

Hating Girls

An Intersectional Survey of Misogyny

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A Squeegee in Your Path

Resisting Erasure

Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos

The hegemony of patriarchal thought in Western civilization is not due to its superiority in content, form or achievement over all other thought: it is built upon the systematic silencing of other voices.¹



A little more than six years ago I found myself listening to a sermon preached by a student in the chapel of our seminary focusing on her experience of being raped, engaging it with a difficult text from a psalm with denunciations of enemies and prayers for vindication against them through divine help.² In her searing account of being raped multiple times by three different men, this young woman showed not only her vulnerability but also her wisdom, her understanding of feelings of hatred and her slow regaining of trust in herself and in others. Through her testimony I learned a new language to approach this difficult topic in sacred scripture. As she told her own story, linking it to imagery used in the psalm, she tapped into the power of story to unlock buried pain and cries of distress from those with similar experiences. It was a personal story, and therefore unique, but also a story shared by many women. Recently the revelations made public by the #Me Too movement have once again brought to attention the frequency of women's molestation in our culture.

1 Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 282.

2 Psalm 59 includes lines as the following: 2. Deliver me from my enemies, O my God, and from those who rise against me protect me. 3. Deliver me from the workers of evil and from men of blood save me. 4. For, look, they lie in ambush for my life; they attack me, those strong men, not for my offense, and not for my sin, Adonai! ... 7. They come back every evening, they howl like dogs and prowl around the city. 8. See, they froth at the mouth, daggers from their lips, for who is listening? ... 14. Make an end to them in wrath, make an end, so they be no more; may they know God is ruler in Jacob, to the ends of the earth.

In listening to our student's sermon what struck me most besides her story of the deeply wounding experience of violation was what happened in the aftermath. Few people in her environment were equipped to receive her story, so that she not only lost trust in herself and her judgment but also in those around her because she could not give voice to what had happened. Something this shameful and *dirty* had to be wiped out. A devastating result of her rape was that she lost her voice. It was only through a long struggle and with the help of an unlikely biblical text that she was able to name what happened to her. Such instances, including my own less violent experiences, all examples of struggles against being erased, afford momentary views when the tip of the iceberg of patriarchal malfeasance against women becomes visible.

The title of this essay is a variation on the song "Un Violador En Tu Camino"/ A Rapist In Your Path.³ Its lyrics directly confront the violence of patriarchy, which the perpetrator commits with impunity. Like the psalm cited by the preacher in our chapel, the women of the song state their innocence, declare that the violence against them did not happen because of something they did, how they appeared, or what they wore, which somehow would make it their fault.⁴ The virus that is currently swamping the globe has put an end to live performances for the time being, but its thoughts and words are with us to stay, as they tear at the webs of patriarchal actions and ideologies that hold us imprisoned. With the "squeegee" of my title I have in mind the instrument that sponges dirt from a surface, a useful and seemingly benign tool. I chose it because what may appear benign and insignificant, even useful, in order to wipe away what is dirty and unwanted, in reality may abet the cover-up of inconvenient and even deadly truths.

Going back in my own history, I recall an incident when I was a young woman in graduate studies at my university in Europe in the 1960's. At that time all the professors in my department were male as were most of my peers. Although our classes were small, few professors engaged in any sort of dialogue with their students. Of twenty students in one class, five of them were perhaps women; in this particular class the professor was more generous than

3 The song with the accompanying dance was created by the Valparaiso Feminist Collective Las Tesis. First performed in Santiago, Chile, on November 25, 2019, it quickly became hugely popular. Its video became viral and both song and dance were performed all over the world. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjhGYeKHkbQ>

4 Psalm 59 also protests the speaker's innocence: 4. *Look, they lie in ambush for my life strong men plan an attack on me; not because of my fault and not because of my mistake, o God.* 5. *I have done no wrong yet they are ready to attack me.*

most in putting aside time for the attendees to make their voices heard. On one occasion, when we were invited to make an observation or pose an inquiry, I raised my hand to ask a question. Admittedly, this was a rarity, for I cannot recall any woman raising her hand in class at any time during those years. Of the question or the response nothing has remained with me, neither of the topic under discussion or the issue about which I was curious. Only the shock-wave that went through the classroom once I opened my mouth has stayed with me clearly. Later, I heard that the professor had discussed the matter of my *boldness* with colleagues and administrators. I experienced no significant repercussions but clearly it was the exceptional nature of my gender rather than the content of my question that called for comment and attention. I was accepted as a student, allowed in the classroom, but with the unstated condition that I would not make my presence known by drawing attention to it through my voice. Making my gender the focus caused erasure of anything significant I might have brought to the discussion.

Many years later, living in the United States with a husband and our small son, when I had finished my doctoral studies, a position in my field was advertised in another state. The university that awarded me my degree had an administrative office, run by someone in charge of circulating my dossier, a privilege for which I paid a small fee. When I called the office to inquire if my Vita had gone out so I could apply for the opening for which I seemed suitable, she told me she had seen the posting of the position but judged the location to be too far away for me to commute. Again, all the attention was on my gender, defined as wife and mother, and constructed in a way to extinguish any professional life to which I might have aspirations. A bigger swipe of the squeegee occurred that time, potentially putting up a roadblock on the path toward the exercise of my vocation.

Compared to a story of violation, these two examples seem trivial, but even such seemingly insignificant cases serve to highlight the constant battering of misogyny a woman receives when functioning in a profession dominated by men. Once I set the wheels in motion to have the appropriate papers sent together with my application, I eventually received the position that I held for forty years. I had the luck to have an extremely supportive mate, whose watchful eye had initially discovered the advertisement for the position. Thus, a small crack, opened for me by a vigilant and encouraging husband, turned into an open door, and I got my job. It turned out that before a final decision was made by the faculty to recommend me to the Board as the new hire, a number of my colleagues, all of them male at the time, argued in favor of hiring two teachers for the same position, accepting me as the female and adding a male. Clearly someone of my gender needed the male half! Subsequently, there

would be a great deal of sexist and misogynist comments and treatment that were wounding and made my work environment threatening and unpleasant. But, as one of my male colleagues used to point out with some frequency, it was so much worse in other schools! I did not know how good I really had it! So, be quiet already! The squeegee continued to do its work. Professional reviews of my early years regularly included comments about my physical appearance and demeanor. Apparently, I did not smile often enough.⁵

Those of us who came of age in the twentieth century grew up at the tail-end of modernity. In the modern age logic and reason were regarded as the tools to lead humanity to objective truth. Industrialization, technological innovation and capitalism are the hallmarks of modernity for the developed world. Within these frameworks male and female genders each have their place, and while the male is enough by himself, the female is not enough to be a person in her own right, to carry the load, do the job, in other words to exercise the function of a human being. Women were excluded from education, professions and politics because it was not in their *nature* to do so. In the words of Rosemary Radford Ruether: “Woman is ... defined as a *relative being* who exists only in relationship to the male, who alone possesses full autonomous personhood.” She surmises that this view of woman may be the “ultimate core of misogyny”⁶ Although this understanding of the female is rooted in classical periods it took on new shape and function in modernity. The stated conviction of my former colleagues in the mid-seventies that they were willing to settle for a female colleague if they could also hire a male is a testimony to the fact that this perspective was alive and well in American culture and religion in the late 1970s.⁷ Because the exclusion of women became more visible in the modern age, this also became the period in which resistance took place and gains were made in terms of access to education, professions, and political power, albeit at the cost of physical and psychological suffering, and enormous consumption of time and energy. In the United States it goes without saying that patriarchy with its oppression and silencing of women has gone hand in hand with the practices of slavery, so that gains in

5 Such comments were not only sexist but xenophobic in that the critics took no account of my different cultural origins.

6 Rosemary Ruether, *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power* (New York: Paulist, 1972), 100.

7 Since my institution was a theological seminary the irony of this position *vis a vis* the biblical story of humanity's creation is hard to ignore. In the classical creation story of Genesis 2, the male is not enough by himself so that the female is created as a corresponding half (Gen 2: 18).

many places affected only white women and were made at the cost of dividing women from one another.⁸

In post-modernity which arrived somewhere around the middle of the twentieth century and which still defines contemporary modes of expression, everything, including reason and logic, is a construct.⁹ Multiple truths define the landscape, and our understanding of the world becomes more fluid and diverse, also in terms of gender which is equally conceived of as a social construction. This era has presented openings for rights and privileges in regard to women's autonomy over their bodies, the freedom to live according to one's chosen rather than assigned gender, and to enter into marital relationships with persons of the same gender, for example. While in modernity religion was the guarantor of the moral sphere separated from that of the state, in post-modernity religion becomes an area of personal preference, which can lead to a mix and match approach, Christianity mixed with Zen Buddhism, or a search for rapprochement between religions that were heretofore hostile to one another. At the same time, steps that move cultures forward habitually unleash a virulent backlash, especially, although not only, from the direction of religious conservative strongholds. Once again, it serves to listen to Ruether as she observes that periods of serious backlash "are usually an indication that women are attempting to enlarge their sphere of activity and are colliding with male efforts to prevent it."¹⁰

Religious institutions are mainly "conserving" bodies, organizations that exist to uphold traditional values and mores, rather than to change them. Openings toward change may occur in the first stages of formation, including challenges to practices related to gender roles. Such "transgressive" impulses

8 Susan Thistlethwaite argues that "American patriarchy is inextricably interwoven with race and class as well as sex." *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (New York: Crossroad, 1989.)

9 It is a misunderstanding to conclude that truth does not matter in the post-modern context. Truth is as important as always, but it is arrived in complicated ways and through engaging different conversations.

10 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 119. In her landmark book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, the Austrian-American scholar Gerda Lerner, who pioneered women's history as a field of academic studies, defines patriarchy as "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance in society in general." *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 239. Sexism she defines as "the ideology of male supremacy, of male superiority and beliefs that support and sustain it." "... as long as sexism as an ideology exists, patriarchal relations can easily be re-established, even when legal changes have occurred to outlaw them." *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 240.

are often quickly opposed and wiped out for a variety of reasons, one of which is the desire to maintain status quo in areas where change is not absolutely required and maintaining well-established cultural norms.¹¹ Thus, early Christianity appears to have included women as full partners in support and evangelization, to ultimately deprive them of the claim to full humanity.¹² Times of change pose a particular challenge to religious institutions because of their nature to be conserving of tradition.¹³ While the era of post modernity has ushered in profound changes in cultural and religious relations, it has at the same time created a yearning for a return to traditional values, bringing back periods of perceived stability and common understandings of oneself and the community in which one lives.¹⁴

On the other hand, religion is more than the standard bearer for traditional values and morality. Christian and Jewish traditions maintain a sacred text, which they confess to be a living document in which believers meet the spirit of the divine to help them negotiate paths forward out of current predicaments. While these texts contain regulations and instructions that continue to establish moral standards for contemporary believers, they also provide direction through telling powerful stories. The writers of the Hebrew Bible and

11 See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, especially *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) and *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

12 That women's voice is taken away in texts as 1 Corinthians 14: 33–35 and 1 Timothy 2: 11–15 also witnesses to the fact that women were indeed participating in supporting the apostolic evangelizing efforts. The most egregious example of the Scriptural voice arguing against women's full humanity is surely in 2 Timothy when the writer makes the declaration that women "will be saved through childbearing, provided they remain in faith, love and holiness, with modesty." (1 Timothy 2: 15) In other words, women are not saved through Christ but through bearing children and that only under certain conditions.

13 This is one reason why religion seldom leads the pack in the course of cultural change and reformation. Religious support for the institution of slavery in the United States can be cited as well as the latest struggles to accept gender identities other than the traditional heterosexual cis-gender in mainline Protestantism in the United States. My own denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA recognized same-sex marriage in the same year the United States Supreme Court ruled its legality, 2015. The church made its decision only after a long and divisive battle, lasting more than forty years, and other mainline churches are still not reconciled to full acceptance.

14 The ongoing and seemingly unbreakable support for Donald Trump's presidency in conservative Christian circles can only be explained from this desire to return to ways and relationships of the past, which must be achieved no matter whether their leader in his personal life gainsays everything their own lives reflect in terms of honesty, reliability and sexual libertinage. There is no question but that this past existence is illusory and unreachable. The dangerous part of the illusion is the support for a person who is in no way suited to be a head of state, who has the talent to tap into these fears and yearnings.

the Second Testament tell their histories for a great part in story-form. They understood how a people's past is most effectively told by relating historical events in ways that entertain as well as teach, providing information about a community's yesterday in order to engage the listener in their own day, and help them to find meaning in their world and chart a path for the future.¹⁵ Like the young preacher in our pulpit with which I began, they knew that the story has the ability to shape an understanding of their own world for the listener making it possible to find a way through its difficulties and entanglements. Post-modern understandings of the sacred text enhance the possibilities of hearing and applying the stories in new ways, perceiving not only one voice, but the different voices that speak in them and finding coherent themes in the multi-voiced chorus.

If patriarchal arrangements and patriarchal ways of seeing the world is all one has known, even if we subject it to critique and scrutiny and resistance, it may escape us that these arrangements and ideologies have a history also and that they have not always been the same. Recently, the painter Artemisia Gentileschi of the Italian baroque period came to the attention of the art world through several exhibits, the most recent in the National Gallery of London. The lead-sentence of the online piece announcing the exhibit reads: "In 17th century Europe, a time when women artists were not easily accepted, Artemisia was exceptional."¹⁶ It is a truth easily taken for granted that in previous eras, women in male dominated professions were rare because they did not belong in the art world. Actually, the acceptance of women in the world of art today is still limited, to go by the relative scarcity of artwork by women artists on display in major museums in the United States. As recently as 2019 the Museum of Modern Art in New York increased its percentage of paintings by women to 28% from its previous 3.8 percent. Julia Jacobs in a review published in the New York Times of September 25, 2019, concluded that only 11 percent of "art acquired by the country's top museums for their permanent collections

15 As a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, I consider the facts of ancient Israel's history to be important and in need of attention and the term "historical" to be appropriate for a great deal of biblical material. All the same the biblical text does not contain history writing as we recognize it today. "Taking the differences between the ancient world and the modern era into account, we may ascribe the category of historiography to the Historical Books of the Bible." Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos *The End of the Beginning: Joshua & Judges* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 3. See also Rachelle Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

16 <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/artemisia>.

is by women.”¹⁷ This percentage, contrary to expectations does not reflect an upward trend, but has “remained relatively stagnant.” It is not surprising then that a general opinion of 17th century Europe, surely an age even less hospitable than our own (!), would judge it to be a climate that was unwelcoming to the woman painter. *Swish, swish goes the squeegee.*

In fact, the Italian art world of the late Renaissance and the early Baroque saw a flourishing of women as professional practitioners of the visual arts, Artemisia only one among them. It is not difficult to find the names and pictures of dozens of women painters of the period in Italy alone. As I wrote about Artemisia and other painters of her day:

It is important to recognize Artemisia but it is equally important to remember her in the context of a period when the door for women opened to a world of possibilities beyond traditional expected roles. When Gentileschi is defined as the “only woman” painter of her time, making her the exception and an outlier, this recognition is established at the cost of ignoring her talented and productive sister artists. Also, erasing the memory of women’s presence in a male dominated field of the past discourages participation in present times. If we cannot find ourselves by looking at the past it is going to be difficult to take on non-traditional roles in the present. A door that is wide open can become a door ajar and then a door that closes altogether. We do well to keep this in mind today. Vigilance in preserving her memory and that of the multitude of women who contributed to the visual arts through the centuries is always in order.¹⁸

Patriarchal arrangements and ways of seeing the world is what we know; erasure of women through violence and taking away their voices is what we know; thus we tend also to erase voices and presence of women in the past, when we assume things must have been so much worse than they are in our own day. Something happens in our view of the past that blocks us from recognizing our own presence there, perhaps the most pernicious result of the activity of the squeegee, for it robs us of a history, and therefore of seeking a way forward into

17 Julia Jacobs, “Female Artists Made Little Progress in Museums Since 2008, Survey Finds.” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/arts/design/female-art-agency-partners-sothebys-artists-auction.html#:~:text=The%20exhibition%2C%20called%20%E2%80%9CWomen%20Take,part%20of%20their%20permanent%20collection.> Jacobs based her conclusions on an analysis done by Artnet.

18 <http://johannabos.com>, “The Art of Erasure.”

the future. Our perspective is everywhere blinded by the patriarchal structures and ideologies that are a part of our current world.¹⁹

A word of caution then, before we step into the biblical world. The cultures in which the Hebrew Bible took shape are ancient; biblical literature was composed in the context of literary and cultural traditions of civilizations around the Mediterranean, far removed from today's western world in terms of space and time. It takes special effort and attention to listen to the voices that come to us from such a different place. Although in general the biblical text is unfamiliar territory, many people assume familiarity. If we state that world was a patriarchal world, we probably make an assumption of familiarity that leads us astray. Patriarchy does not always wear the same face, and patriarchal arrangements have undergone considerable changes in history. Biblical scholar Carol Meyers: "patriarchy may always be present but it is not always the same."²⁰ With Meyers I understand the dynamics of gender hierarchy to be context specific. The Hebrew Bible especially does not give evidence of imposing a gendered perspective on its world in depicting women as "other" and less human to explain their subordination. The position of women in ancient Israelite society was not supported by ideological underpinnings. This does not make of the biblical world a "feminist paradise" or imply that women were not at a disadvantage but at least "the Bible does not add insult to this disadvantage, does not claim that women need to be controlled or need to be directed because they are passive, or any other justifications for male domination that have been prevalent in Western culture."²¹ Such claims are still powerful today notwithstanding the progress that has been made in terms of women's access

19 Gerda Lerner: "Human beings have always used history in order to find their direction toward the future: to repeat the past or to depart from it. Lacking knowledge of their own history, women thinkers did not have the self-knowledge from which to project a desired future. Therefore, women have, up until very recently, not been able to create a social theory appropriate to their needs. Feminist consciousness is a prerequisite for the formulation of the kind of abstract thought needed to conceptualize a society in which differences do not connote dominance." *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 281.

20 Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 28–29 and *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 180–202. Lerner in her comments on the definition of patriarchy: "It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does *not* imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence and resources." *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 239.

21 Tikva Frymer Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002), xv.

to traditionally held male occupations and professions Binary gender codes are alive and well in our world and may also dominate our reading of a text that comes from a very different world. If it is taken as a given fact that 17th century Europe lagged far behind our more enlightened times in regard to participation of women in certain fields, surely this is even more true of eras that long preceded them! *Swish, swish goes the squeegee.*

From the ancient biblical world comes the story of princess Tamar, the daughter of Queen Ma'acah and King David, in the kingdom of Israel (full text located in the Appendix).²² She was a daughter of royalty on both father and mother's side. Her mother was the daughter of king Talmi in Geshur, the current Golan Heights. At her introduction into the story, her name is wedged between her two brothers, adding an unnecessary double mention of her father's name. The note that she is beautiful is relatively rare in the Bible which only occasionally refers to the appearance of a person.²³ Her name means palm tree and she may have been named for her foremother Tamar on her father's side, through her great-great-grandparents Ruth and Obed.²⁴ Although David did not keep as large a harem as many kings did in that part of the world, the household was extensive with sizeable grounds and lodgings in the precinct of the palace for the grown-up members of the household; a busy place with a lot of coming and going of administrators, servants, and relatives other than the immediate family.²⁵ Absalom was Tamar's full brother and Amnon her half-brother by David's wife Ahinoam of Yezreel.²⁶ The piling on of male names around the beautiful Tamar bodes ill. Amnon was the oldest, David's

22 See Appendix for the complete text of 2 Samuel 13: 1–22. For theological and literary commentary see Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos, *Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwy, 2011), 201–206 and Johanna van Wijk-Bos, *The Road to Kingship: 1–2 Samuel Vol 2 in A People and a Land* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 291–95 and 337–41.

23 The observation about looks is made more often for the family of David than for others. David himself is spoken of as “ruddy,” with “beautiful eyes,” and his wife Abigail is also introduced as a “beautiful woman” (1 Samuel 25: 3). Bathsheba the mother of Solomon, who appears in the story with all its attendant drama just before the tale of Tamar, is called “very beautiful” (2 Samuel 11: 2) and later in the history his son Absalom is said to be more beautiful than anyone in all of Israel (2 Samuel 14: 2).

24 The story of that Tamar makes for an interesting tale as told in Genesis 38. See also Ruth 4: 12.

25 According to biblical record Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11: 3). Even though this number is likely an exaggeration of the reality in accord with exaggerated accounts of numbers at the time, a large harem was probably the norm, established both for diplomatic reasons and as a symbol of the status of the monarch.

26 The biblical text records a total of at least 17 children born to David by various wives (2 Samuel 3: 2–5 5: 14 and 12: 24).

presumptive heir, with Absalom third in line. Amnon is said to “love” his sister, which could mean that he lavished a great deal of attention on her, spoiled her as a younger sister, for example. To abuse the reader of that possibility the information follows immediately that something else is going on, for Amnon is making himself sick, not just about his feelings, or perhaps not at all about his feelings, but rather about the fact that there are rules about sex with a virgin among his people so he can’t see his way to “do something to her.”²⁷ There are also laws against sexual relations between family members, but this aspect does not arise yet.

A fourth male character pops up to get things moving, a cousin on Amnon’s father’s side, one Yonadav, by reputation a smart fellow. He invents a plan: Amnon will pretend to be ill, not too hard under the circumstances, and when his father, the king, comes to visit him on his sickbed he can ask him to allow Tamar to come and prepare him a special dish, something to comfort him, make him feel better while he is watching her.²⁸ Perhaps Tamar had a reputation for preparing special foods for the sick, or perhaps the idea is that the sight of a beautiful woman will revive his flagging health. Apparently, David’s permission, as head of the household, is needed for Tamar to visit her half-brother, so the plan is set in motion. First, everything works as foreseen and Amnon does as his cousin advises. He asks King David if his sister Tamar, may come and prepare him some special food his presence. The delicacy he suggests inserts an interesting variation on the “comfort” food Yonadav had proposed. Amnon substitutes a word literally meaning *heart-cakes*. This is, after all, a matter of the heart!²⁹ The king makes the request of Tamar, which, although politely framed, counts more as a command coming from her royal father. Thus far the story portrays patriarchal arrangements. Tamar is a secondary character, surrounded by powerful males, significant only in that she is used as a pawn on the chessboard, the means to solve a problem for the crown-prince.³⁰

27 According to biblical law a man who had sexual intercourse with a virgin had to marry her. (Exodus 22: 16; Leviticus 21: 14; Deuteronomy 22: 19).

28 The term used in the Hebrew connotes such a diet rather than food in general. When you eat this kind of this you become healthy or fat. Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings* (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 2013), 496fn5.

29 The language of the scene reminds strongly of love language, especially as it appears in the Song of Solomon. Food as a comfort for lovesickness is appealed to in Song of Solomon 2: 5 and 5: 8. “Sister” or “my sister” is part of the Song’s love language (Song of Solomon 4: 9, 10, 12; 5: 1, 2; 8: 8).

30 Although the line of succession does not get established by David until he is almost on his deathbed (1 Kings 1), being the oldest male descendant in a household counted for a

Unsuspecting, Tamar does the prince's bidding when he asked her for food since he is her half-brother after all and next in line to become the king. She comes prepared with her ingredients and as soon as she enters his house, we see everything in detail: he is lying down, she makes the dough, kneads it, shapes it into hearts and bakes the cakes with him watching. Then she hands him the food, but he refuses to eat and instead commands everyone else to leave so that they are alone, and invites her into his bedroom, a more intimate place, where he promises he will take the food. Perhaps her instincts tell Tamar that something is not exactly the way it should be with everyone out of the way while she remains alone with her brother in his bedroom; it may feel uncomfortable, but she still acts on trust. Food was demanded and food is what she prepares and offers. But, instead of taking the food, Amnon takes her, the language here is violent, and he tells her to sleep with him, then as now a euphemism for having sex. At this point all movement in the story stops because Tamar opens her mouth to speak.

Granting a character speech in a story enhances their presence and significance. Thus far the only characters who are quoted directly are two men, Yonadav and Amnon. Not only does Tamar receive a voice, but her words are powerful and true. What we know about Tamar is only that she is beautiful. We can figure out that she must have been young, but we do not know how young, because she still lives in her parents' house. A young woman who has come into her beauty. Fourteen? Fifteen? Sixteen? Amnon must have been a great deal older, mentioned in the text already before David is crowned king over all Israel.³¹ He lives in his own house, and thus most likely has a family. Tamar so far has done everything an obedient daughter and sister of an older brother does. Nothing in the story creates the expectation that she will put up any resistance. But she does resist, strongly and wisely. First, she pronounces an unequivocal "No!" That one word should have been enough, but she has more to say. She calls Amnon "my brother," pointing to their family relationship. She points out that his abuse will shame her and Amnon himself will be disgraced as well. What would she do as a violated woman? Who would marry her? "Where would I go with my shame?" she demands. Finally, she is able to summon up the courage to offer counsel. Although there are laws that forbid brother and sister marriage, it is possible that especially for royal

lot and the rise of King Solomon, who was nowhere near the throne in the pecking order, takes place only after deliberate manipulation of the king by two court officials, one of whom includes his mother Bathsheba. It is also worth noting that Solomon's ascension goes accompanied by abundant bloodshed (1 Kings 2).

31 2 Samuel 3: 2.

offspring exceptions could be made, as was the case elsewhere in the world around Israel. So she urges Amnon to ask King David, the final authority in such things.³² Tamar has the longest speech in the episode, a speech filled with strength and wisdom, showing her ability to think even when in great danger. It's about her, but also about her family, about her and Amnon as members of a people with an ethos, with norms. They are people of privilege, a part of the royal household, the king will be open to his son's request.

Her logical arguments and request do not help her, for Amnon refuses to comply and rapes her. The text piles up words that highlight his malfeasance: *he did not want to listen; he overpowered her and raped her.*³³ And it gets worse, because even at this point there might have been a turn in a different direction; but instead of repenting, instead of offering comfort, Amnon sends her out with harsh words. Although the prince is not polite in any part of the story and speaks mostly in command-form except when he talks to other men, overtly abusive words follow his abusive deed. Disgusted perhaps with himself and projecting his disgust onto Tamar, he orders her out, ignoring her protest that sending her away is worse than what he has already done! He asks a servant to throw her out of his house, locking the door behind her. While the insult of making one of his servants cast her out lends a particular egregious note to the proceedings, in addition, the politeness with which he addresses his attendant stands in contrast to the brutality of his tone to Tamar, to whom he refers now as "this one." Presumably, Amnon was himself entirely capable of bringing her to the door but in handing this task to an underling he shows both unwarranted cruelty, and cowardice.

Once again, we watch Tamar in vivid detail as the text in an extraordinary twist turns attention to her clothes. She was wearing a special dress, either long or especially colorful, to indicate her status in the royal household as a virgin daughter of the king.³⁴ Once outside, she shows obvious signs of mourning, putting ashes on her head and tearing her robe. In addition, she refuses to be a silent victim as she walks around crying aloud. She needs the world around

32 For an insightful article about this story see Anna Carter Florence, "Listening to Tamar: Pay Attention to the verbs and who controls them," *The Christian Century* 135, 2018, 26–29.

33 Literally the text reads: "he did not want to listen to her voice, he overpowered her and abused her and slept with her." A short sentence with five verbs to underscore the depravity of his action.

34 The detail is exceptional because the biblical text rarely affords insight into people's clothing. The adjective describing Tamar's robe occurs only twice in the Bible, with the other reference in respect to the robe of Joseph, given to him by his father (Genesis 37: 3, 23, 32). The meaning of the word describing the robe is not entirely clear.

her to know that she has been violated. According to biblical law, a “girl who cries out when she is attacked is considered innocent of sexual wrongdoing.”³⁵

Then the last, and not the least, significant moment in the drama happens: her brother Absalom encounters her although we do not hear how or when. The rumor about Amnon’s infatuation was likely known around the court, since Absalom asks her if Amnon “was with her,” and then goes on to tell her to be quiet. Absalom, another beautiful child of David, does not listen to his sister any more than Amnon did. Although on the surface his action is one of kindness, his words are inhibiting, and he makes light of what has happened to her by telling her not to let it affect her too much, not to take it “to heart.” Absalom does what those in the circle of the raped victim do best, be they friend or family: he shushes her. The last sounds we hear from Tamar is her crying out, for she becomes a “desolate woman,” a description that in the Bible occurs in connection with destroyed and deserted land.³⁶ She moves into Absalom’s house and never marries; the only member of the family she could count on offers her protection but no comfort. He trivializes her bereaved state of a single woman who drags the shame of her rape around with her, and while he affords her protection, he is busy pursuing an agenda of his own, one that will soon become evident in the story.

Amnon was the rapist in Tamar’s path, her father became her brother’s enabler, and Absalom is the one wielding the squeegee to erase Tamar’s voice. She was correct in pointing out that the aftermath of the rape was worse than the violence itself. Her very presence was wiped from the board by the males in her family. King David is furious according to the storyteller, but he does not do anything about his daughter’s suffering, then or later. Absalom’s reaction is hatred for Amnon who is as of this moment marked for death. A tragic story, one familiar to our own context in which a woman finds no resolution than a continuing spiral of violence playing itself out in her circle of intimates; where she finds no ear to listen to her voice, to hear her tell the tale in order to find healing and regain trust. She is gone from the story.

Tamar was indeed a beautiful woman, not primarily because of her appearance or clothes, but because she resisted her rapist. The episode does not take place in a vacuum, of course. It follows on the heels of King David’s rape of Bathsheba, condemnation by God’s prophet, and the death of a husband and a child. In Anna Carter Florence’s words since as of that time there is “the chilling sound of the predator sniffing the air.”³⁷ After Tamar’s violation, the story

35 Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 202), 165–66.

36 Isaiah 1: 7; Ezekiel 23: 33; 35: 7; Joel 2: 20; Zephaniah 2: 9.

37 Carter Florence, “Listening to Tamar,” 27.

continues with the murder of Amnon by Absalom, followed by palace intrigue and a political coup which sets King David on the run, causing more sexual violence, ending only with the death of David's treasured son in battle. Violence begot violence. The only wise words are spoken by women in this tale of kingship teetering on the brink of collapse, a household divided against itself and a people who are on the verge of complete disarray. Even for the storytellers of the Bible who do not shy away from severe critique of people and leaders, sparing few their merciless spotlight on deeds of human ugliness, these chapters in the histories called after the prophet Samuel paint a tragic tale of overweening pride and oblivion to moral responsibility. In the end, three of David's sons have died and equilibrium in the kingdom is hanging by a thread. The rape of Tamar is not quite the beginning, but it serves as another symbol of the disarray that marks David's kingship as of the time he first set eyes on Bathsheba.

Tamar lost her voice, as many victims of sexual and domestic violence lose their voice, forced into silence by the powers that be or the incapacity of the surrounding circles to hear the story, to accept the ugly facts, to hold the hand of a sister in solidarity. She comes out of the palace, goes into Amnon's house, is raped and ends up a desolate woman in the house of brother Absalom. Her cries of violation unheeded, unheard. It happened to her not because of anything she did, not because of the way she dressed or behaved, or what she ate or drank. She speaks eloquently and well to her rapist, she does what she is supposed to do and no one is willing to listen. It is a story that takes place in a patriarchal world of the Bible, but it is a world we recognize readily for a reason. It looks eerily like our own world. Anna Carter Florence writes "asking how a text might go differently is another way of asking how our lives might go differently." This text is one that makes her affirm that we can "claim the strength of standing together. We can claim the outrage of planting our feet. And we can claim the freedom of imagining new endings."³⁸ We can pick up the cry of Tamar of anguish and indignation and cry it out to the world with her.

I propose we go still further in continuing her voiceless presence and look again at the complete account of King David, from the time he violates Bathsheba and commits cowardly murder by ordering a hit on her husband, to the moment he comes home after Absalom is killed only to face another rebellion in his kingdom. David takes up a lot of space in the Bible, with a large presence that marks two biblical books. He was obviously one of those people to whom stories accrue, heroic tales of great and awesome defeats and clever manipulations. He is charismatic, everyone falls in love with him when he first

38 Carter Florence, "Listening to Tamar," 29.

comes on the scene and he outwits his powerful boss at every turn. King Saul never manages to catch him and dies an ignominious death on the battlefield. David is the proverbial character whose path is marked by good fortune. Above all David enjoys the favor of Israel's God. Divine guidance and counsel follow him wherever he goes, steering him right making his plans align with the Deity's design. It is a trusting relationship on David's side who consults God along his difficult road to kingship with great frequency. All of this can be said until the chapter in his life when he sees a beautiful woman bathing from the vantage point of his rooftop, from which moment events take a radical turn in the wrong direction.

Scholars put the boundaries of these stories and their markers at different places, but they always include chapters 9–20 in Second Samuel.³⁹ Generally, commentators assume that the material came from one hand, someone with a clear eye for David's foibles and the less admirable parts of his nature.⁴⁰ The chapters show cohesion of subject and style and depict a king in stark contrast to what came before. They can be read as one story with a king who takes a wrong turn at the beginning, in the course of events jeopardizing both his kingship and his realm, and at the end regaining a fragile stability. Unlike the depiction that led up to them in 1 and 2 Samuel, the narratives paint a David who takes unnecessary risks on behalf of his own needs and desires, a fond father who indulges his sons, and condones the rape of his daughter by not calling the perpetrator to account. He turns a blind eye on the machinations of another son who first murders his brother, then manages to stage a revolt, and he leaves the women in the palace behind to be raped by his rebel son. He is no longer with his soldiers on the battlefield but sits impotently waiting for news about the death of his sons, first Amnon, then Absalom. It is hard to imagine anyone farther from the young hero who stole everyone's heart at the start of his career. Above all, there is no question of divine guidance in this material. David does not ask the deity for counsel, in regard to his family or his kingdom, nor does he receive any beyond an announcement of consequences for what he has done. God is for the greatest part absent from this part of David's life.

Already in the late nineteenth century American biblical scholar Henry Preserved Smith considered this part of 2 Samuel to be a "homogenous and

39 The perimeter of this material sometimes identified as the Court History of David are variously defined as consisting of 2 Samuel 9–20+ 1 Kings 1+2 or 2 Samuel 9–20.

40 For two treatments of King David that put him in a more negative light see Joel Baden, *The Historical David: The Real Life of an Invented Hero* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013) and Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons; Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

continuous narrative of David's life."⁴¹ He and other scholars proposed various possible authors, all of them male. Smith also argued that the original author was someone close to the events, but that it would be the "height of temerity to determine a setting" for these texts. The prophet Nathan or Gad, each having a place in the account, have both been candidates for authorship. Taking all these suggestions into consideration and agreeing that the author likely was someone close to the events, I assume also that the story was originally in *written* form. The literary skill of the story is striking to everyone who comments on it.⁴²

Are we taking part in the erasure of women by ruling out possible authorship by a woman? Are the arguments against this possibility much like those of the reviewer who judged a bygone era to be an unwelcome place for a woman artist? Is it possible to escape our patriarchal reading of the world of the past? That women composed text is recorded in the Bible itself.⁴³ Is there anything that holds us back from assigning this story to a female author? Bathsheba and Tamar both come to mind as candidates, but my preference goes to Tamar. Unlike Bathsheba, she has a voice in the story and her reasoning is complex and sturdy. If with Carter Florence we want to claim the freedom of "imagining new endings," are we not free to imagine this new ending?

The ancient world was indeed patriarchal but not exactly in the same way as our world; it was a less gendered world and women in biblical culture filled a great number of professions. Biblical scholar Carol Meyers lists textile work, food-processing, healthcare, cultic activities, prophecy and musical composition and performance among the professions open to women in that time and place.⁴⁴ Biblical scholar Wilda Gafney has convincingly argued for membership of women among scribal guilds, both in the larger ancient Mediterranean world and Israel.⁴⁵ Much of the biblical material is anonymous, authorship can only be surmised. I suggest that the assumption of an all-male authorship for the Hebrew Bible stems from persisting patriarchal prejudice. The sanest voices in the stories of 2 Samuel 9–20 are those of women: Tamar in chapter 12, the wise woman of Tekoa in chapter 14 and the wise woman of Abel

41 Henry Preserved Smith, *The Books of Samuel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899), 310.

42 For more extensive comments on literacy in the biblical world, see van Wijk-Bos, *The End of the Beginning*, 31–32 and 150.

43 Exodus 15: 20–21, and Judges 5: 1–31, for example.

44 Carol Meyers *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 171–79.

45 Wilda C. Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 123–30.

in chapter 20.⁴⁶ It is very possible that Tamar was a literate woman, trained in the schools common at royal courts. Living in the house of her brother did not mean she was imprisoned; she may have congregated with other clever women at the court, including Queen Bathsheba, her own mother Ma'acah, and Abigail, one of David's wives who is called "insightful."⁴⁷ She did not have the preoccupations of most women with family and teaching of children, which would have left her more freedom and the opportunity to write down the story of her father and his court as she saw it. In doing so, she reclaimed the voice her brother had taken away, and our acknowledgment of her authorship returns her voice to her.

I began this essay with a reflection on events that illustrate the erasure of women's presence and their voice in current contexts dominated by patriarchal ideologies. I argued that such perspectives not only influence modes of perceiving the present world, but also our reading of the past. One way to reclaim our presence is to resist the erasure of women's voices in history. Tamar, granddaughter and daughter of kings, wrote it all down, including the story of Bathsheba and Uriah and the story of her own rape and humiliation, drawing on material she knew from earlier traditions.⁴⁸ Her view of the world around her, permeated by male violence that she wanted to bring to light, does not make for a lifeless or a loveless story. On the contrary it pulses with all the profound feeling of which the human heart is capable. We have no proof of her authorship of course, but that can be said of much of the biblical text. We may have it all wrong, but we could do worse than taking our stance here, resisting the squeegee of erasure and listening to Tamar's story. By assigning to Tamar the creation of the work of art that became the Court History of David, we raise up her voice and not only cry together with her the cry against the misogynist violence, but also stake a claim against erasure of the female voice in contributing to the writing of sacred history.

Appendix

2 Samuel 13: 1–22:⁴⁹

2 Samuel 13: 1–2: Afterwards, this happened: Absalom, the son of David, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar, and Amnon, the son of David, loved her. Amnon

46 Following this line of thinking I have in the past argued for female authorship of Genesis 38 Ruth, and Ecclesiastes.

47 See 1 Samuel 25: 2.

48 Van Wijk-Bos, *The Road to Kingship*, 341.

49 Author's translation based on the traditional Hebrew text.

was so distressed that he became sick on account of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin. It seemed impossible in Amnon's eyes to do something to her.

2 Samuel 13: 3–5: Now Amnon had a friend whose name was Yonadav. He was the son of Shimah, David's brother. Yonadav was a very clever man. He said to Amnon: Son of the king, why are you so down every morning? Won't you tell me? Amnon answered: I love Tamar, the sister of my brother Absalom! Yonadav said: Stay in your bed and fake illness, so your father will come to see you. Then say to him: Please, let my sister Tamar come and comfort me with food. Let her make the comforting dish before my eyes, so I can watch and eat from her hand. So Amnon went to bed and faked illness and the king came to see him. Amnon said to the king: Please, let my sister Tamar come, and let her bake some heart-shaped cakes in my presence, so I can take this comfort from her hand. David sent word to Tamar at home: Please, come to the house of your brother Amnon and make him some comforting food.

2 Samuel 13: 8–14: Tamar went to Amnon's house and he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, and shaped it into hearts with him watching; then she baked the cakes. She took the pan and set it before him and he refused to eat them. Amnon said: Everyone out! And everyone left. Amnon said to Tamar: Bring the comfort-food to the bedroom so I can eat it out of your hand. Tamar took the heart-shaped cakes she had made and brought them to her brother Amnon, in the bedroom. When she brought them to him to eat, he grabbed her and said: Sleep with me, sister! She said to him: Oh no, my brother, don't force me, for we don't do things like that in Israel. Don't do something so disgraceful! Where would I take my shame? And you! You would be disgraced in Israel. Why don't you speak to the king, for he will not keep me from you. But he did not listen to her; he overpowered her and raped her.

2 Samuel 13: 15: Then Amnon came to hate her deeply. The hate with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. He said to her: Get up! Out! She said to him: Oh no, don't do that! Sending me away is worse than what you did to me! But he did not want to listen to her. He called one of the men who waited on him and said: Please, send this one away from me. Outside with her and close the door behind her! Now she was dressed in a fancy robe, the way the virgin daughters of the king were dressed. His man led her outside and closed the door behind her. Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the fancy dress she wore and put her hand on her head, walking around crying out loud.

2 Samuel 13: 20: Her brother Absalom said to her: Has your brother Amnon been with you? Now be quiet, my sister; he is your brother; don't break your heart over it. Tamar stayed desolate in the house of her brother Absalom. When King David heard all this he was furious. Absalom did not say anything to Amnon either good or bad, for Absalom hated Amnon because he had raped his sister Tamar.

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