

Conclusion

*Inside the oldest stories are older stories
Not destroyed but hidden. Swallowed.
Mouth songs. Nobody knows how many.
The texts retain traces, leakages, lacunae,
Curious figures of speech, jagged irruptions.*

Alicia Ostriker ¹

Preamble

With the implementation of feminist narrative tools to analyse four stories of unmarried daughters in the Hebrew Bible, a major aim of this thesis has been to search for and retrieve evidence of strands of resistance narrative in one or more of the texts. My conclusion is that there do appear to be traces of women's traditions in each of these stories.² It is probable that most of these traces are originally oral, but as valued traditions they have been included in the texts, just as thousands of other strands of poems, laws, proverbs, genealogies, speeches and narratives of unknown origin contribute to the rich diversity of literature which is the Hebrew Bible. I have also noted a number of events and issues which the stories have in common and I have expanded feminist discussion in relation to the four *b^etuloth* narratives.³

¹ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, "Reflection on Jewish Identity: Entering the Tents," *Feminist Studies* 15, no. 3 (autumn 1989), 547.

² See "Retrieving Resistance Strands," pp. 474-76

³ See "Comparing the Four *B^etuloth* Texts," pp. 467-72, and "Original Contributions," pp. 476-78.

Biblical Commentary through the Ages

The Hebrew Bible is without doubt the product of a community immersed in patriarchy, but what is surprising is the persistence in the West of the prejudices and blind-spots of androcentricity.⁴ It is only in recent decades that hermeneutical endeavour has diversified with feminist critics leading the way to new and varied approaches to biblical exegesis.

Yet even in the ‘enlightened’ twenty first century in which the West is saturated with Bibles in every conceivable format, the narratives about the daughters of Lot, Zelophehad, Jephthah and David remain virtually unknown among mainstream Christians. The reason for this is that too many writers who popularise the Bible continue to cling to traditions which promise intellectual safety, and remain unaware that they risk ignoring or misunderstanding the textual voices and silences of the Bible’s ‘other’ - those who are little, last, least and lost.⁵ Indeed, one could call it a conspiracy of silence to hide away the Bible’s ugly tales in order to “keep God gorgeous” by protecting the image of God.⁶ Paradoxically, however, challenging but obscure stories like those about Seila and Tamar - stories of failure, indifference, cruelty and suffering - have

⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 22.

⁵ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Mi.; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 17. Not only does the word ‘other’ mean people who are least and last but also the Earth and all her floral and fauna, clouds, winds, oceans and land: all of these receive recognition in the pages of the Hebrew Bible.

⁶ Lorna Hallahan, “In My Flesh Shall I See God; Journeys Around Disability and Theology” (Ph.D. diss., Flinders University of South Australia, 2005). At the Adelaide College of Divinity on 27th April, 2004, I attended Hallahan’s presentation on her Ph.D. thesis. Hallahan spoke about the reluctance of most Christian leaders and teachers to criticise the deity, and the way this reluctance leads to extraordinary attempts to justify all biblical portrayals of God in order to “keep God gorgeous.” Permission to use quotation granted 9th October 2009.

much to offer ordinary people who may be experiencing deep pain in their relationships.⁷

As noted earlier, it is vital for a feminist student of the Bible to learn to ‘re-vision’ selected texts which may or may not feature women.⁸ Indeed, feminist interpretation is necessary to counter centuries of male commentary which has led to Christians conferring sainthood on Lot and Jephthah and honouring David as Israel’s greatest king. It is necessary to persist in seeking ways to de-patriarchalise the Bible’s hidden texts and bring them into today’s collective consciousness in order to make use of, and benefit from, the treasures they contain.

The Secret World of Women’s Wisdom

The anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, who lived for two years with a Bedouin clan from 1978 to 1980, discovered that the poetry and story traditions of the women of the clan are kept secret from the men of the clan.⁹ If there are similarities between Bedouin and ancient Hebrew cultures, secrecy could be a major reason for the paucity of women’s stories and rituals in the Hebrew Bible – a book which lacks information about women’s lives in general. Equally Carol Meyers’ archaeological and biblical research has led her to conclude that in the pre-monarchic period women had considerable private and some public

⁷ See “Postscript,” p. 481.

⁸ See Chapter 1: “Support for a Feminist-Narrative Methodology”, p. 15.

⁹ Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 26 (See “Methodology: Orality and Folktales,” p. 83.

influence in ancient Israel, but that it was generally hidden, informal and related to the kind of wisdom associated with the feminine.¹⁰

This women's secrecy may be a reason that there is no record of the content of two of the rituals in Seila's story, and that only ambiguous references to Tamar's healing rite persist in 2 Samuel 13. In contrast, it is not difficult to imagine that the speech of Lot's daughter has long held a place in the Israelite treasury of ancient folklore, and I imagine that the marvellous story about the Zelophehad sisters' achievement was popular among both men and women in pre and post-exilic Israel. This popularity may have ensured them a place in an overwhelmingly androcentric collection of ancient literature, namely, the Hebrew Bible. Yet the potentially subversive elements of a biblical narrative constitute a deconstructive trace¹¹ which may well be missed by a narrator's patriarchal consciousness. Almost certainly the *b^etuloth* stories are preserved primarily because the fathers are the principal characters, while the daughters' activities and discourse are included because they contribute to the narratives about their famous fathers.

There may be other reasons, of course, and one can imagine that the Zelophehad sisters are among the exceptions to the rule. In the following scene I have imagined a Jewish boy, a future compiler of Holy Scripture, hearing an old story

¹⁰ Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 180-81; Meyers, *Households*, 61-62, 69-70.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 403.

as he plays on a riverbank in Babylon while his mother and other women wash their families' garments.

Today is warm and sunny, so a small group of women are down at the riverside, slapping wet garments on large flat rocks. As they work they gossip and reminisce about life back in Judah in the 'good old days' and the children splash close by among the reeds looking for tadpoles. After a while a bright-eyed girl calls out, "Auntie Aidah, tell that story again, you know, the one about the five sisters." So Aidah recounts her grandmother's tale of the five fearless girls who presented a petition to Israel's Great Court: a petition which resulted in the Lord establishing a new sacred law. Listening intently and in silence, the girls and boys take the wrung garments from the women and spread them over the larger clumps of reeds to dry. This story is a favourite among a number of 'grandma tales,' and most of the older children - including the lad who one day will have the sacred duty of working on the most holy scroll of all, the writings of Moses - have already committed it to memory.

Whatever the motives for their inclusion in Israel's scriptures might be, the presence of the nine *b^etuloth* in the four pericopes adds to the multi-faceted relationship between YHWH and his people and contributes to the rich texture of Israel's history.

Feminist scholars have quickly recognised just how exceptional the daughters in these four narratives are - particularly because each reveals one or more aspects of women's wisdom and/or influence. The role of 'wise woman' is generally ascribed to older women, like the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14:1-20),

whose wisdom may be a professional attribute.¹² However, I have come to regard the young women of the four *b^etuloth* texts as among those who participate in the Israelite tradition of women's wisdom. Bekirah is a woman who covertly and effectively exerts influence over her father for the greater good of what is left of her community, and Mahlah and her sisters are rare examples of women influencing Israel's hierarchy in an arena - the law - which is usually reserved for males only. Later Seila submits to the authority of her father yet - without directly accusing him of foolishness - she subtly chastises Jephthah for making his deadly vow. Finally Princess Tamar, although she fails in her attempts to deflect Amnon's evil purpose, her heroically impassioned speech reveals that she is wise in her understanding of Israel's social customs, laws and ethics.

Most remarkable is the ability and freedom of all these young women to speak and act with a degree of autonomy. What apparently makes this possible is their liminal state as *b^etuloth*, hovering as they do 'betwixt and between' the father's control of his child and the husband's control of his wife.

Dutiful Daughters and the Fathers Who Fail Them

B^etuloth who have not yet left the *bet 'ab* have, as just stated, some autonomy because of their liminal state, but the uncertainty which accompanies liminality also makes them particularly vulnerable. Mieke Bal claims that in ancient Israel,

¹² Dijk-Hemmes, "Traces," 106-107; Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975), 21; Camp, "Wise Women," 24.

“the most confined category of people, daughters who live in their fathers’ houses, are also the least safe... [for] to go outside is dangerous for daughters.”¹³ Bal’s claim appears to be true for the daughters in all four pericopes and results in disaster for Seila and Tamar. It is not immediately apparent, but the danger of going out also applies to the Zelophehad sisters. Although the latter are treated with respect when they do approach the holy space at the entrance to the tent of meeting, prior to this first court appearance the sisters cannot have been certain of their safety.¹⁴

The nine *b^etuloth* who appear in the four pericopes are particularly vulnerable to danger: first there are no mothers watching out for their welfare,¹⁵ and second, their fathers manifestly fail in their duty to protect them. As Tapp concludes, “Virgin daughters are expendable.”¹⁶ Yet the narrators’ portrayal of their extraordinary loyalty towards the various fathers means that they take upon themselves the task of supporting and/or protecting their fathers’ interests, and in Tamar’s case, her brother Amnon’s interests as well. Lot’s daughters provide him with two sons to ensure the continuity of his *toledoth*, Zelophehad’s daughters demand that his name is remembered in the allocation of *nachalah*, Jephthah’s daughter sacrifices her own life so that he can honour his vow, and in obedience to David’s order, Tamar performs a healing ritual for her brother.

¹³ Bal, *Death*, 171, 173; Archer, *Her Price*, 116-21.

¹⁴ See Chapter 3, “Repetition,” p. 206.

¹⁵ Genesis 19 is the only pericope of the four which mentions a mother, but she does not interact with her daughters, and is wordless and passively obedient until her fatal backward glance. See Thesis Introduction, p. 5, and Thesis Introduction, “Text Selection,” 8-9; and Chapter 2: “Death and Life,” p. 112, “Lot’s Wife,” 142-43, “Suspicion,” 152, 155.

¹⁶ Tapp, “Ideology,” 171.

Of all the *b^etuloth* presented in these narratives, Lot's daughters appear to be the least dutiful. Bekirah and Tsirah trick their father so they might conceive children, and although Lot eventually benefits from their actions, his daughters do not state that what they do is for his sake. Rather, they see their strategy as their only means of escaping their post-holocaust isolation. Ironically, the two who suffer most of all, namely Seila and Tamar, are portrayed as the most dutiful and faithful.

Seila's sacrifice seems to have no positive purpose at all. Even if Seila's sacrificial stance is viewed as deflecting what Seila believes is an even worse fate for her father, namely, dishonour, it cannot be regarded as anything but a tragedy. In contrast, even Bekirah's unconventional strategy of conceiving a child with her inebriated father results in the establishment of Lot's *toledoth*. Thus in all four stories, the narrator depicts the *b^etuloth* as moving to protect their fathers' honour, yet none of the fathers in any of these narratives attempts to protect or speak up on behalf of his daughter or daughters.

Apart from mothers who speak up on behalf of their sons (e.g. Rebekah in Genesis 27:5-13, 42-46; Bathsheba in 1 Kings 1:15-21), there are few women in the Hebrew Bible who confidently challenge Israel's male hierarchy and succeed: Mahlah and her sisters are the first to do so.¹⁷ In so doing, the sisters

¹⁷ Other Israelite women who successfully challenge Israel's male leaders are the prophets Deborah and Hulda, and the woman of Tekoa, all of whom are married women (Judg. 4:4-5:31; 2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Samuel 14¹1-20). Yet women who fail, like Miriam and Michal, are punished when they challenge social norms and expectations in a patriarchal society (Num.

‘break the mould’; they are the exceptions to the view that in the Hebrew Bible “virgin daughters are powerless to resist their objectification: they may speak, but only in concession to their fate.”¹⁸ Although Bekirah does eventually speak in order to determine her and her sister’s fate, initially they are powerless. So it is true that in their exposure to danger, abuse, abandonment and/or murder, ‘expendability’ is the experience of the daughters of Lot, Jephthah and David. Ironically, among the unmarried daughters in the Hebrew Bible, those who fare the best are the five sisters who have no paternal ‘protector.’

A number of feminist critics have pointed out - correctly in my view - that the daughters in these four texts are presented as dutiful because they are seen as underscoring patriarchal ideology.¹⁹ Yet no-one has explained why the fathers are depicted as selfish, neglectful and/or abusive. If the daughters are dutiful - and this is obligatory behaviour for a daughter in relation to her father - why are the fathers not more thoughtful? Why do the daughters have to suffer the dangerous consequences of their fathers’ neglect? Part of the answer to both questions may lie in the expectation that adult brothers defend their family honour by guarding their sister’s purity.²⁰ However, in a tragic instance of irony, Tamar, the only *b^etulah* in the four pericopes who has brothers is ruined by a brother who should have been her protector.

12:1-15; 2 Sam. 6:20-23). Their suffering serves as warning to other women who might contemplate insubordination to the patriarchy.

¹⁸ Tapp, “Ideology,” 171.

¹⁹ For example, Exum, “Second Thoughts,” 79.

²⁰ Stansell, “Honor and Shame,” 71; John K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1964), 172-73. The most famous example is that of Levi and Simeon who exact revenge on the Shechemites for the rape of their sister Dinah (Gen. 34:25-31).

So what are these narratives telling us about fathers? They are all portrayed as deeply flawed characters, while their serene, even heroic, daughters suffer because of their fathers' dysfunctional attitudes, behaviour and emotions. From these three areas of dysfunction the fathers' emotions, which include Lot's fear, Jephthah's anguished reproach and David's anger, are powerfully conveyed by each narrator to his audience.²¹ The narratives make it clear that "patriarchs negotiate between the inside and outside worlds...women, notably virgin daughters, are safe only insofar as they are allowed to remain inside the patriarch's home."²² In the first two stories presumably the daughters are protected by YHWH when they move into the outside world, but there is no divine intervention for the daughters of Jephthah and David. Excluding the deceased Zelophehad, in every family the father behaves reprehensibly with his hesitancy, impulsiveness, thoughtlessness and/or neglect endangering his daughter or daughters. Nor is this negative portrayal confined to fathers of daughters, for it is difficult to find positive portrayals of any fathers in the Hebrew Bible.²³

Although biblical narrators record many paternal sins of commission and/or omission, rarely are the fathers overtly criticised. There are at least two ways to

²¹ In contrast, little is revealed about the daughters' emotional responses to their fate.

²² Tapp, "Ideology," 170.

²³ The Hebrew Bible provides many examples of troubled relationships between fathers and sons, from Abraham who banishes one son and almost kills the other, to Isaac and Jacob and the strife cause by paternal favouritism, through to Eli, Samuel and David who fail to hold their sons accountable for their evil deeds. In Genesis 31:14-15, even married daughters like Leah and Rachel receive poor treatment from their father Laban. However, the depiction of fathers in the Hebrew Bible - a subject which would benefit from more extensive analysis - is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

understand the narrators' view: the first lies in the group-mindset of ANE culture, and the second lies in the heterogeneity of the Hebrew Bible. The rise of individualism in the West since the Enlightenment prompts modern audiences to puzzle over the Bible's contrasting portrayals of fathers and daughters in three of the *b^etuloth* pericopes. Schüssler Fiorenza's complaint that "not only is history *written* by the winners, it is also made by them,"²⁴ sounds odd when the *b^etuloth* narratives depict the girls as much wiser than the 'winners,' that is, their foolish fathers.

However, in the context of an ANE culture, it may be that the narrators unhesitatingly present Lot, Jephthah and David with various character flaws for two reasons: first, a father's behaviour which a modern audience may view as abusive - for example, the offer of a man's daughters to a Sodomite mob to save the honour of male guests - possibly is seen by the narrator as a parental prerogative. Indeed, in ancient Israel "a husband or father was within his rights to do whatever he wanted within the household."²⁵ Second, the virtue displayed by a man's daughter reflects positively on the whole household and especially on the male head of the *bet 'ab*. This means that the narrators - unable to critique their own androcentric points of view²⁶ - would also regard a patriarchal household as a collective in which the honour or shame of a family

²⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 80; Fontaine, "Abusive Bible," 94.

²⁵ Miller, *Tell*, 91.

²⁶ This perspective was proposed by Dr. S. Joh Wurst in conversation 19th February 2009.

member is indistinguishable from honour or shame of the household head, namely, the father.²⁷

YHWH's Role

“Above all,” proclaims Nahum Sarna in 1966, “the Bible is concerned with the problem of divine justice....God must act according to a principle that man [*sic*] can try to understand, and that principle is the passion for righteousness.”²⁸ Five years ago John Petersen concludes his study of female characters in the Hebrew Bible by affirming his belief in “the Lord’s involvement in these women’s pain and struggle.”²⁹ Yet the narrators in three of the four *b^etuloth* texts do not depict YHWH as particularly interested in these young women *per se*. Rather, the God of Bekirah, Seila and Tamar is portrayed rather as a deity “caught up in the male bias of the text.”³⁰ In Genesis 19, YHWH rescues Lot and his daughters for the sake of Abraham, but not for their own sakes. Once they reach Zoar, however, YHWH disappears from the text. In Judges 11, YHWH does not rescue Jephthah’s daughter; on the contrary, she dies because YHWH helps her father to fulfill his fateful vow. In 2 Samuel 12:11 Nathan declares that YHWH has cursed David and his family. This curse has terrible consequences for the king’s innocent daughter: when Tamar is raped and humiliated no God comes to her

²⁷ This idea is similar to that of the world-renown paediatrician D. W. Winnicott’s concept that “there is no such thing as a baby”: there is only a “*baby and someone*. A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship.” D. W. Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin Books Ltd., 1964), 88.

²⁸ Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 147.

²⁹ John Petersen, *Reading Women’s Stories: Female Characters in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 2004), 171-72.

³⁰ Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1994), 7.

aid; when she cries aloud for justice, no deity comes to redress the wrong. Only in Numbers 27 does YHWH affirm the *b^etuloth*, and although he later restricts their marriage options to men from their own clan, he gives the sisters the opportunity to choose their own husbands.

In summary, although Israel's God acts benignly towards the daughters in the first two *b^etuloth* narratives, the second two are tragedies in which YHWH appears to seal the deadly fate of Seila and to ignore the rape and subsequent social death of Tamar. Such mixed outcomes can be viewed as a microcosm of human experience in general. Some experience the deity as one who is deeply involved in human activity, while others at the opposite end of the spectrum experience the deity as dangerous, deadly or completely absent.

Such ambiguity surrounds the roles – as well as the absences - of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible in general and in the four pericopes in particular. Paradox is repeatedly evident in depictions of the deity, so “those who can welcome the Bible's *discontinuities* can marvel at the moral spectrum presented by the many and varied representations of God in biblical literature.”³¹ The contradictory portraits of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible are the essence of what Sawyer terms “an anarchic theme that runs through biblical literature,”³² and have generated much agonised and agonising discussion over time. Humanity's struggle with

³¹ Sawyer, *God, Gender*, 159.

³² Sawyer, *God, Gender*, 158.

theodicy and its inability to apprehend the mysterious “Other” is captured in these stories about nine *b^etuloth* and their vastly varying fortunes.

Resisting the Burden of Patriarchy

Critical feminists repeatedly remind their readers that “biblical literature was produced by and for an androcentric community,”³³ so the women who appear in the pages of the Bible are idealised constructs who serve the interests of the Bible’s male compilers. So long as the female protagonists do not challenge the patriarchal establishment, as the unfortunate Miriam attempts to do (Num. 12:1-16), they are acceptable and portrayed sympathetically.³⁴

I agree that the women who are portrayed favourably in the Bible serve patriarchal interests: the four pericopes chosen for this dissertation portray *b^etuloth* who ostensibly carry the values of a male world. Each of the daughters, however, subverts that world in some way. The most surprising case is that of the daughters of Zelophehad. Although they maintain the patriarchal values of their day, they nevertheless openly challenge the patriarchal hegemony without censure. In contrast to Miriam’s challenge, the sisters’ subversive action achieves its aim primarily through more artful strategic planning.³⁵ Their male relatives naturally protest, but the Zelophehad sisters’ bid for land entitlement is

³³ Exum, “Second Thoughts,” 79.

³⁴ Judah’s daughter-in-law Tamar also challenges the patriarchal establishment with her trickery, but perhaps because her goal is to add to Judah’s *toledoth* she is treated sympathetically by both Judah and the story’s narrator.

³⁵ Miriam’s challenge to Moses’ leadership is clumsy and threatening to the male hierarchy. Her bid spills out of the confines of patriarchy in a case of “too much too soon.”

successful because they speak in the name of their father. The result is that they become co-legislators with the deity.³⁶ I agree with Miriam Therese Winter that these wonderful sisters can and should be promoted as role models for today's young women.³⁷

Working on this dissertation has also led me to conclude that the narrators' constructs of women are not all that remain of previous or original stories, for these four narratives also provide glimpses, distorted as they may be, of the lives of a few of ancient Israel's women. The strongest argument in favour of this view is based on the textual references to women's rituals in Seila's story and in the description of Princess Tamar's baking ritual.

In *Gender, Power and Promise*, following their discussion about the vicissitudes of Eve's life (Gen. 2-3), Fewell and Gunn turn to the daughters of Eve in Genesis-Kings:

From time to time... we shall glimpse Eve's daughters following in her footsteps. They will show initiative, courage, and independence despite societal constraints. Yet just as Eve is eventually cast into the shadow of the Adam, not to speak of the tree, women in Genesis-Kings will often shade into invisibility. And when we see them most starkly, it will often be to witness the patriarchal "punishment" inscribed on and in their bodies because they have dared to usurp men's (divine?) authority.³⁸

³⁶ See "Challenging YHWH," p.72??

³⁷ Winter, *Woman Witness*, 230.

³⁸ Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 38.

In which of these four *b^etuloth* texts do women's bodies bear patriarchal "punishment"? Seila and Tamar definitely do; Lot's daughters, I believe, bear it in their damaged psyche and the ethical uncertainties surrounding their actions at the story's conclusion. Despite their humiliation and subjugation, none of the women in Genesis, Judges and 2 Samuel appears fearful and every one of them has something to offer. Bekirah and her sister show courage and hope for the future when their father is moved only by fear; Seila participates in what appears to be a obscure women's ritual and is immortalised in another women's ritual in her honour; and Tamar upholds her moral integrity throughout a merciless assault which destroys her status as a princess and a respected virgin ready for marriage and - if she is indeed a priestess-healer - her career as well.

The *b^etuloth* who are exceptions to the perception that women's bodies bear the punishment of men are the Zelophehad sisters. Do they escape because they have no father or because they dare to appeal to Moses directly? An affirmative response to both questions is only part of the answer, for my narrative analysis of the text indicates they achieve their goal primarily because they act on behalf of their deceased father. It is this motive which moves the patriarchal God of a patriarchal community to respond so positively to the sisters as he puts their proposal into law.

That said, I nevertheless regard the story of Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah as a great example of a narrative which has been able resist the burden of

patriarchy to a remarkable degree. It is so positive and powerful that I am prepared to promote the hypothesis that an oral tradition of Israel's women is strong enough for the narrator to have little alternative but to include this unique tale of the five fearless sisters in the book of Numbers. The power of the story is such that it even spills into the book of Joshua. Having mulled over the texts over a number of years now, I think that there are two important reasons for the story's prominent place in the Torah. The first is because the sisters instigate the formulation of a new law for the sacred legal code of Israel - no small achievement - and the second is because of the story's focus on a topic which is surely close to the heart of every Israelite: land entitlement. The narrator is so impressed with the sisters that he chooses them to symbolise the courageous and optimistic 'new Israel' as it is gathered on the Plains of Moab, poised and ready to invade Canaan and take up YHWH's gift of the Promised Land.

The achievement of Mahlah, Hoglah, Milcah, Noah and Tirzah is a literary landmark which has been disregarded for far too long. If I could wish for one major outcome from this dissertation, it would be to raise the profile of the Zelophehad sisters. They have much to teach 'women of the Book'³⁹ about recognising what is required for change, for example: good preparation, a succinct and effective presentation, gracious assertiveness and above all, self-confidence.

³⁹ This term I have adapted from "people of the Book," which is used for Jews, Christians and Muslims - all of whom claim the Hebrew Bible as sacred scripture:

Comparing the Four *B^etuloth* Texts

Since unmarried daughters living in their father's house are the primary protagonists of this thesis, the following section highlights the motifs and/or topics which the four texts have in common. These subjects include liminality, names, personal qualities of courage, wisdom and skill in planning, lines of descent and inheritance, women's role in the maintenance of male honour, death, and the role of women's traditions in the compilation of the four pericopes.

A major connection between all of the *b^etuloth* is their liminality, both in the manner the narrators have chosen to portray them, as well as in their life stage, that of *betuliyim*, the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood.⁴⁰ None of them are married, although Zelophehad's daughters do marry at the end of Act Two (Num. 36:11-12).⁴¹ Without husbands, the *b^etuloth* are under the guardianship of their father or male next-of-kin yet exposed to great danger.⁴² Lot's daughters are rescued from rape and death in Sodom; Zelophehad's daughters - with no male kin representing them - risk their lives as they step into Israel's law court; Seila dances through the doorway of the *beyt 'ab* to her death; and Tamar obeys her father's order to leave the *beyt 'ab* only to be raped, rejected and ostracised. All are endangered: the first two groups of *b^etuloth* escape, the last two *b^etuloth* are destroyed.

⁴⁰ Wenham, "B^ETŪLĀH," 331-37.

⁴¹ The only *b^etuloth* whose position is somewhat ambiguous are Lot's daughters, who apparently are betrothed until their fiancés die in Sodom. See Chapter 2, "Ambiguity," p. 120.

⁴² Bal, *Death*, 172. See also "Dutiful Daughters," pp. 459-60.

Another example of commonality is in the area of character analysis where a problem emerges in every attempt to categorise the *b^etuloth*. That is, not one of the *b^etuloth* conform to one of Berlin's three categories: fully-fledged, type or agent. Perhaps this conundrum is simply another sign of the ambiguous status of unmarried daughters.

When comparing stories, it is also difficult to decide whether naming, or not naming, the daughters has any significance from a feminist perspective.⁴³ In Judges 11 and 2 Samuel 13, the lives of one nameless and one named *b^etulah* end in death or banishment; while in Genesis 19 and Numbers 27, 36 and Joshua 17, the outcome for the other nameless and named *b^etuloth* is new life. Being named, therefore, does not ensure a more positive outcome for that person. In the Genesis 19 and Judges 11, the fathers are the pivotal figures in the narrative and the daughters have no names. Conversely in the Numbers, Joshua and 2 Samuel texts, the daughters are named and the fathers have muted roles.

It may be that Lot and Jephthah's daughters are unnamed because the narrator wants the focus to remain on the father rather than their offspring, but perhaps it would be more fruitful to ask an androcentric narrator why he names Tamar and Mahlah and her sisters. The answer is probably different for each situation.

⁴³ Perhaps the record of a person being named at birth underlines their importance, for the naming of a daughter is rare: the only instances are of Dinah's naming by Leah (Gen. 30:21) and Job naming his daughters Jemimah, Keziah and Keren-Happuch. Job is the only father in the Bible to name daughters (Job 42:13-14). Dinah is important because vengeance for her rape results in enmity between Israel and the Canaanites, and presumably Job's daughters are named because they symbolise Job's abundantly restored fortune: they are the most beautiful women in the land and - perhaps because their father is so wealthy - they receive *nachalah* along with their brothers (Job 42:15).

Tamar's father is the most famed of all monarchs of Israel, so it is understandable that a daughter of David has a name. In contrast Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah are the instigators of an important change to land-inheritance laws and consequently their fame ensures that their names are preserved in Israelite lore. Apparently a biblical narrator must have a very good reason before he decides to award a mere *b^etulah* with a name.

Named or not, the *b^etuloth* share a number of personal qualities. Each one faces a challenging situation with courage and thoughtfulness. They understand the men with whom they must negotiate, and they act accordingly; there is wisdom in their reasoning and in their actions. Another attribute shared by the daughters is competence in planning, for they all act to avert evil and to benefit their families. Lot's older daughter outlines her plans to her sister so that they might both implement them, Mahlah and her sisters present theirs to a court of law, and the strategy of Jephthah's daughter is to greet him, assure him that she will accept the terms of his vow and obtain his consent to attend a two-month ritual. Only Tamar is taken by surprise, so she needs to think rapidly in order to escape her assailant. Her failure to escape does not reflect negatively on her, for the princess's monologues reveal that - unlike the men in her family - she has social imagination and moral intelligence.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See Chapter 5, "The Protest Monologues," pp. 443-446. Contra Reis, *Cupidity*, 50-53: see Chapter 5, "Suspicion," p. 422.

Another area which the daughter stories share is the matter of inheritance, whether it concerns land entitlement (*nachalah* נַחֲלָה) or a line of descendants (*toledoth* תּוֹלְדוֹת) - both very important concepts in the Hebrew Bible. Lot gains *toledoth* because of his daughters' actions which secure their pregnancies, but Jephthah - whose victory presumably ensures that his *nachalah* is restored to him - loses his *toledoth* when his daughter dies. The achievement of Zelophehad's daughters is to claim an entitlement to *nachalah* in their father's name, but the rape of Tamar leads to Absalom's vengeful murder of Amnon so that neither Tamar nor Amnon have offspring and therefore no *toledoth*.⁴⁵ The first two stories are about success in achieving *toledoth* and *nachalah*, while the second two stories result in loss of *toledoth*.

Another significant connection between the daughters of Lot and Jephthah is the notion of sacrificing a daughter in order to maintain male honour. Lot offers his two daughters for the Sodomites to rape in order to protect his male guests and honour the hospitality code; Jephthah gives up his daughter as a burnt offering to YHWH in order to honour his vow. Their fates are, however, vastly different. Lot's daughters are saved by YHWH's messengers, whereas Jephthah's daughter - along with a distressingly high number of other young women in the book of Judges - has no saviour.

⁴⁵ The narrator does not say whether or not Amnon is a father, but it can be presumed that he is not because later there is no succession claim by a son of Amnon. Since David has other sons, his own *nachalah* and *toledoth* remain unaffected by the loss of two sons and the internal banishment of his daughter.

Death is an element before, after or during each of the four stories: the mother of Bekirah and her sister dies in the holocaust, the father of Mahlah and her sisters dies during Israel's wilderness wanderings before he could arrange marriages for his daughters, Seila dies as an *'olah*, and later Tamar's brothers are killed. Every daughter suffers loss through untimely death.

Yet these are more than cautionary tales for unmarried daughters. It is probable that many women's stories and legends circulate in early Israel but do not survive the passage of time. Consequently I propose that three of the four *b^etuloth* narratives appear in the Hebrew Bible in part because the young women are caught up in the activities of their fathers who are famed for various reasons: Lot because he is nephew of Abraham, Jephthah because he is judge of Israel, and David because he is king of Israel. The one exception is the story of the *banoth* Zelophehad who realise success without the aid of father or brother, although their father's name is invoked in the process. Paradoxically, Mahlah and her sisters achieve their goal of access to *nachalah* precisely because they do not have male guidance and protection.

The book of Judges records Israel's social deterioration and 2 Samuel traces the slide into chaos of David's family and kingdom, but when the four *b^etuloth* pericopes are placed into chronological order the narratives can be viewed as symbolising the deterioration of women's status as Israel moves away from

subsistence living with its dependence upon YHWH for survival towards the manifold problems associated with a settled existence and urbanisation.⁴⁶

Midrashim and the Power of Identification

The most enjoyable writing task of this thesis has been the opportunity to prepare a *midrash* for each pericope and thereby identify with a *b^etulah* who features in the story. Imagining an early-Israelite woman's thoughts and feelings through significant days of her life has been a new experience for me. Since none of the *b^etuloth* is portrayed as a fully-fledged character it has been a valuable exercise to 'fill in the gaps' as it were. In the process I have imagined possible motives for the daughters' behaviour and this has facilitated the subsequent retrieval process. The practice of identification with characters in ancient literature demands creativity and reticence, but as a student of biblical narrative seeking to identify with its female protagonists I am beginning to discover its rewards.

One reward - extraneous to the purpose of this thesis - is that by expanding on a biblical story of a woman's suffering and expressing it in the first person, one consequence could be its transformation from a remote tale of ancient times into a powerful means of supporting and empathising with women in our own communities who have suffered or continue to suffer various forms of abuse and/or deprivation. A *midrash* has the potential to break through the isolation

⁴⁶ Ochshorn, "Mothers and Daughters," 13. Carol Meyers' archaeological research gives credence to the view that as Israel became an urbanised nation, the status of women dropped. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 187-88

experienced by an abused woman to give her support in the painful journey towards spiritual and emotional healing and growth.

The major benefit of writing a *midrash* has been the realisation that it is possible to expand on an androcentric narrator's text while retaining all the elements of the original plot. In the process I have enjoyed 'discovering' the imagined perspective of a female protagonist. I have found to my surprise that it does not distort the reading but enlivens it by revealing aspects of the extant text that are easily overlooked. For example, by imagining the escape from Sodom, I now have deep respect for Bekirah and her sister along with a degree of compassion for poor old Lot. Indeed, in empathising with a *b^etulah* in each of the four narratives the other characters gain in colour and liveliness because they are seen from the perspective of one of the protagonists. Rather than detracting from the narratives and the way they are presented in the Hebrew Bible, writing the *midrashim* has made it possible for me to read their nuances with increased appreciation.

Retrieving Resistance Strands of Women's Traditions

While the scholarly community accepts the androcentricity of the overall perspective of biblical narrators, the Hebrew Bible has another extraordinary quality, namely, that "voices from the margins, voices from the fissures and cracks in the text, assure us that male sovereignty is contrived and precarious."⁴⁷ That is, the Bible's multivocal nature means that ambiguity, irony and counter-

⁴⁷ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 204.

voices abound. Thus the Bible “makes provision for its own critique. It points to its own incongruity.”⁴⁸

This provision is not necessarily deliberate. For example, an androcentric narrator may not consciously promote women’s traditions, but by including them in the text their status as powerful and deeply-rooted customs in the Israelite community are confirmed and cannot readily be ignored or erased. It is only since the 1970s that exegetes have begun to explore stories in the Hebrew Bible using the narrative and feminist techniques which have made it possible to discern these “voices from the margins,” namely, strands of women’s oral traditions.

Researchers like Dijk-Hemmes, Brenner and Meyers have skillfully explored specific genres of women’s traditions such as laments, prayers, advice, songs of births and victories, “words of ritual goading, taunting and mockery, and also words of soothsaying and of prophecy.”⁴⁹ While biblical narrative has not attracted the same scrutiny in the search for women’s traditions, in recent decades *b^etuloth* texts have been variously researched by feminist exegetes who have uncovered previously un-recognised literary nuances and/or remnants of women’s sayings and/or rituals from largely unknown sources. A number of

⁴⁸ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 204; Thesis Introduction, “Reasons for Selecting the Four Texts,” p. 10.

⁴⁹ Murphy, *The Word*, 101; Dijk-Hemmes, “Traces of Women’s Texts,” 32-67, 85-97; Carol Meyers, “Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986): 209-23. See in Chapter 1, “Orality and Folktales,” pp. 83-89.

these are almost certainly remnants of women's oral traditions.⁵⁰ In addition, the various biblical narrators' acceptance or ignorance of the presence of resistance narrative - recognised today as a "call for transformation" when read "against the grain" - has made it possible for ambiguity to be a significant characteristic of the *b^etuloth* stories.

Original Contributions of this Thesis

Expanding on Signs of Orality

In the first pericope (Gen. 19:31-36) Lot's daughter Bekirah's two speeches outlining her plan of action, and the immediate repetition of each speech as the sisters enact her instructions, carry the signs that they are remnant strands of a legend most probably preserved for generations by Israelite women gifted in the art of storytelling. There are also signs of orality in the second pericope where there are fixed motifs and multiple repetitions of scenes, names and genealogy of the Zelophehad sisters (Num. 27:1-2 and Josh. 17:3-4). Further, the confident legal presentation of Mahlah and her sisters suggest the persistence of oral and/or written women's traditions which are at some stage well-known in the Israelite community.

In contrast, the textual fragments related to the second and third women's rituals in Judges 11 suggest that they originate from secret women's traditions precisely because the male narrator does not attempt to reproduce what almost

⁵⁰ Surprisingly, the narratives about the daughters of Lot, Zelophehad and David are overlooked entirely in Dijk-Hemmes' search for traces of female voices in the Bible. Van Dijk-Hemmes, "Traces," 17-109.

certainly are rites and songs transmitted only by and to women.⁵¹ Seila's instruction to Jephthah to "leave me alone" while she goes to the mountains is surely a "wandering rock:" Mieke Bal's metaphor for the "fragments of discourse that circulated within the culture."⁵² Perhaps even more remarkable as a "wandering rock" is Tamar's healing ritual and the partially-erased phrases which verbally correlate with other non-Yahwist ANE healing rites.

B^etuloth as Legendary 'Wise Women'

In developing Norman Habel's idea that Bekirah daughter of Lot possesses some important qualities of the 'wise woman' of folklore,⁵³ I began to realise that her plan to begin restoring the post-holocaust population of the Ghor Valley - in which she displays initiative similar to that of YHWH when he instructs Noah to "preserve the seed" of all creatures (Gen. 7:3c) - makes her a co-worker of the deity in the salvific work which the messengers begin when they rescue Lot's family from Sodom.⁵⁴ This realisation gives a far more positive and exciting perspective to this largely maligned addendum to Sodom's story.

As with the tale of the *banoth* Lot, I have found aspects of the wise woman motif in the other three pericopes, for the various narrators' depictions of Seila, Tamar and the Zelophehad sisters imbue the speeches of each *b^etulah* - perhaps unintentionally - with one or more of the special qualities of women of

⁵¹ See Chapter 1, "Methodology," pp. 83-88.

⁵² Bal, "Dealing," 322.

⁵³ See Chapter 2, "Retrieval," pp. 170-71.

⁵⁴ See Chapter 2, "Retrieval," pp. 171-74.

wisdom.⁵⁵ In the stories of the *banoth* Zelophehad, the sisters present numerous attributes of wisdom – especially the skill in questioning national leaders, including YHWH, about the law. In Judges 11, despite doubt about Seila’s self-destructive behaviour, I read her first words as those of a wise woman who censures Jephthah for making that fateful vow.⁵⁶ And Tamar, caught unawares by her self-serving brother, also has qualities of a wise woman as evident in her courageously censorious monologues.⁵⁷

I believe that further studies on sources of - and traditions concerning - women’s discourse on texts featuring *b^etuloth* may provide more valuable insights. Equally, continuing research involving comparisons between biblical texts and other ANE documents may also bear significant fruit in the future.⁵⁸

Summary

The wandering rock is not attached to a particular setting.

The rock itself embodies resistance – a rock cannot be destroyed.

And the rock keeps wandering.

We come across these wandering rocks even today

and get something out of them.

Mieke Bal⁵⁹

⁵⁵ See Chapter 1, “Orality and Folklore,” p. 86.

⁵⁶ See Chapter 4, “Retrieval,” p. 338.

⁵⁷ See Chapter 5, “Retrieval: Habbiryah,” p. 433, and “The Protest Monologues,” p. 444.

⁵⁸ The work of comparing biblical with other ANE documents is a field of research which continues to yield fresh insights about the ancient world.

⁵⁹ Cullen Murphy quotes Mieke Bal in conversation. Cullen Murphy, *The Word According to Eve: Women and the Bible in Ancient Times and Our Own* (Boston, Ma.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999), 123.

In this dissertation I have chosen to study four texts featuring nine *b^etuloth* as representatives of all unmarried women who appear in the Hebrew Bible - most of whom have no narrative voice.⁶⁰ The drawing together of the four pericopes to analyse narratives featuring unmarried daughters and their discourse is the dissertation's initial contribution to biblical scholarship. New steps in intra-textual feminist re-readings have also been taken, and the concluding inter-textual discussion has outlined a number of interesting commonalities.⁶¹

Unexpected discoveries have been made, particularly in the first and last pericopes. I argue that in Act Two of Genesis 19, despite Bekirah's liminal position she nevertheless displays the initiative required to begin the work of human restoration after a catastrophic event. In the last pericope, Tamar's story, I suggest that the account of the princess's meal preparation - with its similarities to ANE records of other sacred non-Israelite healing rites - has been partially erased by the narrator due to political and/or religious ideology.

Finally, my proposition that every one of the leading *b^etuloth* in the four pericopes has at least some of the attributes of the traditional 'wise woman' may prompt more discussion about wisdom in ancient Israel and its association with the feminine.

⁶⁰ The Hebrew Bible's only other *b^etuloth* who speak are Rebekah (Gen. 24:15-61), Zipporah and her sisters (Exod. 2:16-21), Miriam (Exod. 2:1-9; 15:19-21; Num. 12:1-16) and Naaman's slave-girl (2 Kings 5:2-4).

⁶¹ See this chapter, "Comparing the Four *B^etuloth* Texts," pp. 467-73.

The dissertation's thesis - that it is possible to retrieve strands of resistance narrative from the four chosen texts – may well be verified with greater knowledge of ancient Israelite literature and oral traditions than is now available. Nevertheless, having researched the work of numerous biblical and ANE scholars, and on the basis of the deductions made via narrative analysis and application of feminist principles to all four texts, my research leads to the conclusion that there are clues which offer evidence of remnant oral traditions - more specifically, women's traditions - which have resisted excision by patriarchal editors. Judges 11 and 2 Samuel 13 hold stronger claims to the presence of these traditions, but there is also argument in favour of women's folktales persisting in Genesis 19 and Numbers 27, 36 and Joshua 17.

Mieke Bal's image of "the wandering rock... [namely] the remains of the cultural traditions of women which are preserved within the patriarchal culture," is well-respected among biblical feminists.⁶² Bal's metaphor connects with my contention that each of the four b^etuloth texts contains at least some remnant of women's oral traditions. Many other displaced rocks have yet to be discovered in the Hebrew Bible's landscape of texts and the myriad challenges they pose for intrepid hermeneutical explorers. May their fossicking be rewarded.

⁶² Mieke Bal, *Macht, mythe en misverstanden het recht om verkeerd te lezen. Over Richteren 19 en het interpretatieprobleem* (Amsterdam: Katholieke Theologische Universiteit Amsterdam, 1989), 16 [the above quotation is cited and translated by Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes in *On Gendering Texts*, 89].

Postscript

When we read some of the darker stories, we weep. We weep not because we are feminists, we weep because we are human. We weep because the text that our perspective has helped to create calls us to weep, calls us to grieve over a humanity in need of healing.⁶³

Just as the Hebrew Bible's *b^etuloth* texts have been neglected, many women today have their own narratives which have not been heard, much less affirmed: stories of abandonment, hurt, grief and loss as well as stories of courage, achievement, grace and love. When the challenging stories about Bekirah, Mahlah, Seila and Tamar at last become well-known, women who carry burdens of pain, fear or wavering faith may be inspired to cultivate their own resistance strategies; strategies which have the potential to lead to emotional and spiritual healing, restoration or transformation of relationships - perhaps even severance from destructive relationships - growing awareness of their own strengths, and to the celebration of life itself.

⁶³ Fewell, "Feminist Reading," 84.