic enemies of Israel, evidenced by the use of incest and bastardy in the birth narratives of Moab and Ammon. Bailey argues that this theme continues throughout the Bible in its dismissive vitriol against both of these geographic neighbors.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.1.2 Tamar

Tamar marries Er, the eldest son of Judah. When he dies, through the law of levirate, Judah marries his second son, Onan, to Judith. Because he does not wish to endanger his inheritance, Onan refuses to provide Judith with a child and he is struck dead. A third son, Shelah, is withheld from Tamar until Shelah reaches his majority but the reader knows that Judah has no intention of marrying him to Tamar. Tamar then tricks Judah into sleeping with her and giving her sons. Because Judah failed to fulfill his duty to Tamar, she is acclaimed the more righteous.

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<sup>8</sup> David Penchansky, "Staying the Night: Intertextuality in Genesis and Judges," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. D. Fewell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 77-88; Weston W. Fields, "The Motif 'Night as Danger' Associated with Three Biblical Destruction Narratives," in *"Shaarei Talmon," Studies in the Bible, Qumran and the Ancient Near East...* ed. M. Fishbane and E. Tov (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 17-32; Anne Michele Tapp, "An Ideology of Expendability: Virgin Daughter Sacrifice in Genesis 19:1, Judges 11:30-39 and 19:22-26," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading in Women's Lives*, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 155-174.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Alter, *The David Story* (New York: Norton, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Randall C. Bailey, "They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: the Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives," in *Reading from This Place*, vol. 1, ed. F. Segovia and M. Tolbert (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 121-138.

Certainly characterizations of Tamar, the roadside seductress of Genesis 38, run the gamut from harlot<sup>11</sup> to loyal widow<sup>12</sup> to yearning womb<sup>13</sup> to mother of righteousness<sup>14</sup> to overlooked daughter<sup>15</sup> and so on. Gerhard Von Rad sees in Genesis 38 retrojective evidence of Judah's dynastic claims.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, E.A. Speiser says that Tamar's story shows that "she had the stuff... to be the mother of a virile clan, which is clearly the main theme of the story."<sup>17</sup> John Rook believes that Tamar's actions are motivated out of an authentic concern to honor her dead husband through levirate marriage despite Judah's designation of her as '*almanah*,<sup>18</sup> (a widow, lacking male kin and male guardianship).<sup>19</sup> Authors such as Eleanor Ferris Beach argue for cultic connections from outside Israel. She links Tamar's name to various mythic images in Canaanite tradition, suggesting that Tamar's goddess background was stamped out by the biblical redactors.<sup>20</sup> Many are the scholars who relate both Lot's daughters and Tamar narratives either to levirate concerns or the Davidic dynasty or both.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Kirsch, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), 125-144.

<sup>12</sup> Bernhard Luther, "The Novella of Judah and Tamar and Other Israelite Novellas," in *Narrative and Novella in Samuel*, ed. David M. Gunn (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1991), 89-118.

<sup>13</sup> Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 60-74.

<sup>14</sup> Leila Leah Bronner, "The Invisible Relationship Made Visible: Biblical Mothers and Daughters," in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series) 3*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 172-191.

<sup>15</sup> Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series 310 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 356-357.

<sup>17</sup> E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*. Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1964), 300.

<sup>18</sup> John Rook, "Making Widows: the Patriarchal Guardian at Work," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27(1997): 10-15.

<sup>19</sup> A note on Hebrew transliteration: for technical reasons, the Hebrew *koph* will be transliterated as q; the guttural *he* will be rendered as ch. Where I am quoting another scholar's transliteration, I will preserve their spelling.

<sup>20</sup> Eleanor Ferris Beach, "Transforming Goddess Iconography in Hebrew Narrative," in *Women and Goddess Traditions in Antiquity and Today*, ed. Karen L. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 239-263.

<sup>21</sup> Jack M. Sasson, "The Issue of Ge'ullah in Ruth," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 5 (1978): 52-64; Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History," *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982): 425-437; Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (New York: Brill, 1997); Mieke Bal, *Lethal love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Indiana University Press, 1987); Dvora Weisberg, "Levirate Marriage and *Halitzah* in the Mishnah," in *The Annual of Rabbinic Judaism*, ed. J. Avery-Peck, William Scott Green and Jacob Neusner (Brill: Leiden, 1998), 37-69.

### 1.1.3 Ruth

Ruth's story begins on the road back to Bethlehem from Moab. She is traveling with her mother-in-law, Naomi, and her sister-in-law, Orpah. All three women are widowed and, as such, their means are limited. Naomi encourages the Moabite daughters-in-law to return to their native land to find husbands. Orpah does; Ruth remains with Naomi, expressing her filial affection for her mother-in-law. Ruth gleans in the fields of a near kinsman of Naomi's, Boaz. He takes pity upon the poor women and looks out for Ruth. Naomi hears of this and encourages Ruth to approach Boaz. Ruth does, going down to the threshing floor and presenting herself to Boaz, who accepts her offer. He bargains for her hand and property in the marketplace since another has a closer claim. They eventually have a son, Obed, who is the grandfather of David.

The Book of Ruth elicits a broad succession of interpretation with varying results. Traditionally seen as emblematic of *chesed*, that loving kindness thematically linked to the festival of Shavuot and the giving of the Torah, Ruth relates to the giving of land and people.<sup>22</sup> Andre LaCocque sees in Ruth the redemption of the foreign woman or the marginalized character who personifies the image of Israel herself, that landless captive people seeking hope

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<sup>22</sup> Adele Berlin, "Ruth and the Continuity of Israel," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, ed. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 255-256.

in a foreign climate.<sup>23</sup> Esther Marie Menn argues for Ruth as the royal ancestress who redeems the Davidic line and is herself a marker of David through her morally ambiguous actions and trickery.<sup>24</sup> For Mieke Bal, to read Ruth is to enter into the biblical tension between law and legitimacy, between possession of the land (*go'el*) and a thematized future (levirate).<sup>25</sup>

#### 1.1.4 Bathsheba

Bathsheba's story begins in 2 Sam. 11. King David's men, including Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, are away at war. From his rooftop, the king spies Bathsheba bathing. He calls for her; they have sex and he sends her back home. Upon discovering that she is pregnant, she notifies the king who recalls her unwitting husband from the battlefield. David attempts to dupe Uriah into sleeping with his pregnant wife. He does so not out of loyalty to the men still fighting. David has him sent into the heat of battle where Uriah is promptly killed. After mourning the death of her husband, Bathsheba and David marry. The child, though, dies as a result of their transgression. But they have another son who will become King Solomon.

We next encounter Bathsheba in 1 Kings 1 and 2. Now David is near death and Bathsheba is part of the power struggle to place her son, Solomon, on the throne, even though there are many half-brothers before him in the line of succession. She reminds David of an unknown promise to make Solomon king when he dies; David agrees to her request. Bathsheba approaches Solomon with a request from his half-brother, Adonijah, for David's concubine after the king's death. Solomon realizes that this is a threat to his kingship and has Adonijah killed.

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<sup>23</sup> Andre Lacocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 55ff.

<sup>24</sup> Menn, 96-100.

<sup>25</sup> Bal, *Lethal Love*, 80-81.

One of the standard characterizations of Bathsheba was made by R. N. Whybray who writes that Bathsheba is a “good-natured, rather stupid woman who was a natural prey both to more passionate and cleverer men.”<sup>26</sup> Bathsheba is akin to the innocuous ewe lamb of Nathan’s moral parable (2 Samuel 12). Daniel Boyarin argues that this powerful metaphor is incredibly evocative for the pastoral culture of its time:

the story ... performs as narrative its ideological and cultural function of female subjugation... The biblical text encodes a very vivid picture of an ideal marriage as ‘like the love of a shepherd for his only ewe-lamb.’<sup>27</sup>

A third motif associated with Bathsheba is that of the woman who brings death, as noted by Blenkinsopp and Gunn. Following themes from myth and legend, Blenkinsopp and Gunn tie Bathsheba to the agent of death; relationship with her results in sorrow, loss and suffering.<sup>28</sup> She is an agent of chaos, a force of destruction rather than political harmony or cosmic order. Feminist writer Cheryl Exum finds in Bathsheba’s story an account of forcible sexual assault. She argues that for her, David is not the only one responsible for Bathsheba’s violation. All later writers, redactors and commentators on the text perpetrate this aggression by continuing her ambiguous and vulnerable presence in David’s story.<sup>29</sup> George Nicol agrees that Bathsheba’s motives are ambiguous but he describes her as a resourceful character who manipulates the situation to her advantage.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative*; SBT 2nd Series, 9 (London: SCM Press, 1968), 40.

<sup>27</sup>Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 151, 152-3.

<sup>28</sup>Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Theme and Motif in the Succession History and the Yahwist Corpus,” *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1966): 52-56; David Gunn, “Traditional Composition in the ‘Succession Narrative,’” *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976): 222-223.

<sup>29</sup>Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*; JSOT Supp. 163 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 171.

<sup>30</sup>George G. Nicol, “Bathsheba, a Clever Woman?” *Expository Times* 99 (1987-88): 88.

### 1.1.5 Women and Ambiguity

Many see the links among Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth. All three are stories of women without appropriate male relationships. They have no husband and the male guardians in their lives are not doing their jobs. Left to their own devices, they must act. All fall within the range of Davidic ancestresses. Furthermore, both Tamar and Ruth relate to levirate discussions.

Bathsheba, however, is not one that we would normally associate with these three stories. But her tale is marked by many of the same narrative elements that we find in Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth. She is a woman alone; her husband is away at war. She acts of her own accord—when she finds herself pregnant by the king, she does not tell anyone but the king. As with the other three narratives where there are three deaths, we find the same in her story—Uriah, her newborn son and Adonijah. The rampant ambiguities in her story, noted by Nicol, Exum and Gunn, argue for her inclusion. We will see that the textual allusions inherent in her story find her in conversation with these other narratives. Without isolating these narratives and comparing them one to another, we would not necessarily see these relationships. And, since we are not reading them for what they tell us about David or Israel, we can more freely associate previously unrelated texts.

The ambiguities of these texts as well as the narrative gaps allow for new constructions, ones that intentionally recognize the initiative of these female characters. We find valor in their independent resourcefulness. These narratives reproduce individual acts which, in the words of Scott, “nibble away at established power structures and form a mode of individual self-help.”<sup>31</sup> These stories celebrate quotidian struggles waged with nothing more than the wit, guile and

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<sup>31</sup> Scott, xvi.

sweat of the defenseless. These women use their own resourceful and wisdom, the weapons of the powerless, to achieve economic security. These are not grandiose ends. But what we find in their non-coordinated strategies and their individual successes are subtle confrontations within the established power structures where women succeed.

Further, the motifs and allusions within the four stories argue for their relatedness as part of the cycle of female heroic narratives. This heroic relationship stands in tension to expected readings of these stories as well as the bounds of their civic or cultic usefulness. But we are not reading these women's narratives for their information about Israel or the religious cult. When we read them for what they tell us about women, we begin to see the women more clearly.

## 1.2 THE HERO

Folklore scholars such as Lord Fitzroy Raglan, Joseph Campbell, Propp and Zipes take for granted that heroes are male.<sup>32</sup> In fact, a gender qualifier is only added when the hero is female—the equivalent of a “nurse” vs. a “*male* nurse.” A heroine, by contrast, is not necessarily a person of great achievement. This can simply refer to the main female character of a story or a myth or a legend. No particular talents (besides two X chromosomes) are required before the awarding of this appellation: one's presence in the narrative merits the title “heroine,” a passive accolade at best.

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<sup>32</sup>Fitzroy Richard Somerset Raglan, “The Hero of Tradition,” *Folklore* 45 (September 1934): 212-231; Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); Vladimir A. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revs. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977); Jack D. Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*; revs. and expanded ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002).

A hero is a man of considerable valor and bravery, a character of combative prowess and cunning who stands metaphorically (and sometimes literally) head and shoulders above the crowd. In numerous narratives across a vast array of cultures and times, his celebrated superiority is made manifest in the fight: courage and ferocity serve as his essential battle implements.<sup>33</sup> He is an extraordinary individual who embodies psychic alienation from ordinary human experiences through his myriad adventures.<sup>34</sup> In conquering, he takes his rightful place among the masculine pantheon thereby achieving transcendence.

What particular traits or characteristics define a hero? Following structuralist impulses, some folklorists charted the similarities between standard hero narratives by reducing them to a list of traits—such as their similarities in birth, death or conquests, providing a baseline ranking system for measuring a heroic figure’s mythic achievements. Raglan and Propp—as well as J.G. Hahn, Otto Rank and Heda Jason—each developed such schemes or trait lists based on male literary exploits. Such lists yields similar traits across many types of male narratives—for instance, an unusual birth, foster parentage, a complicated quest, rising to kingship and a celebrated burial place (Figures 1-4).

When male categories are imposed upon female characters, the female players repeatedly fail to achieve a similar level of traditional (male) heroism. But when comparing female narratives to other female narratives, one obtains an entirely new and consistent set of standards. This re-reading allows us to appreciate what is profoundly female about these characters, not how well they act like men.

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<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: a Window on the Iron Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

<sup>34</sup> John A. Byars, “Yeats’s Introduction to the Heroic Type,” *Modern Drama* 8 (1966): 409-418.

Trait patterning has some precedent in both gender and biblical studies. For instance, Dan and Jason champion a certain kind of heroine trait patterns. Esther Marie Menn, working with what she calls the Davidic ancestresses, developed a list of traits for what she terms the *royal ancestress motif*. These traits include moral ambiguity, trickery and sexual prowess. This new research re-informs our reading of the royal ancestresses but ultimately, the stories of these women are focused on David as inheritor (and focus) of these traits.<sup>35</sup>

As mentioned, the trait list closest to our study is developed by Mary Ann Jezewski. She tests Lord Raglan's system against tales where gender was the deciding factor for inclusion in her analysis (not history or narrative plot). While she finds that most female figures fail to rank in Raglan's male-based heroic system, she does uncover a coherent pattern of narrative traits that mimic the confluence in male-based narratives. Jezewski discovers some remarkable deviations from the accepted male model: a female hero is like a male hero in so far as her exemplary personal characteristics might include courage, power or magic. However, in contrast to Raglan's system, Jezewski's notes the following in female narratives:

- the death of the female hero is hardly ever emphasized;
- female heroes have more morally conflicted stories which often include their misdeeds, especially amorous affairs, jealousies or revenges;
- the Andromeda theme permeates: a female hero who attaches herself to stronger/higher status male, seemingly for the purpose of becoming pregnant by him. Once this is accomplished, either the female character distances herself from that stronger male, or the female character disappears from the text.

The application of Jezewski's model to biblical literature leads to some interesting conclusions. These stories of sexual intrigue appear in the canon of sacred literature; yet these women do not overtly seek the deity's favor or offer their lives for the good of their community.

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<sup>35</sup> Menn, 100-105.

Neither should these stories be read as cautionary tales about sexually profligate women: their stories utilize sex simply as part of the plot. The true heroism lies in their enterprise in securing something for themselves that will ensure their future status and stability. Furthermore, as Jezewski's model makes clear, the heroic moment for women is not a valorous death or victory in battle--it is the point of adroit action, fueled by their own wits and initiative.

My study submits these structural methods to biblical tales that encompass the moral ambiguity and sexual ploys that Jezewski uncovered in her cross-cultural work. In the context of the biblical narrative, I find that individual female initiative can be viewed as heroic. This heroism does not depend upon the imprimatur of the Bible or its later compilers and editors but rather comes independently from the folkloric credentials of these female narratives. Furthermore, unlike scholars like Menn, who view the moral ambiguity and sexual shenanigans of the Davidic ancestresses as important to understanding David's character, my work strives to define the character of the women themselves, not as proxies for David or Israel. It is my contention that the Bible offers a robust vision of female heroism that has been overlooked by previous biblical commentators.

### **1.3 THE APPROACH: HISTORY, GENDER, FOLKLORE AND THE BIBLE**

I begin this study by looking at the historiographical background to the Hebrew Bible, specifically what the Bible is doing in its historical narratives. This is an important starting point since the Bible incorporates narrative as well as historical, prophetic, poetic and legalistic texts. These four stories represent an amalgam of objective history and subjective memory rather than

a strict recounting of actual events. I next want to place our four female narratives in their particular narrative context. I will do this by presenting some of the major textual theories behind Genesis through Kings, the books where our stories appear. Through this process, we will see how these approaches incorporate women into the Bible's larger civic and cultic themes by subsuming them under the heading of "Israel," which tends to deflate the characters' gender as well as their individual initiative. The kind of action which marks our stories—women motivated by self-interest coupled with deception and trickery—puts these characters in league with female heroes from folk tale and legend. Thus, I next move into an application of folklore methodologies as a constructive means through which to access the women in our biblical narratives. I will impose a structuralist frame adapted from Vladimir Propp and Mary Ann Jezewski on these stories to test how well they fit with other, non-biblical female heroic narratives. Finding strong heroic themes in our four narratives, I next look at the four stories in isolation in order to uncover the allusions, parallelisms and language which link them both within the Bible and as heroic narratives. I conclude by critiquing previous discussion of women in the Bible as well as arguing for the efficacy of women as an analytic category as suggested by Ortner and Heilbrun, arguing that this new identification of heroic women in the Bible affects further interpretations of the Bible.

### **1.3.1 History and the Text**

In the next chapter, I will provide an overview of the standard interpretations of Genesis through Kings, the books where our four stories appear. This chapter focuses on the larger discussion of Israel's idealized history and how these particular narratives have been situated within that paradigm. I will look at four major thematic approaches: the Bible as salvation history; Bible as

epic history; Bible as succession narrative or court history; and Bible as literary product only. The first three approaches offer different perspectives on Israel's history, seeing Israel's story of itself as a reflection of a distinctive theological and historical consciousness. How much of those narratives are objective historical retellings and how much is subjective memory? Also, the first two perspectives (salvation history and epic narrative) apply to the Genesis through Kings narrative material. However, the Bible as succession narrative or court history applies most directly to the Samuel-Kings material but does reflect an editorial hand on earlier narratives as well. In this, our focus is on framing the larger discussion about the books from which our four stories emerge, that is, the historical books of the Bible.

But we need to place the historical narratives in context. That is to say, can we ever hope to discover their original intent and purpose? And what of other ancient Near Eastern literature of the time? What role should these works play in our understanding of these texts? These are some of the concerns of this chapter. This study presents some of the standard conceptualizations regarding the Bible's historical books and some of the theories regarding its idealized purposes. I then move on to feminist interpretations which take these traditional storylines and often try to fit women's stories into those larger, more idealized "truths."

Amram Tropper claims the Bible demonstrates a thriving historical consciousness where subjective elements of memory combined with official modes of understanding.<sup>36</sup> Clearly we can locate a sense of this in the Bible where folklore, oral literature and official history come together. The Bible seems replete with a sense of the importance of Israel's history as communicated through human lives. And, significantly for our discussion, the Bible

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<sup>36</sup> Amram Tropper, "The Fate of History After the Bible: A New Interpretation," *History and Theory* 43:2 (May 2004): 180.

incorporates religion into its consciousness since so much of the historical narratives concern the work of God in time and history.

Historian Yosef Yerushalmi argues that the biblical writers wrote and compiled with an historical awareness where historical meaning rather than our modern sense of objective reportage plays a crucial role. Yerushalmi suggests that the biblical redactors compiled the Bible as a work of official civic truth production as a way to impart meaning to their history. The Bible, he claims, is the manufactured collective memory of an exiled people.<sup>37</sup> The Bible simply represents a patterned guide to the whole of history by highlighting God's will and how God's people, the Israelites, exhibit that will.<sup>38</sup>

Historian Amos Funkenstein posits that the writers and compilers of the biblical historical material employed an awareness somewhere between analytical history and subjective memory without completely encompassing one or the other. This, says Funkenstein, is the historical consciousness of the Bible, a mediating category between historical accuracy and created memory.<sup>39</sup> In the Bible, Funkenstein finds that history is the purposeful unfolding of time toward God's intended ends. Israel as well as her enemies—Assyria, Babylonia and Egypt—are divine pawns in God's universal plans for all nations. Foreign powers are no more masters of their own fate than Israel is: "...by following their own, blind urge for power, the nations of the world unknowingly serve a higher design."<sup>40</sup> But, what we see in the Bible is that design changes as human understanding of God's ways grows. Ultimately, God does not change; humanity's ability to understand and appreciate God matures over time and it is the record of that

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<sup>37</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Meaning* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 2.

<sup>38</sup> Yerushalmi, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 54ff.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

intellectual and theological maturation which is recorded in the Bible. For example, as the expected end fails to materialize, biblical historical consciousness moves from imminent expectation of God's vindication of His people (apocalypticism) to history as future-oriented and providential (eschatology). The reality of God has not changed, humanity's expectations have.<sup>41</sup> Thus, what we see in biblical narrative is the maturation of a theologically informed historical understanding rather than an intention primarily to impart meaning to history.

The Bible demonstrates an historical consciousness that undergirds and informs its composition. Yet we must take into account the broad spectrum of historical perspectives on the Bible. On one extreme we find Phillip Davies, who claims that the Bible is mere literary artifice.<sup>42</sup> For him, ancient Israel represents a myth perpetuated by biblical scholars. Robert Alter refers to the Bible as 'historiated prose fiction,' arguing against the Bible as history (or even dismissing it out of hand as a question of relatively little interest).<sup>43</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky claims the literary material of the Bible should be read as an androcentric literary construct. It simply represents a stylized account of human beings in God's divine economy.<sup>44</sup>

Historian Nahum Sarna insists that we fail to understand biblical Israel without recourse to Near Eastern comparative material. This literature confirms Israel's place in this historical setting and highlights its distinctive moral and religious vision over and against Mesopotamian or Egyptian claims. Sarna claims that we miss what is distinctive about Israel if we reduce the Bible to mere prose narrative.<sup>45</sup> Ronald Hendel takes this one step further: later compilers

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<sup>41</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 222-243.

<sup>42</sup> Philip Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel* (Sheffield, Eng: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 21-46.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 24-25.

<sup>44</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddess: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Maxwell Macmillian International, 1992), 140-142.

<sup>45</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*; JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), xv-xvi, .

probably used non-Israelite stories to craft an identity for itself that is set apart or distinctive from either Egypt or Mesopotamia. He argues that Israel made a collective identity for itself out of the documents of the ancient Near East. He posits “imagined communities,” fed by stories of Israel’s epic past that highlight not how much Israel is like anyone else, but distinctive, set apart and unique.<sup>46</sup>

The task of putting the Bible into its historical context means dealing to some extent with other literatures of the ancient Near East. The role of ancient Near Eastern cognates is affirmed in the work of Umberto Cassuto, who finds that the Bible echoes other Near Eastern epic narratives. What we find in the Bible are robust examples of a biblical Israelite epic, adapted and distinct from Mesopotamian, Sumerian or other ancient Near Eastern tales.<sup>47</sup>

Biblical scholar Gerhard Von Rad’s theories about what he calls the Hexateuch move historical-critical scholars away from dependence upon these Near Eastern works. For von Rad, the Hexateuch--the first six books of the Bible--are a distinctive biblical unit. And, as such, it should be read as the unfolding of God’s redemptive work through the history of Israel.<sup>48</sup>

Looking at the later stories of David and Solomon, Whybray identifies a more directed history at work. He claims that the Davidic material in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings has an objective political agenda. This is not history but political propaganda, an apologia for Solomon’s reign.<sup>49</sup>

While I agree that the Bible is not history in the modern sense of the word, it is important to consider how its unique historical consciousness is communicated. Our folkloric approach arises from literary-critical impulses. Yet I cannot ignore the significant historical elements

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<sup>46</sup> Ronald Hendel, “Israel Among the Nations: Biblical Culture in the Ancient Near East,” in *Cultures of the Jews: a New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 43-76.

<sup>47</sup> Umberto Cassuto, “The Israelite Epic,” *Biblical and Oriental Studies* 1 (Jerusalem 1973): 69-102.

<sup>48</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 169-172.

<sup>49</sup> Whybray, 19-47.

within the biblical narratives that frame my chosen stories. These arguments serve my contention that Israelite writers/redactors incorporated material with a clear agenda in mind. Biblical scholars might arrive at different conclusions (Bible as history, Bible as literature, Bible as propaganda, etc.) but debating the relative strengths of those conclusions remains outside the nexus of my concerns.

A certain historical consciousness frames the biblical narratives which seek to present an idealized Israel. The task then is to situate these female stories within these various analytical frames. From here, we will see how these narratives have been used and, to some extent, misappropriated by those overriding interests. I will focus on an important thematic idea that has been overlooked—the integrity and narrative independence of these women. While I view this narrative material as historical in nature (situated as it is within a particular historical context), it is not history since its narrative elements and structures more closely approximate literature. I am not championing Ruth or Tamar or Lot’s daughters as actual historical persons; rather, I am reading them as texts. As such, I believe that their literary independence has been trumped and overwritten by the national claims of Israel. Using a text-based methodology allows new access to this material and suggests some reasons for the inclusion of these stories.

### **1.3.2 Bible and Gender**

In chapter 3, I add gender to our analysis and present how stories of women in these books have been identified. I look at some of the major feminist scholars and detail their approaches to stories of women in the Bible. Motifs such as annunciation proclamations and barren mothers as well as women at the well and militaristic women fail to include our four women’s stories. Lot’s daughters, Tamar and Ruth are generally grouped as part of the Davidic cycle of narratives.

Further, Tamar and Ruth also are examples of levirate laws in the Bible. Bathsheba is usually grouped with stories of “the woman who brings death,” a negative assessment upon her sexual enticements. These are important appraisals upon these stories but they fail to fully account for gender. Looking at Tamar, Ruth and Lot’s daughters for their information about David fails to do service to the unique issues present in their tales. And reducing Bathsheba to a cautionary tale also fails to consider what the narrative gaps offer us with respect to her story.

An example of this sort of traditional analysis is Gary Rendsburg’s 2003 *Bible Review* article which carries the title, "Unlikely Heroes: Women as Israel." Rendsburg argues that female heroes in the Bible evoke an image of Israel as the ultimate "other." Rendsburg’s reading of Deborah and Yael, Rahab, Hagar and Sarah and Tamar suggests that their heroic status comes from their ability to overcome:

The dupe will be duped ... And who is Tamar but Israel, of course: the nation of low status that succeeds not through power and might, which it lacks, but through quick wit and moral rectitude.<sup>50</sup>

Concludes Rendsburg, "Why are there so many women in the Bible? Because these women represent the various aspects of a greater entity, the people of Israel and their history."<sup>51</sup> Rendsburg identifies this as "unlikely heroism"--despite holding social marginality, they metaphorically overcome through our ability to read them as ciphers for Israel's epic aims. Thus, heroic status for biblical women depends less upon anything exemplary about them as individuals (except for being a low rank woman) and more upon their ability to evoke Israel's nationalist identity.

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<sup>50</sup> Gary Rendsburg, “Unlikely heroes: women as Israel,” *Bible Review* 19:1 (Feb. 2003): 53.

<sup>51</sup> Rendsburg, 53.

Esther Fuchs argues that biblical women provide scholars with metaphoric locations through which to view the victimization of Israel, represented by the symbolic but cruel violence visited upon women in the text.<sup>52</sup> Cheryl Exum, referring to the sister-wife stories in Genesis, claims that many of these female narratives tell us nothing about specific women (since they are often silent or nearly so in the text) but rather are meant to highlight the honor of husband/brothers--and not to inform ideas about women.<sup>53</sup> Frymer-Kensky suggests that perhaps we can really know nothing about gender from the Bible since its androcentrism is a given element of ancient society. She argues that there can be no debate with biblical misogyny since the biblical focus is on presenting the *character* of humanity in opposition to godly character, rather than its gender.<sup>54</sup>

I find these arguments engaging, but the conclusions are insufficient. I am positing a different way to read these stories. They fall within the narrative books in the Bible, not the historical or prophetic books. I believe—as many commentators believe—that these stories serve a more emblematic role. I view these tales of female deception and trickery as part of independent narratives that arise out a domestic (possibly feminized) context and only later harnessed to the cultic/political aspirations of Israel. This hypothesis can be defended since they only obliquely highlight God's role. There is a sense in which God appears as an implied or assumed presence behind the narrative action. However, worship of and obedience to God fails to overtly appear anywhere in these stories. God is merely the implied pilot of events. Public concerns such as ritual practice or temple piety or even a moment where the women pray fail to

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<sup>52</sup> Fuchs, 30-33.

<sup>53</sup> Exum, 148-168.

<sup>54</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 142.

manifest anywhere in these tales. Unlike Exum, Fuchs and Frymer-Kensky, I am looking to the structural clues embedded within these stories. I believe these narratives fail to tell us anything about Israel...except how these stories were put to use for Israel's larger political aspirations.

Perhaps this is a harsh reading, but it is symptomatic of traditional Bible scholarship. More recent biblical scholars—specifically feminist scholars—look at female action in the text. These critics focus on the distinctive nature of various female-oriented narratives, especially as those narratives highlight the independent nature of biblical women amidst a patriarchal system (Israel) or a misogynistic text (the Bible). For example, Lillian Klein's *Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Bible* (2003) follows a literary path in analyzing female figures like Yael, Deborah, Michal and Bathsheba. Klein claims that these stories speak to male anxieties and male power differentials in the text. Preoccupied as they are with authority and control, she calls these "narrated male fears of female power."<sup>55</sup> Klein feels that we celebrate stories of women while bemoaning the constraints put upon them and their extraordinary efforts to escape from textual oblivion.<sup>56</sup>

Some feminist scholars take a single trope or organizing principle and apply it to the women of the Bible. This provides a means for developing insights into the biblical culture, either textually or historically. Esther Fuchs' work on daughters in the Bible proposes some theories on the value of biblical daughters in relation to their more celebrated narrative brothers. Her aim is less to reflect on Israelite society at large but to stay within the confines of biblical narrative in order to scrutinize its androcentric culture. She argues that we need to be wary in

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<sup>55</sup> Lillian Klein, *Sexual Politics in the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

our use and application of the Bible's information to the modern situation lest we unwittingly reproduce that androcentrism in modern family and social dynamics.<sup>57</sup>

Robert Alter also categorizes women's narratives using their identifying roles in the Bible. He groups the narratives according to type scenes: the woman at the well, the barren mother, the trickster. For Alter, these represent a microcosm of larger cultural concerns written upon the bodies of women.<sup>58</sup> Naomi Steinberg notes that the female trickster presents a recurring pattern that offers essential interpretive clues but is rarely considered.<sup>59</sup> She refers to the female trickster as one who uses trickery to achieve not communal but personal goals. These individuals often serve as representatives of Israel's role as social underdog—for example the midwives Shiphrah and Puah; Rachel to Laban; Delilah; and Michal to Saul. Despite their individualistic aims, Steinberg argues that female tricksters are not portrayed as disruptive to social or economic stability and thus are meant to be read iconically or as a lesson to an oppressed people.<sup>60</sup>

Renita Weems' *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (1995) offers profound insights into the role of women (usually unnamed and faceless) in the context of prophetic literature. Like Klein, Weems finds that the prophetic metaphors of women casts them as prostitutes with their skirts lifted up, publicly naked and shamed or as whores chasing after foreign lovers. These metaphors tell a modern readership far more about ancient gender anxieties than it does about the historical realities of ancient Israelite women (who

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<sup>57</sup> Esther Fuchs, "The literary characterization of mothers and sexual politics in the Hebrew Bible," *Semeia* 46 (1989): 151-166; "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," *The Mankind Quarterly* 23 (1982): 149-60.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 47-62.

<sup>59</sup> Naomi Steinberg, "Israelite Tricksters, Their Analogues and Cross-Cultural Study," *Semeia* 42 (1988): 4.

<sup>60</sup> Melissa Jackson offers a response to this, reading Lot's daughters' and Tamar's trickery as comic. In her analysis, these stories are meant as escapism or comic relief rather than emblematic of Israel and therefore, inhabit a realm of the fantastic rather than the transcendent; see "Lot's daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26 (2002): 29-46.

probably did not traipse about in such states). This fear of foreign alliances and worry over false gods is symbolically written on the bodies and actions of women in prophetic literature. Weems convincingly argues that women, moreso than men, emblematically exemplify idolatry and unfaithfulness to the covenant.<sup>61</sup>

Part of my work is intended to stake out a territory for narratives that employ the bedtrick, or sexual trickery by hidden identity or false pretenses or simple surprise, for the female character's personal gain.<sup>62</sup> My intention is to offer another interpretation of that action that does not depend upon patriarchal categories such as Israel's salvation history or the religious cult or various royal dynasties. I see their individual initiative as part of the cadre of actions that identifies them as female heroes. While barren mothers and female military leadership certainly have their place, their designation as "heroic" depends upon their ability to fulfill the covenantal promises delivered to men or their similarity to male heroic figures. Deborah, Yael and Judith slay the enemy. Female heroes, according to our definition, use themselves and not necessarily violence to achieve their ends. Therefore, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba are closer to the ideal of a female hero than Judith is.

The argument here is to see that these female heroic narratives have nothing to do with military leadership, overt pedagogical concerns for religion or God's place in Israel (except as an unvoiced, implied category at best) or the fertility of the mother. Thus, by analyzing these narratives using structural methodologies adapted from folklore, I find a new and deeper

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<sup>61</sup> Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex and Violence in the Hebrew prophets*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1-2.

interpretation for these narratives and a means for establishing the heroic identification of specific actions in the text.

### **1.3.3 Folklore and the Bible**

Chapter 4 outlines what a hero is and how we have been conditioned to assume the male gender of heroes. Under this rubric, we also expect that female characters must exhibit established (male) traits and actions in order to gain admittance to the title “valorous.” However, there exists a unique set of traits and actions that arise from female-driven narratives without reference to male heroic models. These female narratives show a consistent pattern of female initiative, trickery and moral ambiguity, characteristics not often associated with male narratives but seen with regularity in female ones. Traits and characteristics such as these argue for the female heroic, a singular designation that valorizes female initiative. After a structuralist comparison of these trait patterns to our four stories, I argue that Lot’s daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba possess these particular traits of the female heroic. This has implications for how we read these stories and furthermore understand their place in the Bible.

My approach applies a structuralist comparison developed by folklorists to biblical narratives of women. There is little debate that many of the narratives in Genesis through Kings represent archaic oral and folkloric forms. But what does that mean? What is folklore and what does it look like in the Bible?

Dan Ben-Amos remarks that "the themes and forms of folklore appear to be universal, yet no other expression is so imbued with regional, local and cultural references, meanings and

symbols," thus making a universal definition difficult.<sup>63</sup> To paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart, perhaps we only know folklore when we see it. David Bynum argues that the term "folklore" is often applied to any sort of story that is neither history nor literature proper, serving as the default label for items which defy easy categorization.<sup>64</sup> Folklore tends to be less historical in emphasis and more focused on conveying truths in a symbolic or literary form. Margaret Mills prefers to refer to these symbolic literary forms as "oral tradition," which provides greater latitude with respect to the history and provenance.<sup>65</sup> Alan Dundes groups these sorts of narratives—myths, legends and folktales as well as jokes—under the broad heading of folk literature, thereby encompassing all manner of popular narratives.<sup>66</sup>

The Bible certainly contains examples of this sort of indigenous popular literature. Its narratives convey stories of the miraculous as well as quotidian events and persons, operating in a sphere where momentous actions are realized. While the Bible includes official decrees and cultic legislation, its narrative stories maintain close ties to oral literature. Many of these stories, such as the flood and the life of Moses, find cognates in ancient Near Eastern literature. Those who approach the Bible from a literary perspective such as Alter and Adele Berlin as well as historical-critical scholars like Joseph Blenkinsopp and E.A. Speiser all agree to some extent on the Bible's earliest foundations in oral literature and folklore. Thus, while there is great debate as to what folklore is, there is no argument regarding the folkloric nature of biblical narrative.

This work clearly recognizes the oral and folkloric roots of the biblical narratives. By identifying these narratives as folklore, I am making two assumptions. First, these stories do not

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<sup>63</sup> Dan Ben Amos, "The Idea of Folklore: An Essay," in *Studies in Aggadah and Jewish Folklore*, ed. Issachar Ben-Ami and Joseph Dan (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), 11.

<sup>64</sup> David Bynum, "Samson as a Biblical φήρ ὀρεσκῶς," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, ed. Susan Niditch (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 59.

<sup>65</sup> Margaret Mills, "Domains of Folkloristic Concern: The Interpretation of Scriptures," in *Text and Tradition*, 234.

<sup>66</sup> Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 3.

purport to primarily convey historical information as their essential purpose. Rather, our stories appear to be entertaining, cautionary and/or perhaps pedagogical, suggesting their more domestic (rather than institutional) beginnings. They contain a sense of history—a kind of historical consciousness—but not the strict recitation of history. Second, because these stories follow patterns that identify them as folklore, I can apply folklore methodologies—but add the defining element of gender—in order to read these narratives anew.

My use of folklore to understand the Bible is not an innovation. Susan Niditch is perhaps the best known of the biblical folklorists for her *Underdogs and Tricksters: a Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (1987) as well as *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (1996). Niditch masterfully presents the folkloric roots of much of the Bible's narrative material. She surveys the oral culture of the Bible, identifying power differentials conveyed via its oral traditions. She argues for the Bible's earliest beginnings in sacred oral performance. Niditch is particularly insightful in her discussion of the biblical trickster, one of low social status who changes his situation through deception. Through this discussion, she enlarges our view of characters like Jacob and eventually Israel itself as symbolic of the underdog who overcomes not through military might but through cunning and trickery.<sup>67</sup>

Another current proponent of the Bible and folklore is Heda Jason, an Israeli folklorist, who collects primarily Eastern European oral narratives from émigrés to Israel. She analyzes biblical figures such as David and Goliath and their heroic attributes using formalist methods developed from her oral history work. Characters such as David, she argues, have much in common with legendary heroes like Achilles, Perseus and Roland. Her method exemplifies a

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: a Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: HarperRow, 1987), xi.

strict adherence to a structuralist approach which graphically illustrates the heroic trope in the Bible.

Jason's considerable efforts to place biblical characters among a cross-cultural heroic pantheon rest solely on the rigid application of a structuralist schema. Jason provides detailed graphing of the David narrative from 1 and 2 Samuel based upon a trait list that she has developed (see Table 4). Her identification of heroic narratives is a useful one to this study, but her analysis falls short in two ways. First, she offers a strict categorization of David's life based upon sequencing of events and various traits, but makes no attempt to put these traits in a larger context or suggest how these heroic motifs apply to biblical narratives. Second, her analysis of David is self-proving: David is a hero; David has these characteristics; therefore, all heroes have these characteristics. It seems Jason believes it is the task of later researchers to take this heroic designation and make something of it.<sup>68</sup>

Scholars like Jason, who isolate traits and folkloric characteristics in narratives, depend upon linguist and folklorist Vladimir Propp, especially his *Morphology of the Folktale*. Propp develops one of the earliest trait lists for folktales, including heroic tales. Propp focuses on Russian folktales, breaking them into irreducible narrative units. Through his analysis of characters and activities within these units, Propp identifies thirty-one standard units or events within heroic folktales. Propp claims that not all folktales will contain all thirty-one elements; however, he asserts that whatever narrative units are present will always occur in the same order.

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<sup>68</sup> Heda Jason, "King David: A Folkloric Analysis of His Biography," in Michael Heltzer and Meir Malul, eds., *Teshûrôt LaAvishur: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East in Hebrew and Semitic Languages* (Tel Aviv-Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publications, 2004), 87-106; "David and Goliath: A Folk Epic?" *Biblical* 60 (1979), 36-70.

It is the sequence along with the identifiable narrative units that distinguishes a story as an heroic narrative:

The sequence of events has its own laws. The short story too has similar laws, as do organic formations. Theft cannot take place before the door is forced. Insofar as the tale is concerned, it has its own entirely particular and specific laws. The sequence of elements ... is strictly *uniform*. Freedom within this sequence is restricted by very narrow limits which can be exactly formulated.<sup>69</sup>

Most scholars no longer adopt absolute imposition of this sequencing regulation. There is greater richness in considering both the particular narrative elements as well as their sequence in the story. A synthesis of the two leads to multivalent results. With this adaptation of Propp's theory, his method continues to profoundly influence present scholarship.

For example, Ilana Dan develops a structural analysis that focuses on the persecuted heroine genre.<sup>70</sup> Applying Proppian categories, Dan isolates the narrative units of the innocent or persecuted maiden trope. Unlike male heroes who must progress away from home, the persecuted heroine's field of battle is domestic in nature. She undergoes several trials in her biological home as well as her husband's home, where she finds eventual resolution.<sup>71</sup> After identifying the persecuted heroine traits, Dan further locates this trope within a broad range of cross-cultural tales. Dan's approach shows how Proppian analysis can tease out a gendered character as well as establish the elements of that particular trope. However, like many who employ a strict Proppian analysis, she limits her conclusions to an analysis of the structure. Like

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<sup>69</sup> Propp, 22.

<sup>70</sup> Ilana Dan, "The Innocent Persecuted Heroine: An Attempt at a Model for the Surface Level of the Narrative Structure of the Female Fairy Tale," in *Patterns in Oral Literature*, ed. Heda Jason and Dimitri Segal (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 13-30.

<sup>71</sup> Dan adopts Propp's methods as well as some material from Russian folklorist and morphologist Aleksandr Nikiforov, who Dan argues predates Propp's work by at least a year. Nikiforov published studies on narrative units that he termed "grammatical action formations" in 1927 in Russian; it was translated into English in 1973. See Aleksandr Nikiforov, "On the Morphological Study of Folklore," trans. Heda Jason, *Linguistica Biblica* 27-28 (1973): 25-35.

her teacher Heda Jason, Dan offers no significant conclusions regarding the results of her work or its wider implications for literary criticism or gender studies.

Propp's application to biblical narratives has become ubiquitous. Biblical scholar Pamela Milne argues for Propp's continuing relevance to her work on the book of Daniel: "Even if Propp's fairy-tale model proves not to be completely or totally applicable to the stories in Daniel, it does seem likely that it would, at least, be a useful heuristic tool. No other extant model appears to be as closely related to these biblical tales as Propp's fairy-tale model."<sup>72</sup>

Jack Sasson and Harold Fisch employ Propp's structuralism to their analysis of Ruth's story. They also apply Proppian categories to earlier levirate tales such as Tamar's where they find parallel narrative units that relate to Ruth's story. Sasson and Fisch go farther than pure structuralists like Jason and Dan. Having completed their comparisons and identified the significant units within Ruth's story, each argues for the primacy of Boaz or Obed. This analysis, they claim, enlightens our vision of the father, Boaz, or the son, Obed as the real *go'el* [redeemer] in Ruth (but does not, it would seem, expand our notions regarding the one for whom the book is named – Ruth).<sup>73</sup>

The prevalence of literature on folklore and the Bible suggests that this kind of structural analysis still flourishes on the periphery of mainstream biblical criticism. Propp, Niditch, Dan and Jason are often cited as foundational for continuing research on the intersection of the Bible and folklore.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, I believe critics such as Sasson and Fisch are arguing for the

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<sup>72</sup> Pamela J. Milne, *Vladimir Propp and the Study of Structure in Hebrew Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 15.

<sup>73</sup> Sasson, 52-64; Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History," *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982): 425-437.

<sup>74</sup> Steven J. Zeitlin, "I'm a Folklorist and You're Not: Expansive versus Delimited Strategies in the Practice of Folklore," *The Journal of American Folklore* 113 (2000): 3-19; Steven Swann Jones, "The Innocent Persecuted Heroine Genre: An Analysis of Its Structure and Themes," *Western Folklore* 52, no. 1 (January 1993) : 13-41; Heda Jason, "The Jewish Beauty and the King: Coherence in Folk Tales. Preliminary Sketch of a Model," in *Text*

cultural transmission of values and identities through oral and/or folkloric literature. However, Sasson and Fisch do not use gender as a defining category. Nor do these scholars seek to apply folklore in order to uncover a deeper understanding of gender-specific behaviors in folkloric analysis. Rather, the scholarly intent appears to be focused on developing newer hypotheses about oral (preliterate) cultures and the historical avenues of oral transmission. Niditch's aim is to portray the roots and concerns of historic Israel via the metaphor of the trickster. Dan, who clearly works with gendered texts, speaks of the persecuted heroine without necessarily unpacking the term "heroine" or the gender dynamic at work. Hers is a strict structural analysis of the text, allowing future scholars the means to identify a text and categorize its characters according to standard patterns.

On the other hand, Jason—and, to some extent Fisch, Sasson and even Niditch—argue for a multidimensional biblical approach beyond the more rigid application of Proppian analysis. This multidimensional perspective claims that it is not enough to reduce a text to its component parts and identify one trope or another. The scholar must discern what those parts mean and their significance within the right context. Such research might include conjecturing about what this story might have meant to the hearers/readers of this story in their own time, how later editors/redactors might have used and reworked this material, and how we interpret and process these stories today. That each of those elements might have a different answer makes the

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*Connexity, Text Coherence: Aspects, Methods, Results*, ed. Emel Sözer (Hamburg: Buske, 1985), 500-525; Peter Feinman, "Boy Meets Girl: Stories of Eligibility and Encounter in Ancient Israel," in *Life and Culture in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Richard E. Averbeck, Mark W. Chavalas and David B. Weisberg (Potomac, MD: CDL Press, 2003), 217-251.

process of analyzing the structure of biblical narrative a bit like archaeological sleuthing—having found and identified a piece of ancient Israel (metaphorically speaking), the researcher must conjecture on its original context and, if possible, draw conclusions about what that meant then and what it might mean now.

I intend to situate my analysis among this cadre of biblical folklorists by taking an established methodology—structural analysis—and applying it to a well-defined set of texts within a larger textual corpus (female narratives in the Bible). I want to apply Propp’s methods but with far less emphasis on an exacting sequence. Rather, I am interested in showing how the malleability of the same tropes and events with these stories shows their relatedness, a high degree of narrative artistry and an eye for linking previously unrelated stories in ways that adds to their heroic characterization.

I will do this by introducing another set of tools. Folklorist Mary Ann Jezewski also developed a list of hero traits from a cross-cultural collection of female narratives. She finds that stories of female characters are most often compared to male heroic models and—not surprisingly—the women come up short. However, when women’s stories are compared to other women’s stories, the narratives show remarkable similarities. Her trait list on the female heroic will prove instrumental to explaining our biblical narratives (see Figure 5),<sup>75</sup> as we shall see in Chapter 4.

The introduction of gender to the analysis adds to the richness of characterization of these figures as female gender heroes. These chosen stories exemplify what Doniger has called the bedtrick, a sexual trick or pretense, which ultimately challenges the boundaries between sex and

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<sup>75</sup> Mary Ann Jezewski, “Traits of the Female Hero: the Application of Raglan’s Concept of Hero Trait Patterning,” *New York Folklore* 10, no. 1-2 (1984): 55-73

gender, power and identity.<sup>76</sup> This sort of sexual escapade is limited in the Bible to female stories. Outside the Bible, we find male figures like Zeus, Apollo, Uther Pendragon or the wolf in the Red Riding Hood tales adopting whatever form (human or animal) necessary to seduce a woman. However, there seem to be no corresponding narratives of seductive deception by men in the Bible. This particular trope falls to women and as such, we are offered unique insights into their character through this particular motif.

I further argue for the heroic stature of biblical women like Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba. The implications are two-fold. This new view of women in the Bible finds resonances between stories that previously did not find themselves in conversation with one and other. It makes claims for the female heroic that might not intuitively agree with established notions of the heroic. We have been encouraged to accept male role models as the standard by which all heroic narratives are measured. This study suggests that there are is a robust set of characteristics that female heroes demonstrate and this argues for their designation as gender heroes—that is, heroes identified by their gender-specific characteristics. Secondly, the approach sets this research apart from previous folkloric scholarship by testing Jezewski's female hero model against biblical women. We are at once assessing Jezewski's theory and, when confirmed, recognizing that we have models of the female heroic in the Bible. This has implications for continuing biblical studies, especially considerations of the origins of these tales. This classification provides another avenue for understanding not only biblical women but the Bible itself.

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<sup>76</sup> Doniger, 1-2.

## 1.4 READING THE STORIES TOGETHER

Chapter 5 focuses solely on our four selected stories. After arguing for their designation as female heroic stories, I want to read them in isolation from the biblical text in order to discover various markers, actions, words or repetitions between the stories that further determines their relatedness under this rubric. Some of these markers include the bedtrick; use of the marketplace; the verb *dabaq*, or 'to cleave'; three deaths; daughters; seeing/knowing and not being seen/not being known. Having ascertained their relatedness based on internal clues, some of the questions to be answered include: How important is it that all four stories share so many of these narrative units in common? Can we argue that trickery or deceit plays a significant role in female biblical narratives, and if so, why? What does it mean that the reader recognizes dramatic irony in the stories? How does that inform our understanding of them as gendered characters?

My argument is for female heroes as potent gender symbols. They provide robust examples of female action and therefore communicate important information about female initiative, resistance and individual strategies intended to diminish the limitations placed upon them as women. What we find in our four stories are substantial illustrations of the female heroic, signified by a gender which wears its weapons upon and within themselves. The stories of these women in the Hebrew Bible are more than literary devices or the means to get the reader to see the divine hand of God on Israel or as mere players in the Davidic line. This methodology allows us to establish specific traits and characteristic of female (gendered) heroism, as opposed to a monolithic ideal of presumed male heroism. I believe that the heroic elements of these females' sexual trickery have been overlooked or discounted in the effort to weave them into the epic fabric of the biblical narratives. Having established their independent and folkloric

credentials, I want to show that their origins have been subsumed under the national concerns of Israel.

## 1.5 CONCLUSIONS

Literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun argues that the anxiety for mother-daughter narratives is not the same as father-son stories. Daughter-centered stories are overshadowed by the larger Oedipal conflict between fathers and sons. In this spectacle daughters are reduced to mere stock figures, a kind of window dressing for the larger drama. Their identity is figuratively engulfed by the aims of text. According to Heilbrun, daughters labor under the constraints of an androcentric narrative perspective. Textual utility for daughters depends upon how well these women enhance the father-son relationship. Their efficacy grows with the daughters' ability to enlighten the masculine tension in the text.<sup>77</sup>

I see resonances between Heilbrun's argument and this work on female biblical narratives. Every biblical woman is also a daughter. Their utility in the larger corpus depends upon their ability to enhance our reading of patriarchal Israel and its concerns. Therefore, all biblical female narratives run the risk of engulfment by these larger civic or institutional agendas. They have been overwhelmed by the aims of Israel and the redacted concerns of David's dynasty. When we read them this way, we read women in texts with male eyes.

Further, if the end of these narratives is commodification within a larger redacted corpus, our folklore approach leads me to conjecture on the folktale origins of our stories. We can never

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<sup>77</sup> Carolyn Heilbrun, "To the Lighthouse: The New Story of Mother and Daughter," in *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revs. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 135.

be certain of the original context of our narratives. But if folklorist Jack Zipes and historian Marina Warner are correct, then many of these stories possibly first flourished in feminized domestic contexts.

This dissertation aims to re-examine our four narratives as examples of gendered heroism in the Bible. Our reading of these stories has been and continues to be overshadowed by focusing on the cultic and political ambitions of Israel and the character of King David. I consider what is being communicated to the canonical community by domesticating these female narratives and examine what we *fail* to see by only viewing them that way. The implications of these stories have been metaphorically engulfed by the cultic aims of the Bible and to a greater extent, the epic aspirations of the later nation. By viewing these women in service to a larger cause, we miss what is unique and distinctive about their resistance to established notions of power and authority. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner argues that women represent their own analytical category. By reading the stories of women as their own analytic category and making claims for the stories as gendered narratives, we move beyond valuing these women for their ability to inform our notions of Israel. This work argues that gender differences do matter in the Hebrew Bible and women's narratives offer another vision of subversive action that is unique and distinctive to their stories.

Finally, these are stories of exemplary women that appear in the Bible. They represent, to some extent, exemplary religious figure. Thus, it seems natural to ask if these biblical female heroes are like other female religious heroes. That is, in what ways are female heroes in the Bible like female saints, for example? Issues of the body and iconic represent hold true for both female heroes and female saints. But the points of similarity as well as the differences help refine our image of female heroes. We see that female biblical heroes celebrate physicality as

well as trickery. It is their self-interest and their initiative as well as their robust embodied natures that mark their stories as examples of the heroic feminine. Female heroes carry their essential weaponry both upon and within themselves.

And, as a response to those who claim that the Bible is only a patriarchal or androcentric text, this dissertation aims to counter that argument by establishing what a female hero is and showing where they reside in the Bible, independent of any political, social or cultic agenda. What we have in female biblical heroes is a hearty and vigorous notion of the feminine.

In the end, I want to ask questions of the Bible—questions that sometimes lead to competing and even contradictory conclusions. The Bible is a multivalent, multivocal work within a complex web of meanings and purposes. My contribution is but one argument regarding these narratives. The significance of this research, I hope, is to offer a new perspective from gender and folklore for reading these narratives that may have nothing at all to do with Israel or religion in the ancient world.

Our reading of biblical narratives argues for women as an analytical category of its own in order to break the public/private divide. Women's stories can function to tell us something about women. We need not justify their inclusion in the Bible based on their ability to inform our understanding of Israel. They offer a stout service in informing our notions of women as valorous exemplars of the feminine.

I establish a notion of what a gender hero is. This is a narrative where the gender of the protagonist plays an integral role to reading her story. A gender hero is an exemplary woman who shows initiative and courage, who through her own auspices achieves her goal. This often includes trickery and sexual intrigue but she is far more than the sum of her sexuality. A gender

hero enlightens our ideas about women and gives us another means for establishing women as an analytic category.

Out of context, the stories of Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba can be uncomfortable tales where incest, prostitution or seduction takes center stage. The same traits that make them anomalous—their sexual initiative, moral ambiguity and independence —also make them intriguing sites of analysis. Understanding and applying literary methods from folklore, we see that their actions are not anomalous; they fit within a larger pattern of the heroic feminine, making these women less like utilitarian literary devices and more like full-blown literary characters.

## 2.0 HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Everywhere [in the Bible] there is evidence of an effort to explain the present in terms of the past, and this effort is itself the most explicit expression of historical thinking.<sup>78</sup>

The Hebrew Bible has a problem with the notion of history. Debates rage over sources, dating, and composition. Since we lack the original written sources that make up the Bible, we can never know who composed them, nor date them with certainty, nor place them in a precise historical context. The most historians can do is compare the Hebrew Bible to other extant ancient Near Eastern texts, and then perform close philological studies. We can hypothesize on what biblical redactors and editors thought they were doing when they compiled this material and we can further point to how communities actually interpret these books, whether or not that was the original intention. But at heart, most historical debate is merely conjecture coupled with evidence from other ancient Near Eastern communities.

In this chapter I want to start our study of these four narratives by looking in general at biblical history. I intend to frame the discussion in order to illuminate the folklore and literary roots to our narratives which are grouped in the Bible among the historical narratives. I will begin by demonstrating the stories' utility to the idealized story of Israel which we find in the Bible. I will next focus on four views of the Hebrew Bible—Bible as salvation history, Bible as

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<sup>78</sup> Von Rad, 169.

epic narrative, Bible as succession narrative, and Bible as literary narrative—that are most relevant in considering the role of women in biblical stories. I intentionally chose these approaches as they directly impact the way we read the four stories that I want to consider: Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba. The first three approaches reflect a kind of historical consciousness among the later redactors who compiled this material—but each approach projects a different agenda. The fourth theory comes not from an historical-critical perspective but from literary theory. This approach argues that biblical narratives arise from literary (rather than historical) impulses with a secondary urgency for preserving objective historical information. However, literary approaches to the Bible must grapple with the historical information that the material presents. In this, literary theories offer their own ideas regarding the historical data situated within literary products like biblical narratives. Furthermore, the literary perspective offers some noteworthy ideas about persons and actions in the text.

My intent is not to challenge the efficacy or import of these various salvation, epic and dynastic perspectives. However, I do eventually want to claim that these readings keep us from discovering much that is new or insightful with respect to stories about biblical women. As Funkenstein and Yerushalmi will each claim in their own way, what the Bible gives us is an idealized image of Israel as a people of God. By situating our reading and interpretations within this emblematic or theological Israel framework, scholars continue to ask how women fit within that somewhat enhanced ideal. For example, their distinctive reproductive role is highlighted for how it furthers some aspect of the Bible's theological or civic agenda. But only reading the Bible this way limits our ability to see and appreciate the women in these narratives. For example, I find that these four narratives in particular only tangentially communicate any sort of

God information so mining them for their significance with respect to God or Israel's faith seems to like a mental stretch.

By highlighting the basic debate regarding the Bible as history and then moving to think about the gendered aspects of each of these approaches (Chapter 3), I intend to show the limitations to these arguments with respect to our four narratives and our ability to read them for gender information. From here, I will move into a discussion of folklore and, demonstrating the folkloric affinities within our stories, and begin to mine our four narratives for their gender information and motifs.

These four analytical frames are not intended as an exhaustive survey of biblical criticism regarding the material from Genesis to Kings. I simply want to open the argument with a general survey of relevant biblical criticism regarding the books that comprise our four biblical narratives. In fact, only the approaches that touch most directly upon our four stories will be the focus here—salvation history, epic literature, dynastic history, and literary theories. These are significant to my perspective since all of these find ways to include the stories of women in their overarching theories. In this, gender is not distinctive since it represents but one component within the larger story of Israel, which subsumes many persons and nationalities. Therefore, this chapter will look at critical approaches to biblical narrative without necessarily isolating gender as a defining factor. Furthermore, it is not my intent at this point to critique how well gender is incorporated into biblical analysis. It is my task at this point to see how women in general and our four women's narratives in particular fit into these larger biblical discussions.

With that in mind, these four approaches to (apparently) historical narratives do seem useful for looking at women in the Bible even though that is not their stated task. In these interpretations, women often serve God's salvific aims in human history through special

pregnancies (Sarah, Rebekah, Samson's mother) or through their exemplary feats in defense of Israel (Deborah, Yael, the apocryphal Judith). In this, the resourcefulness of Tamar and Ruth takes on providential overtones since their pregnancies indirectly illustrate God's saving hand in ways unknown or unclear at the time. The epic narrative perspective suggests that the Bible arises out of its oral and folkloric roots and incorporates stories of women as underdogs who best their more powerful adversaries—a powerful tale for a diaspora people. The best example of this is Esther, but Tamar and Ruth as well as Bathsheba—three powerless women—all overcome more powerful men in the context of their stories. When one reads biblical narratives with an eye to the Davidic line, this process rehabilitates and privileges the House of David as God's chosen dynasty. This kind of reading includes incorporating stories of the Davidic ancestresses such as Tamar and Ruth (as well as Lot's daughters in their opportunism) and seeing how their stories foreshadow David's enigmatic ways. And literary analysis offers a useful way to liberate oppressed or voiceless characters from the hegemonic representations of power in the Bible. The Bible reproduces an established hierarchy of authority as well as patriarchal modes of influence; by unpacking the literary elements of voice, genre and context, we can get at some of culturally-informed notions of gender that the text presumes.

Admittedly, some of these historiographical theories directly compete with one another. Literary theories use historical biblical theories in order to frame their arguments but often depend in greater measure upon textual tools of allusion, parallelism and typology to make their case. Then again, reading the Bible as a witness to salvation history means that one accepts that history is tied to a theological vision of time. The biblical narrator might not meet modern standards of history, but using historical-critical theories can tease out new meanings. This dissertation will not resolve the tensions that exist in this debate. However, those tensions open

the door for emerging ideas about how Bible stories have been used to further some of the institutional and dynastic aims of Israel. This survey of ideas and theories is intended to lay the groundwork for a more pointed consideration of women's narratives in the Bible.

This chapter supplies a general frame of reference for the historical material of Genesis through Kings—those books and stories that chronicle the formation of Israel as a people and an emerging nation up to its demise in 587 BCE.<sup>79</sup> The discussion encompasses the patriarchal narratives of Genesis through the desert wanderings of the Israelites and their eventual establishment in the land of Canaan where dynastic impulses grow and develop into a nation called Israel that is destroyed first by the Assyrians (722/721 BCE), then the Babylonians in 587 BCE.<sup>80</sup>

Yet, despite the Pentateuch's claims, the true hero of these stories is God. It is God who challenges Abraham to travel from Mesopotamia to Canaan. God provides for Jacob's family during a terrible famine by leading them to Egypt. It is God again who leads them out of

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<sup>79</sup> I limit myself in general to Genesis-Kings since I am specifically interested in two stories from Genesis (Lot's daughters; Tamar); Ruth and Bathsheba (who appears in 2 Sam. 11 and 1 Kings 1 and 2). In the Tanakh, Ruth appears in the Writings (Ketuvim, in the *Hamesh Megillot*, or The Five Scrolls), based on its late authorship and late events, such as the restoration to Zion under Ezra. Given Ruth's placement between Judges and Samuel in Christian Bibles, her story confirms the viewpoint of the Deutonomistic Historian and is read as a link between the time of the kings and the monarchy. Her story is also seen as a justification for the Davidic monarchy as she is a Davidic ancestress and thus, approaches interested in arguments for the Davidic dynasty would necessarily include her book. Conversely, her story can also be read as a later justification for marriage of foreign women after the return of Ezra-Nehemiah (see Andre LaCocque, "Ruth," in *The Feminine Unconventional*, 84-116). However, since I am most interested in her role in defense of the Davidic line, I view her story in its chronological placement between Samuel and Kings. Furthermore, since our four stories do not appear in Exodus, Leviticus or Numbers, I will not refer to them in any substantive way. Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers are subsumed under *Heilsgeschichte* as well as epic narrative theories which deal with the Pentateuch as a whole but they are not the focus of any specific textual interest in this particular study. Chronicles also falls outside our purview for several reasons: is it significantly later than the Samuel-Kings cycle; it appears to use Samuel-Kings as source material; and, most importantly to this study, the Bathsheba-David interactions are not reproduced there (see Leslie C. Allen, "The First and Second Books of Chronicles," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 299-308). At most, Chronicles provides only a cryptic mention of Bathshua, mother of Solomon and three other boys (1 Chr.3:5).

<sup>80</sup> I use the term 'nation of Israel' in a generic sense to refer to the Land of Israel which split into two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom of Israel (c.930 BCE – 722/721 BCE) and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (c.930 BCE-587 BCE). My arguments do not debate the status of Israel as a nation or a city-state but rather use this in a general sense to designate that area that self-identifies as the people and the land of the Israelites.

captivity in Egypt and into the Promised Land. God's prophets anoint the kings and God's prophets also announce the impending destruction of the kingdoms of Israel and then Judah, due to the wickedness of the people and their leaders.

As we proceed, it will be important to negotiate this boundary between history and theology. Our four stories appear in the midst of narratives that purport to tell Israelite history. But if God is the hero, is this in any sense history as we would understand it today? Did the writers intend to tell us about Israel or about God? Does it necessarily have to be one or the other? Obviously not, since we have before us the story of God told through the lives of ordinary and not-so-ordinary Israelites. Or, should we change the emphasis: is the Bible the story of ordinary and not-so-ordinary Israelites who happened to have a monotheistic faith? How we work out that emphasis will determine how we read the stories of men and women in the Bible (that is, identifying who the real star is—God or humanity). Therefore, our next task is to work out what sort of historical consciousness can be located in the Bible so that we might better proceed to the books themselves. Staking a claim for whether we are reading history or fiction as well as what its intent is in presenting historical information will set the stage for our discussion of the four approaches, which will follow.

## **2.1 HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

[H]istory is to the nation rather as memory is to the individual. As an individual deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going, so a nation denied a conception of its past will be

disabled in dealing with its present and its future. As the means for defining national identity, history becomes a means for shaping history.<sup>81</sup>

The Bible, says Amram Tropper, “provides evidence of a thriving historical consciousness.”<sup>82</sup> But what is this “historical consciousness” with respect to biblical history? Is it Schlesinger’s history-as-a-means-of-shaping-history, a desire by later redactors to create a usable past? Is it merely cobbling together memories for a people no longer with a homeland or identity? Is this biblical Israel’s desire to present their story as truthfully as possible, whether or not those truth claims can withstand the scientific methods that modern historiography applies?

Historical consciousness incorporates partial and subjective elements of memory with objective, “official” modes of understanding. Both serve as investigative fields for later analysis. However, discerning where memory ends and objective history begins creates friction when considering the historiography of the Bible. What did the writers and compilers of this material think they were writing and compiling? Did they privilege the subjective over the objective or vice versa? Can we in any way verify which elements are the result of memory production and which are institutional or public forms? Are such forms simply a type of objectified narrative? And, significant for our discussion, what role does religion play, since so much of the historical narratives concern the work of God in the community?

The historical consciousness debate embodies another thorny biblical issue. What do today’s biblical scholars mean by historical consciousness and can we infer that such modern concepts were in the minds of the later redactors or compilers of this material? Do modern historians run the risk of eisegesis by invoking the historical consciousness of ancient redactors?

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<sup>81</sup> Arthur J. Schlesinger, Jr., “Folly’s Antidote,” *New York Times*, January 1, 2007, A23.

<sup>82</sup> Amram Tropper, “The Fate of History After the Bible: A New Interpretation,” *History and Theory* 43:2 (May 2004): 180.

The historical consensus seems to be that compilation of Israel's written history began in the pre-exilic era of ancient Israel and continued through its post-exilic diaspora (6<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Shnayer Leiman argues for a basic canon of fixed texts by the second century BCE.<sup>83</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, referring to the Deuteronomistic history, claims that there can be no question that this material was pulled together as Israel dispersed outside the land, incorporating both early oral as well as epic verse into a type of salvific literature.<sup>84</sup> Rolf Rendtorff echoes these sentiments, offering that many different narratives achieved a sort of independent literary form and underwent editorial compilation in exile.<sup>85</sup> R.N. Whybray agrees, suggesting that the dynastic histories, as well as more extensive wisdom compositions, were assembled long after the time of Solomon, the presumed author of the sapiential material.<sup>86</sup>

Yosef Yerushalmi, writing on Jewish history, claims that Herodotus wrote history but the Jews were the fathers of meaning in history. Accepting the post-exilic roots of the Bible, he argues that the biblical writers wrote and compiled with an historical awareness somewhere between memory and history. Yerushalmi emphasizes the role of memory production rather than history for the writers and compilers of the biblical material. In the communities of the later-diaspora Jews, he locates a profound sense of meaning in their historical writing and compilations. But for the biblical redactors, this meaning-in-history perspective translates into compiling the Bible as a work of idealized civic truth production, not history in the modern sense. Those who read and interpret the Bible from a modern historiography perspective in actuality stand at odds with what is going on in the Bible since biblical historical writing is more

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<sup>83</sup> Shnayer Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1976), 20.

<sup>84</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 19.

<sup>85</sup> Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: an Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 157-164

<sup>86</sup> R.N. Whybray, "The Joseph Story and Pentateuchal Criticism," *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968): 522-528.

akin to the manufactured collective memory of an exiled people. For Yerushalmi, the Bible communicates something of Israel's past but ultimately fails to represent what might be considered a true historical consciousness.<sup>87</sup>

This does not mean that no history exists in the Bible. In history, says Yerushalmi, God revealed himself to his people. Historical events like the Exodus and the revelation at Sinai were commemorated for their sacred significance. In this context, history becomes a reenactment of sacred, momentous events. Since there can be no return to Sinai, what took place at Sinai must be commemorated and remembered (thus, the title of his work: *zakhor*) for those who were not there that day.<sup>88</sup> Individual, historical memory is codified and reenacted in ritual, worship and myth which are collective and national concerns. The Bible simply represents a patterned guide to the whole of history by highlighting God's will and how God's people, the Israelites, exhibit that will.<sup>89</sup>

Historian Amos Funkenstein claims that the writers and compilers of the biblical historical material may or may not have intended to write a history of Israel but they embodied something he terms an historical awareness. This awareness exists along a continuum between analytical history and subjective memory without completely encompassing one or the other. This, says Funkenstein, is the historical consciousness of the Bible, a mediating category between objective history and created memory.<sup>90</sup> In the Bible, this profound historical awareness—or consciousness-- arises in the prophetic era where the Israelite people are conceptualized as part of God's purposeful efforts. All history, Funkenstein claims, is future or

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<sup>87</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Meaning* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 2.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>90</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 54ff.

apocalyptic history--the purposeful unfolding of time towards God's intended ends. The end of time itself is already divinely appointed; God's people, Israel, are already in the process of becoming according to a carefully ordained schedule. To the prophetic writers and compilers, both triumph as well as defeat signal God's power over human time and history. Even Israel's enemies—Assyria, Babylonia and Egypt—are divine pawns in God's universal plans for all nations, including Israel. Foreign powers are no more masters of their own fate than Israel is: "...by following their own, blind urge for power, the nations of the world unknowingly serve a higher design."<sup>91</sup> But, that design changes as human understanding of God's ways mature. As the expected end fails to materialize, apocalypticism gives way to eschatology. The innovation of biblical historical consciousness is the move from imminent expectation of God's vindication of His people (apocalypticism) to history as future-oriented and providential (eschatology). God does not change, humanity does.<sup>92</sup> This is the maturation of a theologically-informed historical understanding . What the Bible highlights is the unfolding of humanity's understanding of God and God's ways, from earliest myth to prophetic pronouncements.

It is not my intent to decide the merits of memory production versus objective history. We will see that Yerushalmi's claim that the Bible represents a patterned guide to the whole of history informs theological readings like salvation history and, to some extent, epic narrative and dynastic history approaches. But Funkenstein's notion that the Bible's historical consciousness presents a mediating category between memory and history seems helpful for understanding our four narratives. As Funkenstein argues, the biblical compilers and redactors employed a type of historical awareness that was theologically informed and matured over time and came to fruition

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 222-243.

during Israel's exile from the land. Previous stories from oral as well as epic and literary genres were committed to a final, written form and compiled into a work intended to serve as a type of directed history. In this way, the Bible is read as a predictive narrative rather than a descriptive account of Israel's people and history.

Biblical history contains historical as well as theological, political and spiritual concerns and, depending upon one's perspective, some or all might take precedence at any given time. How long this writing and compiling took or what debates occurred in establishing the final text—while important and significant—is outside the purview of our discussion.<sup>93</sup>

Instead, I want to focus on what Carl Holladay contends is the task of biblical interpretation: to gauge the historical consciousness of Scripture in order to better negotiate what the story might have meant in its original context and what it might mean today. Holladay says, "Every interpretive act is a journey there and back again."<sup>94</sup> To paraphrase Holladay, our task is to journey back into these stories in order to interrogate the historical awareness attached to these stories. We cannot bring them more fully into our present discussion until we grasp their presence in the uses of biblical narrative. And ultimately, I will journey back into the present since it is the larger biblical narrative that I wish to appraise. I maintain that the gendered nature of these four stories has been overwhelmed by later civic and/or dynastic issues. We do not read them as gendered texts but rather for the information they can provide about Israel. We celebrate

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<sup>93</sup> It seems clear, though, that the books that we are dealing with—Genesis through Kings—had a standard written form within the Jewish community prior to the exile. Something that biblical scholars would recognize as a final canonical Bible is established by the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the Common Era. For more in-depth debate on canon formation and dates, see J. M. Auwers and J. H. de Jonge, ed., *The Biblical Canons* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 163; Leuven: Peeters, 2003); Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, ed., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002); Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Shnayer Z. Leiman, ed., *The Canon and Masorah of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: KTAV, 1974).

<sup>94</sup> Carl Holladay, "Contemporary Methods in Reading the Bible," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 130.

the stories of women in the Bible for the ways in which they serve Israel or God or the covenant—but not for what they tell us about women *as women*.

The content of that directed history will be the subject of our next consideration. As with sources, the original meaning of biblical historical narrative is lost. However, several theories regarding Israel's historical destiny, tied to the stories that they told about themselves and about their place in the world, will help us to think more about the Bible's historical consciousness. We will next look at the ways in which the material from Genesis through Kings has been approached—as a historical narrative, as epic literature, as dynastic history, and through literary approaches. Each in its own way grapples with the “problem” of history to a greater or lesser degree. And each approach seeks to read biblical narratives for what they tell us about God and Israel and its people, which includes women. Thus we will figure out how each of these approaches talks about women in their books and specifically, our four women's narratives. We will find that our women's stories fit quite snugly into these larger civic agendas.

## **2.2 BIBLE AS HISTORICAL NARRATIVE**

Reading the Bible as a kind of historical narrative presupposes that the intent of the writers/editors to convey information about Israel's past is apparent and recoverable by modern scholars. Simply stated, historical-critical approaches to the Bible claim that the Bible provides objective historical information about ancient Israel. One reads the Bible chronologically for historical cause and effect, a seemingly straightforward task. However, this means that one tracks the Bible's unfolding of its history while also making sense of biblical claims about God

and divine intervention in that history. This means that this is a history “fraught with meaning”: it recounts Israel’s past and its efforts to become a people and a nation. But the true hero is never any one person but rather God.<sup>95</sup> This is the story of a particular people’s (Israel’s) relationship with their God where time itself becomes sanctified. In this sense, says Leo Perdue, the scholar embarks on a quest that is first theological and then historical. This is not a historical journey to discover *what happened* but a discipline that concerns itself with what may be determined to be *true*, historically as well as theologically.<sup>96</sup>

Under the heading of historical narrative, we locate two of our perspectives: the Bible as salvation narrative and the Bible as epic literature. Each of these sees historical narratives in the Bible which make claims regarding God’s role in providing for God’s people. History itself is salvific in these perspectives; any other non-theological explanation has little bearing. There exists a historical nucleus around which is built the story of God’s interactions of behalf of God’s people. We will look at these perspectives, keeping in mind how they impact our four stories.

### 2.3 BIBLE AS SALVATION HISTORY

Gerhard Von Rad is representative of the school known as *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history), the story of God’s redemptive activities in history as portrayed in the Bible. This school reads

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<sup>95</sup> Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 22.

<sup>96</sup> Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology After the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 35.

the Bible in light of its religious traditions and finds that all of time, from prehistory in Genesis to the exile and beyond, is the story of God's saving actions in the life of ancient Israel:

The real actors in the drama are neither nations nor kings nor celebrated heroes. Yet the whole course of events is pursued with breath-taking interest, and the writer is himself deeply involved in the narrative, precisely because this is the sphere of divine activity.<sup>97</sup>

For Von Rad, the Bible represents Israel's notion of itself as a people under the protection of divine providence. God's covenant with Abraham, fulfilled through his son Isaac and Isaac's son, Jacob, is the realization of land, fertility and greatness (Genesis 12-50). The Israelites sing God's praises in Exodus 15:1-18 for bringing them, his special people, out of Egypt as they embark on their wilderness experience: "You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode" (Ex.15:13). Reading this material from a salvation history perspective results in a narrative in service to Israel's notion of itself as a people set apart:

And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and you shall know that I [am] the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning which I did swear to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you for a heritage: I [am] the LORD. (Ex.6:7-8).<sup>98</sup>

As Joseph Blenkinsopp notes, viewing these texts as salvation history means that one reads the varied stories in the Hebrew Bible under a unifying rubric which understands that this is "Israel's view of its origins, its place in the world and its destiny."<sup>99</sup>

Thus, Lot's daughters' incest is viewed as justification for God (and Israel's) anger against Moab and Ammon, the children of bastardy. Tamar's and Ruth's unexpected

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<sup>97</sup> Von Rad refers to a Hexateuch, with the addition of Joshua to the Pentateuchal material, as the completion of the covenantal promises; *Hexateuch*, 171.

<sup>98</sup> All biblical translations are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>99</sup> Blenkinsopp, 5.

pregnancies become further evidence of God's hand upon Israel since without their sons, there can be no David or Solomon. Even Bathsheba's difficult beginnings with David are recast as an example of God's redemption of seemingly unredeemable actions—the child of adultery dies but Bathsheba's subsequent pregnancy results in the great king, Solomon. Thus, while David will be denied the chance to construct God's temple, his son, Solomon, will. In all of these, we read for the theological truths imparted by human actions and foibles. Rather than focusing on the relative moral weakness of human beings, we find God's mercy on behalf of Israel which colors her view of herself and her history.

While the historical material contained in the Hebrew Bible can have tremendous value for its emblematic sense of Israel's salvation history, it cannot be called history in the scientific or analytical sense of the word. History itself becomes salvific in this worldview. Non-theological explanations fall outside salvation history's purview since they fail to consider—or outright deny—divine destiny. Reading the Bible this way allows one to group unrelated (and perhaps antithetical) stories together in order to make the argument for God's saving hand upon all that the Israelites do, have done and will do.<sup>100</sup>

## **2.4 BIBLE AS EPIC NARRATIVE**

The Bible as epic narrative also tells the story of Israel's national destiny but focuses on how well God's people fulfill God's covenant. Where salvation history looked at all of biblical history as the story of God's saving care for his people, the epic narrative perspective frames

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<sup>100</sup> An example of a contradictory story would be the Levitical injunction against marrying one's sister-in-law and the story of Tamar (Lev.18:15-16).

history as the story of God's *people* and how they satisfy God's commandments. Frank Moore Cross defines epic as part of a culture's oral past. Israel's early narrative traditions show hallmarks of oral formulations such as word pairs and phrases and parallelisms.<sup>101</sup> What marks epic literature from history proper, says Cross, is that epic literature presents concrete memories of the past that give the appearance of history. Israel's epic literature recounts events in its heroic past that give expression to its understanding of itself as people of God:

... I believe it is permissible to define epic as the traditional narrative cycle of an age conceived as *normative*, the events of which give meaning and self-understanding to a people or nation...The Hebrew epic recounted crucial events of developing nationhood and gave classical expression to Yahwistic religion.[emphasis original]<sup>102</sup>

#### 2.4.1 Pentateuch

As one aspect of looking at the Bible as an epic story, E.A. Speiser suggests that the Yahwist (J) writer shows greater concern for people-centered stories than for momentous events. This directs the epic story of human history around the person of Abraham. His story of obedience to God's commands models an ideal human history:

The [Genesis] story commences with one individual, and extends gradually to his family, then to a people, and later still to a nation. Yet it is not to be the tale of an individual or a family or a people as such. Rather, it is to be the story of a society in quest of an ideal. Abraham's call, in short, marks the very beginning of the biblical process.<sup>103</sup>

For Speiser, biblical history is not necessarily a national history but the narrative of

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<sup>101</sup> Cross, 24.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>103</sup> Speiser, 87.

society as the embodiment of an ideal, that is, a way of life. A history of that kind transcends national boundaries and may conceivably be retraced to the beginning of the world.<sup>104</sup>

This is a larger view of history as a sacred narrative-- “the subject matter was not secular but spiritual history, history a writer might recount, but could not color to his own liking.”<sup>105</sup>

In “The Israelite Epic,” Umberto Cassuto claims that in the Bible we have robust examples of an early Israelite epic narrative. He identifies this epic through comparison to ancient Near Eastern stories such as Marduk’s war with Tiamat and his rise to power over the seas and rivers in the Enuma Elish. The Bible parallels these stories but inserts a monotheistic God’s mastery over water and land in Genesis. This, says Cassuto, is Israel’s epic narrative story. When we encounter some of these more fantastical stories, we are in fact encountering Israel’s ancient narrative of itself which is intimately associated with God.<sup>106</sup>

More recently, Barry Bandstra echoes Speiser’s notion of biblical individuals representing the epic quest of Israel but places greater emphasis on the theological elements in Israel’s epic narratives. The key to unpacking the Bible’s epic forms lies in the Pentateuch. For Bandstra, the Pentateuchal material represents a theological model where the people of God move within the promise but have not yet found fulfillment. Like Speiser, he finds in biblical epic the story of people (rather than events) but for Bandstra, greater emphasis lies in unpacking their theological implications. In the Torah, Bandstra identifies a peripatetic people yearning for home. Joshua, along with the subsequent historical narratives, represents the fulfillment of the divine promise. This epic story, with its intentional break between Deuteronomy and Joshua, speaks to an exiled community:

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., lvii.

<sup>105</sup> Speiser, xxxix.

<sup>106</sup> Umberto Cassuto, “The Israelite Epic,” *Biblical and Oriental Studies* 1 (Jerusalem 1973): 69-102.

By not including the conquest recorded in Joshua [in the Pentateuch], the hope of the people resonated with that of their forebears. Like their ancestors, they too would gain possession of the land ... someday. The structure of the Pentateuch affirms that the exilic community is essentially a community of hope.<sup>107</sup>

#### 2.4.2 Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings

Reading the Former Prophets from an epic narrative perspective focuses on the kings, prophets and leaders. The designation of epic narrative means that the biblical author/editor judges the stories of kings and leaders on how faithfully they followed God and the covenant. The spotlight now moves from God's hand in human history, such as was pertinent to the earlier books, to a chronicle of human efforts to meet the obligations of faith. In viewing this later Israelite history this way, there is greater latitude for free choice and human effort: a king is now judged according to his fidelity to God's call. This standard weighs kings and nations by a criterion not necessarily established or recognized in their own time but evaluated by a later narrative authority that theologically directs our reading of history.<sup>108</sup>

This emphasis on the faithfulness of rulers relates to Israel's national theological destiny. Solomon is the high point of Israelite history which exemplifies God's commitment to the Davidic covenant ("But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took [it] from Saul, whom I put away before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be established for ever before you: your throne shall be established for ever," 2 Sam 7.15-16; also repeated in 1 Chr. 3:5). Like salvation history, epic narrative in the Former Prophets reads history theologically. In particular, many of the kings who come after David are weighed against the phrase, "the acts

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<sup>107</sup> Barry Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament* (Belmont, WA: Wadsworth, 1995), 198.

<sup>108</sup> Von Rad, 206.

which he did, [are] they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel? “ but all wicked kings are dismissed with the phrase, “but he did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all that were before him.” A king’s efficacy depends upon his ritual obedience; his legacy is his faith. According to this perspective, says Bandstra, “Israel prospered or suffered in relation to how obedient or disobedient they were to the covenant.”<sup>109</sup> This designation of epic narrative includes the perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historian, a school of compilers thought to have flourished under the kingship of Josiah (late 6th century BCE). These scholars gathered legends and earlier historical accounts in order to frame Israel’s story from Moses to the exile, based on Deuteronomy’s law codes, as one of devotion to God, hatred of foreign religious practices and a concern for the widow, orphan and stranger.<sup>110</sup>

As one example, the Northern Kingdom king Omri was known to be a powerful leader when he ruled for 12 years over Israel. Ancient non-biblical documents attest to his military exploits as well as his success in negotiating foreign alliances (especially the marriage of his son Ahab to the Phoenician princess, Jezebel, thereby dynastically solidifying Israel’s relationship with Tyre [cf. 1 Kings 16]).<sup>111</sup> One would think then that the peace and prosperity offered by Omri would be accounted a good thing in the Bible. Yet, in terms of his dynastic legacy, Omri, his son Ahab and his entire dynastic house is judged an abysmal failure. Omri and Ahab negotiated treaties with “foreign” (polytheistic) nations; they allowed foreign religious practices, including the cult of Baal, during their reigns; they failed to support the cult of Yahweh

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<sup>109</sup> Bandstra, 181.

<sup>110</sup> James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 370-373.

<sup>111</sup>The Mesha Stele tells of Omri’s invasion of Moab “year after year,” for nearly forty years, suggesting Omri’s considerable military influence over Moab; see “Annals of Mesha” excerpt in Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, revs. and expanded ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 157-159; on Omri himself, see Frank S. Frick, *A Journey Through the Hebrew Scriptures* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 334-336.

exclusively, bringing trouble upon God's people ("in his sin he made Israel to sin," 1 Kings 16.26)<sup>112</sup> Thus, while modern political history tends to consider Omri a capable leader, the Bible dismisses his reign as a disaster. He failed to keep God's precepts and for this, nothing else matters. His rule and those that follow him are wicked in the eyes of God, the final arbiter of the success or failure of a royal dynasty.

In another way, Yair Zakovitch argues that biblical epic forms were taken and reworked in order to counteract polytheistic ancient Near Eastern literature and thus, used the same epic form to argue against foreign myths. This conscious reshaping of pagan narratives for monotheistic ends supports the idea of the Bible as an epic historical narrative but suggests that it is something far more derivative. Viewing the biblical stories from the perspective of the epic narrative school posits that the biblical compilers and redactors worked to demythologize pagan stories in crafting a narrative history. They did this by highlighting faith over feats (monarchical or heroic) and redrafting Israelite history as the special story of Israel's faithfulness to God. The Hebrew Bible utilizes epic forms in order to tell the extraordinary story of this people, which necessarily measures success or failure on their faithfulness rather than military or economic or political success. Thus, epic historiography represents Israel's best efforts to write its own comprehensive saga, one that is far more theological and subjective.

Zakovitch, citing Cassuto's comparative work, finds common cause with those who view the Bible's composition as a conscious demythologization of Near Eastern material that contributes to a uniquely Israelite epic work. For him, though, the Bible is not truly epic literature. Zakovitch recognizes merely epic forms and allusions, borrowed or adapted from an as

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<sup>112</sup> Frick, 254-258; Siegfried H. Horn, "The Divided Monarchy," revs. P. Kyle McCarter, in *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999), 139-141.

yet-undiscovered Israelite epic, one that “creates an unbridgeable partition between idolatry and the faith of Israel.”<sup>113</sup> Zakovitch claims that the epic’s ideological foundations were undermined by later post-exilic editorial initiatives. Rather than identifying biblical narrative as epic literature, Zakovitch speaks of the epic character of the Bible, which he locates in the Former Prophets, which existed side-by-side with an undiscovered oral epic literature. He uses the conquest narratives to make his point. In the Book of Joshua we find “a campaign of exhilarating military blitzes with divine assistance.” In Judges 1, we find a far less confident picture of failures, defeats and Israelites forced to live in proximity to Canaanites rather than conquering them.<sup>114</sup> This, claims Zakovitch, is evidence of both epic and history existing together in the Bible:

The epic literature of ancient Israel, just like the epic literature of the other inhabitants of this land, oral literature *par excellence*, existed, in my opinion, side by side with biblical historiography. But written literature, as it falls more and more in line with the religious norms of the community, gradually rejected the oral [epic] tradition.<sup>115</sup>

Assuming the presence of epic forms in the Hebrew Bible (whether in fact they reflect a true Israelite epic or merely reproduce its style) implies a later hand molding the message so that an epic perspective is assured. For example, Zakovitch claims that the Samson story

is a covert polemic against the original tradition concerning the Israelite hero: the Samson story in the Book of Judges was created in order to turn Samson, a mythological/solar hero, into a good Jewish boy whose strength is not derived from his own divine origin but from God and according to his will.<sup>116</sup>

Thinking about how our four stories fit into the epic narrative perspective helps focus our attention more concretely upon these women. Women’s stories show some of the parallelisms

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<sup>113</sup> Yair Zakovitch, “Yes, There was an Israelite Epic,” *International Folklore Review* 8 (1991): 21.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>116</sup> Zakovitch contrasts Samson with Hercules from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book IX; *Ibid.*, 22.

and similarities that Cross says marks this as oral literature.<sup>117</sup> The epic's theological message is also not necessarily limited to one sex. Women's narratives in Genesis through Kings deal with the quotidian and normative lives of every day women. They do what they normally do just as the men do. To echo Bandstra's wandering motif, the women wander along with the men: roaming in the wilderness and awaiting fulfillment is not limited to the men in the community. Furthermore, none of our four biblical women enjoy direct conversation with God. The constraints of the covenant are not imposed upon Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth or Bathsheba (or, for that matter, any biblical women). However, salvation for the community comes through women since continued fertility is one of the marks of the covenant. Through this approach, we find that female initiative, which is a signature mark of our female stories, becomes salvific:

In the near absence of God and angels, Ruth, and Esther and Judith as well, function as savior figures in their stead...[Biblical women] are forced to act on their own to achieve their goals... [S]alvation is achieved not through divine initiative but human (*female*) enterprise.<sup>118</sup>

God works through human vessels like women. And, God works in very gender-specific ways since pregnancy and birth can only be accomplished by women. In this, they serve the larger aims of epic literature where the divine interacted with the human in a normative Israelite past to meet and fulfill the theological claims of the community.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> We will see more in-depth discussions of this when we get to chapters 3 and 4, specifically the comparisons from Fisch, Sasson and Menn on Ruth, Tamar and Lot's daughters and Alter and his identification of motifs like the annunciation motif, wife-sister stories, and the woman at the well motif.

<sup>118</sup> Linda Day, Power, Otherness and Gender in the Biblical Short Stories, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 20 (Dec. 1998): 123-124.

<sup>119</sup> Cross, 25.

## **2.5 BIBLE AS DYNASTIC HISTORY**

It is possible to read the material from Genesis through Kings with an eye to dynastic information. This approach is apologetic in nature, indicating a heavy editorial hand that intends to redirect how the story of Israel's kings is read and understood. Using the laws of Deuteronomy as a guide, kings are judged according to their ability to meet their cultic obligations. Since the Davidic narratives appear in Samuel and Kings, this perspective applies most directly to those books. However, we will see that it pertains as well to how we read material in Genesis, specifically the stories of his ancestor, Judah, and those that follow from him.

### **2.5.1 Succession Narrative**

Within the dynastic history perspective, we can narrow our focus to the material from 2 Samuel through 1 Kings and identify this material as a succession narrative (SN). Recognizing narratives this way means that we read the stories that present the rise of the House of David and the Davidic covenant as justifications for the Davidic kingship. This interpretation prioritizes God's hand on the House of David within the larger story of Israel's salvation history. Such a perspective reads the historical narratives of David, Solomon and subsequent kings as literary productions under the guise of history that justify Judah's and specifically David's dynastic claims. The conclusions also serve as something of a cautionary tale. Within the Succession Narrative, David and David's legacy through his son Solomon do not escape scrutiny for their successes as well as their considerable failures. Says Frank Frick, examining Samuel-Kings for

the information it provides about the upstart David and his son, Solomon, one is presented “a model to be avoided for those who would reform or reestablish the Davidic state.”<sup>120</sup>

Leonhard Rost, one of the first to use the designation of succession narrative, claims that the Succession Narrative was composed by eyewitnesses in order to validate the Davidic monarchy as well as defend Solomon’s subsequent place on the throne.<sup>121</sup> Most modern scholars do not agree with Rost. Instead, they see a heavy editorial hand at work, reworking earlier dynastic stories. However, detection of a succession narrative is useful for methodological purposes.

For example, R.N. Whybray considers the succession stories to be examples of political propaganda. Whybray modifies Rost’s eyewitness theory, offering that this history was composed during the court of Solomon as a signifier of Solomon’s dynastic destiny, with a mixture of eyewitness testimony and later fictive elements.<sup>122</sup> He finds that public events are recorded in an objective fashion. However, stories dealing with clandestine meetings, character descriptions and intimate encounters are more imaginative in nature. Therefore, says Whybray, the SN should be considered an historical novel, or a novel with historical overtones based on snippets of eyewitness accounts. And its aims are political: this is propaganda whose intention is to justify and defend Solomon’s, the tenth son’s, claim to David’s throne.

Secondarily, Whybray finds sapiential material throughout the SN. Whybray argues that the SN is replete with wisdom-related motifs: recognition of human limitations, death,

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<sup>120</sup> Frick, 306.

<sup>121</sup> Leonhard Rost, *The Succession to the Throne of David*, trans. M.D. Rutter and D.M. Gunn (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), 65-114.

<sup>122</sup> Whybray’s date is much earlier than more recent scholars give. See Whybray, *The Succession Narrative*, 19-47; on later dating, see S.E. McEvenue, “The Basis of Empire, A Study of the Succession Narrative,” *Ex Auditu* 2 (1986): 34-45; P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., “Plots, True and False: The Succession Narrative as Court Apologetic,” *Interpretation* 35 (1981): 355-367; Serge Frolov, “Succession Narrative: A ‘Document’ or a Phantom?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 81-104.

importance of counsel, and little concern for public religious performance. This wisdom material is intended to exemplify the virtue of Solomon and his court. Whybray conjectures that the amount of detailed personal and domestic information in the narrative lends credence to his eyewitness theory.

### **2.5.2 Court History**

A corollary to reading Samuel-Kings as a dynastic history comes from David Gunn. Like Whybray, Gunn identifies the Samuel-Kings material as justifying the dynastic House of Judah. But Gunn argues that this narrative's focus is David, not Solomon. Gunn expands the sense of this dynastic narrative and views it as a Court History, a self-contained unit added later to the larger monarchical histories. Reading this as a court history (rather than a succession narrative) means that the focus is on presenting the public as well as the private life of David. Gunn claims that the Court History model illustrates the tensions between David's family obligations, which he meets poorly, and his public kingship, which he fulfills quite successfully until his personal issues, such as his son's civil uprising and his relationship with Bathsheba, overwhelm his public persona.<sup>123</sup>

This is not political propaganda, says Gunn, but something closer to oral literature. Identifying traditional folkloric motifs within the narrative, Gunn concludes, "how it might then relate to historical 'fact' is a quite separate issue ..."<sup>124</sup> For Gunn, the sort of narrative realism found in the Court History should not be confused with historical writing since its task is to convey a narrative tying Israel's fortunes and a Davidic monarchy together. Whybray might call

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<sup>123</sup> Gunn, 214-229.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 220, 229.

this a historical novel; Gunn would simply say it is a novel, without the historical qualifier.<sup>125</sup> Ultimately, it is the story of David's maturation and Israel's development as a new monarchy, which is one and the same tale.<sup>126</sup>

Like Gunn, James Ackerman prefers to identify Samuel to Kings as a court history rather than a succession narrative since this material focuses on David more so than Solomon. Furthermore, it fails to provide the actual promise of Solomon's succession anywhere except in an obscure comment by his mother.<sup>127</sup> Ackerman argues that the Court History wants to create knowledge gaps in order to elevate David in all his ambiguous integrity: "the text's opaque quality, woven by an artful narrator, leaves many possibilities for us to ponder."<sup>128</sup> Citing the work's post-exilic sensibilities, Ackerman suggests that

there is a wistful Camelot air to the work. Beneath the cool, dispassionate voice of the omniscient narrator, there is a lament that Israel's brief moment of greatness was lost by the perverse actions of passionate and headstrong individuals.<sup>129</sup>

These varied approaches dramatically highlight seemingly conscious attempts by later compilers and editors to reformulate historical narratives. Most scholars agree that these later editors sought to rehabilitate the beginnings of the monarchy, especially in light of objectionable events and individuals.

This view of Samuel-Kings as a reworked monarchical narrative dovetails closely to our discussion of women. Several of the stories of women in the Hebrew Bible touch directly on the

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<sup>125</sup> D. M. Gunn, *The Story of King David*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1978), 37-38; 61-52.

<sup>126</sup> Frick, 311.

<sup>127</sup> Bathsheba reminds King David of a promise that is recorded nowhere in the Hebrew Bible: "And she said to him, My lord, you swore by the LORD your God to your handmaid, [saying], Surely Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne" (1 Kings 1.17); James S. Ackerman, "Knowing Good and Evil: a Literary Analysis of the Court History in 2 Sam. 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 53.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

later stories of the line of Judah in general or the Davidic monarchy in particular. For instance, Esther Marie Menn proposes that the Davidic ancestresses are integral to revitalizing the image of David himself. The particulars of her arguments will be discussed in the next chapter but she contends that a Davidic dynastic history encompasses far more material than simply Samuel-Kings. Menn encourages reading much of the patriarchal history material specifically as a rehabilitation of the line of Judah which culminates in David. Privileging the line of David provides a justification for the story of Ruth, which reformulates foreigners (and specifically Moabites, who appear in David's ancestral background) as faithful followers of God. Furthermore, Tamar's pregnancy in Genesis 38 is reconceptualized as part of God's redemptive hand on the House of Judah. Without Tamar's craftiness, there is no Perez, and without Perez, there is no David. Even Lot's daughters, whose heinous incest results in nations built on bastardy, are redeemed. If we see them as part of David's dynastic history, then we understand that they are a necessary element to bring us to David and Solomon. Therefore, such horrific sexuality, while not condoned, serves the purposes of dynastic history: they are essential cogs in a larger, dynastic wheel.<sup>130</sup> And Bathsheba, a woman in David's immediate orbit, reflects David back for us. In her ambiguous integrity, she, as well as many other women in David's life, are significant elements in Ackerman's "many possibilities to ponder.

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<sup>130</sup> Menn, 99-105.

## 2.6 BIBLE AS LITERARY NARRATIVE

Literary approaches to the Bible represent the farthest remove from objective history. Literary theorists of the Bible are not as interested in historical-critical arguments regarding biblical people and places. In fact, literary theories are fairly critical of historical impulses imposed upon the text. Although the Bible might impart historical information, such information is unreliable and fails to inform our understandings of the text as a work of literature. As a literary product, one analyzes the Bible without a real concern for authorship. This approach deemphasizes how a text came to be and displays a singular emphasis on isolating the text in its final unified form. Historical context provides points of interest in their ability to illuminate the meaning of words. Primarily, it is the relationship between the reader and the text where the act of interpretation most fully occurs.

However, biblical narratives seek to impart information that has theological, dynastic and literary as well as historical import. Meir Steinberg presents that view, arguing that “the narrative is historiographic, inevitably so considering its teleology and incredibly so considering its time and environment. Everything points in this direction.”<sup>131</sup> Tremper Longman puts it a bit more bluntly:

The Bible as literature or history is a false dichotomy. It is both and much more ... [Yet] the Bible is more like literature than nonliterature... To cast truth in the form of a story leads the hearer or reader to pay closer attention to it, to be shocked to reconsider what otherwise might easily become a truism.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Meir Steinberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 30.

<sup>132</sup> Tremper Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1987), 151-152.

Literary arguments do not seek to defend biblical narratives as a factual record. Literary approaches to the Bible seek to isolate the text as text and stays within that analytical frame to make its claims. For instance, one compares biblical texts for their formal or structural similarities rather than their historical dependence upon one another. Because of the multivalent nature of the Bible, with many voices and disparate forms of writing, it offers a variety of theological perspectives which literary theory is able to help uncover. Historical provenance holds less authority except as it helps to structure the analysis. However, as we have seen, the Bible incorporates history into its worldview. But the aim is not necessarily to impart a truthful accounting of verifiable, scientific fact. The overriding emphasis is on creating a narrative of what one historian calls a usable past.<sup>133</sup>

An extreme (and wildly unpopular) version of this perspective is Philip Davies' *In Search of Ancient Israel*. Davies considers literary as well as historical evidence in debunking the idea that a "biblical Israel," such as we have in the Bible, ever existed. While Davies is known as a historian, he uses literary analysis to dismisses biblical Israel as a literary construct, a fictive creation of later biblical compilers and editors. What we have in the Bible, he claims, is an idealized nation that never existed except in the minds of later writers and present scholars and readers. What he terms "historical Israel" represents a conglomeration of tribes and family groups that occupied the hill country of Canaan during the Iron Age. This "historical Israel" in no sense corresponded to any sort of nation or state but was probably the rag-tag remnant of groups seeking to establish a place of their own. In this regard, he develops a third designation, "ancient Israel," which represents a combination of both these historical and fictive Israels. In this, "ancient Israel" is not history but merely a literary construct, similar to "biblical Israel" in

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<sup>133</sup> James VS. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 70.

its objective reality. Davies claims that Israel cannot be reconstructed from a theological work of memory like the Hebrew Bible. Any reconstruction from biblical accounts is simply reproducing a theologically apologetic literary work; this is neither reliable nor verifiable history of the sort that archaeology provides. Biblical scholars, he argues, are depending upon the Bible to prove the Bible and that is bad science. Historical-critical approaches to the Bible err in misinterpreting their data. A literary approach to the Bible proves that the Bible is nothing more than a work of historicized entertainment or literary fiction, but it certainly is not history.<sup>134</sup>

As noted above, Davies' theories fail to hold much sway in the academic community. As one reviewer writes, Davies' approach to biblical literature is as follows: if it reads like fiction and is malleable to an analysis developed for fiction, it must therefore be fiction.<sup>135</sup> The greatest weakness to his theory does indeed come from historical criticism. Most scholars, including Davies, agree that the biblical narratives are a literary construction dated to the post-exilic era. But whatever the content or nature of the relationship of that literary community to Israel, past or present (as a diaspora people), is well-nigh impossible to reconstruct. His "Israel as literary fiction" fails to shed light on either literary or historical approaches to the Bible while at the same time dismissing biblical literature as having absolutely nothing of historical insight to impart.

Sumerologist Tikvah Frymer-Kensky compares early Israelite narratives from Genesis with material in other ancient Near Eastern contexts. She recognizes that the biblical narratives are doing neither history nor literature as we might understand them. However, Frymer-Kensky seeks to do justice to the competing theological claims of the text while also analyzing its more historically grounded stories. Taking a comparative literary approach, she argues for the

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<sup>134</sup> Philip Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 21-46.

<sup>135</sup> Ziony Zevit, "Review: Philip R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel*," *AJS Review* 20, no. 1 (1995): 154.

innovation in ancient Israelite narratives, especially in its view of women. Polytheistic goddess myths of other ancient cultures ghettoize women, she claims, creating separate and unequal spheres where female deities were relegated to domestic concerns of the household and fertility. She suggests that Israel's monotheistic narratives offer a surprisingly egalitarian view to the ancient world where gender is included under the heading humanity. Frymer-Kensky finds that Israel's narratives are examples of the transformation of myth where monotheism is the theological point of it all:

This view of the essential sameness of men and women is most appropriate to monotheism. There are no goddesses to represent 'womanhood' or a female principle in the cosmos; there is no conscious sense that there even exists a 'feminine.'<sup>136</sup>

The Bible is essentially a theological text where information about God informs notions of humanity and the world in general. Women now, rather than being viewed as inferior, are simply one (equal) version of this thing called human beings. Therefore, she finds arguments about gender disparity in the Bible to be a misreading of the narrative since it is the story of a single God where humanity (not men, not women) reflect and represent God's designs. The difference between human beings is one of degrees—degrees of genitalia rather than character—since both are subsumed under the designation “human.”<sup>137</sup> Israel has a god who lacks a female consort, fertility rights, even an embodied existence. We can in no way approach or approximate this god. Therefore, what the biblical narrative reproduces is a subtle theological narrative that reflects the fundamental similitude of humanity as a means to symbolically represent monotheism, and, by extension, God.

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<sup>136</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 142.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 118.

## 2.6.1 History Through Language

Another literary perspective is offered by Robert Alter. Alter finds in the literature of biblical narrative key insight into biblical historiography:

...[F]or biblical narrative, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Chronicles, is an account of how divine word—and in more ambiguous ways, often human word as well—becomes historical fact. The constantly reiterated pattern, then, of command or prophecy closely followed by its verbatim fulfillment confirms an underlying view of historical causality, translates into a central narrative device the unswerving authority of a monotheistic God manifesting Himself in language.<sup>138</sup>

For Alter, the Bible touches on quotidian events and persons as the sphere where momentous actions are realized. But the Bible is not descriptive, as one would expect of objective history. Like others before him, Alter argues for the Bible's roots in oral literature and folklore. However, where folklorists might highlight the uses of various folkloric conventions like duplications and poetic meter, he finds that biblical narrative imaginatively refashions standard conventions for its own theological or historical purposes.<sup>139</sup> The focus for Alter is on the Bible as a narrative instrument through which theology and history are communicated to God's people:

Language in the biblical stories is never conceived as a transparent envelope for the narrated events, or as an aesthetic embellishment of them, but as an integral and dynamic component—an insistent dimension—of what is being narrated. With language God creates the world; through language He reveals His design in history to men. There is a supreme confidence in an ultimate coherence of meaning through language which informs the biblical vision.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Robert Alter, "Biblical Narrative," *Commentary* 61:5 (May 1976): 62.

<sup>139</sup> Robert Alter, "Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 360.

<sup>140</sup> Alter, "Biblical Narrative," 67.

Adele Berlin would agree that the biblical medium for communicating information is through narrative, not objective history: “Narrative is the predominant mode of expression in the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>141</sup> For scholars like Alter and Berlin, modern literary approaches offer more fruitful avenues of discovery when it comes to the Bible. The historical fabric of the text, while interesting, cannot unlock the secrets of this theologically-informed narrative.<sup>142</sup>

While not interested in debating the fact or fiction of historical (or “ancient” Israel), Berlin argues for the representational scope of biblical literature. “Abraham in Genesis is not a real person any more than a painting of an apple is a real fruit ... It is just that we should not confuse a historical individual with his narrative representation.”<sup>143</sup> What is real are the surface patterns and meanings of passages. It is the text that matters; whatever history has to offer is secondary to the text as the site of its own meaning production:

Biblicists have flaunted evidence that ‘proves’ the Bible was, for example, orally composed, or historical, or legendary, when all that has really been proved by this evidence is that the Bible contains narrative.<sup>144</sup>

Scholars from a more literary perspective like Berlin’s have no real concern for the historicity of the text. Whatever meaning the text holds, whatever components make up the text and the relationship between the reader and the text—these hold a place of primary interest for literary theorists who view narrative as the central key to unlocking the Bible.

These literary theories prove quite important when we look at biblical women in general and our four stories in particular. We will critique many of these in greater depth in the next two

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<sup>141</sup> Berlin, 113.

<sup>142</sup> And, if we accept the view of those like Davies, there can be no reliable historical evidence even to be had in the Bible since the history that it purports to chronicle is itself a literary, subjective fiction.

<sup>143</sup> Berlin, 13.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 15.

chapters. But for the moment, we can touch on a few of them, for illustrative purposes. Literary theory helps us to see motifs like the annunciation stories of Sarah and Rebekah, or with respect to Bathsheba, the motif of the woman who brings death. The literary motif of the woman at the well alerts readers to an impending marriage proposal, such as we see in the stories of Rebekah, Rachel and Zipporah. Word study of the word *go'el* (redeemer) in Ruth's story helps scholars locate who in fact is the true redeemer in Ruth's story – some say Boaz, her husband, some say Obed, her son and grandfather of David. Some, using literary theory will look at the same story and come up with completely different concepts of who a narrative person is or what their import might be. For example, using literary theory, Berlin does not see Bathsheba as a harbinger of death but instead, argues for her continuing exploitation every time someone reads her story. These, and many other proposals will form the basis of the next two chapters where we narrow our focus to biblical women.

## 2.7 CONCLUSIONS

This short introduction to historical and literary theories to the Bible is by no means exhaustive. My intent is to frame our subsequent study by introducing some of the ways in which modern scholars conceptualize the historiographical focus and purpose of biblical narrative. Several points emerge from this selective survey:

First, it seems clear that few if any of the above scholars would recognize the Bible as a work of history in the modern sense. Clearly the writers, compilers and later redactors of this material first and foremost intended to craft a work with an exacting purpose. The content of that purpose—whether historical, theological, apologetic or literary—remains an active source of

debate. And, to engage Longman, to say that one is more significant than the other is a false opposition since the Bible presents important theological, dynastic, epic, literary as well as historical information, sometimes all at the same time. The Bible may attempt to convey that information via narrative conventions or under the guise of history. But we must accept the fact that biblical narratives are theologically-informed with significant historical and narrative gaps and ambiguities. Its richness lies in its literary artistry. When we mine the biblical narratives for their God information as well as their data about the beliefs of ancient Israel, we are often handsomely rewarded. To read the Bible for objective, analytical history is not the focus of this work nor, I would argue, is that the biblical authors' and editors' intent.

Second, few would agree that these narratives represent eyewitness accounts of the events.<sup>145</sup> This is not objective history nor is it ethnography—but neither is it exactly literature in the realm of Milton and Dostoyevsky. What the biblical narratives seem to offer is a generalized historical consciousness in literary form, enlightened by a theological impulse of the sort suggested by Funkenstein. Thus, the biblical compilers/redactors—whose motives we can never know for certain—brought this material together to serve larger civic and/or spiritual aims. I agree with those who argue that the Bible does indeed intend to impart historical information. That that information is less than reliable as objective fact or often fails to meet the most basic level of verifiable fact does not lessen its import.

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<sup>145</sup> I did not mention Harold Bloom's *The Book of J* (1990), where he discusses the Documentary Hypothesis and specifically, the role of the ancient Yahwist (J) writer, whom he conceptualizes as a woman of great literary artistry (first hinted at in Hector and Nora Chadwick's *The Growth of Literature* ["Early Hebrew Literature," Vol. 2, 1936]). Bloom suggests that she is attached to the Davidic court after the reigns of David and Solomon as a literary chronicler of court life and intrigues, crafting a work of literary entertainment. Given Bloom's more popular (rather than scholarly) approach, his J-as-eyewitness theories lack the sort of academic architecture that put him in conversation with these other scholars. For example, he opines, "We, whoever we are, are more naive, less sophisticated, less intelligent than J or Shakespeare," [p. 234] a charge which, while intriguing, needs greater context than is available here to be of use in thinking about the historiography of the Bible.

The writers and compilers judiciously present their material in order to situate them within a larger theological message. But what makes these stories compelling is the personal aspects. As Alter asserts,

[t]he implicit theology of the Hebrew Bible dictates a complex moral and psychological realism in biblical narrative because God's purposes are always entrained in history, dependent on the acts of individual men and women for their continuing realization. To scrutinize biblical personages as fictional characters is to see them more sharply as multifaceted, contradictory aspects of their human individuality, which is the biblical God's chosen medium for His experiment with Israel and history.<sup>146</sup>

The biblical stories do include women as well as men. Our next effort is to narrow our focus to women in these biblical narratives. We will find that women in the Hebrew Bible fit the historical and literary perspectives that we have outlined above. Women can be signifiers of Israel's salvation history. Annunciation narratives speak to the special status of women in fulfilling God's plan for Israel as a people of destiny. Women are part of the great epic story of Israel. They, too, in their quotidian aspects, are mothers of righteousness. As part of the Succession Narrative, women play a role in helping the House of David achieve its preeminence and point the way to David, one beloved of God. And literary theories identify the overwhelming patriarchy of the text and work to liberate women from the implied misogyny both within the text and by later interpreters that reproduce those entrenched power structures.

Biblical women fit well into these larger interpretive frames. We will see that when next we consider the women within the text. However, it remains to be seen how successfully the various explanations offered in this chapter impart information about the women. These historical impulses urge scholars to ask a particular set of questions, such as how these women-as-representative-of-Israel accounts reproduce larger theological, historical or epic aims.

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<sup>146</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 12.

At heart, the Bible is a theological text that offers a robust picture of God's relationship with His people. We will come to see that that sort of overt God information is lacking from our four narratives. We can broadly infer the hand of God upon their efforts but if we read what is actually on the page, we are hard-pressed to presume that our four stories have anything at all to do with God or patterning individual religious practices of women in Israel. Whatever relationship the women in these narratives have with God, it is not communicated through their stories. This then raises some important questions about their place in the text as we journey further. It furthermore impels us to ask a different set of questions than the historical-critical approach and thus, places this work more squarely within those literary impulses which ask other questions of the text.

For our purposes, Genesis-Kings presents narratives replete with historical as well as literary elements which add to the texture and richness of the stories. From the patriarchal narratives of Genesis down to the monarchical accounts of 1 and 2 Kings, the stories selectively demonstrate the lives of people who walk in a special relationship with their God. The hero of these stories is the God of Israel. This added theological dimension impacts my interpretive method. I respect the religious impulses of Scripture while attempting to more succinctly focus on the biblical stories as literary products. The continuing tension between the Bible's own claims about God and divine intervention in light of our four non-theological stories provides the nexus for this discussion.

### 3.0 BIBLICAL WOMEN: LOT'S DAUGHTERS, TAMAR, RUTH AND BATHSHEBA

In our previous chapter, we discussed several approaches to the stories of Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba—how these women exemplify the struggle of Israel to survive, or how these stories highlight God's saving actions on Israel's behalf. By narrowing our focus specifically to these female narratives in the Bible, we find that feminist scholars isolate the role of women, emphasizing their subjects' transformative actions as mothers, warriors, underdogs and tricksters.

However, these critical approaches rarely examine what makes the female characters so exemplary besides simply acting like men. In most instances, the word "heroine" is applied in a literary or symbolic fashion, often simply denoting the lead character in a story. A female character's valor derives less from anything that she does and more from her place as the main personality in her narrative. Thus, her exemplary status can be tied to notions of Israel, either institutionally or theologically.<sup>147</sup>

Several recent biblical scholars attempted to isolate and define female categories of action such as sexual agency. Some examples are Alice Ogden Bellis' *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Bible* (2007), Susan Ackerman's *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress*,

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<sup>147</sup> For examples of this, see Esther Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines," 149-160; Rendsburg, 16-23ff; Exum, *Fragmented Women*; Athalya Brenner, "Female Social Behavior: Two Descriptive Patterns Within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm," *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 257-273. .

*Queen* (1998) and Phyllis Bird's analysis of biblical harlotry.<sup>148</sup> These works organize female narratives based on general motifs, developing a deeper literary-critical appreciation of the Bible's diverse female characters. For instance, Esther Fuchs argues that biblical mothers hold the most valorous position for women in the Bible. Says Fuchs, "There is a growing effort to create a causal link between [mothers'] procreative ability and their moral status ..."<sup>149</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky's *Reading the Women of the Bible* (2002) includes a chapter entitled, "Victors," where she claims that Deborah, Yael, David's Shunamite and Rahab all serve as substantial examples of this valiant identification.<sup>150</sup> And there is Lillian Klein's triumphalist *Deborah to Esther* (2003), which lionizes named women as boundary transgressors and audacious role models.<sup>151</sup> These and many others look especially to Ruth, Esther, Sarah, Rebekah, Deborah and even apocryphal Judith as ideals of female action.<sup>152</sup> Each acts independently and not necessarily through maternity alone.

In many instances, we enjoy these stories because we find that women can do what men do and achieve God's ends or fulfill covenantal promises of land and greatness as well as fertility. But, speaking from a literary-critical perspective, female narratives can be exemplary simply for the things that female characters accomplish without reference to these larger theological claims. Our stories find God tangentially present in the lives of the women. The women are part of a larger Israelite community but the role of religion in their stories is small at best. God never speaks to the women (either directly or through a divine agent) and they do not

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<sup>148</sup> Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmate, Harlots and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Phyllis Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," *Semeia* 46 (1989): 119-139.

<sup>149</sup> Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 31.

<sup>150</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 3-57.

<sup>151</sup> Klein, 8; 33.

<sup>152</sup> On Yael, Deborah and Judith, see Sidnie White Crawford, "In the Steps of Jael and Deborah: Judith as Heroine," in *"No One Spoke Ill of Her": Essays on Judith*, ed. James C. VanderKam (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 5-16; and, Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and for an overall feminist perspective of female agency in Genesis and Judges, see Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Book of Judges* (Sheffield, JSOT, 1993) as well as Brenner's *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (First Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) and (Second Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

pray directly to God in the context of their stories. The male redactors could have removed these stories at some point or embellished upon God's larger presence in their successes. But for whatever reason, they chose not to. These female narratives maintain a narrative presence in the Bible and that alone provides sufficient justification for considering the ways in which biblical women are exemplary.

In this chapter I will argue that the stories of Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba present evocative portrayals of feminine self-interest which fuels their ingenuity. I will first examine Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth, then address the ways in which Bathsheba finds common cause with these three.

### 3.1 STANDARD APPROACHES

What does it mean to argue that these four narratives are "evocative portrayals of feminine self-interest which fuels their ingenuity?" What is evocative about their ingenuity and how does that differ from standard interpretations of these stories?

Feminist scholar Cheryl Exum claims that the traditional approach to female narratives organizes them in motif-driven ways that reflects "established notions of literary unity."<sup>153</sup> Exum challenges biblical interpreters to expand upon this material by stepping outside the assumed ideology of the text in order to develop a plurality of interpretations.<sup>154</sup> For example, Exum views the Bible's androcentrism in female narratives as a means to control female sexuality. I agree that there is an assumed ideology and that established interpretations often reiterate that. For example, casting women as representatives of Israel's underdog status is a powerful symbolic trope that includes women in the larger narrative of Israel's past. But such a

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<sup>153</sup> Exum, 12.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 11.

reading does not necessarily allow for women's narratives to be read as stories of women; they become valued for what they tell us about Israel or Israel's larger ideological concerns. However, the ideology reflected in the Bible is not just a fear of female sexuality, as Exum argues, but a conscious effort by the biblical writers and editors to redeploy female enterprise for the community's dynastic or epic purposes. I see this most acutely exemplified in the ways in which traditional interpreters have understood our four stories.

When we read our four stories together, we can see that these women act in individual, non-coordinated ways to achieve their own ends without overt reference to the greater community, the religious culture or God. As I have noted previously, God's providence is often merely implied. Without the biblical context, one could read these stories and not understand that they were part of a larger sacred text. At heart, these neither are theological stories nor are they necessarily pedagogical tales on the merits of the *eshet chayil*, "the good woman."<sup>155</sup> Rather, these four stories portray an evocative female resourcefulness where sexual politics, or what Wendy Doniger calls "the bedtrick," provides the climax to their narratives and a way of understanding their actions without reference to the greater dynastic and/or institutional aims of the text. Doniger defines the bedtrick as a sexual trickery "that contests the intimate relationship between sex and gender, power and identity."<sup>156</sup> In the biblical context, this trickery represents *the* evocative moment for our female characters.

While some might emphasize the sex vs. power differential, I want to elaborate on another aspect of Doniger's definition. I see the bedtrick as a gender identity dynamic. In the biblical stories, sexual trickery is employed not as a sex-for-power ploy but rather as a graphic expression of an essentially gendered (female) narrative. This is one of the defining moments that identifies these narratives as female stories. In the Bible, we find that the bedtrick is something that only women utilize. However, when it is used, we do not find that the women are

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<sup>155</sup> From Prov. 31.10: "A good wife (alternatively, "a worthy woman") who can find? She is far more precious than jewels."

<sup>156</sup> Doniger, 1-4.

attempting to overthrow more politically powerful men or seducing men in order to take over leadership of the clan, the tribe or the kingdom. In the biblical context, it becomes a mark of female narrative, something that we associate only with female stories in the Bible. Thus, the biblical bedtrick summons forth an array of associated motifs (such as lack of an appropriate male, pregnancy and birth) which we can read and interpret for the information it provides about the women in the story. The bedtrick is one of the ways to gender a narrative; just the presence of a woman in a story is not enough to mark it as a gendered narrative.

If the bedtrick marks this as a female gendered narrative, then another consequence of this identification is that we find the power differential challenged. These narratives do not necessarily highlight women attempting to overthrow the established power structures. Nor are they developing strategies for coordinated communal acts of resistance. Rather, I find in each narrative an instance of non-coordinated individual action where the focus is on distributing resources to and for themselves. In the Bible, the bedtrick represents a power struggle fueled by individual female initiative and ambition rather than maternal desire or civic duty. Their marked acts represent the weapons of the relatively powerless—trickery, deception and individual self-help. In this, the bedtrick is a survival strategy that mitigates the boundaries of the prevailing patriarchal culture.<sup>157</sup> Thus, in the biblical context, the bedtrick presents a complex web of associated actions and meanings that go far in helping us to unpack the gendered character of a narrative. This dynamic of initiative, ambition and independent action challenges the image of biblical women in an evocative fashion that adds to the plurality of meanings associated with these stories.

In this chapter, I present some of the standard interpretations that establish the "literary unity" of these stories. In this, we will see that standard approaches to Tamar and Ruth are most often grouped together under levirate concerns with Lot's daughters also joining the unit when the focus is on the line of Judah or the House of David. Bathsheba will come into the discussion

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<sup>157</sup> Scott, xv-xviii, 302.

when talking about foreign wives who bring death or general presentation of the women in David's immediate circle. Previous approaches, feminist as well as standard, do not consider the bedtrick vital to reading the gendered actions in these stories. My argument does not depend upon reading these four stories as part of established related cycles in the Davidic corpus or as levirate texts. I do not deny these identifiers; I am simply using evidence from the stories themselves in order to argue for another approach. I argue that the bedtrick defines these stories as gendered texts. However, we first need to consider some of the dominant thematic elements found in these stories and stake my claim for another interpretation.

### **3.2 MY APPROACH**

As we have seen, it is possible to read the stories of Tamar and Ruth (and sometimes Lot's daughters) as Davidic ancestresses whose initiative provides the means to realize the Davidic covenant. Because each woman is seen as a progenetrix of the Davidic line, their stories ultimately impart as much information about David (and, subsequently the House of Judah), as they do about the women themselves. It is also possible to locate in the stories of Tamar and Ruth—and somewhat tangentially, Lot's daughters—examples of levirate practice that inform our understanding of primogeniture and inheritance in the ancient Near East. These three narratives exemplify the importance of patrimony in ancient Israel (Lot's daughters) and specifically how levirate laws functioned and were applied in precise situations (Tamar; Ruth).

These three—Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth—are further linked in their roles as outsiders. Such women symbolize Israel's political and geographic status as an exiled people; their stories mirror Israel's post-exilic reality. Their actions carry far more weight as symbolic

metaphors for Israel's diaspora sensibilities than they do as narratives of women. The woman-as-Israel metaphor reproduces the underdog motif as one who succeeds—i.e., the exile in a foreign country who eventually secures land, fertility and greatness via divine providence.

Standard interpretations of these narratives help us to gain insight into political and civic notions of ancient Israel, ancient Near Eastern inheritance practices and the dynastic importance of David. But such interpretations do not necessarily enhance our understanding of the women in the text. Fuchs notes what we have in the Bible is “an ideology that affirms women in their ability and willingness to support the patriarchal arrangement.”<sup>158</sup> Traditional biblical interpretation of women deepens our understanding of cult practices and male prerogatives, but it insufficiently illuminates anything about these women as female agents. For instance, by interpreting these stories as exemplary levirate narratives, we reduce the women down to historical and legal illustrations. When we identify Ruth and Tamar as Davidic ancestresses, we diminish their unique characteristics; they become mere instruments in Israel's overall history. These varied perspectives which highlight larger dynastic and institutional issues offer scant insight into these female narratives as gendered texts or to the women as independent agents. The purpose of reading the stories this way is to discover something about Israel. If we want to know something about the women in these stories, we need to ask different questions.

### **3.2.1 Approach to Bathsheba**

For example, one of those “different questions” might be the relationship between Bathsheba and the other three stories. She is technically not a Davidic ancestress. She is not in the line of David but simply one member of a large cadre of women around David. Her tale does not specifically focus on her inheritance issues. But a closer look reveals some interesting connections to the

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<sup>158</sup> Fuchs, “Sexual Politics,” 32.

other stories. Her narrative is intimately linked to the House of David. Her congress with the king results in an heir, Solomon, which makes her an ancestress in the Davidic line. Furthermore, her story presents another female narrative where inheritance (that is, her role in Solomon's accession to the throne) ultimately comes into play. Furthermore, unlike many of the women who appear when David is young and virile, Bathsheba reappears in David's decline and continues to play a vibrant role in his story.

There are additional ideas that link Bathsheba to the other three. The narratives of Tamar and Ruth as well as Lot's daughters concern women without male partners. Bathsheba's story opens with a missing male partner—her husband Uriah is away at the battlefield. Ruth and Tamar are both foreigners. Lot's family is viewed as outsiders in Sodom (“This one here is an alien,” Genesis 19.9 [NIV]). Bathsheba is not a foreigner but her absent Hittite husband is. Like Lot's daughters and Ruth, Bathsheba's story does not seem overly concerned with her lack of maternity—but she does give birth to a son in the line of David.

Thus, while standard interpretations of the Bathsheba story fail to associate her thematically with the prior three, her story contains some of their same concerns. These components manifest themselves in different ways, challenging the synchronicity of established interpretive unities.

### **3.3 LOT'S DAUGHTERS**

Lot and his family appear in Genesis 19. Living in the land of Sodom, Lot meets two strangers (angels) at the city gate. Impressing upon the strangers the importance of taking cover before nightfall, Lot convinces them to spend the evening with his family. The motifs of nighttime and

darkness foreshadow ominous and sinister events.<sup>159</sup> Marauding Sodomite men eventually assail Lot's house, demanding that he turn the strangers over to them, "that we might know (*yada*) them" (19.5). In a stunning moment, Lot says, "Behold now, I have two daughters who have not yet known a man; let me, I pray you, bring them out to you, and you can do to them as [is] good in your eyes: only to these men do nothing; for they came under the protection of my roof" (Genesis 19.8).

Belligerent demands such as handing over one's visitors imply that this scene records a power challenge, not a sexual one. These Sodomite men mean to do real physical harm to these strangers. Raping Lot's daughters will not satisfy such bloodlust. The men demand male victims in order to physically humiliate them. As Anne Michele Tapp argues, the issue of male rape in this context "is not merely one of sex, it is more one of violence ... Sex is the vehicle through which violence and hatred are expressed..."<sup>160</sup>

The threshold of Lot's house serves as the locus of action, his doorway providing the only barrier between safety and violation.<sup>161</sup> Lot is more than willing to sacrifice the sanctity of his household and his children for some presumed notion of hospitality among men who do not even respect him (they scoff, "This fellow came here as an alien and he would play the judge," 19.9). As Sharon Jeansonne notes, "Lot's callous offer is ostensibly motivated by his desire to protect his guests; however, it is obvious that Lot is in no position to offer protection to them."<sup>162</sup> It will take divine intervention to defend Lot's wife and daughters.

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<sup>159</sup> Weston W. Fields, "The Motif 'Night as Danger' Associated with Three Biblical Destruction Narratives," in *"Shaarei Talmon," Studies in the Bible, Qumran and the Ancient Near East...* ed. M. Fishbane and E. Tov (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 22.

<sup>160</sup> Tapp, 162.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 127.

The crowd turns ugly, mocking him, promising Lot worse treatment than the strangers. Lot's excessive show of hospitality and attempted camaraderie with neighbors who ridicule him shows his misplaced aspiration to gain the sympathies of the aggressive Sodomites. David Penchansky remarks that Lot's attempts at camaraderie and hospitality fall flat—even the angels reject his offer of "ritualistic male bonding, instead opting for more humanistic and individual valuation. They intervene and preserve the lives of the women."<sup>163</sup> Penchansky further claims that ancient Near East culture situates male friendship in a strategically central role. Women, by contrast, are tangential.<sup>164</sup> They serve as manifestations of one's honor status since, as Penchansky claims, "they are objects of barter, [a] means by which the male members of society can remain secure and proud."<sup>165</sup>

The strangers/angels retrieve Lot and strike the crowd blind—an interesting play on Lot's name, which roughly translates as "veil" or "covering," reflecting his own impaired vision. Lot and his family are told to leave Sodom immediately; the angels have come to destroy the city. Lot warns his two other unnamed daughters and sons-in-law; the sons-in-law only laugh at him, finding in Lot a source of derision. They stand in closer proximity to the ridiculing men of Sodom than to Lot and his family.

His married daughters and sons-in-law refuse to leave so Lot takes his wife and two remaining (and still unnamed) daughters and flee. His wife, perhaps longing for the left-behind daughters, looks back against the angels' orders, and is transformed into a pillar of salt. It is

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<sup>163</sup> Penchansky, 82.

<sup>164</sup> Anthropologist Sherry Ortner echoes these sentiments in arguing that a woman's purity (often an idealized and generally unrealizable status) becomes a reflection of the state in highly stratified complex societies; see Ortner's "The Virgin and the State," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 3 (Oct. 1978): 19-35.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

interesting that she alone turns back "to see," forever frozen in that backward glance, while Lot, the veiled one, never really does see what is going on.

Lot and the daughters arrive at the cave in Zoar, a scene replete with further maternal and sexual symbolism.<sup>166</sup> The daughters fear that all the men of the world have been destroyed, evidencing a similar lack of vision that permeates Lot's narrative. They conspire to get Lot drunk and sleep with him, "that we may preserve the seed of our father" (19.32). As Randall Bailey slyly remarks, "Lot is so drunk both nights that he knows neither their lying down nor rising up (*welo yada beshikbah ubequmah*). But he does perform!"<sup>167</sup> The resulting sons—Moab and Ammon— although related to Israel, are counted among Israel's traditional enemies.

Some might argue that this incestuous scene forever predisposes these unnamed girls to antiheroic status. However, the ironic turn for Lot's daughters is not the act, but the motivation behind the incest. The daughters get themselves with child in a way that mirrors the selfish and shortsighted affections of their father: they mistakenly see destruction of the entire world and thus visit a sexual violation upon the father who offered them up to the same fate. "The mounting avalanche of disaster," to quote Robert Alter, finds the tables turned in paradoxical ways on Lot.<sup>168</sup> Where once he would play the grand patriarch and appallingly sacrifice the children, now the children take charge and sacrifice whatever small dignity Lot has left in order to vouchsafe their own ends. The possessions now possess Lot: the cruel exploiter is now exploited. Put bluntly, the ravishment that Lot would have visited upon his daughters is now his

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<sup>166</sup> Gunn notes that *me'arah* [cave] is used euphemistically for the female sexual organ; thus the cave becomes the site where the daughters come in contact with the maternal as well as create new life; David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: an Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1980), 93-94.

<sup>167</sup> Randall C. Bailey, "They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives," in *Reading From This Place, vol. 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the U.S.*, ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 129.

<sup>168</sup> Robert Alter, *The David Story*, 271.

fate.<sup>169</sup>

### 3.3.1 Lot's Daughters: Interpretation

The story of Lot's daughters prompts numerous explanations, with many situating Middle Eastern hospitality at its symbolic center. Brian Doyle follows Lot from his choice of Sodom to his daughters' incest, and charting Lot's personal disintegration, Doyle finds that the lack of family integrity and specifically paternal affection results in chaotic and downright deviant female agency.<sup>170</sup> Sharon Jeansonne also identifies Lot's actions as the narrative focal point with his drunkenness serving as the moral center of the story.<sup>171</sup> Elie Wiesel and Rebecca Goldstein prefer to emphasize the tragic figure of Lot's wife as a means to understand Lot and the singular issue of loss and destruction.<sup>172</sup> Ultimately, it is Lot—and not his daughters—who provides the narrative and analytical focus. Social/cultural taboos like rape and incest are counted as a tragic consequence of Lot's inept fatherhood rather than moral deficiency on the part of the daughters.

Weston Fields is far more interested in the interplay of light and dark and the symbolism of night and day in the Lot narrative as keys to its dynamic interpretation.<sup>173</sup> Lot's unsolicited offer of the daughters occurs under dark of night; the mob violence also commences after nightfall. And, in the darkness of the Zoar cave, the rape that Lot would have had visited upon his daughters takes place after an evening of alcoholic overindulgence.

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<sup>169</sup> Jeansonne, 128.

<sup>170</sup> Brian Doyle, "The Sin of Sodom: *Yada, Yada, Yada?* A Reading of the Mamre Sodom Narrative in Genesis 18-19, *Theology & Sexuality* 9 (Summer 1998): 95.

<sup>171</sup> Jeansonne, 128-129.

<sup>172</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Lot's Wife," in *The Future of Prophetic Christianity*, ed. D. Carmody and J. Carmody (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 76-87; Rebecca Goldstein, "Looking Back at Lot's Wife," in *Out of the Garden; Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. C. Buchmann and C. Spiegel (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 3-12.

<sup>173</sup> Fields, 17-32.

Another interpretation advances the hypothesis that Lot's daughters illustrate a folkloric motif called "New Race from Incest after World Calamity (A1006.2),"<sup>174</sup> cited in Stith Thompson's *Motif Index*.<sup>175</sup> Warren Kliewer situates Lot's transgressions in closer relationship to archaic fire narratives and fertility rituals than to the biblical account of the house of Abraham. The incest motif links Lot thematically to other non-biblical folkloric and archetypal tales of world calamities where a god or man and his daughter are the sole survivors and must reproduce in order to repopulate the world. Based on folkloric analysis of this motif, Kliewer hypothesizes that stories of humanity surviving fire are older than flood narratives like Noah's and may explain why the incest in the tale appears so particularly barbarous and primitive.<sup>176</sup> Kliewer dismisses modern views that argue for this as an explanation for the misbegotten conception of Moab and Ammon. Rather, says Kliewer, what modern readers should recognize in Lot and his daughters is a grotesque tragicomedy:

It is the world of the sad, painful, bitter, beautiful Jewish jokes: I've sometimes thought the story of Lot and his desperate daughters ought to be told in a Yiddish accent, ending with, "So after all that work what happened? Their kids were *goyim*."<sup>177</sup>

Kliewer's criticism targets historical-critical scholars like Randall Bailey who construe the sexual deviancy in the Lot narrative as a means to disparage Israel's foreign neighbors. The use of deviant sexuality, he argues, either via innuendo or graphic detail, supplies the means of discrediting and shaming Israel's neighbors, justifying Israel's hatred and oppression of the "other."<sup>178</sup> In Bailey's analysis, Lot is spared the brunt of blame since Bailey locates bastardy in

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<sup>174</sup> Warren Kliewer, "The Daughters of Lot: Legend and Fable," *Illif Review* 25 (1968): 21.

<sup>175</sup> Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959).

<sup>176</sup> Kliewer, 24-25.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>178</sup> Bailey, 124.

the daughters of Lot, not Lot himself. The illicit union is plotted and accomplished by "the children of the disobedient wife." Thus, Lot is exonerated.<sup>179</sup>

For Robert Alter, these disobedient daughters provide the means for future dynastic accomplishment. Their reproductive agenda, misplaced as it might be, assures that there will be a House of David. Alter considers this a reflection of group survival instincts despite the monstrous nature of the act:

As the biblical imagination conceives it, neither national existence nor the physical act of propagation itself can be taken for granted. A society that rejects the moral bonds of civilization for the instant gratification of dark urges can be swept away in a moment; the elemental desire for survival in a seemingly desolate world may drive people to desperate means, to a kind of grim parody of the primeval command to be fruitful and multiply...<sup>180</sup>

More explicitly, without Moab, Lot's grandson, we do not get Ruth. Without Ruth, there can be no David. Although a defense of incest is well-nigh impossible, Lot's daughters do secure for Israel the possibility of King David. And in David we find an individual as morally ambiguous and sexually opportunistic as these two ancestresses. In fact, David's family line is replete with incestuous liaisons.<sup>181</sup>

Lot is at the mercy of his daughters by the end of the narrative. At this point, Lot truly ceases to be a parent and becomes instead the child, a docile follower of the intents and purposes of others. When his children act, Lot is powerless to stem the tide of their misbegotten intent. In similar ways, this mirrors the chaotic family dynamics which we see in Jacob's and David's families.<sup>182</sup> We can read the bedtrick by Lot's daughters as a profoundly gendered act. Unlike

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>180</sup> Robert Alter, "Sodom as Nexus: The Web of Design in Biblical Narrative," *Tikkun* 1, no. 1 (1986), 36.

<sup>181</sup> Menn, 103-105.

<sup>182</sup> See the slaughter of Shechem by the Simeon and Levi after the rape of their sister Dinah (Genesis 34); Amnon's rape of his half-sister Tamar and Absalom's avenging fratricide and public rape of David's concubines (2 Sam. 13).

sons, the daughters do not strike out physically like Shechem or Absalom to avenge some offense, real or imagined, to their prestige. Instead, the daughters do that which only women can do—and, in this case, feel they *must* do: they get themselves with child. While biblical sons seem to act out in physically violent—and often destructive—ways, the daughters work within the household. In this domestic act, I find a uniquely feminine response to their predicament, real or imagined. Through their bedtrick, they perpetuate the family—albeit in less than ideal ways—rather than destroy it.<sup>183</sup>

These varied interpretations on Lot's story—tragic irony, grotesque comedy, a vehicle to denigrate "the Other," or a concern for preserving David's line—focus primarily on prerogatives apart from the daughters themselves. When we emphasize something other than the actions of the daughters, we reduce them to mere ciphers in the greater narrative drama of Lot's disintegration. This ignores the impact of their actions as profoundly gendered deeds. By a gendered act or deed, I mean an action which is specific to a character's gender and thus helps us, the readers, to better see them as gendered (male or female) characters. In the context of the Bible, we find that sexual trickery is a gendered act attached to women. It will become a significant part of the discussion as I make the case for a female heroic in the Bible in subsequent chapters. But at this point, I simply want to note that Lot's daughters' advantageous ravishing of Lot, is a singular act which takes the focus off of Lot and onto the daughters. By reading this as a gendered text, we clearly see that these are women of survival and invention, as heinous and despicable as their actions might be. And by highlighting this trickery as a gendered act, we are

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<sup>183</sup> "Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the 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). While Jacob's family is not physically destroyed, the actions of Simeon and Levi threaten the interests of the household, specifically the ability of Jacob to live and flourish in a foreign land.

encouraged to try and understand it in the context of deeds that only women do in the Bible. What then might that mean? Will reading these as gendered stories enrich or complicate our understanding of biblical women? As we attempt to read these biblical women's narratives as gendered texts, without reference to patriarchy or patrimony or any other masculine paradigms, we will find that our appreciation for the initiative and nerve of the women in the text grows. I therefore submit that reprehensible or shocking acts, such as the bedtrick by Lot's daughters, are part of what makes these gendered (female) narratives.

Yet somewhat shocking non-sexual deeds attach to other women in the Bible. Yael drives a tent peg through the foreign invader Sisera's ear (Jdg. 4-5). Judith decapitates Holofernes and then puts his head in her food bag (Jd.13). These women are valorized while the equally horrific incest of the daughters is reviled. Why might that be? The Bible does not necessarily find killing of enemies repugnant by men or women, especially since innumerable narratives recount similar acts of physical violence by Israelite men against foreign opponents. The daughters' sexual congress itself is problematic but the Bible is not prudish. In a more significant way, we need to look at female ingenuity within these different stories. When we do, we find that the daughters' work for their own ends, not for the good of the community, the way Yael and Judith do (say the daughters, "...[there is] not a man in the earth *to come in to us* after the manner of all the earth: Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, *that we may preserve [the] seed of our father.*" [Genesis19.31-32], emphasis mine). And therein lies their legacy. Commentators like Berlin conclude that female initiative rendered for the good of the community is glorified; female initiative for the good of one's self is condemned: "[t]he portrayal of women as deceptive or dangerous is the hallmark of misogynous fiction."<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Exum, "Sexual Politics," 30; see also Day, 119-124.

Therefore, stories of sexual trickery, which we find primarily in female narratives, have to be reconfigured by later editors and redactors in order to validate their place in the narrative.

This valorization of female action by later editors and redactors is part of the epic narrative of Israel. The epic approach claims that the one of the purposes of the biblical story is to highlight the community's relationship with their god. However, as we have already seen, God does not appear as an embodied presence in Lot's story (except through the medium of the angels, and even then, he speaks only to Lot). But public religious performance such as prayer or fasting or special devotion is not part of Genesis 19. God is credited with hailing down fire and brimstone (Genesis 19:24) and for remembering His promises to Abraham (Genesis 19:29). The girls never speak to the angels nor do the angels address them. They do not pray for God's intervention on their behalf nor, for that matter, does Lot.<sup>185</sup> How then can we see this as evidence of the epic perspective?

Valorous female resourcefulness is that initiative which assists the dynastic purposes of the community. But to see this, we must know what lies ahead. That is, we can infer divine aegis in the daughters' actions because that links the reader to Ruth and Ruth gets us to David.<sup>186</sup> To rehabilitate the line that comes out of Moab, we need Ruth. We can mend the damage done by the incest by the redeeming value of Ruth the Moabite.<sup>187</sup> But this interpretation fails to do justice to the text itself. It is an interpretation from the vantage point of later writers and redactors. We have no evidence in this story that the author intends to imply God's blessings upon the efforts of the girls or that he knows of Ruth or David. It provides no information that

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<sup>185</sup> Day refers to this as God being active but not present; 122.

<sup>186</sup> In the context of the narrative itself, even reading back into the text from the vantage point of Ruth or David, any claims of divine intervention in the daughters' actions will be problematic since reference to God appears nowhere in their negotiations for Lot's evenings in the Zoar cave; nor does the text evidence language of God blessing their efforts. In fact, God last appears in vs.29 and then only in the context of remembering His promises to Abraham not to destroy Lot.

<sup>187</sup> Menn, 96-100; Fisch, 432-433.

would lead readers to conclude anything but that this relates the incestuous beginnings of Moab and Ammon and the bastardy of the House of Lot. Such interpretation glosses over any sexual politics in an attempt to redeem the line of Moab (which we need to get to David) and utilizes the daughters for the greater epic aims of the later writers and redactors.

A more robust, comprehensive reading focuses on the daughters' actions. In a very real sense, the daughters reflect the same values and virtues that Lot possesses—short-sightedness and a lack of faith. Adele Reinhartz claims that unnamed status of biblical characters encourages us to read them as anonymous “types”—mothers, daughters, queens, sisters, harlots—rather than as individuals with specific character traits. This is intentional on the part of biblical writers—it emphasizes and helps clarify the characterization of the male characters in the text.<sup>188</sup> However, I would alter that assessment somewhat. Reinhartz argues that the daughters' unnamed status provides the counterpoint to named male characters like Lot. To my reading, Lot's daughters do help us to see Lot more clearly but are not opposites of Lot. In fact, they are ironic reflections of his myriad character flaws (his short-sightedness being primary among them). The unnamed daughters offer a mocking textual critique of Lot. They reflect back for the reader Lot's ineptitude as a father, provider and moral center through their dreadful deception.

Viewing the daughters' bedtrick as a site of sexual power dynamics lends the narrative greater resonance. That is, situating the incest at the center of the story lends significance to the daughters' cunning. Maternal desire fuels their choices, horrific as they are. Furthermore, reading this as the story of the daughters and not only of Lot allows for the gendered elements of the story to emerge—the home as metonymy for women, the cave as womb, female

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<sup>188</sup> Adele Reinhartz, “Anonymous Women and the Collapse of the Monarchy: a Study in Narrative Technique,” in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 43-67.

resourcefulness (Lot's wife as well as the daughters) and a concern to perpetuate the family.<sup>189</sup> Settling for the dynastic or xenophobic rationales fails to elucidate the elements of gender within the narrative. The daughters remain utilitarian at best and at worst, invisible by such analysis.

### 3.4 TAMAR

Sandwiched between Joseph's plunge into slavery and his adventures in Potiphar the Egyptian's home we find a pericope on his older half-brother Judah's life in Canaan. Judah's story begins and ends abruptly, seemingly out of place—chronologically as well as geographically.

Judah leaves Jacob's fold to travel to Adullam, a Canaanite town near Bethlehem, where he marries an unnamed Canaanite woman. They have three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. In time, Judah obtains a wife for Er—Tamar (possibly a Canaanite, since Judah is in Canaan and we are not explicitly told that he returns to his natal land to obtain a wife for his son). Er dies early in the marriage as the Lord considered him evil (Genesis 38.7). Judah then charges Onan to “perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother” (38.8). Judah invokes the custom of levirate to order to perpetuate Er's line as well as to secure Judah's investment since Tamar is now the economic and social responsibility of his household.

Onan, however, has a different idea. Knowing that any child with Tamar would compete with him for Er's inheritance (38.9), Onan practices *coitus interruptus*, “lest he should give offspring to his brother.” Such withholding makes good economic sense: Er's lack of heir means that Onan will inherit more of the birthright due to first sons. However, like Er before him, Onan is struck dead by God, although this death is understood as just punishment for Onan's selfish, unrighteous behavior.

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<sup>189</sup> See Exum's references to house and home as the symbolic feminine in *Fragmented Women*, 47.

Judah fears now for his remaining son, Shelah. Put bluntly, sex with Tamar has resulted in the deaths of two of his three sons. In an attempt to delay further congress with this apparent black-widow spider, Judah dispatches Tamar back to her father's house to await Shelah's maturity.

Time passes. Tamar experiences a dawning awareness that Judah is not going to honor his responsibility to her, content to keep her "wife and not-wife."<sup>190</sup> As Tamar is technically promised to Shelah, remarriage outside of Judah's clan is not a possibility without Judah's approval. She exists in limbo as a resident of her father's household. Her father pays for her daily upkeep but cannot contract another marriage for her. She remains tied by laws of kinship to Judah, who shows no interest in providing for her or honoring her with any sort of marriage.

Tamar seizes the day. In vs. 13, she hears that her father-in-law is travelling to Timnah for sheep shearing. Tamar removes her mourning garments, adorns herself as a *zonah* (prostitute) and waits by the entrance to Enaim on the road to Timnah.<sup>191</sup> The justification for such provocative action is found in vs. 14b: "She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage."

Judah, now a lonely widower, takes notice of Tamar-as-*zonah* on the side of the road, veiled, intriguing and anonymous. He propositions her, unaware of her identity (an ironic play on the name of the place, Enaim, or "Eyes," since he does not recognize Tamar).<sup>192</sup> Judah offers a young lamb from the flock as payment for services to be rendered. As pledge for the lamb's delivery, Tamar shrewdly negotiates for his signatory items: a signet ring and his staff. He agrees; they consummate the transaction. VS. 19 observes that Tamar then leaves, discarding the veil of the *zonah* and again donning her widow's garments.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Dvora Weisberg, 67.

<sup>191</sup> Phyllis Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," *Semeia* 46 (1989): 125-126.

<sup>192</sup> Ellen Van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives," *Biblical Interpretation* 5 (1997): 15.

<sup>193</sup> An interesting discontinuity noted by Bird and others, when Judah's friend Hirah the Adullumite comes to make good on payment, he asks for the place of the *qedesha* (a higher status temple worker), rather than the common prostitute (*zonah*), who sat by the side of the road (v. 21).

Three months later, the widow Tamar is pregnant. As a member of Judah's household, her illicit sexual congress calls Judah's honor into question.<sup>194</sup> Judah must publicly defend himself. He calls for Tamar's open humiliation and death through burning (Leviticus 21.9 sanctions the burning of the daughter of a priest who commits prostitution).<sup>195</sup> Tamar quietly sends Judah his signatory items, noting that the owner of these fathered her child. He has been tricked.

Judah recognizes Tamar's actions—says Judah, “She is more righteous than I” (vs. 26). But Judah neither marries Tamar nor visits her sexually again. Their relationship, such as it was, served its transitory purpose and focuses now on the child to be born.

Tamar gives birth to twin boys, with the younger twin superseding the elder in a tale reminiscent of the birth of Jacob and Esau. Zerah pushes his hand out first, then recedes and Perez—that is, “Breach”—is born. Thus the younger will supersede the older.

### 3.4.1 Tamar: Interpretation

The story of Tamar portrays a richly textured individual whose rehabilitation, as Leila Leah Bronner claims, is long overdue.<sup>196</sup> Bronner claims that Tamar aids the dynastic needs of future

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<sup>194</sup> Ortner, "The Virgin and the State": 19-35.

<sup>195</sup> Interestingly, both the Bible and ancient Near Eastern law codes of the time parallel some of what we see going on in this context although they deal far more harshly with the father-in-law's transgression. Levs. 18:15 warns that a man should not uncover his son's wife's nakedness lest *he*, the father-in-law, be cut off from the community. Levs. 20:12 says, “If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death.” The Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1792-1750 BCE) states that if a father-in-law has intercourse with his daughter-in-law after his son has slept with her already, the father-in-law is to be drowned (Article 155). Or, if a father-in-law sleeps with his daughter-in-law, even if his son, her husband, has not slept with the daughter-in-law, then the father-in-law must return her dowry and allow her to marry as she chooses (Article 156). Any of these might apply to Judah, who slept with Tamar after (we assume) Er had slept with her. And since she was promised to Shelah but never delivered to him to consummate the marriage before Judah slept with her, we might conjecture that she was able to live on her own without similar interference from Judah (“He [Judah] did not lie with her again,” Genesis 38:26). See Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 106.

<sup>196</sup> Leila Leah Bronner, "Aggadic Attitudes towards Prostitution: Rabbinic Rehabilitation of the Marginalized Woman," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh Congress of Jewish Studies (1993)*, Division C, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies), 36.

generations and is accorded esteem and respect as a “mother of righteousness” as her actions give rise to kings and heroes. Her harlotry stands without condemnation. Rather, she finds restoration in talmudic tradition as a selfless heroine, worthy of praise and honor as a woman of exceptional modesty, more like Rebekah in her actions than Rahab. Bronner finds that Tamar functions in the text as a conduit to the line of David.<sup>197</sup>

Eleanor Ferris Beach locates hints of goddess imagery in Tamar’s story which powerfully connects her to Near Eastern mythical motifs. Tamar, or the palm, represents the goddess in ancient art:

[In Tamar we find] the woman or Goddess who brings death to her lovers; father-daughter unions; the birth and conflict of twins; the fertility implications of sheep shearing festivities; and the connection of Tamar’s name (“palm”) to fertility Goddess art.<sup>198</sup>

Focusing on Judah’s signatory items, Beach connects his ring, cord and staff to visual iconography of the moon god Nanna of the ancient Near East. These items correspond to both kingship and pastoral oversight. Discussing this symbolism, Beach finds that Judah’s gift of them to Tamar helps to restore and inaugurate Judah’s power and the eventual monarchy of his line. “Through Tamar’s mediation, Judah’s patriarchal insignia and lineage, which appeared lost, are restored and transformed into the inaugural symbols and ancestor of Israel’s greatest temple builder and administrative justice—Solomon.”<sup>199</sup> For Beach and her modern readers, connecting Tamar to Near Eastern goddess imagery switches the narrative emphasis from her to the dynastic and political male heritage of her later successor—that of Solomon.

Bernhard Luther considers the Judah-Tamar novella a tribal history:

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>198</sup> Beach, 252.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 254.

the author of Genesis 38 ... relates the genesis of the nation up to the birth of the eponyms of the individual tribes; he has no interest in relating the origins of the subdivisions of the tribes. The author of Genesis 38 now wants to relate, additionally, how the parts of the tribes came into being and how the tribal fathers settled in the land of Judah.<sup>200</sup>

For Luther, the narrative's focal points are Judah and Judean authority. Tamar's role as *qedesha* and the function of levirate marriage within the community provide narrative motifs which encourage the larger androcentric action. The story's importance lies in emphasizing Judah's role and his tribe's place in the land of Canaan. Luther considers Tamar's deception a necessary ploy in order for the reader to more fully appreciate Judah. Judah's character highlights the humor in the story. Luther portrays those around Judah as part of the reflected glory that shines back upon the star of this story, Judah. Luther considers Judah an object of cheerful affection: "... the catastrophe has been averted, and, in novelistic terms, ... he now has three sons again. Blessing has finally come to him. So affection for Judah is linked with the laughter."<sup>201</sup>

Another theme associated with Genesis 38 finds Tamar as an anchorless widow. John Rook interprets the Hebrew word *almanah* ("widow") not simply as a woman without a husband but as a woman lacking profound kinship connections. Rook suggests that *almanah* refers to a woman peripheral to the kinship group, without male representation or guardianship. She is "un-embedded," both within her kinship group and within the larger community. Passing from father to husband to related kinship males, a true widow is always someone's responsibility since death does not end the responsibility of a family to their daughter-in-law. Says Rook,

The point to be made, one that is often misunderstood, is that a woman does not become an *almanah* when her husband dies; rather, she is *almanah* when she has no kin tie and is without a male guardian.<sup>202</sup>

By consigning her to her biological father's household, Rook contends that Judah withholds his

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<sup>200</sup> Luther, 117.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>202</sup> John Rook, "Making Widows: the Patriarchal Guardian at Work," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27 (1997), 11.

legally-required guardianship of Tamar. Judah's neglect renders Tamar most fully *'almanah*. In fact, it is Judah who calls Tamar *almanah* (she is to remain a widow [*almanah*] in her father's house until Shelah comes of age, vs. 11). In declining to exercise full guardianship over his daughter-in-law, he doubly shames her: not only is she sent packing to her natal home, but she arrives home degraded to wife and not-wife status. Judah fails to fulfill his responsibility to Tamar, yet he does not fully appreciate that his honor still depends upon her. With the announcement of her pregnancy, Judah experiences public humiliation, suggesting an actual kinship connection between them despite his dismissal of Tamar and her *almanah* (unembedded, without guardianship) designation.<sup>203</sup>

Tamar's initiative releases her from a marginalized existence as an unembedded female, that is, a woman in a family but without a family. Rook concludes that Tamar's trickery is motivated by a desire to honor her dead husband through levirate:

Her purpose is simply to defend the rights of her dead husband's [Er's] household. Her husband, she believes, is deserving of an heir ... her motive is to claim what she believes rightfully belongs to her husband.<sup>204</sup>

Phyllis Bird agrees regarding the selfless nature of Tamar's actions. But Bird feels that Tamar's motivation arises out of a concern for a man but not Er:

Her bold and dangerous plan aims to accomplish that end by the agency of the man that has wronged her. It satisfies both duty and revenge. It is not a husband she wants, but an heir for Judah, and so she approaches the source.<sup>205</sup>

Rook and Bird agree that Tamar's actions are motivated out of a concern for preserving the masculine honor associated with her husband's household (either Er's or Judah's), not her own. This assessment places female agency in a subordinate role to the honor/shame culture of ancient Israel. This argument finds its climax in Judah's stunning role reversal when he claims that

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>205</sup> Phyllis Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine," 123.

Tamar, a woman, is more righteous than he. Yet, by this analysis, we are encouraged to read this as a statement on Judah's honor, not Tamar's. The shame is one that accrues to Judah even though, if we understand Rook's point, Tamar has been living a shameful non-existence—without male guardianship or kin ties—in her father's household. Tamar seeks to redeem herself through trickery yet, according to this interpretation, we are to read this as Tamar's attempt to reclaim her husband's or father-in-law's honor.

Through this type of analysis, we find ourselves looking at Tamar with masculine eyes. Some would argue that this is a prime example of the Bible's androcentrism: stories hopelessly trapped within a masculine power dynamic. Whatever roles women play textually, their value is measured against male prerogatives. As Esther Fuchs argues, their role in the text is to highlight the men:

My contention is that the Bible does not merely project a male consciousness, but that it promotes a male-supremacist social and cognitive system. According to this system, man is a more 'authentic' representative of God because God is male, and God is male because the Bible reflects a masculine construction of the divine.<sup>206</sup>

By interpreting Tamar's bedtrick as an action rendered on behalf of her dead husband or her dismissive father-in-law, we cease to appreciate her contribution to the narrative. Tamar operates within the same honor/shame culture as Judah. It is conceivable that we can read Tamar's deception as her effort to redeem *her own* honor. In fact, the argument that the levirate narratives (Ruth as well as Tamar) demonstrate the wife's effort to redeem the name of her dead husband is rather specious since the biblical evidence is ambiguous on this account:

Another similarity (between Tamar and Ruth) is that in both narratives the theme is to bring forth a son to keep the name of the deceased husband alive ... [yet] no mention whatsoever is made of the continuation of the name of the husband. The fathers replace the sons and do the work of the brothers.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 12.

<sup>207</sup> Van Wolde, 24.

Finally, Esther Marie Menn categorizes Tamar as a royal ancestress. This motif stands alongside other female tropes such as annunciation narratives or barren mother motifs. Unlike the barren mothers (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel), Tamar's fertility is not called into question. She is childless, but not barren. Tamar's predicament consists of a lack of an appropriate sexual partner. Infertility is merely the result of this void. In fact, Tamar is without husband or partner and certainly through much of the narrative has no male protection or oversight. She is left to her own devices in her relationships as well as her childlessness.

Unlike what we find in annunciation narratives, this account bears no divine pronouncement of a special pregnancy or child. Indeed, God's presence finds voice only as a destructive force (in the deaths of Er and Onan) rather than a creative one. Tamar makes no supplication to God for either a husband or child or even for the softening of her father-in-law's heart. Furthermore, divine intervention on Tamar's behalf is absent. For the conflict to move forward, Tamar must act.

Tamar's story exhibits the hallmarks of what Menn categorizes the royal ancestress motif:

- absence of appropriate sexual partner
- secrecy/deception of female initiatives
- motif of mistaken identity
- female initiative leading to older male sexual activity
- no miraculous divine intervention
- foreign ethnic identity of mother
- birth of sons who stand in Davidic line
- absence of contiguous narrative—stories of the sons and the mothers end with the birth narratives<sup>208</sup>

For Menn, Tamar—like all the Davidic ancestresses—forcefully connects the reader to other women in the Bible that lead us to the Davidic image. Tamar acts as an audacious interloper

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<sup>208</sup> Menn, 96-100.

which represents one aspect of her legacy to the Davidic line. Like David to Saul, Tamar's legitimization comes at the cost of another's honor (Judah). And, to succeed, Tamar, like Ruth and Lot's daughters, must resolutely use the people around herself to achieve her ends. As such, says Menn, Tamar foreshadows the youthful David, the slayer of Philistines and the ebullient street dancer:

... the shrewdness and resourcefulness of David's ancestresses, their opportunism and daring, their effective control of history through unorthodox means, also corresponds more generally to the character of David's reign. A usurper and empire builder, David, like his royal ancestresses, placed at a safe narrative distance, succeeds magnificently through the unconventional.<sup>209</sup>

Tamar is not portrayed as an agent of patriarchal imperatives or as an icon of misplaced goddess imagery. The independent initiative that fuels her duplicitous bedtrick renders her an example of courage, "a symbol of self-directed, destiny-changing action."<sup>210</sup> Placing Tamar among the pantheon of royal ancestresses lifts her from her role of redeeming Judah or her dead husband. According to Menn, we anticipate David through her cunning and resourcefulness. David now is not just a king and a husband and father—he is also a trickster, a deceiver and a sexual manipulator. We more fully comprehend the unorthodox and complex nature of David's kingship if we appreciate the stories of his ancestresses:

There may also be a hint at the morally problematic quality of kingship itself in [Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth's] birth narratives. In the three narratives, human women take the initiative reserved for God in the birth narratives involving the barren wife motif, and this may thematically correspond to the king's usurpation of divine leadership, expressed in some strands of the tradition (1 Samuel 8). The entirely human nature of events leading to the emergence of the royal lineage may therefore implicitly comment on the human aspect of Israelite kingship.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Menn, 102-103.

<sup>210</sup> Bronner, 40.

<sup>211</sup> Menn, note 206, 103.

We valorize Tamar's duplicity because we value its role in David's life. Such analysis links her metaphorically and symbolically with her later ancestor, David, the audacious, individualistic usurper of the throne. However, the initiative and individuality of Tamar gets lost in the interpretive imperative to get to David. This analytical perspective values Tamar for what she can tell us about David or Judah. Tamar's distinctive role as woman or daughter or wife or widow is overshadowed as she becomes thematically associated with David or kingship in general. Rook and Bird overlook Tamar's initiative as something germane to Tamar the woman. Her initiative becomes simply a tool towards our understanding of the men.

Menn's presentation of the royal ancestress motif helps to organize and ameliorate tensions around David's later, less attractive qualities (his foreign ancestry, his trickster status, his interloper activities). In this, she provides a very useful heuristic for understanding how these opportunistic women serve the larger aims of the text. However, what Menn's analysis does not do is necessarily help us to see what the women actually do—how this motif informs and enriches our understanding of women. That is, does the Bible look favorably upon, to borrow Menn's phrase, unorthodox, unconventional women who do God's work (ie., achieving pregnancy against all odds)? As she rightfully points out, death surrounds Tamar (as well as Lot's daughters, Ruth and Bathsheba). There is a motif for that—the woman who brings death. Do we need to reconcile that against Menn's Davidic reading? Or are these our only two choices for problematic women—either read them as Davidic ancestresses (good) or harbingers of death and destruction (bad)? Can problematic women (that is, women who employ deceptions like the bedtrick) only be valorized by association with male prerogatives and male stories? We will keep these questions in mind as we turn to Ruth and Bathsheba.

### 3.5 RUTH

The book of Ruth elicits an expansive array of interpretations. As we just saw, Menn again counts Ruth as one of the royal ancestresses who redeems the Davidic line and is herself a precursor of David through her bold captivation of Boaz.<sup>212</sup> In later Jewish tradition, Ruth is emblematic of *chesed*, that loving kindness thematically linked to the festival of Shavuot and the giving of the Torah. Furthermore, Ruth's return to Bethlehem with Naomi relates to concepts of *beit lechem* ("House of Bread," or metaphorically, a place of sustenance and sufficiency) or meeting the needs of the widow, the orphan and the stranger.<sup>213</sup> Andre LaCocque sees in Ruth the redemption of the foreign woman or the marginalized figure who personifies the image of Israel herself, that landless, captive, hopeless people in a foreign land.<sup>214</sup> For Mieke Bal, to read Ruth is to enter into the biblical tension between law and legitimacy, locating in Ruth a symbolic discussion between the covenantal promises of possession of the land (*go'el*) and a thematized future (levirate).<sup>215</sup> Similarly, Adele Berlin proposes that in Ruth the ancient covenant promises of land and redemption of the people are realized: she embodies exile and return, family and people, culminating in the restoration of the line of David.<sup>216</sup>

The story of Ruth stands as a piece of narrative artistry, complete in four short chapters, in a period of timeless antiquity.<sup>217</sup> Elimelech, his wife Naomi and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion leave Israel for Moab due to famine in the land. These men—Elimelech and his sons

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<sup>212</sup> Menn, 96-100.

<sup>213</sup> Judith A. Kates, "Women at the Center: Ruth and Shavuot," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, ed. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 189.

<sup>214</sup> LaCocque, 55ff.

<sup>215</sup> Bal, *Lethal Love*, 80-81.

<sup>216</sup> Adele Berlin, "Ruth and the continuity of Israel," 258-259.

<sup>217</sup> The literary convention, "Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled..." (Ruth 1.1), alerts the reader to the fact that this is not historical in the modern sense of the word.

Mahlon and Chilion—all die in Moab. The sons in fact have been married to Moabite women for ten years without issue, suggesting their sickly or infertile states. Upon the men's passing, Naomi and her daughter-in-laws leave Moab for Bethlehem, a place of nourishment and safety ("House of Bread"). Naomi entreats the daughters-in-law to return to Moab as she can provide them neither economic support nor the promise of future sons to marry. Orpah reluctantly decides to return to her mother's house (*bet em*). Afterwards, comes Ruth's moving "wherever you go, I will go" speech (Ruth 1.16-18) where she promises to adopt Naomi's god, Naomi's people and even to die with Naomi. In fact her pledge concludes that only death should part them: she will continue to cleave (*davqa*) to Naomi, even unto death.

Ruth and Naomi, two indigent women, settle in Bethlehem. Boaz, a wealthy kinsman of the dead Elimelech, takes pity on the women and allows Ruth to glean after his reapers. He thanks Ruth for her many kindnesses to his relative, Naomi, saying, "The LORD recompense your work, and a full reward be given to you of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings (*kanaf*) you have come to trust" (2.12). When Naomi sees the abundance of goods that Ruth brings home, she realizes that Boaz has taken special care of Ruth. Says Naomi, "Blessed [be] he of the LORD, who has not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead" (2.20).

Noami encourages Ruth to adorn herself and head down to the threshing floor, a place of revelry in the aftermath of the barley harvest. But, instructs Naomi, "... do not make yourself known to the man, until he is done eating and drinking. And it shall be, when he lies down, that you will see the place where he shall lie, and thou shall go in, and uncover his feet, and lay yourself down; and he will tell you what to do" (3:3b-4). All this she does and when the drunken Boaz ("his heart was merry," 3:7) finds her at his feet, Ruth does not wait for him to instruct her. Rather, she speaks forthrightly, using the same wing metaphor that Boaz first applied to his care

for her: " I [am] Ruth your handmaid: therefore spread your skirt (*kanaf*) over your handmaid; for you [are] a near kinsman" (3:9). In the morning, she is sent away full ("Do not go empty to your mother-in-law," says Boaz; 3:17), a heavily weighted impression that she might be carrying more than an apron full of barley home from her threshing-floor encounter. Amy-Jill Levine remarks that the threshing floor is associated with sexual activity.<sup>218</sup> Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer recognizes the rampant ambiguity of the threshing floor scene. She notes that chapter 3 of Ruth is rich in double entendre, including the use of the term *eshet chayil*, often translated "a worthy woman," but which also carries overtones meaning "procreative power," further enhancing the suggestion of possible sexual congress between Ruth and Boaz.<sup>219</sup> Whether Ruth and Boaz completed a sexual act or not, the point is that the threshing floor scene changes the nature of the relationship between Ruth and Boaz, one of the aspects of the bedtrick. He is clearly taken with her offer, and by implication, Ruth herself ("And he said, 'May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; you have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich,'" Ruth. 3:10). Ruth's boldness has touched him and Boaz responds boldly as well.

Boaz serves next as the public *go'el*, redeeming the economic rights to the two women in the marketplace of Bethlehem. Through this, we gain some insight into the legal wranglings around ancient inheritance and property rights and the process of *halitzah*, especially in the absence of a male heir. But clearly, these proceedings are not normative since the *go'el* usually

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<sup>218</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, "Ruth," Carol Ann Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, ed., *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 88.

<sup>219</sup> Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, "Ruth," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vs. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 930.

is not required to serve as *yabum* as well, which is what we see Boaz arguing for at the marketplace.<sup>220</sup>

Boaz is recognized as free to contract marriage with her and take over a small parcel of land that remains in Elimelech's name. Ruth bears a son, Obed, named by the women of the town (4.17). She is praised by these same townswomen:

And the women said to Naomi, Blessed [be] the LORD, who has not left you this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel. And he shall be to you a restorer of life, and a nourisher of your old age: for your daughter in law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him (4.14-15).

Ruth's transformation transcends simple gender categories.<sup>221</sup> She assertively interacts with Boaz on the threshing floor, not a place for decent women. She proposes a relationship to him whereas the biblical model is one of men pursuing women (Jacob and Rachel, for example). She is later proclaimed better than seven sons. This acclamation challenges biblical notions of sonship, which represent the fullness of life and household success. In the book of Ruth, Naomi claims that she is bitter and empty in part because no more sons will come forth from her, yet Ruth 4 reads, "Praise to you Naomi, a son is born..." then is followed by the "better than seven sons" claim. One might read this wording as signifying *yes, at last, Naomi has another son, but what she has in this daughter surpasses seven of those.*

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<sup>220</sup> Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 251-252.

<sup>221</sup> Van Wolde, 434.

### 3.5.1 Ruth: Interpretation

Some have argued that this text celebrates the life and friendship of two poor women.<sup>222</sup> The emphasis in this perspective is on the multitudinous yet anonymous face of Israel's poor and not necessarily Ruth and Naomi's status as women.<sup>223</sup> Yet Richard Bauckham claims that the importance of female narratives like Ruth's is less the gender of Ruth than is the gendered perspective of these works. That is, socially-conscious narratives like Ruth's clearly offer a remarkable view on life as a poor family (which happens to be comprised of women) in Israelite culture and society.<sup>224</sup>

In a different vein, Phyllis Tribble argues for the core of Ruth as love (*'ahavah*), a love which redeems both Naomi and Ruth. Closely reading Ann Ulanov's psycho-social analysis of Ruth in *The Female Ancestors of Christ* (1993), Tribble writes of the transcendent commitment between Ruth and Naomi that focuses on love as the redemptive clue to this story: "Ruth's love heals Naomi's bitterness... It is the love that redeems... Ruth embodies redemptive power."<sup>225</sup>

Harold Fisch finds Ruth's story offers biblical proof for the messianic line in general and the ascendancy of the house of David in particular.<sup>226</sup> Readers are encouraged to see important clues to the ageless character of the Davidic cycle. For Fisch, this structural analysis provides for the recovery of the covenant story:

... the function of the story of Ruth is to "redeem" the previous episodes of the corpus... "Redemption" is the *Leitmotif* of the work... The Ruth-Boaz story is the means of

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<sup>222</sup> Ruth Anna Putnam, "Friendship," in *Reading Ruth*, 44.

<sup>223</sup> Berlin, 255-256.

<sup>224</sup> Bauckman, 3-4; Carol Meyers, "Returning home: Ruth 1.8 and the gendering of the Book of Ruth," in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 89, 114.

<sup>225</sup> Phyllis Tribble, "Ruth: a Text in Therapy," *Union Seminary Quarterly* 51, no. 3-4: 38, 39.

<sup>226</sup> Fisch, 433.

“redeeming” the entire corpus... Ruth establishes a new kind of language for understanding what has gone before, so that a full exegesis of the stories of Lot and Judah requires reference to the story of Ruth and conversely, the story of Ruth looks back to these earlier paradigms and forward to what is to be disclosed in the story of the house of David. This is the method of “intertextuality.” It is also, we may add, a way of talking about salvation-history.<sup>227</sup>

Jack Sasson finds in Ruth powerful elements evocative of folklorist Vladimir Propp’s heroic morphology. In this system, Ruth serves as the true hero, Boaz is the “magical agent,” Obed is the *go’el* and Naomi becomes the beneficiary of Ruth’s activities since she serves in the tale as Ruth’s encourager and ultimately, her mentor.<sup>228</sup> While arguing against levirate obligation as the core focus of the narrative (“this writer [Sasson] finds little satisfaction in [such] arguments”<sup>229</sup>), Sasson identifies a curious twist to the book of Ruth:

... we might venture to explain why Ruth, unique in Biblical literature, actually *ends* rather than begins with a genealogy: From a Proppian perspective, *the genealogy of 4.18-22 actually begins the tale of Obed, rather than ends that of Boaz!*<sup>230</sup>

In this exceptional analysis, Sasson concludes that Ruth’s focal point is to begin the Davidic cycle, starting with the birth narrative of Obed, rather than with the saving character of Ruth. He challenges his readers to consider the fact that we can read this another way: not as the gradual unfolding of salvation history, but as the genealogy of the House of David, itself an embedded heroic motif.

Both Fisch and Sasson look forward textually from Ruth either to David (Fisch) or Obed (Sasson). While Fisch does deal at length with the women in Genesis 19 and 38 as well as Ruth, gender is not his focus. Instead, he emphasizes the uncovering of salvation-history. The

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 435, 436.

<sup>228</sup> Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: a New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 201.

<sup>229</sup> Sasson, 129.

<sup>230</sup> Sasson, 213 (emphasis in original).

covenantal promises made to Abraham and the emergence of the Davidic dynasty provides the analytical center of the Ruth story. This examination places men center stage, demonstrating their roles as conversational participants with YHWH and conduits for God's special purposes.<sup>231</sup> Fisch reproduces the gender power dynamic of the text without necessarily critiquing these issues, especially in light of a book named after a woman. His concentration never strays from the external or cultic elements of Israelite religion, most clearly personified in the covenant promises made not to Sarah, but to Abraham. There is no interpretive focus on women of ingenuity and initiative except when those traits work to bring us to greater understanding of the men in the stories.

For his part, Sasson concentrates on the heroic genealogy and the birth of Obed which places the Ruth narrative in the larger Davidic corpus. Like Fisch, Sasson hardly notices the gendered elements of this cycle. That these are stories where women and female concerns predominate (such as male guardianship and economic security through the birth of sons) seems secondary. Sasson claims that Ruth serves as a hero in her own narrative, even though he argues that the focus and purpose is to highlight the extraordinary coming of the Davidic kingdom via Obed.

Sasson argues for a birth of the hero motif whereby the new hero (in this case, Obed) inaugurates a new family line that accomplishes great and remarkable things.<sup>232</sup> However well that explanation might enlighten the ending of Ruth (which some scholars feel is a later addition<sup>233</sup>), it does not respect the book of as a piece of Israelite storytelling about a woman. Sasson's categorizing of the Ruth narrative constricts its particularity while highlighting its

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<sup>231</sup> Day, 123.

<sup>232</sup> Sasson, 213.

<sup>233</sup> Edward F. Campbell, Jr., "Ruth," *The Anchor Bible 7* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 172.

universality. For example, Sasson does not necessarily elucidate anything particular about Ruth as a daughter, a foreigner or a wife. Ruth's initiative, as with so many others, is tied to larger textual aims (in this case, alerting readers that this is a hero narrative where Obed plays the part of the champion). We can derive no information about Ruth's motivation or the role of the bedtrick from such analysis since it depends upon viewing Ruth as of necessary utility for arriving at Obed.

As has already been stated, the attractiveness of the Ruth narrative lies in its ability to stand up to numerous interpretive strategies. Susan Reimer Torn suggests that Ruth incorporates "a highly charged, transformative field, encompassing a moral paradox of extremes."<sup>234</sup> While its structure encompasses folklore, liturgical applications, theological dynamism and dynastic aspirations, it will suffer as well the view that Ruth offers a new and dynamic vision of women.

However, reducing Ruth to symbols such as the covenantal promises of land, fertility and greatness enhances our understanding of Israel as a people and an emerging nation but offers little with respect to the gendered elements of her narrative. She returns to "the house of bread" (*bet lechem*); she achieves fertility (Obed); and through her, Israel realizes greatness (House of David). However, what of Ruth's initiative? How best are we to read those in the context of the narrative and not with reflection upon the dynastic or epic aims of Israel? Clearly those items are not in evidence in the text. Nor again is reference to prayer, public worship or sacrifice or YHWH.

The argument for reading the Ruth narrative as a story about Ruth depends upon viewing her in the context of her relationships in the story. She is a younger female who is emotionally, financially and physically dependent upon an older maternal figure for more than just

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<sup>234</sup> Susan Reimer Torn, "Ruth Reconsidered," in *Reading Ruth*, 337.

sustenance—that is to say, she is a daughter. In choosing Naomi and, by extension, rejecting Moab, we see Ruth's metaphoric rejection of her lineage (descended from a people viewed as incestuous) and her elevation as a model of daughterhood. She further chooses Boaz and in this, evokes that individuation whereby “her actions show her as a woman pursuing the wholeness of life.”<sup>235</sup> When the female chorus of Bethlehem claims, “she is better to you than seven sons,” we find a symbolism replete with the richness of devoted love, not unlike that between a mother and child, as well as a biblical image of maternal fecundity and richness. Ruth's resourcefulness, tied to an intimate relationship with her mother-in-law, tells us much about Ruth the daughter and the survivor that is cloaked by the mask of epic narrative or dynastic inference that Fisch and Sasson would argue for.

### 3.6 BATHSHEBA

To this point, many of the scholars we have examined see textual relationship between Tamar and Ruth as well as Lot's daughters. None mention Bathsheba in that context. However, reading Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth as related stories depends upon interpreting their actions in light of Israel's institutional, civic or dynastic aims. If one chooses to leave that paradigm behind, one can read these stories in order to tease out the gender clues within—that is, what is it that they do that only women in the Bible seem to do? And, do those actions relate their story to other stories in the Bible? And, finding these relationships, what conclusions might

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<sup>235</sup> Phyllis Trible, “Ruth: a Text in Therapy”: 37.

we draw from them? How well Bathsheba's story fits with the other three will depend on how successful we are in leaving those masculine paradigms behind.

The Bathsheba story follows a simple plot line. In 2 Samuel 11, an indolent King David lounges at home alone while his troops are busy waging war (vs.1). From across the roof, he spies a beautiful woman at her bath (we learn in vs. 4 that this was a bath of ritual purification for Bathsheba). Inquiries are made; she is identified as the daughter of Eliam, wife of Uriah the Hittite. David notifies her of his interest—"David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him..." 2 Sam. 11.4)—and they sleep together; she returns home at some unspecified time. In a nice parallel to David's initial call to her, in vs. 5 she, too, sends a simple message: "I am pregnant."

David acts quickly. He recalls Uriah from the field, ostensibly to see how the battle goes. In vs. 8, David encourages Uriah to go home and relax ("wash your feet," says David, a euphemism for intimate relations). But Uriah, in a state of military readiness, stays his course, sleeping at the palace rather than risking a visit to Bathsheba and possible transgression of his holy war vows. David tries to get Uriah drunk to again encourage his visit to Bathsheba and still, Uriah remains faithful to his vow.

Exasperated, David sends word to his field commander Joab, ironically "by the hand of Uriah" himself (vs. 14), to place the Hittite in the direct line of fire. Joab positions Uriah in a "place where he knew there were valiant warriors" (vs. 16). Not surprisingly, Uriah is killed in the line of duty. Bathsheba ritually mourns, then she is recalled to the palace and she and David are married and their son is born. This child though suffers illness and dies as a result of his illicit conception, causing David tremendous grief and mourning. In comforting Bathsheba,

David again impregnates her and this second child is called Solomon because “the Lord loved him” (12.24).

Bathsheba next appears prior to David’s death. She and the prophet Nathan conspire in 1 Kings 1 to ensure Solomon’s ascendancy by recalling a heretofore unknown promise to place her son on the throne (1 Kings 1). And in 1 Kings 2, she plays an ambiguous role in the death of Adonijah. At Adonijah’s request, Bathsheba asks her son, now King Solomon, for the rights to the dead king’s concubine, Abishag. Adonijah’s request is viewed as an indirect threat to Solomon’s power and Adonijah is killed as a potential usurper. Like the motivation behind her revealing bath, how cognizant Bathsheba is of the outcome in making this request remains to be seen although 1 Kings 2 is replete with Solomon’s purges of those who represent a direct threat to his kingship.

### **3.6.1 Bathsheba: Interpretation**

Reading the 1 Kings account, where Bathsheba seems to manipulate the weak and dying David, we see Bathsheba as a resourceful wife and mother. Yet it is her sexual congress with David that sets the stage for her to act in the imperial venue. Once wed to David, Bathsheba has the means through which to expand upon her role as an actor within the text. However, before all those things, the story begins with her unconventional introduction to David.

One of the standard characterizations is offered by R. N. Whybray, who writes that Bathsheba is a “good-natured, rather stupid woman who was a natural prey both to more passionate and cleverer men.”<sup>236</sup> The Bible does not share why Bathsheba was openly bathing

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<sup>236</sup>Whybray, *The Succession Narrative*, 40.

within clear view of the palace (as opposed to some other location), only that she was.<sup>237</sup> Whybray feels justified in patronizing Bathsheba, gently scolding her for her unwitting role in her sluggish king's voyeurism. Her innocent bath eventually results in the death of her husband, a valiant warrior, her infant son and later, a bloody succession that does not end until all of Solomon's brothers and competitors are either dead or vanquished.

Bathsheba also plays the innocuous ewe lamb in Nathan's moral parable on David's transgression (2 Samuel 12). Daniel Boyarin argues that this powerful pastoral metaphor is incredibly evocative for the pastoral milieu of its time: "the story ... performs as narrative its ideological and cultural function of female subjugation... The biblical text encodes a very vivid picture of an ideal marriage as 'like the love of a shepherd for his only ewe-lamb.'"<sup>238</sup> The woman, in need of guidance and direction, cannot be faulted for her mistakes since it is the shepherd who must gently guide and direct. Like the ewe lamb, Bathsheba is small and innocent; she is also somewhat benighted and a tad dim-witted when it comes to the wiles of men.

Female nakedness, says Michael Satlow, represents a robust challenge to male fortitude rather than a moral reflection upon the woman herself. Since a female cannot be blamed for failing to realize the consequences of her actions, it is incumbent upon men to safeguard female propriety. Patriarchal societies must reinforce female modesty less to protect women and more so that men will not lose control. Speaking of the later rabbinic culture, Satlow argues:

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<sup>237</sup> Archaeological evidence for public baths is not found in Israel until the second century BCE. At this point (the time that the action of 2 Samuel and 1 Kings purports to occur, roughly 1100-1000 BCE), the nature of ritual immersion is not established by the Bible. Judith Baskin notes that the word *miqveh* does not even appear in the Bible; see Judith Baskin, "Miqveh," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vs. 9 (Detroit: Macmillan, 2005), 6046; King and Stager, 69-71.

<sup>238</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 151, 152-3.

Female nakedness is understood by rabbis entirely within a context of female modesty or propriety before men ... The rabbis frequently exhort (rather than prohibit outright with a legal ruling) men not to look at women in any state of dress or undress for fear that they will be led into sexual misconduct.<sup>239</sup>

Satlow further notes that such male sexual misconduct is not so much a matter of sexual sin as it is a loss of self-control, a virtue of great value.<sup>240</sup> Thus, Bathsheba's bath highlights David's lack of discipline rather than offering any sort of insight into the motivations or machinations of Bathsheba herself.

As with the ewe lamb metaphor, nakedness indicates a woman's vulnerability, her need for guidance, direction and perhaps, protection.<sup>241</sup> Such vulnerability could point to a lack of honor or respectability but again, without proper guidance, no more could be expected from a woman. Read in this context, the transgression lies with David, who fails to recognize the inherent defenselessness of Bathsheba's nakedness. David neglects to preserve Bathsheba's modesty and/or virtue and acts on a moment of stolen voyeurism.

A third motif associated with Bathsheba is the woman who brings death, a distinction noted by both Joseph Blenkinsopp and David Gunn.<sup>242</sup> Following designs from myth and legend, Blenkinsopp and Gunn tie Bathsheba to the agent of death, a common figure in ancient literature. Examples of this motif include Briseus and Achilles, Helen and Hector, and Aphrodite and Narcissus, to name a few.

Beginning with Eve, through whom transgression enters the Garden, the Hebrew Bible is replete with women associated with death and destruction—Delilah and Samson, Rizpah and the

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<sup>239</sup>Michael L. Satlow, "Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 3 (1997): 440-441.

<sup>240</sup>*Ibid.*, note 44, 441.

<sup>241</sup>*Ibid.*, 451.

<sup>242</sup>Blenkinsopp, 52-56; Gunn, "Traditional Composition": 222-223.

death of Ishbosheth and Abner, Tamar, David's daughter Tamar (2 Sam. 13) and the death of Amnon.<sup>243</sup> Because of Bathsheba, her husband Uriah and her unnamed infant die and later, Adonijah as well. She is an agent of chaos, a force of destruction rather than domestic tranquility, political harmony or cosmic order.

On her status as a woman who brings death, I agree with Blenkinsopp and Gunn. Given the number of male deaths when Bathsheba is around, she clearly signifies a problematic character. And in this we find resonance with our other females under consideration. In Genesis 19, we find many men (and women) dying while Lot and his daughters survive. Tamar also can be considered in this light since two husbands die while married to her. While Ruth bears no direct responsibility for her husband's death, her story begins with the death of three men—her father-in-law as well as her husband and his brother. Reinhartz picks up on this death trope through her argument on named and unnamed women in the Davidic cycle. She argues that the contrast between the named wives of David and the unnamed wives and concubines of Solomon allows us to see the fruitfulness of David's kingship in contrast to Solomon's folly, which eventually leads to the destruction of the kingdom. Thus, naming allows us to see David's successes more clearly; anonymity marks the destructive nature of Solomon's kingship.<sup>244</sup>

One feminist reading of Bathsheba turns her from an agent of chaos into a site of victimization. Cheryl Exum, like Satlow, views David as the more responsible member of the relationship. However, Exum locates in Bathsheba's story an account of forcible sexual assault. This violation is effected not only by David, but indeed, by all later writers, redactors and commentators who perpetrate this offense by continuing her literary victimization in the context of the Davidic material:

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<sup>243</sup>Gunn, "Traditional Composition": 223.

<sup>244</sup>Reinhartz, 48-55.

The rape of Bathsheba is something that takes place not so much in the story as by means of the story. When I refer to ‘the rape of Bathsheba’ in what follows, I use it as a metaphor to describe Bathsheba’s treatment at the hands of the androcentric biblical narrator, whose violation of her character consists both in depriving her of voice and in portraying her in an ambiguous light that leaves her vulnerable, not simply to assault by characters in the story but also by later commentators of this story<sup>245</sup>

For Exum, Bathsheba is a function of the Davidic redactor's misogyny whose use for Bathsheba is limited to highlighting the House of David. Bathsheba’s silence and ambiguous motivations leave her prey to all manner of editorial flights of fancy. Without voice, claims Exum, Bathsheba’s void is filled by myriad masculine ploys.

One consequence of Exum’s interpretation is that Bathsheba’s bath represents an example of David’s eminent dominion over all his subjects, including women, rather than anything to do with Bathsheba’s motivations or ingenuity. Furthermore, Bathsheba’s silence in the text is deafening witness to all the survivors of those who treat sex as a form of power or possession. And the issue of Bathsheba’s naïve or youthful culpability allows commentators to further sully her character in a manner that Exum views as a violation.

The stridency of Exum’s invective against Bathsheba’s biblical ambiguity leaves little room for alternative interpretations. In a chapter entitled, “Raped by the Pen,” Exum argues that not only is Bathsheba unloved by David but she suffers a physical assault at his hands since her subjectivity is silenced in the 2 Samuel 11 account.<sup>246</sup> Exum is speaking directly to commentators like H.W. Herzberg and George Nicol who leave open the possibility that

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<sup>245</sup>Exum, 171.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 175.

Bathsheba purposely bathed knowing that David was watching from his rooftop or else, at the very least, she is guilty of “contributory neglect.”<sup>247</sup> Exum writes:

The narrator who disrobes Bathsheba and depicts her as the object of David’s lust is the real perpetrator of the crime against Bathsheba, and commentators like Hertzberg, who imply Bathsheba may have desired the king’s attentions, perpetuate this crime.<sup>248</sup>

It remains unclear whether Bathsheba’s initial relations with David were consensual or coerced; how one reads that passage will determine whether one views her as Whybray’s ewe lamb or as Exum’s unloved rape victim. However, Exum’s charge that Bathsheba is silenced by the text fails to resonate. True, she is silent as to the nature of her initial encounter with David so there remains latitude to construe this as a forcible sexual encounter. However, unlike other rape victims in the Bible, whom we never hear from again, Bathsheba does not remain textually silent.<sup>249</sup> In fact, she seems to find her voice on behalf of her son and is shown conspiring on his behalf with the prophet Nathan.

Bathsheba’s story does contain significant voids and silences. For example, it is unclear if her late afternoon bath is an intentional seduction by Bathsheba or a rape by David. In mourning Uriah, we are not sure if Bathsheba is just going through the motions until she is free to pursue David or if she is actually bereft and, if so, if she really wants to marry the king. The story of her request to King Solomon on behalf of his half-brother Adonijah seems intentionally vague regarding what Bathsheba knew might be a consequence of her request. Exum sees ambiguity in Bathsheba’s story only as a negative, an opportunity for misogynistic fantasies. To

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<sup>247</sup> W.H. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*; The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 309-310; Nicol, 360.

<sup>248</sup> Exum, 174.

<sup>249</sup> Other biblical rapes include the unnamed concubine of Judges 19 (who never speaks); Tamar and Ammon (2 Sam. 13); and the interaction between Dinah and Shechem, where the issue of consent is somewhat unclear (Genesis 34).

my way of thinking, Bathsheba's ambiguity opens the door to a multitude of ideas, not all of which necessarily reproduce patriarchal power arrangements. By looking at Bathsheba alongside Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth, I am stepping within Bathsheba's ambiguity but also not confining myself to established notions of how to read Bathsheba's story.

In contrast to Exum, Randall Bailey offers a counter argument with political overtones. In analyzing the Hebrew of the David-Bathsheba affair, Bailey asserts that Bathsheba responds to David's invitation in full knowledge of herself and her authority.<sup>250</sup> His language analysis demonstrates that the use of the verb *shelach* (to send) is used in conjunction with female power and influence—Rahab in Joshua 2:21; Deborah in Judges 4:6; Delilah in Judges 16:18; and Jezebel in 1 Kings 19:2. Bailey finds that this verb is also used by Bathsheba when she sends word to King David that she is pregnant (2 Sam. 11:5). Concludes Bailey, "Thus Bathsheba is placed within a highly select number of powerful and/or devious women through the use of this verb ... [it] raises the possibility that this unit ... is one of political importance in which a woman is the prime mover."<sup>251</sup> Bailey challenges the order of events in the text and places the David-Bathsheba affair *after* the Absalom revolt of 2 Samuel 15.31.<sup>252</sup> Bailey contends that Bathsheba is the granddaughter of Ahithophel, daughter of Eliam and therefore, from a prominent political family. For Bailey, Bathsheba's bath then becomes a bedtrick with the intent to lure the king into a politically advantageous alliance not only for Bathsheba, but for her family as a whole. David's alliance with her is one of political importance, especially in light of Ahithophel's treasonous defection to Absalom. Bailey concludes:

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<sup>250</sup>Randall Bailey, *David in Love and War: the Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12*. JSOT Sup 75 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 86.

<sup>251</sup>Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 90.

... perhaps we should rethink whether this unit is a narrative primarily concerned with “sexual lust gone awry” or rather with a story of political intrigue in which sex becomes a tool of politics. In other words, is this not really a story of “political marriage”?<sup>253</sup>

Given such a notion, Bathsheba is now a politically motivated woman, trying to find a means to reestablish her disgraced family. The bath becomes a public act intended to renegotiate the power differential on behalf of the stigmatized house of Ahithophel.

On the other extreme, George Nicol contends that Bathsheba is without political agenda. For Nicol, Bathsheba is simply a resourceful, cunning female who manipulates the situation to her advantage. Nicol celebrates the rampant ambiguity present in Bathsheba's actions, noting, “Although the presentation of the character may be ambiguous, and that ambiguity ultimately precludes dogmatic solutions, once it has been noted it may be necessary to attempt to press beyond it and to consider which of the possible interpretations is to be preferred.”<sup>254</sup>

In pressing beyond, Nicol clearly identifies Bathsheba as a self-conscious, intentional woman, wife and mother. In contrast to Exum's characterization, Nicol considers Bathsheba a woman of action, especially in light of her machinations on behalf of Solomon. Concludes Nicol:

She appears to be depicted as a resourceful woman rather than one who is used, and the resourcefulness which she clearly displays in 1 Kings weighs the balance in favour of an interpretation of character which pays due attention to her as a clever woman, sufficiently calculating to see every political opportunity and resourceful enough to bring each opportunity to fruition.<sup>255</sup>

By pushing the ambiguity in the Bathsheba stories, Nicols argues for Bathsheba's more robust characterization based upon motifs like the bedtrick and her later handling of David in

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<sup>253</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>254</sup>Nicol, 88.

<sup>255</sup>Ibid., 363.

Solomon's ascendancy. That ambiguity also allows Nicol to conclude that neither David nor Bathsheba come out particularly well in the story.<sup>256</sup> Unlike the Bathsheba of many other commentators, Nicol's Bathsheba is free from outside political or social accretions and can be viewed more responsibly as a self-conscious agent of action than as any sort of political pawn or sexual temptress than has previously been posited. However, Nicol fails to consider that Bathsheba, as David's subject, could hardly refuse his offer. Her response, like Dinah's or the unnamed concubine in Judges 19, is not recorded. Perhaps she is a clever, resourceful woman—but perhaps Bathsheba's later ingenuity came as a result of her forced encounter with David, not prior to it. The text will clearly allow both interpretations but unlike Exum's charge against ambiguity, is loathe to settle on one or the other.

While Bathsheba cannot be read under the rubric of levirate or dynastic aims, her story carries many of the same motifs of Lot's daughters, Tamar and Ruth. For instance, she is a vulnerable woman. Her husband is not only away at war but he is a foreigner, a Hittite. There is a scene of possible sexual trickery and a later scene of outright manipulation fueled by ambition for her son.

All four of these stories lack over God information or any of the signs of the religious cult of the time—sacrifice, prayer or even an annunciation-type visit such as we see in Sarah's or Hannah's stories. We are not always privy to the interior motivations behind their actions. Individual initiative and female inventiveness in this context seems to be for their own ends and not for the good of any community or cultic purposes. Thus, while Bathsheba may be a cunning, resourceful woman, the question becomes, to or for what end? Is her possible seduction of the king fueled by personal ambition? Or, finding herself pregnant, does she decide to make the best

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<sup>256</sup>George G. Nicol, "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: some Observations on Ambiguity in the Biblical Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 73 (1997): 53.

of it? Is that the true measure of a resourceful woman? Nicol fails to answer these but perhaps we can continue to ask what we might make of resourceful women in the Bible and suggest what sorts of claims we might make for this motif.

### 3.7 THE WOMAN IN THE TEXT

These narratives have been dominated by interpretive concerns not their own, much like the female characters themselves. Interpretations situate these women in service to any number of purposes that ultimately fail to unearth anything new about the *women* in the stories. For the most part, we read them as fulfilling the national or dynastic aspirations of Israel rather than any ends of their own. They distinguish themselves in important ways: as signifiers of Israel the underdog who makes good, or the redacted valorization of the Davidic line through their efforts, or even the aegis of God working to achieve His ends for the chosen people (even though God fails to appreciably appear in any of their stories). And, while that hermeneutic might be useful and appropriate, it fails to fully inform our reading of these as female narratives. These are stories where women play substantial roles. Yet, in many of the standard interpretations we have considered, the women remain mere literary devices, pointing the way to the larger dynastic or epic aims of the text rather than offering anything noteworthy as gendered texts. Caroline Walker Bynum argues that scholars must be suspicious of the rampant and unexamined androcentrism that looks *at* women, finding them in every way (socially, economically, politically and sexually) liminal, or marginal, with respect to men. Bynum suggests that looking at women from the perspective of the men in the text assumes an unvoiced symmetry where women are in some sense equivalent to men, desiring the same ends or the same goals but in

some sort of corollary or inversely gendered way. There exists a tacit assumption that female inferiors are exact inversions of their male superiors: “If the superior in society generate images of lowliness in liminality, the inferior will generate images of power.”<sup>257</sup>

For Bynum, gender does not operate that way. True gender symbols are not the mirror-image of one another or examples of women existing in inverse correspondence to men. Truly gendered texts allow us to see *with* women, rather than looking *at* them as near-men or inverse-men.<sup>258</sup> When scholars stand *with* women textually, rather than viewing them from the standpoint of their utility to larger external aims, they find not symmetry or correlation but uniqueness. Reading and understanding the women in the stories this way enhances our understanding of female social drama rather than reinforcing our appreciation of male ones.<sup>259</sup>

These four stories defy easy interpretive categorization as simply narratives of Davidic ancestresses or levirate concerns. In situating the bedtrick as a site of sexual politics at the center of these narratives, I find symmetry and intertextual links among the four stories. We can better grasp the gendered components within these stories by viewing female intrigue as the central plot device to these narratives rather than the birth of a son. These incidents of sexual intrigue represent an intensely gendered power struggle, undertaken and achieved in ways that overturn the established power hegemonies in the text.

But what does that mean? How might we interpret these sexual politics beyond reductive female sex-for-power arguments? We need to progress outside of established arguments and even beyond standard biblical criticism itself. These four stories, when not read in levirate or dynastic contexts, contain similar motifs including Doniger’s bedtrick. I find other approaches

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<sup>257</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 33.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

prove useful in helping us to read and interpret these four stories together. Folkloric methodologies offer other avenues for organizing stories and tales. Structural methodologies from folklore group narratives with female characters together in dynamic ways that emphasize and categorize women of enterprise and independence. It is to that approach that we now turn in order to make a more definitive argument for a female heroic motif in the Hebrew Bible.

## **4.0            DEFINING THE FEMALE HERO**

### **4.1        THE WOMAN IN THE TEXT**

Through this analysis, we see how standard biblical interpretations often reproduce hegemonic discussions of power already encoded in the text. In this analysis, biblical women metaphorically or historically communicate much about Israel. For instance, mothers are salvific in their fecundity because they serve the higher aims of salvation history. Or we understand that stories of turnabout by the powerless speak to an exiled diaspora people. Reading the stories of women as prefiguring David and his ensuing line conveys a good deal about later kingship. And using literary tropes to uncover the women in the text often illuminates our view of biblical men behaving badly.

There is no doubt that the study of women often results in enlightening our appreciation of men. Theories about women—literary or historical—cannot stand if they fail to contemplate basic gender dichotomies (either as biological or a culturally defined reality). However, most of the scholarship that we have considered thus far results in thoughtful, measured ideas about institutional Israel or men or both. Female characters are valorized for their service to the institutional aims of the text or because they can do what a man can do by fulfilling the role of trickster or underdog. When we look to women’s narratives for what they tell us about the men or the nation in the stories, we fail to see the women in the stories. Folklorist Joseph Mbele

noted the same problem in African epics. Mbele refers to the way in which women are acclaimed as “real heroes” when they accomplish roles established for men in their societies:

It would satisfy many of us if women were recognized and celebrated as women, and not on the basis of how they accomplish male roles as defined by their respective societies. The kind of heroism bestowed on women for playing male roles is problematical, since it entails the alienation of women from their identity. The irony, still, is that the societies involved do not see this as problematical: the women's assumption of male roles and their subsequent accomplishments mark these women as real heroes according to the standards and expectations of their societies. In other words, these societies accept, idealize, and celebrate the very process we might consider alienating.<sup>260</sup>

Put another way, heroes are usually men. In effect when women become like men they can be seen as heroes. When women do what (male) heroes do—when they meet the expected standards of their societies—then they are accorded valorous status. Mbele’s criticism asks that “heroism” be redefined as a broad honorific category. I find that Mbele’s point rings true. Standard notions of female heroism match or at least approximate an expected pattern of heroic imagery. Figures such as Joan of Arc, Boadicea, Brunhild of *The Niebelungelied* or the biblical Deborah and Judith fit society’s expectation of the heroic. These militaristic-type heroines exemplify the same quantities of robust bravery, strength of arms, shrewd cunning and action as their male cognates. Joan of Arc bests the English at the siege of Orléans; Judith beheads Holofernes to save Bethulia. These female characters reproduce the universal experiences of the hero. *But there is nothing truly gendered about their actions.* These characters present no unique traits that would identify them as gendered heroes; all we have here are examples of women who successfully act like men. Joan even adopts male dress, one of the significant transgressions for which she gives her life. Nothing remarkably female attaches to what they do; they simply imitate masculine characteristics. Following on Mbele, I would argue that these

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<sup>260</sup> Joseph L. Mbele, “Women in the African Epic,” *Research in African Literatures* 37, no. 2 (2006): 65.

female figures are celebrated for how well they play the man. In effecting military victory for the good of the community, we idealize and celebrate these women as heroes because they do what we think (male) heroes ought to do.

A fuller conception of the heroic must take gender more seriously. This requires different questions and an altered set of assumptions. I do not deny the power of the (implied) masculine model. But we should act with greater skepticism. First, distinctive gender issues deserve consideration within a specific narrative context. By “gendered context,” I am referring to narratives where the gender of the protagonist becomes a deciding factor in the narrative as a whole. Female narratives can be read, analyzed and codified in the context of and with reference to other female narratives or their male analogues. A female narrative informs and reinforces a characters' quintessential femaleness by reflecting a gendered reality—for instance, a world of limited choices and limited freedoms. A true female narrative does not seek to overcome gender by symbolizing women emulating men or adopting male attitudes in dress and action. Rather, women’s tales follow a specific typology in affirming their protagonist's essential femaleness via a remarkable individual independence of thought and action within their limited narrative confines.

In addition, we should more vigorously interrogate the androcentric assumptions behind our reading and interpretation of female narratives in the Bible. When faced with universal concepts such as heroism, the insertion of gender potentially enriches the discussion. It follows that the sort of vibrant enterprise exhibited in our four narratives can be labeled in ways that have nothing to do with Israel, royal succession or David. This chapter reads biblical narratives of women and puts them in conversation with other, non-biblical female narratives. Alternative meanings more readily emerge when the Bible’s ideological stance is deemphasized.

This process of reading different stories together is common in folkloric studies. In reading women's narratives from other contexts, several folklorists have remarked on commonalities and similarities among female stories. These commonalities include women manipulating men as well conflicting ideas about the female character's morality. We find these motifs in some of the female narratives in the Bible. A folkloric method therefore might provide another lens through which to understand these biblical stories. Our four narratives can possibly find common cause with female narratives outside the biblical context. Obviously, female narratives from other historical and social contexts have nothing to do with Israel and its institutional or theological concerns. Thus, a folkloric approach offers another reading on these stories, a reading that highlights gender rather than theological or civic concerns. Furthermore, such a method might lend itself to hypotheses regarding the beginnings and original intent of these female narratives (with the caveat that any conclusions are only conjecture at best because we lack original source materials).

This study will adapt a folklore methodology to the reading of female narratives in the Bible in order to establish the existence of a female heroic pattern among biblical narratives. First I will look at some of the universal claims that apply to both male and female heroic literature. Then I will look at specific models of the male heroic. From here, we will consider several folklorists who work with female heroic narratives. I will then take one of these female hero trait lists and apply it to several female characters from the Bible including our four stories. From here, I will offer my argument for the existence of a female heroic pattern in the Bible.

This novel heroic designation presents an opportunity to consider the women of the Bible in a new way. This is an argument for not only reading the narratives of biblical women together but also using a broad range of female narratives to make claims for the female heroic in the

Bible. This means that we are not comparing them to male narratives nor are we asking our female characters to say or do things that symbolize the theological and/or institutional aims of the Bible. Rather, we are isolating these stories to see how women negotiate their restricted choices and narrow freedoms in non-coordinated and subversive ways. The customary imposition of a male paradigm works against the hope of deriving anything new or insightful from legends and narratives of female characters. Gender becomes immaterial when we look at women in order to discover something about men.<sup>261</sup> My task is to reverse that process.

## 4.2 SEMANTICS AND HISTORY

One of the first problems encountered in this analysis is one of semantics. When I apply the term hero or heroine, I am applying it to literary characters who serve as the main focus of a narrative. For this study, a hero refers to narrative characters who demonstrate specific, demonstrable traits.

Furthermore, this work samples a jumble of narrative genres in order to make its point. For instance, England's Henry V, the hero of Agincourt, as well as Joan of Arc and Boadicea were real historical people. King David might have existed; his verifiable reality is still debated.<sup>262</sup> The Bible's Judith and Esther exist only as narrative figures. This raises important

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<sup>261</sup> Mary Ann Tolbert, "Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods," in *Searching the Scriptures, Vol. 1: The Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 115-119.

<sup>262</sup> The inscription on fragments of a stele, dated roughly from the 9<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, found in northern Israel between 1993 and 1994 refers to *bêt Dawid*, or the house of David. For some archaeologists and historians, this is proof that a Davidic dynasty existed. However, most are reluctant to see this as proof positive for an historical king over a united monarchy named David. See Eugene H. Merrill, "Archaeology and Biblical History: Its Uses and Abuses," in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts*, ed. David M. Howard and Michael A. Grisanti (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), 90; Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel: From the*

questions: can a lived figure be a hero, or must a hero be only legendary or fictional? Are the traits of historical figures different enough to require their own heroic category? Do we damage our heroic standard by mixing historical and legendary figures? Or, for the purposes of this study, are heroes textual?

For the moment, let us consider Joan of Arc. Joan's actual accomplishments can be historically verified. She bested the Burgundians at Patay. She was tried by the English and burned at the stake as a heretic in Rouen in May 1431. Proper documentation and authentication of her actions are primarily the concerns of the biographer not the folklorist. Yet, the illustrious literary accretions since her death make for rich textual fodder.<sup>263</sup> For the historical biographer, Joan's mythic embellishments detract from historical reconstructions of her life. However, for literary analysts and specifically folklorists, these heroic embellishments demonstrate an artistry that scholars refer to as life stories being made to fit a heroic pattern.<sup>264</sup> The question of a character's historical reality neither adds to nor detracts from her narrative's depiction of her heroic character.

All we know about these biblical women come to us via texts. I am using a structural approach to get at the gendered elements within the texts. Therefore, for this study, the concept of the heroic is a textual category and all heroes are textual. In this, I will reproduce the interests of a folklorist, not a biographer. My purpose is to apply a folkloric analysis to narratives of female characters that live on in oral or written accounts. The historical authenticity of these female characters contributes no advantage (nor disadvantage) to their literary exploits. Rather,

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*Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 225; Biran, Avraham and Joseph Naveh, "The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment." *Israel Exploration Journal* 45 (1995): 1-18.

<sup>263</sup> Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: the Image of Female Heroism* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 3-10.

<sup>264</sup> Jezewski, 56.

these narrative bona fides provide ample scholarly justification for most folkloric work and are therefore sufficient for this study.<sup>265</sup>

### 4.3 WHO IS A HERO?

Like the Supreme Court definition of pornography, we often know a hero when we see one. Traditionally, heroic literature presents the hero as a martial champion, one who excels at arms in the masculine arena of male camaraderie on the field of battle. Gilgamesh, king of ancient Uruk, is such a hero. Arjuna, the unrivaled archer of the *Mahabharata*, is such a hero. Both prove their superiority in the fight; courage and ferocity serve as their essential battle implements as well as their primary aristocratic virtue.<sup>266</sup> A hero is an extraordinary human being who emphasizes the individual's alienation from ordinary humanity through dangerous pursuits and unusual endeavors.<sup>267</sup> In psychological terms, he overcomes, to the acclaim of all, by rejecting what has come before and succeeding the previous generation.<sup>268</sup> In overcoming others as well as himself, he achieves transcendence.<sup>269</sup> The hero's unique task, says folklorist Heda Jason, is to demarvelize the world: through his intervention, the human hero allows for the human resolution to problems.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Concerning the historicity of real or fictional heroic characters, see Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980); Raglan's more limited vision, Fitzroy Raglan, "The Hero of Tradition," *Folklore* 45 (1934): 212-231; and, Jezewski's discussion of Raglan and Dundes' approach to this, 55-56  
<sup>266</sup>Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: a Window on the Iron Age*. The Rede Lecture, 1964 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 12.

<sup>267</sup> John A. Byars, "Yeats' Introduction of the Heroic Type," *Modern Drama* 8 (1966): 413.

<sup>268</sup> Otto Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero," in *Quest of the Hero*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 27.

<sup>269</sup>"Hero," c.v.s., *Storytelling Encyclopedia*, ed. David Adams Leeming (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1997), 29.

<sup>270</sup> Heda Jason, *Whom Does God Favor: The Wicked or the Righteous? The Reward-and-Punishment Fairy Tale*. FFCommunications 240. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1988), 139-147.

Hero narratives fulfill a diverse array of social functions. For example, tales of successful underdogs help to ameliorate social tensions between elites and subordinates. Heroic tales also standardize group values and communal identification. Furthermore, legendary tales render the world less capricious: the tales normalize a society's sense of personal belonging while leaving readers comfortably within a permissible sphere of operation.<sup>271</sup> The heroic quest becomes one's own—even though one need never leave the comfort of home.

#### 4.3.1 Universal Heroic Motifs

Common parallels exist between male and female narratives, suggesting that there are aspects of a universal heroic that are not gender-specific. Surveying these many motifs and narrative models, several patterns emerge. These include:

- o Hero experiences conflict through dissociation from the known;
- o Hero overcomes difficult or lower status to reach a more secure, socially successful position;
- o Inversion of reality—the lowly heroes disguise themselves as elites or vice versa;
- o A hero symbolizes a positive view of change and human success in a fundamentally benevolent universe.<sup>272</sup>

Both male and female narratives are replete with conflict that requires resolution. Male heroic figures tend to resolve conflict through military and martial prowess. Their combat tends towards the public sphere of the battlefield, the court or the marketplace. Achilles, Siegfried and biblical heroes like Joshua and David make their name in feats of arms. By contrast, for every martial character like Joan of Arc or Amazonian warriors, there is a figure like Sheherazade or

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>272</sup> See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 23-40; Otto Rank, "Quest of the Hero," 27ff; Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 23-29, 35-40; Jack D. Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, revs. and expanded ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 1-22.

Esther. That is, one aspect of female narratives highlights conflicts concerning a more feminized field of battle—inside the home, the palace or the bedroom. The tales of Andromeda and Medea both focus on obtaining a higher status male for their own purposes. Cleopatra takes first Caesar then Marc Antony for similar dynastic and political aims. Queen Esther's private chambers provide the setting for her appeal on behalf of her people to Ahasuerus as well as Haman's fall. Thus, the field of combat for female heroes often moves along domestic relational lines, tying them to the home or family.

Another heroic trope for both genders centers on destiny. Male and female narratives exemplify an individual realizing some greater imperative. The heroic moment focuses on the hero's advancement toward fulfilling that unique destiny.<sup>273</sup> In *The Song of Roland*, the hero Roland only blows the Olifant at Roncevaux so that others know where to find his dead body, his destiny fulfilled by exposing the treachery of others.

The core quality for female narratives shows a similar individual enterprise towards destiny. Perpetua, a martyr of the early church, seeks martyrdom and steadfastly declines a pagan marriage and a comfortable domestic existence. She chooses to enter the lion's den for her faith. The female hero, like the male hero, is motivated by a sense of destiny, or is compelled to act in accordance with the irresistible course of events. These events can include achieving a higher status or securing her economic well-being, or, through her example, pointing others to a higher, transcendent truth.

The quest or the journey plays a large role in heroic narratives. Victor Turner and Joseph Campbell argue that the heroic moment is the quest itself, not the realization or the culmination of the journey. The quest in male heroic tales often requires movement out and away—

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<sup>273</sup> Jan de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 220-229.

geographically as well as physically and emotionally—from the place of his birth or upbringing. This all-encompassing quest serves as the driving force behind heroic literature’s remarkable impact. Victor Turner describes the heroic quest as one of inhabiting a space that is neither here nor there, not in the world but certainly not out of the world either. This represents a boundary experience, a circumstance where a man can make a name for himself. This powerful social marginality beckons to each individual; however, only the truly heroic will answer the call. Heroes then are valiant men who move into this fringe of paradox and ambiguity, embracing marginality for a season. Having once undertaken this journey, these champions reenter their community with greater authority, insight and wisdom.<sup>274</sup>

For male heroes, because of the arduous and life-changing nature of the journey, the return from the quest often renders social reintegration impossible.<sup>275</sup> One of the best examples of this is Frodo in the last installment (*The Return of the King*) in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. After completing his quest to rid Middle Earth of the last ring, he returns to his home in The Shire only to discover that, unlike his boon companion Sam, he can no longer live the simple life he once knew among the hobbits. He leaves his natal land forever to live among the Elves, for he says,

... I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” *Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society* (1964),: 4-20.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-11; Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 51; 59-60; 391.

<sup>276</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of the Lord of the Rings* (New York: Random House, 1992), 338.

The biblical Jesus travels into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights to wrestle with conscience and evil before he can truly undertake his destiny as an itinerant preacher and teacher. In *The Once and Future King*, young Arthur must leave his adoptive home with Sir Ector in the “Forest Sauvage” in order to fulfill his destiny.<sup>277</sup> Marginality, alienation and finally, reintegration (dissociation from the known to the unknown and then back again) mark male stories.

Like male heroic tales, a female hero’s quest provides the energy that fuels the action. However, female stories emphasize geographical stasis. Female narratives rarely demonstrate the sort of physical movement marked by the male hero’s radical leave-taking. In fact, women have limited ability to move freely outside the domestic sphere. Thus we find that female characters work within their context—both literally as well as textually—to bring about the realization of their objectives.

The female character’s achievement of her goal, while important and significant, marks the beginning of the end of her narrative. The female hero fades from the narrative once her goal has been realized. Sheherazade’s fantastic storytelling, part of her quest to stay alive, carries readers through the thousand and one nights. Once her king is pacified, her journey is over. It is not marriage to the king which motivates the action but Sheherazade’s efforts to forestall forced mortality.

These universal aspects do not work against establishing unique traits for female narratives. Instead, the commonalities between male and female heroic narratives suggest that there are universal heroic values that transcend gender. Thus it might indeed be possible to argue for a truly universal and genderless heroic narrative (that is, one that does not assume that

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<sup>277</sup> T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins, 1958), 552-553.

female figures will accommodate themselves to male standards). However, for our purposes, these general features—the quest, the role of destiny and conflict, the field of battle—represent broad heuristic categories that certify the heroic authenticity of a narrative. As we focus on how the gender of actors influences the contours of these motifs, we will develop a new perspective on heroic narratives.

#### 4.4 CHARACTERIZATION OF THE MALE HEROIC

In the early part of the twentieth century, psychologist and philosopher Otto Rank identified significant parallels among stories of disparate cultural heroes like Gilgamesh, Cyrus of Persia, Romulus and Remus, Siegfried, Moses and Jesus based on a comparison of traits and actions in their narratives:

**Figure 1. The Birth of the Hero (Rank) <sup>278</sup>**

1. The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king.
2. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles.
3. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative).
4. As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box.
5. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or by a humble woman.
6. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents in a highly versatile fashion.

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<sup>278</sup> Otto Rank, *Myth of the Birth of the Hero: a Psychological Interpretation of Mythology*, F. Robbins and Smith Ely Jelliffe, trans. (New York: The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co., 1909).

7. He takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged, on the other.
8. Finally he achieves rank and honors.

Rank identified within these narratives structural similarities such as an overriding interest in the hero's parentage, access to power and personal privilege. For Rank, these correlations represent psychological truths: they symbolize the individuation of the adult and the child's nostalgic longing for the safety, comfort and innocence of childhood. In Rank's somewhat circular argument, these psychological universals reflect the human longing to identify with something outside itself but is the self:

The true hero of the romance is, therefore, the ego, which finds itself in the hero, by reverting to the time when the ego was itself a hero, through its first heroic act, i.e., the revolt against the father ... Myths are, therefore, created by adults, by means of retrograde childhood fantasies, the hero being credited with the myth-maker's personal infantile history.<sup>279</sup>

More recent folklorists depend upon the methods and conclusions developed in Vladimir Propp's *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1927; translated into English in 1958).<sup>280</sup> Propp reduced Russian heroic folktales down into "morphemes," the simplest and least reducible linguistic elements from the basic sentence structure of the tales. From these morphemes, Propp isolated what he considered the most essential components in folktales, identifying thirty-one typologies or basic elements. These then could be utilized as a guide for recognizing heroic narratives across cultural and historic situations. While not all tales will include all thirty-one traits, Propp argued for all these identifiable traits occurring in the same order in all stories.

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>280</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the folktale*. 2<sup>nd</sup> revs. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

Thus, a predictable sequence defined the essential structural component of heroic literature. The tale takes the following sequence (although not all the elements will appear but the sequence will remain the same regardless):

**Figure 2. Dramatis Personae (The Hero; Propp) <sup>281</sup>**

1. A member of a family leaves home (the hero is introduced);
2. An interdiction is addressed to the hero ('don't go there', 'go to this place');
3. The interdiction is violated (villain enters the tale);
4. The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance (either villain tries to find the children/jewels etc; or intended victim questions the villain);
5. The villain gains information about the victim;
6. The villain attempts to deceive the victim to take possession of victim or victim's belongings (trickery; villain disguised, tries to win confidence of victim);
7. Victim taken in by deception, unwittingly helping the enemy;
8. Villain causes harm/injury to family member (by abduction, theft of magical agent, spoiling crops, plunders in other forms, causes a disappearance, expels someone, casts spell on someone, substitutes child etc, comits murder, imprisons/detains someone, threatens forced marriage, provides nightly torments); Alternatively, a member of family lacks something or desires something (magical potion etc);
9. Misfortune or lack is made known, (hero is dispatched, hears call for help etc/ alternative is that victimized hero is sent away, freed from imprisonment);
10. Seeker agrees to, or decides upon counter-action;
11. Hero leaves home;
12. Hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc, preparing the way for his/her receiving magical agent or helper (donor);
13. Hero reacts to actions of future donor (withstands/fails the test, frees captive,

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<sup>281</sup> Propp, 25-64.

reconciles disputants, performs service, uses adversary's powers against them);
14. Hero acquires use of a magical agent (directly transferred, located, purchased, prepared, spontaneously appears, eaten/drank, help offered by other characters);
15. Hero is transferred, delivered or led to whereabouts of an object of the search;
16. Hero and villain join in direct combat;
17. Hero is branded (wounded/marked, receives ring or scarf);
18. Villain is defeated (killed in combat, defeated in contest, killed while asleep, banished);
19. Initial misfortune or lack is resolved (object of search distributed, spell broken, slain person revived, captive freed);
20. Hero returns;
21. Hero is pursued (pursuer tries to kill, eat, undermine the hero);
22. Hero is rescued from pursuit (obstacles delay pursuer, hero hides or is hidden, hero transforms unrecognizably, hero saved from attempt on his/her life);
23. Hero unrecognized, arrives home or in another country;
24. False hero presents unfounded claims;
25. Difficult task proposed to the hero (trial by ordeal, riddles, test of strength/endurance, other tasks);
26. Task is resolved;
27. Hero is recognized (by mark, brand, or thing given to him/her);
28. False hero or villain is exposed;
29. Hero is given a new appearance (is made whole, handsome, new garments etc);
30. Villain is punished;
31. Hero marries and ascends the throne (is rewarded/promoted).

Few scholars adopted Propp’s entire (and rigid) building-block method, finding greater richness in the mix of traits rather than just irreducible sequential components in their analysis. Yet, Propp’s methods find wide application across studies of heroic literature. The earlier Austrian philologist and diplomat Johann von Hahn (late nineteenth century) developed his own hero trait list:

**Figure 3. Hero Pattern (Hahn)** <sup>282</sup>

1. The hero is of illegitimate birth
2. His mother is the princess of the country
3. His father is a god or a foreigner
4. There are signs warning of his ascendance
5. For this reason he is abandoned
6. He is suckled by animals
7. He is brought up by a childless shepherd couple
8. He is a high-spirited youth
9. He seeks service in a foreign country
10. He returns victorious and goes back to the foreign land
11. He slays his original persecutors, accedes to rule the country, and sets his mother free
12. He founds cities
13. The manner of his death is extraordinary
14. He is reviled because of incest and he dies young
15. He dies by an act of revenge at the hands of an insulted servant
16. He murders his younger brother

Israeli folklorist Heda Jason also presents her own trait chart based on a comparison of cross-cultural heroic models.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Johann Georg von Hahn’s **Hero Pattern** (from *Sagwissenschaftliche Studien*, Jena: Mauke, 1876). Taken and adapted from Mary Magoulick, “Various Patterns of Hero Journey” ([http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/hero\\_patterns.htm](http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/hero_patterns.htm)), accessed September 6, 2006.

<sup>283</sup> Unlike Jason, who knows and refers to Propp in her work, Alan Dundes has pointed out that von Hahn, Rank and Fitzroy Raglan all worked in near isolation without reference to or seemingly even knowledge of others doing essentially the same sort of structural work on hero narratives; see *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 229-231.

**Figure 4. The Hero's Biography (Jason)** <sup>284</sup>

1. Prologue/genealogy of protagonist
2. Complications at conception
3. Unusual birth
4. Celebration of hero's birth
5. Hero named
6. Baby-hero made invulnerable
7. Prophecy/destiny of baby revealed
8. Attempt made on baby's life; baby removed
9. Rescued and raised in foster home
10. Hero's childhood and youth
11. Acquires heroic attributes
12. Hero embarks on warrior career; sets out on quest/adventure
13. Tales of exploits
14. Chosen to rule over his elders
15. Adult life events (further combat, decision-making, etc.)
16. Hero's physical prowess
17. Hero loses strength
18. Abandons warrior career
19. Death of hero
20. Burial
21. Second generation heroes

Each folklorist attempts a comparable trait patterning approach and each produced their own set of traits and characteristics that fits their reading of heroic narratives. Thus, the efficacy of trait patterning as a methodology seems firmly entrenched in folkloric research.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Jason, "King David": 87-106.

However, whatever success trait patterning realizes in establishing a heroic genre soon fades in the face of gender distinctions. Gender is not a defining category for these studies. Female narratives often are limited in their ability to evince universal equivalency with male-oriented narratives. At best, the imposition of male categories on female narratives realizes only modest success in establishing anything new or noteworthy with respect to women and the heroic. Clearly such a process tends to measure a female character's ability to fit androcentric notions of the heroic. When a female character matches the established heroic ideology, we celebrate her success in acting like a man. This hardly makes her a female hero.

#### 4.5 FEMALE HEROES

Propp's structuralist methods continue to influence present scholarship. For example, Ilana Dan has developed a structural analysis that focuses on the persecuted heroine, a cross-cultural trope identified earlier in the twentieth century. She applies Proppian categories to her texts (as well as some material from Russian folklorist and morphologist Aleksandr Nikiforov, who, Dan argues, anticipated Propp's work by at least a year).<sup>286</sup> Dan focuses on four types of stories of the innocent or persecuted maiden.<sup>287</sup> This maiden experiences trials and conflict first in her birth home, then in her married home. Away from family and friends, she must find resolution within

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<sup>285</sup> Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore*, 228-229.

<sup>286</sup> Nikiforov published on "grammatical action formations" in 1927 in Russian, English translation 1973. See Aleksandr Nikiforov, "On the Morphological Study of Folklore," trans. Heda Jason, *Linguistica Biblica* 27-28 (1973): 25-35.

<sup>287</sup> She identifies these motifs as the innocent slandered maiden; a variant of Snow White; a persecuted stepdaughter tale; and the black and white bride tale.

herself rather than in her circumstances. Dan conjectures that this female character inhabits a broad range of cross-cultural tales.

**Figure 5. The Innocent Persecuted Heroine (Dan)** <sup>288</sup>

1. Heroine is persecuted or threatened in her family home
a. Family gives heroine over to villain
b. Villain harms heroine
c. Family banishes heroine, or heroine runs away from family
2. Rescue of heroine and meeting of future husband
a. Helper aids heroine in her distress
b. Agent connects heroine with future husband
c. Future husband meets heroine
3. Prince marries heroine
a. Heroine bears child(ren)
4. Heroine separates from husband
a. Husband temporarily leaves home; heroine thereby exposed to villain's intrigues; OR husband sends her on journey, entrusting her to villain
b. Villain intrigues against heroine; OR villain actually harms heroine
c. Husband banishes heroine (or she runs away from husband and his family); OR heroine simply wanders off
5. Heroine rehabilitates herself
a. Heroine temporarily changes her identity in order to approach her family
b. Benefactor helps heroine
c. Heroine works to attract attention of others
6. Heroine is rehabilitated and villain punished
a. Husband discovers villain's treachery
b. Husband and others set out in search of heroine
c. Heroine recognizes husband/family/villains.
d. Heroine reveals identity to others

<sup>288</sup> Ilana Dan, "The Innocent Persecuted Heroine: An Attempt at a Model for the Surface Level of the Narrative Structure of the Female Fairy Tale" in *Patterns in Oral Literature*, ed. Heda Jason and Dimitri Segal (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 13-30.

e. Heroine tells her story to others
f. Benevolent other(s) punish villain(s)
g. Husband reinstalls heroine

Says Dan, "The heroine is depicted as particularly virtuous: she will not be seduced, even in the most horrible circumstances, and is charitable. The villains, in contrast, are sinners: seducers, slanderers, murderers, and misers."<sup>289</sup>

Although Propp's work did not concentrate on gender or feminine characters, Dan uses Proppian analysis to tease out the persecuted maiden and establish the elements of this particular gendered trope. Like many who employ Proppian analysis, Dan's work is limited to the analysis of the structure and order of the narratives and an unpacking of the unique identifiers within those narrative elements. However, this method does allow for the identification of some gendered elements within the heroic literature genre.<sup>290</sup> Dan is concerned with gender; however, she focuses exclusively on folkloric or fairy tale heroines (whose stories usually end in marriage) rather than biblical women.<sup>291</sup> Furthermore, Dan considers one particular type of heroic narrative: the innocent persecuted heroine. More tropes than this exist for women, especially women in the Bible.

Propp continues to exert influence upon current biblical scholarship as well. For instance, Pamela Milne suggests that Propp's methods hold great relevance for biblical studies.<sup>292</sup> She argues that Propp's methodology furthers the sort of linguistic analysis developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, contributing to the ongoing structuralist analysis of biblical stories. We saw some

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>290</sup> For a passing critique of Dan's analysis, see Swann Jones, 14. Jones argues that Dan's efforts are limited since she seeks only to fit the heroine into "Propp's Procrustean model" and fails to offer any sort of new synthesis.

<sup>291</sup> Dundes argues that the fairy tale genre usually ends in marriage, not death; *Interpreting Folklore*, 231.

<sup>292</sup> Milne suggests that Saussure's lectures between 1906 and 1911 predate *Morphology of the Folktale* and further contribute to the general argument that structural work helps identify "internally coherent systems" within narratives; see Pamela J. Milne, *Vladimir Propp and the Study of Structure in Hebrew Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1988), 23-25.

examples of this type of Proppian biblical structuralism in the work of Jack Sasson and Harold Fisch, who applied Propp's methods to Ruth's story.<sup>293</sup> For example, Fisch claims that the constitutive elements of Ruth's story find typological resonance with levirate tales such as Genesis 38. This, Fisch argues, provides a "totalizing" reading of biblical material that reveals previously masked structural linkages between seemingly different narratives. He proposes that Israel's salvation history lies embedded within those linked narrative structures. While most consider Proppian analysis ahistorical, in this instance, Fisch does not. He suggests that these shared constitutive elements results in an encompassing historical chronicle that cannot be fully discussed or understood without reference to its grammatical others (Genesis 19; Genesis 38).<sup>294</sup> Without Propp's structuralist approach, claims Fisch, these links would not be textually visible.

In attempting to reveal a true female heroic ideal, folklorist Mary Ann Jezewski took Lord Fitzroy Raglan's heroic model and applied it to female narratives from a variety of cultural and historical settings.<sup>295</sup> For Raglan, hero tales represent the recitation of ritual incidents transformed over time into heroic legends. The hero exists outside historical reality. His heroic epic or legend therefore is the myth secularized:

... the story of the hero of tradition is the story not of real incidents in the life of a real man, but of ritual incidents in the career of a ritual personage ... [I]f they really did exist their activities were largely of a ritual character or else their stories were altered to make them conform to type.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Sasson, "The Issue of *Ge'ullah*," 52-64; Fisch, 425-437.

<sup>294</sup> Fisch, 428; 435-437.

<sup>295</sup> These include both historical as well as legendary and mythic women such as Aphrodite; Helen of Troy; the Polynesian fire goddess, Pele; Cleopatra; Brunhild of the *Niebelungelied*; Brunhild, the Merovingian Queen; Guinevere; Eleanor of Aquitaine; Mary Queen of Scots; Empress Wu Chao of 7<sup>th</sup> century China; Pocahontas; and the Arabian princess, Al Zabba, among others; see Jezewski, 55-73.

<sup>296</sup> Fitzroy Richard Somerset Raglan, "The Hero of Tradition," *Folklore* 45 (September 1934): 220.

Raglan's method of trait patterning is similar to Propp's. Like Propp, Raglan distills culturally and historically diverse hero stories down to a set of basic characteristics. Unlike Propp, Raglan confines himself primarily to Greek mythic heroes (rather than Propp's Russian folktale heroes) and the order of events in the tale carried little weight.<sup>297</sup> Finding correlations across an array of narratives, Raglan develops a numerical ranking system for assessing a hero's mythic exploits.<sup>298</sup> In Raglan's schema, Oedipus, Theseus and Moses rank high on the heroic scale. By contrast, Elijah, Sigurd/Siegfried and King Arthur are only middling examples; their exploits fail to fulfill the full range of heroic behaviors associated with Raglan's hero ranking system.

Jezewski found that most female figures failed to rank with any success in Raglan's system. Few had the sorts of military exploits common to male stories. There were very few instances of foundling infancies or mistaken identity in stories of female heroes. Few female narratives carried the record of a glorious death or a celebrated burial that one expects in heroic literature. Jezewski then dropped the imposition of Raglan's categories in order to develop her own. She preserved Raglan's method of comparative reading across a wide range of legends, myths and narratives where female characters figured prominently. That is, she compared female stories to other female stories and found a unique pattern of female heroism that presented itself across culturally dissimilar texts.<sup>299</sup>

Jezewski has illuminated some remarkable deviations from the accepted male model:

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<sup>297</sup> These include Oedipus, Theseus, Romulus, Heracles, Perseus, Jason, Bellerophon, Pelops, Asclepius, Dionysos, Apollo and Zeus as well as Semitic heroes such as Joseph, Moses and Elijah, the Norse Sigurd and Britain's mythic Arthur and Robin Hood, among others.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.; see also Fitzroy Richard Somerset Raglan, *The Hero: a Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 3-25.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

- o The death of the female hero is rarely emphasized;
- o Female heroes have more morally conflicted stories due to their amorous affairs, jealousies or revenges;
- o The Andromeda theme dominates: a female hero who attaches herself to a stronger/higher status male, seemingly for the purpose of becoming pregnant by him, and then distancing herself from that stronger male when he has served his purpose(s).

For Jezewski, a female character is considered heroic if "her life story and her heroism live on in various written forms," including encyclopedic entries, biographical references, books or written portrayals that present her or her actions as valorous.<sup>300</sup> A female hero is like a male hero in her exemplary personal characteristics of courage, power or magic. A female character's heroic value accrues not from her death or her battle prowess but from the ways in which she negotiates basic female concerns of economic, domestic or reproductive security. The content of a character's virtue, purity or piety often fails to enter into the heroic equation. Jezewski found that many of these female heroes are morally ambiguous figures, using whatever means they have at their disposal to secure their objectives. Overall, heroic female stories seem to celebrate remarkable women *as women*—and not for how well they act like men.

Like Propp, Raglan and others, Jezewski establishes a collection of characteristics that affirm the heroic credentials of a narrative character. She looks at an array of historical and legendary figures but with an eye to the gender of the narratives as their defining feature. Below is a comparison of the two ranking systems, Raglan's male-based system and Jezewski's gendered approach:

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<sup>300</sup> 59; Jezewski defines a hero "as a person whose life story is passed on by oral tradition and/or written accounts and is remembered for exceptional deeds that have as their basis qualities exemplified in courage, power or magic," 55.

**Figure 6. Raglan and Jezewski's adaptation of Raglan**

<b>Hero Traits (Raglan, 1934)</b>	<b>Female Hero Traits (Jezewski, 1984)</b>
1. His mother is a royal virgin	1. Her parents are royal or godlike, and
2. His father is a king, and	2. They are often related.
3. Often a near relative of his mother.	3. There is mystery surrounding her conception and/or birth
4. Birth circumstances are unusual.	4. Little is known of her childhood.
5. He is reputed to be the son of a god,	5. She herself is a ruler or goddess.
6. At birth, attempt is made on his life, often by his father, but	6. She is charming and beautiful.
7. He is spirited away, and	7. She uses men for political purposes.
8. Reared by foster parents in a far country.	8. She controls men in matters of love and sex.
9. Little information about his childhood.	9. She is married, and
10. On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.	10. She has a child or children
11. After a victory over the king and/or giant, dragon or wild beast	11. She has lovers.
12. He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and	12 Her child succeeds her.
13. Becomes king.	13. She does a man's job or deeds.
14. For a time he reigns uneventfully, and	14. She prescribes law.
15. Prescribes law, and	15. There are conflicting views of goodness.
16. Later he loses favor with the gods and his subjects, and	16. Her legend contains the Andromeda theme. <sup>301</sup>
17. Is driven from the throne and the city.	17. The subsequent resolution of this theme is by treacherous means which results in an untimely death, exile or incarceration of the male.
18. He meets with a mysterious death,	18. Her death is uneventful and may not even be mentioned in her legend.
19. Often on a hilltop.	
20. His children, if any, do not succeed him.	
21. His body is not buried, but nevertheless	
22. He has one or more holy sites/sepulchers.	

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<sup>301</sup> **Andromeda Theme:** female hero is “rescued by stronger male, often saving her from life with a less-suitable mate; resolution though requires the rescuer’s passing since he is now rendered less attractive.

Jezewski provides an essential method for locating and identifying heroic women. She notes that “[t]he concept of hero trait patterning is, in itself, a controversial subject but one that has not been vigorously applied to the female hero.”<sup>302</sup> Her particular set of traits remains untested with respect to biblical women. We can think of many examples of valorous or plucky women who might fit here.

#### **4.6 BIBLICAL WOMEN AND APPLICATION OF THE HEROIC MODEL**

As Jezewski notes, trait patterning has not been vigorously applied to female narratives. I would add that trait patterning has not been robustly applied to female biblical narratives either. If we take Jezewski’s list of female heroic traits and apply them to female biblical narratives, including Lot’s daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba, we will develop a new perspective that liberates these characters from their embedded institutional context and allow us to recognize the gendered elements in these narratives. A trait patterning methodology does not depend upon the larger theological framework of the Bible to inform our reading. Instead, we analyze characteristics within the stories in isolation from the larger narrative. This folkloric approach does not ask how the stories fit into the later redacted aims of the Bible; rather, it puts biblical women in metaphoric conversation with other female narratives both within as well as outside the Bible, enriching our sense not only of the female heroic but of female inventiveness across diverse cultural and historical settings.

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 69.

Eventually, after unpacking the heroic credentials of our female narratives (this will be our task in chapter 5), we will reinsert the stories back into the Bible and offer some ideas for their inclusion (chapter 6). Before adopting Jezewski's methodology, I need to expand upon some of her categories and offer a few caveats to her claims.

Jzewski says that female narratives that 1) continue in a stable written form and 2) present a woman as valorous in the context of that narrative presents sufficient justification for inclusion in her study.<sup>303</sup> As I argued in chapters 1 and 2, biblical women are valorized by their inclusion within the larger interpretive stories of salvation history or political propaganda or dynastic histories. But since I want to look at them without those glosses, I cannot assume that women are valorous just because they are in the Bible. The stories themselves, without the larger theological imprint, do not necessarily present the women that way.<sup>304</sup> Do these stories approximate the female heroic as established by folkloric standards, which stand outside and apart from biblical norms? Are the stories heroic without the biblical context? What, if anything, about the stories ties them to heroic motifs of women? I seek to understand the characters in the context of their own narratives and not as constituent stories within a larger sacred narrative. If there are recognizable, cross-cultural models of the female heroic, as Jezewski argues, then one question to ask is do stories of biblical women fit as well? And if they do, what does that mean?

Therefore, I accept Jezewski's first requirement for inclusion of a narrative: these must be stories of women that continue on in a written form. However, the stories themselves do not

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>304</sup> The women may in fact be valorous in the context of their stories: Tamar is proclaimed more righteous than Judah; Ruth is celebrated as better than seven sons, a celebration of her heroic *chesed*. But it seems to me that what Jezewski is arguing for is a female character's presumed heroic character simply because she appears in a narrative

necessarily valorize the women. The very thing that I am seeking to establish are the heroic bonafides of these biblical female characters. Given the diverse nature of female representation in the Bible and the limited traits that Jezewski offers, it seems unlikely that biblical narratives of women will fit this benchmark. But I do not want to prejudge any of our narratives as more or less heroic; that is the intent of this process. Therefore, I submit a broad spectrum of biblical stories to the test without predetermined notions as to their heroic stature. As we unpack the findings, we will see how our assumptions are challenged by new heroic identifications.

Finally, Jezewski argues that the selection sample should represent as complete stories as possible in order to cut down on unknowns and in order to adequately test the confluence of heroic traits.<sup>305</sup> Because I am limiting myself to a single work—the Bible—I choose not to include snippets of stories, such as the rape of the unnamed concubine in Judges 19 or the story of Dinah and Shechem, which is only a single incident in the life of Dinah (but part of the larger narrative of the Jacob clan). Therefore I will test our four stories first. I will also include Esther and Judith since they, like Ruth, have book-length stories.<sup>306</sup> Deborah will be included since critics such as Lillian Klein and Tikva Frymer-Kensky point to her as the premier example of the heroic biblical female.<sup>307</sup> I will also submit a motif—the barren mother—to this process as well. While there is no sustained narrative entitled, “the barren mother” in the Bible, this theme

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<sup>305</sup> Jezewski, 59.

<sup>306</sup> I include the deuterocanonical book of Judith for several reasons: 1) like Esther and Ruth, she has a book-length work in her name; 2) she continues to merit scholarly biblical interest (biblical commentaries such as the Anchor Bible and the Interpreter’s Bible both offer volumes dedicated to Judith) as well as current academic interest (see recent postings on “The Sword of Judith” conference, New York Public Library, April 2008 (<http://www.h-net.org/announce/show.cgi?ID=159313>); and, 3) most significantly for this study, she is often mentioned as a biblical heroine; see especially Bellis, 198-210, where she concludes, “Judith is one of the strongest heroes in all of Jewish literature. She combines traditional piety with feminine beauty and masculine daring to accomplish what no other leader could,” 210.

<sup>307</sup> Klein, 33; Frymer Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 49-50.

appears across at least three narratives in Genesis (Sarah; Rebekah; Rachel).<sup>308</sup> In these narratives, fertility depends upon God's direct intervention into the lives of the patriarchs and their families. Abraham is assured by God that he will be a great nation and that fertility will come to his family through his wife Sarah (Genesis 17-18). Isaac entreats God on behalf of his barren wife Rebekah and she conceives (Genesis 25:21). In Genesis 30:22, we are simply told that Rachel's infertility ends because "God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her and opened her womb." Furthermore, we have sustained stories of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel beyond simply their infertility problems. Therefore, I include these women because, as Robert Alter argues, their narrative similarities are intended to link the stories together not as a sustained narrative but as an example of "a beautifully interwoven wholeness."<sup>309</sup>

#### 4.6.1 Jezewski's Categories

Most of Jezewski's categories require little explanation. I will reproduce some of Jezewski's clarifications here before applying the traits to our biblical narratives. Furthermore, as I discuss each story, I will expand upon a trait in the context of that particular narrative when necessary. Several of Jezewski's categories I accept with some clarification and alteration—[7] she uses men for political purposes, [8] she controls men in matters of love and sex, [10] she has a child or children, [13] she does a man's job or deeds, [15] there are conflicting views of her goodness and, [17] resolution of the Andromeda theme by treacherous means resulting in untimely death

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<sup>308</sup> This motif also appears in the story of Samson's mother (Judges 13) and Hannah, Samuel's mother (1 Sam. 1-2) where the promises are made to the women not to their husbands. However, we have more information about Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel than we do of Samson's mother (whose name we never learn) and Hannah. Therefore, following Jezewski's charge, I will stay with more complete stories than less complete ones in order to more fully test this process.

<sup>309</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 188.

or exile or incarceration of the male. These require further amplification as to how I understand them and how I am applying them, particularly in the context of our biblical stories. Following this discussion, I offer my own trait list for female biblical heroes (see Figure 6).

Trait 7 (*she uses men for political purposes*), in the biblical context, has implications far beyond ambition for political command in the context of our stories. Jezewski applies this trait primarily to women who hold positions of leadership or political power or royal rank. In the biblical context, our stories do not concern women who have political power or authority (queens, empresses, princesses, leaders in their own right or wives of leaders of clans or tribes). Many of the stories that we will be looking at have to do with subaltern women who are widows or who lack adequate male representation. Only Esther is a queen. Furthermore, only the barren mothers, Deborah and Esther have husbands for the bulk of their stories.<sup>310</sup> The rest are the stories of women who are struggling to survive on their own. Their efforts reflect the harsh economic realities of life for unattached women in patriarchal societies. They need men for legal representation as well as economic security. And while God's saving presence is implied behind the scenes, we do not find these women praying for God's intervention or divine blessing upon their efforts (save for Judith, who prays that God will bless her deception).

These narratives reflect actions that avoid direct confrontation but rather represent individual acts of resistance that mitigate prevailing economic or social structures. In this way, the political dynamic within their stories highlights individual strategies that erode established

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<sup>310</sup> Even this is a somewhat problematic claim. Deborah is identified as “the wife of Lappidot,” with absolutely no further information given about him or even any scenes that include him in Deborah's story. Klein suggests that he in fact fulfills the role that most biblical wives do—he is in the background, without a voice (33). Bathsheba has a husband when her story begins, but we never see them speak to one another, they appear in no scenes together and Uriah never even refers to her by name, even declining to sleep with his wife while the Ark of the Covenant as well as David's men are camped out in warfare (2 Sam. 11:11). On the other hand, Esther's husband is remote and buffoonish, in his regal aspects more like an Oriental potentate than a mate, but her uncle Mordecai more than fulfills the role of male protector and benefactor on Esther's behalf.

power structures which deny these women access to economic well-being. By expanding upon our sense of the word political, we find that biblical women use men for political purposes in ways that often have nothing to do with royal administration or civic leadership (although, in the case of Deborah and Judith, it certainly can take that more politicized meaning). Rather, the sense that we also see is biblical women using relationships with men in order to secure their economic well-being or legal rights. This aspect of the term “political” concerns the dynamic at work in everyday social relationships involving authority or power. This would be the sense in which I would apply this designation: situations where a woman uses relationships with men to gain authority or power. In the biblical context, however, the sense of that authority or power is not blind political ambition but rather personal economic security or legal power.

Trait 8 refers to instances where a female character controls a man (or men) in matters of love and sex. In the biblical context, this is where I locate the bedtrick, or a place of sexual trickery where gender identity and power dynamics come to the fore. As I have previously noted, the bedtrick can be an incident of sexual congress, where a female character tricks a male character into having (licit or illicit) sexual intercourse with her. However, the bedtrick need not culminate in sexual intercourse. As Jezewski notes, it can be Hera’s tricking Zeus into handing over his mistress or Aphrodite’s ability to evoke love and lust in men or Helen of Troy’s insinuating herself back into Menelaus’ good graces after the Trojan Wars through her overwhelming beauty.<sup>311</sup> The bedtrick signifies an instance where the gender dynamics in the story are reversed: a woman takes charge and through deception, trickery or even the promise of sex yet to come, gets a man to do her bidding. This reversal can result in sexual intercourse, but at its heart, the bedtrick is the moment when the balance of power is challenged or reversed.

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<sup>311</sup> Jezewski, 60-61.

Completing the sexual act is not an absolute requirement for identification of the betricker. Thus, we will find that the ambiguity in some of our biblical stories allows us to identify this trope. In the biblical context, it often seems clear that through the ingenuity of women, the balance of power switches in their favor, but the totality of the transaction is left to the imagination.

Trait 10 is simply “she has a child or children.” Jezewski does not make a distinction between children born prior to the action of the story, adoptive children or children acquired as a consequence of the narrative action. However, we find that in the context of the biblical narratives, these stories overwhelmingly highlight biological sons born as a consequence of the female character’s actions. In the stories that we are considering, none of these women have biological sons prior to the beginning of their stories (Sarah and Rachel have only non-biological sons through their maid servants and these sons subsequently take secondary roles once a biological son is born). Where there are children, we find that sons are born as a consequence of the mother’s actions in the course of the narrative (barren mothers; Lot’s daughters; Tamar; Ruth; Bathsheba). Deborah, Esther and Judith do not have children before their narratives begin and we are not told that any children come after the focus of their story passes.

Jzewski explains Trait 13 (*she does a man’s job or deeds*) as “activities that were deemed the domain of males at the time the female hero lived or her legend was popularized.”<sup>312</sup> In this instance, I want to clarify how I am isolating these narratives from the larger biblical context and how I am reading them without dependence upon the Bible’s overriding theological explanations. In order to understand the content of a female character’s actions, part of our definition requires that we recognize when her actions cross gender lines for her time and place. This identification does not necessarily valorize or condemn those actions (see fuller discussion

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 58.

of trait 15 below), nor does this identification depend upon the larger biblical context in order to justify the place of these female narratives. Rather, it is simply an acknowledgement of the culture out of which a narrative arose and an acknowledgment when a female character is credited with male-identified actions or responsibilities. There are several examples of this: Judah travels to his sheep shearer's (Genesis 39:12) and Boaz winnows barley at his threshing floor (Ruth 3:2). Both are male-identified activities. However, we also find that *righteousness* in the Bible is a male responsibility (Tamar is acclaimed more righteous than Judah although such righteousness was his job). Ruth, in her exemplary devotion to Naomi, is acclaimed "better than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15). The economic and emotional care for Mahlon and Chilion's mother is now accorded to Ruth, the daughter-in-law: therefore, she fulfills the sons' duties.

Trait 15 (*conflicting views of her goodness*) identifies a female character's misdeeds such as affairs, acts of revenge or petty jealousies that, says Jezewski, "are condemned by those recounting the legend." Jezewski does not offer any more explanation for this trait except to say that heroes possess many admirable attributes but female hero tales include actions that are clearly viewed as problematic.<sup>313</sup> I want to expand this identification beyond misdeeds to include the moral ambiguity regarding women in female narratives. We find a penchant for complexity and ambiguity in many of the Bible's narratives. This seems to be an intentional plot device since the aim of the text is not to convey a journalistic account of what happened but rather what Alter calls "historiated prose fiction," which reflects

a remarkable range and flexibility in the means of presentation, [that is] utilized to liberate fictional personages from the fixed choreography of timeless events and thus ... transform[s] storytelling from ritual rehearsal to the delineation of the wayward paths of

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<sup>313</sup> I am assuming her use of the term hero, which appears here without gender qualifier, means that she is referring to narratives of male heroes, in contrast to female heroic tales; 58.

human freedom, the quirks and contradictions of men and women seen as moral agents and complex centers of motive and feeling.<sup>314</sup>

Based on this expanded sense of a woman's "misdeeds," I would include interior judgments on female actions as well as exterior analysis of the story. I believe that the ambiguity in biblical stories argues for including both these perspectives. Biblical analysis, as we saw in the move from standard biblical interpretations (chapter 2) to feminist perspectives (chapter 3) is an ongoing and rich tapestry of ideas. Furthermore, many of our biblical texts offer little or no judgment on a female character, leaving open a definitive assessment on Alter's choreography of quirks and contradictions that liberate our characters from a fixed choreography. Limiting ourselves to only judgments that a narrative offers on its character's nature is terribly restrictive and often misleading since the text rarely offers a judgement. For instance, a story might make assessments regarding someone's character that no longer hold true in the modern context (Joan of Arc was labeled as heretic for wearing men's clothing, a charge that carries no weight anymore). Then again, we tend to view sexual manipulation in all times and in all places as morally problematic—dressing as a whore and sitting by the side of the road, read in the abstract, is clearly something that one might mark as a misdeed. But in Tamar's case, her manipulation of Judah is eventually accounted by the text as righteous and just. So, as Wendy Doniger claims,

we must consider both the ways in which, within the text, the trickster manipulates the ambiguity that hedges the truth or falsehood of the sexual act and the related ways, outside the text, in which the storyteller manipulates the ambiguity of the truth or falsehood of stories about the sexual act.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 24, 26.

<sup>315</sup> Doniger, 11.

Thus, I identify this “goodness trope” in biblical narratives, based on information both *within* the story itself as well as *exterior* analysis of the story. The interior assessment as well as the exterior discussions regarding a female character’s actions provides evidence of the continuing debate over the moral integrity of many of the Bible’s female characters. As with the above discussion of trait 13, I am identifying narrative tropes in isolation from the larger biblical context. But the ambiguity that surrounds various aspects within the stories and fuels much of the continued scholarly interest in biblical narratives compels me to reflect on the larger discussions of how these women have been read, especially in their historical context. The ambiguity surrounding female trickery in the Bible certainly moves me beyond the established readings of these stories. For example, Tamar taking on the guise of the harlot is acceptable because Judah proclaims her the more righteous. Ruth goes down to the threshing floor, a place Levine claims no nice girl should go, based on the culture of the time (a point lost that might not be apparent to most modern readers but perhaps understood in its own time).<sup>316</sup> Bathsheba’s bath is clearly visible, if to no one else, at least to the king, again perhaps representing a situation that was understood in its original context as problematic but whose cultural challenge is lost in the modern context. Are these actions always acceptable or are they exceptions because they are in the Bible? Or, more to the point are we willing to say that harlotry and nakedness and boldness always an agreeable means to an end? These are misdeeds at once because of their historical context as well as for their textual context.

Trait 17 refers to resolution of the Andromeda theme, where the female hero “may think twice about spending the rest her of life with [her male rescuer].”<sup>317</sup> Jezewski defines this trait

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<sup>316</sup> Levine, “Ruth,” 88.

<sup>317</sup> Jezewski, 58.

as actions which effect the removal of the male rescuer through treachery on the part of the female hero. In the biblical context, what we find is less of an emphasis on the treachery of the female hero. Rather, we find a more pronounced statement on the removal or de-emphasis of the male character's role in the narrative. The motivation or presumed treachery of the female character is less point: what is clear is that the male figure fades from the scene once the female hero has achieved her goal. He is instrumental only insofar as he is able to help her with her singular task.

At this point I want to apply Jezewski's traits to our four female stories as well as some other female narratives in the Bible. For example, Deborah, Esther and Judith are often singled out as biblical heroines.<sup>318</sup> I will also apply this standard to the barren mother motif which includes the stories of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel in Genesis. Their stories contain similar actions as well as a concern for the continuity of the household in the face of female infertility. Where there are differences or distinctions, I will note them. Finally, as I mentioned earlier, I include Judith because of her strong characterization as a named female, her piety and devotion and the profound gender elements in her story. Further, while Judith's story is chronologically later, her story parallels some elements in the Deborah story, marking it as also worthy of consideration here.

The application of Jezewski's trait list to biblical female narratives follows. The number in brackets refers to its corresponding category in Jezewski's list. I do this to challenge our notions of women in the Bible as well as our ideas about the heroic. That is, while we might

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<sup>318</sup> Klein refers to Deborah and Yael as "audacious female role models" as women inhabiting positions of unusual power; 33; Frymer-Kensky counts Deborah and Yael among the female victors in the Bible; *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 58-63; on Esther's heroism, see Esther Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," 77-84; on Judith, see Amy-Jill Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 367-376.

hold a generalized concept of heroism, applying Jezewski's categories to biblical women will require us to think more concretely about heroic narratives, especially in the context of the Bible.

#### 4.7 APPLICATION OF THE FEMALE HEROIC TO BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

##### 4.7.1 Barren Mothers: Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel (Genesis)

Little is known of their childhoods [4]. All are noted for their beauty [6]. Sarah controls Abraham in sexual matters; he goes in to Hagar at Sarah's behest (Genesis 16.3). Rachel has middling control over Jacob. She, too, gives her handmaiden Bilhah to Jacob in order to have sons for herself. And she barter with Leah for her fertility-producing mandrakes, gifting Leah with a night with Jacob for the plants. Jacob is neither mentioned nor consulted. But Rachel is unable to coerce fecundity. She storms, "Give me children or I will die!" Jacob replies, "Am I God, that I have withheld the fruit of your womb?" (Genesis 30.1-2). [8] All are married [9]. All eventually have children [10]. Their sons continue on in the *toledot* of Genesis and beyond [12]. If trickery is the purview of men in the Bible, then Rebekah can be said to do a man's job or deeds. Although Jacob is named "Trickster," it would seem he learned his craft from his mother [13]. Regarding trait 15, conflicting views of their goodness: all three matriarchs have moments of sexual duplicity (Sarah and Rebekah have wife-sister stories where they tell a foreign king that they are their husband's sister instead of their wives; Rachel is replaced by Leah as Jacob's first bride). However, since each instance of this duplicity is engineered by their husbands or father, we cannot count this against characterizations of the female character's goodness. Trait 18 says that a female hero's death is uneventful and may not merit mentioning

in the narrative. By contrast, we see that Sarah's death, while uneventful, does merit mention. Rachel's death in childbirth is eventful and also merits telling. Rebekah's exact cause of death is not mentioned.

#### 4.7.2 Lot's Daughters (Genesis 19)

Nothing is known of their childhood [4]. Lot, as the girls' father, is supposed to contract marriages within his clan in order to provide for his daughters as well as to keep his property and holdings in the family. When it appears that he is not able (or willing) to do so, the daughters take this particular issue into their own hands and use Lot to secure their future status in some presumed community [7]. In this, they control Lot in matters of sex (but not necessarily love) [8]. They have children—Ammon and Moab [10]. Moab and Ammon succeed their nameless mothers in their continuing biblical and historical relationship with the Israelites long after Lot and his daughters fade from the scene [12]. The daughters do a man's job or deeds in securing the next generation for the family (“Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring through our father.” Genesis 19:32), a task that normally falls to the family patriarch. Lot, in his inebriation, is either too drunk or too despairing to do so [13]. There are conflicting views of their goodness; commentators find the daughters horrific examples of incest or benighted children who have lost their moorings [15].<sup>319</sup> The Andromeda theme is present: the daughters attach themselves, metaphorically, to Lot for the purpose of providing themselves with sons and saving them from a life of barrenness. Once that

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<sup>319</sup> For negative analysis of the daughters, see Bailey, “They're nothing but incestuous bastards,” 121-138; for daughters as ploys in larger issues, see Jeansonne, 123-129; Ilona N. Rashkow, “Daughters and Fathers in Genesis... or, What's wrong with this picture?” in *New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. C. Exum and D. Clines (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 250-265..

is accomplished, Lot is exiled from the narrative and seemingly, from history [16, 17]. Their deaths are not mentioned [18].

### 4.7.3 Tamar (Genesis 38)

Nothing is known of her childhood [4]. Inference from the text suggests that whatever Tamar's physical attributes, she is able to exude a certain charm (she successfully entices Judah despite being veiled and "wrapped"; Genesis 38:14) [6]. She seduces Judah for her own political/economic purpose—having a son will secure her status in the community as well as provide for herself financially. Any son will be the heir of her dead husband, the first son of his father, denied to her in her childless state but available to her through the convention of levirate marriage [7]. She controls Judah in matters of love and sex—duped and we presume somewhat lonely (his wife dies in vs.12), he comes willingly to Tamar's bed [8]. She is married to Judah's first son Er and has a levirate marriage with his second son, Onan, who also dies [9]. She has twins, Zerah and Perez via her relationship with Judah [10]. She has lovers since Judah is not a husband but rather a liaison [11]. Her child succeeds her since Perez is a named ancestor of both Boaz and David as well as in genealogical recitations of the Davidic line [12]. Righteousness in ancient Israel is often viewed as the purview of man. In this regard, Tamar acts as a man: Judah himself notes that she is more righteous than he is (Genesis 38.26) [13].<sup>320</sup> The conflict regarding

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<sup>320</sup> Provs.21.21: "He that follows after **righteousness** and mercy finds life, **righteousness**, and honor," and "The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the **righteousness** of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him," Ez. 18.20. Honor, justice and righteousness are the purview of men; women can aspire to righteousness but the one who is right with God counts as part of the minyan, can appropriately pray in the Temple and the prayer houses, offers the sacrifices—that is, circumcised men. See *Blackwell Dictionary of Judaica* entry on 'Righteousness' which claims that a *tzaddik* is a righteous man and that 36 perfectly righteous men ('*lamed vav*') are required for the maintenance of the world; Dan Cohn-Sherbock, s.v. "Righteousness," *The Blackwell Dictionary of Judaica*

her goodness has to do with the perception of her roadside subterfuge: socially and morally, prostitution significantly reduces one's status, but harlotry in service to a higher cultural (levirate) or moral (dynastic) good renders Tamar less compromised by her actions, but compromised, nonetheless [15].<sup>321</sup> The Andromeda theme applies here: Tamar aligns herself with the more powerful and wealthy Judah merely for the benefit of her reproductive prerogatives. Once she finds herself pregnant with Judah's child, the text notes that Judah "knew her no more" (Genesis 38.26). While Tamar fades from the scene, so does Judah in terms of his role in her life ("He did not lie with her again," 38:26) [16, 17]. Her death fails to merit mention [18].

#### **4.7.4 Deborah (Judges 4-5)**

Little is known of her childhood [4]. She is a named prophetess to whom the Israelites came for judgment (Judg 4.5); thus, she can be seen to be acting as a local ruler or elder in the time before the monarchy [5]. She definitely uses men to achieve God's goals, not her own. And in fact, she shames the men around her by proclaiming that their glory will pass to a woman ("...the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman," 4.9) [7]. She is the wife of Lappidoth [9] but no children are mentioned. Her role as a judge marks her as doing a man's job or deeds since judgeship is typically limited to men in the

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(Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 458; see as well 'Righteousness' as the purview of the Israelite nation, especially men of Israel and their covenantal obligations tied to righteous acts and thoughts; Szubin, H. Zvi and Louis Jacobs, s.v., "Righteousness," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, ed. Vol. 17. 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 307-309

<sup>321</sup> Phyllis Bird, " 'To Play the Harlot': an inquiry into Old Testament metaphor," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 78-85; Phyllis Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine": 124-126.

Bible [13].<sup>322</sup> Her story is not concerned with detailing any elements of her personal relationships with men or children. Her death is not mentioned [18].

#### 4.7.5 Ruth

Little is known of her childhood; she is only introduced in reference to her marriage to Chilion, son of the widow Naomi [4]. Ruth's goodness charms Boaz and eventually, all the women of Bethlehem. To her question of why he might take notice of her, a poor foreign widow, he remarks that he is aware of kindnesses to Naomi, implying that her fidelity is worthy of his favor (2.11). In the end, all the Bethlehem women proclaim her "better than seven sons" owing to her fidelity and *chesed* (loving-kindness) towards Naomi (4.15) [6]. One of the ways in which Ruth uses Boaz is for economic purposes. As with Tamar, her status as a widow means she lacks the economic security of a husband's family not only for herself but for her mother-in-law, Naomi, as well.<sup>323</sup> In addition, two unattached women need the political and legal security that comes from a male relative's ability to speak for them in public matters (as in the marketplace discussion regarding Elimilech's property and the disposal of Ruth the widow of Mahlon (Ruth 4) ). It is therefore politically expedient for Ruth, as the younger, more attractive female in the household, to pursue a relationship with a financially secure male. Her choice of Boaz, which he recognizes in 3:10 ("you have not gone after younger men, whether poor or rich") suggests that Ruth is purposely selecting Boaz for her purposes [7]. Ruth controls the situation more so than

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<sup>322</sup> Indeed, Klein asks if this is possibly the feminization of a masculine paradigm; 33.

<sup>323</sup> In Ruth 2, the wealthy kinsman of Naomi's husband is identified as Boaz and it seems by happenstance that this is the field that Ruth lands upon. While the issue of divine providence lurks about the edges of this story, such godly oversight is never explicitly stated or affirmed. We are therefore left to conjecture in this ambiguous space whether it is God's providence or Ruth's and Naomi's machinations of Boaz's kin obligations that bring about this initial meeting.

Boaz the benefactor. While working at the behest of Naomi, she purposefully cultivates her relationship with Boaz who has shown her kind concern: "Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace" (2.2). Later, Boaz remarks that she could have gone after younger men but instead chose him, a kindness greater than Ruth's on behalf of Naomi (3:10) [8]. She was first married to Mahlon. A later second marriage follows after Ruth's bold proposal that Boaz should take her under his wing (3.9) [9]. She bears Obed [10]. Obed continues on after her in genealogical recitations of the line of Judah (Ruth 4:22; 1 Chr. 2:12) [12]. With respect to doing a man's job or deeds, Ruth's fidelity—like Tamar's righteousness—to her husband's family is analogous to that which a son would do for his widowed mother. In going out and gathering up the remains from the reapers, she secures sustenance for herself and Naomi, providing for their welfare and securing their place in the community in a way that a male relative would (or should) have.<sup>324</sup> Ultimately, the text celebrates Ruth as the daughter who is better to Naomi than seven sons [13]. There is no conflict regarding Ruth's goodness towards Naomi; Ruth's ambiguous role at the threshing floor, however, is another matter. Is her threshing floor interaction a seduction—an example of Doniger's bedtrick—or is this simply an opportunistic ploy on Ruth's part to catch Boaz after an evening of revelry and impress upon him his obligation to serve as the redeemer? The narrator does not say. For her part, Ruth does not follow the exacting plan that Naomi has laid out for her.<sup>325</sup> Instead of remaining quietly at Boaz's feet and awaiting his instructions, when Boaz inquires who is there, Ruth says, " I [am] Ruth your handmaiden: now, spread your cloak over your handmaiden; for you [are] a near

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<sup>324</sup> In fact, this point is thrown into counterpoint by the *chalitzah* scene in the public square where "Mr. So-and-So" (Amy-Jill Levine's translation of *pelony almony*) is publicly identified as not serving as *yabum*; see Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 251-252.

<sup>325</sup> Ruth 3:4 reads, "But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." Ruth does all of this but does not sit quietly at his feet awaiting instruction but rather informs him of his obligations.

kinsman" (3:9).<sup>326</sup> Ruth now, it seems, directs Boaz. Ruth's bedtrick—her uncovering of Boaz's "feet," a common euphemism for male genitals—is further marked by the fact that Ruth must not only identify herself in the dark to Boaz, but alert him to her desired relationship with him.<sup>327</sup> And the ambiguity continues when Boaz says, "Go not empty unto thy mother in law" (3:17). Again, as Amy-Jill Levine notes, perhaps she left full with more than an apron of barley<sup>328</sup> While Ruth is credited with great *chesed* towards her mother-in-law, she can also be seen as one who takes full advantage of the situation before her, Levine seems to imply. Thus her goodness carries an element of ambiguity to it: she possibly works for the good of Naomi, but also uses the situation to her benefit as well [15]. The Andromeda theme follows: she and Naomi are rescued from a life of crushing poverty and low-status by her marriage to Boaz [16]. Boaz quickly fades from the scene while Ruth's status is further elevated and celebrated through the birth of Obed. The village women declare Ruth's *chesed* and honor Naomi's new child ("A son has been born to Naomi," even though it is actually Ruth who gives birth to Obed; 4:17). Boaz's role in this is not mentioned at all and in fact, is not mentioned again until the recitation of the generations in 4:21. His instrumentality is completed. Boaz fades from the scene once Ruth has secured her family's financial well-being [17]. Her death is not mentioned [18].

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<sup>326</sup> This obligation, Nehama Ashkenasy notes, is technically incorrect but Ruth is appropriating the spirit of the law of *yibbum* to her advantage; see "Language as Female Empowerment in Ruth," in *Reading Ruth*, 120-121.

<sup>327</sup> Ashkenasy discusses this as a seduction scene based on the euphemistic use of the term "feet;" see *Reading Ruth*, 121; for biblical examples, see 2 Sam. 11.8 where David suggests that the war-weary Uriah return to his wife and "wash his feet"; Isaiah 6.2 where feet refers to genitals on the seraphs of God's heavenly court; Isaiah 7.20 where we are told that prisoners are shamed by shaving the hair on their "feet."

<sup>328</sup> Levine, "Ruth," 89.

#### 4.7.6 Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11, 12; 1 Kings 1)

Little is known of her childhood [4]. As noted in Chapter 3, Bailey hypothesizes that she came from an elite family among the ruling class in Israel. If so, we can credit her with coming from a ruling class [5].<sup>329</sup> Her physical attractiveness prompts David's invitation [6]. Bathsheba's actions can be construed as an intentional political ploy to align herself (or her family, if we accept the theory of their political aspirations) with the king. If so, her bath can be construed as a seductive manipulation of David for her family's purposes. But her later efforts on behalf of Solomon's ascendancy can be clearly identified as manipulating David for political ends [7]. Given the ambiguity surrounding her bath, again one might conjecture that Bathsheba exerts some control over David's wandering eye. Later, Bathsheba and Nathan later conspire to place Solomon on David's throne after the old king's death, recalling a long-forgotten promise to that effect which the Bible itself fails to record (1 Kings 1). Her influence over the dying David seems to arise from whatever romantic or sexual relationship they once had [8].<sup>330</sup> She is married first to Uriah, then to David [9]. She has Solomon as well as possibly three other sons (1 Chr. 3.5) [10]. Solomon's royal story continues on after both Bathsheba's and David's [12]. There are conflicting views of her goodness [14].<sup>331</sup> She continues the Andromeda theme insofar as David "rescues" her from widowhood after the orchestrated death of Uriah the Hittite

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<sup>329</sup> Randall Bailey's contention is that Bathsheba is the granddaughter of Ahithophel, daughter of Eliam and therefore, from a prominent political family. David's alliance with her is one of powerful political importance; *David in Love and War*, 90.

<sup>330</sup> Adele Berlin notes that Bathsheba not only exploits the men around her—David as well as Nathan and Solomon—but creates trouble for women as well. Berlin argues that Bathsheba's interactions on behalf of Adonijah to Solomon reflect her jealousy of David's last concubine Abishag's younger, more robust beauty: "Characterization in the Biblical Narrative: David's Wives," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 75.

<sup>331</sup> On this point, see fuller discussion of Bathsheba in Chapter 3.

[16]. This resolves itself through David's old age and death, although she remains seemingly fresh and vibrant even in her duplicity before the king [17]. Her death is not noted [18].

#### 4.7.7 Esther

Little is known of Esther's childhood or birth except that she was orphaned and taken into the household of her cousin Mordechai to be raised [4]. The text remarks that she is "fair and beautiful" (Esth 2.7) [6]. Esther uses men for political purposes although, according to some, it is uncle Mordechai who is to be celebrated as the star of this story and not Esther. In fact, she is used by Mordechai (or God) for their purposes, not her own.<sup>332</sup> Mordechai chastises her, saying,

For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this (4. 14).

Mordechai's challenge carries political overtones, yet his concern is for the preservation of the Jews as a whole. The text implies that Esther has been put in proximity to the hapless Ahasuerus in order to ensure the continuity of her people [7]. Once Esther gains access to the king, she realizes greater influence over Ahasuerus, especially in orchestrating the complete removal of Haman from the court [8, 9]. No mention is made of children, the content of her marriage or what her life looks like after Haman's death. Her death merits no mention [18].

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<sup>332</sup> Carey Moore, *Esther*. Anchor Bible 7B (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), lii.

#### 4.7.8 Judith

Little is known of her childhood [4]. We are told, “She was beautiful in appearance, and was very lovely to behold” (Jdt 8.7) [6]. Her eventual seduction and beheading of Holofernes is for the protection of her town, Bethulia (and not for her own personal gain) [7]. Judith controls the action by setting up the parameters of the seduction—her stroll into Holofernes’ camp, her need to eat her own (kosher) foods, her prayers in the evening, her flirtatious drinking party that ends with his death [8]. She is the widow of Manasseh who died during the barley harvest [9]. She takes no more husbands or lovers, left no children, fasting all the days of her widowhood, devoted to God alone (8.6, 8). She does a man’s job or deeds; she outlasts the general Holofernes at drink as well as slicing his head off after he has passed out [13]. However, there are conflicting views of her goodness: while she is pious, chaste and God-fearing, the introduction in the *Oxford Annotated Bible* notes that “she showed herself to be a shameless flatterer, a bold-faced liar, and a ruthless assassin.”<sup>333</sup> Twice in Chapter 9 Judith asks God to bless her guile:

By the deceit of my lips strike down the slave with the prince and the prince with his servant; crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman. (9:10)

Make my deceitful words to be their wound and their stripe, for they have planned cruel things against your covenant... (9:13)

For those who include Judith’s story as one that adds to Israel's salvation history narrative do so by positioning Judith in the company of women who practice deceit for the good of the

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<sup>333</sup> Robert C. Dentan and Carey A. Moore, introduction to “The Book of Judith,” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Revised Standard Version, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 20A

nation.<sup>334</sup> Others offer alternative theories for Judith's inclusion in the deuterocanonical books (rather than the canonical text). In addition to its Greek composition and later date, Sidnie White Crawford and Toni Craven suggest that Judith's lesser status is a result of her autonomy in the context of her narrative: she is a threat to the system of patriarchy that puts personal wealth and control of women into the hands of men, not women. [15].<sup>335</sup> While Judith does seduce then dispatch Holofernes, she fails to evoke the fullness of the Andromeda theme of a female attaching herself to a stronger male to save herself from a life with a less-suitable male. Judith does not seek a child to further her husband's estate. Judith's concerns are not for herself or driven by any ambitious or romantic desires—they are for her town and her people. Judith merely feigns interest in Holofernes in order to bring about his death and not for the realization of her reproductive potential or for a more advantageous alliance. Her death does merit mention as she frees her faithful maid. In addition, we have a remarkable account of a woman distributing her property to her kin and being mourned by the community for seven days (Jdt 16.23-24).

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<sup>334</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation," 367-376.

<sup>335</sup> Toni Craven, "Judith 2," in *Women in Scripture*, 105; Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther Not Judith: Why One Made it and the Other Didn't," *Bible Review* 18 (February 2002): 45. Claudia Rakel argues that Judith's power must conform to established hegemonies of power: "A woman, whose beauty gives her such great power that she can bring about a man's death (even if it is the enemy commander), should not have unlimited use of this power. [Judith] must be made to return to the traditional role of women in her society so that she does not threaten continuance of the patriarchal hierarchy," Claudia Rakel, "'I Will Sing a New Song to My God': Some Remarks on the Intertextuality of Judith 16.1-17," in *Judges: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), note 94, 47.

#### 4.8 INTERPRETATION OF FEMALE HEROIC MODELS IN THE BIBLE

If one were to make an arbitrary baseline for what is considered more than a nominal ranking on this scale, one might require at least a 50% match for any character to be considered minimally heroic. Four of the stories (Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba) demonstrate at least 50% of Jezewski's characteristics and three of these—Tamar, Bathsheba and Ruth—rank even higher on Jezewski's trait chart: Tamar has a 72% match (13/18), Bathsheba and Ruth have a 67% match (12 out of 18 traits). Jezewski suggests that this better than 50% demonstration of traits represent a significant match, justifying recognition of these characters as examples of the female heroic.<sup>336</sup> The rest of the narratives score far lower on Jezewski's scale (well below 50%) than Lot's daughters, Bathsheba, Tamar or Ruth. Deborah, Esther (both 6 traits) and Judith (7 traits) demonstrate behaviors that are often considered valorous. Yet, if we adopt Jezewski's model as our standard, they probably cannot be considered heroic.

This method provides a standardized pattern for female heroism and locates it within several narratives within the Bible. These narratives show significant coherence to the model of the female heroic. With that in mind, we can make certain claims for women's narratives in the Bible, particularly Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba and, to a lesser extent, Lot's daughters.

Application of the Jezewski model places several biblical narratives more decisively within the female heroic category than others. But what does that mean? Does this standard impart anything new or insightful other than condensing these narratives to a set of traits? What nuance to our understanding of "hero" does it provide? Might this be a mere semantic shift—are we simply reducing these stories to a stock characterizations without fully considering the

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<sup>336</sup> Jezewski, 70-73.

context and richness of each tale? What justice—or injustice—do these tactics do to these stories?

Let us begin with the barren mothers of Genesis. While they are certainly intent upon their individual reproductive prerogatives, their stories fail to illustrate traits like the Andromeda theme that we find in Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba. The barren mothers of Genesis are certainly intent upon their individual reproductive prerogatives but their stories fail to further demonstrate female heroic traits like a woman doing a man's job or deeds. What is clear is that their narratives are intimately tied to the larger saga of the patriarchs with whom they share center-stage. Does that mean that Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel are not heroes? No, but in the context of this discussion, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba fit cross-cultural heroic models far better than the barren mothers do. Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba reproduce the attributes of female heroic narratives in a way that the barren mothers do not. Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba can therefore be identified as heroic characters based on their similarity to this external heroic standard.

Judith and Deborah appear more closely aligned with male models of heroism since their concerns are not reproductive but military in nature. Are Deborah and Judith therefore unheroic? Not at all—their valor is firmly established by the text. But because they do not demonstrate more of the female heroic traits, they fail to resonate as *female* heroes. Deborah's and Judith's stories focus on urging men to fulfill their masculine responsibilities and protect their communities. When the men fail to act, the women do, for the good of the community. Thus, Judith's and Deborah's heroism is not individualistic but public and political in nature.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> We will discuss this in greater depth in Chapter 6 but I am referring here specifically to claims of anthropologist Sherry Ortner who argues that the public domain of these sorts of civic concerns is associated with men. Thus, public political/ institutional life and concerns can be gendered as the masculine culture of the polis (and, in a corollary argument, the domestic concerns of the household can be gendered as feminine, and therefore of lesser

These female characters highlight a civic dynamic where their good efforts work to effect God's protection over the community. The female heroic includes similar aspects of women doing a man's job. However, it moves beyond the public sphere and includes aspects of marriage and children, matters profoundly associated with women. Judith and Deborah do not exhibit enough of the other traits to merit their inclusion in the female heroic standard. There is no mention of lovers or children in their stories, both very personal and female issues. And although both clearly manipulate men for their purposes, their reasons are not individualistic. They undertake their exemplary actions for the greater good of the community, something that seems more common to male heroes but less prevalent in female heroic stories.

Esther's story showcases court intrigue and the concerns of a community in exile while turning a blind eye to the problems of a Jew marrying a non-Jew. She is noted for her beauty, one of the marks of a female hero. But whatever treachery she conceives, whatever intrigue she contrives, these are not for her own ends but, like Deborah and Judith, on behalf of her community. Like Deborah and Judith, Esther's actions place her more firmly in the pantheon of national heroines rather than gender heroines. Esther is valorized for her efforts on behalf of her people in exile. The gendered aspects of her story—lovers, reproduction, children—do not appear. While gender plays a role in getting her into Ahasuerus's company, it is at the behest of others that Esther acts. Carey Moore even wonders if Esther would have shown any independence for herself without the person he considers the true hero of the story, Mordechai.<sup>338</sup>

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importance); see Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1972): 5-31.

<sup>338</sup> Carey Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions*. Anchor Bible 44 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), liii.

Thus we find that independent action, a mark of the female heroic, is one of the elements clearly identified in our four narratives. Lot's daughters, who only demonstrate 50% of the female heroic characteristics, present an interesting study in extremes: they act on their own behalf but through incest. That incest adds to the discomfort that we have with arguing for their valorous character. In Tamar's and Ruth's case, later interpretation will recast their initiative as important to Israel's self-identity as the underdog, the outsider or the chosen one. Bathsheba does not necessarily add to Israel's self-identification but her story enhances the picture of David as a crafty schemer and draws attention to the problems of the monarchy. Yet, in contrast to Deborah, Judith and Esther, here we find individual women acting alone to achieve their own "rescue."<sup>339</sup> And that rescue necessarily includes aspects of the bedtrick. Further, these narratives include an instance of the Andromeda theme: once they achieve the goal of their trickery (a man to provide them with a child), the man fades from their story. Therefore, their own small goals—not the goals of the community, the nation or history—are their focus. They do not look beyond themselves for help. We find that men become stock instruments in helping women succeed when reading these stories for the female heroic. A female hero is her own best defense against the limitations that are placed upon her. By that I mean what we find is that a female hero's martial array is upon her body, her battlefield is the metaphoric bedroom and victory lies with her alone.

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<sup>339</sup>These are common explanations; examples include Berlin, "Ruth and the Continuity of Israel," 255-260; Menn, 35-71; Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: a Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); Day, 109-127; on Bathsheba, see previous comments by Randall Bailey.

## 4.9 SIGNIFICANCE

Lot's daughters, Ruth, Bathsheba, Tamar find common cause with this gender-specific heroic trait motif. This motif in large measure highlights a female character's personal issues unlike the more nationalistic stories of Judith, Deborah and Esther. And in this identification, these narratives find confluence with other female narratives outside the biblical milieu. This particular gender symbolism moves these biblical female characters outside their role as informing our ideas regarding Israel's nationalistic or dynastic plot and into more dynamic roles that enlighten and expand our sense of the female heroic.<sup>340</sup>

These women are agents of their own destiny, limited only by the choices offered by the narrative confines in which we find them. Their valor lies in *achieving*; in this case, the means to that end simply supplies the mettle for the heroic feminine. Heroism lies in their resourcefulness and their individual initiative. Their battle implements lie upon—and within—themselves.

There is an interest in casting these gender comparisons as power studies –what Nehama Aschkenasy calls "uncovering the voice of the marginalized by deconstructing a reading from the exclusive point of view of the ruling class..."<sup>341</sup> For example, Judith's narrative exemplifies the power of the underdog who triumphs. Judith, a mere woman, overcomes a far superior enemy not by force of arms but by drink and guile. We *want* Judith to be a gender hero. And in some sense, she is: she does something that the men of her Bethulia either cannot or will not. She slays the beast and returns again, like Cincinnatus, to take up her widow's weeds in perpetuity, claiming no status or glory for herself. Other than the mere hint of sexual promise, she is secure

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<sup>340</sup> Berlin, "Characterization," 73.

<sup>341</sup> Nehama Aschkenasy, "Reading Ruth Through a Bakhtinian Lens: the Carnavalesque in a Biblical Tale," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 3 (2007): 439.

in her role as a national hero, but not as a female hero. This process tells us that her story does not exhibit that cadre of female traits that places her among cross-cultural female heroic characters.

What then is the significance of these findings? Does this process improve or enrich our understanding of these texts? Are we gleaning new information or new appreciations that have not previously been realized?

First, I would argue that we have reclaimed a method for reading women's narratives together. By comparing women's stories to other women's stories within the Bible, we discover parallels and coherence without reference to larger discussions of power or authority encoded by the Bible. This approach frees our interpretation from reiterating ideological notions of what the text claims women are doing (that is, serving God or institutional Israel's larger purposes).

This new perspective also significantly enhances the textual polyvalence of the Bible. The identification of the female heroic is simply one meaning among many meanings that we find in the Bible. This process is not intended to overwrite or supersede previous meanings. It stands against ideological and theological readings as the preferred reading and suggests that a gendered approach offers a wider array of meanings. This is one alternative reading among many; in that regard, the identification of the female heroic robustly embraces the textual ambiguities of the Bible. The symphony of interpretations works together and presents a multidimensional, multilayered text. Looking at these narratives as evidence for a female heroic adds to the contested meanings that we locate in the Bible.

Finally, if the addition of the female heroic adds to the polyvalence of the Bible, neglect of this heroic typology impoverishes our view of women. Locating a female heroic deeply enriches our appreciation of these narratives. We now have a standard by which to identify

female narratives and a way of reading that compares female narratives to other female narratives. To leave this typology aside is to once again reduce these female characters down to stock figures, with no independent identification beyond that which is assigned them by later editors and redactors. Our table of traits, modified from Jezewski's list for the biblical narratives, is below:

**Figure 7. The Female Biblical Heroic (Collins)**

1. Little is known of her childhood
2. She can be charming or beautiful
3. She uses men for her own purposes
4. Her story includes the bedtrick, an instance of individual initiative focused on sexual trickery or deception
5. She is married
6. She has a son
7. She has lovers
8. Her child's story continues on after her
9. She does a man's job or deeds
10. Removal or de-emphasis of the male figure after the birth of the son
11. Her death is hardly ever noted
12. Her actions are morally ambiguous and there are conflicting views of her goodness.

Now that we have firmly isolated these stories and identified heroic elements in the stories of Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba, we can read these stories together and pose new questions of these narratives. It is not my intent to argue that we should remove these

narratives completely from the Bible and make any sort of wide, universalistic claims regarding the valorous nature of their sexual intrigue, for example. In this context, the female heroic identification serves as a heuristic, not as a broad, popular notion. Thus, to further our investigation of the female heroic in the Bible, I wonder if we can say more about its unique presentation in these four stories. How does the Bible's heroic model uniquely represent this trope? What differences or qualifications do our four stories offer on this model, and if there are differences, are they significant? Ultimately, are there enough similarities between our four stories to argue that there is an authentic biblical female heroic, distinct in some way from cross-cultural models? And if so, what does that mean?

Our next step is to read these four stories together in order to find patterns of language and action that enhance the typological heroic relationship between them. Through charting the narrative structure, plot elements and language down to particular words, we find a related thematic cycle to the stories. Certain common themes, such as the lack of men or the presence of words like *agunah* and motifs of cleaving, argue for their linked character. This related cycle also does not depend upon levirate themes or dynastic concerns, but in the context of the four narratives, we find individual ingenuity and action rising to the fore as one of its overriding themes. The symbolic links between the narratives propose that we can deepen our appreciation for these as gendered narratives by reading them together. The next phase of this discussion will add to the catalog of contested meanings in the Bible and intends to enrich the discussion of women. Through reading these four stories together, we can uncover a heuristic device unique to the Bible's depiction of women and can thus argue for a distinctive female heroic in the Bible. It is to that discussion that we now turn.

## 5.0 READING THE STORIES TOGETHER

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will continue my literary analysis of these four stories by reading them together. I will place them side-by-side without reference to any other outside texts (including biblical narratives) in order to observe deeper similarities between the stories themselves that might otherwise be missed. This comparison takes a two-pronged path. First we will find various parallel structures emerging. Other scholars have noticed some similitude, like motifs of trickery and leave-taking. But other motifs—like negotiation and its more emotional cognate, bargaining, for or by these women—emerge more fully via this comparison.<sup>342</sup> Furthermore, once we have identified these parallel textual events, they raise further questions about the meaning and significance of these events. By isolating these stories in this way, I find significant typological similarities between the women in these stories.

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<sup>342</sup> We will discuss this in detail below but to clarify: instances of negotiating refer to impersonal transactions of a more businesslike nature. These would include Judah and Tamar's working out payment for her sexual services or Boaz's marketplace negotiations for Elimelech's land and Ruth. Bargaining entails a more emotionally-charged personal drama. In these interactions we find a boundary experience, a place where a character's fate depends upon the outcome of a sensitive transaction even though that character might not even be present for the interaction. Examples of this are David's efforts to get Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba or Ruth cleaving to Naomi on the border between Moab and Bethlehem. The difference between them hinges upon fate: the fate of the narrative's plot depends upon a successful outcome to the negotiations. A character's fate (in some instances, their life or their death) depends upon how the instance of bargaining goes.

## 5.2 MONOPOLIZATION AND READING TOGETHER

The “monopolization of biblical meaning” is a term used by Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn in describing a biblical reading where one infers an omniscient narrator who has a clearly evident ideological emphasis. Reading with this sort of ideological bias, Fewell and Gunn argue, forces ensuing conclusions into established, ideological meanings: “That every resolution of [biblical] ambiguity, for example, should result in the same ideological conclusion is inherently improbable.”<sup>343</sup> In reducing the Bible to an ideological narrative, the authors suggest that scholars are no better than fundamentalist readers who cannot suffer alternative readings even in the face of an obviously complex and ambiguous biblical narrator.<sup>344</sup>

Identifying the female heroic within the Bible provides one avenue of release from that “monopolization of meaning.” When we look for new links among these four stories, we discover alternative readings to entrenched ideological interpretations. This alternate approach has its ideological anchor in feminist perspectives on the heroic and offers the best chance for allowing the stories’ meanings to emerge without reproducing the Bible’s larger political or institutional concerns. As Fewell and Gunn argue, new readings do not claim to represent *the one* right reading. However, I do argue that this is a competent, viable and underappreciated alternative response to the text.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Tipping the Balance: Sternberg’s Reader and the Rape of Dinah,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110:2 (Summer 1991): 194.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

### 5.2.1 Typology

My analysis looks for patterns of similarity in action, motivation or theme—in a word, *typology*. I recognize that this is a somewhat problematic term in biblical analysis. I am not using typology in the Christian sense—that is, I am not reading Old Testament figures as symbolically prefiguring New Testament characters. I do not see Old Testament “types” as symbolically foreshadowing Jesus, which is how this term is often understood in biblical contexts. Instead, I am looking for structural or thematic patterns of language and action without reference to future or past biblical history. I am simply identifying symbolic relationships. My focus is on discovering meanings that exist between texts that might otherwise escape notice. I believe these symbolic similarities foster new textual associations of meaning.

This idea of reading texts in isolation from larger contexts arises in part from the language theories of literary critics Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, who find that “text intersects with other texts,” creating mosaics of meaning.<sup>346</sup> Symbolic relationships, repetitions and similarities can be isolated and analyzed for what they allow the reader to observe. Identifiable textual markers serve as signs—and, according to Kristeva, these signs prompt potentialities of meaning that lie not outside the text but rather between the text and the reader.<sup>347</sup> I favor this approach because the “potentiality of meanings” have not been fully exhausted in these stories.

Take, for example, a comparative discussion of Ruth. Her story serves as the lynchpin for structural comparisons between Genesis 19 and Genesis 38 for two leading scholars, Harold Fisch and Jack Sasson. I will look closely at their analyses since they both isolate texts and

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<sup>346</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T. Moi (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1986), 35-36.

<sup>347</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Semeiotikē. Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Du Seuil, 1969), 82-83.

compare them side-by-side. Their conclusions range among the standard interpretation of these stories (levirate marriage and redemption of the Davidic line). Because their concern is salvation-history and/or dynastic antecedents, the gendered elements of these stories have been overlooked. Fisch and Sasson do not read these as gendered texts (that is, texts that tell us something about women) and therefore, many of the behaviors or characteristics that adhere to the women in these stories are glossed over or unrealized in their analysis.<sup>348</sup>

This kind of analysis tends not to rely on historical processes of textual development or authorial intent; this is not an effort to establish how one text came to be in the corpus or how one text successfully influenced another. Rather, according to Harold Fisch, this reading together approach finds texts in dynamic conversation with one another. Here is Fisch defining for his readers what he feels the intertextual process is and how he will be using it in his arguments for Ruth's dependence upon Genesis 19 and 38 as a related cycle of texts:

This is the method of "intertextuality" ... We are not here doing historical criticism in the orthodox sense; we are not speaking of the priority of sources, or disentangling documents reflecting different historical periods from which the text is thought to be constituted... We are talking rather about a dynamic of relationships between texts by means of which time and history may be seized with any aid from archaeological or other extra-textual evidences.<sup>349</sup>

I am adapting some of this approach but I am not technically embracing intertextuality's methodologies or claims (thus my reluctance to use that term in this context). As I read Kristeva,

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<sup>348</sup> As previously stated, I define a gendered text as one that is read and mined for what it tells us about women through their unique characterization, actions, words or impact. Therefore, stories where women abound may not necessarily be gendered texts (since there may not necessarily be enough characterization and actions in the text to inform our notions of women) but many stories where women play significant roles can be analyzed for their gendered elements and therefore, represent texts that can be gendered, or gendered texts.

<sup>349</sup> Fisch, 436.

intertextuality refers to the intentional shaping of a later text by an earlier one (although literary critic William Irwin claims that the term intertextuality has become so muddled it has lost much of Kristeva's original meaning and power).<sup>350</sup> I am not arguing whether any of our four narratives depend upon one another for their composition. Rather, I am simply isolating them and reading them together in order to identify similarities.

Thus, I will build on Fisch and Sasson's structural method. I will adopt their method but will privilege gender as my overriding concern in reading these stories. This approach will accomplish several things: first, it will allow us to see the larger parallels between these four stories. Second, these parallels raise questions about meaning and purpose that we might not otherwise realize—questions about the meaning of the women themselves and what we see now that perhaps was not previously evident. We will ask additional questions about the role of deceit and how we are to make sense of that. Furthermore, the symbolic issue of redemption is addressed—that is, this process redeems whom or better, what? Finally, due to Bathsheba's identification with the female heroic in the previous chapter, I will add Bathsheba to the mix and attempt to identify the similarities in motif and action among these four narratives.

All these questions add to apprehension of and appreciation for an identifiable, authentic female heroic in the Bible.

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<sup>350</sup> William Irwin, "Against Intertextuality," *Philosophy and Literature* 28, no. 2 (October 2004): 227-242.

### 5.3 RUTH AS STARTING POINT

While there are many stories about biblical women as mothers and sisters, there are few daughter-centered narratives in the Bible. A reader is left with relatively few measures of comparison and contrast. In Genesis 19, the daughters of Lot are not just the ancestresses of Moab and therefore, Ruth; in fact, their only identifying moniker is that of daughter. In Genesis 38, we find another daughter (more specifically, *kallah*, or daughter-in-law) in Tamar.<sup>351</sup> Like Ruth, she lacks identification as anyone's particular daughter or wife or mother (although she is her father-in-law Judah's economic and social responsibility). She also experiences events—like Bathsheba and Lot's daughters—that suggest an affinity between the stories: scenes of bargaining and negotiation, no available men, deception and sexual intrigue resulting in an unconventional pregnancy. Furthermore, together these four accounts offer a non-traditional view of biblical women: daughters who demonstrate loyalty, righteousness and loving-kindness. For these women, laboring as have-nots is valorized. These are women of initiative who work within the system to find solutions. In fact, even foreign-born daughters can become children of Israel itself. As a result, they can work to alter the reader's ideas about female children in a world of abundantly patriarchal values.

Consequently, proceeding with a structural view of these narratives advances our comparative approach. Two scholars—Harold Fisch and Jack Sasson—have done this structural work with Ruth and Genesis 19, arguing that both narratives seem “inescapably loaded with the sense of history.” Both stories present the account of a particular family line and demonstrate

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<sup>351</sup> *Strong's Concordance* gives bride as the first meaning of *kallah* and daughter-in-law as its secondary meaning. Interestingly, *kallah* is used seven times to refer to Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth; *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, s.v. “3618. כלה *kallah*.”

remarkable symmetry and parallelism.<sup>352</sup> Yet that remarkable history gets interpreted in different ways with markedly dissimilar conclusions concerning both redemption and the narrative power of these stories.

Through this comparative method we discover that the Bathsheba and Tamar narratives also include some of the same characteristic motifs and actions that Fisch and Sasson uncover in Ruth and Genesis 19. Thus, we begin our typological study with Fisch and Sasson's work. Their categories prompt us to expand our reading beyond Ruth and Genesis 19 to include Tamar and Bathsheba as we move towards uncovering the distinctive picture of the female heroic in the Bible.

#### **5.4 HAROLD FISCH, JACK SASSON AND A STRUCTURAL APPROACH**

Fisch offers a structural outline for the confluence of similarities in what he calls “the Ruth corpus” (Lot's daughters, Tamar of Genesis 38 and Ruth). Starting with the destruction of Sodom and ending in the birth of David, Fisch concludes that the Ruth corpus provides clear genealogical proof for the messianic line in general and the ascendancy of David in particular. His close textual analysis of related narrative structures provides evidence of Israel's salvation history narrative.<sup>353</sup> Fisch's categories highlight what he terms “historical drama”—these men and women are not interchangeable plot devices but unique narrative figures.<sup>354</sup> For example, he finds literary evolution in the synchronic movement from a relatively crude sexual encounter

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<sup>352</sup> Fisch, 425, 427.

<sup>353</sup> His categories include descent, disaster, “*agunah*-theme (abandonment), redemption, bedtrick, celebration, levirate union and issue (birth of sons); *ibid.*, 433-436.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 431-432.

in Genesis 19 to the veiled roadside seduction of Judah to the highly nuanced and darkly symbolic seduction of Boaz by Ruth. In these, says Fisch, we find “the crossroads of [biblical] history,” the justification for viewing these as connected narratives as much for their evolving structural correlation as for the genealogical ones.<sup>355</sup> Fisch concludes by suggesting that the literary dynamic between texts can elicit as much—or maybe more—than strict historical-critical analysis of this material:

The Ruth-Boaz story is the means of “redeeming” the entire corpus and of inserting it into the pattern of *Heilsgeschichte* [salvation history]. Ruth establishes a new kind of language for understanding what has gone before, so that a full exegesis of the stories of Lot and Judah requires reference to the story of Ruth and, conversely, the story of Ruth looks back to these earlier paradigms and forward to what is to be disclosed in the story of the house of David.<sup>356</sup>

Applying a similar structural methodology, Jack Sasson analyzes Ruth by applying the heroic motifs of Vladimir Propp. While Ruth fails to rise to the morphological levels set out by Propp, Sasson still identifies some powerful heroic elements. In Sasson’s system (and adopting Propp’s categories—see Appendix B), Ruth serves as the true hero, Boaz is the “magical agent,” Obed is the *go’el* and Naomi becomes the dispatcher/beneficiary of Ruth’s activities since she serves in as Ruth’s encourager and ultimately, her mentor.<sup>357</sup> Sasson finds little satisfaction in levirate explanations for Ruth. Instead, he sees the beginnings of the Davidic cycle by categorizing Ruth as the protracted birth narrative of Obed. While Ruth is instrumental to this process, ultimately this is the story of the Davidic dynasty.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 433-435.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 436.

<sup>357</sup> Sasson, *Ruth*, 201.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 129.

While Sasson's argument—that Obed inaugurates a new family line that accomplishes many great and heroic things—enlightens the story, *it does not respect Ruth's place in the narrative*.<sup>359</sup> It fails to consider Ruth's character as a unique piece of Israelite storytelling, with significant clues and typological links to other narratives in the Hebrew Bible. Sasson's eagerness to emphasize the Davidic dynasty overshadows other elements in the narrative. Sasson has done a splendid job of cross-cultural analysis, but does not necessarily provide a picture of Ruth on her own merits.

Fisch convincingly argues that the Ruth narrative redeems the related narratives that have come before it textually. To Fisch, Ruth represents a far more sophisticated narrative correction to the earlier Lot and Tamar stories. The crude depiction of Lot's family's incest to Tamar's more subtle maneuver finds its fullest development in Ruth. This dynamic of relationships leads us to the House of David and a robust image of the House of Judah. I agree with Fisch's methodology and his claim that we need to read Ruth in light of Lot's daughters—but with some modification. This analysis need not favor one narrative as more or less mature or advanced than the other. Further, Fisch claims that the diachronic elements are absolutely essential to analyzing this corpus.<sup>360</sup> This does not ring true as an essential element to our approach. The change over time from one text to another is outside our comparative concern about gender and the heroic. For our purposes, what connects Ruth and Lot's daughters as well as Tamar (and Bathsheba) has to do with what they accomplish in common as well as how they uniquely achieve those things.

For comparative purposes, the result of Fisch and Sasson's study is that Ruth, Genesis 38 and Lot's daughters are profoundly connected to one another by the structural similarities of their stories. Looking simply at the structure as we find it in the stories themselves, we find that those

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<sup>359</sup> Sasson, *Ruth*, 213.

<sup>360</sup> Fisch, 433.

similarities often have very little to do with larger dynastic concerns. Further, I would contend that Bathsheba also finds textual correlation to these four stories.

Finally, the categories of *agunah*/abandonment, deceit, the bedtrick and unconventional pregnancies all manifest themselves in some way in these female narratives. Yet, both Fisch and Sasson focus on the masculine aspects of these narratives, such as heroic genealogy, salvation-history, the disclosure of the House of David and covenant. Fisch and Sasson seek to shoehorn these female narratives into male-centered concerns of the text. These are stories where men take center stage and demonstrate their roles as conversational participants with YHWH, message runners and conduits for God's special purposes.<sup>361</sup> Fisch never strays from the external elements of Israelite religion, most clearly personified in the covenant promises made not to Sarah, but to Abraham. Both Fisch and Sasson miss the gender elements and thus, the richness of women of ingenuity, initiative and, as we shall see, redemption of the various roles that a gendered biblical experience can take.

## **5.5 LOT'S DAUGHTERS, TAMAR, RUTH AND BATHSHEBA: A STRUCTURAL APPROACH**

Following the lead of Fisch, I offer an approach that outlines parallels in all four of our texts, with a special emphasis on gender. In addition, I borrow two of Fisch's categories—bedtrick and

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<sup>361</sup> Day, 123.

*agunah* motif—as illustrative categories for my purposes. The bedtrick we have discussed elsewhere but the *agunah* theme requires a bit of explanation. Fisch defines the *agunah* theme as

the theme of the woman abandoned or widowed and unable, as a result, to continue the line of the generations. And the solution in each case is along the same lines. A father or father-figure becomes responsible for the perpetuation of the family, although the initiative in all three narratives is taken by the widow/daughter herself who secretly or by guile offers herself to the ‘father.’<sup>362</sup>

I understand Fisch to mean that he is not limiting this theme simply to the narrow legalistic understanding of a woman who is not technically allowed to take another husband but rather is expanding it within the confines of these narratives to include *male abandonment* as a motivating factor behind their eventual trickery/guile of the daughters/widows. Their unmarriageable status is understood; the term *agunah* encompasses the fact that their husbands are either dead or have abandoned them. But this theme takes in the emotional reality that there are also men who could or should be providing for these women but are not. Thus, the *agunah* theme incorporates an inclusive sense of the strict legal and emotional limitations placed upon marriageable women as a decisive motivating factor in their later deeds. This makes their guile/trickery all the more remarkable since it is the women who are contriving to actively work around these restrictions.

My charge therefore is to trace shared elements across all four narratives. Focusing on similarities allows us to more clearly identify these narratives as examples of the female heroic in the Bible (Figure 8).

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<sup>362</sup> Fisch, 429.

**Figure 8. Parallels Between Lot's Daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba**

<b>PARALLELS BETWEEN LOT'S DAUGHTERS, TAMAR, RUTH AND BATHSHEBA</b>			
<b>Lot's Daughters</b>	<b>Tamar</b>	<b>Ruth</b>	<b>Bathsheba</b>
Leave-taking	Leave-taking	Leave-taking	Leave-taking
Lot leaves for Sodom	Tamar leaves home for Judah's household	Ruth and Naomi leave Moab for Bethlehem	Bathsheba leaves her home for the palace
Negotiating	Negotiating	Negotiating	Negotiating
Lot offers daughters to the mob	Tamar negotiates terms of sex with Judah	Boaz negotiates for land and Ruth in marketplace	Bathsheba negotiates with David for Solomon's succession
Death of three	Death of three	Death of three	Death of three
Two daughters and wife die in Sodom	Husbands Er and Onan die; Judah's wife dies	Mahlon, Chilion and Elimilech die	Uriah, unnamed baby and Adonijah die
Bargaining	Bargaining	Bargaining	Bargaining
Lot bargains with God outside Zoar	Tamar bargains for her life; sends Judah his personal effects in response to his outrage at her pregnancy	Ruth pleads with Naomi outside Bethlehem, pledging her devotion	Uriah and David bargain over Uriah's return home to Bathsheba
Almanah/Agunah	Almanah/Agunah	Almanah/Agunah	Almanah/Agunah
Daughters think there are no men left after Sodom's destruction	Tamar sent home to father's house to live as a widow; Shelah not forthcoming as husband	Naomi and Ruth both widows	Bathsheba's husband is off at war but she is quickly widowed
Bedtrick	Bedtrick	Bedtrick	Bedtrick
Wine and incest lead to sex with Lot	Tamar entices Judah	Ruth goes to Boaz's threshing floor	Bathsheba bathes in David's sight
Birth of son(s)	Birth of son(s)	Birth of son(s)	Birth of son(s)
Birth of Moab and Ammon	Birth of Perez and Zerah	Birth of Obed	Birth of Solomon

### 5.5.1 Seven Similar Narrative Events

We find seven narrative events that link all four of our stories together (leave-taking; negotiation; death of three; bargaining; *agunah/almanah* motif; bedtrick; and, birth of son). I believe these events are neither coincidental nor generic; they are too specific and too numerous to be either. Instead, I feel these parallel events indicate the shared nature of these stories and their female characters. For instance, all our characters are taken out of their known situation and put into a new environment; all are vulnerable in some way; all experience deaths close to them; and, most importantly, all characters make choices to act—either at the time or later—in order to secure something for themselves. This cannot be overstated: rather than being seen as stock characters or simple devices in service to a larger plot, these women are active participants in their destiny. Therefore, it is not by chance that their stories share elements; these stories have common traits because their lead characters have common traits.

Before we outline these shared events, I want to define certain terms. *Leave-taking* refers to the physical movement of our characters from one geographic place to another. Two other closely related events occur in all of our stories: *bargaining* and *negotiation*. I define negotiating in these contexts as strictly business-type transactions—an impersonal, straightforward exchange of property, persons or money, often with attendant concerns for public prestige. These interactions can be initiated by either the men or the women in the stories and tend occur at practical junctures. I intend to make a distinction here between these more detached operations and more emotionally-charged, strident personal dealings, which I call bargaining. Bargaining in this context focuses on personal dramas fueled by emotional concerns

for intimacy, affection, paternity and survival. Both of these actions occur in the context of our stories. The *agunah* motif (an unmarriageable state brought about in this context by male abandonment) and *almanah* (widowhood) motif also appear in all four stories as well as the deaths of three persons, the bedtrick and the birth of son(s). Analysis of these various structural elements finds us looking at these stories in new ways as we seek to uncover the women within these shared events.

#### **5.5.1.1 Leave-taking**

Both Lot's family as well as Elimelech and Naomi leave Israel for foreign climes, suggesting their alienation from Israel. Tamar leaves her natal household for Judah's to be married, and leaves her father's home to go to the entrance to Enaim in order to entice Judah (Genesis 38.14). Bathsheba also leaves her household at David's request twice—first, at his summons after he espies her at her bath (2 Sam 11.4); second, after the death of Uriah (2 Sam. 11.26).

#### **5.5.1.2 Negotiating**

This refers to business/commerce interactions intended to preserve or enhance the male prestige or status with little attendant emotional investment. Bargains concern strict transactions focused on exchange—persons, money, items. This type of commerce includes property issues as well as securing one's rights or maintaining one's public reputation in the community. Often this negotiation appears at a practical juncture in the story.

Lot's experience with the mob provides an example of this. He offers his daughters to the violent crowd in order to save his own prestige ("let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my

roof,” Genesis 19:8). He shows himself to be shortsighted (a play on the meaning of his name, “a covering” or “veil”) by failing to recognize the two men within his home as angelic visitors.<sup>363</sup> Even the crowd mocks him and his aspirations to be one of them (“This fellow came to sojourn, and now he would play the judge!” Genesis 19:9). He is saved only by divine intervention, not because of anything that he does, but presumably because of Abraham’s entreaties in the previous chapter. Lot therefore is the *anti-go’el*: he redeems no one; his efforts prove pathetic at best and shameful at worst. He will find one rape substituted for another as the narrative unfolds.

In Tamar’s account, we find a terse business exchange. Before Tamar will agree to have sex with him, Judah must provide Tamar with some tangible pledge of future payment. He promises to later deliver a kid from his flock, secured by his ring, staff and signet. In a single verse, they both agree and the sexual transaction takes place (Genesis 38:18). He in fact keeps his side of the deal: he later sends his friend the Adullamite to deliver the kid to the non-existent courtesan (Genesis 38:20).<sup>364</sup>

In the bargaining event in Ruth, all the actors perform in honorable ways. The unnamed kinsman of Elimelech intends to redeem the land of his dead relative. Boaz, as arbiter of these transactions, takes slight advantage of the situation, insisting upon marriage to Ruth for the unnamed male relative when normally such a thing would not be expected. The kinsman is unable to fulfill this added obligation; to do so might impoverish his estate. Boaz, in this

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<sup>363</sup> Admittedly, Abraham also fails to recognize these as angelic visitors (Genesis 18), a necessary requirement for the folkloric motif of hospitality to a magical stranger (see Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publications, 2006), 134-136). However, in this instance, given the descriptive connotation behind Lot’s name, his failure to grasp that these mysterious strangers are powerful divine messengers provides additional and significant insight into his character (beyond simply alerting the reader to the folkloric convention).

<sup>364</sup> Judah refers to her as a common harlot (*zonah*; 38:15). Hiram the Adullamite refers to her as a cult prostitute, or *qedesha* (38:21).

instance, serves as the public *go'el*, the one who redeems Ruth and Naomi through these proceedings.

Bathsheba conspires with the prophet Nathan to bargain with David in order to secure Solomon's place on the throne. At Nathan's urging, she appears before the enfeebled king, reminding David that he swore by the Lord his God that Solomon should reign after him (1 Kings 1.17). She negotiates with David for her son's ascendancy, citing his promises on Solomon's behalf, and later, negotiates with that same son Solomon on behalf of his half-brother for the dead king's concubine. In each instance, she looks both innocent and clever, her interior thoughts and motivations unavailable to us.

### **5.5.1.3 Death of Three**

This occurrence appears in all four stories. In the Lot narrative, we find two of Lot's married daughters perishing in Sodom as the hellfire rains down. Lot, his unnamed wife and the two unmarried daughters are forcibly sent from the city by angels whereupon—despite warnings—his wife looks back; she becomes a pillar of salt, preserving forever her backward gaze. Thus three women die and Lot and his two remaining daughters depart.

In Tamar's story, husbands Er and Onan die early on—Er for some unnamed wickedness, Onan for spilling his seed. Later, Judah's unnamed wife also dies. After her death—and perhaps spurred by loneliness—Judah, on his way to the raucous sheep-shearing festivities, contracts the faux harlot Tamar.

In the Ruth tale, the death of three comes after the family's leave-taking from Judah. These named men—Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion—all die in Moab. The sons in fact have been married to Moabite women for ten years without issue, suggesting their sickly or infertile

states (since Ruth clearly can bear children).<sup>365</sup> When famine/disaster strikes Moab, Naomi leaves Moab. Like Lot, her household now includes two unmarried women beside herself.

During the course of Bathsheba's tale we also find three male deaths. First her husband Uriah dies; then, the unnamed baby from her illicit relationship with David. Finally, Adonijah, the contender that threatens her son's place on the throne, is killed. She begins the process (deliberately or not is unclear) that ends with Adonijah's death at Solomon's hands by asking for David's concubine Abishag on his behalf (1 Kings 2). In an indirect way, she is connected to all of these deaths. She does not order Uriah's death; David does. She plays a role in the unnamed baby's conception but God appears only to David to foretell of the infant's impending death (2 Sam. 12:14). Finally, she asks not for Adonijah's death but for David's concubine, Abishag, on Adonijah's behalf. More than the other three women, Bathsheba remains an ambiguous character. Ultimately, Irene Nowell feels the biblical narrator is far more concerned about David's moral presence than Bathsheba's role in any of this although is it Bathsheba who pays the price: "The narrator focuses the story on David; Bathsheba remains a mystery ... Nonetheless, she suffers for David's sins: both her husband and her baby die."<sup>366</sup> And, I would argue, Bathsheba also plays a role in Adonijah's death. Her entreaties to Solomon spell death for the requesting half-brother.

#### **5.5.1.4 Bargaining**

In this context, bargaining is a more emotionally-charged transaction than the businesslike, public negotiating. Here we find interactions that focus on personal dramas

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<sup>365</sup> Mahlon translates literally as "to blot out" and Chilion as "to perish." These names serve as markers to alert the reader to the shadowy, feeble nature of these husbands.

<sup>366</sup> Irene Nowell, "Jesus' Great-Grandmothers: Matthew's Four and More," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70:1 (January 2008): 8.

involving intimacy, survival, affection and paternity. This is also an essential part of what I will later identify as the core narrative undergirding all four accounts.

For the Lot narrative, a plaintive boundary bargaining occurs on the Zoar plains, where Lot balks at going up to the mountain. Instead he negotiates with God for a different place of safety. Lot asks, "...Behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtake (*dbq*) me, and I die" (Genesis 19.19).<sup>367</sup> This is an emotionally charged exchange: Lot stands on a poignant precipice between destruction and the unknown. Lot hides in a cave outside of Zoar and will not enter the city out of fear that some unknown evil (*ra'*, or evil, misery or unhappiness) will cling (*dbq*) to him. Lot fears for himself: he anxiously seeks release from further harm. Whether Lot pleads for liberation from either physical or emotional hurt is unclear: that which clings to Lot at this moment could be the fear of further destruction or an emotional plea for no more personal misery. It could be both.

Tamar's bargaining represents a high-stakes gamble. Judah's honor has been sullied by the report of Tamar's pregnancy. He calls her out (presumably from her father's house as she has been sent from Judah's household) to a public place for her punishment. She plays her trump card—Judah's personal effects—negotiating now not for a place of physical safety but for her very life. In this situation, not unlike Genesis 19, the men emerge as less righteous than the women. She successfully gambles and spares not only her own life but that of her unborn children, winning for all of them the place of honor denied to them by Judah.

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<sup>367</sup> We will spend some time looking at this word and its nuances in depth later in the chapter. For the moment and in the context of Genesis 19, *dbq* carries the sense of a causative: to cause the LORD's disaster to adhere or cling to him in an entirely undesirable way.

Ruth and Naomi's bargaining occur at the boundary to safety, the land of Judah. At Naomi's insistence, Orpah reluctantly decides to return to her mother's house (*bet em*), rather than the conventional father's house. After that we find Ruth's stunning and moving "Entreat me not to leave you ... for where you go I will go" speech (Ruth 1.16-18) whereby she vows her willingness to adopt Naomi's god, Naomi's people and even to die with Naomi. Unlike Lot, she declares affection like a child for a parent: I will be what you are, do what you do, go where you go, believe what you believe. Lot fears that some unknown evil or misery adheres (*dbq*) to him; Ruth's narrator employs clinging (*dbq*) to express Ruth's emotional connection to Naomi. She will remain steadfast to this Israelite mother-in-law, even unto death. Ruth's affection impels her towards attachment; Lot's fears cause him to shun connection.

For Bathsheba, the bargaining most directly concern David and Uriah, with Bathsheba as the indirect pawn of these dealings. She inhabits an uncomfortable social boundary insofar as she is married and pregnant but we, the reader, know that she is not pregnant by her lawful husband. Ultimately, the issue is who will take paternity for her unborn baby even though Uriah is unaware that there is an unborn baby involved. But in this tale, it is Uriah who is more righteous, not David and not Bathsheba.<sup>368</sup> Over several evenings, the king urges the soldier to visit his wife for conjugal pleasures. Uriah does not openly defy the king but neither does he visit Bathsheba. Despite David's considerable efforts to get Uriah to sleep with his wife, Uriah remains constant. As a result, David's bargaining is unsuccessful. By this act of loyalty Uriah seals his fate, the fate of his wife's unborn child and David's later conviction of his sin (2 Sam. 11.6-26).

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<sup>368</sup> In Genesis 38, clearly Tamar is the stated "most righteous one" in her story. In Genesis 19, there seems to be no one who is righteous. It would be difficult to argue that there is anything righteous about the efforts of Lot's daughters *unless* one conjectures that they represent young, innocent girls who feel that they are in desperate circumstances. In this, they more fully symbolize their father's dimness rather than moral corruption on their part.

### 5.5.1.5 Almanah/ Agunah motif

The *agunah*, or unmarriageable woman, motif is closely related to the designation of *almanah*, or widow. Three of our women are widows—Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba. In all instances we find that either male indolence or the lack of men motivates them to act. Thus it would seem that this is a significant element of our stories. Yet, we will find that one—*agunah*—is a more cogent designation for our women than the other (*almanah*).

As previously noted, the designation *agunah* refers to a wife who has been abandoned or widowed and is thus unable to carry on her husband's line. The true widow, or *almanah*, inhabits an equally socially unembedded status. Carolyn Leeb expands upon this distinction and claims that a widow occupies a precarious existence, one that is not socially controlled, circumscribed, restricted or protected by a husband, son, father or uncle. To modern sensibilities, this might seem liberating: a woman outside male oversight, able to at last claim her life as her own. However, for ancient women, to be *almanah* means trying to survive within a meager social support network by depending upon the charitable impulses of their neighbors. Such a life results in a desperate, hard-scrabble existence where no one person is responsible for the widow since technically all are responsible for her.<sup>369</sup> For Leeb, to be *almanah* specifically

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<sup>369</sup> The Bible, and the book of Deuteronomy in particular, is filled with exhortations for the community to care for the widow, orphan and stranger and provides an elaborate charitable social network for its poorest and least protected citizens. For example, Ex. 22:22 says, "You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child;" Deut 24:17 says, "You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge; Deuteronomy 26:13, "Then you shall say before the LORD your God, 'I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all the commandments which you have given me.'" However, these are not politically legislated social services but rather theologically driven. One is to care for the indigent because the Lord God cared for Israel and brought them out of Egypt for they were once strangers in a strange land (Ex. 22:21; Levs. 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19). Such charity depends upon the amount of religious obligation felt by individuals and thus, widows, orphans and strangers really did depend upon the kindnesses of others for this sort of support.

refers to a woman's more less economic and social status: "[She has] no secure attachment to a household headed by an adult male, in which she can be protected and represented."<sup>370</sup>

Such would seem to be the case with our women. However, Leeb notes, Bathsheba is never called *almanah*, even after Uriah's death. Neither are Ruth and Naomi, where—especially in Naomi's case—it would be most appropriate since she is past child-bearing age, another mark in Leeb's opinion of the true *almanah*.<sup>371</sup> In Tamar's story, Leeb notes the identifying category of *almanah* is not applied. Rather, Leeb argues, Tamar is commanded by Judah to live as if she were a widow in her father's house, even though in fact she *is* a widow twice over and Judah still has economic responsibility for her, not her biological father.<sup>372</sup>

Leeb's clarification of biblical widowhood argues that the truest expression of widowhood is a post-menopausal woman without clan ties to a supportive social and economic network. This is Naomi. However, young and reproductively viable women such as Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba do not inhabit that role. And while all three women live in households without male headship, it would seem that they live in proximity to an abundance of men. Therefore, they suffer more acutely from a lack of *available* males (or available males who are unable or willing to act) rather than from their status as widows.

Interestingly, Lot's daughters find themselves in a situation that closely mirrors *almanah*—they are pre-menopausal women without family connections. They live ostensibly in an unconventional household headed by a male but without the necessary social moorings. They have survived Lot's offer of their virginity to the crowd in Sodom. Their city has been destroyed and now they find themselves alone with their father in cave outside Zoar and for all they know,

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<sup>370</sup> Carolyn Leeb, "The Widow: Homeless and Post-Menopausal," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (Winter 2002): 160, 162.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*

their world has been annihilated. All they know—all they can see—is what is true for the other three: if a male is to be had, they must secure him for themselves, thus leading to the bedtrick.

*Agunah*, the inability to marry coupled with unavailable men, provides another essential component of the core narrative and is responsible for setting the action in motion. Specifically, all the women in our stories lack not only available men, but children—specifically sons—as well. The Lot story encounters the *agunah* motif in the cave when the daughters finally speak. To their minds, they are abandoned and alone in the world and thus, they concoct a course of action based on the premise that there are no men left in the world after the destruction of Sodom. (They are inheritors of their father's lack of insight: they fail to see that only Sodom and Gomorrah have been destroyed.) Fearing no one to help them raise up their father's seed, they act to remedy the situation.

For Tamar, the lack of men is evident: two husbands have died and although there are many men around her in the narrative (she is the only living woman in her story), none are available to her. She is sent to her father's house to languish; then, "She saw that Shelah was grown up and she had not been given to him in marriage" (Genesis 38.14). Furthermore, she is living as a widow in her father's house. Yet her father cannot contract another marriage for her. Only Judah can do that. Furthermore, she has been promised Shelah but that situation shows no guarantee of resolving itself.

In Ruth, Naomi alerts the reader to the dearth of men. She has no husbands for Orpah and Ruth; she has no husband herself and she has no more sons to give them.<sup>373</sup> She says even if she were to become pregnant that night, she could not ask them to wait for that child's majority

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<sup>373</sup> One might conjecture here that Naomi's lament is for herself as a marriageable female as well as for the daughters-in-law and her realization that probably no man will present himself *to her* as potential husband or lover. Yet she, for her part, expresses her grief in terms of the daughters-in-law ("Are there yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?" Ruth 1.11), a reversal of the Lotan situation.

for these two to forestall marriage for themselves. Unlike Lot's daughters, she frees them to look beyond her and find men for themselves.

For Bathsheba, her unembedded status comes about because her husband is off at war. And while we might conjecture that this represents not a lack of men but merely a temporary absence (like Lot's daughters), there also appear to be no children in Bathsheba's life. Thus, like all of our women, she lacks not just a husband but sons as well. Like Tamar, she is wife-not-wife; married but with a husband who is away for much of the action.<sup>374</sup> Her social status and economic standing are ambiguous at best.<sup>375</sup>

#### 5.5.1.6 Bedtrick

Lot's daughters enfeeble their father with wine and have intercourse with him on two successive evenings. Again, Lot is silent and presumably has no memory of these events since we hear nothing from him again. If he figures this out, if he feels shame, we simply are not told. In effect, he is ravished, a stunning ironic play by the daughters who nearly suffered the same fate because of their father's blind allegiance to a notion of "hospitality."

Tamar's trickery includes her *zonah* disguise in order to entice the one person who has responsibility for her, gaining some concrete assurance to later use against him and completing her seduction. Her duplicity rests less in her sexual deception than in her premeditation: she wants a child, not just by anyone, but by her husband's family. It would seem that this is the only way to earn what she feels she deserves.

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<sup>374</sup> In fact, we never even see Uriah speak with Bathsheba. All his interactions are with David alone (2 Sam. 11.7-12).

<sup>375</sup> Weisberg, "Levirate marriage and *halitzah*," 67-68.

Ruth, at Naomi's insistence, heads to the threshing floor, a place of drunken revelry in the aftermath of the barley harvest. She undertakes a certain seduction of Boaz in order to win his heart—or at least his commitment. Ruth's initiative is not viewed as untoward but is reckoned to her as *chesed* by Boaz, who calls her "my daughter" twice in the context of his declarations for her. In the morning, she is sent away full, a heavily-weighted impression that she literally might be carrying more than an apron full of barley home from her clandestine threshing-floor encounter.

Bathsheba's adulterous pregnancy comes about as a result of David's rooftop vision of her bath as well as the king's late-day languor. As we have already noted, so much of Bathsheba's character depends upon her ambiguity; her bedtrick raises the same questions of intention. Did she aim to seduce David with a less-than-modest bath? Could she have declined his invitation, once offered? Did she intend to get pregnant by the king as means to entrap him? Was she aware that David recalled Uriah after she announced her pregnancy to him? Did she know that David seemed to wish to cover up—or even outright deny—paternity of this baby? The only person who emerges honorably is Uriah. (Even the prophet Nathan and King Solomon are tainted by proximity to David and Bathsheba.) There exists ample opportunity to question the integrity of Bathsheba's actions which includes license to view her bath as a prelude to a bedtrick.

### **5.5.1.7 Birth of son(s)**

The birth of sons occurs in all four narratives. Unlike the barren mother birth narratives, the intent is not necessarily to alert readers to the special nature of these boys.<sup>376</sup> Rather, these children are specially begotten through the initiative of their mothers. It is the mothers that we notice; the birth of these sons merit special attention because of the efforts and machinations of their mothers.

Barrenness, such as it is, arises not from any physical impairment or emotional dysfunction (such as Rachel, who bears the blame for her infertility [Genesis 30:1-2]). The void stems from a lack of appropriate males. Once those men are obtained (by some highly irregular means), pregnancy occurs quite naturally.

## **5.6 HEROIC TYPOLOGY AND TEXTUAL PARALLELS**

The thematic commonalities (leave-taking, negotiation, the motif of three deaths, bargaining, the lack of available men, trickery and the eventual birth of sons) trigger important questions about the potentialities of meaning regarding these women—specifically new questions about the role of deceit, what is or is not literally and metaphorically visible in these narratives, and ultimately, what is the essence of daughterhood in the Bible. Looking at these four stories together, we recognize elements that might have previously escaped our notice as we focus on common themes and typologies. Unlike the textual parallels, which are tied to identifiable events in the narrative, these types are more symbolic or thematic in nature. By reading these narratives

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<sup>376</sup> Once they are born, we really hear nothing more about them, save Solomon, whose birth narrative is not part of the bedtrick of Bathsheba.

together and through close consideration of these symbolic associations, we can deeply interrogate the webs of signification that emerge from these shared narrative events.

For example, one symbolic association between all four stories is the motif of daughters. Lot's daughters and Ruth are clearly identified as daughters in their stories. Tamar is Judah's daughter-in-law. Bathsheba is recognized as the daughter of Eliam (2 Sam. 11:3). Certain actions seem to arise from their roles as daughters (rather than mothers or wives) in the text. Looking at their motivations and concerns as daughters, we can build a more nuanced picture of how these four stories portray biblical daughters. This is especially significant. Now we find that the categorization of daughter is linked to motifs of deception, which offers noteworthy insight into the gendered nature of these stories.

For biblical daughters, the marriage of gender and deception makes perfect sense. As Karla Shargent notes, "...the insecurity of biblical daughters can be said to operate at least partially because their textual world is one that positions them on the boundaries."<sup>377</sup> For Lot's daughters the emotional core of their narrative hinges on their father's concern for himself that some evil overtake him, even though they, too, are travelers with him on this disastrous road. They inhabit an emotional boundary outside Lot's immediate circle. The word *dabaq* (to cleave, cling or stay close to) is understood in this context as referring to Lot's fear of being consumed by some unknown disaster, comes as Lot cries to the angels, "I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me (*tidabaqni*), and I die," (Genesis 19:19). Lot eschews the directives given to him by God's emissaries and, in a broader, thematic sense, he also disavows any emotional intimacy for himself and consequently, for those around him. Neither his wife nor his daughters are named, nor does he voice concern for them or see them in loving ways. He appears

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<sup>377</sup> Karla G. Shargent, "Living on the Edge: the Liminality of Daughters in Genesis to 2 Samuel," in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 29.

frightened by proximity to emotional intimacy, either with his god or his family. His daughters therefore resort to deceit in order to release themselves from their marginalized existence. They represent boundary characters.<sup>378</sup> Metaphorically as well as textually, Lot's daughters realize no secure place of their own and live as dwellers on the edge, struggling to survive.<sup>379</sup>

Tamar's deceit depends not upon intimacy, per se. As one who is left vulnerable by the deceit of others, she also inhabits a boundary not of her own making, living not only *like* a widow, but in actuality *as* a widow in her father's house. She must resort to her own wits to bring about her desired end. She tricks Judah based on his own weakness and need. In this context, deceit is vindicated by the text itself when Judah declares Tamar's righteousness above his own ("She has been more righteous than me," Genesis 38.26).

In the Ruth narrative, Naomi and Ruth negotiate new boundaries, boundaries that are both geographical and devotional. Like Genesis 19, cleaving and emotional intimacy provide the expressive core of this plot, but in ways never dreamed of in Lot's story. On the border of Judah, Ruth pledges to cleave—both physically as well as emotionally—to Naomi. Unlike Genesis 19, here we find a character embracing intimacy, acclaimed for her role in Naomi's life and her emotional sufficiency rather than declaring panic and dread and hiding in a cave to forestall such cleaving or physical closeness. Where the daughters of Lot are textually frozen out and Lot eschews emotional connection, in Ruth we find the rehabilitation of devotion between a parent and child. This finds later expression in her praise as "better than seven sons," a numerical

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 29, 30.

<sup>379</sup> Shargent, 42.

expression of exaggerated intensity.<sup>380</sup> Whatever deceit or trickery adheres to Ruth is ameliorated by her abundant *chesed*.

Bathsheba's story—like Tamar's—inhabits an ambiguous boundary. The narrator hides Bathsheba's motivations from us; our interpretation of her runs the gamut from innocent pawn to designing manipulator.<sup>381</sup> While her story is ostensibly about David, we find in Bathsheba an actor left purposely elusive by the text. Her ingenuity is later revealed—her influential skills become more marked as her narrative progresses. We find her realizing a place in the text in quiet yet demonstrable ways. Our perception of Bathsheba as the docile ewe lamb is challenged since her trickery indirectly results in death for those around her. No one declares Bathsheba righteous. No one celebrates her *chesed*. Yet neither is she vilified (like Jezebel), nor is she seen as in any way cautionary, like Proverb's Lady Folly.

Now, I will look more closely at some thematic elements common to all these stories that I call the core narrative. This core joins these four stories and refers to the typological or symbolic relationship between them. These connections arise in the context of our previous effort of reading the stories together. Now we take the actions that we have charted above and try to interpret the meaning or symbolic significance behind these actions. This process is intended to identify significant meanings implicit within these linked narratives. We can now turn to the symbolic motifs common to all four: seeing and knowing, deceit, daughters and cleaving/ emotional intimacy. Once these themes are determined and explored, we can more fully engage a question regarding who (or what) is redeemed by this process and what effect does that have on our interpretation of these narratives.

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<sup>380</sup> See note in Yairah Amit, “‘Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?’ (1 Samuel 1.8): Male and female interpretations,” in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*,” 71.

<sup>381</sup> Moshe Garsiel, "The Story of David and Bathsheba: a Different Approach," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993): 256; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 27-30.

### 5.6.1 Seeing But Not Knowing

All of these accounts showcase some aspect of those who see but fail to fully recognize those around them. This "seeing but not knowing" takes on a particular poignancy since the individuals who are most clearly overlooked are the women. In Genesis 19 this failure to see takes on appalling import; in Ruth, we see the reassignment of that signification in adept and artful ways.

In Genesis 19, Lot proves himself lacking in vision in innumerable instances. On the threshold of his home, Lot symbolically closes the door behind himself and steps outside. He transgresses the boundary between the sanctity of his home (the feminine) and approaches the external (masculine) chaos of the public.<sup>382</sup> He offers his two virginal daughters, failing to see on two levels: either that angelic messengers have come within his midst as well as failing to see his two daughters as anything more than a means to an end. Whatever concern he has for his daughters is veiled (a play on Lot's name, which means covering or veil) behind his own self-concern.

In addition, we find in Genesis 19 a mother whose eyes are forever looking backward. Lot's wife looks not at whatever future she might have with her two remaining daughters, but back to the ones left behind. This mother has been advised not to look back, not to consider the past of the city or her left-behind children. Yet she does and is forever after preserved in that backward glance. Thus, she not only fails to see her two remaining daughters—she ensures that she never will.

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<sup>382</sup> Tapp, 162; Shargent, 36.

In Genesis 38.14, Tamar dons the garb of harlotry and sits at the gates of Enaim ("Eyes") after she "sees" (*rartah*) that Shelah has grown but is not being offered to her in marriage.<sup>383</sup> Verse 15 states, "When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a harlot, for she had covered her face." He fails to see her, to recognize her, even during intercourse since he departs without comment. His lack of vision is ironically confronted when he demands to see Tamar prior to her public punishment. Judah recognizes his own signatory items and then must accept that she has realized what he did not. With Tamar, we see what Judah must be made to see: that she is the more righteous.

For Ruth's part, the lack of vision is more benign but perhaps just as neglectful. For example, Orpah evokes Lot's wife. Orpah ("back of the neck") signals her return to Moab, her looking back to the land of her mother (*bet em*).<sup>384</sup> This maternal imagery brings to mind our connection to Lot's wife, looking back for her daughters in the foreign land of Sodom. And like Lot's wife, Orpah dies from our view through her return to her mother's house, the place of her backward glance (from whence we glimpse the metaphoric 'back of her neck') as well.

Naomi clearly believes that her happiness and security depend upon proximity to husbands and sons.<sup>385</sup> She bemoans her lack, calling herself bitter—not sad, not grieving, but bitter—an enhanced state of sorrow coupled with anger. Although she returns with a loyal daughter-in-law, she does not even acknowledge Ruth to the women of the town (1.20-21), despite Ruth's expressed desire to stay with Naomi above all others. She cannot see any value in Ruth.

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<sup>383</sup> Van Wolde, 15.

<sup>384</sup> Campbell, 55; 64; 72-73.

<sup>385</sup> Levine, "Ruth," 84.

Later, in the dark of the threshing floor, Boaz asks Ruth, “Who are you?” implying that he, also, does not or cannot see. He must be told by Ruth who she is, not only in her essence, but in her desired relationship with him (“I am Ruth, your servant. Now spread your ‘wing’ [*kanap*] over your servant, for you are a redeemer,” 3.9). As Levine points out Naomi (and, I would argue, Boaz as well) must learn to see Ruth’s value.<sup>386</sup>

The focus of sight in Bathsheba's story comes from David's perspective:

And from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon (2 Sam. 11.2)

Bathsheba, unlike our previous women, is the focus of a man's—David's—gaze. The sight of her spurs David to action even though David dwelt (*yashab*) in Jerusalem while Joab and his men fought the king's battles (2 Sam. 11.1). Yet like Lot and Judah, and to some extent Boaz (who must ask Ruth to identify herself), David sees in Bathsheba what he wants to see—a beautiful, sexually available woman. The problem is, however, that Bathsheba is *not* sexually available—at least to him. In fact, prior to sending for her, David is informed of her married state. Unlike Judah, he cannot claim ignorance of her status. He admires her beauty from his rooftop and that gaze alone supersedes all other information about her.

Her trickery lies in enticement only. She can be faulted for setting the action in motion—or for starting something without thinking through the consequences. Or perhaps she fully knew the consequences but proceeded anyways. She may in the final analysis ultimately be guilty of playing at naïveté.<sup>387</sup> Bathsheba’s ambiguity can bear all of these.

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

<sup>387</sup> Berlin, “Characterization in Biblical Narrative,” 76.

## 5.6.2 Deceit

Deceit firmly attaches itself to women, especially daughters, in the Bible. We find many examples of female falsehood: Rachel lies to her father Laban about stealing his household gods and compounds the deceit by sitting upon them, possibly defiling them. Did this happen during her menstrual cycle? We cannot be sure; since Rachel lied to her father already, she might also be lying about her physical state (Genesis 31.34-35).<sup>388</sup> In Exodus, Pharaoh's own daughter directly defies her father's decree to kill every Israelite baby boy by rescuing the baby Moses. In an act of further deceit, she sends him to be raised in an Israelite household, only later bringing him into Pharaoh's palace to be raised as her own (Ex. 2.10). In 1 Samuel, Michal, who loved David, tricks her father Saul by lying about David's presence in her household thereby aiding David in his escape from Saul (1 Sam. 19). The narrator tells us more than once that Michal loves David but never once says anything of her love for Saul or if in fact David bore any love for her at all (1 Sam. 18.20; 18.28).<sup>389</sup>

Irene Nowell suggests that deceit is the purview of the powerless, one of the sole means available to them.<sup>390</sup> And few are more powerless in the Bible than daughters. Thus we find deceit linking our four narratives. Lot's daughters ply their father with alcohol till he would not know one from the other ("he would not know when she lay down or when she got up" [Genesis 19.35]). Tamar plays the harlot on the side of the road. She does not overtly lie to Judah but neither is she forthcoming. Nowell contends that Tamar's is a double deception since "she was

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<sup>388</sup> Rachel claims that "the time of women" is upon her. But if that is so, she has defiled the items by proximity to her menstrual blood (Levs. 15:20 charges that a menstruating woman contaminates anything or anyone she touches during her monthly period).

<sup>389</sup> Klein, 85-90.

<sup>390</sup> Nowell, 5.

not a prostitute and payment was not what she wanted."<sup>391</sup> Ruth tricks Boaz, going to the threshing floor under dark of night as a sort of seduction (something, Nowell claims, not done by proper girls). She further manipulates Boaz, asking that he serve as *go'el*, a role specifically reserved for the brother of the deceased (Deuteronomy 25.5-10).<sup>392</sup> Bathsheba's deceit is established if not by her seductive bath then by her machinations to put Solomon on the throne. She recalls an unrecorded promise by David that he would privilege her son above all others (1 Kings 1.17). Bathsheba exploits David's continuing desire to engineer the course of Israel, even as he slips into death.

If, as Nowell claims, deceit is a ploy utilized by the vulnerable, then has gender alone rendered these women vulnerable? Perhaps a better question might be are these particular women more vulnerable than other women in the Bible who do not resort to such deception? To whom or to what are they made vulnerable? Is it the whimsy of men alone that renders them defenseless? Certainly we have other women so victimized—Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11, for instance, or the unnamed Levite's concubine in Judges 19—two women who die horribly at the hands of short-sighted, foolish men. The difference is female enterprise. We might note that the women in Judges lack initiative, resulting in their shocking deaths. However, such a declaration blames the victim, as if their silence justifies their destiny, when in reality we have different stories. Not all daughter stories evidence deceit (Jephthah's daughter) and not all daughters who lie to their fathers succeed (see Michal, who despite her lies on his behalf was eventually repudiated by David [2 Sam. 6.21-23]).

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 10.

Deceit plays a significant role in our stories. It ties the narratives together in a linked motif that highlights the vulnerability of the women in these particular stories but in markedly dissimilar ways. Lot's daughters are victimized by their father's inept parenting and his inability to value them in any substantive way. Tamar, too, is held captive by Judah's blatant disregard for her. Ruth's vulnerability lies in her foreign status, her widowhood and the crushing poverty that surrounds her and Naomi. Boaz is not the perpetrator of this victimization but clearly there are family connections in Bethlehem who have failed to recognize Naomi's desperate situation.

Like much in Bathsheba's story, the narrator's economy of language makes it difficult to know what is deceit and what is merely not known. However, there is no doubt that deceit permeates the narrative, from her problematic pregnancy and David's abhorrent actions with Uriah to those around Bathsheba who would use her as a political pawn (see her possible connections to the disgraced house of Ahithophel [2 Sam. 23.34] to her dynastic intrigues on behalf of Solomon and Adonijah).<sup>393</sup>

This symbolic connection draws attention to a key ingredient in these narratives: deceit emerges when males who should provide for and care for these women do not, often with ironic consequences. Such pretense should not be read as a cautionary device—that is, do not act like *these* women—since the result for them is not death but the birth of sons. Deceit is not encouraged but neither does it necessarily discourage women from behaving badly. In this instance deceit seems more apropos as a mark of their linked character. Deceit serves to alert us that these are enterprising women, providing another defining element within these gendered narratives.

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<sup>393</sup> A minority view considers the possibility that Bathsheba might also be a foreigner, either via her marriage to a Hittite or through linking her to Bathshua the Canaanite in 1 Chron. 2.3; Nowell, 268-269; 277.

### 5.6.3 Daughterhood

We have said much about daughters in the text; now we ask: what is the role daughter in our stories? How important is this claim, “better to you than seven sons”? Who makes that charge and why?

In all four stories, we have daughters who are either mistreated (Lot’s daughters, Tamar) or who are left without a husband at home and no apparent protector/father figure (Ruth/Naomi and Bathsheba, who later finds David fulfilling the role of protector—among other roles). The mistreatment/abandonment by their fathers/fathers-in-law or absence of a proxy protector leaves them vulnerable, a theme that drives much of the narrative. The actions taken by these women is often as a direct result of how they were/are treated as daughters, and how they reclaim what is necessary to re-establish themselves in a new environment. Even Bathsheba’s story (ambiguous as always) raises questions about her characterization as an unprotected daughter: Uriah’s absence is caused by his military service in David’s army; David places Uriah, Bathsheba’s social defense against unembedded status, in harm’s way and then marries his widow, challenging the notion of David’s role as “protector.”

But Ruth’s story is the most intriguing narrative about daughters. The claim “better to you than seven sons” requires a more comprehensive discussion since so much of the expression is tied to the value of sons. Sons leads us to daughters and daughters leads us to gender; thus, we pursue this typology as a way to further investigate the gendered components of these narratives.

Two unrelated biblical narratives echo this paradigm of completeness around a bevy of sons. In 1 Sam 1, we have Samuel’s birth narrative and the barren mother motif. Rather than the usual mother appealing to God and paternal silence (or complete absence), we have a clearly loving relationship focused on comforting and encouraging the barren wife— “... to Hannah he

gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb” (1 Sam. 1.5).<sup>394</sup> When she weeps over her barren state, the husband, Elkanah, asks tenderly, “Hannah, why do you weep? ... Am I not more to you than ten sons?” (1 Sam. 1.8).

The implication is clear: while Hannah laments her infertility, the love and affection of Elkanah is there and available to fill the void suggesting a sufficiency that (presumably) comes from children.<sup>395</sup> He offers an image of emotional plenty through his emblematic challenge, “Am I not more to you than ten sons?” How successful this poignant endearment is remains to be seen: Hannah still prays for a child. Yet Elkanah, through his moving response, encourages readers to infer a tender emotional bond.

Similarly, we have the story of the hapless Job, whose family structure presents a vision of symbolic family completeness. He is the father of ten children—seven sons and three daughters—who regularly feast together in a model of family harmony (Job 1:4). These children die during the course of Job’s trials but others are restored to Job at the end of his tribulations. We are told, “The Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before,” blessing his later days even more than his beginnings (42:10, 12). Seven more sons are granted Job’s inheritance as well as three daughters, named alongside the sons (42:13).

In this context, family sufficiency and completeness contains many more sons than daughters. (In the modern idiom, it would be analogous to the American standard of 2.4 children. That such a configuration cannot possibly exist in reality is beside the point. It stands as the metaphoric standard of family completeness). Thus, both Hannah and Job echo a sense

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<sup>394</sup> The Bible’s evidence for marital affection is often implied rather than supplied. See for example Jacob’s sharp retort to his beloved Rachel’s plea for children; Abraham’s curt response to his long-time wife Sarah’s desire to banish Hagar, the first mother; Isaac’s silence in the text in his relationship with Rebekah and her efforts to obtain and maintain her difficult pregnancy.

<sup>395</sup> Rather than overt affection, many feminist scholars read this as dim-witted insensitivity on Elkanah’s part. To think that his love is sufficient to Hannah is undercut by the text, where Hannah fails to reply, but next enters the temple to continue to petition God for a child (see Amit and notes, 70ff).

that a house full of sons represents the ultimate prototype of biblical family fullness.<sup>396</sup> In both of these accounts, Elkanah's "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" and Job's restoration of seven sons after their earlier loss represents a rhetorical depiction of the model family.<sup>397</sup>

In Ruth, we find crucial typological clues in the acclaim of the Bethlehem women. When she is acclaimed as "better than seven sons," we recognize reverberations with the biblical sense of family completeness. She fulfills the roles that Mahlon and Chilion vacated (especially since both men are clearly identified in Ruth's narrative more as sons than as husbands).<sup>398</sup> On one level, she redeems Naomi and her place in the text by proving her worth as a child-substitute. She does the things that a husband and sons should do by caring for her widowed mother-in-law, providing for her physical needs and voicing an emotional bond in evocative and tender terms. Ruth, the redeeming daughter-in-law and foreigner, realizes the crowd's acclaim in her ability to surpass *sonship* as a daughter or wife or mother. She does not realize the crowd's praise as "better to her than three daughters," echoing the Joban parallels. The number, therefore, is not random: Ruth's actions complete Naomi's family in the way seven sons would "complete" a household. And, the comparison to sonship is not misogynistic—Ruth is celebrated not as the same as seven sons but as *better* than seven boys.

On this crucial level, Ruth's transformation into a model of family sufficiency challenges that notion of sonship.<sup>399</sup> Ruth 4 reads, "Praise to you Naomi, a son is born..." then is followed immediately by the 'better than seven sons' claim. One might read this wording as signifying 'Yes, Naomi has another son, but what you have in this *daughter* surpasses seven of those.'

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<sup>396</sup> It is worthy of note that while Jacob has the eponymous twelve tribes, that is not the paradigm of family sufficiency that we find evoked here

<sup>397</sup> Amit, 71.

<sup>398</sup> Van Wolde, 435.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 434.

It simply is not enough that Ruth exhibits *chesed*. She overcomes much in order to redeem the image of the foreigner, the Gentile and, most importantly, the daughter. Rather than “a quiver full of children” (Ps. 127.5), we find only one—and, a woman, a Moabite, and a daughter, at that. We now see Ruth clearly not for how well she plays the son but rather in her ability to rehabilitate our ideas of family sufficiency. A daughter has challenged that notion, the biblical authors have argued, and put the reader on notice. We must reconsider the daughters who have gone before for undoubtedly here is one who resides in the text, acclaimed above all sons.

#### **5.6.4 *Dbq* (cleaving/affection)**

Although the word *dbq* is not mentioned in the stories of Tamar or Bathsheba, the concept is present in both narratives. While the text is not clear on Tamar’s relationships with either of her first two husbands, it *is* evident what is left for her: widowhood, the very definition of unattached. It is her rightful pursuit of attachment that prompts her to act. It is both ironic and fitting that Tamar dresses as a prostitute—the typical union between prostitute and client is, by nature, short-lived, yet Tamar is seeking the opposite: a long-term (cleaving) to her in-law’s family.

Like Tamar, we are told very little about Bathsheba’s relationship with Uriah. Neither are we certain of Bathsheba’s affection for David (although we might conjecture). What is interesting is David’s affection for Bathsheba. Clearly she is more to him than a mere dalliance. His effort to secure Bathsheba involves enormous risk, and the price he pays (the death of their love child) is high for both of them. Again, much is left to interpretation in Bathsheba’s story,

but there is no doubt about the lengths to which David will go to keep Bathsheba close by, leading to questions about whether affection might drive the narrative.

The occasion of Ruth's heartfelt commitment to Naomi requires a moment's consideration. The Anchor Bible Commentary passes somewhat quickly over *dbq* in Ruth, but feminist scholars express heightened interest in the use and placement of this word.<sup>400</sup> This evocative clinging offers profound insight into the nature of Ruth's connection to Naomi. It is she who emotionally embraces Naomi and would willingly follow her unto death, undeterred by Naomi's silence or disregard.

Gail Twersky Reimer likens this particular scene to the emotional core of another parent-child interaction, the *Aqedah*, or the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22.<sup>401</sup> God charges Abraham to "Take your son, your only son, *the one whom you love...*" and sacrifice him upon Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22:2). Abraham, the loving father, remains silent in the face of Isaac's questions. Ruth 4:15 turns the focus of that loving around, claiming "for your daughter-in-law, *who loves you*, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him..." While she and Naomi, the beloved parent, are acclaimed, Ruth remains silent. If we look back to the emotional tension between parent and child in the *Aqedah*, we find hints within Ruth to view this as a mother-child relationship. This phrase, "the one who loves you" invokes the impetus behind Ruth's cleaving to Naomi.

In Genesis 19, Lot claims that he cannot travel to the hills as God would want him to do lest evil or destruction overtake (*tidabaqni*) him. Lot's sense of the word here seems reminiscent of "the hound of heaven," especially since Lot's anxiety is focused on that evil or unlucky force that might pursue him even unto death. He avoids emotional proximity to his god, to his

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<sup>400</sup> Campbell, 72; Levine, "Ruth," 84-90; Aviva Zornberg, "The Concealed Alternative," in *Reading Ruth*, 76.

<sup>401</sup> Gail Twersky Reimer, "Her Mother's House," in *Reading Ruth*, 99.

daughters and seemingly to life itself. He evades anything that might emotionally overtake or overwhelm him.

Yet, the emotional elements of this clinging bring to mind a more nuanced sense of overtaking: it is the same word used in Genesis 2.24 when God says that a man shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one. It is used in Genesis 34.3 to describe what Shechem felt in the aftermath of his violation of Dinah: “His soul clung (*tidbaq*) to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl, and he spoke kindly to her.” This is the *qal* imperfect verb form, expressing a simple causal action: Shechem feels real affection for Dinah. The biblical authors are signifying a passion, a genuine bond, on Shechem’s part by the use of the poignant “cleaving” here.

Deuteronomy 11.22-23 employs *dbq* to characterize the embrace of the Israelites for YHWH:

For if you will be careful to do all this commandment which I command you to do, loving the LORD your God, walking in all his ways, and cleaving (*davqa*) to him, then the LORD will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourselves.

Again, we see in this directive the love that exists not between suzerain and vassal, but more akin to parent and child. Cleaving unto one’s God, a mighty and fearful God, to be sure, suggests an emotional relationship between kin. This is the sense that we see in Ruth’s claim that she will hold fast to Naomi even unto death:

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung (*davqa*) to her. ...But Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you." (Ruth 1.14, 16-17).

To cling in this way, to adhere or stay close enough to be one's shadow, suggests a proximity to one another beyond simple friendship. This is passionate attachment to another, like a child feels for its mother or a husband and wife experience. Boaz uses this term twice in encouraging Ruth to stay close to his people, perhaps foreshadowing Ruth's nearness to Boaz, not as mere kinsman, but as husband and lover:

Then Bo'az said to Ruth, "Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close (*tidbaqin*) to my maidens." (Ruth 2.8).

And Ruth the Moabite said, "Besides, he said to me, 'You shall keep close (*tidbaqin*) by my servants, till they have finished all my harvest.'" (Ruth 2.21).

We see here, then, a significant contrast between Lot's tale and Ruth's involving our notions of cleaving/abiding and secondarily, a typological connection between these two tales. In one, Lot flees, fearing to be overtaken by his god. Lot's emotional frigidity forestalls closeness of any sort. His children stay with him long enough to produce another generation but the language of cleaving/ emotional connection is noticeably absent. Affection is not part of Genesis 19's textual dynamic. On the other hand, Ruth craves an emotional bond with Naomi and on this hinges our redemption of the biblical vision. Her emotional proximity to Naomi corrects our vision of Moabites as well as daughters. It allows us to see in Ruth the truest expression of *'eshet chayil*, or the woman of valor.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> Nowell, 260-265.

## 5.7 TEXTUAL REDEMPTION

The designation of *go'el*/redeemer looms large when considering the book of Ruth. Boaz is the redeemer through his symbolic covering (*kanaf*) of the women in the story. Obed can serve as *go'el* since he represents the continuity of the line necessary to bring us to David. In another vein, YHWH can be the *go'el* since ultimately it is God who provides the means for maintaining the women as well as continuing Elimelech's name and property.<sup>403</sup> And finally, Ruth herself can be both hero and *go'el*—without Ruth there is no narrative and therefore no redemption.

But the greater question raised by this comparative process is not who is *go'el*, but rather, who or what is redeemed? Is it Naomi who is redeemed by Boaz? Is Ruth is redeemed by Boaz? Is the Davidic line redeemed by Tamar's initiative? Is Solomon redeemed by Bathsheba? In Lot's case, he is the anti-*go'el*: he redeems no one. His efforts prove pathetic at best and shameful at worst. He will find one rape substituted for another as the narrative unfolds. Are Lot's daughters then responsible—and able—to redeem themselves? Can something as heinous as their misbegotten scheme result in their own textual redemption?

If we go back to our discussion of seeing and knowing, we find that one of the things redeemed by Ruth is Naomi's vision of her world. Naomi is made to recognize Ruth's role as daughter to her: it is up to the Bethlehem chorus to elevate Ruth out of Naomi's silence and focus her place in the biblical tradition for all future generations.<sup>404</sup>

In Boaz we find a character who fails to see Ruth and must be initiated into her worth. The marginalized daughter must claim her place in an older man's life and instruct his efforts (not unlike Lot's daughters). In addition, she obtains a place for herself like another Davidic

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<sup>403</sup> Levine, "Ruth," 90.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

daughter-in-law, Tamar of Genesis 38. We find in both stories women who act upon the unseeing (Judah as well as Boaz) in order to obtain their place in the narrative as both *go'el* and daughter. And in Bathsheba we encounter a woman who is seen but perhaps only as another wants her to be seen and not as she really is (also like Tamar's roadside seduction). This seeing and not seeing begins a chain of events that results in Bathsheba's evolving narrative status: she goes from participant in an adulterous liaison to a mother redeeming the throne for her son. Some scholars view this as evidence of Bathsheba's diplomatic ingenuity and persuasion rather than mere duplicity and emotional manipulation.<sup>405</sup> Bathsheba's redemption takes a form that should by now be clear. Deceit and trickery of men is an essential motif for valorous women in the Bible.

## 5.8 A UNIQUE FEMALE BIBLICAL HEROIC

In an article entitled "Heroes and Jungians," psychotherapist Mark Levon Byrne argues that the fullest experience of symbolic death is what makes the quintessential male hero. In a subtle shift, he suggests that Western heroic mythmaking has left aside valorizing the man who suffers symbolic death and returns to society wiser and humbled for his brush with death. Rather, Byrne claims, the West worships only one side of the mythic death equation: the heroics of men who overcome death by besting other men. In death-defying heroics

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<sup>405</sup> Heather A. McKay, "'Eshet Hayil or 'Ishshah Zarah: Jewish Readings of Abigail and Bathsheba, both Ancient and Modern," in *Jewish Ways of Reading the Bible*, ed. George J. Brooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press on behalf of the University of Manchester, 2000), 259.

[t]he hero becomes the ideal of manhood by defending the society against its enemies, to the extent that a god ... reflect[s] the warlike nature of most European cultures.<sup>406</sup>

This valorization of the defeat of death is responsible in the modern context for a one-sided masculine ego, one that in its formative stages (adolescence) seeks heroic expressions of independence in gang activity, drugs or similarly destructive youthful rituals.<sup>407</sup> Byrne concludes that the drive towards fulfilling one's individual needs is the immature expression of the heroic:

Perhaps we can speak of two kinds of heroes. The first is immature, driven by the need to assert his individual needs and desires in the world. It is often only after we have experienced some basic ego gratification (at whatever age) and are able to sacrifice it that another kind of hero emerges; one who is willing and able to sacrifice himself for the greater good... What distinguishes these two kinds of heroes is their attitude to death: the former defends against it, while the latter has in some way surrendered to it and is more "alive" as a consequence.<sup>408</sup>

Byrne is speaking in psychological terms of two aspects of the masculine ego and the maturation of psyche from its individual needs to sacrifice for the greater good of others. He provides an interesting contrast to our study since his work is profoundly identified with the male heroes and masculine gendered metamyths as well as offering a remarkable distinction between "immature" and "mature" heroic characters.<sup>409</sup> Byrne makes definitive claims for the male heroic. What our study has discovered in the Bible is a robust picture of the female heroic that I believe sits alongside Byrne's male hero. Thus, his declarations provide a frame for contrasting

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<sup>406</sup> Mark Levon Byrne, "Heroes and Jungians," *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 18, no. 3 (1999): 18.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>409</sup> On the issue of gendered metamyths, Byrne argues that "we are witnessing the end-time of the heroic culture, and can look and work towards the rise of more democratic, less aggressive and nongendered metamyths" (15). Since Byrne is speaking at length of the hero as the psychological ideal of manhood, I am assuming that he is making arguments *for* and *about* the male gendered metamyth.

and presenting our case for the female hero in the Bible and allow us the opportunity to crystallize the profound picture of female initiative that is offered in the text.

Byrne says that the drive towards individual goals and desires is the mark of an immature hero, at least with respect to male heroes. Within the masculine pantheon, male heroes must mature past these limited ambitions lest they remain among those heroes identified as overgrown bullies, rapists and warmongers.<sup>410</sup> For female heroes in the Bible, the limitations placed upon their gender mean that their circumstances often do not allow them to move beyond their domestic settings. Thus, they remain within the home, the bedroom or the palace and it is from this vantage point that they battle for their due. Unlike male heroes, for whom the whole world is the stage, we find that female heroes work within the confines of their environment to express a very real resourcefulness and drive. Thus, what we find in the Bible is that female heroes articulate individual ambitions. This is not a mark of an immature hero; this, in fact, is the one of the authentic marks of the female heroic in the Bible. She finds within herself the strength to maneuver around her limited freedoms to achieve her modest, individual goals.

Byrne argues that the masculine hero of classical history and literature is one who overcomes death. Our study has shown that female heroes in the Bible, by contrast, reproduce life. Their single minded focus on producing child fuels their trickery. And having achieved that child, they are remarkable as well for the fact that their child plays a significant role after them in the Bible. Their heroism owes not to their military might or violent death on the field of battle. Rather, female heroes in the Bible overcome death by reproducing life through their sons.

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 15.

Finally, Byrne concludes that the distinguishing element between immature and mature heroes is their attitude towards death: the immature hero fends off death while the mature expression of the heroic surrenders to death and in this way, overcomes it.<sup>411</sup> Our claims for the female heroic in the Bible argue that our heroic characters do indeed sacrifice themselves and fulfill this death-defying paradox of intention: by submitting to death they overcome it. Death surrounds the female heroic in the Bible. Each of their stories contains at least three male deaths. Through scenes of bargaining, each experiences a high-stakes gamble that could end in their banishment (Lot's daughters; Ruth) or death (Tamar and Bathsheba for adultery). In a symbolic way, each of the women inhabits a deathlike role in society, either as a widow, an unmarriageable woman or as a social outsider. We find that these figures are often overlooked in their own stories: the men fail to see them for who or what they are. They inhabit a liminal emotional space where they long for some investment by the men around them and, finding only a void or silence, they work to achieve life and recognition.

To Byrne's charge that the "mature" hero is one who surrenders to death because he is acutely alive to its consequences, I contend that the female heroic is clearly alive to the consequences of death. We find this particularly in our female heroic stories. In the Bible, the female hero embraces death on many levels—through the deaths of the men around her as well as her own symbolic death as an unmarriageable woman. Furthermore, she faces the reality of her own demise through her deceit and trickery. In the confines of a patriarchal society, the cost of her actions could be her reputation or, more significantly, her own life. Yet, she fully enters into this reality. In each instance—Tamar dons her courtesan's veils, Ruth enters the threshing floor, Lot's daughters ravish their father; and Bathsheba, either at her bath or before the dying

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 36.

David—we find a woman, with individual enterprise and pluck inhabiting a liminal space between life and death. She enters and emerges on the other side, her quest fulfilled, her goals realized, her battle won.

As I have argued, the female heroic presents a unique, identifiable set of characteristics that stands alongside male models of the heroic. Furthermore, what we find in the Bible is a distinctive and robust picture of women who through individual enterprise show the value and power of valiant female initiative. This typology provides a way to valorize female ingenuity as a gendered action. That is, it enhances our appreciation for women of individual initiative rather than as agents on behalf of larger ideological issues that do not even manifest themselves in the context of their narratives. This heroic identification celebrates female trickster figures who work outside established power structures and who find success in untraditional (to masculine ways of thinking) ways. Like male heroes, what commands our attention here is the journey undertaken by these female characters. What is distinctive is the identification of the female heroic in the Bible. The biblical female heroic offers an image of women resolutely concerned with survival and the continuity of life in the face of death, neglect and shame, who are willing to use guile, trickery and deceit to achieve their own ends.

**6.0 CONCLUSION: LOT'S DAUGHTERS, TAMAR, RUTH AND  
BATHSHEBA, AND THE WEAPONS UPON THEIR BODIES**

“God is for men, religion is for women.”

--Joseph Conrad, *Nostramo* (1904)

My interest in this subject began with a simple question: Why are these particular female narratives in the Bible? In the context of a sacred narrative, the stories of Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba do not seem to fit. The narratives do not seem concerned with accurately depicting historical Israel. Furthermore, the stories fail to impart anything specifically about what sort of relationship biblical women have with God. At most, God lurks quietly behind the scenes but does not make an appearance or speak directly to any of the women. There is no mention of observing dietary laws, cult practices or ritual concerns. One infers God's presence because the stories appear in the Bible. But, without that biblical context, we just have stories of women. In fact, the narrative events move forward not through God's auspices but via the resourcefulness of the women. Their more folkloric character thus raises questions about their place in the grand epic narrative of Israel.

After significant consideration of these four stories, this work establishes that a distinct female heroic exists within the Bible. Traditional approaches to the heroic assume a monolithic benchmark that fails to factor in gender. The typical heroic yardstick assumes that men and women can be measured against a presumed gender-neutral standard, when in fact the heroic “trait list” really only works for male narratives. I counter that men’s and women’s narratives separately embody unique, gender-specific character traits; it is on that basis that we can make claims for the female heroic. Using this revised rubric, we find that the biblical stories of Lot’s daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba communicate a valor unique to the individual enterprise located within women’s stories. These stories find common cause with narratives associated with the female heroic that arise in other contexts. Now that we have identified the female heroic, I would like to suggest how these stories found their way into the Bible and why. But first, a summary of my arguments so far.

*Biblical Narrative:* I examined four specific stories of women in the Bible whose characters (1) lacked an appropriate male partner and (2) utilized some form of trickery and deceit in their narrative. I first noted some of the ways in which narratives from Genesis through Kings (where our four stories appear) have been identified, without considering gender. Four categories emerged: biblical narratives can exist as a story of Israel’s salvation history; as a piece of epic literature; as a re-telling of a succession narrative; or simply as a piece of literary artistry. All of these represent an institutional awareness of Israel as a special people, set apart for a particular theological purpose: God is the author of history and therefore, Israel’s destiny as a people and a nation is intimately connected to and shaped by this God. This viewpoint represents an overriding theological focus found in the Bible.

All four of our stories can be subsumed within these larger themes. These narratives are part of Israel's story of salvation history. The women's reproductive efforts help further the covenantal promises made to Abraham. All four fit within epic themes since they symbolize Israel the exile, the metaphoric underdog who succeeds, which is the story of Israel itself. In addition, each of these women perpetuates the Davidic line, helping to illuminate some aspect of David's character as well as to enhance the claims of his dynastic line. And finally, each story demonstrates the unique and vibrant nature of the Bible's special literary artistry. Thus we can read these stories for what they convey about each (or all) of these biblical perspectives.

*Gender themes:* I then looked at gender within these critical approaches. Scholars find that women fit the standard historical and literary theories that were previously outlined. For example, the annunciation narratives of Sarah, Rebekah and Samson's mother inform readers that these pregnancies will result in special sons. For Sarah and Rebekah, their pregnancies confirm divine providence with respect to Abraham's line and the covenantal promises made to him. Samson's story redefines biblical heroism as faithfulness to God rather than acts of individual bravery and force of arms. There is a largely salvific air about these annunciation stories. Women's fecundity plays a unique supporting role in fulfilling Israel's destiny as God's chosen people.

Women also functioned within epic literature as tricksters and underdogs, motifs which Israel sometimes assumes for itself. Judith and Yael, seemingly powerless women in the midst of strong foreign men, eventually triumph through deception and violence. Their physical mastery of these mighty men provides hope to an exiled or oppressed people: they, too, one day will rise up and best their overlords. Esther is the image of a Jewess in a foreign court who foils

the efforts of those who would destroy the Jews. These landless Jews, without an advocate, identify with Esther. Like her, they are powerless, foreign, outside the land, and yet they have within themselves the ability to achieve great things on behalf of their people.

By narrowing our focus, we discover that stories of particular women gain significance for pointing the way to David, who embodies a highpoint in Israelite history. Davidic ancestresses such as Tamar, Ruth and even Lot's daughters as well as the women immediately around David such as Michal, Abigail and Bathsheba provide considerable insight into the nature and character of David. Like David, all of these women are multifaceted: their stories emphasize individual initiative which does not always keep the greater good of others in mind. The women function as tricksters in their stories, coercing, misleading or outright deceiving the men in their stories. But their actions are neither malicious nor cruel. They act out of self-preservation for the most part (whether justified or not). And in this, they help point the way to David, who embodies all of these characteristics. Furthermore, readers find the very ambitious but flawed David and his ensuing line exemplified through the stories of these equally ambitious but flawed women.

Literary representations of women help to liberate many of the nameless, faceless women's stories in the Bible from their flat, functional characterizations. Jephthah's daughter and the unnamed concubine of Judges 19—two stories of horrific violence—bring the men in those stories into sharper contrast. Through the women, we find the men acting in abhorrent ways. And the stories of violence against daughters—Dinah and David's daughter, Tamar—enlighten our views of their fathers, who offer neither comfort nor concern in the aftermath of their violations. The fathers' distress centers on their own personal honor and their households;

words of any sort for the violated daughters are nonexistent.<sup>412</sup> Here again we find women serving to inform our ideas about the men in the text. While the actions of the women are clearly their own, the substance of the narrative enlightens our grasp of how well men performed as fathers, husbands, kings or servants of God.

By way of conclusion, I want to take the next few pages to frame a few of the points made in this study. In my introduction, I suggested that it is not enough to reduce a text down to its component parts and simply identify one trope or another. The subsequent task is to discern meaning and significance behind those tropes and motifs. This includes not just providing the current state of scholarship on this material but conjecturing on the original context of such narratives as well as considering some of the implications that arise from such a study, both in its original context and for the future state of such scholarship.

First and foremost, this work makes the case for women as their own analytical category. We have seen through this study that we can discover much about the women in the text without reference to men or depending upon male models in order to validate their inclusion. While analyzing the stories might not enrich our understanding of God or Israel's religious culture, there is still efficacy to looking just at the female narratives. If nothing else, this perspective

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<sup>412</sup> In the context of the narrative, neither Jacob nor Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi speak directly to Dinah. David never addresses Tamar after he sends her to Amnon. Both fathers speak to their sons and are angered by the violence of the sons but they offer no words of comfort to the ravaged daughters. The ambiguous biblical narrator simply does not tell us. The silence of Jacob and David with respect to their daughters in the aftermath of their rapes is astounding, especially since Genesis 34 and 2 Sam. 13 both share the conversations that continue to occur between the fathers and their sons. Thus, it would be an argument from silence to imply compassion on the father's part for their violated daughters. But the same charge would apply if we were to deny that they felt compassion for their daughters. All we can say is that Jacob and David offer no words of any sort—compassion, anger or disregard—for their despoiled daughters. They do not inquire into their physical or emotional state and they certainly do not request the daughters' input on their rapists. In this, Dinah and Tamar are no longer daughters but are reduced to stock characters and find utility in alerting us to the larger narrative issues, like honor. For example, regarding Shechem's request to marry Dinah, Fewell and Gunn conclude, "To have their [Simeon's and Levi's] sister marry an uncircumcised man would be a 'disgrace' to them, they say. Perhaps their honor is at stake, *their* honor," (emphasis theirs); Fewell and Gunn, 202.

liberates the Bible from its charge as merely an androcentric document. We can discover much about women and the power of the text to convey important gender information.

To do this, it was necessary to pull these narratives out of their biblical context. This was done in order to see what was missed by only reading them as embedded narratives within the larger picture of Israel. It seemed nearly impossible to discover pertinent gender information without removing these stories from their historical books and reading them in isolation. What are the implications of that? Does that mean that we can only appreciate female narratives out of context? That is not necessarily so. I believe what this process has done is shown another way to read women's stories by challenging established frames of reference which require these women's narratives to fit an institutional or theological agenda. In this instance, we more clearly recognize that these stories have as great an affinity with folktale motifs as they do with the story of Israel. That does not take away from their place in the biblical text. But this process does provide us a better lens through which to read and interpret gendered action in these narratives—that is, by comparing women's narratives to other women's narratives, regardless of their institutional or theological message. If we really hope to see the women in the Bible, we need to hold them to a gendered standard suggested by Sherry Ortner—the idea of women as their own analytical category.

Secondly, if women can provide their own analytical category, we might then move to conjecture on the origins of these particular narratives. This is only speculation at best, but given the folktale elements within these stories and their focus on women's actions, it seems that women in ancient Israel might have been the purveyors of these stories. Thus, these stories might have their earliest roots in a feminized household setting.

This speculation on origins leads us back to the thinking about their utility to Israel's story of itself. Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba have been symbolically overwhelmed by text. These stories have been harnessed to the larger narrative of Israel and in this, we have lost touch with the feminized dynamic that exists in these stories. This work of uncovering the valorous elements in their individual initiative is an effort to recover that dynamic.

Finally, I want to think about one possible implication of this analysis. Thinking about role of these stories in a sacred document like the Bible, can we posit that female heroes represent religious heroes as well? If female Christian saints, for example, represent religious heroes, how similar are they to our female biblical heroes? Similarities between the two around issues of the body and representation help to refine our picture of female heroes. Female heroes are powerful examples of female resourcefulness that celebrates initiative as well as their dynamic embodied essence. In discerning the exceptional attributes of the female heroic in the Bible, we locate instances of vibrant female action that honors women as embodied, created beings.

In the end, what our study asserts is that female heroes carry their essential weapons within themselves. We find in these biblical gender heroes a full and vigorous notion of the feminine. This argument for the female heroic releases the Bible from those who would dismiss it as a reductive, patriarchal text and thus limit its ability to communicate anything worthwhile to the modern context.

## 6.1 WOMEN IN THE TEXT

Standard biblical interpretations often replay hegemonic discussions of power already encoded in the text. When we look at women for what they tell us about the *men* or *the nation* in the stories, we fail to see the women themselves. Biblical women metaphorically or historically communicate much about Israel. For instance, mothers are salvific in their fecundity because they serve the higher aims of salvation history. Or we understand that stories of turnabout by the powerless speak to an exiled diaspora people like the Jews. Reading the stories of women as informing our notions of David and his ensuing line tells readers a good deal about David. And using literary tropes to uncover the women in the text often enlightens our understanding of the men—mostly men behaving badly.

There is no doubt that the study of women often results in enlightening our appreciation of men. Theories about women—literary or historical—cannot stand if they fail to contemplate basic gender dichotomies, either as a biological truth (sex) or as a culturally-defined reality (gender). However, most of the scholarship that we have considered here results in thoughtful, measured ideas about institutional Israel or men or both—but not the women themselves.

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner's influential discussion of the male/female-public/private divide argues that many cultural studies tend to create oppositional categories of male (or public) domains of power over and against female (or private) domains of domesticity and nurture.<sup>413</sup> She argues for the universal nature of this gender divide which finds its genesis in simple human biology. Ortner begins with the argument that social constraints and obligations of gender follow from one's sexual identification as biologically male or female. One's sexual

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<sup>413</sup> Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" 5-31.

identification and thus, one's body, plays a crucial role in deciding one's place and obligations in a society. For example, a woman's body functions to create and nurture "species life." This places women closer to creation and the home and thus to nature. A man is not tied to home through menstruation, pregnancy, lactation or child-rearing. Because men do not have these episodic physical transformations, a man's physiology frees him more completely to take up public life or the projects of culture. Ortner concludes that the public work of politics, commerce, rhetoric and building is universally more valued than the private domestic sphere of nurture, education and religion. With respect to the religious sphere, this concept suggests that the business of God (priest; shaman; ritual specialist) is men's work; women deal with the emotive and the more personal aspect of faith and belief. Because of this value differential, Ortner argues, women operate in lower order social roles compared to men's more public civic and cultural roles: "The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact."<sup>414</sup> These power differentials, argues Ortner, are further reflected in academic studies which assume the higher value of public and/or institutional life over private/domestic spheres of influence.

Ortner later revisits this article and softens some of her conclusions on the universal nature of female oppression. By 1996, she finds cultures more unpredictable with respect to power relationships between genders than she thought in 1972.<sup>415</sup> Later, she is less willing to

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid.: 5.

<sup>415</sup> Ortner finds that male dominance is not nearly as universal as she thought in 1972; cultures are "more disjunctive, contradictory, and inconsistent" than she used to think. And, while the *categories* of nature/culture represent universal structures, the problem for ethnographers and historians is identifying how communities work out the *relationship* between the two instead of assuming a monolithic, universally applicable power differential where male/culture holds a higher status over female/nature: "...[E]ven if the nature/culture relationship is a universal structure across cultures, it is not always constructed—as the paper may seem to imply—as a relationship of cultural 'dominance' or even 'superiority' over nature... the argument from the universality of the nature/culture opposition was in no way meant to suggest a similar universality at the level of 'sexual meanings.'" (178); Ortner,

make universalistic claims for worldwide male cultural dominance. However, she does not back away from the gendered nature of the nature/culture divide. Ortner continues to affirm the widespread bifurcation between male and female spheres but she ameliorates her previous stance, claiming that the universal problem is *how* the relationship between nature and culture is resolved. As an example of this, Ortner defends the idea that differential gender relationships (“the transcendence of nature” via public or civic life) is a consequence of social structures designed for purposes other than the oppression of women and is not therefore an aggressive, active will-to-power by men. The power differentials that break along gender lines are a consequence of how a society establishes itself and are not always a conscious effort by one gender to limit another.

The idea that power differentials are a consequence of established social arrangements pertains to the Bible as well, where we find a world that is primarily patrilocal, patriarchal and patrilineal. To quote Conrad again, God is for men: the covenant is written upon men’s bodies via circumcision. No such requirement is made of women. Israelite religious practices demand an all-male priesthood and only unblemished men are allowed into the Holy of Holies. Women are freed from these rigorous religious requirements. Or, put another way, women are excluded from the centers of religious power. In this way, the text does not read like a conscious theological rationale for the subjugation of women. Rather, the dissimilar power relationships seem to reflect patriarchal arrangements *already* present either in the society of the time or during the time the text was written or both.<sup>416</sup>

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“So, *Is* Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” in *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 173-180.

<sup>416</sup> Ortner, *Making Gender*, 176-177.

The text does reproduce those arrangements, but in some ways, the text weakly ameliorates those inherent patriarchal structures by offering a presumed egalitarianism. While men might be favored in biblical society, both genders are involved in Israel's story (thus, religion is for women). Men as well as women serve to illuminate notions about God and the community of Israel. For instance, male analogues to our women-as-Israel examples exist in the Bible. We find men in the text doing some of what women symbolically do. For example, the metaphoric role of underdog is not limited to one gender. Men serve as underdogs. We see this in the motif of the younger son who inherits against primogenituristic expectation (Isaac, Jacob, Judah and Ephraim). Furthermore, we find analogous structural disadvantages in stories of men as well as women. Men like Daniel operate as foreign nationals, just as do women like Esther and Judith. Men also have stories where they act on their own behalf. Jacob tricks Esau out of his birthright; Joseph rises to prominence in Pharaoh's court by his own wits. God is given a good deal of the credit for the good outcome for men as well as women in this context.

Each gender possesses the ability to represent the community in its totality rather than its particularity. We potentially see the women more clearly as full contributors to the human condition rather than in the specificity of their gender. As Frymer-Kensky argues, we are better served by looking at men and women as two degrees of humanity subsumed under the heading *creation*, rather than overemphasizing gender differences to the exclusion of all else. But again, we end up talking about the community—be it the textual community of the Bible, the historical Israelite context or the narrative's theological perspective—rather than the specifics of a creation that was created male and female and not androgynous.<sup>417</sup> Differences matter; male and female

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<sup>417</sup> Frymer-Kensky gives passing notice to the Gnostic and Kabbalistic notions that Genesis 1.27 (“in His image he created him, Male and Female he created them”) refers to an original androgyne who was separated into Adam and Eve based on the curious “he created it/him”; see her entry, “Woman (and Man) in the First Creation Story, in

are not equivalent in the Bible and to assume their similarity risks suggesting that women become most human when they serve the functions that men serve in God's designs for Israel.

But women's stories too often are read as a reflection of male categories of power and meaning. Women become symbolic of the male/public face of biblical narratives but men never become symbolic of the female/domestic sphere. Using Ortner's public/private divide as our organizing principle, we see that the comparison is a one-way conversation: women are to men as men are to men. Or put another way, women are to Israel as men are to Israel, an analogy that from a gender perspective only tells us that women can potentially represent Israel as well as men can. In traditional analysis, women are measured against men rather than measured within their own gender as part of the narrative re-telling of Israel.

Thus we find that the current debates about women in the Bible tend to reproduce these categories of public/male/valued and private/female/devalued, whether that is an accurate depiction of Israelite society or not. In fact, Carol Meyers argues that in the pre-monarchic economy of ancient Israel, distinctions between a "public" and "private" realm hold no meaning since there was no true public domain. Household production formed the dominant level of social organization and since no real male-oriented public hierarchies existed, Meyers concludes that the family household was the primary economic and social unit and therefore gender power differentials were less bifurcated:

We can thus re-vision the place of women in pre-monarchic village households and suggest that the vital productive and reproductive roles of women, along with their essential social and socializing roles, created a situation of gender complementarity...<sup>418</sup>

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*Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, ed. Carol Meyers (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 175. See also James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 84-85. Phyllis Trible associates the original androgyne with *ha'adam* in Genesis 2-3 and not the P account of Genesis 1. She argues that it is only with the creation of woman and removal of the rib that the original *ha'adam* is differentiated into male; *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 98-99.

<sup>418</sup> Carol Meyers, "Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, 39.

The importance of female narratives rises when they become like men by representing the civic/public aims of the text. When women's stories successfully illuminate our image of Israel—as a people, a culture or a dynastic line—they grow in importance. But analyzing these stories from this perspective tells us relatively little about the women themselves. If we want to recognize these as stories where gender plays a defining role in how we read and understand the women in the story, we have to move beyond this particular analytical framework.

## **6.2 ORIGINS OF FEMALE LITERATURE IN ISRAELITE CULTURE**

Having made the case for identifying these narratives in a new way, what purpose does the argument serve other than presenting a new comparative reading? What ideas about women in the Bible can we draw from this? How does this possibly enlighten our understanding of women, of biblical composition or redaction history or the role of the Bible today?

It is nearly impossible to suggest how certain themes or voices within the Bible came into being. The sources are lost to us. We cannot recreate their beginnings. One should always exercise caution in presuming to ascribe any sort of certainty as to how or where biblical elements arose. At most, we can conjecture as to their origins, but such theories will always remain tentative at best. The later biblical writers and editors depended upon myriad sources in cobbling together the Pentateuch and historical narratives. Many of these narrative voices attest to the Bible's folkloric and oral roots whose original composition lies well beyond our ability to

reconstruct.<sup>419</sup> Given the folkloric affinities of our particular stories, it seems likely that their beginnings lie in a domestic sphere where they were kept alive through retellings in Israelite and affiliated households.

Folklorist Jack Zipes argues that, in general, early folk and fairy tales served something of a pedagogical function. To quote Zipes,

Originally the folk tale was (and still is) an oral narrative form cultivated by non-literate and literate people to express the manner in which they perceived and perceive nature and their social order and their wish to satisfy their needs and wants... [T]he folk tale originated as far back as the Megalithic period and both non-literate and literate people have been carriers and transformers of the tales.<sup>420</sup>

Prior to their standardization by more famous collectors like the Grimms in Germany and Perrault in France, folktales served as teaching tools that could be adapted and modified to meet the needs of their impressionable pre-literate audiences.

Folklore, in its earliest embodiment, flourished in domestic settings as household narratives. Folktales (and fairy tales, the more miraculous and/or shape-shifting cognates to folktales) might not be composed in homes but find their most common retelling in households.<sup>421</sup> If we then adopt the gendered public/domestic divide offered by Ortner, it would follow that folktales, the household literature of the private sphere, were disseminated by women.<sup>422</sup> Zipes argues that oral folkloric literature is timeless in its ability to adapt to historical

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<sup>419</sup> See, for example, Zevit, "Review," 155-156; Gunn, "Traditional Composition," 220; Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 1-22.

<sup>420</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell*, 7.

<sup>421</sup> This is the point that Warner argues for in *From the Beast to the Blonde*: "So although male writers and collectors have dominated the production and dissemination of popular wonder tales, they often pass on women's stories from intimate or domestic milieux; their tale-spinners often figure as so many Scheherazades, using narrative to bring about a resolution of satisfaction and justice," 17.

<sup>422</sup> Speaking of the continual circulation of the European folkloric cycle, but apropos to the propagation of folk and fairy tales in general, Marina Warner writes, "Women's capacity for love and action tragically exceeded the permitted boundaries of their lives—this self-immolatory heroism [found in folk tales and fairy literature] was one

and economic situations. Good tellers rearrange and transform the stories to fit their audiences. Thus, these stories have the power to be retold and reformed by women in the household, the nuances added or subtracted to meet the needs of the teller. Says Marina Warner, "... fairy tales... offer a way of putting questions, of testing the structure as well as guaranteeing its safety, of thinking up alternatives as well as living daily reality in an examined way."<sup>423</sup>

It would not be far-fetched to imagine that women shared these stories of exemplary females with other women and children in the household. Stories are, says Warner, the weapon of the weaponless.<sup>424</sup> Our four biblical stories focus on women struggling to claim that which they feel is their due—a child, by which to secure their place in the community as well as their financial well-being. They use the system to their advantage and coerce another into doing what they want, which is getting them pregnant. In this, these particular tales are similar to folk literature which reflects the anxieties and concerns of their own context and times: fear of invasion, loss of property, early death of children and mothers. Perhaps we might conjecture that their popularity is owed to women telling and retelling tales of women like Tamar and Ruth and even Lot's daughters and Bathsheba to several generations of women and children in the household.

Therefore, within folkloric discussions where the role of women in propagating and disseminating these sorts of stories is acknowledged, I conjecture that these narratives find their beginnings as oral literature made popular at the household level. They possibly developed and were shared most prominently in domestic settings by Israelite women. Their continuing

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of the few chivalrous enterprises open to them"; *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 393.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 411.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 412.

popularity as Israelite folk stories might then explain their inclusion in a larger sacred work like the Hebrew Bible:

Folk tales powerfully shape national memory; their poetic versions intersect with history, and in the contemporary embattled quest for indigenous identity, underestimating their sway over values and attitudes can be as dangerous as ignoring changing historical realities.<sup>425</sup>

Few debate the folkloric origins of these stories. The roots of their stories have little or nothing to do with the subsequent religious practices of Israel. Yet we find them now within a piece of sacred literature and suggest that these narratives have been reworked so that we might see within them the workings of God and ultimately, the chosen destiny of Israel. Their gendered components have been harnessed to the larger story of Israel and thus we no longer see them in their original *Sitz em Leben*—as tales about women, not about Israel.

### 6.3 OVERWHELMED BY THE STORY

The Bible contains few stories where women-as-daughters star. We have far more women-as-wives and women-as-mothers (potential as well as realized) than women-as-daughter narratives. And in those few daughter narratives, we find equal instances of horrific violence and family chaos.

Looking at sons and daughters in literature, literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun claims that in family dramas, sons take center stage. The Freudian dynamic plays out with boys, who metaphorically fear castration by the father; the sons respond with violence in order to assert

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 410.

themselves against their fathers. The Oedipal tragedy speaks to the masculine within the text, which often overwhelms all other story lines.<sup>426</sup> But for mothers and daughters, Heilbrun argues, the motif is not violence but engulfment. Daughters do not fear metaphorical castration or violence at the hands of their mothers. Textually, they are overwhelmed by mothers, engulfed by their smothering love or oppressive need to keep the daughters near and under their considerable sway.<sup>427</sup>

A similar engulfing is found in the family dramas of our female narratives. If Israel is the Bible's mother, then our stories have been overwhelmed by the later redaction and adaptation to the text's larger theological aims. Our four stories are harnessed to institutional Israel and, over time, our women are reduced to stock characters. Their importance is limited to informing our notions of civic or cultic Israel. We no longer read them for what they might have meant in their original oral context or for what they might tell readers about women in the Bible. When we question why these stories of sexual deception and trickery might be in the Bible, traditional interpretations encourage us to see these narratives as examples of some aspect of Israel (the mother) herself. We fail to read these stories for themselves, for what they communicate to us about women.

This is not an argument for a universal "woman" any more than it is an argument for a universal female narrative. I am suggesting that the Bible has engulfed these narratives to such

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<sup>426</sup> This is not to imply that there are no stories of mothers who visit violence or death upon their children in literature. Using James Joyce and Virginia Woolf as her exemplary authors, Heilbrun refers to the father-son dynamic which tends to overwhelm narratives to the exclusion of all else. She argues that daughters within these stories become metaphorically swallowed up by the larger masculine struggle; their efforts to assert themselves, textually or metaphorically, are piteously viewed as textually insignificant. In this, she makes larger claims for women consenting "to their roles as stock figures in a drama of which they could never be the protagonist" (137); Carolyn Heilbrun, "To *The Lighthouse*: The New Story of Mother and Daughter," in *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revs. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 134-139.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

an extent that what might be their original gendered nature is lost to us. What we have instead is what folklorist Jack Zipes calls a commodified popular culture:

Once there was a time when folk tales were part of communal property and told with original and fantastic insights by gifted storytellers who gave vent to the frustration of the common people and embodied their needs and wishes in the folk narratives... Today the folk tale as an oral art form has lost its aura for the most part and has given way to the literary fairy tale and other mass-mediated forms of storytelling.<sup>428</sup>

The Bible broadly embodies Zipe's notion of a mass-mediated or commodified storytelling. The original context of biblical narrative is no longer available to us so we are left to read and understand these stories only as part of a later and highly redacted text. Whether they were known to their original audiences as bawdy tales, moral fables or legendary epics will probably never really be known to us. But their placement in the Hebrew Bible assures that we read and understand these as communicating something about how Israel understood itself, its past and its future under God's providential care. Thus what we find is that biblical composition and redaction represents a type of culture industry which has determined not just the inclusion of folkloric narratives but their actual transmission into the historical context.<sup>429</sup>

Folklorist Renate Baader dismisses this sort of editorial rebranding. Her analysis specifically critiques 17th and 18th century French folklore but her criticism has bearing upon the biblical context. She disparages 17th and 18th century male editors who took morally ambiguous folk tales and revalorized feminine faults in an effort to craft a morally acceptable tale.<sup>430</sup> This seems a noteworthy comparison to the process of biblical compilation and composition. Our stories of gutsy women seeking their due have been overtaken by the larger

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<sup>428</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revs. ed. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>429</sup> Zipes, ix.

<sup>430</sup> Quoted in Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 22.

narrative and institutional issues of later writers and redactors. Their initiative and sexual potency has been harnessed to an official history where it has been rendered usable. Gender distinctions are dissolved: “women’s voices have become absorbed into the corporate body of male-dominated decision-makers” where their stories have lost their bond with “the particular web of tensions in which women were enmeshed and come to look dangerously like the way things are.”<sup>431</sup> Once we might have found simple folk narratives. Now, biblical rebranding encourages us to see these female stories as part of a larger civic, theological or dynastic account.

Folklorists like Zipes speculate that female-driven narratives end up serving the aims of a dominant masculine culture. From this perspective, we conjecture that later editors and redactors took these popular tales and incorporated them into the Israel’s story of itself, modifying their more female-oriented focus to fit the aims of then-current institutional, theological or political Israel. Over time then, we can see how the original sense of these stories as profoundly gendered narratives was lost. Now, we read them only for what they communicate about larger issues.

#### **6.4 SAINT, ICON OR HERO?**

For the moment, I want to move beyond the Bible and think about the implications of this study in a wider theological context where gender and religion intersect. This coupling of gender with theological themes presumes that our women potentially inform our notions of women as religious or spiritual figures. Since Lot’s daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba are so unlike

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<sup>431</sup> Warner, 417.

male heroes, can we claim that they hold more in common with other female religious heroes? Thinking specifically of female saints in the Christian context, do we see our female biblical heroes finding common cause with religious heroes like saints as they strive to fulfill God's will? Do female biblical heroes reproduce some of the same motifs as Christian saints? And if so, is that significant?

Female hero stories, like hagiographies, portray something of an iconic or static image of an exemplary individual who shows pluck and initiative. On a structural level, the comparison seems to end there: it would be hard to consider Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba as religious figures of any sort, given the lack of God-language and ritual activities. Their stories are not hagiographies; they do not act in order to serve or to model a closer relationship to God. Furthermore, female heroes differ from saints in their reproductive and ritually impure states. In their embodied aspects, I am thinking particularly of ascetic religious heroes who tend to renounce their sexuality (whether male or female) through celibacy and physical denial. This sexual denunciation deflates their particularity. The potency of gender is nullified through sexual denial.

Additionally, like heroes, female saints often exhibit exemplary physicality. Hagiographies recount tales of extreme self-denial of adequate food and sexual pleasure. Carolyn Walker Bynum's study of female ascetics of the 12th and 13th centuries suggests that this bodily mortification is a saint's unique intimate expression of solidarity with Christ's physical suffering.<sup>432</sup> As we have seen, female heroes also exhibit a hearty physicality but not

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<sup>432</sup> Fasting was the way in which women participated in Christ's suffering; suffering was considered an admirable and appropriate means for women to attain sanctity. Women's "holy anorexia" therefore was not simply a bizarre behavior or a body-hating practice but rather a gender-specific avenue in the Middle Ages towards *imitatio Christi* where they attempted to fuse themselves with the suffering physicality of Jesus. Says Bynum, "The notion of substituting one's own suffering through illness and starvation for the guilt and destitution of another" is a

in order to mortify the flesh nor in imitation of divine suffering. In contrast to saints, female heroes of the Hebrew Bible do not deny their physical sexuality; these female heroes celebrate physicality. Female heroes demonstrate a physical robustness that is as unique and appropriate an expression of their gender as fasting is for female ascetics. In the female heroes of the Bible therefore we locate powerful examples of female resourcefulness that at once celebrates their initiative as well as their unique and dynamic embodied essence. In discerning the exceptional attributes of the female heroic in the Bible, we locate instances of vibrant female action that honors women as embodied, created beings.

Saints also act as a type of icon. While unlike saints in their physical robustness, female hero narratives do approximate saints as icons in their purest sense. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, icons serve as painted scripture, static images whose intention is neither historical nor realistic. Rather, icons reflect higher spiritual truths as a source of meditation and devotion. The idea is not to convincingly depict any particular saint but to portray them in their spiritual essence as a conduit to the divine realm.<sup>433</sup>

Female heroes are not disembodied. Hearty physicality plays an indispensable role in their identification. Nor do we find their iconography particularly transcendent. Our female narratives exist in a particular context (the Bible) where the imaginative universe is constrained by its historical setting. But, unlike the Eastern Orthodox icon, they draw attention to women of worldly resolve, expressed in an imaginative medium. Female hero narratives do not communicate verifiable historical realism any more than they point to transcendent, divine truths.

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theological (not a psychological) statement; see Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA : University of California Press, 1988), 206.

<sup>433</sup> For further discussion see John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and Its Role in the World Today*, 4<sup>th</sup> revs. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 68-69; Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 9-58.

Rather, female heroes, like icons, offer a dialogic connection between readers and the text by valorizing gendered action. Trickery and sexual enterprise become hallmarks of female narratives, expressing an essential self-reliance that identifies them as heroic women. We read them and share their stories because they convey in a stylized fashion a vital message about decisive, vigorous women.

A female gender hero therefore presents a robust reconfiguration of the heroic based on distinctive characteristic or traits in narratives identified by the female gender of the protagonist. A female biblical hero is like a saint in her notable actions but unlike a saint in motivation: a female biblical hero moves forward for her own ends, not for or toward divine purposes. A female biblical hero's narrative mirrors an icon in representing a static image that points to a truth outside of itself. But unlike an icon, a female biblical hero's significance lies in her robust physicality and embodied action which includes an active sexuality.

Being a female lead in a story does not suffice for this designation of gender hero. What we find in the Bible is a standard set of characteristics which distinguishes gender heroes who demonstrate individual resolve through trickery resulting in a woman achieving her goal. Gender heroes do not deny their gender; they celebrate gender. They fulfill their unique narrative roles through individual enterprise with some element of sexual intrigue as part of their skill set. This formulation does not reduce women to mere wombs or offer will-to-power arguments based upon a sexual stratagem. Rather, female heroes like Lot's daughters, Ruth, Bathsheba and Tamar function as evocative gender symbols because they, in the words of Victor Turner, include a real sense of both physical and natural processes.<sup>434</sup> Gender particularity and a robust physicality remain essential elements to their stories. Female heroes do not escape from

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<sup>434</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 43.

the confines of gender so much as become more fully gendered through the telling of their tales.<sup>435</sup>

## 6.5 WEAPONS UPON HER BODY

What does it mean to define an authentic female heroic and argue for her existence in the Hebrew Bible? How applicable is this approach to other stories in the Bible? What implication does it present for further studies?

To begin, the title “weapons upon her body,” is adapted from a passage from Tractate Yevamot 115a of the Babylonian Talmud, which says

[If a woman states], “Idolators fell upon us” or “Robbers fell upon us, and [my husband] died while I escaped,” she is believed. There [her statement is believed] in accordance with the view of R. Idi. For R. Idi stated: “A woman [carries] her weapons about her.”<sup>436</sup>

Yehuda Radday further expands upon this passage, providing the symbolic nuance behind its charge:

What the Talmud teaches in Bab. Sanhedrin 21a in the name of Rabbi Shimeon proves how well the Rabbis knew to read between the lines, how deeply cognizant they were of human nature, how much they appreciated what is best in women, and how they were able to smile when a smile is in order... Rabbi Idi (fourth century C.E.), a connoisseur as it seems, remarked in Bab. Yebamot 115a that a woman carries her weapons upon her body.<sup>437</sup>

A woman’s gender protects her. The fact that she is a female forms the basis of her defense against suspicion that she is the murderer. Her physical beings provides not only her

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>436</sup> Soncino edition, Babylonian Talmud (London, 1934-1939).

<sup>437</sup> Yehuda Radday, “Sex and Women in Biblical Narrative Humor,” *Humor* 8, no. 4 (1995): 366.

legal defense but the means of an offensive posture as well. She bears upon her person the justification—the weapon—of her innocence. For the female heroes, her body becomes a tactical advantage, her sex an aspect of her valorous array. Gender defines a woman but gender is also a defensive as well as an offensive weapon for the female hero.

Gender can also *define* certain narratives. In fact, we more fully appreciate the motivations of Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba because we read these as gendered stories. We are not asking these women to be men or to justify their achievements only when they align with male characters. Instead, when we read their stories as gender hero stories, we expect to find certain things: they use trickery, individual initiative and sexuality without recourse to anyone or anything other than themselves; that is, the weapons upon their bodies. Unlike biblical male heroes whose crucial battle attributes include superior physical strength as well as divine assistance, our women bring nothing to the conflict beyond themselves. In the context of their narratives, gender heroes bear upon themselves as well as within themselves the necessary resources to overcome. And therein lies the crux: exemplary female heroes do not look beyond themselves for help. As women, they bear within themselves the means to succeed. These narratives exemplify women who discover an interior strength that enables them to act. In this, they serve as powerful metaphors for female fortitude: their most essential battle implement is themselves.

Second, we have refined our vision of women as characters in their own right. We have moved beyond viewing biblical women as flat, functional figures, and come to appreciate them as what Ortner refers to as their own analytic category.<sup>438</sup> Women are more than simply agents who enrich the historical and theological picture of Israel. And they do far more than

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<sup>438</sup> Ortner, *Making Gender*, 116.

foreshadow David's character or the aims of the Davidic dynasty. Reducing female narratives to the official aspirations of later editors and redactors denies these stories—and us—their essential gendered meaning.

Carolyn Heilbrun echoes those sentiments:

Women, I believe, search for fellow beings who have faced similar struggles, conveyed them in ways a reader can transform into her own life, confirmed desires the reader had hardly acknowledged—desires that now seem possible. Women catch courage from the women whose lives and writings they read, and women call the bearer of that courage friend.<sup>439</sup>

While this represents a modern perspective on something that may not have been the intent of ancient oral storytellers, these sentiments provide a moment of reflection. Stories survive because they communicate something to the reader (and the hearer) about themselves. As Heilbrun says, we “catch courage” from stories of those who struggle as we do—and eventually succeed—whether we do or not. One imagines ancient women taking courage from Lot's daughters, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba, stories of self-sufficient, forthright women.

But, the larger textual issues of organized religion in Israel have overwhelmed these gendered issues. These might be stories about women but those characters are used in service to bigger, more significant concerns. Our reading of biblical narratives argues for women as an analytical category of its own in order to break the public/private divide. Women's stories can function to tell us something about women. We need not justify their inclusion in the Bible based on their ability to inform our understanding of Israel. They offer a stout service in informing our notions of women as valorous exemplars of their gender.

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<sup>439</sup> Vanessa Grigoriadis, “A Death of One's Own,” *New York Magazine*, Dec. 1, 2003 (accessed Feb. 11, 2009: [http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/n\\_9589/](http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/n_9589/)).

Finally, we find that we have developed a notion of what a gender hero is. This is a narrative where the gender of the protagonist plays an integral role to reading her story. In the Bible, we are presented with unique examples of this. A gender hero is an exemplary woman who shows initiative and courage, who through her own auspices achieves her goal. This often includes trickery and sexual intrigue, but she is far more than the sum of her sexuality. A gender hero enlightens our ideas about women as embodied, physical beings and gives us another means for establishing women as an analytic category.

Women—in the Bible as well as in other literature—do not need to measure up to expectations set by men. We have found that women carry their essential weapons within themselves. A gender hero, even in the Bible, does not necessarily seek God’s help. This makes a gender hero problematic; her story makes us uncomfortable. But unlike saints and other iconic imagery, we find in gender heroes a full and vigorous notion of the feminine. This argument for the female heroic releases the Bible from those who would dismiss it as a reductive, patriarchal text and thus limit its ability to communicate anything worthwhile to the modern context. Patriarchy exists, but we have amazing and timeless examples of female heroism here, if we have eyes to see.

**APPENDIX A: TRAITS OF MALE AND FEMALE HEROES (RAGLAN/JEZEWSKI)**

**From:** Mary Ann Jezewski, “Traits of the female hero: the application of Raglan's concept of hero trait patterning,” *New York Folklore* 10/1-2 (1984), 55-73.

<b>Raglan on Hero Trait Pattern</b>		<b>Jzewski on Female Hero Traits</b>
<b>1934</b>		<b>1984</b>
1. His mother is a royal virgin		1. Her parents are royal or godlike, and
2. His father is a king, and		2. They are often related.
3. Often a near relative of his mother.		3. There is mystery surrounding her conception and/or birth.
4. Birth circumstances are unusual.		4. Little is known of her childhood.
5. He is reputed to be the son of a god,		5. She herself is a ruler or goddess.
6. At birth, attempt is made on his life, often by his father, but		6. She is charming and beautiful.
7. He is spirited away, and		7. She uses men for political purposes.
8. Reared by foster parents in a far country.		8. She controls men in matters of love and sex.
9. We are told nothing of his childhood.		9. She is married, and
10. On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.		10. She has a child or children.
11. After a victory over the king and/or giant, dragon or wild beast,		11. She has lovers.

12. He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and		12. Her child succeeds her.
13. Becomes king.		13. She does a man's job or deeds.
14. He reigns uneventfully.		14. She prescribes law.
15. He prescribes law, and		15. There are conflicting views of her goodness.
16. Later he loses favor with the gods and his subjects, and		16. Her legend contains the Andromeda theme*
		and
17. Is driven from the throne and city.		17. The subsequent resolution of this theme is by treacherous means which results in untimely death, exile or incarceration of the male.
18. He meets with a mysterious death,		18. Her death is uneventful and may not even be mentioned in her legend.
19. Often at the top of a hill.		
20. His children, if any, do not succeed him.		* <i>Andromeda theme: idea that a female hero is "rescued" by stronger male, often saving her from life with a less-suitable male; resolution requires the Persean hero's demise as he is now less attractive.</i>
21. His body is not buried, but nevertheless		
22. He has one or more holy sites or sepulchers.		

## APPENDIX B: THE HERO (VLADIMIR PROPP)

**From:** Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, translated by Laurence Scott; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, revised and edited by Louis A. Wagner. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.

Tale takes the following sequence (not all elements will appear but sequence will remain the same regardless):

1. A member of a family leaves home (the hero is introduced);
2. An interdiction is addressed to the hero ('don't go there', 'go to this place');
3. The interdiction is violated (villain enters the tale);
4. The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance (either villain tries to find the children/jewels etc; or intended victim questions the villain);
5. The villain gains information about the victim;
6. The villain attempts to deceive the victim to take possession of victim or victim's belongings (trickery; villain disguised, tries to win confidence of victim);
7. Victim taken in by deception, unwittingly helping the enemy;
8. Villain causes harm/injury to family member (by abduction, theft of magical agent, spoiling crops, plunders in other forms, causes a disappearance, expels someone, casts spell on someone, substitutes child etc, commits murder, imprisons/detains someone, threatens forced marriage, provides nightly torments); Alternatively, a member of family lacks something or desires something (magical potion etc);
9. Misfortune or lack is made known, (hero is dispatched, hears call for help etc/ alternative is that victimized hero is sent away, freed from imprisonment);
10. Seeker agrees to, or decides upon counter-action;
11. Hero leaves home;
12. Hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc, preparing the way for his/her receiving magical agent or helper (donor);
13. Hero reacts to actions of future donor (withstands/fails the test, frees captive, reconciles disputants, performs service, uses adversary's powers against them);

14. Hero acquires use of a magical agent (directly transferred, located, purchased, prepared, spontaneously appears, eaten/drank, help offered by other characters);
15. Hero is transferred, delivered or led to whereabouts of an object of the search;
16. Hero and villain join in direct combat;
17. Hero is branded (wounded/marked, receives ring or scarf);
18. Villain is defeated (killed in combat, defeated in contest, killed while asleep, banished);
19. Initial misfortune or lack is resolved (object of search distributed, spell broken, slain person revived, captive freed);
20. Hero returns;
21. Hero is pursued (pursuer tries to kill, eat, undermine the hero);
22. Hero is rescued from pursuit (obstacles delay pursuer, hero hides or is hidden, hero transforms unrecognizably, hero saved from attempt on his/her life);
23. Hero unrecognized, arrives home or in another country;
24. False hero presents unfounded claims;
25. Difficult task proposed to the hero (trial by ordeal, riddles, test of strength/endurance, other tasks);
26. Task is resolved;
27. Hero is recognized (by mark, brand, or thing given to him/her);
28. False hero or villain is exposed;
29. Hero is given a new appearance (is made whole, handsome, new garments etc);
30. Villain is punished;
31. Hero marries and ascends the throne (is rewarded/promoted).

## APPENDIX C : HERO PATTERN (J. VON HAHN)

From: Johann Georg von Hahn's **Hero Pattern** (from *Sagwissenschaftliche Studien*, Jena: Mauke, 1876). Taken and adapted from Mary Magoulick, "Various Patterns of Hero Journey" ([http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/hero\\_patterns.htm](http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/hero_patterns.htm)), accessed September 6, 2006.

1. The hero is of illegitimate birth
2. His mother is the princess of the country
3. His father is a god or a foreigner
4. There are signs warning of his ascendance
5. For this reason he is abandoned
6. He is suckled by animals
7. He is brought up by a childless shepherd couple
8. He is a high-spirited youth
9. He seeks service in a foreign country
10. He returns victorious and goes back to the foreign land
11. He slays his original persecutors, accedes to rule the country, and sets his mother free
12. He founds cities
13. The manner of his death is extraordinary
14. He is reviled because of incest and he dies young
15. He dies by an act of revenge at the hands of an insulted servant
16. He murders his younger brother

## APPENDIX D : BIRTH OF THE HERO (OTTO RANK)

**From:** Otto Rank, *Myth of the Birth of the Hero*. New York: Vintage Books, 1964

1. The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king.
2. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles.
3. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative).
4. As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box.
5. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or by a humble woman.
6. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents in a highly versatile fashion.
7. He takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged, on the other.
8. Finally he achieves rank and honors.

## APPENDIX E : THE HERO'S BIOGRAPHY (HEDA JASON)

**From:** Heda Jason, "King David: a Folklore Analysis of his Biography," Michael Heltzer, Meir Malul, ed. *Teshurot laAvisur: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, in Hebrew and Semitic Languages* (Tel-Aviv-Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publications, 2004): 87-106.

1. Prologue/genealogy of protagonist
2. Complications at conception
3. Unusual birth
4. Celebration of hero's birth
5. Hero named
6. Baby-hero made invulnerable
7. Prophecy/destiny of baby revealed
8. Attempt made on baby's life; baby removed
9. Rescued and raised in foster home
10. Hero's childhood and youth
11. Acquires heroic attributes
12. Hero embarks on warrior career; sets out on quest/adventure
13. Tales of exploits
14. Chosen to rule over his elders
15. Adult life events (further combat, decision-making, etc.)
16. Hero's physical prowess
17. Hero loses strength
18. Abandons warrior career
19. Death of hero
20. Burial
21. Second generation heroes

## APPENDIX F: THE PERSECUTED HEROINE (ILANA DAN)

From: Ilana Dan, "The Innocent Persecuted Heroine: An Attempt at a Model for the Surface Level of the Narrative Structure of the Female Fairy Tale," ed. Heda Jason and Dimitri Segal *Patterns in Oral Literature* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 13-30.

Says Dan, "*The heroine is depicted as particularly virtuous: she will not be seduced, even in the most horrible circumstances, and is charitable. The villains, in contrast, are sinners: seducers, slanderers, murderers, and misers*" (14).

1. Heroine is persecuted or threatened in her family home
  - a. Family gives heroine over to villain
  - b. Villain harms heroine
  - c. Family banishes heroine, or heroine runs away from family
  
2. Rescue of heroine and meeting of future husband
  - a. Helper aids heroine in her distress
  - b. Agent connects heroine with future husband
  - c. Future husband meets heroine
  
3. Prince marries heroine
  - a. Heroine bears child(ren)
  
4. Heroine separates from husband
  - a. Husband temporarily leaves home; heroine thereby exposed to villain's intrigues; OR husband sends her on journey, entrusting her to villain
  - b. Villain intrigues against heroine; OR villain actually harms heroine
  - c. Husband banishes heroine (or she runs away from husband and his family); OR heroine simply wanders off

5. Heroine rehabilitates herself
  - a. Heroine temporarily changes her identity in order to approach her family
  - b. Benefactor helps heroine
  - c. Heroine works to attract attention of others
  
6. Heroine is rehabilitated and villain punished
  - a. Husband discovers villain's treachery
  - b. Husband and others set out in search of heroine
  - c. Heroine recognizes husband/family/villains.
  - d. Heroine reveals identity to others
  - e. Heroine tells her story to others
  - f. Benevolent other(s) punish villain(s)
  - g. Husband reinstalls heroine

## **APPENDIX G: FEMALE BIBLICAL HERO TRAIT LIST (COLLINS)**

1. Little is known of her childhood
2. She can be charming or beautiful
3. She uses men for her own purposes
4. Her story includes the bedtrick, an instance of individual initiative focused on sexual trickery or deception
5. She is married
6. She has a son
7. She has lovers
8. Her child's story continues on after her
9. She does a man's job or deeds
10. Removal or de-emphasis of the male figure after the birth of the son
11. Her death is hardly ever noted
12. Her actions are morally ambiguous and there are conflicting views of her goodness.

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