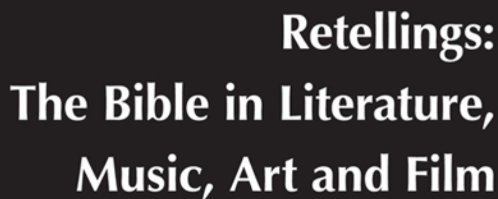

Retellings: The Bible in Literature, Music, Art and Film

Edited by

J. Cheryl Exum

BRILL

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Music, Art and Film

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Editorial Preface

The Bible has played an inspirational role in the literature, music and art of Western culture for centuries, and the various treatments the Bible has received in literature, music and the visual arts have, in turn, influenced the way the Bible is read. From its earliest beginnings, film has entered the picture as another influential medium for bringing biblical stories and characters to life for millions of viewers, many of whom have little knowledge of the Bible itself.

In recent years biblical scholars and students have become increasingly interested in studying retellings of biblical stories in the arts, not only for their relation to the biblical text but also for the 'story' they have to tell (or, if they are not strictly 'retellings', for the light they might shed on the biblical text). Analysing retellings based on biblical characters or stories is not a matter of looking at the text and then asking how the literary, musical, or visual representation 'got it right' or 'got it wrong'. A retelling of a biblical event or story, as the contributions to this volume reveal, is more than a simple transposition of a text onto a page, a canvas, a stage or celluloid. The retelling is itself an interpretation of the text and deserves to be studied for its own particular insights into and its time- and culture-bound perspective on the text. These insights and perspectives often can lead us to see something in the text we might have missed, or can help us appreciate the richness or complexity of the text, or encourage us to interrogate the text and its time- and culture-bound perspective or agenda.

The present collection of essays on this important topic is appearing concurrently in a special issue of the journal *Biblical Interpretation*. Since it was founded in 1993, *Biblical Interpretation* has played a key role in fostering the publication of articles in the newly developing area of the reception history of the Bible in the arts. In addition to articles in regular issues of the journal, two special issues of *Biblical Interpretation* have been devoted especially to this topic, *Beyond the Biblical Horizon: The Bible and the Arts* (1999) and *The Bible in Film/The Bible and Film* (2006). Now, with *Retellings*, *Biblical Interpretation* is publishing for the first time articles on the Bible in music, together with a diverse collection of essays dealing with

the Bible and literature, art and film. Music is something of a newcomer to the study of the Bible and the arts, perhaps because it has been more difficult to make a musical score accessible to readers, and because, to deal with more than a libretto, a scholar must know not only about the Bible but also about music. Unlike art, where we can all see, for example, a painting before us and follow an argument about it, we cannot hear the music that is discussed in a scholarly article. But this is all changing, and analysis of the use of the Bible in music is being more and more represented in print as well as at scholarly meetings (the Society of Biblical Literature, for example, has sessions on the Bible and music at both its national and international meetings).

The eight contributions to this volume illustrate a range of exciting approaches to retellings of the Bible in literature, music, art and film and reveal something of the scope of this fascinating and rapidly expanding area of inquiry.

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Noah's Ark and Mrs. Monkey[1]

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University of Alberta

Abstract

The article traces the interpretation of the flood story in children's literature, from the apparently literal versions, in which imaginative reinterpretation is transferred to the illustrations, to the non-verbal crowded scenes of Peter Spier, the Midrashic retellings of Scholem Asch and Marc Gellman, feminist readings, like those of Bach and Exum, Madeleine L'Engle's teen novel, and versions which stress the annihilatory implications, including Janisch and Zwerger's *Noah's Ark*. It concludes with a discussion of Ruth Kerr's *How Mrs. Monkey Missed the Ark*, in which the canonical text is virtually eliminated, and only appears through the cracks.

Keywords

Children's Bibles, contemporary Midrash

A ramp goes down from our couch to the floor. God has brought a flood upon our house, and we all have to climb up the ramp onto the ark, together with all the imaginary animals, to escape from it. Our son Joseph has Noah's ark jigsaws, pop-up books, and was given a cloth Noah's ark as a baby, which he carried everywhere. Noah's ark is a per-

[1] A version of this paper was given at the Pacific Northwest Regional Meeting of the Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature at Tacoma, Washington, May, 1999. Thanks are due to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, under whose auspices it was partly funded. Thanks are also due to Benjamin Berger, for his able assistance. The author also wishes to thank Random House Inc. for permission to use illustrations from the Golden Children's Bible and Peter Spier's Noah's Ark; Henry Holt Ltd, for Pauline Baynes' "Noah and the Ark"; North-South Books for Heinz Janisch and Lisbeth Zwerger's "Noah's Ark"; and Harper Collins for Judith Kerr, "How Mrs. Monkey Missed the Ark," ©Kerr-Kneale Productions Ltd. 1992.

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vasive cultural object, and one largely detached from its biblical moorings. It has entered a different canon, along with Winnie the Pooh, Peter Rabbit, Franklin the Turtle, Mother Goose, Thomas the Tank Engine, Curious George. How many children know that it comes from the Bible? It may be contextualized in a children's Bible, and reproduce or adapt a conventional translation; it may lose virtually all its sacred and biblical associations, except for the trained ear, as in Brian Wildsmith's *Professor Noah's Spaceship*[2] or in M.B. Goffstein's *My Noah's Ark*, in which a woman recalls the ark her father made her, and which sustains her through the years.[3] The proliferation of Noah stories—there must be thousands—testifies to a cultural currency and fluidity, which recalls that from which the biblical flood story arose. In each case, the Noah story will participate in an oeuvre of a particular illustrator or narrator, such as Peter Spier, Tomie dePaola, Nonny Hogrogian, or the Petershams, with his or her recognizable style and imaginative world. Parents too, or any adult, may enjoy and understand versions of the story on different levels; for instance, Peter Spier's wonderful illustrations, or the dark, humorous, sentimental, and profound tales of Marc Gellman's *Does God Have a Big Toe?*[4] The transformation of the flood narrative, from a foundational text of human and biblical insecurity into a child's plaything, a celebration of animals and of language—as in many Noah's ark animal and alphabet poems—and of human control, replicates its history in Midrash and miracle play. As

[2] Brian Wildsmith, *Professor Noah's Spaceship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). The spaceship on which the animals travel to find a new unpolluted planet journeys for forty days and forty nights. Professor Noah, the scientist who builds and provisions the spaceship with the help of the animals, sends Dove to bring back a leaf from the new planet. When the leaf turns out to be an olive leaf he realises the planet is Earth.

[3] M.B. Goffstein, *My Noah's Ark* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). The biblical references are interwoven into the very human story. The narrator hears her father's voice "behind a closet door, booming like God's: 'Make it three hundred cubits long.'" The ark comes with pairs of animals, to which her father adds over the years. The narrator teaches the story of Noah, and the model ark, to her children. The story concludes with the rainbow of "our fun and sorrow."

[4] Marc Gellman and Oscar de Mejo (ill.), *Does God Have a Big Toe?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989).

Kathy Piehl[5] says, animal books, toys, and pets are among a child's first sensual and literary experiences; the story enacts the possibility of survival against odds, against the ultimacy of death. A Noah's ark may be a "transitional object," a safe place in which to experience and overcome the terrors and possibilities of the world. Robert Coles points out that children are mirrors of ourselves, in whom we project our hopes for the future.[6] In reading a Noah's ark book to our child, we may go back to that safe place, and express our own desire, for the sustenance of story, for a good world.

Ruth Bottigheimer shows that, for all their aspiration to timelessness, to the reproduction of sacred texts, children's Bibles are as culturally and temporally conditioned as any other literature.[7] She studies them in relation to class, gender, confessional values, and historical processes. For instance, the character of God is progressively ameliorated: from the vengeful judge he becomes the all-loving Father.[8] The openness of the biblical stories is exploited in children's Bibles, to produce often opposed readings. The study of children's Bibles, Bottigheimer claims, like that of the Bible itself, is a work of careful juxtaposition, "so that commonalities and contrast become visible."[9] Especially in the last twenty or thirty years, children's versions of the biblical narratives have been informed by critical perspectives, such as feminism and multiculturalism. Thus the study of children's Bibles, and the flood story in particular, will show much greater diversity now than at any time in the past.

Many, of course, are, or purport to be, straight and quasi-authoritative retellings of biblical narrative: *The Golden Children's Bible, The Reader's Digest Bible for Children, Bible Stories for Children, The All-Colour Book of Bible Stories, The Illustrated Children's Bible*, etc.[10]

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5) Kathy Piehl, "Noah as Survivor: A Study of Picture Books," *Children's Literature in Education* 13 (1982), pp. 80-81.

6) Robert Coles, "The Shaping of Children's Bibles," (Review of Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children*) *The Christian Century* 113 (1996), p. 938.

7) Ruth Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

8) See Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children*, pp. 62-63.

9) Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children*, p. 57.

10) Joseph Grispino (ed.), *The Golden Children's Bible*, illustrated by José Miralles

Some—Tomie DePaola, Pauline Baynes—reproduce conventional translations; Lore Segal and Leonard Baskin write their own, using Buber/Rosenzweig and Luther as models;[11] *The Golden Children's Bible*, while generally faithful, makes a few concessions to their readers' potential skepticism (Noah is only of "a very great age" instead of being 600).[12] Complications, like the seven pairs of clean animals, are generally edited out;[13] some versions omit the raven;[14] nearly everyone ignores Noah's embarrassing drunkenness, subject of an earlier exegetical and moralistic tradition, as Bottigheimer shows.[15] *The Living Bible*

(Racine, WI: Golden Books, 1993); Marie-Hélène Delval, *The Reader's Digest Bible for Children: Timeless Stories from the Old and New Testaments* (Westport, CT: Reader's Digest, 1995); Geoffrey Horn and Arther Cavanaugh, *Bible Stories for Children*, illustrated by Arvis L. Stewart (New York: Macmillan, 1980); Patricia J. Hunt, *The All-Colour Book of Bible Stories*, illustrated by Giovanni Caselli (London: Kaleidoscope Books, 1986); James F. Couch, *The Illustrated Children's Bible*, illustrated by Geoffrey Brittingham (Nashville, TN: Ideals Children's Books, 1995); Kenneth N. Taylor, *The Living Bible* (Wheaton: Tyndale Publishing, 1970).

11) Lore Segal, *The Book of Adam to Moses*, illustrated by Leonard Baskin (New York: Knopf, 1987).

12) Anne DeVries, *Story Bible for Older Children* (St. Catherine's: Paideia, 1978), says that Noah was "over 500 years old" when God spoke to him, but then posits that God gave the wicked generation a 120 year period of grace, which would make Noah over 620 when the flood came, in clear contradiction to the biblical text (p. 23).

13) Exceptions are Anne DeVries, *Story Bible for Older Children* p. 25, and Pauline Baynes, *Noah and the Ark* (London: Methuen, 1988), who use the RSV without alteration. Even Lore Segal and Leonard Baskin, who generally reproduce the biblical text with fidelity, omit this section. *The Illustrated Children's Bible* raises the distinction between clean and unclean beasts only to eliminate it, in a curious revision of the text: "Clean beasts, and beasts which were not clean…went, two by two…" (p. 15).

14) Kenneth Taylor, *The Book for Children*, illustrated by Richard and Frances Hook (Wheaton: Tyndale Publishing, 1970), omits both dove and raven (p. 26). Charlotte Pomeranz, *Noah's and Namah's Ark* illustrated by Kelly K.M. Carson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981) eliminates the raven. The dove, incidentally, is sent by Namah.

15) Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children*, pp. 103-14. Bottigheimer says that the excision of the story, at least in Northern Europe, dates from the 1690s, and the emphasis, in those few versions in which it was included, is transferred from paternal disrespect to the evils of drunkenness. Segal and Baskin do include this scene, though they paraphrase Noah's puzzling curse of Canaan (*The Book of Adam to Moses*, p. 12). Bottigheimer points out that in wine-growing areas of Switzerland the stress was not

tells that on the very night of the exit from the ark Noah got extremely drunk (presumably he had some stashed away) and his sons had to put him to bed, perpetuating the tradition of the comic Noah. In the context this substantiates God's belated discovery of human frailty. "And he was the one good man!" it concludes. Anne DeVries develops the episode into an independent narrative, combining the motifs of the demon drink and filial disrespect that informed the earlier tradition.[16] Peter Spier has Noah peacefully cultivating his vineyard, before and after the flood.[17] *Noah's Wife* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), by Marty Rhodes Figley, substitutes cucumbers.[18]

Midrashic elaboration is often transferred to the illustrations,[19] some of which emphasise the realism of the narrative, while others diffuse it. Tomie dePaola, for instance, strives towards an iconographic and typological effect. While the text, selected from the NIV, reinforces the sacrosanct particularity of the story, the illustrations suggest that it is timeless and ethereal, for instance by eliminating perspective. The final epiphany frames Noah and his family in an ecclesiastical setting, perhaps a basilica, with medieval (Romanesque?) overtones; the rainbow forms the cupola, separated from the family by a frieze of arches, under which they are enclosed in an alcove or niche, just as icons often provide saints with architectural background.[20] Noah's arms are out-

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on Noah's drunkenness and shame but on the value of wine-production (*The Bible for Children*, p. 114). The colourful video biography *Noah* (A&E, 1996) claims that Noah was a Renaissance man on the basis of his invention of the cultivation of vineyards.

16) DeVries, *Story Bible for Older Children*, pp. 28-31. DeVries' version includes also racial insinuation (Ham is "a large, dark-skinned man") and Christological prophecy, since DeVries' interpretation of Japhet dwelling in the tents of Shem (Gen. 9:27) is that they will both share the blessings of the Redeemer.

17) Pauline Baynes' book is framed by illustrations of a portly Noah asleep sheltered by two arching vines under a hot sun. Vines with luscious grapes also grow around the sacrificial altar. In Madeleine L'Engle's teen novel *Many Waters* (New York: Farrer, Strauss, Giroux, 1986) Noah is famous for his wine.

18) Moreover, it is Noah's wife who specialises in their cultivation.

19) Bottigheimer stresses the importance of illustrations in interpreting the "stubbornly 'open'" biblical texts (*The Bible for Children*, pp. 56-57).

20) In Pauline Baynes, too, the revelation at the beginning and sacrifice at the end have a liturgical and ecclesiastical effect. Noah receives God's message framed by an

stretched, presumably in blessing, while he is flanked by two boys holding olive sprigs, like YHWH in Zechariah 4. The grouping of the figures, the positioning of hands, the doleful expression of the woman on the right, the dove held by Mrs. Noah on the left, compound the iconographic association: it could be a saint with donors, or the women at the cross. A hand from heaven indicates the rainbow, while leading back metonymically to the invisible deity, again reminiscent of medieval convention. A composition of two cats and two kittens stares out from the left hand corner, communicating domesticity, and perhaps a sense of mystery and grace. On the entrance to the ark, Mrs. Noah is foregrounded with the same two cats, but without the kittens. The cats may represent the continuity of life, as well as proliferation in the ark, but they also serve as emblems for Mrs. Noah, evocative of the wifely domain of home and kitchen.[21] The initial scene, like the final one, is liturgical. Noah's hands open, as if offering up prayer, towards the divine hand that extends down from the aura in the top right hand corner; symmetrically, in the final scene, the aura is in the top left hand corner. Noah's wife's hands are folded across her breast and her eyes closed; her posture, perhaps even her wimple, expresses pious submission to God's will, and shelter under the outstretched arms of her hus-

---

arched structure against a reddish background, separated from his family and the violent world beyond. A long red sash billows over his arm, while doves flutter around. In the sacrificial scene, Noah is clothed in the same red cloth; the family raises their hands aloft, while two prostrate themselves.

[21] Cats, as one might expect, figure largely in children's Noah's ark stories. Two have cats as their principal or focal figures: Arielle North Olsen, *Noah's Cats and the Devil's Fire,* illustrated by Barry Moser (New York: Orchard Books, 1992), and Janet Stevens, *How the Manx Cat Lost Its Tail* (San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990). In Peter Spier's *Noah's Ark* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), the cats remain on the ark after it has been abandoned, luxuriating in the chaos. In Nonny Hogrogian's *Noah's Ark* (London: Julia MacRae Books, 1986), a cat watches one of the sons making the drawings for the ark and a pair of cats occupies the gangplank at Noah's feet. Noah's ark alphabet books, such as Willard Goodman's *Noah's Ark A.B.C.* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), delight in cats. In Charlotte Pomeranz's *Noah's and Namah's Ark*, Noah listens to God's instructions cradling the old farm cat. Jack Zipes writes of the function of cats in both the oral and literary tradition "in *civilizing* men and explaining how the civilizing process operates in western society" (*Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry* [New York: Routledge, 1997], p. 17).

band. In the background a procession of apparently motionless animals, their legs stiff and straight, is depicted on undulating hills, while Noah's children and their wives look down from the ark. The Christian frame of reference is also suggested by the sheep, complete with lamb, and doves who populate the world outside the ark in the penultimate illustration. DePaola's trademark bunnies and mice, with their simplified outlines, contribute to the sense of innocence—precisely the world of the DePaola story.

The Reader's Digest Bible for Children, on the other hand, depicts people climbing onto rooftops, embracing, weeping, clinging to logs, and clambering onto protruding rocks, as they watch the ark sail away. In the previous picture, recognizably the same couples are talking to

Figure 1. *The Golden Children's Bible*: The Flood

each other while the ark is being constructed; some have knowing looks, others appear bewildered. We thus see them in their ordinary lives. The horror of the scene is distanced, however, by the simplification of features, the primitive clothing, and the impressionistic merging of sea, rain, and mountains. A starker, lurid realism is to be found in *The Golden Children's Bible* (fig. 1): rushing highlighted waters, terrified animals, elephants or perhaps mammoths[22] trumpeting at the

[22] The divide between prehistoric and modern fauna seems to be that between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 in *The Golden Children's Bible*. Nonetheless, the elephants in this

skies, two men dressed in what look like tea-towels staring at the ark in anger or regret, one of them incongruously stroking the head of a kid. The ark, in contrast, is in a tranquil lake and illuminated by a clearing in the clouds. The effect is cinematic—one suspects the influence of Bible movies—and difficult to take seriously, whether because of stylization or exaggeration.[23]

Figure 2. Pauline Baynes: The Flood

illustration appear to have woolly coats, though this may also be the effect of the rain. Perhaps, unlike the Reem in Midrash, the mammoths became extinct because there was no room for them on the ark. In Maud and Miska Petersham's gorgeous *The Ark of Father Noah and Mother Noah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1930), the mammoths and dinosaurs are unable to enter the ark because Noah makes the door too small, and they weep. We miss out that page. Madeleine L'Engle and Janish and Zwerger also populate the antediluvian world with prehistoric and/or mythological creatures, such as centaurs, unicorns, manticores, and dwarf mammoths.

[23] *The Golden Children's Bible* was first produced in 1962 and reflects the aesthetic tastes of its era. It has sold nearly five million copies (Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children*, 212-13).

Pauline Baynes' exquisite pictures (fig. 2) communicate the beauty of the destroyed world in minute detail; islands are vivid with multicoloured life, while the waters are crowded with corpses. The drowned animals still seem to be running or treading water, as if they have not yet familiarised themselves with death. Sheep graze on one of the islands under the eye of a beneficent lion; either crisis has suspended the laws of predation, or we have a version of the peaceable kingdom.[24] People generally raise their hands imploring; we see one person (a woman?) pulling another out of the water, though it is not clear whether he or she is alive or dead. Another is dragging himself or herself out of the water. A giraffe incongruously peeks out of a hole. A giant frame-breaking fish is about to devour a corpse; other frame-breaking images are a peacock's gorgeous train, a crane's black wing, a windblown tree, a volcano, and a small bird which seems to hold up the border. The outline of the picture is thus broken up into segments, as if horror can only just be contained by the page. The bleak biblical account of the death of all creatures[25] is balanced by an oval medallion of green waters in which the drowned are suspended; the illustrator achieves an effect of solidity and clarity through the beauty of colour and form, and delicate wave patterns that seem to be engraved into the water, especially round the edges. The final scene in the sequence shows the ark, a low grim black vessel, like a barge, floating on water of gradually increasing intensity. In the water a few human figures can be seen, barely sketched. The solitude of this picture, with its closed in ark, its undulating blues, its lowering clouds and pinpoint lights, contrasts with the richness of illustration before and after.

Peter Spier, in his prize-winning *Noah's Ark*, relies on stillness, as well as a complete absence of words, except for a prefatory poem by Jacobus Revius (1586-1658). The animals crowd around the ark, while the waters gradually rise around them. As the first puddles form, elephants

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[24] This may reflect the antediluvian vegetarian diet, in keeping with Gen. 1:31.

[25] Only Max Bolliger, *Noah and the Rainbow*, illustrated by Helga Aichison (trans. Clyde Robert Bulla; New York: Thomas Crowell, 1972) evokes the starkness of the biblical narrative: "every living thing on earth had to die." It is accompanied by a minimalist illustration of dark greenish waters, crabs, vague floating things, and submarine mountains.

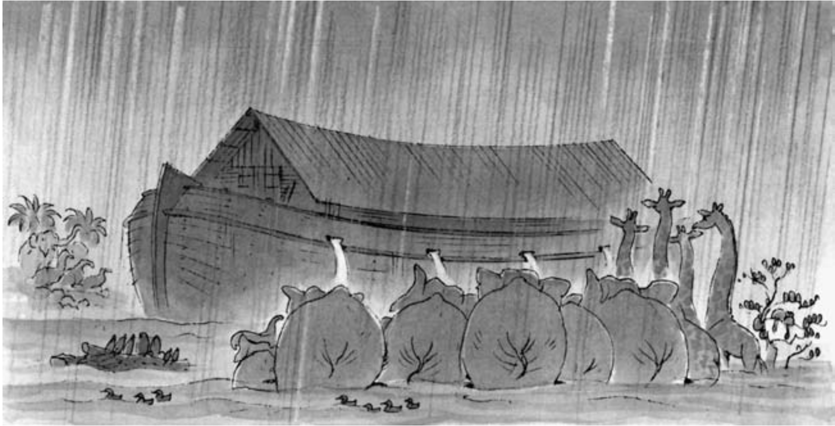

Figure 3. Peter Spier: Elephants and Giraffes Around the Ark

put their trunks around the calves, while monkeys and all sorts of birds sit on their heads and on the camels' humps. Koalas, raccoons, and sloths climb up or hang in a large tree, whose branches are thick with birds. It could be a scene at the Umschlagplatz. In contrast to Baynes' vivid colours and perfect draughtsmanship, everything is covered in dreary sepia. Spier is a master of the implicit; for instance, in the next illustration, families of ducks bob around elephant rumps, and one has to imagine that the smaller animals have drowned (fig. 3). On the following page, the ark is borne higher and higher above submerged towns, vineyards, and mountains. It is an inverted world. As the book continues, the frenetic life within the ark alternates with emptiness outside it. Two whole pages are occupied by a pale blue wash, in which the sea can hardly be distinguished from the sky.

Heinz Janisch and Lisbeth Zwerger's *Noah's Ark*[26] uses a spare surrealism: people stagger round under huge wind-blown umbrellas, a unicorn prances, hybrid creatures abound, among their eerie reflections; in a later picture, lugubrious giant fish swim through windows (fig. 4).[27] We see no deaths in these depictions; instead, people are overwhelmed by strangeness, stillness, and hopelessness. In one illustration,

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[26] Janisch and Zwerger, *Noah's Ark* (London: North-South Books, 1997).

[27] The same motif is used in Judy Brook's entirely non-religious, non-moralistic, and non-threatening version of the story (*Noah's Ark* [New York: Franklin Watts, 1973]).

Figure 4. Heinz Janisch and Lisbeth Zwerger: Noah's Ark

for instance, people sit on their rooftops, like storks, as the waters reach their windows.

Warwick Hutton's *Noah and the Great Flood*[28] communicates the universality of the destruction through foregrounding the odd skull and bone on Mt. Ararat, a far more telling image than the heavy handed composition of swimming cattle and a person with arms upraised at the beginning of the flood. It is a messy world to which

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Fish sail over swirling trees and look at their reflections in windows. We also find it in *How Mrs. Monkey Missed the Ark.*

28) Hutton, *Noah and the Great Flood* (New York: Athenaeum, 1977).

Noah and his family return.[29] Tibor Gergely's *Noah's Ark*[30] has an exciting picture of people waving their arms about while lightning crashes and water cascades, the figures far too schematic to evoke sympathy. Similarly, in the video *Noah's Ark*,[31] in the best American Bible-Western tradition, we catch a glimpse of some people whose improvised raft is swamped by a wave, but since they are baddies, we don't really care. In these cases, the catastrophe is mitigated either through indirection or by dehumanising the victims. In Lorenz Graham's magnificent Liberian version, the destruction is displaced, or metonymically indicated, through a series of poetic rhetorical questions:

> Where be the people what done laugh?
> Where be the giants what walk like trees?
> Where be the leopards big like elephants?
> And all the elephants standing up like mountains?
> Where they be?[32]

Other versions will avoid drawing attention to the annihilation, probably as too frightening.[33] Similarly, the wickedness of humanity evokes a variety of responses; most children's Bibles have difficulty imagining evil that would justify wiping out the Earth. For the hugely successful Anne DeVries the unforgivable sin is laughter: "They laughed and laughed and laughed…They laughed at God!...God doesn't allow men to laugh at Him."[34] *The Living Bible* illustrates "evil you can hardly

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[29] In another illustration debris is suggested through a floating amphora and giant drifting leaves. Again, no corpses.

[30] Gergely, *Noah's Ark* (New York: Golden Press, 1983).

[31] Turner Productions, 1994.

[32] Lorenz Graham, *God Wash the World and Start Again!,* illustrated by Clare Romano Ross (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1971).

[33] Piehl, "Noah as Survivor," p. 82. As one might expect, this includes most of the versions for younger children, like DePaola, Lucy Cousin's *Noah's Ark* (Cambridge, Mass.: Candlewick, 1993), Judy Brook's *Noah's Ark*, and Lois Lenski's *Mr. and Mrs. Noah* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1948), which does however have a few toy trees and houses dotted in the water. Other examples are Patricia Lee Gauch and Jonathan Green (ill.), *Noah* (New York: Philomel, 1994)—a lovely multiracial version; Linda Hayward, *Noah's Ark* (New York: Random House, 1987), for preschool-Grade 1 children; and Glen Rounds' *Washday on Noah's Ark* (New York: Holiday House, 1985).

[34] DeVries, *Story Bible for Young Children*, p. 18. According to Bottigheimer, Anne

imagine" with a portly Mycenaean looking lady playing a harp to a grinning man with a wine beaker.[35] Pauline Baynes barely indicates the evil with a sketch of a fight and what could be either sex or rape. The inside covers of the book are crowded with scenes of mayhem, against a lurid red background. Peter Spier, as usual, communicates utter horror with complete candour: an army leaving a burning city, devastated fields, slaughtered cattle.[36]

Some versions modernize the evil. In Brian Wildsmith's *Professor Noah's Spaceship*, the evil is pollution, which threatens the lives of the animals in the forest. Comparably, Ann Jonas's *Aardvarks Disembark*! (New York: Green Willow, 1990) concentrates on the exit from the ark. Noah calls out the animals in alphabetical order. But many are left whose names he does not know, so he tells everyone to disembark. As he and his family descend, they pass through wonderful beasts with marvellous names.[37] Many, however, are now extinct. The flood is thus

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DeVries' *Kinderbibel* has sold over 1.5 million copies in a variety of languages since it was first published in 1948 (*The Bible for Children*, p. 200). In DeVries' *Stories for Older Children*, the laughter is muted and replaced by more conventional "wicked pastimes" (p. 25) and "frightful sons" (p. 23). In Max Bolliger, *Noah and the Rainbow*, we are told that "God was angry with them/because they did not fear Him/and because they laughed."

35) In some cases, one suspects that the comic effect is deliberate. Barbara Reid, *Two by Two* (New York: Scholastic, 1993), begins with a scene that could come from a children's *Arabian Nights*, with an obese Sultan nibbling grapes, hints of courtly skullduggery, and a gaudily dressed lady from the harem throwing out slops. The caption reads "way back in the olden days/People turned to evil ways./They spoiled the world with greedy plots/Dirty deeds and nasty thoughts./God was mad and with a frown/Said, 'Wash it clean! Let them drown!'" Doggerel is used for similar effect in Charlotte Pomeranz, *Noah and Namah's Ark.* In Nonny Hogrogrian, an upper illustration of children fighting corresponds to a lower one of adults battling with swords; the identity of dress suggests that they are the same people. However, the fierce upturned eyes and the highly stylised stomping feet produce an effect of comic exaggeration.

36) Lorenz Graham's *God Wash the World and Start Again* dramatically transfers the evil to the animals: "And monkey mens what eat the people/And snakes what carry fire in their mouth/To cook the mens they eat," though people also do not listen to "Him Word."

37) *Aardvarks, Disembark!* is the only children's flood story I know of that realistically depicts Ararat as snow-capped. As the animals descend, so does the world become green. The motif of snow at high altitudes is used to eerie effect in Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (London: Penguin, 1984).

projected into the postdiluvian era. Janisch and Zwerger represent the evil through a desolate scene of smoking chimneys, with a few scattered huge scimitars and long bones. It is thus evocative of both the industrial wasteland and perhaps the Holocaust.[38]

Some versions paraphrase the biblical text, to explore the depths of the narrative, to ask its questions, to bring it to life, or to introduce a particular twist. Alice Bach and Cheryl Exum, for instance, draw attention to Noah's silence, through repeating three times that he did not respond; in fact, neither he nor any other human character says a word throughout the narrative. We do not know why this is; Bach and Exum are entirely non-judgmental. The silence is subsumed unobtrusively in the life of the ark and the exit from it. In this Bach and Exum are faithful to the biblical narrative, as they comment in their note to the story.[39] The characters, and the animals, are vividly imagined, through non-verbal interactions, thoughts, and activities. We see the world for the last time, before it is inundated, as Noah and his wife look out, just before God closes the door. Noah's sons are reluctant to bring turnips, sprouts, and kohlrabi, because they do not like them—a comic detail that opens up the realm of idiosyncrasies. The animals are realised in their fear, depression, and pleasure, as the sun warms their fur on the deck. As one might expect, Bach and Exum attempt to shift gender boundaries. Whereas many versions simply reinscribe traditional gender roles,[40] Bach and Exum distribute roles equally and without appar-

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[38] Janisch and Zwerger's text correlates the evil with the code of heroism introduced by the giants. The scene is surmounted by immense white birds flying enigmatically over chimneys. The eeriness is compounded by a great shadow with no obvious source.

[39] Alice Bach and J. Cheryl Exum, *Moses and Noah's Ark: Stories from the Bible*, illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon (New York: Delacorte Press, 1989), p. 27.

[40] Frequently, Noah and his sons are depicted building the ark, while their wives are cooking meals beside it. In Lawrence T. Lorimer's *Noah's Ark* (New York: Random House, 1978), the men build the ark, while the women harvest the grain and other food products. See also Baynes. This suggests the influence of popular anthropological studies on the division of labour in traditional societies. In Glen Rounds' *Washday on Noah's Ark*, the men build the ark while the women do the laundry. Even those versions that emphasise Mr. and Mrs. Noah equally, such as the Petershams' *The Ark of Father Noah and Mother Noah*, Lois Lenski's *Mr. and Mrs. Noah*, and Marty Rhodes Figley's *Noah's Wife*, similarly differentiate their roles. Ann and Reg Cartwright, *Norah's*

ent reason. "She [Noah's wife] hammered and sawed the beams. She measured and marked the long boards; he stirred the vats of pitch." The sons gather grain and the daughters-in-law fruit and leaves. Noah's wife takes the initiative in smiling at Noah, when the sun comes out. However, as in the Bible, Noah is the principal actor, the addressee of the divine word, the focus of thought and feeling. The family is his extended personality. But Noah is a flat character, as in the Bible; we do not see his goodness, he does not reflect on God's message, and his reactions, cogitations, and joys are immediate, and commonplace. "It's time to go into the ark" is his one quoted thought. He is deafened by the animals,[41] finds it hard to imagine the amount of rain, and delights in the feel of the grass and the smell of wildflowers when they leave the ark. He and his wife smile at each other, but no more. We have no insight into the relations of the characters with each other, or into their interior lives. Even the detail that the sons did not like kohlrabi or turnips is a quirk rather than a character trait. Bach and Exum fill the gaps in the biblical narrative, without truly changing it. Indeed, as good biblical scholars, one suspects that their commitment is to the story itself, free of pious accretions. This is evidenced, for instance, by the notes they append to the text.

A somewhat different example of paraphrastic retelling is Scholem Asch's version in his collection *In the Beginning*. Asch draws on Midrash for much of his detail, for instance the jewel that illumined the ark[42] or Noah's objection that he is not a hunter. Asch's Noah is much wryer and more bad-tempered than those in most conventionally pious read-

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Ark (London: Red Fox, 1994; 1st edn, 1983), dispenses with Noah altogether. Norah saves the animals on her farm and the builds the ark. Incidentally, this version, like Judy Brook's, lacks all religious and frightening implications. There are one or two versions which lack the division of labour. Tibor Gergely's is one example; another, curiously, is M.B. Goffstein, *My Noah's Ark*, in which Noah has a hammer and mop, and Mrs. Noah a saw. Interestingly also, the Turner Productions video *Noah's Ark*, which otherwise is both sexist and racist, is characterised by an equal apportionment of tasks.

41) This something of a motif. The Petershams depict Mr. and Mrs. Noah in their huge double bed with fingers in their ears, and comment "Mr. and Mrs. Noah had to put cotton in their ears before they could go to sleep."

42) T.B. Sanhedrin 108b, Bereshit Rabbah 31.11, Yalkut Shim'oni I.57.

ings, and certainly than Bach and Exum's Noah. When his contemporaries mock him, he says to himself, "Laugh all you wish; I know what I know." Driven to distraction on the ark, he curses, scolds, and strikes the animals. The animals themselves spend their time spreading scandal. The shtetl has come to the ark; the ark is the shtetl. And like the shtetl, it is not a benign world, but it does have vitality. And it is this world which is redeemed.

In Piotr and Józef Wilkon's *L'Arche de Noé*,[43] the animals also complain and Noah threatens to throw them off the ark.[44] The threat transforms the animals into paragons of gentleness and consideration, in a world that is fundamentally good.[45] In Asch, the meanness is inherent in existence; nothing heals the rift between Noah and the animals.[46]

Asch's Noah is more magical than Bach and Exum's. He asks God how he will find "worms squeezed in the heart of stones," and suddenly a fabulous bestiary, a world entirely animated, opens up to the imagination. One thinks of the shamir, the worm that cut the stone for Solomon's Temple.[47] When they arrive, the animals bow before Noah and beg permission to enter the ark, a ceremonial act that seems to come from a more hierarchical, ritualised era. Whereas many versions induce an aura of contemporaneity, or ordinariness, even in antique garb,

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43) Piotr and Wilkon, *L'Arche de Noé* (Éditions Nord-Sud, 1992). *L'Arche de Noé* is a translation, but no reference is given to the original.

44) Most versions make comic capital out of life on the ark. My favourite, perhaps, is the Petershams' *The Ark of Father Noah and Mother Noah,* in which, after Mother Noah exhausts her fund of stories, Noah organizes a daily parade. However, the novelty of the parade soon wears off, until the elephants finally refuse to participate.

45) The Wilkons make no mention of humanity's evil, nor the death of those left outside the ark.

46) The most extreme exemplar of the "mean" is Priscilla and Otto Friedrich, *Noah Shark's Ark* (New York: Barnes, 1961), which is characterised by its total inversion of the original story. Everyone survives the flood, and only Noah is threatened with disaster, as his ark, laden with consumer goods instead of animals, sinks. Only Noah is rotten, and finally sees the evil of his ways, whereupon his beard turns white and he runs back to his house with a smile on his face. *Noah Shark's Ark*, too, lacks a deity or any moral motivation for the flood, which is, in any case, a snowstorm. In L'Engle, *Many Waters*, Noah is initially grudging, and his latent goodness is restored by the novel's time-travelling teenage heroes.

47) T.B. Gittin 68b.

Asch's suggests not only the shtetl, but the shtetl's narrative tradition, with its mingling of European fairytale and Midrashic legend.[48]

A more radical Midrashic reading is to be found in Marc Gellman's justifiably popular *Does God Have a Big Toe?* Gellman, in best Midrashic fashion, creates his own narratives around and in between the lines of the biblical text. They exemplify the Midrashic principle that the best way to explain a story is to tell another story. Gellman devotes three stories to the flood. In the first, all the animals seek God to intercede with him to avert the flood. Only the fish, however, realise that he is everywhere, and thus they are entirely saved. In the second, Noah cannot bring himself to tell his friends about the impending flood, while in the third the rainbow is preceded by a rainbow of birds, who have come to look for their friend, the dove, whom, together with the raven, they have previously rejected. Gellman writes beautifully, and has an extraordinary capacity for bringing his characters to life. "Like most people, Noah ignored the bad news;" "From the beginning, God[49] knew that the people would try to act better than their neighbours. But honestly, God never expected to have the same problem with the animals"; "When God made the world, nothing turned out right, so God decided to start all over again." The beginnings of the stories immediately introduce the consciousness and unconsciousness of their characters, and have a directness, and lightness of touch, that saves them from sentimentality. The animals "Flew, flopped, rolled and ran, jerked and jumped, crept and crawled, slithered and slid" to find the place where God lived. The alliterative sequence turns the roster of animals into a series of verbs, life as movement and interruption. The birds squabbling over who gets to nest next to whom on the ark remind us not only of human foibles, but our own predilection for beauty. The best

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[48] Another version by a classic Yiddish writer is Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Why Noah Chose the Dove*, illustrated by Eric Carle (trans. Elizabeth Shub; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974). When the animals hear that there is about to be a flood, they all find reasons why they should be saved, except for the dove, who remains modest and quiet. The comic effect of Singer's version arises largely from the zaniness and beauty of some animals' claims. The mouse, for instance, declares that it is cousin to the elephant; the horse advances that it has the largest eyes. But the housefly counters that it has more eyes!

[49] Like Bach and Exum, Gellman avoids personal pronouns for God.

place, next to the window of the ark, "was grabbed right away by the parrots, who would only allow the bright-pink flamingoes to nest next to them, who would only allow the canaries next to them," and so on. The middle story, by far the most intense, focuses in Noah's silence, as do Bach and Exum. Whereas Bach and Exum's Noah is merely very attentive, preoccupied with taking in every detail of God's extraordinary instructions, Gellman's Noah is embarrassed, in denial, and procrastinates. "Noah didn't have the heart to come right out and tell his friends. But he did try and tell them in a roundabout way." At first he thinks that the passenger list may be delayed in the mail; later, he suggests to his friends that they build a house high in the mountains or take swimming lessons. Moreover, it is a relatively benign world. A stock motif of conventional flood stories, from the Midrash on, pits Noah against sceptical, hostile neighbours, who refuse to listen to his call to repentance.[50] Gellman's neighbours, Noah's friends, are bemused, especially when Noah tells them that it is a statue, or a statue of a boat. "Noah's friends thought that he was nuts. But then they thought he was nuts even before he started building the ark." Being nuts, it would seem, does not make him less likable; it evokes perhaps their tolerance.

Then the rains start. Noah's friends, Jabal and Jehaz, come to the ark dressed unconvincingly in a zebra suit. Noah tells them how sorry he is "for you, sorry for the animals, sorry for me, and sorry for God." The story ends with the rain, which, some say, "was God's tears." This is all very well, and at least Gellman confronts, as does the Zohar,[51] the issue of Noah's moral responsibility and anguish. But it does not seem quite

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[50] This motif is represented by DeVries (cf. n. 25 above), L'Engle, *Many Waters*, pp. 287-88, the Turner video *Noah's Ark*, Figley, *Noah's Wife*, and, perhaps, *The Golden Children's Bible*, which has a picture of Noah apparently expostulating with recalcitrant workers (*The Golden Children's Bible*, by the way, is one of the few that suggest that the ark was built by other than Noah's immediately family). In most, however, the ark is built in isolation, in line with the tendency to draw attention away from victims. In Janisch and Zwerger, some bystanders and a centaur look on with seeming astonishment; *The Reader's Digest Bible*, as I have already noted, foregrounds chattering neighbours.

[51] Zohar Hadash 22 c-d, 23. See Daniel Matt (ed.), *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (Classics of Western Spirituality; Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 57-59.

adequate to say that the rain may have been God's tears. It does not exculpate God, nor does Noah's apology excuse Noah. There is something very uneasy about the ending of the tale. Similarly, the first narrative, in which the fish are all saved because they realise that God is everywhere, is cute, but disturbing, because of its implication that the other animals deserve to suffer for their mistaken ideas about God. This repeats the polemic against idolatry and false worship in monotheistic traditions, but it may make us uncomfortable in a pluralistic age. The third tale, "The Bird Feather Rainbow," with its wondrous conversion of the birds, is a bit too good to be true. It ends with the raven, who had refused to return to the birds that had ostracised him, passing out fresh olives to his erstwhile shipmates. And one wonders.

Gary Schmidt's "Noah by the Window of the ark"[52] lacks all sentimentality. It is a perfectly realised moment in the voyage, as Noah waits for the dove to return, full of memories of the past and anticipation of the future. As in Gellman's "Noah's Friends," Noah profoundly grieves for the drowned world. There is not a trace of self-pity, of posturing, in his grief. He thinks "about the children playing in the streets who had been called in by worried mothers when the rain began to fall." The world is not evil, at least the children and their mothers are not totally evil. Gellman deflects the horror of the story through humour, whose message is that the narrative does not have to be taken altogether seriously. In Schmidt's narrative, Noah weeps "often" over the lost world, which is recognizable as our world. His tears are genuinely emblematic of the flood. When the ark lands on Ararat and Noah opens a window, he laughs, and his unexplained "true" laughter may release, and be infused with, the emotions of the voyage. The laughter is embarrassing, contradictory, and introduces an element of manic strangeness to this otherwise contemplative character. "Ham wondered if he could have heard right. But when Noah had pulled his head back in the window, Ham had seen that his father was truly laughing."

Perhaps that is the nakedness, or anticipates the nakedness. At any rate, it is a characterisation of Ham, and a defining, perhaps horrifying, moment. But it is subsumed into the rhythm of the narrative, and

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[52] Gary Schmidt, *The Blessing of the Lord: Stories from the Old and New Testaments*, illustrated by Dennis Nolan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

Ham disappears from our view.[53] Instead, it introduces characterisation through perception of another figure, which predominates in the last part of the story. Here we watch Noah's wife unobtrusively looking at Noah, in fear and love, as he waits for the dove. In contrast to Ham, she does not witness the cathartic relief when the dove returns. She hears it indirectly, when her daughters-in-law gasp in unison. Then, marvellously, the gaze switches to Noah. We see him looking at her "with love in his eyes." Their entire history is implicit between them. The story ends with Noah "sliding" the olive leaf into her hair, a gesture that is sexual, imaginative, and gentle.

Figure 5. Peter Spier: The Dove Returns

[53] Ham, perhaps because of the curse that concludes the biblical narrative, receives a great variety of characterisation in children's versions. For the Petershams, he is a very positive character, who plays on his mouth organ on the roof of the ark when the sun comes out, and cheers the animals. For negative views, see L'Engle, DeVries, and the Turner Productions video.

Peter Spier's *Noah's Ark* also depicts Noah and his wife embracing at that moment, an enfolding less obviously sexual but profoundly loving, while their dogs yap around and a son looks on quizzically (fig. 5). Then Noah carries the olive stem triumphantly through the ark, finally to feed the cow.

In a class by itself is Judith Kerr's *How Mrs. Monkey Missed the Ark* (London: Harper Collins, 1996). It is utterly innocent. There is no evil, no divine culpability for the flood, there are no corpses. The canonical text makes its presence felt through small details, like a dove with an olive leaf in a bottom right hand corner, and the rainbow on which Mrs. Monkey slides to earth. The adult (and child?) reader is aware of the real story, hovering in the back of the mind, but can ignore it for the time being. The animals, smiling, are just boarding the ark, and the first raindrops are falling when Mrs. Monkey decides she just has to get a nice bag of fruit for their voyage. It all takes longer than expected, and she is stranded. God is worried. So are the animals and Noah, but not Mr. Monkey. God sends a dolphin, who does everything save take Mrs. Monkey back to the ark (fig. 6). She jumps to an orange branch, and sinks to a submarine fig tree. The fish love figs. Mrs. Monkey has her nice bag of fruit now, and swims to the surface. No dolphin, no branch. God sends a big white bird, who flies with Mrs. Monkey in the sun for days and days until they see the ark on Mt. Ararat through a hole in the clouds. But sadly the fruit has dried to pips and skins, which miraculously coalesce into one big seed. From it grows a tree bearing all the fruits Mrs. Monkey collected, bananas, dates, oranges, and figs, and all the animals feast on it. The book ends with an elephant helping Mr. and Mrs. Noah build their house, while the animals peacefully have their young.

"Mrs. Monkey" is a child's story, without the interventionist, earnest voice of adult retellings, without overt ideological, feminist or ecological agendas. The child, of course, is Mrs. Monkey; animals in children's stories often are displaced children. But she is also adult, "Mrs." Monkey, with all its connotations of bourgeois and indeed patriarchal respectability. The child blends with the adult; the adult reader can take on a child persona, and vice versa. Children are often called little monkeys; monkeys, perhaps more than any other animals, have child characteristics, in fables and children's literature. The figure of Mrs. Monkey

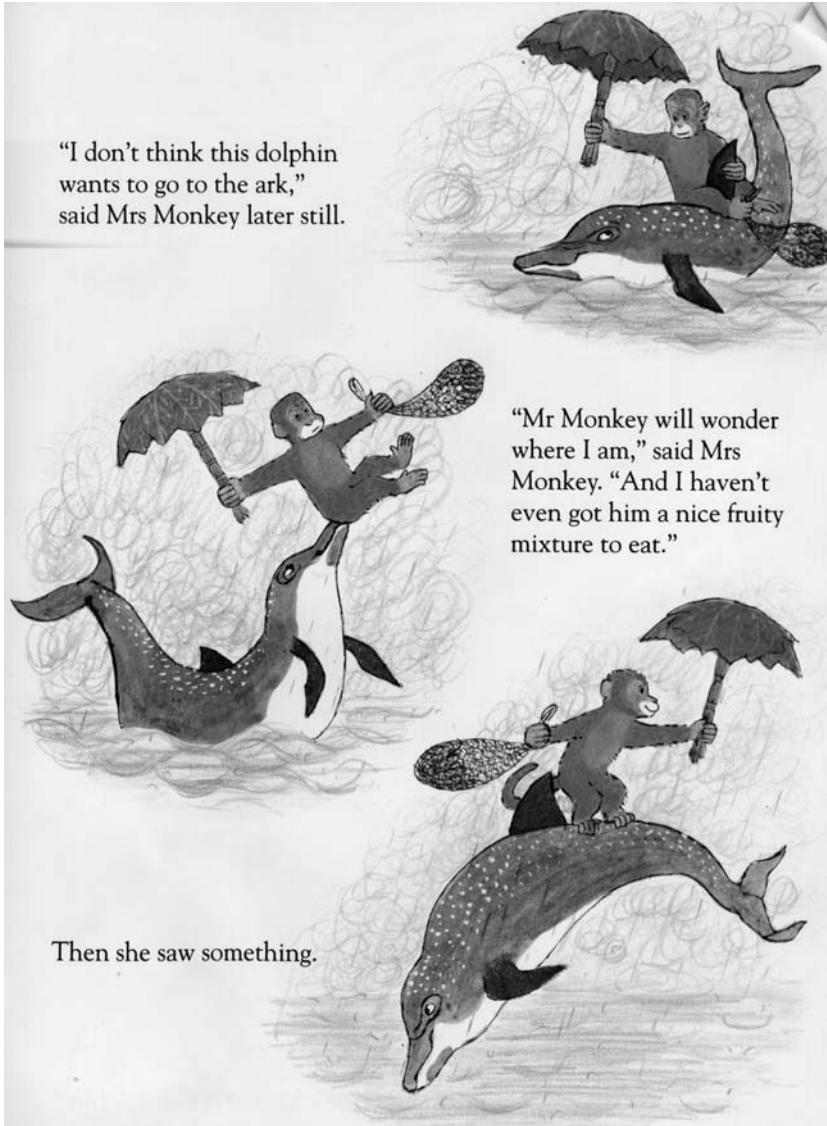

Figure 6. Judith Kerr: The Dolphin

richly exploits the stereotype; she is agile (look how she holds her umbrella through thick and thin), resourceful, adventurous, loves fruit, and expressive. She also conforms to the gender and domestic function of food-maker and provider: she says at one point: "Mr. Monkey will

wonder where I am…and I haven't even got him a nice fruity mixture to eat." But she is a Mrs. Monkey free from Mr. Monkey, for the whole of the voyage. Mr. Monkey's only role is to express confidence in her. Indeed, all the couples (Mr. and Mrs. Giraffe, Mr. and Mrs. Lion etc.) seem to get on very well together. At the beginning of the story it is Mrs. Noah who has the hammer.

Identification with Mrs. Monkey is complemented by the child-angels, who are the principal facilitators of the action. The angels bring the dolphin and the white bird, they show God where she is, they hush the storm so that God can see, and hold bowls to catch the raindrops. The angels are benign and explicitly children, and they seem to have fun bouncing around in the storm, shushing the lightning, sleeping on clouds. God as the supreme paternal figure, the head of the hierarchy, has lost all his dominance; he has to be shown where Mrs. Monkey is, and is by turns worried, solicitous and gratified. With his long white beard, his mild dignified face, he conforms to a grandfatherly stereotype, of an adult world that is complicitous with that of children. Even his decision to send Mrs. Monkey something that swims seems to be anticipated by the angels carrying a dolphin.

We have several overlapping displacements: from the ark to the world outside it, from Noah to an animal, from male to female, from adult (God) to child or child-angel. The displacements suggest a counter-story, a point of vantage from which to look at the original story, but also untouched by it. Even the helper-figures, the dolphin and the white bird, evoke mythological expectations—Amphitryon, the stork who carries babies, the pelican who devours them—which are disappointed or neutralized, left just outside the realm of the story. The dolphin proves merely playful, and another child figure.[54] It balances Mrs. Monkey on its nose, like a performing seal, curves and leaps in the

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[54]) A dolphin also figures in Norma Farber's *Where's Gomer?*, illustrated by William Pène du Bois (New York: Dutton, 1974), in which Noah's mischievous and loveable grandson, Gomer, is left outside the ark. When they arrive at Ararat Gomer is waiting for them. Another story, also by Norma Farber, that tells of survival outside the ark is *How the Left-Behind Beasts Built Ararat,* illustrated by Antonio Frasconi (New York: Walker and Co., 1978). In Madeleine L'Engle, *Many Waters*, Noah's daughter, Yalith, is granted immortality and ascends to heaven just before the flood, corresponding to the ascent of Astra in Midrash (Yalkut Shim'oni 44).

water, a creature of beauty and acrobatic pleasure reminiscent of the waterpark or the dolphinarium. Its resistance to adult authority, its wish to spend as much time in the water as possible with its latest reluctant toy, may evoke child and adult identification. It also turns it into a trickster, who facilitates Mrs. Monkey's transference to the orange branch and thus to the ongoing pleasure of the story. The dolphin is not malign, but it does suggest an anarchic countertext, which may be represented in any case by the flood. "A big storm was blowing up…it was blowing harder than ever…" How many children have not delighted in pretending to be a storm, or at the very least the Big Bad Wolf? Or blowing out birthday candles?

The monkey discovers a wonderful world, and certainly has a much more exciting time than the animals on the ark, most of whom look very seasick. It is an inverted world: "The trees hardly moved. Fish flew through their branches instead of birds." Crayfish, crabs, seahorses, and multicoloured fish float among leaves and figs, half seen in the green water. Much of the pleasure comes from the beauty of the illustrations, the arabesques of the trees, pointillesque details, such as purple figs against a green background, that distract us from the story, from figurative interpretation. The story is subsumed in a different kind of fantasy, or let us say wonder. Moreover, the wonder is mediated through the fish, who discover figs: "They (fish) were finding new things to eat. The fish were eating figs." Alliteration combines with voluptuousness and visual incongruity. An octopus is ensconced in a nest of leaves, a knotted tentacle curled around a fig, its mouth open in a delighted smile.

The white bird is also wonderful. The beauty of white birds, such as storks, swans, and pelicans, is associated with purity, an evocation implied by Mrs. Monkey's "What a nice clean bird."[55] Mrs. Monkey's approbation accords with her domesticity, her persona as Mrs. Monkey, but also with a child's conditioning, or immediacy of response to that which is new and shining. Mrs. Monkey exchanges air for water, flying for swimming, enjoying the sun above the clouds. It is good to be warm, dry, and celestial ("The sun dried Mrs. Monkey's fur. It dried

[55] In Janisch and Zwerger, *Noah's Ark*, however, white birds compound the sense of eeriness and desolation.

Figure 7. Judith Kerr: Final Scene

the fruit and it dried the bird.") On their flight, Mrs. Monkey and the bird encompass the angels and God. The bird's wings correspond to those of the angels, its whiteness to God's hair and beard (there are other correlations, e.g. between the divine aura and the sun). Mrs. Monkey and the bird suggest the circumference and pervasiveness of God's glory.

The main plot is completed with Mrs. Monkey's return to earth, and the miraculous tree, on which all the fruit in Mrs. Monkey's bag grow, may seem de trop. It echoes the tree of knowledge or of life in the garden of Eden, Ezekiel's paradisal tree which nourishes all the animals, and, most proximately, reverses the story of the Tower of Babel. In the context, however, it preserves the memory of Mrs. Monkey's search and the world of the flood. In the Bible, the exit from the ark is followed by immediate disintegration: terror is established between human beings and animals, violence is acknowledged and regulated, Noah gets drunk. Here harmony is maintained, against our knowledge and the canonical story, at least until the last page.

At the end of the story, Mrs. Monkey's escapade, and Mr. Monkey's confidence in her, are endorsed. "They make a nice mixture," says God of the fruit of the tree, echoing Mrs. Monkey's words. He may be referring to the fruit, the animals, or the world. Mr. and Mrs. Monkey sit at the very top of the tree, a banana and an orange in their hands. A lion holds a fig branch between its teeth, a tiger dates, a bear reaches up for bananas. Predation has yet to begin. On the final page, the Monkey family are foregrounded; the baby monkey sits on the lap of one of its parents while the other pokes a finger playfully at it (fig. 7). In the background, the miraculous tree grows behind Mr. and Mrs. Noah's house, while two angels dance, hands touching, and one flies down to help Mr. Noah and Mr. Elephant with the roof. The white birds fly overhead, with their child. Only Mr. and Mrs. Noah, for some reason, are without offspring.

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Jephthah's Daughter as Object of Desire or Feminist Icon

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Abstract

The narrative of Jephthah and his daughter (Judg. 10:6-12:7) has inspired approximately five hundred artistic treatments throughout history. In this article, I investigate two works of fiction from the twentieth century: Richardt Gandrup's *Jeftas Datter* (1922) and Naomi Ragen's *Jephte's Daughter* (1989). My main purpose is to see how these pieces of literature deal with the issue of violence by engaging in dialogue with the biblical tradition. On the basis of a narratological analysis, I discuss these works in terms of their strategies for interpreting the biblical text and of their impact on society.

Keywords

Jephthah, judges, violence, feminism, narrotology, literature

The issue of so-called domestic violence is not a new one.[1] Tales of abusive husbands, brothers and fathers have been told from antiquity to modern times and they are abundant in the Hebrew Bible. One of the most gruesome examples is the story of Jephthah (Judg. 10:6-12:7), who sacrifices his daughter as a burnt-offering to fulfill his vow. This biblical narrative presents an ethical and existential dilemma which has inspired approximately five hundred artistic works since the Renaissance.[2] It has been particularly well represented in sixteenth century

1) I am indebted to Hanna Stenström and Lena Roos for comments on this article.

2) W.O. Sypherd, *Jephthah and His Daughter: A Study in Comparative Literature* (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1948). The sudden growth of interest at this time could be explained by the parallels to the Greek tragedy.

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drama (e.g. Buchanan), the musical oratorio of the Baroque (e.g. Handel), and the poetry of the Romantic period (e.g. Byron).

Twentieth century literature features only a handful of novels based on the Jephthah story, most of which belong to the category of historical fiction.[3] In this article, however, I intend to explore two of the more radical re-workings of the narrative set in modern times: Naomi Ragen's *Jephte's Daughter* (1989) and Richard Gandrup's *Jeftas Datter* (1922). My main purpose is to see how modern literature deals with the issue of violence by engaging in dialogue with biblical tradition. To that end, I will make comparative analyses of three elements of the narrative: story, narrator and character.[4] Secondly, I will discuss the novels in terms of their strategies for interpreting the biblical text and I will also briefly reflect on the impact of this literature, examining, for example, reviews. Ragen's work is my main focus, since it prompts questions of how and whether a contemporary feminist can make use of this vicious narrative. The earlier Danish piece serves as a contrast, illustrating an emphatically male-oriented reading.

The Biblical Narrative

The Jephthah narrative in the Hebrew Bible can be described as a repetition of the Deuteronomistic pattern of the history of Israel, depicting

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[3] In *Wrestling with Textual Violence* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), I analyze two historical versions of the narrative, "Upon This Evil Earth" by Amos Oz (in *Where the Jackals Howl* [London: Chatto & Windus, 1981], and *A Mighty Man of Valour* by E.L. Grant Watson (Bristol: Burleigh Press, 1939). Three other literary works on the narrative has appeared in twentieth century, although of less interest to my purpose. Lion Feuchtwanger's novel *Jephthah and His Daughter* (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1958) is an attempt to give a historically accurate account of the political power struggles in the region. Vincenz Zapleta's drama *Jephtas Tochter* (Schöningh: Paderborn, 1920) virtually neglects the daughter. In Gertrud van le Fort's short story "Die Tochter Jephthas" (in *Die Tochter Jephthas und andere Erzählungen* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964], Jephthah's daughter features briefly as a counter-motif. Set in the Spanish Inquisition, a rabbi interprets the loss of his daughter to the plague in terms of Jephthah's sacrifice.

[4] G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (trans. Jane E. Lewin; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). My use of narratology is presented in detail in Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence*, pp. 24–71.

disobedience, downfall, repentance, and deliverance, although it contains significant variations.[5] When the people cry out for help, the deity sends no deliverer as expected. Instead, the elders of Gilead see themselves obliged to persuade the "mighty warrior" Jephthah to lead their forces. Jephthah delivers the people from oppression, but his religious legitimacy is not self-evident. As the story continues, Jephthah sacrifices his daughter and massacres the neighbouring clan of Ephraim.

This biblical narrative raises a number of questions. It is not clear how the story coheres and there appears to be no straight line from cause to effect. Moreover, the lack of moral judgement by the narrator stands out as exceptional in the context of the Deuteronomistic history, where the narrator constantly evaluates rulers according to their degree of religious orthodoxy. One also wonders whether the ambiguous characterization of Jephthah and his daughter amounts to a tacit judgement by the narrator. In the analysis of the modern fiction, I will discuss how, if at all, these gaps in the biblical narrative are solved or at least addressed.

Gandrup's Male Gaze

The Danish author Richardt Gandrup (1885–1974) wrote poetry, prose and literary criticism.[6] A recurrent theme in his works is the individual's vain but mandatory struggle for purpose and meaning.[7] His literary worlds are thus inhabited by people who fail to seize given opportunities. *Jeftas Datter* was his seventh novel and the second, along with *Macpelas Hule*, on a biblical theme.[8] Gandrup situates the story of

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5) R.G. Boling, *Judges* (The Anchor Bible 6A; New York: Doubleday, 1975).

6) S.A. Cold, "Richardt Gandrup," *Dansk biografisk leksikon*, 5 (1979), pp. 114–115.

7) M. Hoyer, "Richardt Gandrup: En studie," in *Den Nye Litteratur*, pp. 49–52.

8) R. Gandrup, *Jeftas Datter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendals boghandel, 1922), and *Macpelas Hule* (Copenhagen: Gyldendals boghandel, 1920). Macpela is the name of the field close to Mamre that Abraham bought to bury Sarah (Gen. 23:17–19) and where he himself later was buried (Gen. 50:13). *Macpelas Hule* is also a modern tale, where a husband contemplates the adultery of his wife Sarah. Allusions to the Old Testament are common in Gandrup's work as a whole, according to H. Topsøe-Jensen, "Digteren

Jephthah in his own time and translates the biblical sacrifice into an arranged marriage.

A lonely painter comes to a private family hotel for his meals. He devotes his time to the study of the other guests and to meditation on the meaning of life, love and art. A girl catches his attention. The staff inform him that she is the daughter of a professor of Philology and that she is soon to be married to an old man. The artist finds her father heartless and begins calling the girl "Jephthah's daughter". He attempts to get to know the girl and ponders whether he could stop the marriage, but never takes action. The girl shows no interest in the artist and in the end, she commits suicide. The artist momentarily reflects on his own responsibility, but he is neither surprised nor outraged. Life simply continues and he turns his interest to one of the waitresses.

Not much happens in this story. The lack of events in Gandrup's novel sharply contrasts with the drama of the biblical story. A single possibility is raised; that the encounter between the painter and Ms Saaby ("Jephthah's daughter") will somehow transform their lives.[9] This possibility, however, is never realised. The painter continues his existence of voyeurism and stagnation. The novel's plot corresponds to the one in the Hebrew Bible only in two regards: a father decides the fate of his daughter and the daughter dies. The narrator also says that the stay in the family hotel represents the mourning in the mountains.[10] Contrary to the biblical story, the daughter in Gandrup's novel takes her own life and her death appears as a purely individual tragedy. She is mourned only by the waitress, a distant acquaintance.

The narrator of *Jeftas Datter* is the artist, who himself is part of the narrative. Nevertheless, he remains passive, restricted to the role of the observer.[11] Unlike his biblical counterpart, Gandrup's narrator clearly

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Richardt Gandrup," in *En Jydsk Kulturpersonlighet* (Aarhus: Søren Lunds Forlag, 1955), p. 165.

9) C. Brémond reduces a story to three main functions: the possibility, the act and the result. C. Brémond, *Logique du Récit* (Paris: Editions du Seuil), p. 311.

10) The painter once makes reference to the professor's travels as the war against Ephraimites, but the parallel is not elaborated. Gandrup, *Jeftas Datter*, p. 75.

11) Like the daughter's beloved Hamor in Handel's oratorio, Gandrup's painter/narrator shows no real interest in helping the daughter. On the contrary, he even hopes to be saved by her. Gandrup, *Jeftas Datter*, p. 120. For comparison with Handel's oratorio, see Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence*, pp. 144–146.

sympathizes with the daughter over against her father. At one point, he disapprovingly comments on the biblical story, "Jephthah's daughter was sacrificed. That is the most preposterous and awful story in the Bible."[12] Yet, the daughter in Gandrup's novel is also turned into an object of desire. In accordance with the conventions of the 1920s, the sexual aspect of this longing is merely suggested, for example through the innumerous repetitions of the phrase "mourning her virginity." Furthermore, the account of the painter's thoughts during their one dance reveals a tendency to describe his desire in spiritual terms: "I did not speak. To a goddess one turns only in prayer, and I did not dare to pray."[13] He thus places the daughter on a pedestal, alienated from, yet coveted by, ordinary men like him. What the daughter herself thinks or feels is inaccessible to this narrator.[14]

The fact that the narrative is exclusively rendered from the painter's perspective creates an even greater distance between the daughter and the reader than is the case in the externally focalized biblical narrative. The reader is only given a stranger's fantasies and speculations about the daughter. Furthermore, the events surrounding the arranged marriage, that is, the real drama, are never directly in view, and the daughter's suicidal death is merely told in retrospect.

The characters of *Jeftas Datter* are roughly sketched. Mr Saaby is a Professor of Philology who tolerates no criticism.[15] When he and his wife come to visit their daughter at the hotel, they speak only of the food and of the weather. By referring to the professor as Jephthah, the narrator suggests that he is cruel and heartless. This echoes the way Prince Hamlet jeers at Ophelia's father, old Polonius, for using her as a pawn in the struggle for power.[16] Apart from having arranged his daughter's marriage, Mr Saaby takes no further action. In comparison to his biblical counterpart, Mr Saaby is a simplistically drawn evil figure.

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12) Gandrup, *Jeftas Datter*, p. 33.

13) Gandrup, *Jeftas Datter*, p. 83.

14) This point is once made explicit: "I was standing and thinking about Jephthah's daughter. What did she think about? What did she experience?" Gandrup, *Jeftas Datter*, p. 130.

15) Gandrup, *Jeftas Datter*, p. 59.

16) Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence*, p. 1.

The daughter, Ms Saaby, is described as "big and of strong constitution, bright and healthy. She is both girl and woman at the same time."[17] The other men at the family hotel find her to be the most attractive woman around.[18] With regard to her inner qualities, the narrator laments her inaccessibility and his own inability to understand the disillusioned look on her face. Yet he seems certain in one regard: "the Bible tells us that Jephthah's daughter had never known a man. That is what her eyes seem to confirm."[19] Similar to her biblical counterpart, Ms Saaby is defined above all in terms of her status as a sexual being. The main character of this novel is the painter/narrator himself who completely dominates the narrative. Yet, this fretful inhabitant of a rather empty literary world stands in stark contrast to the much more vivid, although distant, woman-to-be-killed.

Ragen's Feminist Utopia

Naomi Ragen is the author of five international bestsellers, of which two feature biblical women as their main characters.[20] She is a columnist for *The Jerusalem Post* and a persistent advocate of gender equality and human rights. *Jephte's Daughter* (1989) was her debut novel, set in orthodox Jewish circles in contemporary Jerusalem. Similar to Gandrup's novel, the issue of arranged marriage is her focus. Whereas Gandrup used the biblical story mainly to add color to the characters, however, Ragen integrates the biblical narrative in her own work on many different levels.

Ragen's story is divided into two parts. The first covers young Batsheva's disastrous marriage to Isaac to the point of her attempted suicide. The second deals with her exile in London and her return to seek justice in the Rabbinic court. Contrary to Gandrup's minimal story, Ragen features an intricate pattern of plots and subplots. The emphasis on the time after the "sacrifice" is what distinguishes Ragen's story both from the biblical text and the Danish novel.

17) Gandrup, *Jeftas Datter*, p. 73.

18) Gandrup, *Jeftas Datter*, p. 153.

19) Gandrup, *Jeftas Datter*, p. 69.

20) These are *Jephte's Daughter* (1989) and *The Sacrifice of Tamar* (1994).

Batsheva's father, Abraham Ha-Levi, is the sole survivor of a distinguished 200-year-old dynasty of Hassidic scholars. On the train to the concentration camps, he vows to his mother that he will continue the family line. Once escaped from the Nazis, however, he shuns religion and devotes his life to business. Satiated by his success, he sees an opportunity for repentance by letting his daughter Batsheva marry the most promising scholar in Jerusalem, Isaac Hershen. When Batsheva accidentally sees Isaac abusing her dog, she wants to call off the marriage. Her father then tells her of his vow, and explicitly ties her fate to that of the biblical Jephthah's daughter. Batsheva is persuaded to proceed with the marriage, which immediately breaks down. Isaac symbolically mutilates her by wrecking her camera, burning her books and shaving her hair. When she protests against giving him sole control of their bank account, he beats her for the first time. She makes several pleas for help and one attempt to escape, but she is always brought back to her husband. When her son turns three, she cannot stand the thought of leaving him in the same repressive school where Isaac was brought up. She reads her favourite author, D.H. Lawrence, and realizes that suicide is her only way out.

Miraculously, Batsheva survives and finds refuge in London. She is reunited with her tutor of English Literature, Elisabeth. She gains economic independence and falls in love with a Christian man. Torn between the fear of losing either her son or her lover, she decides that she cannot deny her heritage. She returns to Jerusalem to have her divorce tested by the Hassidim. Her father testifies on her behalf, renouncing his own vow as foolish, like Jephthah's. The Rabbis grant her divorce as well as custody of the child. Isaac is denounced by her father and Batsheva's lover David proves to be a Jew. They can therefore be married and start a new life together.

Like the biblical Jephthah, Abraham Ha-Levi is separated from his family at an early point. Both characters spend years in a symbolic wilderness, where they await their "true calling." Yet whereas the elders of Gilead persuade a reluctant Jephthah to redeem his people, Abraham persuades Rabbi Magnes to agree to his plan to secure the survival of his dynasty (as well as accepting his own repentance). In both stories, the vow of the father requires the obedience of the daughter, that is,

she has to pay for his vow with her life. Moreover, both texts stress the willingness of the daughter to accept this "sacrifice."[21]

In contrast to the biblical daughter, however, Batsheva eventually protests against her fate. Rather than mourning with her female companions, she repeatedly runs away alone. The most important difference in relation to the biblical story lies in the fact that Batsheva does not die. Yet it is not clear how her suicide is stopped. Is the deity somehow involved, which is also the case in Handel's oratorio *Jephtha*?[22] In exile, Batsheva gets the chance to live a "free" life, but she is alienated and thus she suffers. The road towards the rehabilitation of her life paradoxically goes through the same religious traditions that ruined her previous existence. Her father even admits that he misunderstood his religious duty.[23]

The act of reading plays a crucial role in this story. It is the explicit identification with Jephthah's daughter in the book of Judges that persuades Batsheva to stay with her abusive husband.[24] The survival of her family's dynasty is thereby tied to the early religious history of the Jews. Abraham Ha-Levi makes his daughter responsible for keeping a tradition of three millennia intact. According to him, the stakes are of gargantuan proportions: to break with tradition is to say that the Nazis were right.[25] When she does take the leap into the unknown, it is the suddenly remembered words from Lawrence's *Women in Love* that give her the impetus: "It was as if Ursula was her, thinking and planning within her…Batsheva closed the book with a kind of joy. This then was what she had been seeking. A way out. The beginning of a new form of existence. Death."[26] In terms of impact on Batsheva's thinking,

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21) The first century Jewish work *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* stresses the willingness of the daughter even more strongly than the book of Judges.

22) In Handel's oratorio, the sacrifice is aborted by an angel, who explains that Jephthah has misunderstood the vow. The interpretation that the daughter never was sacrificed was earlier suggested by Ibn Ezra and David Kimchi. See D. Gunn, *Judges* (Blackwell Bible Series; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005).

23) Abraham Ha-Levi thereby expresses a point made in the Talmud by *Genesis Rabbah* (60:4), that Jephthah, along with three other biblical figures (Eliezer, Caleb and Saul), swore improper vows.

24) This is evident e.g. in Batsheva's note of farewell (Ragen, *Jephte's Daughter*, p. 259).

25) Ragen, *Jephte's Daughter*, pp. 172–173.

26) Ragen, *Jephte's Daughter*, pp. 245–246.

there is no difference between Judges and *Women in Love*. In fact, Batsheva's reading of the Western classical heritage together with her non-Jewish tutor serves to establish an alternative canon, a counter-tradition, to the rigid conventions of the orthodox community.

The narrator of *Jephte's Daughter* is invisible. There are no "connotators of mimesis" such as direct comment or temporal summary.[27] Furthermore, the focalization of the narrative is often internal, shifting from one character to another. The reader is thereby informed not only of Batsheva's views and feelings, but also of those of her opponents, such as her husband or mother-in-law. The ideological profile of the narrator therefore must be inferred indirectly, through the development of the story, but this is more easily done here than in the biblical text. The "resurrection" and triumphant return of Batsheva, the degradation of her abusive husband Isaac and the public repentance of her father Abraham serve as not so subtle indications of the narrator's loyalties.

In contrast to the biblical text, it is the daughter and not the father who features as the main character of Ragen's novel. This heroine undergoes a development in many stages. She begins her literary life as a beautiful, intelligent and pious young girl. She challenges her rabbinic teachers and her mother fears that she is "spoiled." When Isaac first sees her, she reminds him of the biblical characters of Queen Esther and Rachel the matriarch, for whom Jacob worked fourteen years.[28] During their marriage, Isaac methodically grinds down her self-esteem, but never succeeds in completely eradicating it. Her resignation and despair are temporary. In exile, unrestrained by religious tradition, Batsheva recreates herself "from her own head…fearless and enterprising."[29] Yet she finds the freedom of exile to be another kind of prison, where she experiences prejudice as a woman and as a Jew. The choice to finally confront the religious authorities demands an abundance of courage and intellectual sharpness.

In relation to the patriarchal society of which she is a part, Batsheva's development could perhaps be described as follows. She begins as

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27) Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 165.
28) Ragen, *Jephthe's Daughter*, p. 81.
29) Ragen, *Jephthe's Daughter*, p. 271.

the naïve exception to the male order, allowed freedoms no other girls could dream of. Suddenly, she is subjected to the absolute rule of a cruel husband, denied access to the intellectual and physical world she had previously known. Having broken out of this prison, she is not content to remain on the outside. Instead, she re-enters the matrix of oppression to obtain justice. Although she appears to have no intention of changing the system, her personal victory sets a new judicial precedent for others.

Abraham also undergoes a certain development, although not one as dramatic as Batsheva's. He begins as an apparently tender and simultaneously sovereign leader of his household. Becoming obsessed with the idea of repentance and of the preservation of the family dynasty, he cannot be stopped. Batsheva mourns over his "deliberate blindness, his willed ignorance."[30] Like his biblical counterpart Jephthah, he cannot see his responsibility in claiming his daughter's life. Unlike Jephthah, however, he comes to his senses and publicly admits his fault. Moreover, Abraham Ha-Levi is not crushed at the end. He even participates in the rehabilitation of his daughter.

Isaac's development is one of decline. He is chosen as a bridegroom for Batsheva due to his exceptional intellectual capacities and his religious piety, for the purpose of begetting the next great leader of the orthodox community. Coming from austere conditions, he is corrupted by the material wealth of the Ha-Levis. Most of all, he fears that he is a hypocrite, and Batsheva is the first person to expose the shallowness of his faith. In the end, he is completely degraded by his male superiors, whom he aspired to lead one day. For Isaac Hershen, the divorce from Batsheva constitutes a symbolical expulsion from what had been his home, the religious community.

Considering the context of this novel, the intertextual references to the Hebrew Bible, achieved by the naming of the characters, appear significant. Like the Abraham of Genesis, Abraham Ha-Levi leaves his family and moves to a foreign country, the United States. Like his biblical counterpart, he is ready to sacrifice his child. Needless to say, Abraham's binding of Isaac is the closest parallel in the Hebrew Bible

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[30] Ragen, *Jephthe's Daughter*, p. 216.

to Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter.[31] Like Isaac in Genesis, the novel's Isaac has no choice but to dedicate his life completely to religion. In both narratives, furthermore, Isaac represents the hope for a glorious future for the people. Yet whereas the biblical text conveys nothing of Isaac's thoughts or feelings, Ragen's novel portrays Isaac as wearing his piety as a coat, easily taken off at will.

The name Batsheva connotes power and influence. Married to the greatest King in the literary history of Israel, the biblical Batsheva successfully manipulates the members of the royal court, paving the way for her son Solomon. Batsheva Ha-Levi is born into a royal-like position and proves able to win the approval of the religious court, thereby rescuing her son from a symbolical death. Unlike her biblical counterpart, Batsheva is not spotted from the roof top by an all-powerful regent, and brought to him at his command. Rather, it is Batsheva who discovers David, first unfit to be her lover due to his Christian confession. Not until his Jewish descent is proved beyond doubt is he worthy to enter her house in Jerusalem.

Batsheva's breaking away from Isaac is partly mirrored by two other couples in the novel. Her friend Elisabeth also chooses to live with a scholar, her teacher Graham. He sees the marks of abuse on Batsheva's body, but chooses to remain silent for the sake of convenience. Once Elisabeth finds out, she immediately throws him out of her apartment. Batsheva's mother, of simple origins, meekly obeys the wishes of her successful and distinguished husband. But when Abraham tries to stop her from meeting her daughter upon her return from exile, she challenges him for the first time in their marriage. She also accuses him of causing their daughter's tragedy. Thus, all three women break away from non-egalitarian relationships. Moreover, the mother and the friend hold their spouses responsible for the suffering of Batsheva, due to their conscious or unconscious negligence. Thereby the point is made that the problem cannot be reduced to the evil of Isaac. Rather, his violent behaviour is implicitly condoned and made possible through the passivity of "ordinary men" in Batsheva's midst.

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[31] An early prolepsis towards the daughter's sacrifice and survival is Batsheva's statement that the Aqedah is her favourite passage in the Bible; Ragen, *Jephthe's Daughter*, p. 23.

Interpretative Strategies

In a previous broader study on the Jephthah narrative, I synthesized five different interpretative strategies: condemnation, identification, glorification, alienation and censure.[32] "Strategy" I defined as the manner in which the reader solves the interpretative difficulties that he or she confronts during the act of reading.[33] The element of violence constitutes such a difficulty, and in the following I will discuss to what extent these categories can be applied to Gandrup's and Ragen's literary works.

Jeftas Datter testifies to several different strategies. This narrative denounces the biblical text as a whole and the character of Jephthah in particular, which serves as an apparent example of the strategy *condemnation*. With regard to the daughter, however, it can be debated whether the text is an example of *alienation* or *glorification* or both. The use of a first-person narrator who observes her and does not let her speak increases the distance between the daughter and the reader. Calling her a "goddess" is an expression of the same strategy, *alienation*, since it turns the daughter into a stranger who is out of reach, as an essential Other.

But could not the use of epithets like "goddess" imply a very positive value judgement in the daughter's favor, thus giving expression to the strategy of *glorification*? The choice between these two lines of interpretation depends on a central consideration: is the daughter valued for her own sake or is she merely valued as an object of male desire? *Jeftas Datter* is an example of a completely non-religious interpretation of the Jephthah narrative. In my view, the biblical story is merely used to create an air of archaic mystery for the narrator's object of desire.

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32) Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence,* p. 209 . I there define the strategies as follows: 1. Condemnation: to explicitly pronounce judgement upon certain elements of the narrative and directly dissociate from these. 2. Identification: to explicitly recognize certain elements of the narrative and attempt to understand these elements from inside the diegetical world. 3. Glorification: to implicitly make a positive value judgement with regard to certain elements of the narrative. 4. Alienation: to implicitly distance oneself from certain elements of the narrative. 5. Censure: to deny or eradicate certain elements of the narrative.

33) Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence,* pp. 207–210.

Although the sexualizing of the daughter is less graphic in Gandrup's novel than, for example, in Amos Oz's short story "Upon This Evil Earth," the function of the daughter is the same: to cast the unattainable virgin as the most coveted of women.[34] Gandrup's use of this specific piece of biblical tradition is an example of a far-reaching secularization, which in this case serves to alienate the female figure in the text.

Ragen's novel is an example of the interpretative strategy *censure*, in that the daughter does not die. Rather, the daughter's attempted death serves as a turning-point after which her fortune changes. The climax of the story is here postponed to the new and, for the daughter, triumphant ending. Ragen's narrative expresses the hope of a utopian future where the Law proves to be good and is used to benefit women. This is a vision of an egalitarian future, where the good husband replaces the wicked, and where the woman is the teacher of the man in their common search for wisdom.

Although the story censures the daughter's physical death, it does not eliminate all aspects of it. The first part of the book is a painfully realistic account of living with an abusive husband. Batsheva is here on many occasions symbolically mutilated. Continuing beyond her attempted suicide, the narrative does not nullify the daughter's experience of standing face to face with death.

It could be debated whether the strategy of *identification* is evident in this narrative. Yet the internal focalization alters and the perspective of the daughter is thus not exclusive. Moreover, the narrator refrains from explicitly commenting on the story. Thus, although this narrative to a large extent presents the daughter's version of events, the narrator does not support her version in an authoritarian way. It apparently takes a feminist author to give voice to Jephthah's anonymous daughter in our time. Yet it is not simply a polemic counter-narrative, but one where many voices are heard.

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[34] Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence*, pp. 196–200.

Literature and Change

Jeftas Datter shows that condemnation of the man does not always serve to rehabilitate the woman. Paradoxically, the narrator's disapproval of a single male actor does not fundamentally question the general dominance of a male perspective. Despite its anti-religious stance, the novel perpetuates the patriarchal bias of the biblical text. From a feminist point of view, it could be concluded that secularization is no remedy for androcentrism.

Consideration of the context in which the novel was written makes this conclusion all the more compelling. The issue of women's rights was definitely on the political agenda at the time, since Danish women gained the right to vote only a few years before the book's release (1915). An arranged marriage between a young girl and a much older man apparently challenged the emerging notions of emancipation for women. Yet the idea that a woman would prefer death over the love of any man (such as the painter) was perhaps even more provocative. Although the narrator expresses outrage at the thought of Ms Saaby's fate, he is still far from recognizing her right to an autonomous existence. Ms Saaby remains enigmatic and voiceless. According to Gandrup himself two years after the release of *Jeftas Datter*, the purpose of his writing was to "stress the significance of man's inner life."[35] Judging from *Jeftas Datter*, Gandrup's programme did not yet include female human beings. In retrospect, therefore, *Jeftas Datter* could be regarded both as a symptom of change and of conservatism with regard to gender.

Neither Gandrup's work in general nor *Jeftas Datter* have made significant marks in Danish literary history. Some critics considered his two short and tragic novels on biblical themes a peak in his literary career, whereas others regarded them as artistic failures.[36] A non-

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[35] Gandrup, "Danske forfattare fortaeller om sig selv," *Den Nye Litteratur* 1 (1924), p. 239. In an article on literature and politics, Gandrup argues that the task of the artist is to give artistic expression to the Truth ("Litteratur og Politik," *Tidskrift for Danske Folkeoplysning* 4 [1930], pp. 59-60).

[36] Kjell Elfeldt regards the short tragic prose on the "difficulties of the heart" (my translation), of which *Jeftas Datter* is an example, as one of the finer moments in Gandrup's production; Elfeldt, "Richardt Gandrup," in *Litteraturen idag: Essays* (Copenhagen:

impressed critic of the daily newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* verges on the sarcastic when he wishes the author a "swift return to life."[37]

Although an antiquated literary work, however, Gandrup's *Jeftas Datter* testifies to a truism still relevant in the popular culture of Western society: adoration does not equal emancipation. To turn a woman into an object of desire is not the equivalent of treating her with respect. Gandrup's allusion to the biblical tradition serves as a kind of a veil, which further estranges and objectifies the young woman.

Ragen's literary world is not without complications from a feminist perspective. Her utopia is a decisively heterosexual one; the novel is "romantic" in the most common sense of the word. Although it tells the story of a woman who defeats her husband-oppressor, it by no means challenges the institution of marriage before God. Although the rule of individual patriarchs is portrayed as illegitimate, patriarchy as such is not deconstructed. The father proves good, the Rabbinic court just, the new husband lacks a dark side and the daughter does manage to rise above her lowly position as runaway wife. Batsheva's happiness is dependent on the men that surround her. What if her father had not testified in her favor or if she really had fallen in love with a Christian, man or woman? Strict narratologists find such questions meaningless. My point is to say that such complications are unthinkable in the literary world of this novel. Batsheva knows how to maneuver the system but she is hardly the architect of her own fate. *Jephte's Daughter* is the tale of a powerful woman who struggles and succeeds in changing her individual life, but who does not necessarily seek a new world order. Whether the happy ending simply leads to raising a new generation or not, the reader will never know. The long-term subversive potential of this novel, then, is in my view, rather limited.

Reviews of *Jephte's Daughter* were for the most part enthusiastic. Ragen received praise for her "vivid characters" and the novel is said to

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Nyt Nordisk Forlag, 1926), p. 173. Margareta Høyer, on the contrary, criticizes Gandrup's works on biblical themes, for not being "artistically crystallized", i.e., the material is not being elaborated enough; Høyer, "Richardt Gandrup: En studie," p. 51. I strongly support the latter view.

[37] I. Lange, "Jeftas Datter", *Berlingske Tidende*, 13 October 1922, p. 3.

explore the same world as Potok's in *The Chosen*.[38] She was, however, also criticized for compromising the elaboration of the novel's "religious and emotional themes."[39] None of the reviews made available to me commented directly on the element of violence in the narrative. Concentration on the literary form of a work is in line with the general scope of literary criticism. Yet I find it remarkable that the issue of male abuse, a key element in the story, is so consistently avoided in the literary discourse on this work.

In a broader political and cultural discourse in Israel, however, the publishing of Ragen's novel sparked intense controversy over whether it was right to expose the domestic affairs of the Hassidim in this manner.[40] As a result, shelters for battered Orthodox Jewish women were opened, guidelines for Orthodox Rabbis in dealing with abuse were written and Orthodox women's organizations succeeded in putting the issue on the public agenda. Thus, it appears that Ragen has not only presented an original interpretation of a biblical narrative; the reception of her book has also had a real impact on the life of abused Orthodox Jewish women.

In evaluating Ragen's novel from a feminist point of view, the conventional family ethics of its literary world stand against the tremendous value of revealing the reality of male battering in an Orthodox Jewish context. In other words, the need to challenge the lasting ideology of heterosexual marriage stands against the imminent necessity to stop violent men from beating their partners. I find both tasks crucial. The novel definitely gives an important contribution to the latter and deserves credit for that. It thereby illustrates the fundamental importance of reading as a way to break away from a repressive status quo.

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38) For example by *Library Journal* and Susan Isaac, author of *Shining Through*. I refer to an out of print or unavailable edition of *Library Journal* (1988), of which an excerpt has been sent to me by Toby Press on 26 October 2006.

39) The quotes refer to an out of print or unavailable edition of *Publishers Weekly* (1988), of which an excerpt has been sent to me by Toby Press on 26 October 2006. Notably, this is the same kind of critique that Gandrup also received in his day, by Høyer, "Richardt Gandrup," p. 51.

40) Ragen, *Jephthe's Daughter*, pp. vii–viii.

Published already in 1989, the work is obviously not influenced by the development of feminist theory during the 1990s, when concepts like "the heterosexual matrix" were used to explain the anatomy of the oppressive gender system.[41] It would clearly be much more difficult for a professed feminist author today to write about the family in such an unreservedly sentimental manner and without dealing with the issue of power at a more fundamental level.[42] Ragen's *Jephte's Daughter* envisions a society where a woman can be vindicated and where religious law is unbiased. The novel also recognizes the reality of the violent present and refrains from using gendered stereotypes such as the aggressive "wild man" or the passive female victim. It could therefore be described as both realistic and utopian, although I do not find it utopian enough.[43]

Jeftas Datter and *Jephte's Daughter* represent distinct ways of dealing with the issue of violence. Gandrup's secular but male-centered inner drama paradoxically appears as an allegorizing interpretation of the biblical narrative. Ragen's work, in contrast, is a detailed and realistic account of abuse in a religious context, mainly but not exclusively from the woman's point of view. *Jeftas Datter* voices emphatic condemnation of the biblical text and of the modern patriarch, where *Jephte's Daughter* censures the biblical text and presents religion as a means of oppression as well as liberation. Whereas the Danish novel pays little interest to the alienated young woman, the later Israeli novel continues beyond the act of violence, to offer its female protagonist an egalitarian but conventional future.

41) J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

42) A feminist author who earlier dealt with the issues of power and sexuality in a very exhaustive manner is the 2004 Nobel Prize laureate Elfriede Jelinek, e.g. in *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983).

43) It is not utopian enough since it does not deal with the issue of power. By analogy, E. Schüssler Fiorenza's critique of H. Räisänen can be inferred here; she argues that ethical criticism cannot be equated with feminist criticism for the same reason. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Defending the Center, Trivializing the Margins," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), pp. 29-48.

Of the two studied novels, *Jephte's Daughter* is the one to have had a substantial impact on society. Being a fictional work which deals with the power of reading secular literature, it contributes to a breakthrough in the Jewish Orthodox community's recognition of violence as a physical, moral and gendered problem. Literature obviously has the potential to transform even the religious domains of the real world.

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Latecomers: Four Novelists Rewrite the Bible

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Abstract

This essay examines the use of biblical stories as sourcetexts in four novels: David Maine's *Fallen*, Howard Jacobson's *The Very Model of a Man*, Muriel Spark's *The Only Problem*, and Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*. While each goes about its business of rewriting the biblical story in relation to a particular contemporary agenda or concern (American consumerism, the crisis of theism, the viability of happy endings in fiction, the revolt against patriarchy), they have in common a sense of lateness which they ironically project onto the biblical urtext. A sense of lateness is typical of modern and postmodern rewritings of ancient narratives and indeed is a characteristic of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century literary consciousness. By turning the biblical story into a latecomer, the four novelists simultaneously free themselves from deference to a story deemed sacred in Western culture *and* pay homage to its indispensability as a platform. Rewritings of this kind are of value both as a reality-test for pro-theological readings of the Bible and, by their very existence, as a barometer of interest in the Bible among the general reading (or cinema-going) public.

Keywords

novels, Bible in modern literature, retellings, reception

The rewriting of ancient texts has become an attractive topic for novelists in recent years.[1] This article examines four landmarks in the modern history of the literary rewriting of biblical stories, in order to expose critical areas in the interrogation of the biblical urtext or sourcetext and to notice what the four have in common.

[1] An example would be Margaret Atwood, *The Penopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2005).

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The four rewritings are David Maine's *Fallen*,[2] Howard Jacobson's *The Very Model of a Man*,[3] Muriel Spark's *The Only Problem*,[4] and Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*.[5] The biblical urtexts with which we shall be concerned are the stories of Cain and Abel (both the novel of Maine and that of Jacobson), Babel (also Jacobson), Job (Spark), and the Virgin Mary (Naylor).

The newest of the four is the novel by David Maine. It has been seen as the manifesting of the 'black hole of the lost Eden' of the American Puritan tradition of Father-fear.[6] The novel's great innovation is that it tells the story of the fall backwards in forty short chapters from the murder of Abel by Cain right through to the creation of Adam and Eve. The opening chapter is 40, entitled 'The Old Man'. It is Cain in his old age. Like Maine's earlier novel *The Flood*, this is a rewriting not in modern dress but in the clothes of a primitive Near Eastern world. The effect of reversing the narrative is to disorientate the reader, an effect which is compounded when Eve 'recapitulates' the challenge of God in Paradise—'what have you done?'—before it crops up in the novel's own (reverse) chronological sequence.

This version of the fall has a feminist Eve and a blundering, muddling-through Adam. We learn that Cain's terrible act is not his first fratricide. He in fact strangled a twin-brother in Eve's womb. The background philosophy is that of the modern American consumerist world, where you are 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' and where 'life is not a lesson'. The world we end up with (Paradise) is 'what we've got'.[7]

David Maine's novel, for all its urbane knowingness, is at least ostensibly affirmative of a theological reading of Genesis 4. In Jacobson's *The Very Model of a Man* we find something very different. At the level of structure and plot, this rereading takes the form of a sequel to the Genesis story. This is Cain in exile. Jacobson's Cain is conversant with the

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2) David Maine, *Fallen* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006).
3) Howard Jacobson, *The Very Model of a Man* (London: Penguin, 1993).
4) Muriel Spark, *The Only Problem* (London: The Bodley Head, 1984).
5) Gloria Naylor, *Bailey's Café* (New York: Vintage, 1993).
6) Adam Nicholson in a review in *The Daily Telegraph*, 25th February 2006.
7) Maine, *Fallen*, pp. 127, 236, 244.

attempts to turn him into a Gnostic hero, on the road to the Romantic rebel of Byron's poem. But, though he finds himself a figure of fascination for the citizens of Babel, he rebuffs all attempts to glorify his story or opportunities to offer himself as a guru. For him exile is a journey of self-discovery, leading to a rejection of the notion of God. He finally leaves behind both Gnosticism and orthodox theism, in a novel whose Jewish-atheist author is very capable of using the techniques of midrash for purely literary purposes. For our purposes the core of the novel is the section which rewrites the Genesis 4 story.[8] In this Apologia, Cain presents himself as the product of a dysfunctional family: 'Ours was not a family that gracefully expressed intimacies. We were harsh, in the image of a God who didn't dare trust His affections.'[9]

After the rejection of his offering, Cain becomes angry with God. In the absence of the socialising influence of family meals eaten together, he becomes increasingly negative: 'So I lacked example and training. And I lacked will. Any sort of manufacture that did not in some way diminish or deny God's plan for nature exhausted me.'[10] In the end, Cain's derisory attempt to bake a cake for God, set against his conclusion that sacrificial offerings are merely a way of dipping one's toe in the experience of death, provokes Abel into jumping on him and in the ensuing struggle Cain, half-accidentally, kills his brother.

Jacobson presents the story of the first family as a dead-end. Its outcome is a disillusioned Cain, a man determined to warn others off the theology of Genesis, though resistant to the idea of being the hero of a new Gnostic movement. The closing words of the novel find Cain on a lonely journey, where he finds happiness at last in an oblivion of wordlessness: 'Rendered to all intents and purposes mute, Cain found few pleasures in the hundred or so years that were left to him; but slept easily, without dreams, now that he was no longer naming names and had forgotten the word for God.'[11]

It seems relevant to note that Jacobson's dismissive approach to the theism of Genesis is mirrored by his ironic sense of modern Jewish

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8) Jacobson, *The Very Model of a Man*, pp. 296-320.
9) Jacobson, *The Very Model of a Man*, p. 299.
10) Jacobson, *The Very Model of a Man*, p. 313.
11) Jacobson, *The Very Model of a Man*, p 342.

identity as emblematic of the rootlessness and alienation of western liberal intellectuals. In a newspaper article he wonders whether Zionism is meant to eradicate this form of consciousness: 'Israel itself came into being, as an idea, to put paid to that "permanent witticism" which is the Cain's mark of a Jew's wandering, his having no country of his own to live in, and his having therefore set up home, ironically, in his own intelligence.'[12]

Muriel Spark's *The Last Problem* distances itself from the biblical story by making it the subject of the researches of its main protagonist, the millionaire Harvey Gotham. There is an ironic tension between the dilettante world of Harvey Gotham's musings on the epilogue to Job and on the painting by Georges de la Tour of 'Job Visited By His Wife'[13] and the more serious events in the real world in which his estranged wife, Effi, is involved. When Effi is finally shot dead by police engaged in combating a terrorist group of which she is part, the two worlds come together. Although Job does not actually lose his wife in the biblical urtext, here Harvey Gotham (as a Job-substitute) does and it is only by this means that he is brought into confrontation with reality. In an essay discussing Muriel Spark's novel, Hugh Pyper[14] quotes Harvey's final musings on the biblical story in the context of what he argues is the novelist's preoccupation with the neglect of the epilogue. The thoughts attributed to the character are:

> The work was finished and the Lord had blessed the latter end of Job with precisely double the number of sheep, camels, oxen and she-asses that he had started with. Job now had seven sons and three daughters as before…And Harvey wondered again if in real life Job would be satisfied with this plump reward, and doubted it. His tragedy was that of the happy ending.[15]

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[12] Jacobson, 'The Dilemma of the Jewish Writer', *The Guardian*, 11th June 2004.
[13] The title Muriel Spark ascribes to the painting obliquely emphasises Job's wife's part in his sufferings. An illustrated edition of the paintings of Georges de la Tour from around the time of the writing of the novel simply entitles it 'Giobbe e la Moglie'. See Jacques Thuillier, *L'opera completa di Georges de la Tour* (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1973), p. 98. But the painting also seems sometimes to be called 'Job Mocked By His Wife'.
[14] Hugh S. Pyper, 'Readers in Pain: Muriel Spark and the Book of Job' in *idem*, *The Bible as Scandalous Text* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).
[15] Spark, *The Only Problem*, pp. 185-186.

The argument here revolves around the question of whether or not the 'happy ending' mars the urtext, given that Spark's interlocutor, Carl Jung, chose to ignore it altogether. Does the epilogue soften or negate the seriousness of the main narrative, giving it what some commentators have deemed a folk-tale ending (though without noticing that traditional folk-tales themselves frequently eschew happy endings)? Or does it in a curious way accentuate Job's plight, by begging the question of whether there can be any restitution for such loss of family that the biblical Job endures? Pyper discusses the pain which is suffered by the survivor or by the reader. But perhaps this view of the text leaves out the sense in which Harvey Gotham only discovers his suffering at the very end of the novel. His is a gradual journey towards suffering rather than through it, except in the fact that he gains a new wife, Effie's sister, Ruth—though even this is a very mixed 'blessing', from what we know of Ruth's character.

Within the main external events of the narrative of *The Only Problem*, the actual sufferer is an off-stage character, the widow of the policeman shot by Effie and her terrorist gang in their misguided attempts to create a fairer world. Harvey Gotham only becomes Job when he finally emerges from his immersion in his aesthetic interest in the Job story and slowly acknowledges the truth about Effie, the truth being simultaneously her involvement in terrorism and the fact that she is indeed the person in the police morgue. The reader may suffer an aesthetic pain from reaching the end of the narrative, but this pain is eclipsed by the sense in which the main protagonist must traverse the whole course of the novel in order to start to be 'Job'.

To move from Muriel Spark's novel to Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*[16] is to enter a very different world. Instead of a playful approach to the rewriting or recontextualisation of an ancient sacred narrative, we find a wholesale re-sorting of the material in which the Bible has no privileged status in relation to other sources of narrative. The stories of Eve, Esther, Jezebel, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and indeed Christ are merely strands in a complex interweaving of narrative material,

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[16] I have found it useful to consult Margaret Earley Whitt, *Understanding Gloria Naylor* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999) for an exposition of the rather tangled and dense narrative.

which also includes the African-American story, the experiences of blacks as combatants in the Second World War, Hiroshima, the Negro baseball leagues, the jazz nightclub and, pervasively, the world of the New Orleans bordello. The genre is that of magic realism and the eponymous café is set in an unstable geographical location, a sort of temporary refuge from the turmoil that is going on all around it. Central to the ethos of the novel is the tradition of the blues in African-American music, signalled by the chapter-headings, 'Maestro, if you please', 'the Vamp', 'the Jam', 'Miss Maple's blues', and finally, 'the Wrap.'

The one matter that Gloria Naylor has in common with Muriel Spark is a concern with the unreality of happy endings. Her seven characters, six of them women, inhabit a dismal world of sexual exploitation and drug addiction, where happy outcomes are thin on the ground. The café itself has two doors, a front door and a back door, where leaving by the back door implies nemesis, which is the case with Sadie (the biblical Sarah.) The hope offered by exiting through the front door is a tentative hope, reliant on a future which leaves behind the good/evil and virgin/whore dichotomies of the biblical stories as used in the service of white patriarchy. The proffered miracle of the birth of a Saviour to a virgin, here in a heavily ironised form, is dependent on human co-operation to fuse together the divergent life-experiences of its protagonists in a way which gives meaning and worth to the victims of a cruel world. In this effort the Maestro (the café proprietor, supported by his wife, Nadine) and Eve, the hostess of the nearby boarding-house, are the true instruments of hope, rather than the obsessively righteous, Bible-bashing Sister Carrie.

Whereas the characters of *The Only Problem* are largely at the apex of comfortable European life in the early 1980s, those of *Bailey's Café* inhabit the dreadful underbelly of American society in the South, circa 1948. Here it is the Ethiopian Jewess, giving birth as a 'virgin', thanks to female circumcision, who offers the glimmer of a miracle, a new beginning, in the shape of George, who will later sacrifice his own life out of love in the novel *Mama Day*, for which *Bailey's Café* is in part a 'prequel.' The other re-written biblical characters, Sadie /Sarah, Esther, Mary (Take One)/ Mary Magdalene, Jesse Bell/Jezebel, together with the non-biblical but quasi-Shakespearean Miss Maple/Stanley charac-

ter, are the victims of sexual and racial abuse and it is only a fleeting contact with the café which validates them as persons, together with the friendship of Eve.

Karen Scheider sees the novel in the context of the African-American struggle to appropriate the 'oppressor's language without succumbing to its structural and tropic oppression'. Whereas in some of her other novels, Naylor had been accused of merely turning the 'phallocentric, objective' model of reality on its head, here she engages with some of the familiar stories of western culture, destabilizing their significance by treating them as intertexts for the real life stories of oppressed blacks. The destabilizing, of course, extends to the rejection of a linear narrative sequence in the novel and to the magic-realistic ignoring of conventional spatial boundaries. She remarks, 'Although Naylor "deforms" Shakespearean texts throughout her oeuvre, more conspicuous in *Bailey's Café* is her deformation of biblical narratives, especially those traditionally used to illustrate the "nature" of woman and therefore to justify misogyny.'[17]

In terms of our review of rewritten biblical stories, the significance of Naylor's approach could, on one view, seem to be less in the detail of the rewriting (Eve as a brothel-keeper, Sarah as a doomed victim of child abuse) and more in the rewriting as a gesture of cultural defiance. The grit of the novel lies in the degradation of human lives which is described, a degradation linked for the author with the normative reading of the dominant texts of western culture. Black women experience themselves defined doubly as 'Other' (in the negative sense of this term), in opposition to the dominant culture of white patriarchy. To engage with that culture in an assertive way is to engage in disruption of its key motifs. We may, nevertheless, detect in the downbeat areas of hope in *Bailey's Café* (Eve as sustainer, the limited successes of Jesse Bell, Stanley's resilience, the 'virgin birth' which needs collective action to make it real) traces of an alternative happy ending to that offered by the western narrative. In a world where, as Jesse observes, 'it's all about

[17] See Karen Schneider, 'Gloria Naylor's Poetics of Emancipation', in Margot Ann Kelley, *Gloria Naylor's Early Novels* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1999), pp. 1-20 (9).

who's in charge of keeping the records'[18], the novel itself is an alternative form of record-keeping.

Amy Benson Brown, in her close study of the rewriting of biblical stories[19], in the work of six key American women novelists, argues that Naylor's programme is much more than a protest. For her *Bailey's Café* amounts to a systematic reformulation of the biblical stories which she handles, offering Eve as the restored Earth Mother of a conjectured pre-Genesis matriarchal form of religiosity, Esther as the victim of racial prejudice, Jezebel as a bi-sexual wife, faithful to her husband and female partner, and the two Marys as the site of the crisis of the virgin/whore dichotomised identity foisted upon them by patriarchy. The hope lies in the Christ-like healing which Eve extends to the female victims of abuse in her alternative version of Eden. For Brown, Naylor has gone beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion into the realm of the hermeneutics of desire, a positive attempt to re-signify the sacred texts of western civilisation, using Bakhtinian techniques to hi-jack the language of the oppressor.

Conclusion

The four latecomers we have considered embody significantly different hermeneutical approaches. David Maine's *Fallen* adopts an ingenious strategy by reversing the chronology of Genesis. The effect is to silhouette patriarchy as the dominant theme of western civilisation, with feminism here playing an ironic role on the sidelines. Howard Jacobson's *The Very Model of a Man* seeks ambitiously to deconstruct theism in what could be described as the ultimate expression of the hermeneutics of suspicion. We have seen how Jacobson links Cain ironically with the common modern sense of alienation. Muriel Spark's *The Only Problem* distances itself from the direct retelling of the biblical story of Job through the device of making Harvey Gotham a dilettante student of the subject. The immediate subject-matter of his studies, the painting by Georges de la Tour, is itself at an aesthetic distance from its subject-

[18] Naylor, *Bailey's Café*, p. 118.

[19] Amy Benson Brown, *Rewriting the Word, American Women Writers and the Bible* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 127-144.

matter, reinforcing the contrast between the abstract world of detached hermeneutics and the violent world of terrorism represented by Effie and her associates. However, when the novel moves on to expose the terrorists as belonging to a dreamy world of misdirected idealism, we are left with the human feelings of Harvey for Effie, and the 'Only Problem' of the novel's title becomes the happy-ending epilogue of the biblical Book of Job. For this 'wife of Job', unlike her biblical counterpart, does not survive the events of the tale and Job only becomes Job at the very end. Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* exemplifies the radical feminist reworking of biblical stories and the application of the hermeneutics of desire beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion. If, as Amy Benson Brown suggests, the relationship of this novel to *Mama Day* implies that Naylor is setting up a rival mythology to that of the Bible, as read at least by western patriarchy,[20] then we have something which goes beyond rewriting.

In their different ways, these four novels seek to efface the biblical urtext, but inevitably point back to it in the same process. Amy Benson Brown again, reviewing not just Naylor's oeuvre but that of Toni Morrison, Emily Dickinson and others, sees feminist literary rewritings of biblical stories as the meeting-point of what Bakhtin calls 'authoritative discourse' and 'internally persuasive discourse'. She claims, '… these writers renegotiate the covenant—the relationship between the woman writer and authority—and that, in Adrienne Rich's phrasing, "what's sacred tries itself/ one more time'. [21]

Seen in the light of this perspective, our four novels are latecomers not just in relationship to the long reception-history of their respective biblical urtexts but in semiotic terms. The sense of lateness extends, as Julie Sanders has pointed out, to the feeling that modern writing comes 'after' the great literature of the past, as well as needing to imitate it, in that other meaning of 'after'.[22]

The four novels turn the tables on their own lateness by inscribing the biblical story as a latecomer at the party. In *Fallen* biblical teleology

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[20] Brown, *Rewriting the Word*, p. 143.

[21] Brown, *Rewriting the Word*, p. 170.

[22] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 156-160.

is ironized by the adoption of a reverse chronology. In *The Very Model of a Man*, Cain outlives his biblical usefulness and indeed theism. In *The Only Problem* we have to wait for the end for the main protagonist to become Job. In *Bailey's Café* the biblical story has to compete with rival stories which are already well-established.

The tactic of making the biblical story 'late' serves to free the writer from deference to a story deemed sacred by western culture. However, the fact that a biblical story is being rewritten is a form of homage to the richness of the urtext, which inevitably remains available as itself (whatever way it is read). The dialogue between urtext and rewritten story, or between 'hypotext' and 'hypertext', in the case of biblical stories has a special value as a reality-test for pro-theological readings of the Bible. Equally, the continued use of the Bible as a collection of source texts for novels (and eventually for films[23]) is an indicator that writers 'know where they are coming from' or, at the very least, where their audiences are coming from. When this readership consists increasingly of people whose first encounter with a particular biblical story is via the novel, latecoming as a theme will have reached its apotheosis.

[23] One thinks immediately of Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* as a version of Kazantzakis's retelling of the story of Christ in his novel *The Last Temptation.* But there are others.

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Eroticism, Death and Redemption: The Operatic Construct of the Biblical *Femme Fatale*

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Abstract

This article explores the themes of eroticism, death and redemption as seen in the world of opera, through a particular lens. This lens is the construct of the *femme fatale* as drawn from the particular world of the Bible. This construct is of course largely the product of the composer's and/or librettist's own social, religious, political and philosophical world view; where the origin of the construct is a biblical narrative, a high degree of elaboration is always required, since the psychology and motivation of women in the Bible is particularly under-developed. The article first surveys the terrain—surprisingly limited to six chief operas, which together treat only four biblical subjects. The first of the operas, Verdi's early work *Nabucco*, is analysed in terms of the depiction of its—totally invented—*femme fatale*, a fictitious daughter Abigaille given to King Nebuccadnezzar. The development of the concept of *femme fatale* is then traced until it reaches its apotheiosis with the extraordinary character of Kundry, in Wagner's *Parsifal*. She is then used as the vehicle to explore the themes in depth.

Keywords

Bible, *femme fatale*, Kundry, opera, Parsifal, Wagner

By definition, every operatic character is a construct—a product of the composer's own thought processes and of the cultural milieu in which she or he worked. Deep-seated attitudes toward gender, prevailing political or social concerns, and broader philosophical trends can all feed into the process through which a character is brought to birth in the mind of the composer and finally given a voice on stage. If this process is applied to a biblical character, the composer's own religious philosophy is likely to play a part also. The composer, in pursuit of musical, dramatic, and perhaps even religious or philosophical goals

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may create an on-stage world that departs significantly from the available biblical data.

Such departures are especially evident when the character depicted is female. Very few women are portrayed in the Bible with enough psychological development and complexity to sustain the heightened emotional form of the operatic stage. Consequently, their operatic representation necessarily involves a creative process through which the bare biblical account is embroidered both psychologically and narratively. Where, as usual, the biblical text does not elaborate upon a character's inner motives for her actions, then these need to be invented and explored—as much through the music as in the libretto. The Bible is silent about the psychological processes that led Delilah to betray Samson, or Salome to comply so readily with her mother's request for the head of the Baptist; but the need to generate and sustain dramatic and musical tension on the operatic stage requires that these be explored. What emerges is far removed from the biblical text. The construction of the biblical operatic woman may nonetheless be of legitimate interest in the field of biblical studies, raising issues of textual reception and bringing into sharp focus the interactions between the biblical material and the cultural settings in which the operas were composed.

The particular milieu in which the operatic biblical woman enjoyed her heyday demonstrates these interactions very clearly. As we shall see, her place in the operatic repertoire was not securely established until the later nineteenth century. Her full emergence, therefore, coincides with *fin de siecle* anxieties about gender identity, and fascination with a constructed orientalism. The result is the operatic version of the *femme fatale*, the misogynist male fantasy of the sexually predatory woman who threatens male constructs of sexual identity and engendered systems of power. She is the dangerous other, the 'castrating woman' who may prove, literally, fatal to those men who encounter her (Locke 1991; Kramer 1990). Opera is certainly not the only genre in which this woman appears in a biblical guise at this time: we meet her also in the visual arts and in the theatre (Exum 1996; Haxell 2000). Nor are all operatic *femmes fatales* biblical characters: Bizet's Carmen and Berg's Lulu would, similarly, fall into this category (Treitler 1977). However, when the biblical and non-biblical operatic *femmes fatales* are brought

alongside each other they do highlight a broader tendency within the genre. Cathérine Clement (1988) has argued that a feminist analysis of opera plots reveals a an almost systemic misogyny; the operatic female is presented as a disruption of a universe primarily conceived in terms of male constructs, a disruption that necessitates her eradication. Within this perspective, the deaths of Lulu, Carmen, Abigaille, Delilah and Salome are not only inevitable, but are required by the conventions of the genre.

Like all her sisters, then, the biblical operatic *femme fatale* is a creature of her own time—often speaking more of the concerns of the age in which she was brought to the stage, and of the men who created her, than reflecting the text of the Bible itself. The more tenuous the link between the character created and the biblical account, the more sharply the processes of her construction come into view—as do the concerns and interests that lay behind those processes. For this reason I wish to focus my attention upon the operatic character who exemplifies the zenith of this process of abstraction from the biblical data. She is Kundry, the only fully differentiated female character in Richard Wagner's final work for stage—*Parsifal,* first produced in 1882 at Bayreuth. In constructing Kundry, Wagner, who was both librettist and composer, united in one person a complex of extrapolated biblical events and characters mapped onto a medieval setting inspired by the legend of the Holy Grail. The resulting character served as a mechanism for him to project onto a mythic—and hence, in his terms, universal—stage, his own reconstruction of the Christian myth and of the image of the redeeming male at its heart. The final point is significant—the redeeming male needs his Other, the unredeemed female who represents in her own person the very disruption in the social and religious order that he supposes to resolve. Clement does not include Kundry in her analysis—a surprising omission, as Wagner's creation offers an extreme case of her thesis. As we shall note, Kundry not only has to suffer death at the opera's close, but is stripped of both personality and voice by the beginning of the final Act. For the entire final scene she has to stand as the mute, perversely ecstatic witness of a ritual restoration of homosocial hegemony. And with its completion, she slips, silently, into death.

Kundry is the extreme case of the operatic construction of the biblical *femme fatale*, but she does have her sisters. Before we explore her in detail, therefore, it is useful to begin by surveying the broad terrain and considering other presentations of the dangerous woman in biblical guise. The number of extant biblically-inspired operas is few, and even fewer have found a permanent place in the regular repertoire. We thus can access a clearly defined corpus in which we can identify a number of significant traits also to be found in Kundry.

The Emergence of the Operatic Biblical *Femme Fatale*

The roots of opera as the genre we would now recognize are generally traced back to early seventeenth century Italy (Grout 1965; Donnington 1981). Its creation, therefore, coincided with the full flowering of the late Renaissance and the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. The Renaissance turn to the classical is reflected in a preference for subjects drawn from Greco-Roman history and mythology which continued into the later seventeenth and the eighteenth century. The influence of the Counter-Reformation can be recognized in a widespread reluctance to portray biblical characters on the theatrical stage. The Council of Trent (1545-1563), which codified Catholic doctrine and practice in response to the Reformation, had not of itself condemned religious theatre; nonetheless, it set in train a mindset within the Catholic Church that regarded the theatre with considerable suspicion. (Zampelli 2002). The alliance between an ecclesial concern to protect formal Catholic dogma and the imposition of state censorship across southern Europe ensured that the Bible did not easily become a significant source for operatic libretti. There were exceptions in Catholic Italy (Murata 1981). In England, however, the sense that biblical scenes should not be brought to the stage prevailed until well into the twentieth century. Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, upon which Richard Strauss' opera of the same name is closely based, was forbidden to the London stage by Lord Chamberlain until 1931 (Gilman 1988:40).

Consequently, the primary musical secular vehicle for the presentation of biblical themes was the concert platform rather than the theatre stage—that is, with oratorio rather than with opera. Even this apparently simple statement is itself problematic, as disagreement exists

among musicologists as to whether at least some of these works may have been partially staged (Gilman 1997). Nonetheless a line was generally drawn at bringing the biblical texts to life in a musico-dramatic, as opposed to purely musical, form. The definitive arrival, therefore, of the biblical heroine or her antithesis onto the operatic stage did not occur until the mid nineteenth century. While puritan sensibilities seem to have lingered in England, the political and social convulsions that shook the European mainland from the French Revolution onwards contributed to the gradual emergence in the mid to late nineteenth century of a small corpus of biblical operas. In these we see the figure of the biblical operatic *femme fatale* progressively explored.

The six chief operas of this corpus treat only four biblical subjects. In one of these the figure of the biblical woman is utterly invented; the other three base their central female character on biblical data, but treat that character in highly inventive ways. The first opera is Giuseppe Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842; libretto by Temistocle Solera). The work follows very loosely chapter four of the book of Daniel, weaving an elaborate domestic plot around the story of the madness of Nebuchadnezzar. By far the most complex and vibrant character in the piece is Abigaille, one of the two daughters invented for Nebuchadnezzar. With her the operatic biblical bad girl—not least as utter construct—bursts into the limelight. Abigaille does not correspond to any figure in the biblical account. She is an invention of the imagination of the original authors[1] and serves the dramatic purpose of giving first to the play and then to the opera a true villain. Technically, Abigaille is not yet a fully-fledged biblical *femme fatale*; she does not bring the male protagonists to their ruin and it is her defects of character rather than theirs that are exposed. Nonetheless, the opera demonstrates several characteristics that will become key in future operatic versions of the biblical *femme fatale*. The first is that of the dangerous oriental outsider; Abigaille's first entrance as warrior princess at the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple signals her role throughout the opera as the agent of the disruption of both the Hebrew/Jewish religious and Babylonian socio-

[1] The piece was based on the 1836 play *Nabucodonosor* by Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornue which was adapted as a ballet by Antonio Cortesi for the 1838 La Scala season.

political hegemonies. Secondly, that disruption is only brought to a definitive end by her own death at the end of the opera. Thirdly, the plot line is elaborated on the romantic level: Abigaille is embroiled in a love-triangle with her sister Fenena (the corresponding operatic 'good girl') and the Israelite prince Ismaele. None of this has any foundation in the biblical text, and the character development is very thin: Abigaille's conversion to the God of the Hebrews and her suicide, with which the opera closes, is as unconvincing as the narrative of her attempt to usurp Nebuchadnessar's throne.

While *Nabucco's* creators withheld the title role from its strongest character, the later operas forefront the lead female role. The second operatic subject is the story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon (1 Kings 10). Two operas have presented this—Charles Gounod's *La Reine de Saba* (1862; libretto by Jules Barbier & Michel Carre), and Karl Goldmark's *Die Königin von Saba* (1875; libretto by Salomon Hermann Mosenthal). Neither has enjoyed sustained popularity. Both pieces elaborate freely upon the biblical text but they develop the character and story of the Queen of Sheba in markedly different ways. The resulting figure is in many ways as much a construct as Verdi's Abigaille, but is now a fully-formed *femme fatale.* In each instance the Queen represents the exotically pagan and sexually predatory outsider. In Gounod's version her male victim is the master craftsman Adoniram, while for Goldmark she is the seducer and destroyer of Assad, one of Solomon's military commanders. Goldmark's anti-heroine is the more fully-formed of the two. As with Abigaille, she is inserted into a love triangle—this time with Salamith, daughter of the high priest and betrothed of Assad. Her disruption of the religious world and her moral destruction of Assad coincide in the second act of the opera. Here is presented the unlikely spectacle of the wedding of Assad and Salamith *inside* the Holy Place of the Jerusalem Temple. At the culmination of the ceremony, as the High Priest unveils the Holy of Holies for the assembly, Assad rejects his bride and proclaims Sheba to be his goddess. Order is only restored at the opera's close with the death of Assad and the back-stage mirage of the engulfing of the Queen and her retinue in a desert sandstorm.

The third biblical story was brought to the operatic stage in Camille Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalilah* (1877; libretto by Ferdinand Lemaire)

With this opera all the elements of the late nineteenth century biblical *femme fatale* are in place. First, the opera breathes a heady orientalism, particularly through its exploration of a musical language that at times transposes a Western stereotypical construction of contemporary Eastern genres onto the biblical milieu. This is most evident in the famous Act Three bacchanale—see Exum 1996. Saint-Saëns' Delilah stands in a long tradition of portraying this woman as the epitome of dangerous female sexuality (Exum 1996). The frequent identification of her with a prostitute is avoided—she is a seductress who proves literally fatal to Samson, and her motivation is primarily one of revenge. The final scene finds her triumphant, as the music of her Act Two seduction aria is transformed into a motif of the mockery of the now chained Samson. Her introduction into the Temple of Dagon allows for that other common element in the *femme fatale* narratives: as Samson dies so does she, and the disruption she has introduced into the established male order is resolved by her own destruction.

All the operas thus far considered drew on material from the Hebrew scriptures. With the final theme we move to a story from the Christian scriptures, the account of the beheading of John the Baptist (Mark 6:17-29; Matt. 14:3-12). The final two operas are *Herodiade* by Jules Massenet (1881; libretto by Paul Milliet, Henri Gremont and Angelo Zanardini) and *Salome* by Richard Strauss (1905; libretto based on Hedwig Lachmann's translation of the play by Oscar Wilde); the *femme fatale* in each is the title character. Caroline Vander Stichele (2001), in a comparative reading of the two operas, has analysed how Massenet's libretto, based on a play by Flaubert, elaborates on the biblical material and invents a complex psychological motivation for the events of the story. Herodias' scheming proves fatal not only for the Baptist, but for her daughter too. This particular dangerous lady survives the opera—but at the cost of her own happiness and her daughter's life. In Strauss' piece, too, a complex romantic plot has been elaborated, and with his Salome the biblical operatic *femme fatale* reaches her apogee. The unbridled oriental sexuality of the dance of the seven veils, the kiss delivered to the severed head of the Baptist and the destruction of Salome map out the shocking power of the dangerous woman, her potential to disrupt the established order and her necessary fate.

The high point of the biblical operatic *femme fatale* coincides, then, with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, she finds a distant echo in Carlisle Floyd's 1955 *Susannah*. This very accessible opera loosely transposes the broad outlines of the story of Susannah and the elders onto the American deep south of the early twentieth century. As I have argued elsewhere,[2] Floyd, who was for this opera his own librettist, traces the development in Susannah's character from communal outcast to victim of sexual predation to a sort of *femme fatale.* Susannah is, however, very different from the characters discussed above, and, indeed, from Kundry. There is no trace of orientalism, and she is far removed from the gender concerns of the *fin de siecle.* Instead, she catalyses a very different set of anxieties, touching upon issues contemporaneous to her creation: religious and sexual bigotry in the poor communities of rural America, and the anxieties and suspicions of the McCarthy era.

One other female biblical character has been placed more than once upon the operatic stage. Ruth features in a number of operas that with one exception are not performed today, nor even available in commercial recordings.[3] These romantic operas have been extensively studied by Helen Leneman (Leneman 2006). While they share the processes of elaboration outlined above, they do not (arguably, could not) recast Ruth as the classical figure of the *femme fatale*.

There are two other significant twentieth century biblical operas: Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron,* left unfinished at his death in 1951, and Benjamin Britton's 1966 *The Burning Fiery Furnace*. The primary focus in the former is the relationship between the two brothers used as a vehicle for Schoenberg's philosophical musings. The second—in which Britten borrows extensively from the traditions of Japanese *Noh* theatre—has an all-male cast. Neither engages in depth with the portrayal of female characters.

The biblical *femme fatale*, therefore, had a brief operatic career. With the exception of *Salome*, none of the works discussed above has enjoyed

[2] In a paper delivered to the July 2006 SBL International Meeting in Edinbugh, Scotland, and subsequently published in the SBL Forum—http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=554.

[3] The exception is Lennox Berkeley's 1956 work *Ruth: An Opera in Three Scenes*.

sustained critical acclaim, and some have almost entirely slipped from the repertoire. Paradoxically the most enduring exemplar of the type is the character who at first sight stands most remote from the biblical text and who yet represents the most complex development of the common elements that have been found within her sisters. She is Wagner's Kundry, and to her we now turn.

Kundry: The Constructed Operatic *Femme Fatale*

The points of contact between Kundry and any biblical data are very slight. Yet they are essential to understanding Wagner's construction of her character. Therefore, I wish to focus upon three moments in which different aspects of this character are portrayed as they relate to the world of the Bible. First, however, I shall briefly identify the religio-philosophical currents of Wagner's thought that feed into the work. I shall then sketch the broad outlines of both the operatic plot and the musical universe through which Wagner attempted to communicate fundamental divine truths as he perceived them.

Wagner and Religion

It would be a mistake to read *Parsifal* in the same light as the welter of Grail-related output of recent years. Unlike much of today's popular Grail writing such as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln 1982), Wagner's aim in *Parsifal* was not to construct an alternative interpretation of biblical—or even historical—data, but rather to break through apparently scientific dogmatic discourses into a world of pure myth and archetype. Historicity is not Wagner's intention (Borchmeyer 2003:139). Rather, his concern, as expressed in his essay 'Religion and Art', was to allow the 'deep and divine truths' found in religious myths to surface directly through an ideal presentation that would cut through the complex edifice of dogmatic beliefs hiding those truths from humanity. This, he believed, would 'save the spirit of religion' from the 'ever growing heap of incredulities commended to belief' (Wagner 1880, 1994:213). This act of liberation was the humanitarian mission of art in general—and of music in particular—

but only insofar as it could be severed from the 'decaying truth of Church' (Wagner 1880, 1994:224). This was the enterprise that Wagner proposed in *Parsifal.*

Not surprisingly, therefore, *Parsifal* is a difficult piece to categorise. Its conceptual genealogy reflects the complexity of Wagner's own thought. At first sight it does indeed appear a Christian piece—complete with constant references to 'der Erlöser' (Saviour), the central role of a sacred spear, a ritual of baptism and—above all—a staged enactment of the eucharist. However, the Christian motifs are never entirely stable. Christ is never named in the opera, and the formulae used in baptism and eucharist are far from the liturgically canonical. Consecration of bread and wine is effected not by the words of institution but through the benediction of the Grail. Above all, redemption, although a central theme, is not understood as a participation in the suffering and resurrection of Christ. Far from it: throughout the piece the image of the suffering male is emblematic of the loss not only of salvation but also, critically, of masculine identity. Instead, redemption is found through a Schopenhaurian act of renunciation linked, at least for the primary female character, to the Buddhist concept of the transmigration of souls.

The piece constantly shifts between its different philosophical strands and deliberately avoids a fully established Christian focus. At least one commentator has suggested that the work's core elements should be interpreted in terms not of Christianity, but of those same Germanic legends that inspired Wagner's earlier Ring cycle (Ashton 1986). That, I believe, is taking the argument too far; the Christian references are unavoidable. However, they are never completely realized. *Parsifal* cannot be read through too close a Christian lens, as Lucy Beckett (1981) does. Nor should we be too taken with Wagner's typically gnomic designation of the piece as *'ein Bühnenweihfestspiel'*. Yes, that could possibly be interpreted as meaning a 'sacred stage festival piece'. But Wagner's own writings make it clear that the more literal meaning is the more likely reading—a festival piece to consecrate a stage. This refers to the physical space of his own *Festspielhaus* at Bayreuth and the eminently practical aim that by restricting performances to that particular stage alone he could provide a secure financial future for his wife and son (Wagner 1882:303-4).

Story and Music

The plot is remarkably simple; Wagner reduces the highly complex thirteenth century poem *Parzifal* by Wolfram von Eschenbach into three intensely dramatic moments, using a key structural technique that permits the action to be thus condensed to its barest essentials. This technique is the use of long static sections where characters relate past events through extended narratives. This device, which is also a significant feature of the Ring cycle, creates in the outer acts a motionless atmosphere that becomes almost dream-like in the first scene of Act Three. These broad sections with no significant on-stage action both complement the slow-moving ritual passages that make up the second halves of Acts One and Three, and also throw into heightened relief the crucial events of Act Two.

Acts One and Three are set in the domain of Monsalvat—the seat of a Templar-like and entirely masculine community of ascetic knights, ruled over by Amfortas, a version of the Fisher King of medieval legend. The community has been entrusted with two sacred relics, a bleeding spear and the Holy Grail. Before the action begins Amfortas lost the spear to the evil Klingsor who, through female agency, stole it and with it inflicted upon Amfortas a wound that will not close. Into this unstable world erupt two characters: Parsifal, a beautiful foolish youth, and Kundry, a wild woman who serves as messenger to the community. He brings death into the Grail world by hunting the wildlife; she apparently seeks to bring life and healing to Amfortas. Yet she is as alien as is Parsifal. Her headlong rush onto the stage bearing balsam for his wound offers both a faint biblical echo, which will be heard much more resoundingly later, and also a hint of a theme we have already encountered in the other operas and which will be foregrounded in Act Two. The balsam with that faint echo of the anointing of Christ has been brought from Arabia, and so introduces an oriental element into the world of the Grail. Indeed, Kundry embodies the orient. Across the course of the opera she passes back and forth both physically and figuratively between the Grail realm of Westernised hyper-masculinity and an alternative construct of an opposing, orientalised world in which there prevails a reluctant conspiracy between the female sexual predator and the emasculated male. It is only in Act Two that we discover the full impact of her role in the dis-

ruptive penetration of the orient into the company of the Grail knights.

In Act Two Parsifal enters Klingsor's enchanted world, where he encounters Kundry once more. Here the orientalism is complete. The wild horsewoman of Act One now appears transformed, in 'Arabic' dress, reclining on a flower-bedecked couch. Kundry is revealed as the very woman who had seduced Amfortas to his moral destruction. Unlike Amfortas, however, Parsifal repudiates her advances, recovers the spear, and destroys Klingsor's world. Act Three then brings a final resolution: Parsifal is anointed as the new Grail King, heals Amfortas with the very spear that first wounded him, and baptises Kundry—who, as is the lot of women in opera (Clement 1989), expires as the piece ends. Masculine hegemony is restored, and the threat of the abject in the form of the female is overcome.

Wagner's *Parsifal* is, therefore, a deeply disturbing—even distressing—work in which *fin de siecle* gender anxieties are played out across a musical terrain at times breathtakingly beautiful and at other times shockingly dissonant. Just as the action moves between the realm of the Grail and Klingsor's magical kingdom, so too Wagner creates two contrasting musical universes. One is strongly diatonic, rhythmically solid, and melodically structured almost to the point of being repetitious and predictable. The other is chromatically sinuous, and violently unpredictable—challenging to the ear and denying the comfort of musical tension resolved. The diatonic musical universe is associated with the aspirations of the Grail Knights for a regimented homo-social world centred upon the ordered repetition of a pseudo-eucharistic ritual. The chromatic musical universe expresses the magical (as against the ritual) and chaotic, superabundant sexuality, epitomised especially by the dangerous female. Across these contrasting musical landscapes aspirations of masculine hegemony and sterile ritual purity are played out against darker anxieties over castration and penetration through the agency of the other, constructed as the abject female.

Act Two: 'Ich sah Ihn, Ihn.'

The event that roots the story of Parsifal in the biblical narrative is recounted by Kundry as her Act Two attempt to seduce him progres-

sively unravels. It is she who is the living link with the Christ of the Gospels. This link is not established, as in the current outpouring of Grail literature, through the *Sang Real* of the descendents of a hypothesized sexual union of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, but through the reincarnation of one who physically encountered him in time. In that sense, she is a biblical woman, living out in each generation the consequences of a sin of supreme blasphemy.

Kundry relates her story—the shocking secret that lies behind her curious behaviour—in an increasingly desperate attempt to persuade Parsifal into sexual union:

> I saw him—him—
> And laughed!
> His gaze fell upon me!
> Now I seek him from world to world
> To meet him once again.
> In the deepest need
> I feel his eyes turn on me
> And his gaze rest upon me.
> The accursed laughter assails me once again:
> A sinner sinks into my arms.[4]

This is the kernel of the story: because the biblical woman who is now Kundry failed to show compassion she was cursed, and cursed by none other than Christ himself! As a consequence of that act, she has since wandered the world, raging from incarnation to incarnation in search of the same look (*blick*) that he cast upon her, in order to experience what she denied him—namely, compassion. Of course, the image of the wandering mocker of Christ invites comparison with Ahasverus, the 'Eternal Jew' of German legend (Borchmeyer 2003:243-4; Delia 1998:111-119; Winterbourne 2003:76-77). Wagner carefully does not explicate this, but the concept of Kundry as female equivalent of the Wandering Jew—or, as the Wandering Jew himself in female form (Delia 1998)—has become a favourite theme among Wagnerian commentators. It also opens the field for speculation about Kundry as the

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4) I have generally followed Lionel Salter's 1970 translation, given in the 1994 Deutsche Grammophon recording, 437501.2.

receptacle for Wagner's own anti-Semitism. However, as we shall see, she is far too complex a character to fit comfortably into that category.

Wagner's unique contribution to the Eternal Jew theme is to marry it with the theme of sexual desire. In seeking release from the curse that was laid upon her by the gaze of Christ, Kundry looks for his correspondingly redeeming compassionate glance, and presumes that she will find it in an emotional experience between man and woman that would be of equal intensity to that in which she was first cursed. Thus, she seeks the redeeming look in the eyes of a sexual partner. However, what she invariably finds there is not her saviour but a weak 'sinner'—a man who looks at her not with compassion but with desire. Therefore, far from lifting her curse, those encounters reinforce it and communicate its effects to others. The desire she meets in the eyes of the saviours she seeks provokes in her not healing tears of repentance but a return to the manic laughter that preludes the emasculation of her sexual partners. The physical penetration of Amfortas' body by the spear, and his ever-bleeding wound, are symbols both of his feminization and of the entry of the untameable into the body politic of the Grail brotherhood. It is masculinity itself, and not simply the individual male, that is threatened by this *femme fatale*. Paradoxically, however, while she and her victims are driven for different reasons towards coitus, Kundry's salvation lies in the man who can renounce sexual congress with her. Yet when she meets such a one in Parsifal, her response is to press herself even more urgently onto him, and finally, rejected, to curse him to her own fate of wandering.

Parsifal's renunciation is problematic in itself. The seduction scene highlights the theme of hysteria identified in many analyses of the work as a whole. In this regard, the misogynist Viennese author Otto Weininger casts a long shadow; for him Kundry was the 'deepest woman-figure of art'[5]—constructed in his terms as a 'no-thing,'[6] sexually obsessed and utterly dependent upon the male for self-realisation. Kundry's sharp swings in mood and the many contradictions inherent

[5] '*der tiefsten Frauengestalt der Kunst*' (471).

[6] '*Die Frauen haben keine existenz und keine Essenz, sie sind nicht, sie sind nichts*' (373).

to her character have invited analysis in terms of Freudian hysteria (Bronfen 1996) or schizophrenia (Chessick 1993). However, we must be cautious: the libretto of *Parsifal* was written long before Freud's published work, and there is a danger, as Winterbourne (2003:67-71) warns, of over-psychoanalysing Kundry. Rosemary Delia highlights the problem by pointing to a 'general critical tendency to place female figures in too narrow an interpretive frame, to force female characters into conformity with masculine images of womanhood' (Delia 1998: 82).[7] Perhaps, as Delia suggests, a more fruitful path is to ask what are the 'barbarous traits' among the Grail Knights that are rebelled against in Kundry's 'dissonant articulations'? This approach comes close to that taken by Misha Kavka in her work on Weininger (Kavka 1995). Kavka regards Weininger's theory of hysteria as an 'unwitting analysis of the condition of unstable masculinity' (1995:143). As a consequence, she argues, 'misogyny is the necessary agent for the construction of a stable masculinity' (1995:141). Within this perspective it can be argued that the Grail knights are engaged in the construct of a masculine wholeness that can be achieved without the recognition of the woman, who needs to be cast as the dangerous other for the constructive enterprise to succeed. Yet, such exclusion is ultimately impossible—and therefore the female remains an ever-constant threat. In a sense, the male is hystericized by her—not ultimately through contamination, but as he recognizes the impossibility of the male hegemonic project. Kundry is set on a destructive path by guilt, her victims by their own impossible fantasies. In a sense all the characters in *Parsifal* are delusional, if not hysterical, which prompts Nietzche's accusation that Wagner himself is 'une nerveus' (Nietzsche 1911:13).

If the spotlight is turned from Kundry to her male partners, then the work can be viewed as much as an exercise in male delusion bordering on the masochistic (Stewart 1996) as in female hysteria. Musically, this is conveyed in the extraordinary seduction scene: Kundry edges Parsifal towards sexual congress by singing to him a lullaby about his mother! This once-dominant figure, abandoned and forgotten by

[7] A number of authors have recognised in Kundry the marks of (male) late nineteenth century concerns around women (for example Zizek 1996; Bronfen 1996); cf. also Nietzche who compares Wagner's heroines to Mme Bovary (Nietzsche 1911:28).

Parsifal, now presents herself to him again in the form of the seductress, who plays upon his unspoken matri-centred guilt. Here another thematic motif emerges: Parsifal's own gender identity is ambiguous in that he has not completed the transition from childhood into adult masculinity. The former is represented in the opera by the figure of his mother, the latter by the brotherhood of the Grail to which he finally accedes in the final scene. His transit through the work, therefore, can be mapped onto the tripartite model of rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960). This model, classically understood, involves an initial separation from a previous state. This separation leads into a phase of more-or-less extended liminality that is resolved by the definitive entry into the new state. Through most of the action, Parsifal is lost in the ambiguities of the middle phase. His failure to respect Montsalvat's prohibition of hunting at the start of Act One does not endear him to the company of the Grail, and his failure to comprehend the Grail ritual leads to his summary dismissal by the Knights at the end of that act. Nor does he belong in the voluptuously feminized world of Act Two—and the curse to share her wandering that Kundry calls down upon him towards the end of Act Two serves to intensify and prolong his marginal status. Parsifal's passage is only completed with his return in Act Three to Montsalvat as Amfortas' healer. The closing sequence of the opera brings a ritual close to Parsifal's initiation into manhood as he assumes Amfortas' former role as protector of the Grail and becomes the minister of its rituals. As Parsifal triumphantly achieves his construct of masculinity, Kundry sinks, silent and lifeless, to the ground. Significantly, therefore, in Parsifal's case both the movement onto the limen and its final resolution are attained at the cost of a woman's life—the abandoned mother in the first instance, the rejected lover in the second. Only thus it appears does this Wagnerian hero achieve adult masculinity—something that Siegfried never quite manages.

Along the course of this passage, two characters compete for the role of initiating elder—explaining the ritual processes to the initiand and leading him into deeper self-knowledge. At first appearance this role is played by the elderly knight Gurnamanz. However, he is a hopeless romantic, and fails to penetrate to the depths of Parsifal's character. Instead, the one who reveals Parsifal to himself is Kundry, as she makes

evident to him the cost to his mother of the passage towards manhood upon which he has entered:

> You did not consider her woe,
> her desperate grief,
> when you finally did not return
> and left no trace behind!
> She waited night and day
> and her laments grew faint,
> grief consumed her pain
> and she craved for death's release:
> And sorrow broke her heart,
> and Herzeleide died.

The long kiss that Kundry finally impresses upon the prostrate Parsifal is simultaneously atonement for his sin, the 'last greeting of a mother's blessing and the first kiss of love.' Sexual predation is thus presented as a cradle song to a male who pretends innocence despite already knowing what it is to abandon a woman. Parsifal—and Kundry—know that he is no innocent; he deserves this, and submits, passively, to her kiss, as she penetrates his body through their mouths. The effect of this upon Parsifal parallels the piercing of Amfortas' body with the spear: he is himself hystericized, and enters into a fantasy of identification with an earlier victim of his seducer:

> Amfortas!—
> The wound!—The wound!—
> It burns within my side!
> Oh sorrow, sorrow!
> Tearful sorrow!
> From the depths of my heart it cries aloud.
> Oh! Oh!
> Most wretched! Most pitiable!
> I saw the wound bleeding:
> Now it bleeds in me!

The image of the pierced side evokes a further leap of Parsifal's imagination—from Amfortas to Christ, vulnerably present in the Grail. Remarkably, now, he comes close to identifying with Christ—he now feels the pangs of Christ within himself. This is, therefore, a double-

fantasy of identification—with the one whose sin has defiled the Grail and with the one who has been defiled. From this point onwards, Parsifal, while painfully aware of his guilt, begins to assume a saviour-like role. He is 'redeemed' through his renunciation of a phallic response to Kundry's gift of sexual awakening—and believes that in doing so he has simultaneously set in motion her redemption and ultimately that of the Grail and its brotherhood too! Who, we might ask, is the true hysteric here?[8]

Act Two: 'Herodias wast Du'

The question of Kundry's redemption can only be addressed if her identity, like that of Parsifal, is revealed. A clue to this identity as provided earlier in Act Two when Klingsor summoned up Kundry through an incantation of the names associated with her previous incarnations.

> Come up! Come up! To me!
> Your master calls you, nameless one,
> primaeval she-devil, rose of Hell!
> You were Herodias, and what else?
> Gundryggia there, Kundry here.
> Come hither! Come hither, Kundry!
> Your master calls: obey!

It is the first name in Klingsor's list that provides a link with the Bible. As we have seen, Herodias, the adulterous instigator of the death of John the Baptist, certainly within operatic tradition represents a biblical *femme fatale.* However, there is no biblical indication of her meeting Christ—let alone mocking him. Here, Wagner is extrapolating. Herodias, does, nonetheless, offer a tantalising link to Salome, the biblical *femme fatale* par excellence. Thus, and rather inexplicably, Borchmeyer (2003:243) understands Kundry to be a reincarnation of both Herodias and Salome. Byron Nelson (1996:49) argues more consistently: taking literally the association of Kundry with the biblical Hero-

[8] For an overview of Parsifal's role as saviour, and an analysis of the final words of the opera, 'Erlösung dem Erlöser' ('Redemption for the redeemer'), see Keinzle (2005).

dias, he claims that there is 'more than a casual link' between Kundry and Salome—biblically her daughter. We therefore find ourselves with the 'murderous mother, ditto daughter' of Vander Stichele (2001). If, as Nelson claims, Salome is the stereotype of the castrating female (1996:50), so too Kundry, the latest reincarnation of her mother—witnessed by the disruption she causes to the Grail community.

However, Herodias is only the first name on the list—and while she provides the essential foot-hold into the biblical story, several names are given to this woman. Taken together these names paint a far broader picture. The 'ur-teufelin', the 'originary she-devil', evokes the memory of Lilith, the non-biblical first wife of Adam (Borchmeyer 2003:243; Winterbourne 2003:62)—and thereby projects Kundry onto a mythic landscape of cosmic proportions. Through this name she assumes something of the stigma of all womanhood as the dangerous other and as threat to any male self-sufficiency. Gundryggia takes us to a different, Germanic mythical universe of the untamed womanhood of the Valkyrie. And finally the Höllenrose, the 'Rose of Hell' is, at least in Christian terms, perhaps the most damning appellation of all, as it counterposes Kundry to the Virgin Mary, the Mystic Rose of Heaven (Winterbourne: 2003:62-4). When these names are placed together, two things happen. First, it becomes evident that the categories of persons represented in Kundry extend far beyond the Jewish milieu—and thus, as I have already suggested, she is too complex to be viewed simply as the receptacle of Wagner's anti-semitism. Secondly, Herodias is assumed into an archetypical figure (Delia 1998:85) who stands for womanhood as essentially antithetical to the celibate patriarchal masculinity to which the Grail community lays claim.[9]

Act Three: 'Dienen, dienen'

In a sense, it's all over for Kundry by the end of Act Two; she is on stage throughout the final Act, but the only words she utters are '*dienen, dienen*', 'to serve, to serve'. The magnificent woman of Act

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[9] Elisabeth Bronfen has offered a Freudian interpretation of Kundry's multiple personalities. They are protective fantasies by which she protects herself from the acknowledgment of the ur-trauma of her initial encounter with Christ (Bronfen 1996: 154-5).

Two has been reduced to a 'dumb domesticated servant' (Delia 1998:122), carrying out housework and attentive to Parsifal's every need. Another biblical motif is introduced in the stage directions; 'Kundry draws from her bosom a golden phial and pours part of its contents over Parsifal's feet which she dries with her hastily unbound hair'. Parsifal's response is to baptise her, which results in the final resolution of her accursed laughter—a flood of silent tears. This transformation into the penitent Magdalene marks the completion of Kundry's redemption. Now, no longer a threat, she can accompany Parsifal into the Temple of the Grail and witness its unveiling. Yet the exorcism of the Grail community is not complete until, silently, she dies in the midst of that community's ecstatic celebration of its restoration to wholeness. Thus, Kundry is a supreme example of Cathérine Clément's operatic woman. The diva without a voice that she becomes powerfully represents the negation of the female that Clément recognizes in all the characters she analyses. This silenced operatic woman is, if anything, an even more potent expression of her 'nothingness' here than her death. More surprising, therefore, that Clément did not include her in her analysis.

Conclusion

With Kundry's silence and eventual death, the members of the Grail community have overcome the last embodiment of difference (Bronfen 1996:161)—the patriarchal circle is closed, and both religion and masculinity have been purified. But have they, really? Parsifal has achieved kingship through the kiss in which Kundry—the dominant partner—orally penetrated him, and through his psychic identification with the hystericized Amfortas. Is he any more an examplar of idealised hegemonic masculinity than his predecessor? Is the whole resolution no more than a further hysterical fantasy (Bronfen 1996:149)? Has the experience brought him to a real maturity—or, as Zizeck suggests, has he merely rejected the 'loss involved in the act of man's opening up to the other-woman' (1996:22)?

A final, perplexing inconsistency in Wagner's projects across his lifetime, seems to underpin this doubt—somewhere along the line this Parsifal who has renounced sexual expression is to father Wagner's first

romantic hero, Lohengrin. We might well ask, along with Nietzche, how did that happen? Wagner's construct of Parsifal himself is fundamentally unstable. But, as Nietzche replied to his own question in a phrase that he presumed to be Wagner's own while failing to locate an exact reference, 'Maybe even chastity has its miracles? *Wagnerius dixit princeps in castitate auctoritas*' (Nietzche 1911:29).

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Re-visioning a Biblical Story through Libretto and Music: *Debora e Jaele* by Ildebrando Pizzetti

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Abstract

Both music and librettos are a form of midrash (creative re-telling), because they re-tell all or part of a story by creating a particular mood or feeling musically. The re-telling is in both the altered text and in the language of music. Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880-1968) wrote both the libretto and music of *Debora e Jaele* from 1917-1921. In this libretto, motivations are completely reversed. Characters perceived in the biblical account as "good" and "bad" seem to be switched. Our previous presumptions about the story and its characters are challenged: the belief that Sisera is evil and powerful, and has no positive qualities; that Deborah and Jael never met; and that Jael and Sisera had had no prior encounters. The libretto and the music succeed in depicting three-dimensional characters with conflicting motives and feelings. The addition of dimensions to the characters amplifies the moral ambiguities found in the original narrative. Sisera becomes a dominant and central character of this opera. Pizzetti is offering a counter-reading, in which the "villain" becomes a kind of hero and the listener can understand why Jael succumbs to his charms. A recurrent theme in this work is the testing of and by God. The viewpoints of Jael and Deborah depict what Pizzetti described as "human" justice (Jael) and "divine" justice (Deborah). An encounter with this opera will alter forever our reading of this biblical story.

Keywords

Deborah, Jael, Sisera, judges, libretto, opera, Kenite, midrash

In this article, I will discuss an interesting and little-known twentieth century Italian opera, *Debora e Jaele* by Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880–1968).[1] The discussion will focus on gap-filling in both the libretto and

[1] Many operas and oratorios based on this story have been written since the seventeenth century. The largest number, including the oratorio *Deborah* by Georg Fredric

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music and will follow a brief literary analysis of Judges 4-5. I selected this particular opera for analysis because of the provocative nature of the drama and its unique musical values.

I treat both music and librettos (the script based on the original story, to which the music is set) as midrash—creative re-telling—because they re-tell all or part of the story by creating a particular mood or feeling musically. The re-telling is in both the altered text and in the language of music. The musical techniques that are used to breathe life into the text may be understood on a different level by the musician than the biblical scholar, but our emotional response to the music will help us to read between the lines and find new and interesting possibilities there. (Unfortunately, the readers of this article can only imagine what this music sounds like based on my technical analyses and a few reproduced measures of the score.)

Pizzetti wrote both the libretto and music from 1917–1921. It is not very common for composers to write their own librettos, but because Pizzetti had started his career as a dramatist, before studying music, it was natural for him. In this libretto, motivations are completely reversed. Characters perceived in the biblical account as "good" and "bad" seem to be switched.

The Biblical Account

The most striking element in this biblical story is the reversal of expectation. A warrior approaches a woman's tent; the reader response is fear and dread that a woman is about to be violated. But in this instance, the woman is not the victim. Later writers and librettists were not comfortable with this reversal, on some level. They also felt a need to fill the gap in terms of any previous relationship between Jael and Deborah and Sisera.

The story is under-narrated, for surprise effect. The reader is never given Jael's point of view. The numerous narrative gaps relate mostly to

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Handel, date to the eighteenth century. Giocondo Fino's *Debora* (1913) pre-dated the Pizzetti by about 10 years. Fino's libretto alters the original narrative more than Pizzetti's does. Interesting similarities between the two librettos are Jael acting as Deborah's spy, and a Jael–Sisera love interest.

motive, specifically: Why did Sisera choose Jael's tent? Why did Jael kill him? Why did Sisera trust Jael so completely?

According to the text, Jael's tent was Sisera's destination (Judg. 1:17, "Sisera fled on foot to Jael's tent"). The only explanation given is "because there was peace between Jabin, King of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite" (Judg. 4:17). So it is possible that Sisera already knew Jael, and was sure her tent was the safest place to take refuge. Did Jael know who Sisera was? She offers to show Barak the man he is seeking (Judg. 4:22), suggesting she knew his identity all along. If Barak also entered Jael's tent without fear (Judg. 4:22), how could Jael have been known as a Canaanite sympathizer, unless she was a double agent?

If the Kenites were itinerant metal smiths who were neutral politically—who in effect had peace treaties with everyone—this could explain Sisera's trust. Smiths would have pitched their tents near battles, in order to service the weaponry.[2]

Another theory to explain Sisera's lack of concern suggests that Jael is a religious functionary, and her tent a sacred space. There are indications that Kenite women had a cultic role.[3] One proof text for this identification is the genealogy in Judges tracing Heber's ancestry back to Hobab, giving Heber himself the status of a priest because this office was hereditary. [4]

Jael's tent is located "at the oak/terebinth (אלך) in Zaanannim" (Judg. 4:11), and the oak is frequently a sacred space in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, Jael's tent is located in Kedesh, the only of Israel's six cities of refuge located in Naphtali, where the battle takes place. Kedesh is an illogical choice in terms of geography, because it would seem too far for Sisera to have reached on foot. But it is a logical choice if the writer wanted to suggest Jael's tent was a sanctified haven.[5] Though this is only subtly suggested in the text, the ancient reader might have understood these allusions instantly.

2) Frymer-Kensky 2002: 53.
3) Frymer-Kensky 2002: 53.
4) Mazar 1965: 297-303.
5) Mazar in Ackerman 1998: 98.

Another explanation for Sisera's trusting, or at least not resisting, Jael's invitation is that her beauty was irresistible (this is *not* in the biblical narrative). Midrashists starting with Pseudo-Philo (Ps. Philo 31.3) say Jael was very beautiful. Pseudo-Philo spoke of the great fascination which Jael's beauty exerted over Sisera.[6] When Jael saw Sisera approach, she arrayed herself in rich garments and jewels. She was unusually beautiful, her voice the most seductive ever found in a woman (Ps. Philo 34, BT *Megillah* 15a). According to another talmudic midrash, Jael surrendered herself to Sisera's passion as the only way to be sure she could kill him (BT *Yebamot* 103a-b). These midrashic interpreters assume that Jael is a temptress because she is beautiful, but they are reading both assumptions into a text that contains no physical description of Jael.

Why did Jael kill Sisera? Was she intending to kill him from the moment she saw him? In other words, was it premeditated or impulsive? Perhaps Jael was afraid, once she had let Sisera into the tent, either that he would awaken and then attack her, or that the army would discover she was shielding him, and kill her. In any case, they would have killed Sisera, so his death in this story was inevitable. This may be why Pizzetti imagined the murder as a mercy killing.

Was the killing done in self-defense? Modern readers might assume this motive, because of the way the act mimics rape. We do not know if ancient readers would have also read it that way. The modern reader is also inclined to imagine violence in Jael's past, either done to her or someone close to her. Modern psychology recognizes that many abused become abusers, as violence begets violence. Killing an enemy general to save a people is one thing, but killing in this violent way suggests more.

What might the writer of the biblical story have been trying to say? The woman's power is located in her sexual availability, viewing the "entrance" as a deadly trap. This is therefore a warning to men to beware the woman who steps outside her domain. Jael's story is specific, but can be read in this broader way as well: even if she was a hero, the story can still be read as a warning to men to beware invitations into a woman's tent. If this was the writer's agenda, it has been com-

[6] Ginzberg 1968: 198.

pletely reversed in Pizzetti's libretto. There, it is Sisera who tempts and seduces. Jael in the end does persuade him to enter her tent, but at that point in the story she has no intention of killing him.

In artistic representations, even if Jael is depicted as a triumphant heroine, Sisera is usually portrayed with some empathy by male artists. Their fascination and horror are both evident in such depictions. This ambivalent response is elaborated in Pizzetti's opera.

Introduction to Pizzetti's *Debora e Jaele*

Debora e Jaele premiered at La Scala in 1922, with Toscanini conducting, but has never been recorded.[7] In this opera, Jael is a dramatic soprano, and Sisera a tenor. These two voices are standard romantic leads in Italian opera. Deborah is a mezzo-soprano, representing age and authority.

The critical reception at the time was generally positive. Conductor and music critic Gianandrea Gavazzeni[8] wrote:

> Even those who don't like Pizzetti, still accept *Debora*; those who disagree with the drama itself, recognize that the values of *Debora* transcend and transform it into poetic and musical expression; whoever doesn't accept the opera in its entirety, still must consider the first act one of the great achievements of modern theatre. From the firmness of its determination, and the exclusion of any generic elements, there is an unmistakable character to the text of *Debora e Jaele*, …theatrical and poetic values which had never before been seen in a musical work."[9]

Pizzetti wrote of the genesis of his work:

> First was the need and desire to create characters I could love: noble, pure, and moved by worthy sentiments and passions...and then the wish (for many years

[7] The 1995 Dutch premiere, conducted by Gabriel Chmura, was performed in concert form at Muziekcentrum Vredenburg, Utrecht. The Katholieke Radio Omroep (KRO) produced the performance and kindly provided me with a copy of the original tape.

[8] Gavazzeni conducted at La Scala from 1948-1977 as well as throughout Europe and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. He was a champion of Pizzetti, under whom he had studied composition at the Milan Conservatory between 1925 and 1931 (<sonybmgmasterworks.com>).

[9] Gavazzeni 1941: 97, 112. Translation by Helen Leneman.

> already) to express in my own voice that marvelous biblical world, in which, it seems to me, we can find everyone, all our passions, hopes, vices…A biblical world in which the mission of the chosen one is not subversive, but intended to preserve the integrity of the community. The mystical nature of love replaces that of power: this religiosity is experienced as a participation in the life of the pure mind. Deborah becomes the voice of a humanity that seeks the affirmation of love.[10]

The adaptation of the well-known narrative preserves in a certain sense only the external frame of the original story: motivation is completely re-worked, to the point that the identification of good and evil seems almost reversed. Within this frame, there is room for a more articulate and individualized clash, between the affirmation of a severe and archaic law, personified by Deborah the prophet, voice of the spirit of the Hebrew Bible, and the overcoming of this same law by a more human one, anticipating *pietas cristiana*. Pizzetti's interest was in

> …the exaltation of a spiritually superior individual, the moral message invested in the chosen one and the cruel tests that person must undergo, with allusion to a world of heightened ideals.[11]

The Music

Pizzetti's vocal writing has been called "declamation" to distinguish it from pure expansive and lyrical singing. But it has also been called a

> …sung declamation… a melodic organism with a strong rhythmic element, characteristic of which is the fact that, while never disconnecting from the word, it sustains it, combines with it syllable by syllable, thereby raising its potential for pathos. But the melody is not slave to the word: born from it, it exists only together with it; it neither destroys nor hides it, but prolongs it beyond the limits possible in verbal expression. Listening to Pizzetti's characters speaking gives the impression of hearing a melody without end, where the words are all clearly perceptible and the musical line is so natural, that we cannot say which was generated by which.[12]

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[10] Quoted in Gavazzeni 1941: 125.

[11] *Dizionario dell'Opera*, www.delteatro.it/dizionario–dell–opera/d./debora–e–jaele.php. Translation by Helen Leneman.

[12] Gatti 1934: 31. Guido M. Gatti (b. 1892) was an Italian music critic and founder

Pizzetti's operas, reacting to the melodic indulgences of his contemporaries Mascagni and Puccini, systematically avoid lyricism for its own sake. The exceptions are when choral groups or individuals are actually depicted singing songs (for example, "Mara's song.") The bulk of Pizzetti's operatic vocal writing consists of a continuous flexible *arioso*, sensitive to nuances of the texts, governed by the natural rhythms of the Italian language. In other words, there are no "arias" that could be taken out of context and performed as are so many from well-known Italian operas. The main models for this *arioso* style are non-Germanic: possibly some response to Debussy, but also the much earlier recitatives of Monteverdi (seventeenth century). The results are distinctive and can be intensely expressive. An outstanding feature of most of his operas is the richly imaginative, often highly dramatic choral writing—e.g. act 1 of *Debora e Jaele*, which takes more than a hint from *Boris Godunov*, bringing the chorus right into the foreground as a complex multiple protagonist whose powerful presence tends to dwarf the individual characters.[13]

Pizzetti assimilated Gregorian music by using the Doric mode. Pizzetti's musical language is like a metamorphosis of the material he has collected, which takes on a completely different life than it had before. The power of Pizzetti's personality is imposed on material that had been dispersed and attributed collectively. The "Gregorian" and "Doric" are subordinated to this kind of "metabolism." There are also vaguely "oriental" *melismas*, the roots of which can be found in certain popular Greek songs, but they are integrated into Pizzetti's personal musical language.[14]

Gatti wrote:

> Every character is strongly characterized in the music, individualized by language, syntax, and rhythm. Only the prophet Deborah shows only one face, revealing the same certainty in every scene. The others—Jael, Sisera, and the people—change from scene to scene. The chorus emerges as a virtual protago-

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of the journal *La rassegna musicale* in 1928. He was the author of and collaborator on a number of Italian musical encyclopedias and reference works, including the monograph of Ildebrando Pizzetti (1934). Translation by Helen Leneman.

13) Gatti and Waterhouse 2000: 818.

14) Gavazzeni 1941: 122.

nist, showing the changeable psychology of crowd mentality. Pizzetti's dramatic idea seeks continual action, yet doesn't exclude notable vocal outbursts: for example between Jael and Sisera in the second and third acts, or Mara's lullaby in the first act, which returns at the end with evocative force, provoking Jael's mission…These musical peaks express the different characters' passions with vivid intensity and realistic vital force.[15]

Music and Text

Gatti discusses Pizzetti's ideas about drama versus music:

> Pizzetti says that opera must be drama if it wants to express the life of its characters. But life is not all drama, or all poetry; not all action, movement, contrasting passions, but also contemplation, rest, serenity. The drama of life, drama in the largest sense of the word, expresses itself precisely in a succession, or better, simultaneity of these and other moments, all of which share the common denominator of the personality who experiences them. There is no musical moment that doesn't contain a grain of drama, and vice versa…Pizzetti's thought…should be understood in this sense: the musical oasis or stasis should and must not interrupt the development of the drama, or create a solution of continuity in the flux of emotions, should not make us forget the rhythm that governs life. So he does not ask for an exclusion of music and singing, only that, in his words, "they are born from, and flower, through the invincible expansive force of the resolution of a dramatic junction, the overcoming of an emotional crisis…"[16]

In other words, Gatti continues:

> Pizzetti does not want drama to be subordinate to music. He believed that from the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries, music was created first and forced the expressions of dramatic characters into that music: "The characters in the drama didn't sing—that is, live; the poets spoke, the musicians sang their words."[17] The characters live and it is they that create the conditions for musical expression; and each one has his or her own mode of expression, just has each has his own life. Each character is strongly characterized and individualized through language, syntax and accent. Pizzetti wrote "For each character, I invented an entire life, in order to see them alive; some of their words refer back to episodes in their past life, prior to the drama."[18]

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15) Gatti, in Dizionario dell'Opera.
16) Gatti 1934: 22.
17) Gatti 1934: 22.
18) Gatti 1934: 22.

Pizzetti was aiming to bring musical theatre into the realm of the life of thought, but the means to this end and the values are still musical. His biblical erudition is translated into true poetry and verbal acuity, with an eye attentive to every dramatic move, but above all there is the power of his music.[19]

The power of Pizzetti's use of language is

> …in the balance between evocation and narration. His very new restoration of tonality and his mixing of archaic with modern modes are important elements in this opera. Of great importance also is his very varied use of chromatic and diatonic modes. [Yet another important element in the work] is the lack of differentiation between vocal and instrumental discourse. Composed of the same material, there is no dualism, no conflict of phonic planes. We cannot even speak of coordination or vocal or symphonic superiority, because from time to time it is instrumental voices or vocal timbres that move the language forward in its narrative or musical, meditative or dramatic phases. Pizzetti's aim is linguistic unity, where there is no divergence between vocal and instrumental discourse. In this way the counterpoint between voices and instruments is tacked onto a complete narrative logic. One could say that the composer, writing the text, was particularly tuned in to music's inner voice, through which he designed the scenes and voices of his characters. The outline of his drama is based on what is brought to light by the musical language. There is a subtle play throughout the opera with the timbre of biblical modes, Psalmic poetry and the elevated tone of liturgical hymns. The libretto read alone can be immediately recognized as poetry, rather than narrative; text has a dominant importance.[20]

Pizzetti's words on this subject confirm this. In an essay "The Music of the Word" which appeared in the first volume of the magazine *Musica*, Pizzetti said:

> When then can we properly start to speak of the music of words? I would say when the rapport between sound and the significance of the word, which in practice, in daily talk, is that of sound/material on one side and significance/spirit on the other, is reversed: when the significance of words is felt as material, and their sound as spirit.[21]

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19) Gavazzeni 1941: 127.

20) Gavazzeni 1941: 99-100, 106.

21) Quoted in Gavazzeni 1941: 107.

Pizzetti elsewhere explained his goal to be:

> …a drama in which music is given the chance to continually reveal the mysterious depths of souls, beyond which limits poetry can never reach.[22]

The Libretto: Challenging Presumptions

The clear male bias in this libretto is the most obvious change of perspective—a kind of midrash on the story. In the biblical narrative, the focus is on Deborah and her call from God. Sisera has a relatively passive role, while in this opera he becomes a dominant and central character. But the libretto—and certainly the music—succeeds in depicting three-dimensional characters with conflicting motives and feelings. The addition of dimensions to the characters amplifies the moral ambiguities found in the original narrative. "What if" questions are convincingly addressed in an attempt to creatively fill in the narrative gaps and challenge previous presumptions we may have about the story and its characters. What are these presumptions, and to what extent are they based on a simple reading of the text, rather than on its traditional interpretation?

What if…

- Sisera almost wanted to be killed, knowing he had abandoned his army? This goes against the presumption that Sisera is evil and powerful, and has no positive qualities (based on Judg. 4:3: "Sisera had powerfully oppressed Israel for twenty years"). He was doing his job as a Canaanite army commander. Does this make him evil? Is it possible to think of Sisera in a positive light, as Pizzetti apparently did?[23] In this libretto, he shows the qualities of pride and humility in defeat.

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22) Quoted in Gavazzeni 1941: 112. Gavazzeni adds: "The musical parts of *Debora e Jaele* perfectly exemplify this ideal." (113)

23) There is a long tradition of negative responses to Sisera. An interesting exception is the Jewish scholar and philosopher Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) who finds redemption for Sisera. Recalling an ancient tradition in which Sisera's descendants taught Torah in Jerusalem, Kook sees it as a lesson "not to be caught up in the stream of hatred even of the fiercest enemy" (Kook quoted in Gunn 2005: 70).

- Jael fell in love with Sisera and killed him against her own will? Is she still a heroine if she is only obeying Deborah's orders (as in this libretto)? The victors of battles always write the history, and there is no doubt that for the Israelites Jael was a hero. But for the Canaanites, or considering the treachery of her action, she would certainly have been considered a traitor. Pizzetti's portrait of Jael is ambiguous, but she emerges as more a victim than a heroine or traitor.
- Jael was a spy for Deborah and did her bidding? This contradicts the presumption that the two had never met. It is usually assumed that Deborah and Jael were from different worlds, belonged to different tribes, and their acts were unconnected. But could Deborah and Jael have ever met? This would certainly explain Jael's actions: she was following Deborah's orders. A meeting between Deborah and Jael was depicted in a much earlier musical work, Georg Fredric Handel's 1733 oratorio *Deborah*. Pizzetti may have been inspired by that work to include a relationship between the two women in his opera.
- Jael and Sisera had once known, even loved, each other? This contradicts the presumption that they had never even met previously. Based on their dialogue, which includes no words indicating recognition, this is a fair presumption. But reading between the lines, an earlier relationship is also not impossible to imagine.

These are questions we might not have thought to ask, but asking them presents possibilities for variant understandings of the story. None of these scenarios directly contradict the biblical text. The remainder of this article will describe the libretto and music of Pizzetti's opera, highlighting how both are used as a midrash on the original narrative.

The Opera

The biblical story has been greatly embellished in the libretto. The opening scene introduces several unfamiliar characters; one of these is Mara (possibly a reference to Naomi, or a play on the Italian word amara, "bitter"), who lost her children in the war and is almost crazed by her grief. She sings a lullaby at various times during the opera, representing the grief of all mothers in war and possibly foretelling the grief of Sisera's mother.

In the opening scene, Deborah is described this way by one of the Israelites:[24]

> And behold, when she speaks, if she shouts against the impious and vile, it's as though a hundred trumpets were loudly blasting: this is the God of vengeance, who thunders and dazzles with his ardent voice. But if she speaks to comfort the poor, it's like the dew falling to bring the earth to life, and every pain melts in tears, and all are happy.

Hever, a speaking character in this opera though not in the biblical version, is accused by the crowd of being a slave of Sisera, and his wife of being Sisera's concubine and giving up her children to Baal. Both deny the accusations. Hever responds:

> They are surely a sad race, the Canaanites, and ferocious beyond words, the army of Sisera. Doesn't my heart bleed like yours, for the horrible crimes and infamies they commit? Am I not therefore like all of you, a son of the God of Israel? But does Sisera know the iniquities under which we suffer? You are all wise and honorable men; who can say that the king of Canaan isn't also wise, just, and fair? And if this were not true, why would God have given him power and the reign?

These comments introduce a prominent theme in the libretto, that of theodicy. If God is just, why would he allow an unsuitable man to become leader of a people? An Israelite warns the others that Hever "speaks honeyed words, but in his heart he has an evil proposition." The chorus sings that Hever is "weaving an insidious web" for them. Others (the basses, possibly representing the elders) say:

> Let him talk, he is older than you, he speaks for your good.

Hever tells them not to do battle with Sisera because they are so outnumbered, without even Reuben, Asher or Dan (based on Judg. 5:15-17). He counsels them to send ambassadors, because the king of Canaan is just.

Finally Jael is heard, "proud and scornful." Jael's voice is like "one continual tremor, of hope and faith, love and fear...She always expresses herself in broken phrases punctuated by melodic leaps that sound like

[24] All translations by Helen Leneman.

screams or sobs, and a continual tonal instability."[25] At this moment in the opera, "tears and repressed pain can be heard in her voice" (indicated in the libretto):

> If I fornicated with the accursed man, then give me the test of bitter waters; ask Deborah, and my stomach will swell if I sinned, and may I disgrace myself, here before you, if I gave my creature to the fires of Baal, if my little one was not ripped violently from my arms…

She describes being trapped in her tent while hearing the wood go up in flames; she swears she has not betrayed them:

> I know there is one God, I adore your God. But if my blood can increase the strength of your hatred, then kill me, and mark your foreheads with my blood, and the first to plunge the blade in my heart, should plant it in Sisera's throat.

In her acceptance of the Hebrew God, there are echoes of Rahab and Ruth.

Both Jael and Hever are portrayed here as followers of the Hebrew God. After Jael's speech, the crowd believes she is innocent. She concludes with the words:

> Kill me, but believe me!

Then she breaks off into convulsive sobs and falls to the ground, exhausted.

Deborah is now seen, standing "erect, majestic and severe." Everyone realizes she has been watching; they drop to their knees with their faces to the ground, murmuring. At this moment a uniquely tonic C major *fff* chord is heard in the orchestra. Then the chorus starts singing to her "Mother, Saint, help us." In this chorus, Gavazzeni writes,

> …the unforgettable polyphonic inspiration places the music above all the other elements. The religious and moral ideas are found in the music in the same rapport as in a motet by Palestrina.[26]

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25) Gatti 1934: 25.

26) Gavazzeni 1941: 129.

Deborah's certainty, Gatti writes,

> …is expressed in her soft speech, solemn, truly prophetic, even when she exalts or menaces the people or Jael. Musically this is expressed through repeated notes, small intervals, sustained chords; sustained and broad phrases, in which not even the hint of doubt can be heard, but rather the assurance of someone who knows the truth...Her narrative-style declamations become even calmer, because the prophetess is only the mouth of God; and God, even when cursing the people who broke the covenant, does not get excited.[27]

Deborah's music opens in C major, the brightest and most upbeat key; she sings an unaccompanied and chant-like recitative, interrupted by short simple phrases over sustained minor chords:

> You, who are holding her arm, are you sure your heart is more pure than hers? All of you, who invoke judgment and punishment on her, are you sure you are not more guilty than she? What are you moaning and lamenting about?

This may be intended as an interesting echo of Jesus' words "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone"(John 8:7; in that passage, Jesus

[27] Gatti 1934: 22, 24.

contradicts the severe judgment of Moses involving the stoning of an adulteress). Deborah continues in a calm chant with biblical-sounding verses containing words that recall both the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy:[28]

> From this blue river to the sea,…lands of milk and honey, I who have brought you forth…Follow my laws, don't worship foreign gods…But if you don't follow my laws, I will send curses and death on you and your sons…

Deborah relates how she told God his people cannot take his punishment any more, even the strongest of them; he is God, he should help them, not let them be destroyed. Does he want others to think he is weaker than their gods? This is an interesting echo of Moses' argument (in Num. 14:15-17 he persuades God to be merciful in order not to let other nations think he was powerless). The music in this section is initially very dry, then becomes increasingly more lyric and tonic.

Gavazzeni notes:

> In Debora's first recitative, we see the heightened musical values. We need cite only the smallest details to explain the idea of the power of music, where it is so tied to the sense of the words. For example, on the words "I who brought you out of the land of slavery," there is a sudden modulation to G# minor, with a heavy *tremolo* preceding it and successive modulations.[29]

Deborah continues telling the people of her words to God:

> Your people have repented, one sign of your pardon and they will arise with new faith in a thousand acts of love.

She then recounts how she saw and heard light and thunder, and the sound of the golden trumpets. Trumpet sounds are heard in the orchestra. In this text, Deborah is again conflated with Moses. She recounts how God spoke to her, telling her to rise up and go; this is sung to a

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[28] Deborah is also compared with Moses in rabbinic Midrash, e.g. in the *Mechilta deRabbi Ishmael,* Shirata 1, on Exod. 15:1; both Moses and Deborah celebrated in song God's deliverance of Israel from oppression (Gunn 2005: 55).

[29] Gavazzeni 1941: 114.

chant-like melody. The music throughout each section starts as unaccompanied recitative, gradually building as the orchestra parts thickens in texture and the music becomes more tonic. The idea of Deborah in the entire act is a musician's. In Gavazzeni's words, "It is not a comment on a character that already exists in history or poetry. It is an invention of timbres, gestures, forms, bodies and sentiments of the heart."[30]

Barak now enters, and expresses his doubts and fears to Deborah, as in the biblical account. She tells him what to do, saying also:

> Blessed are those who have confided and who have feared.

Then she continues:

> But you, who doubted God, you will be punished for your doubt. More worthy hands than yours will put Sisera into the hands of the people.

Jael tells Deborah she will do whatever she commands, and Deborah reminds her that it is God commanding, not her. Then Deborah tells her (in passages vaguely recalling Naomi addressing Ruth):

> Be out this evening, when the lamps are being lit; in six days you'll be in Charoshet and enter his house.
>
> Jael asks: With what weapon will I strike him?
>
> Deborah: Who told you he must be killed? It's enough to put down a wild beast to make the forest safe. You must be sure he comes forth out of the walls of Charoshet, with all his soldiers and chariots, that he descend down the valley and pass beyond the Kishon. Understand? And you can do it, you will; you will bring this one with you [she points to Mara].

At this Jael is upset, thinking this shows a lack of confidence in her. Deborah says:

> Look at her, it's as if she had her broken and bloody heart in her hand.
> Look at her; and in her you'll have present both heartbreak and hatred, always

30) Gavazzeni 1941: 132.

> [Mara is humming the melody of the lullaby under Deborah's singing], and you will not vacillate. Now arise, up on your feet, daughter of Ahira, the god of vengeance calls you!

A blind man appears, lamenting (possibly an echo of Mussorgsky's use of a simpleton in *Boris Godunov*). Jael asks him why he is crying. He only cries "Oh!" She tells him: "Come with me, I know the way." Then in more excited and louder music, she sings:

> I alone know the way, I alone! Don't cry; come, come.

The suggestion, underlined by the more excited music, is clearly that Jael has understood the importance and nature of her mission. Jael takes him by the hand as she exits; Mara follows them. On the curtain, a tonic chord in the rare and very bright key of F# major concludes the act, a musical signal of hope and optimism.

Act 2 opens in Sisera's palace in Charoshet. Gavazzeni notes that the music is "rough and dry," with an acute lack of both lyricism and drama.[31]

In this libretto, Sisera has supplanted Jabin as king, but he is also still the army commander as in the Judges account (Judg. 4:7). When Sisera hears one of his men boasting of raping two girls, he is enraged and orders the man's hands cut off, and the girls returned to their

31) Gavazzeni 1941: 133.

father. This midrashic addition presents a Sisera with more than one dimension.

Gatti points out the different musical values between Sisera and Deborah:

> Deborah's strength seems to come from something outside and above her; while Sisera's will is grounded by passion that consumes him, by a desire to fulfill his life. In this version, Sisera had previously been on a Phoenician ship in Greece, and returned to his homeland hoping to find fulfillment of his heroic dream; but instead he finds himself surrounded by vulgar barbarians who disgust him…The two sides of his passion are idealism and senses, a desire to live and a wish to die; these are integrated in his full humanity…[32]

Hever arrives and tells Sisera of the Israelites' battle plan. Sisera gives him a reward for the information—eliciting words of praise from Hever—but then orders him to be imprisoned in the grotto under the tower to "count his money with the owls." Hever thinks he is joking, but Sisera repeats the order. Then he adds that when he returns from conquering the rebels, he will turn Hever over to the survivors, the brothers he has betrayed.

After this encounter, the mood changes in the music to *largamente, ma con vivo ardore, ff*, (broadly but with lively passion, very loud) as Sisera lets out a battle cry. The orchestra plays in a very high range, and Sisera sings *a-flat-g'-f'* twice, on Alala; then on "Ah-oh," on two minor sixth leaps starting at *c'* utilizing the tenor range. He sings, in an even broader tempo:

> Tomorrow's sun will be beautiful, the most beautiful that has ever been seen shining on the world.

Sisera commands lamps to be brought: "Light, more light!" He orders that his mother be told to send out her most beautiful servant girls; he wants, that night, to see a dance of joy and fervor. "My best wine for everyone!" The chorus repeats his war whoop.

He orders a servant to go down to the city and make the trumpets sound at the fountain of the Dragone, so the squadrons should arm

[32] Gatti 1934: 26.

themselves; and the chariots should line up in the valley (he even specifies the exact location) and they will depart at sunrise—not through Asher's territory, but by the shorter way, the eastern route:

> Three days' march and we will see the rebels' faces and before the Kishon fills with water we will have overcome them, victorious.

Sisera then launches another war cry, tells everyone to drink and shout thanks and praise to Baal, which they proceed to do, interjected by war cries. The king has signaled the dancers to begin, but at that moment a slave enters followed by two women, one veiled. The slave speaks:

> My lord, a foreign woman asks an audience with Sisera [in the background the male chorus is singing to Baal].

She says the woman insisted Sisera knows her:

> Tell him I'm bringing two snakes with ruby eyes on my wrists.

Sisera jumps and looks around, bewildered. He throws his cup on the table, and everyone is struck dumb and astonished. Sisera orders the lamps to be extinguished. As Jael is about to enter, a different dimension seems to open. In Gavazzeni's words, "The music becomes the center of a life of feeling which itself is completely suggestive and invented."[33] The tempo slows, while a short ascending chromatic passage is repeated several times until finally expanding into a broader theme. At the climax, Sisera shouts loudly to the men inside and sends everyone away. Jael crosses the threshold and faces Sisera. In a recitative, with only a single sustained note under him in the orchestra and only occasional chords, he says:

> One day, in a faraway land across the sea, I heard from an old man a discussion about the death of heroes. The old man said: "When the hero has to face his supreme test, then the gods, who hold him dear, place before him the greatest good which in vain he desired in life [denser orchestration here], for the ultimate renunciation: for he who knows how to greet death without regretting anything

[33] Gavazzeni 1941: 133.

> of his life is worthy of going to heaven with the immortals." So, do you precede death, and announce it?

Jael answers:

> With such tenuous hope, oh powerful king, were you waiting for me? Don't you remember the words you spoke to Jael in Saananim, when you liked to honor the tents of the Kenites with your presence? "A lamp is lit in a secret room in my kingdom, in Charoshet, awaiting the one that will put it out, in order to re-light one that is higher and more beautiful. Will you be the awaited one?" And I answered [her expression changes]: 'When the god of Israel indicates to me that you are chosen to rule over all, according to your will and pleasure.' And I said, "when that which I think is bad seems good…" And I have waited for the signs. I saw your troops invade villages and empty houses and storehouses, and I said: "God is now sending a whirlwind to exterminate the impious ones and their king." I saw your troops rape young girls and massacre old men and children, and I said [the singing is more intense but still soft]: "Now God will send lightning to burn the vile ones and their king." And I trembled, I don't know if only from hope or also from fear. But no whirlwind or lightning came down. And I arose with tears filling my eyes, and with dry lips, and coming here to you I stopped at a house to quench my thirst. [There I saw] two virgins raped on your orders, two brothers bloodied on the ground, and two poor old men wailing like starving dogs. And I—forgive me—shouted: O God of justice, if the people of Israel don't deserve this suffering, let me find Sisera dead in Charoshet.

This final phrase is sung broadly, *ff*, in a rare tonic moment with an e-flat minor chord in the second inversion heard as a *tremolo* in the bass while Jael sings *g-flat"*. Jael is challenging God to prove to her that Sisera was not chosen to be a ruler. In the course of this dialogue, it becomes clear that they have met before, but not that they had a relationship. Jael now sings about the snakes on her wrists (Jethro, Moses' father-in-law and Jael's ancestor, possessed a "rod/snake" at one time and Pizzetti's idea may be loosely connected to that). She is referring to a previous conversation they obviously had:

> I said I would never be able to put them on my wrists, because the snakes would have bitten and drained my blood. But look, for seven days you've been my lord, and look, the two snakes haven't bitten; I have come to serve and please you because you are the strongest and the most worthy. Who is with you, is with God, and who opposes you opposes him.

She moves closer and quickly and breathlessly continues:

> I have come to put in your hands a group of rebels from my people, whom Deborah and Barak are gathering to overthrow you.

Though it had momentarily seemed that Jael accepted Sisera as her ruler, because God had allowed him to become king, now it seems she is working as a spy, because she tells Sisera about the Israelites' planned attack—but not the true plan.

> I myself saw and heard Deborah, in Kedesh. She uttered terrible threats against the others, in the name of God.

Jael tells him he needs to move fast if he is to win, before the enemy numbers increase, since Barak is intent on gathering the army in the plains of Jezreel, the other side of the Tabor, and believes Sisera has no idea, and this is less than three days away.

Sisera responds almost desperately:

> Take off that veil, so that I can see you and read your eyes.

On these words, the woodwinds play a series of rapid descending chromatic groups, signifying excitement and anxiety. Jael removes the veil and says: "Look, and read." Then, the libretto directs that "She rips away the whole veil and tosses it behind her. Sisera trembles, silent, lost." Over much *tremolo* and lyric rising chromatic phrases—musical devices commonly used to depict passion—he sings, very softly and with much expression: "Oh! How beautiful you are."

Now the orchestral music stops, leaving only a *tremolo*, another musical indication of trembling or a heartbeat. Sisera sings, in longing, passionate music:

> Again, I would like to take you, hold you in my arms, yet I dare not even touch you. Around you there is like a light cloud of silver smoke which I can't cross. Come closer. How beautiful you are. Look, there inside, where that lamp burns…

Before the final line, all the orchestral music stops, leaving only a *tremolo*. Jael answers:

> No, not now, later, when you return; do you want the enemies to take you prisoner in your bed? The hero that as a boy strangled two lions with his bare hands?[34]

Jael tells him they should wait till after the battle. He begins to suspect she is betraying him. When this is proved, she admits it and tells him it is because she and her brothers all hate him. She goes on:

> Yes, I plotted a betrayal: I wanted to bring you and your armies in mortal ambush because I hate you, as all my brothers hate you. Have me killed or kill me yourself. I won't be the first woman killed at your hands, you killer of women and children.

On her last "Kill me" (*Uccidimi*) she reaches *b-flat*", *ff*, with a g minor chord under her and a dissonant F intruding after two beats, creating a highly dramatic and unsettling sound. Sisera responds to her request, by saying he will take her instead of killing her. At this, she pulls out a knife but then hesitates and falls to her knees. It seems that Jael suddenly realizes she is in love with Sisera, perhaps conquered by his offer of pardon. This is a strong reference to Puccini's opera *Tosca,* in which at this point Tosca *does* plunge a knife into her attacker. So Jael comes off as weaker by comparison; and *Tosca* (written in 1900) would certainly have been known to Pizzetti's audience.

Sisera, overcome by emotion, now sings a long aria:[35]

> Oh, Oh, Jael strong and pure, I have looked everywhere for you, for years and years, wherever my fate brought me, I have invoked you every day and night, to have the strength to live, to have joy in living, to not feel alone, to love. Mirror of my strength and ardor!

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[34] Conflating Sisera with Samson (Judg. 14:6) but increasing the feat from one to two lions.

[35] After this dramatic moment, Sisera "returns to the sphere of memory, in a uninterrupted sequence of lyrical passages that continue to the end of the act. Here truly the theatrical character goes beyond any dramatic reality to enter a moral sphere that is completely internal and fantastic, and brought to light only through allusions in the dialogue" (Gavazzeni 1941: 122).

These final phrases are marked *appassionato* and *ff.* The moon appears over the palace. Jael becomes increasingly ambivalent. She tells him his face is lined with blood, and tells him not to go down, because he has the signs of blood on his face. He denies this, reacting with a shudder of vague terror. The trumpets play a call to battle from backstage. Sisera asks Jael to stay here in his house—her house—to wait her victorious master's return. He sings "Jael" *pp dolcissimo* (very softly and sweetly) again, always on a descending interval. She sings, on a similar descending interval, "O my brothers" broadly, sadly. He sings over her final notes (one of only a few times the voices come together, and a musical foretelling of physical closeness) saying:

> You have only one brother, and he is close, O beautiful one, flower of my life, only golden rose in my secret orchard, O beloved, O spouse, look at me, so I can read in your eyes love that makes you tremble; look at me and let me kiss you, to calm this ardor that burns me on your moist lips.

In the music, there is a steady rise in pitch to the climactic "ardor." Sisera continues in this vein, while Jael asks for pity, in a weaker and weaker voice. She interrupts this last line singing only "O my lord." He continues, over rapid rising scale passage in the orchestra signifying increased excitement:

> Come, O beautiful one, come, let yourself be led into my arms.

She very softly sings "O my lord, have pity," barely audibly. Then he sings an aria, calm and sweet, over an *ostinato* of triplet groups; he also sings two triplet groups at the end of every phrase, chromatically. This combination of musical and rhythmic elements creates a modal, melismatic effect:

> Towards a green and fragrant wood, cool with shadows and clear waters, the secret silent rooms open, for the queen I was awaiting. Let yourself be led, thus, in my arms.

Gatti comments on this section as an example of how Pizzetti makes the drama subordinate to the music:

> When Sisera abandons himself to the sweetness of his desire for Jael, and the music seems to slow down and halt, suspended between heaven and earth, the drama is not actually interrupted, because this musically lyrical moment is a necessary part of this character, not a need for melody or melodic development.[36]

Jael asks for pity again. Sisera tells her he will send away the nine servant girls and will put out the lamps. Suddenly Mara starts singing her lullaby, just audibly but softly and monotonously. Under this (which he obviously does not hear), Sisera sings:

> One by one I will remove those garments that hide your body from me.

The three voices come together now, each character in his/her own world. Jael repeats "Oh!" on descending intervals, while Mara sings her almost melodic lullaby. Then Sisera hears her and asks who is there; Jael says it is the voice of God calling her, the dark hole. Then Jael sings to Sisera:

> I know I am your thing and you can do as you like with me, but let me go! If you really love me, my lord, don't violate me; I will return to Saananim and be alone in my tent; let me go. I know I can only be yours. If the great God wants you to be the victor of my people, you will find me again.

One of Pizzetti's more interesting ideas is to have Jael questioning God's justice and motives, not unlike Abraham with Sodom and Gomorrah.

Jael, trying to leave, falls on her knees with her face to the ground. She continues to beg forgiveness from God, sobbing on lower and lower pitches. Her emotional stress is heard in the music. A sad, broad melody is played on the cello—a very poignant sound—before Sisera says:

> Sisera didn't want to do violence to you. Return to Saananim, because this is what you want. The lamp will continue to burn. Sisera will come to Saananim afterwards, the victor, to take you. You are free, but kiss me.

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36) Gatti 1934: 22.

The singer is instructed to sing these last words "intensely and passionately but softly." They kiss; he asks her why she trembles, she says she does not know anything any more. Their voices overlap a little here, indicating emotional confusion.

Then (rising to a-*flat*") she says: "I don't know anything any more" (in two quick passages, the voice drops to d'). "I am a miserable woman, forgive me; addio," as she melts in Sisera's arms. The act ends on a *fff* passage in e minor, as she melts in Sisera's arms, musically a highly dramatic ending.

It is hard to see in this vacillating character, who succumbs at the first kiss, the biblical character whose main qualities are decisiveness and determination. The alteration reflects the librettist/composer's discomfort with the biblical portrayal, and creates a Sisera that is the embodiment of a male fantasy: virile, tender, and completely irresistible. His music also reflects these qualities, and has a seductive effect on the listeners. Those familiar with the biblical story will find them-

selves conflicted (as did I) at finding Sisera an appealing and sympathetic character. Whether intentionally or not, Pizzetti is offering a counter-reading, in which the "villain" becomes a hero and the listener can understand why Jael succumbs to his charms.

Gavazzeni is apparently not disturbed by any of these elements. He discusses the musical and dramatic elements of the Jael-Sisera relationship with no reference to the original biblical narrative or to the counter-reading:

> The characters of Jael and Sisera offer much opportunity for lyricism. Sounds of words and melodic fragments mix together in sensual outpourings of affection. [The music of their first dialogue is] perfect, with its completely internal melody, sustained, but for that reason even richer…than so many empty pseudo-melodic effusions found in Italian opera before Pizzetti began its linguistic restoration… The rapport between poetry and song is the only one that has an effect on the emotional story of Jael and Sisera, giving it a human development. Pizzetti said: "Vocalism, song, is really a completely interior type of musical expression: the beauty of pure singing, of truly vocal singing, is in the spirit and in the why of all things…Poetry sings its own music…At the roots of a super-intelligible poetic the musician cannot but find an intelligible musical absolute"…It is in the dialogue, considered in its infinite dimensions and facets, that the story and lyric quality of the characters—in the case of Jael and Sisera—derive every possible musical resource. Jael's attempt at deception in Act 2 mixes characteristics and "types" in novel expressive means. The narration, lyric timbre, and dramatic impulse all combine in both languor and nervosity. Chromaticism and diatonicism move through a play of sustained tones and enharmonic evasions to realize a harmonic suppleness without precedent in the history of harmony…Jael's conflicting feelings for Sisera—latent love and sensual attraction that the contradictory character of this man stir up—are heard in the play of words and music with a human and subtle art. Jael is painted with disquieting phonic and verbal suggestions. The life of a character, her true poetic précis, is reflected more in the music than in dramatic action. Even in the most dramatic moments, the definitive moments of linguistic value are always of a musical nature. In this sense, Jael is a completely narrative figure. Her dramatic action always intervenes when its artistic importance—that is, its emotion—has already been highlighted in the musical moment that provokes it. Dramatic action is thus a material and visible continuation of musical intuition.[37]

37) Gavazzeni 1941: 115-118.

Act 3 begins in a grove of Saananim; it is early morning and has just stopped raining after a violent three-day thunderstorm. Mara has been trying to fix the tent with a big wooden hammer—an interesting foreshadowing device pointing to future action. Mara tells Jael that Deborah thinks Sisera fled in this direction, because, she says:

> …the people would cut him in pieces, every mother, every wife should plunge a sword into his stomach. Didn't he make you burn your baby? You will tear his heart out of his chest.

This midrashic addition makes little sense in light of Jael's complete abandonment to Sisera's charms in the previous scene. It suggests that Jael has engaged in cognitive dissonance, dissociating what Sisera's army did to her family from Sisera the man she loves. Jael now prays to God to never see Sisera again, but at that moment he enters, disheveled, and she passionately embraces him, singing "It is you, it is you!"

He says he is not Sisera:

> He's dead—there, in the turbid water. I am a beggar, a dog pursued by a pack of wolves, a tired dog; if you want to give me a little water, then I'll return and hide in the forest.

The slow, halting music depicts a defeated man, a totally different Sisera than the ardent character heard earlier. Jael responds that he is the king and her lord. Sisera protests that because he escaped from the battle and abandoned his army, he is no longer who he was. These remarks show shame and humility, positive qualities that can only partly explain Jael's seemingly mindless total devotion to him. On Jael's love for Sisera, Gavazzeni says:

> Jael has moved from love for her people to love for a single person: the defeated enemy of that same people. And when his ruin is irreversible, this love becomes the only law she obeys.[38]

Sisera continues:

> Haven't they told you yet that Sisera fled? He escaped! He didn't have the heart to die in the chariot, sword in hand. He threw himself into the water to save himself and hid in the woods, to hide from the other men and his shame from himself. No, these wounds are not from sword or spear, look—they are scratches from thorns.

Sisera recounts the battle as if his real opponent had been the Hebrew God, the "invisible enemy god" who caused the sudden thunderstorm. In the description he gives, the first part reverses the account found in Judges 4, while the second part (the description of the storm) is based on Judges 5, the poetic account. He says:

> When we were face to face, they took flight, they didn't dare resist us, and my men had almost reached the summit of the mountain and victory could have been ours. But then from the heavens, the tempest, torrential water, hailstones, lightning. The Israelites shouted and sang with joy. And the course down from the mountain began, with the crazy screamers at our heels. Why did I not myself

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38) Gavazzeni 1941: 120.

> challenge the punishing God? Why didn't I tell him to be a man of flesh and blood and face me? O invisible enemy god, Sisera calls you and defies you!

Jael enters the tent, then returns with a goatskin and bowl, and gives Sisera a mug of milk. He drinks and gives back the cup; she looks at him with eyes full of pity and love. This too is a counter-reading. In the biblical account, it becomes clear at the end that the offer of milk was motivated by neither pity nor love, but was presumably a way of putting Sisera at ease, keeping him free of suspicion, and possibly also helping him fall asleep.

Sisera, sweetly and intensely affectionate, says:

> O my only friend, I thought of you. Maybe only for you I wanted victory, because you were proud of your lord; and maybe only for you I didn't want to die on my chariot. And afterwards, still, I didn't want to come here.

Sisera's music here is panting and breathless, with no soaring lines; it is sustained but not calm.[39] Sisera telling Jael he did not want to come back to her, but could not stop thinking of her, fills in the gap of intent/motive. Jael begs him not to leave, saying she will show him secret paths at night. She also suggests:

> Maybe you can regain your kingdom and return to Charoshet to your mother's house where she is waiting.

He utters a lamenting cry at this thought, and sings in a voice choked with tears, in a "completely new kind of aria, of quintessential poetic humanity, of highly emotional words. These verses will be heard again, in a different harmonic sound, when Jael remains alone after the soldiers have taken away Sisera's body":[40]

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[39] Gavazzeni comments that "Sisera, in Pizzetti's music and lyrics, is a type of man that exists beyond visible acts in the narrative; he exists beyond 'fact.' He doesn't live in the theatrical action but in the 'dialogue,' much like Jael." Gavazzeni additionally comments that Pizzetti's way of mixing themes and new inventive melodic units "reaches its purest beauty in this final Jael-Sisera duet" (Gavazzeni 1941: 121).

[40] Gavazzeni 1941: 125.

> She is there, behind the bars, my mother, with her most trusted and loving attendants, looking out over the plain, her tired eyes more tired from the watching.

Here the libretto includes direct quotes and paraphrases from the biblical text (Judg. 5:28-29). This conquering general's emotional attachment to his *mamma* is very culturally specific.[41] Pizzetti assumes if Sisera's mother is longing for his return, the reverse must also be true. The counter-reading makes Sisera's mother a sympathetic person, one for whom the listener will feel empathy. The empathy for Sisera, found in both text and music, reflects the understanding that Sisera has a mother he adores just like every other grown (Italian) man. Jael maternally caresses his hair. Mara spots them, and runs away. Jael sings to Sisera of her love for him, in a passionate outburst:

> O my lord, I felt it, that you would come, and I awaited you to come with you, to be yours, whether you be king or beggar, doesn't matter to me. You, you, you alone I love! I beg and implore you don't leave me, come into my tent, let's wait for the day to pass and together we will flee, I know every path and I will lead you to your sea. Come into my tent, stretch out on my bed and sleep without fear. Do you want me with you? I will wrap my arms around your neck and will put your head upon my breast. Oh, how much bitterness you must have in your heart, for your mouth to taste so bitter. But my mouth is full of sweetness, there is honey on my mouth, come and fall asleep.

The phrase "You, you alone I love" is sung on four repeated *a"s*, a choice of dramatic impact in the music over text. After she kisses him, there is an intertextual reference to Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* (1909; based on the Oscar Wilde play) in which Salome sings of the bitterness of John the Baptist's mouth on the decapitated head she is kissing. This could be a deliberate reference foretelling Sisera's fate. Though he is not decapitated, he is still killed by a bloody blow to his head, and there would certainly be blood in his mouth.

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[41] In fact, a recent article about Silvio Berlusconi (leader of the Forza Italia party), discussing his release from the hospital, is titled "Silvio dimesso va dalla mamma" ("Silvio, released, goes to visit his mamma") (*E Polis*, Rome, November 28, 2006).

Sisera tries to pull away, but finally succumbs and enters the tent with Jael.[42] Gatti's comments about the Jael-Sisera relationship, like those of Gavazzeni, ignore the contradictory nature of this portrayal:

> Sisera becomes purely a man only before the woman he loves; here he reveals all his goodness…in his words to her when he finds refuge in her tent, there is timidity, whispered words like a confession to himself; the lover and mother are both with his spirit in the final hour: the purity of a son's love is not contaminated next to the sweetness of his other love, and the two musical expressions live in the same atmosphere.[43]

Mara enters with Deborah; Jael exits the tent to face her. Deborah tells Jael she has done well to trap Sisera in the net for the Israelites, but Jael tells her she will protect him. Deborah responds:

> Are you not still the one who promised Deborah to do what God wants her to do? Certainly you have trapped Sisera in the net to consign him to the Israelites, who want him and will have him. The day of your glory is here, O strong woman.

Jael tells her to keep her voice down, to which Deborah says:

> Are you afraid the lion will awake? The lion is tired, in a deep sleep, and you know it well.
>
> Jael responds: And you, you waited till he was closed in a cage and asleep, to take him by surprise and strike him? But beware! Someone is awake and defending him.
>
> Deborah: A woman defends him.
>
> Jael: Yes, a woman, who can look you in the face without trembling.

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42) Gavazzeni comments: "Sisera resolves the contradictions of his human nature—violence and nobility, barbarity and affection—only in the love for this woman, and in this love his life ends. As in other Pizzetti works, there is a Christian tension which must go against the law to affirm the possibility of earthly love" (Gavazzeni 1941: 120-121).

43) Gatti 1934: 27.

Her voice descends to *g*, with an alternate *g* written in the score. The low end of the vocal range in this phrase could indicate Jael's power and confidence.

> Deborah: You defend the enemy of your people? Open your curtain and offer the bed to the dragon who killed and devoured your brothers?
>
> Jael: God allowed him to flee.
>
> Deborah: Yes, maybe to test you, not to help him escape his punishment. You see? God sent me on his tracks!
>
> Jael: Deborah, O holy mother, with the Canaanite people defeated, Sisera is no longer king nor ruler, he is a miserable desperate beggar. What can it matter to you if he dies before your eyes or far away where no one need see him except the plants and the sky and his woman?
>
> Deborah: He is an enemy! And I must annihilate him! Every breath of life of an enemy is against my people and I must put it out—understand?
>
> Jael (almost afraid): If I knew your enemy to be deserving of life, noble, above all the best of your people?
>
> Deborah: I would need to finish him anyway, always.

An *ostinato* passage in the bass, an ominous sound, starts in the orchestra. This dialogue highlights a recurrent theme in this work, the testing of and by God. The viewpoints of the two women depict what Pizzetti described as "human" justice (Jael) and "divine" justice (Deborah).

> Deborah: You, who were elected by the Highest to be an instrument of justice, now you want to betray your God and your brothers? And the anger of the Terrible one, you want it to fall on them for you, for your sin?

Jael sings, in a suffocated voice, on descending passages: "Quiet, quiet."

> Deborah: You would like to flee, with him? Where would you flee, that the arm of God wouldn't reach you? You will find every bed too short, all the blankets too poor, in vain will you try to cover yourselves. [Jael interjects: "Pity, pity."] The angel of God will pass and one blow for two lives, one sole blow for two lives. But this could be the day of your glory. You yourself will put Sisera in the hands of your people.

As in other parts of the libretto, Deborah's language is "biblicized." Phrases recall passages describing God's punishment found in Deuteronomy 28, Exodus 23 and Leviticus 26.

> Jael cries out: No, never, I don't want to!
>
> Deborah: I require you in the name of the just God who sees you and me.

Jael sings an ascending chromatic wail from *b-flat'-a"-a-flat"* :

> But you, who never have pity on the sadness of men, are you so sure to understand God's will?
>
> Deborah: Yes I'm certain.

This dialogue underlines once again the contrast between the two women, and Deborah is depicted as pitiless in her following of God's will. Gavazzeni comments:

> In the final Debora-Jael duet, a dramatic dialectic dominates, one of the strongest such examples in the opera. This is one case where the musical writing is secondary, where it seems to signal only the skeleton of musical forms, allowing the dramatic words to emerge in all their natural violence, along with the situation and the characters in antithesis. Yet it is important again to stress that, even more than in the previous acts, the suggestion and value come from the force of the musical vocabulary.[44]

Gatti notes the change in Jael's voice in this final scene, in her confrontation with Deborah:

> The heart of the loving woman no longer trembles: passion and grief have transformed her, and before the inexorable prophetess she dares to raise her face and proclaim the new law. She is the victorious one, who knows how to find in love the reason for a more elevated life and faith.[45]

Gatti's analysis makes today's reader pause to ask if this might really have been the point Pizzetti was making. Would a Christian audience

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44) Gavazzeni 1941: 134.
45) Gatti 1934: 25.

have identified with Jael/Sisera as Christ victorious? And would they equally have equated Deborah with antiquated Hebrew law?

There are early Christian interpretations along these lines which might have been familiar to Pizzetti. For example, in a third century anti-Marcionite work, "The Harmony of the Fathers," the woman's victory with a wooden weapon anticipates Christ's victory over death on the cross. Ambrose (c.339-97 CE), bishop of Milan, thought Jael prefigured the Church or the bride of Christ: like Jael, the Gentile Church, guided by prophecy, gains the final victory over the enemy. Ambrose thought Judges 4-5 was about "the battle of faith and the victory of the Church."[46]

Deborah tells Jael that soldiers have surrounded them and if Jael wakes Sisera and sends him out, she will watch him killed and he will believe she betrayed him. The music gets faster and louder, culminating in a *ff* descending chromatic passage. Jael tries to get up, falls, tries again, finally takes the hammer she finds on the ground and a long pointed peg and, begging Sisera's forgiveness for what she is about to do, she resolutely enters the tent. As she enters, the "Oeoh" voices become louder, and the soldiers enter. They start singing "Death to Sisera; here is the tent, here he is." As they stand in front of the tent, there is a furious "Oh'", loud and confused. Deborah enters behind them. Jael appears, upright, takes a step out of the tent, holding a flap open so they can see inside. The men stop. She sings, above only sparse accompaniment:

> Down with your swords and spears, isn't it Sisera's body you are looking for? Take it, inside, he is there.

A soldier goes inside and calls out:

> It's him, he's still warm. She punctured his temple with a nail.

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[46] Gunn 2005: 57. Allegorical and typological understandings of Jael in this story were popular for centuries, both among Catholics and Protestants. For Catholics, Jael was often seen as a prefiguration of Mary, especially in the sixteenth century. In the Baroque period, Jael was more often depicted in paintings as a well-dressed temptress, rather than the Virgin. In the Protestant tradition, Jael prefigures Mary and the victory over Satan (Gunn 2005: 72).

Exclamations of stupor are heard, while others sneer. Deborah says to Jael, intensely:

> Did you hear the voice of God?
>
> Jael: Not of your God, of another whom you don't know.

This cryptic phrase could be a reference to Christ. Since Jael had earlier proclaimed her belief in the Hebrew God, the phrase is difficult to understand unless it is a veiled reference to early Christian interpretations of this story discussed above. The men call out:

> Glory to the God of war; come take him out; God's right hand has won; the prophecy of Deborah has been fulfilled, glory to the holy mother of Israel, and blessed for all time the wife of the Kenite, honor and glory to Deborah and Jael. Let us sing a new song to God.

The chorus, preceded by Deborah, holds up the corpse and sings a chorus of praise. Jael repeats Sisera's words about his mother to a simple tune. She breaks off crying and sobbing. Gavazzeni interprets this as a scene of Jael "hallucinating":

> This fantasy image of the mother signaling and calling out from afar in the dying light is completely invented. Pizzetti's "pietas" here, in the stupendous close of the opera, reaches its maximum musical potential, within the architecture of a theatrical form.[47]

But it is not clear if Jael is remembering and repeating Sisera's words, or identifying with his mother—since they have both lost the man they loved—or indeed if she is hallucinating. Determining Jael's state of mind would be up to both the interpreter of the role and the audience.

The simpleton starts singing "Alleluia" to himself, then laughs, which becomes a sob; then he runs to Jael and kneels near her, taking a corner of her garment and kissing it. The curtain descends as the orchestra plays a final soft C major chord, the most optimistic of keys.

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[47] Gavazzeni 1941: 125.

This ending leaves us wondering with whom we were supposed to sympathize. Because of the triumphant final chorus and the bright key, the music suggests this is a positive ending. Deborah, on the side of God and Israel, has won. But the emotional drama of Jael and Sisera has not been happily resolved, and the listener who developed sympathy for those two characters will not find C major an appropriate key for their unhappy end.

This opera has a very specific cultural context, in which Jael and Sisera assume colors and passions lacking in the sparsely-narrated biblical story. There seem to be coded messages for the Christian listener aware of symbolic interpretations of the characters. We may be disturbed by these alterations; we may love or hate these characters, embrace or reject them. We certainly cannot hear this opera and remain indifferent. This setting will make us question all of our previous assumptions about the characters in this story, which we will never read the same way again.

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Oratorio as Exegesis: The Use of the Book of Isaiah in Handel's *Messiah*

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Abstract

Handel's *Messiah* is among the best-known musical compositions of all time, and it is also heavily dependent upon the Bible for its theme and content, thus making it an ideal source for a study of the Bible in music. In this paper I consider how Handel and his librettist Charles Jennens made use of the text of the book of Isaiah (the single most quoted biblical book in the libretto) in both the words and the music of this great oratorio, offering *en route* some observations on the features of a musical text that need to be taken into account in 'reading' it in this way.

Keywords

Isaiah, music, Handel, *Messiah*, oratorio

This paper is about two of the great icons of world culture, the Bible and Handel's *Messiah*, and what they have in common. For those of us who live in the United Kingdom in particular, the link between the two is rather more than thematic. *Messiah* is as foundational a cultural artefact to the life of Middle England as the Bible is a religious one. To many of us, for all the alien origins of both,[1] there is something particularly and peculiarly English about both the Good Book and the Greatest Oratorio, and both have, at least in some sense, transformed, even as they have been transformed by, the life of our nation.

[1] The oratorio is of course the product of a German-born composer first performed in Ireland, and the world which gave us the earliest biblical traditions is a universe away from the UK culturally if not geographically.

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The particular version of the Bible I have in my sights here is the most English of versions, as well—the 1611 Authorised Version or AV, which played a prominent role in the shaping of popular, as well as spiritual, culture in the United Kingdom for over three and a half centuries. It was to this translation, albeit mediated through the lectionaries of the *Book of Common Prayer*, that Charles Jennens turned in 1741 when he sought 'another scripture collection' as a libretto for a new oratorio he would have George Frideric Handel compose and 'perform …for his own benefit in Passion Week': *Messiah*.[2] Without the Bible, this oratorio would have neither text nor theme, and all that, along with its broad familiarity to so many of us, makes it ideal source material for a study of the Bible in music.

To cover every part of the libretto would be unwieldy and indeed impossible in a comparatively brief discussion, so I will be limiting my analysis to the oratorio's references to just one biblical book, Isaiah. But I will not be dealing with the libretto alone. It seems to me that such a study cannot be adequately undertaken without due consideration of the actual music itself. Handel's contribution to the work is in itself as significant a piece of biblical interpretation as that of Jennens, and it too is deserving of serious analysis and critical examination, so, after some methodological observations, I will conclude with a short 'reading' of one of the oratorio's favourite choruses as a piece of exegesis. There is much to be said concerning the libretto first, however.

Isaiah in *Messiah*: The Libretto

Handel's librettist, Jennens, disappointed with the poor preparation of the previous versions, took personal responsibility for the production of the wordbook for the London premiere of the work at Covent Garden in 1743.[3] At that stage he took the opportunity to divide the estab-

[2] Charles Jennens, Letter to Edward Holdsworth of 10 July 1741, cited by D. Burrows, *Handel: 'Messiah'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 11. It is interesting to note that Jennens had a commercial as well as more inspirational motive for the composition.

[3] Burrows, *Handel: 'Messiah'*, p. 29.

lished three parts of the oratorio into scenes, and the outline he produced makes for a useful summary of *Messiah*'s contents:

> **I** (i) The prophecy of salvation; (ii) the prophecy of the coming of the Messiah and the question, despite (i), of what this may portend for the world; (iii) the prophecy of the virgin birth; (iv) the appearance of the angels to the shepherds; (v) Christ's redemptive miracles on earth.
> **II** (i) The redemptive sacrifice, the scourging and the agony on the cross; (ii) his sacrificial death, his passage through Hell and resurrection; (iii) his ascension; (iv) God discloses his identity in Heaven; (v) Whitsun, the gift of tongues, the beginning of evangelism; (vi) the world and its rulers reject the Gospel; (vii) God's triumph.
> **III** (i) The promise of bodily resurrection and redemption from Adam's fall; (ii) the Day of Judgement and general resurrection; (iii) the victory over death and sin; (iv) the glorification of the messianic victim.

It is clear from just a cursory glance, therefore, that prophecy features prominently in the oratorio, and actually it is even more prominent than the above outline admits openly, for many of the key passages of the Hebrew Bible traditionally identified by Christians as 'messianic prophecies' are used throughout the oratorio, not just in the first two scenes which explicitly use the word. And the single largest source of such prophetic quotations is, as might be expected, the book of Isaiah. Out of the fifty-two numbers of the oratorio, some thirteen quote Isaiah, with a total of twenty-five verses out of the eighty-five in the whole libretto, making it the most frequently cited book.[4] It is quoted directly in the following numbers:

Part One
1. Recitative *Comfort Ye* (Isa. 40:1-3)
2. Aria *Every Valley* (Isa. 40:4)
3. Chorus *And the Glory* (Isa. 40:5)
7. Recitative *Behold, A Virgin Shall Conceive* (Isa. 7:14)
8. and 9. Aria and Chorus *Oh Thou That Tellest* (Isa. 40:9; Isa. 60:1)
10. Recitative *For Behold, Darkness* (Isa. 60:2-3)
11. Aria *The People That Walked in Darkness* (Isa. 9:2)
12. Chorus *For unto Us a Child Is Born* (Isa. 9:6)
17. Recitative *Then Shall the Eyes* (Isa. 35:5-6)

[4] Psalms is next, with 16 verses cited.

18. Aria *He Shall Feed His Flock* (Isa. 40:11; Matt. 11:28-29)

Part Two

21. Aria *He Was Despised* (Isa. 53:3; Isa. 50:6)
22. Chorus *Surely He Has Borne Our Griefs* (Isa. 53:4-5)
23. Chorus *And With His Stripes* (Isa. 53:5)
24. Chorus *All We Like Sheep* (Isa. 53:6)
29. Recitative *He Was Cut Off* (Isa. 53:8)
36. Duet and Chorus *How Beautiful Are the Feet* (Isa. 52:7-9)[5]

A presentation of the data in this way makes a few things immediately obvious, all of which are related but need to be pointed out explicitly. First, the Isaiah passages are largely focussed into three substantial sequences, numbers 1-3 (Jennens's Part One Scene One), 7-12 (Part One Scene Three) and 21-24 (Part Two Scene One), with only numbers twenty-nine and thirty-six functioning apart from any other Isaianic context. This tells us more about the structure of the oratorio than anything of great exegetical value. As the outline above illustrates, Jennens thought of his work as a number of short, self-contained elements combining to comprise the whole. Yet, particularly in some of the longer scenes, attempting to reduce the biblical content would have seriously damaged the sense of coherency and logical development of the oratorio. It perhaps takes five movements to do justice to the content of Isaiah 53, lyrically and theologically, and it is therefore not really surprising that it is quoted at greater length over the course of a few separate numbers.

Second, the passages referred to are pre-eminently those that have historically been identified by Christians as Isaiah's prophecies of divine

[5] The history of the development of *Messiah* is almost as complex as that of the Bible itself, it sometimes seems, and this particular number has a particularly contorted history, more information upon which can be found in any of the standard introductions to the work, which include Burrows, *Handel: 'Messiah'*; Watkins Shaw, *The Story of Handel's Messiah, 1741-1784: A Short Popular History* (London: Novello, 1963); R. Luckett, *Handel's Messiah: A Celebration* (London: Gollancz, 1992). Suffice to say for now that it appears Jennens initially presented the New Testament quotation of this passage, Rom. 10:15, and that the Isaianic original was a later alteration. This seems likely given that the following movement is also from Romans 10. However, in the lectionary, Isa. 52:7-13 is set for evening prayer on the feast of the Annunciation along with 1 Cor. 15:1-35, so there is another intertextual connection there.

intervention and comfort, the birth of Jesus and his earthly ministry and his sufferings and death.[6] There are no quotations from Isaiah in Part 3 at all.[7] So there are additional Isaianic passages which have, from the traditional Christian perspective at least, a clear messianic angle, including those which speak of some kind of ultimate restoration (11:1-9 chief among them but perhaps 61:1-4 might be included too), that are well known and feature prominently in the lectionary, which could easily have been used for the libretto and would have been highly relevant to its theme but were not used. This is easily explicable and understandable. Obviously the oratorio is intended to be a setting of a number of biblical texts, not just themes from Isaiah, which, on the whole, is if anything perhaps a little over-used in the libretto in comparison with the rest of the Old Testament. Furthermore, the focus of Part Three of the oratorio is more on the belief that the Messiah's victory over death guarantees the resurrection of believers, and there is little mention of his ongoing work post-ascension or of a future physical Messianic reign on earth, even though Christian theology has been interested in exploring such issues since its earliest days and has long seen them as predicted and prefigured in the two passages I mentioned above.[8]

Third, Jennens has really taken the Isaianic portions of his libretto from just four major passages. Isaiah 9, 40, 53, and 60 are the only passages cited more than once, with 7:14, 35:5-6, 50:6 and 52:7-9 making only brief appearances (and 52:7-9 only in the contested number 36). It is clear from a quick glance at the lectionary of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* that all these passages feature in the liturgical

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6) The one exception to this is number 36, which, as I have noted, is a slightly curious case in itself.

7) Except, that, as Sawyer notes, the 'saying that is written' according to 1 Cor. 15:54 and cited in the recitative *Then Shall Be Brought to Pass* (number 47) is from Isa. 25:8 (J.F.A. Saywer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], p. 172).

8) On this, see, for example, J.T. Carroll, *The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000); C.E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); B.E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: Eschatology in the Patristic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

calendar. It would be slightly disingenuous to deny Jennens credit for his selections, however, because most of Isaiah appears at some time in the calendar for morning and evening prayer (mainly in December), and there are many passages he does not use (even, as I noted, when he might easily have done so). He does, however, retain the link the lectionary makes between certain texts—the readings for Christmas Day include Isa. 9:1-8 and 7:10-17 along with Luke 2:1-15 and extracts from all these passages are used in the same scene (though the other reading for the day, Titus 3:4-9, is ignored).

And finally, fourth, it is worthy of note, if perhaps not immediately obvious from my tabulation above, that only the first sequence 'reads' Isaiah on its own, in order. The second sequence leaps back and forward through the book somewhat, and although the third follows through chapter 53 systematically, with the exception of a brief interruption from 50:6, the scene as a whole is introduced by words from John's Gospel ('Behold the Lamb of God') and continued and concluded with passages from Psalms and Lamentations. Jennens, as we would only reasonably expect, is therefore an advocate of the 'seamless web' theory of scripture interpretation.

Let us then consider the three extended sequences I mentioned in a little more detail.

Part One Scene One: Isa. 40:1-5

The oratorio begins not with the gloom and destruction of Isaiah 1, but with the consolation of Isaiah 40. In a sense this is a rather curious place to start, even if it makes for a rather more comforting opening than might otherwise have been the case. But this means that Jennens makes no attempt to justify or explain the need for a Messiah. There might, for instance, have been good cause to begin with Gen. 3:15, which has long been understood by Christians as the earliest messianic prophecy of the Bible,[9] yet he chooses instead this great prophecy of restoration after exile. It is interesting to note Jennens's identification of this first scene in his 1743 wordbook as 'a prophecy of salvation' but nonetheless striking that he offers no reason why humankind might be

[9] One of the earliest Christian discussions of the passage (dating from c. 180 CE) can be found in Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer*. 5.21.1, for example.

considered in need of saving. Perhaps the lectionary of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* also offers something of a justification for this with Isaiah 40, for it is set there as the main lesson for evensong on the first Sunday after Christmas—not quite the start of the year in terms of either the Gregorian or liturgical calendars, but not far of either and a prominent day nevertheless.[10]

The libretto text is identical to the AV translation in the chorus *And the Glory*, though there are minor alterations in the aria—a simple streamlining of the text by the removal of the repeated 'shall be (made)'—and a more substantial removal of the phrase 'for she hath received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins' in the initial recitative. This is a phrase which poses some ethical issues, of course—making someone pay twice the appropriate penalty is hardly good, even if it might be effective, justice—but I doubt this was among the librettist's motives. It seems most likely, particularly given Jennens's choice to start his text with a message of comfort and not one of judgement, even though the latter might have provided for a more logical development of the 'argument' of the oratorio, that he felt this phrase introduced a more sinister tone to the opening than he would have preferred by talking of punishment. Really the only explicit mention of judgement in the oratorio comes much later, in numbers 38-41; and even there it is in the context of the victory of God (and/or the Messiah) over his enemies. Actually throughout the work there is no real concept of punishment upon humanity for their sin, other than that which was borne on their behalf by the Messiah himself.

Part One Scene Three: Isa. 7, 9, 40 and 60

Jennens is happy here to read Isaiah in a rather circuitous route, leaping from passage to passage to put Isaiah's words into something of a more logical order for his purposes. Here he has been reasonably faithful to the text in front of him once again, taking the text of the Bass recitative and aria numbers ten and eleven and the chorus number twelve *verbatim* and simply adding a clarificatory 'God with us' to explain the meaning of 'Emmanuel' to his citation of Isa. 7:14 in num-

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[10] On the other hand, Isaiah 1 is the very first reading of the liturgical year, set for Matins at the first Sunday of Advent.

ber seven. Things are slightly different when it comes to the aria and chorus numbers eight and nine, however, where Jennens takes the AV marginal reading, 'O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion' instead of 'O Zion, that bringest good tidings', following a long tradition established by the Septuagint and Targum and continued by the Vulgate,[11] repeating this phrase at the end of his citation of 40:9 as a 'lead in' to 'Arise, shine, for thy Light is come' (60:1; the capital 'L' is Jennens's, not the Bible's—perhaps his little way of flagging that, for him, the Light was a person and not a circumstance).

There is a simple explanation for the collocation of chapters 40 and 60 here, and that can be found once again in the lectionary. I have noted above that chapter 40 is to be read on the first Sunday after Christmas; chapter 60 similarly is set for the first Sunday after Epiphany (and in fact for the feast day itself also). In the Christian tradition Jennens represented, the two passages are therefore both given significant prominence and heavily linked to the Christmas story, so it is not surprising that he considers them significant and worth of citing as evidence of the prophetic testimony to the coming Messiah.

Part Two Scene One: Isa. 53:3-8 and 50:6

Despite the fact that *Messiah* clearly (though never explicitly) identifies the Messiah with Jesus Christ, the oratorio describes his sufferings and death entirely proleptically through the Old Testament and not through the narrative accounts of the gospels. There is therefore no trial, no words from the cross, no commendation of Jesus's spirit to God, no carrying away for burial; in short, none of the events that we associate with the Good Friday story at all. In fact the only New Testament reference in the entire first three scenes of Part Two is the quotation in number 20 of John 1:29, 'Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world'—and that image in itself arises from an Old, not New, Testament theological context (it is also placed on the lips of John the Baptist, a character often considered by popular Christian

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[11] There is a useful brief discussion of the translation of this verse in both B.S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), p. 294, and J.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66* (Dallas: Word, 1987), p. 78. Both are agreed that a reading such as that in the body of the AV text is probably to be preferred.

theology as the last of the Old Testament prophets). Isaiah therefore has a prominent function in this part of the oratorio too, as Jennens uses one of its greatest poems to speak of the Messiah's death.

Jennens has been slightly more free in his treatment of the text here. There are some very minor changes—for instance, in movement 21, he writes 'He *was* despised' for the AV's 'is', anchoring the text in a past historical event rather than imagining it as a future one. Yet it is perhaps the parts of the text that he omits, rather than those he cites, that are the most significant here. Jennens excises the phrases 'and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not', and 'yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted' from the libretto even though he quotes the majority of the text carefully. This is, therefore, obviously not the result of sloppiness, but was a deliberate omission. It occurs to me that these are the only direct physical actions in relation to the Messiah/Servant attributed to 'us' in the passage. The subject of the active verbs that remain is the Messiah/Servant himself or the Lord—never humanity at large; but the majority of the verbs are passive anyhow, describing actions done to the lead character without attributing blame for any one of them. In other words, for Jennens what happens to the Messiah in Isaiah 53 is the result of his subservience and God's will alone, and humanity is not culpable for any of the events described.

So how does Isaiah feature in *Messiah*'s libretto? As might be expected, Jennens considers it a set of source-texts for messianic prophecy, and for obvious reasons his concern throughout is the later Christological application of certain key passages and not their likely meaning in their original context. But, to my surprise at least, he leaves us with something of a neutered message theologically. There is no explanation offered for humanity's need for a messiah; no message of judgement and punishment; and no direct blame to be attached to 'us' for the crucifixion and death of Jesus, which is patently what he has in mind when citing Isaiah 53. Jennens, it would seem, was not a man to allow the unpleasantness of atonement theology to infiltrate his 'fine Entertainment'.[12]

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12) Jennens, Letter to Holdsworth, 17 August 1745 (cit. Burrows, *Handel: 'Messiah'*, p. 35).

Music as Exegesis: Some Methodological Observations

Remarkable as its libretto is, *Messiah* is known to us as a piece of music and not a collection of biblical texts, and I want now move on to consider the actual notes that Handel wrote and the sounds they produce. Studies of the Bible in both popular and classical music are, of course, by no means new. But in general they have paid little attention to the music itself, frequently focussing on the musical work as just another element in the reception history of the biblical text and paying more attention to the libretto.[13] At the same time, studies of the Bible in the visual arts have for quite some time now raised and discussed comparatively technical issues such as framing, painting technique, the use of colour and lighting, and the like.[14] I am sure that to a certain extent this reflects the impossibility of 'visualising' musical sound on the printed page without traditional musical notation (which has not at this stage earned quite the status of Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic or

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13) A recent fairly direct parallel to the present paper is Deborah Rooke, 'On the "Handel-ing" of 1 Maccabees: Thomas Morell's Use of Biblical Sources in the Libretto to *Judas Maccabaeus*', *SJOT* 57 (2004), pp. 125-138, but Rooke deals exclusively with the libretto, treating it almost as a poem. J.F.A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel*, is an excellent study of the reception history of Isaiah throughout Western Christendom, which offers many valuable insights but does not take later cultural appropriations of the biblical text into account as attempts at interpretation, and again does not seek to give attention to the music as well as the words. Surely the first extended treatment of the kind of issue I am addressing here is H. Leneman, *The Performed Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), which considers the reception of the book of Ruth in opera and oratorio and focuses heavily on the compositional techniques and musical devices used. I am grateful to the publishers for advance sighting of this book. For an example of this kind of work being done the other way round, that is, a musicologist looking at the Bible as a source for interpreting an oratorio, see K. Nott, '"Heroick Vertue": Handel and Morell's "Jephtha" in the Light of Eighteenth-Century Biblical Commentary and Other Sources', *Music and Letters* 77 (1996), pp. 194-208.

14) Just in the sphere of the Bible in film alone, recent publications include collections of essays such as G. Aichele and R. Walsh (eds.), *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), E.S. Christianson, P. Francis and W.R. Telford (eds.), *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film* (London: SCM Press, 2005) and J.C. Exum (ed.), *The Bible in Film—The Bible and Film* (Leiden: Brill, 2006). There has been a whole *Journal of Religion and Film* since 1996.

even German as one of the fundamental linguistic prerequisites of serious biblical scholarship), but it is a surprising omission nevertheless.

For, while it should be self-evident, it is important to remind ourselves that composers can reflect and portray their understanding and application of the biblical text through the actual notes that are written and played and not just in their selection of thematic source material. The fact that Handel would agree to write an oratorio about the person and work of the Messiah is significant and perhaps tells us something of his religious interests, or at least those of the world in which he lived. The precise selection of texts by the librettist is worthy of critical consideration and analysis. But there are a whole additional set of *musical* questions proper which I think are equally worth answering. We need to ask ourselves what Handel is saying to us through the *sound* of *Messiah* as well as through its words. For his compositional decisions were deliberate, conscious choices, and the preference for one option over another results from a specific intent, not from freak accident. Each choice must therefore have some significance.

According to the great musicologist and aestheticist Theodor Adorno, traditional formal analysis of music generally began with the assumption that 'the truth content of the work…is mediated through the work's technical structure'.[15] And a quick skip through the musicological literature will confirm easily enough that the traditional approach to musical analysis begins with the attempt to identify and describe the form of a piece (noting that different forms arise out of different contexts) and to highlight and critique its key themes.[16] Normally the analysis will then continue to discuss and illustrate the interaction and development of these themes over the course of the work…all of which sounds remarkably familiar to anyone schooled in

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15) T.W. Adorno, 'On The Problem of Musical Analysis', *Music Analysis* I (1982), pp. 169-187 (p. 177). He did say on the same page, however, that 'A piece by Handel—broadly speaking—may to some extent be grasped without analysis'! What Adorno is really adding to the debate in the original context of the quotation is the idea that a piece of music might have some kind of 'truth content'—before him, the focus was generally on structure for its own sake rather than for any other purpose.

16) This can readily be reviewed in such journals as *Acta Musicologica*, *Journal of Musicology*, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, *Music Analysis* and many others.

the historical-critical method of our own discipline, particularly with interests in structuralist narrative analysis. Traditional musicology along with traditional biblical scholarship has long focussed on identifying the component elements of a work and their function within it.

More recent musicology has also been on a similar journey to our own, as we have begun to see the emergence of critical theory as something of an overarching 'metadiscipline' within the arts and humanities. Ellen Rosand, in her 1995 presidential address to the American Musicological Society, highlighted the 'new approaches to music' she felt were beginning to emerge, including 'semiotics, response and reception theory, narratology, gender theory, cultural criticism' and noting 'these are just some of the analytical approaches that have been newly brought to bear on the study of music'.[17] Just as we have learned to mix a little Derrida with our Duhm, so musicologists now have to play with Barthes as well as Beethoven. This critical convergence offers us new possibilities for interdisciplinary cooperation across the humanities and whole new worlds of study, though it offers logistical challenges too. For all the commonality, there are whole dictionaries of terminology to assimilate in each new direction, and there is always the danger that anyone who is less than entirely familiar with the foundational concepts of a discipline and the history of their development will do them great injustice in a cursory glance.

Nevertheless, these are challenges worth attempting, surely, so let us take them on and attempt to read this musical score as a piece of exegesis.[18] The simplest and perhaps most logical approach to such a task is surely to adopt a phenomenological reader-response criticism, and that is what I have chosen to do here.[19] I assume that each feature of

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[17] E. Rosand, 'The Musicology of the Present', *American Musicological Society Newsletter* XXV (1995), pp. 10-15 (cited by Kofi Agawu, 'Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime', *Journal of Musicology* 15 [1997], pp. 297-307 [p. 300]).

[18] The musicologists have gone about the task in their own context with rather more sophistication than is at evidence in my own method; see, for example, N. Cook, 'Theorizing Musical Meaning', *Music Theory Spectrum* 23 (2001), pp. 170-195. I, however, am writing as a biblical scholar, and my intention is to offer an approach which, while it is musically informed, can in some measure be appropriated by non-musicians.

[19] This approach to reader-response criticism is most closely associated with the work

any musical text can be experienced by its hearers as having purpose, significance and meaning because it results from a conscious choice on the composer's part. Handel composed the music he did because he wanted to communicate a particular understanding of reality through it, and felt that the sounds he selected, in the order and manner in which he positioned them, would offer the best and most convincing image of that reality for his audience. Not that we can know a composer's intention any more than we can an author's—and, for that matter, not that it particularly matters, since the 'truth value' of a work is unveiled in its reception not its origination—but we can at least allow him an agenda.[20] That agenda has determined and delivered the oratorio we now have; and, if we are both careful and astute in our approach, we can work back from the finished product, taking note of the various features that need to be observed, considered and discussed, and draw some conclusions about the non-verbal message Handel is wanting to send to his listeners. For music can and does communicate at levels beyond the obvious audible ones, and musical genius is, perhaps, the ability to use sound to create worlds, stories, feelings, and perhaps even beliefs in this way.

In pursuit of their agenda, there are a multitude of choices and alternatives available to composers of a piece of music for every single note they write.[21] For starters, there are four universal qualities that apply to

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of Wolfgang Iser, as exemplified in W. Iser, 'Interaction between Text and Reader', in S.R. Suleiman and I. Crosman (eds.), *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[20] In one famous, but almost certainly apocryphal, story about the origins of *Messiah*, Handel is supposed to have gently rebuked the Earl of Kinnoul, who said the work was 'a noble entertainment', with the words, 'My Lord, I am sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better'. This does not really match up with what we know of Handel or the circumstances in which the oratorio was written—but it does represent an attempt at identifying Handel's compositional agenda.

[21] The volume and precise tempo of a piece of music, and, sometimes and to a lesser extent, its instrumentation are also under the control of the performer(s) at least to some degree—different composers at different periods of musical history guide and instruct their performers quite differently. Composers' instructions to performers in the Baroque era which we are considering here were generally minimal, though there were clear performing conventions (for example, the speed different movements of a suite of dances should be taken at, the manner in which melodies might be orna-

every single individual sound, over which a composer has control if he or she chooses to use them: volume, duration, pitch and tone.[22] Every individual sound will have a volume, from pin-prick quiet to earth-shatteringly loud with innumerable degrees in between; and, of course, this can change—fade in and out, get louder or softer. The time for which the sound is audible amounts to the duration of the sound. Then there is pitch, the frequency of the sound. It can be high or low, or even variable, like a wailing siren, slide trombone or pitch-bent guitar. And finally tone or timbre is the actual physical quality of the sound. This could be a simple oscillator sine wave, or a complex waveform like that of a note from a piano—brash like a trumpet or rich and soothing like a cello. Sounds do not need to be typically or apparently 'musical' to have these four qualities, and even a single sound can communicate immense amounts of information to us through its use of them. Consider the ship's foghorn and the hotel 'ring for attention' bell. Both sounds are intended to communicate a sense of presence, yet while one expresses size, power, potential danger, and demands observance, the other is a rather more polite and gentrified request for attention. Two sounds serving similar purposes in different contexts, but the four qualities of volume, duration, pitch and tone define the emotional colouring, the semantic range, if you like, of the alert they both sound. It is therefore the task of the composer and/or performer to select the sounds they feel best reflect the message, image or emotion they are trying to represent and use them to sell us their story.

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mented) at the time which provided substantial guidance and direction themselves. One classic discussion of such cases which, though dated, has never really been superseded is Thurston Dart, *The Interpretation of Music* (London: Hutchinson; 4th edn, 1967). I should also note here that I have in mind Western music in all the succeeding comments—not all of them are applicable in world music contexts. My definitions here will of necessity be cursory; for more detailed discussion of all such issues the classic authority is S. Sadie and J. Tyrell (eds.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (29 vols; Oxford: Oxford University Press, second rev edn, 2004), also available digitally as 'Grove Music Online' at <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

[22] Some composers wish to establish as much control as possible over every single aspect of each sound—a classic example here would be the work of Anton Webern, whose scores are normally very heavily annotated. See his *Six Pieces for Large Orchestra* (Opus 6) or *Variations for Orchestra* (Opus 30), for example.

When we start to combine sounds and use them together—write them into a musical composition—then a larger range of opportunities opens up: including the qualities of melody, harmony and rhythm, tempo, tonality and texture. Melody is essentially the diachronic arrangement of sounds, their juxtaposition in sequence to produce a particular tune (relying, therefore, on variations in volume, duration, pitch and tone to deliver a chain of different sounds). Harmony on the other hand is synchronic, the combination of different individual notes to provide chords (which might be either dissonant or concordant). Sometimes the harmony results from two or more melodies running alongside each other, and that would be known as counterpoint; sometimes it comes from block chords played on one or a number of instrument(s) together. Rhythm speaks of the duration and timing of the notes and determines the flow or pulse of both the harmonic and melodic elements of a piece. The interaction of these three components is unique and distinctive to each new composition, and each can be used to particular effect or to communicate something broader than mere sound.

Tempo is simply the pace or speed of the music and may remain broadly constant throughout a piece of music or change, abruptly or more subtly. It is normally indicated by the various Italian terms designated for this purpose, though the time signature of a piece (which is primarily there to mark the rhythmic pulse of the music) is often a useful indicator too. In *Messiah*, changes of tempo are used to particularly striking dramatic effect in the Alto aria *But Who May Abide the Day of His Coming?* (number six), and are combined with a dramatic change of key at the end of number 24, *All We Like Sheep.*

This last movement also highlights well for us how significant tonality and key can be.[23] In lay terms, keys amount to the various 'sound

[23] It is worth pre-empting what I will say about tonality to note that the keys used in this movement have a certain emotional resonance too. The largest part of the movement is in F major, which has long been associated with rural scenes and the countryside, and later became the key of Beethoven's Sixth or *Pastoral* Symphony, so is wholly appropriate for a chorus about sheep. The otherwise bright and perhaps inappropriately jolly melody meanders its way through quite happily until it is dragged abruptly into F minor, perhaps the most funereal of all keys, for the section 'And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all'.

palettes' or ranges of notes available to a composer. Minor scales tend to sound more sombre, sorrowful even, whereas major scales have an altogether brighter feel to them, and the key of the music itself can make a major difference to the whole sound and feel of a piece. There are many complex reasons for this, and some of them depend upon the precise instruments used. For example, string instruments such as the violin, viola and cello, for example, have four strings which all resonate to different notes when bowed or plucked and can be 'stopped' with the finger to produce different notes. But stopping the string makes it lose something of its richness and resonance—a minute change, maybe, but it is not difficult to tell when a stringed instrument is playing an 'open' note. And because of the tuning of the instruments and the usage of standard chord progressions in Western classical music, these open strings occur quite frequently in keys such as D, G and A. Such keys have a distinctive quality in string music, therefore—a richness and resonance which is not always present in keys which more rarely use open strings (such as Bb, Eb and Ab, which are often thought of as good woodwind keys). Also, until more recent times, most brass instruments could only play in certain keys, so Handel's choice of key for number 46, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, was fairly restricted (and that choice, since it determined the range of notes available to him for his compositional palette, would also have decided the vocal range and therefore the type of voice needed for the piece—resulting in the sublime conjunction of the bright, high trumpet with the rich, resonant bass voice, for technical as well as musical reasons). The piano, as well, since it was designed to be playable in any key, sounds slightly different in all of them as a function of 'equal temperament', which essentially means that most of its notes are just fractionally out of tune all the time.[24]

Other important features of any piece of music include its texture (is it comprised of block chords like a hymn, or countermelodies set against each other like a Bach fugue?) and orchestration (which instruments are used and what role do they play in presenting the various musical themes?), and then the structural element. Apart from the

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[24] See M. Lindley, 'Equal Temperament', in *Grove Music Online* <http://www.grovemusic.com> (accessed 1 March 2007).

broader musical form and structure of a piece (i.e., is it in sonata form, a minuet and trio, a rondo?), there are principles of harmonic and melodic progression in Western music which guide the composer and to which our ears have become accustomed. So the 'plagial cadence', the harmonic sequence often used for the final 'amen' in many church contexts,[25] has a sense of finality and conclusion to it. The 'leading note', the 'te' note in tonic sol-fa, instinctively leads back (hence its name) to the tonic or 'doh' note whenever it appears. Most blues music and a fair proportion of rock is based around essentially the same twelve-bar chord progression. In each case there is an established order which is complicit with traditional expectation—rules which can be broken if necessary, but which need to be broken with musical skill and for a particular purpose. In such instances, perhaps what is important is not what a musical line is or does, but how it differs from expected behaviour, how it changes and is changed by the context in which it is placed. Breaking the rules and shattering listener's expectations to good musical effect and to produce the desired emotional and intellectual response is really the true genius of any composer.

Finally, in the composition of vocal music there is an additional complication, of course, in the setting of the lyrics.[26] Obviously the music should relate and link to the words—there should be a sense of their belonging together, of a joint purpose, and they should be interdependent, interactive and mutually reflective. The timing, accentuation and intonation of the set lyrics should reflect regular speech to facilitate and not obscure communication. Obviously, there should be sufficient notes for all the syllables to be sung, set at pitches the various performers can reach.

These, then, are at least the major pieces of data we need to process in scrutinising any piece of music. So if we are to 'read' Handel's *Messiah*, these are the kind of things we should be looking for and commenting on as part of the quest for meaning in the music. Let me now

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[25] Though, interestingly, not in *Messiah*, which ends with a so-called 'perfect cadence' (perhaps that, representing as it does the great culmination of history, is equally appropriate in this context).

[26] There is an interesting discussion of Handel's setting of the libretto in Burrows, *Handel: 'Messiah'*, pp. 75-82.

try to illustrate how such a method might work in practice with a short analysis of two of the oratorio's best-known movements.

The Music of *Messiah*

The aria *The People That Walked in Darkness*, number 11, is a classic example of the excellent illustration and imitation of a libretto through the melody. The walking of which the text speaks is mirrored in the music by a consistently twisting and turning, meandering melody, marked *Larghetto* and therefore to be sung at a slightly sluggardly walking pace.[27] Throughout, the music reflects the emotional colour of the words that are set to it in obvious and more subtle ways. For example, where there is reference in the libretto to life, light, dwelling, the general inclination of the melody is ordinarily upward; and where there is reference to darkness, death and shadow the trend is generally downward. Movement in the melody at the start is by single step up and down; yet, even as the first line of the aria continues, it broadens into a huge leap down to the bottom of the performer's vocal register for the word 'darkness'—a real plummet into the abyss. It is also noteworthy that this effect is maximised by a distinct under emphasis in this aria both on harmony (large parts of the accompaniment are in unison with, that is, play the same notes at the same time as, the vocal soloist) and on rhythm, which is, with few exceptions, consistently moving at eight quavers to each four-beat bar throughout.

Particularly in conjunction with the words, then, the music for this particular aria presents a vivid and clear picture of the futile and desperate condition of those it describes, by going for something of a stroll in the dark itself. The music might be a little stark (dare I say tedious?) if it did not reflect so bleakly the situation it describes, but the piece as a whole works supremely well together and is one of the more memorable and distinctive movements of the oratorio.

That aria is followed immediately by perhaps the best-known chorus in *Messiah*. *For unto Us a Child Is Born* is sung by full four-part choir, accompanied by full string orchestra, *continuo*, two oboes and two bas-

[27] See D. Fallows, 'Larghetto', 'Largo' in *Grove Music Online* (accessed 22 February 2007) <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

soons, and is marked by the composer to be performed at *Andante Allegro*, or at a brisk walking pace, in G major, in a regular and pulsing 4-4 time. What does all that say to us that setting the movement as a D minor *Larghetto* would not? Well, from the very outset, everything about this movement speaks of joy and hope. There is a strong sense of momentum and progression to the rhythm and pulse of the piece, and G major is a bright and resonant key with plenty of open notes on the string section throughout the scale. For Handel the birth that is announced is clearly to be a matter of some celebration and joy—it is an event to delight in, not to be feared, an opportunity for salvation not retribution.

The movement has three major recurring themes: the fugal motif of 'For unto us a Child is born' (which I will label Theme A), the more rhythmic 'And the government shall be upon his shoulders' (Theme B, whose stately syncopated rhythm carries itself with fitting dignity) and the full chorus, block chords of 'Wonderful, Counsellor' (C). The themes are repeated four times each in order, with modulations or key changes to the 'dominant' key of D major and the 'subdominant' key of C major and back again.[28] Such modulations are completely typical, serving to establish the traditional tonality of the key (no obscure transitions to far-off, unrelated keys here). The piece as a whole has a clear and measured structure which conforms with expected behaviour and can be tabulated thus:

Theme A in Key G	Theme B in Key D	Theme C in Key D
Theme A in Key G	Theme B in Key G	Theme C in Key G
Theme A in Key G	Theme B in Key C	Theme C in Key C
Theme A in Key G	Theme B in Key G	Theme C in Key G

The movement's stereotypical structure does not mean that there is little of interest to say about it, however. On the contrary, when we

[28] The 'dominant' note in a scale is the fifth one up, i.e., 'so' in the tonic sol-fa system. The 'subdominant' note is so-called because it is the fifth note *down* the scale (thereby making it the fourth note of the eight note octave). The chords which originate from the tonic, dominant and subdominant of any scale (chords I, V and IV) are the primary major chords of that key and go a long way to establishing the tonality of a piece.

review it against the little checklist of items for consideration I just produced, a few features of the number suggest themselves.

First, before the vocal entry, the theme is 'announced' in a short orchestral introduction. Most of the choruses in *Messiah* start rather more abruptly, and in the few instances where there is an introduction it is not normally such an obvious statement of the movement's main theme. Handel's message here is clear: a theme is coming that you need to hear and pay attention to, dear listener. And that message is reinforced by the musical shape of the melody too. It does not begin on the 'doh' note or tonic, but on the 'so' or dominant, which is so prominent that it cannot fail to attract interest or attention, and which falls at a very nice pitch for Sopranos to sing with 'gusto', guaranteeing an emphatic entry. Handel could do little more to add emphasis and attract interest to this theme.

Second, perhaps paying attention to the setting of the words and the accents upon which they fall will help us here. The words which fall on the accented beats in Theme A are 'For…us…born…us…given…us…given'.[29] These are the words which will be heard more prominently and have the greatest impact, and therefore the words of greatest significance. The fact that 'us' is accented in its every appearance serves to highlight the core message that the birth in question is for 'us', whoever that might be.

Third, actually I think 'us' is intended to be just about everyone, and I think that is why Handel choses to set this theme fugally. The theme is first stated by the Sopranos, but they are gradually joined by the Tenors, Altos and Basses, each in their own time. It is almost as if the realisation of the significance of this announcement is spreading throughout the world like wildfire, catching light in different areas of the choir as the vocal line is passed round.

And fourth, when, after the majestic if militaristic Theme B has been and gone, the more hymnic Theme C has its moment, the whole choir is united in its declaration of praise in rich, full harmonies. Three times the conclusion is interrupted and the cycle repeats, but ulti-

[29] Interestingly, the much more rhythmic feel to themes B and C means that in both these motifs all the words are accented in at least some way.

mately it concludes with a repetition of the last line and an orchestral 'outro'.

To my mind, then, the music in this movement communicates to us a number of key concepts: a prominent element of rejoicing in the event prophesied; the need for careful attention to be given to the message and a sense of its importance; an image of the report spreading through the world, accompanied by the realisation that this birth is 'for…us', and an ultimate reconcilation of all the disparate threads of this realization into a united and global expression of praise, in itself something of a musical prefiguration of the *Hallelujah* and *Worthy Is the Lamb* choruses.

Those are just a few, very brief observations. Much more remains to be said about these two movements themselves, let alone the oratorio as a whole. And when we have finished with *Messiah*, there remains, oh, a few hundred years of Western music both sacred and secular to deal with. An immense challenge awaits us if we are to begin to do justice to the study of the musical appropriation of biblical themes and literature. Yet I would like to think that in this paper, we have taken some early and tentative steps toward the development of a detailed and thoroughgoing methodology which will be able to help us to apply to the interpretative task the insights of the great composers as well as those of their lyricists.

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'The Bosom of Abraham' (Luke 16:22): Father Abraham in the Visual Imagination

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Abstract

The phrase 'in the bosom of Abraham' occurs just once in the Bible (Lk. 16:22) and yet has become one of the most powerful and intriguing visual metaphors in the entire repertoire of Christian iconography. As the focal point of the parable of Dives and Lazarus, it suggests a haven of protection and security to which all the (male) characters in the story aspire. The Greek term κόλπος, 'bosom,' is an ambiguous term that can be applied as much to a female figure as a male and indeed Abraham is often represented as if he were 'mother of all nations' rather than, or as well as, father. The iconography associated with the image of Abraham's bosom is both extensive and complex, especially during the period of the Middle Ages, but in this article, I select a range of representative examples to illustrate how artists and iconographers appealed to other biblical texts to help illuminate the meaning and significance of the phrase in Luke: in particular, the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22; the infancy narrative of Luke including the presentation in the temple (Luke 1-2), and the woman who gives birth in Revelation 12. In interpreting the image, artists frequently followed the direction of the exegetes and Church Fathers but this does not seem always to have been the case, especially when it came to harmonizing the contrasting images of Abraham as sacrificial father of Isaac and protective father of Lazarus. Contrary to many biblical commentators, the iconographical tradition largely ignores any suggestion that the bosom of Abraham signifies Lazarus reclining at a heavenly banquet next to Abraham, preferring instead to concentrate on the challenges posed in conveying the somewhat incongruous notion of Abraham, the most venerated of patriarchs, holding a naked and vulnerable child in his bosom.

Keywords

New Testament, iconography, Abraham

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Introduction

Commentators on the Gospel of Luke have long emphasized how the author accords a special place of privilege to women: for example, Mary and Elizabeth in the infancy narrative (chapters 1-2), the women who follow Jesus to Calvary (23:27-31), and those who feature so prominently in the resurrection narrative (23:55-24:10). More recently, however, in the volume *The Feminist Companion to Luke*, two authors have questioned whether, simply because women appear more frequently in Luke-Acts than any other New Testament book, we can conclude that it is Luke's intention to bestow on them a special status and position, even to the extent of overshadowing some of their male counterparts. Mary Rose D'Angelo points out that while Luke does supply more stories about women than Mark and Q combined, these nearly always appear paired with stories about men, either in the immediate context or in the larger context of the gospel.[1] Luke-Acts is far more interested in maleness and masculinity, she argues, than other early texts. There is an unmistakable stress on masculinity: for example, some roles, specifically roles of communal leadership, are clearly marked off for men and Luke uses the divine title 'father' more frequently than Mark and Q combined. D'Angelo concludes that it is more accurate to say that Luke is concerned with gender (rather than specifically with women) and argues that her partial examination of masculinity in Luke-Acts illuminates some of the complex functions of gender diffused throughout the book. Turid Karlsen Seim, the second of the two authors in the volume, explores how women do not always fill the roles left vacant by men.[2] In Luke 1, Joseph (unlike the parallel story in Matthew) is given a much reduced role while Zechariah is muted: the author appears to empty the place of the father and negate the paternal order. The vacancy is not filled, however, by mothers (Mary and Elizabeth) but by God, since the Lukan infancy narrative is

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1) Mary Rose D'Angelo, 'The ANHR Question in Luke-Acts: Imperial Masculinity and The Deployment of Women in the Early Second Century', in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 44-69.

2) Turid Karlsen Seim, 'The Virgin Mother: Mary and Ascetic Discipleship in Luke', in Levine and Blickenstaff (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, pp. 89-105.

concerned not so much with Joseph's absence as with exploring what the divine fatherhood of Jesus actually means. In Luke 2, fathers are reintroduced at the cost of women: now they signal a spiritual fatherhood represented by the prophet Simeon who frames Mary as *mater dolorosa* in 2:35.[3] Like D'Angelo, Karlsen Seim emphasises how Luke's interest lies in the subtle juxapositioning of male and female characters, rather than in championing exclusively the role of women in the gospel story.

To my mind, it is disappointing that neither author extends her discussion to include an important and distinctively Lukan parable which focuses very specifically on fatherhood and which would have supported strongly the general thrust of their arguments (indeed, there is no reference to it at all in the biblical index to the volume). Nevertheless, the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31), centred as it is on the role of Abraham as father, must surely relate to the Lukan emphasis on the roles of fatherhood and motherhood in the infancy narrative that D'Angelo and Karlsen Seim draw attention to, a relationship that was certainly developed in the most interesting and remarkable of ways in Christian iconography, particularly during the Middle Ages.

The parable of Dives and Lazarus is particularly striking for three reasons. First, all nine characters in the story are male[4] and two of them are portrayed specifically as father figures. Abraham is called father three times by Dives (vv. 24, 27, 30) and in turn Abraham calls Dives his child (v. 25). Dives's request to warn his father's five sons of their fate is based on the premise that, as a father, Abraham will understand the feelings and concerns of a parent (vv. 27-28). God is not mentioned in the parable but Abraham appears as a divine substitute, assuming a most venerable role that makes his fatherhood seem even more authoritative. Yet, the focal point of the story, the haven of pro-

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3) Karlsen Seim follows the position of Brigitte Kahl, *Armenevangelium und Heidenevangelium: 'Sola scriptura' und die ökumenische Traditionsproblemmatik im Lichte von Väterkonflikt und Väterkonsens bei Lukas* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1987), pp. 1-6, 142-44.

4) Abraham, Lazarus, Dives, his father and five brothers. The emphasis on fatherhood and sonship makes the absence of any female family member more noticeable.

tection and security to which all the (male) characters in the story aspire, is described as a bosom, κόλπος, an ambiguous term that can be applied as much to a female figure as to a male. (The richness of the imagery is lost entirely in those translations that do not preserve the word 'bosom': for example, the NRSV has 'to be with Abraham', the NIV 'Abraham's side', and the New Jerusalem Bible uses the term 'Abraham's embrace').[5] Second, Luke, ever with an eye for the visual detail, puts into the mouth of Jesus in v. 23 what must be one of the most powerful visual metaphors in the entire Bible: the virtuous Lazarus is carried by angels to the bosom of Abraham while the rich man is prosaically and unceremoniously buried. The visual aspect is highlighted and repeated in v. 24 as Luke portrays the scene through the eyes of Dives, using two different terms for emphasis: 'raising up his eyes…he saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom'.[6] The visual image of Abraham that Luke is so keen to register in the reader's mind is that of an authoritative but affectionate father holding his child closely and intimately to his person. What the reader of Luke 16 may find most puzzling, however, is not how we are meant to understand the gender implications of the term κόλπος, but rather, considering Abraham's treatment of Isaac in Genesis 22, how incongruous such a vivid and powerful image of Abraham as affectionate parent is in the first place. Third, if we look for a parallel female figure holding her child in her bosom, we will not find it in this gospel; Luke does not ever depict Mary or Elizabeth holding an infant and the closest parallel is to another male, Simeon, who 'took the child into his arms' (2:25) in the narrative of the presentation which, like the parable of Dives and Lazarus, is related only by Luke. Iconographers, as we shall see, seemed quite preoccupied with many of these associations and were quick to draw imaginative and often unexpected parallels between

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5) The term 'Abraham's bosom' has a rich and imaginative reception history in English literature. See David Lyle Jeffrey (ed.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 11.

6) The same construction is found in Hebrew narrative. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 122, notes, 'The formulaic chain, "he raised his eyes and saw", occurs frequently in these stories [in Genesis] as a means of indicating a shift from the narrator's overview to the character's visual perspective'. The same technique is used by Luke.

Abraham as father and other biblical figures in order to draw out some of the ambiguities implicit in the term 'into the bosom of Abraham'.

The Bosom of Abraham

How should we interpret the phrase, 'into the bosom of Abraham' (εἰς τὸν κόλπον 'Αβραάμ) and what exactly does it denote? Generally speaking, the explanation given, up to the time of Maldonatus (1583 CE), was that its origins go back to the universal custom of parents taking their children into their arms or upon their knees when fatigued and offering them rest and security in the bosom of a loving parent. According to Maldonatus (*In Lucam*, xvi, 22), however, the term is derived from the custom of reclining on couches at a meal, a rabbinic custom in vogue during the time of Christ.[7] But J. A. Fitzmyer and others have argued convincingly that the phrase 'in the bosom of Abraham' is unknown elsewhere in pre-Christian Jewish literature and that it found its way into the midrashim of the Babylonian Talmud only much later.[8] In spite of this, several commentators still follow Maldonatus and draw a comparison between Lk. 16:22 and Jn 13:23 where the beloved disciple rests against the bosom of Jesus at the last supper; they deduce from this that we should imagine Lazarus reclining on Abraham's breast, enjoying a heavenly meal. As long ago as 1921, Paul Haupt vigorously contested such an interpretation on philological grounds, remarking 'we cannot suppose that when Lazarus died, Abraham was dining in a recumbent posture, and that the angels placed Lazarus on the dining-couch, so close that Lazarus' head was on Abraham's bosom', and concluded that the term must have the more gen-

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7) Mt. 8:11, which suggests the idea of the righteous eating at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (echoing 4 Macc. 13:17), was used as additional evidence to support the image of reclining at a meal.

8) J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XV1V)* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 1132. Likewise, Howard Marshall (*The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978], p. 636) argues that the idea of angels accompanying the souls of the virtuous are not found in Rabbinic sources before 150 CE. Guy Williams ('Abraham in the Christian Tradition', *Scripture Bulletin* XXXVIII. 1 [2007], pp. 15-24 [p. 20]) notes the connection with the archangel Michael escorting the soul of Abraham to heaven in *The Testament of Abraham.*

eral meaning of 'lap'.[9] Contemporary scholars have added nothing of substance to the debate and it would be true to say that explanations as to the origin and significance of the term in Luke 16:22 remain as vague and unsatisfactory now as ever.

The noun κόλπος occurs just six times in the New Testament (Lk. 6:38, 16:22, 23; Jn 1:18, 13:23 and Acts 27:39). It can mean 'lap', in the sense of a fold in a garment in which items may be held as in Luke 6:38; a reclining position at a meal in Jn 13:23 as has been noted above and a bay or inlet as in Acts 27:39. R. S. Brown translates Jn 1:18 as 'the one who is in the bosom of the father' and suggests that the term denotes affection.[10] In the New Testament, the term generally reflects classical Greek usage where it has the same range of meanings and, in addition, is used frequently as a synonym for motherly love.[11] In Rabbinic literature there are several instances where the phrase occurs: an infant who dies before the age of three is carried to the grave in his mother's bosom; in the story of the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons, the mother assures her youngest son that 'he will be bright in the bosom of our father Abraham', and Adda bar Ahaba, a third century Rabbi, after his death, sits in Abraham's bosom.

As a brief aside, it is interesting to draw attention at this point to how κόλπος, meaning 'bay' or 'inlet' (as in Acts 27:39), one of the rarer meanings of the noun, was applied to Lk. 16:22 and represented visually. Characteristic of this interpretation is the comment of Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria (twelfth century) from his commentary on the parable of Dives and Lazarus:

> The bosom of Abraham is the enclosure within which are stored up the good things that await the righteous, who after the storm have found the heavenly haven. We use the same word to name those bodies of water on the sea which are shaped liked harbors and havens.[12]

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9) Paul Haupt, 'Abraham's Bosom', *American Journal of Philology* 42 (1921), pp. 162-67 (p. 167). He argues that Luther's translation 'in Abraham's schoss' is correct since the German noun *schoss* means not only 'lap' but also 'womb'.

10) R. S. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 17.

11) See Rudolf Meyer, 'κόλπος', in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Vol. 3; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 824-26.

12) From the Orthodox Christian Information Center (www.orthodoxinfo.com).

Figure 1. Abraham, Jacob and Isaac in Paradise.
Fresco from the Narthex, Rila Monastery.
© Photo: Florentina Badalanova Geller

Several images depict the souls of the just in the bosoms of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob within the enclosure of paradise, as in this fresco from the Rila monastery in Bulgaria (fig. 1).[13] Here, Abraham nurses Lazarus and is flanked by Isaac and Jacob on either side holding the souls of the just in the folds of a garment. The souls are thus sheltered in two senses: first by the patriarchs' intimate and fatherly protection and second by the walled enclosure of paradise which acts as a haven, a bay, from the stormy ocean of life.

Returning to the probable source of the phrase, the bosom of Abraham, as we find it in Lk. 16:22: in my opinion, the most likely source of the image can be found in the Septuagint where the noun κόλπος appears some thirty-six times to translate the Hebrew noun חיק.[14]

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13) This type of image is given the standardized name of *Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Paradise* in the Princeton Index of Christian Art.

14) See G. André, 'חיק', in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Vol. IV; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 356-58.

κόλπος can refer in the Septuagint to a sexual relationship (for example, Gen. 16:5 where Hagar is given into the bosom of Abraham, or Deut. 28:56 which refers to the sexual intimacy between man and wife), to one's innermost parts (for example, in the very personal prayers of the psalmist in Ps. 35:13 or 89:51) or, most commonly, to denote the relationship between mother and child. In 1 Kgs 3:20, in the story of the two women who come to Solomon for judgment, one claims that her son has been taken away from her bosom by the other; in 1 Kgs 17:19, Elijah takes the son from the bosom of his mother; in Ruth 4:16, Naomi takes the child and lays him in her bosom; in Lam. 2:12, the lives of the children are poured out on their mothers' bosoms. In two further instances, the word κόλπος is used to denote the caring and protective role of a male: in 2 Sam. 12:3, the poor man nurses the lamb, which is like a daughter to him, in his bosom, and in Num. 11:12, God tells Moses to carry the people to the promised holy land in his bosom as a nurse carries a sucking child. The use of κόλπος in the Septuagint denoting a protective parental role and used both of male and female figures provides the key, in my opinion, to understanding the significance of the phrase εἰς τὸν κόλπον 'Αβραάμ in Luke.[15] Finally, since I have already made a comparison above between Abraham and Simeon, it is worth noting here that the phrase used by Luke to denote Simeon's holding of the child in his arms in 2:28, εἰς τὰς ἀγκάλας, is not found elsewhere in the New Testament, as is the case with the phrase εἰς τὸν κόλπον 'Αβραάμ in 16:22. Both phrases are distinctively Lukan. In the Old Testament, the arms and the bosom are sometimes found as synonyms: in the Septuagint translation of 1 Kgs 3:20 (where the woman takes the child from the bosom of the other), ἀγκάλαι is used as a synonym for κόλπος. In the Hebrew version of Isa 40:11, there is a clear parallel between 'arm' and 'bosom': (Yahweh) will gather the lambs in his arm (בזרעו) and carry them in his bosom (בחיקו).[16] The use of both terms as synonyms might suggest

[15] Peter W. Van der Horst, 'Abraham's Bosom, the Place Where He Belonged: A Short Note on ἀπενεχθῆναι in Luke 16:22', *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006), pp. 142-44, argues that ἀπο in compound verbs has the connotation of 'back to where it belongs'. Here, Luke wanted to convey the sense of Abraham's bosom as the place where Lazarus, the child of Abraham, rightfully belonged.

[16] The LXX translates חיק as ἐν γαστρὶ here and not as ἐν κόλπω.

that Luke wants to draw a parallel between Abraham and Simeon as compassionate father figures but, whether or not this is his intention, it is certainly the case that he never uses the same intimate terminology to convey the relationship between mother and child in his infancy narrative.

In terms of Western iconography, many artists would have followed the Vulgate translation of the phrase, *sinus Abrahae*, and especially the Church Fathers' interpretation of the word *sinus*. In classical Latin, one of its most common meanings was to denote the fold of the toga which effectively acted as a pocket in which various objects could be carried around (in Latin, this meaning was much more common than in the corresponding Greek usage of κόλπος.) *Sinus*, in some cases, could also be used as a euphemism for the female genital organs; but where *sinus* and *uterus* are used as parallel terms, *sinus* overwhelmingly refers to the inner organs of men (the space between the chest and the arms, according to Jérôme Baschet) while *uterus* refers to women.[17] From these associations, Baschet underlines the notion of intimacy that the word *sinus* could suggest, with its ability to designate both the inside and outside parts of the body and the folds of the clothes that loosely covered them.[18] Many of the Church Fathers were especially interested in the meaning of *sinus* as a cloth or garment and derived several metaphorical uses of *sinus* connected to various types of textiles: this accounts for the ubiquitous depictions of Abraham (often alongside Isaac and Jacob) holding Lazarus, or the souls of the just, within different kinds cloths and textiles, or tucked deep inside the mysterious folds of their garments.[19]

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17) Exceptionally, however, the Vulgate uses *de utero tuo* of Abraham in Gen. 15:4 where God promises him 'no one but your own very issue shall be your heir'. See Jérôme Baschet, *Le Sein du père: Abraham et la paternité dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), pp. 206-08.

18) Baschet, *Le Sein du père*, p. 207.

19) In iconography, the significance of the cloth went far beyond the folds of Abraham's garment. Baschet (*Le Sein du père*, p. 209) gives some fascinating examples where, in the Exodus story, the Israelite women are shown carrying their children in the folds of their garments in exactly the same way that Abraham holds Lazarus in the folds of his garment.

Figure 2. Abraham with the Souls of the Righteous in his Bosom.
Pamplona Bible, 108, f. 255 v.
Amiens Public Library

One of the main purposes pictorially of the cloth or fold of the garment was to act as a symbolic link uniting all the souls of the righteous and within which they could melt into a single mass.[20] The righteous could thus be represented in the bosom as a compact harmonious group. The brotherhood of the elect is shown by the uniformity of the figures gathered at Abraham's breast. All difference in age disappears and the elect are all the same age, whether little children or sometimes young people, and all either male or of indeterminate gender. There are only two generations: father Abraham and the community of his children, as this example from the 1197 Bible of Pamplona illustrates

[20] See Jérôme Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham: Between Fleshly Patriarch and Divine Father', *Modern Language Notes* 108 (1993), pp. 738-58 (pp. 753-54).

(fig. 2) with its large number of the elect, indistinguishable from one another, in the folds of the patriarch's body clothes.

The early Church Fathers were more concerned with the location and function of Abraham's bosom and with the number and identity of its occupants rather than focusing specifically on Luke's use of the word κόλπος.[21] Nevertheless, their deliberations on the subject frequently found their way into the iconography of the bosom of Abraham in one way or another. For the early Church Fathers, the bosom of Abraham was, first and foremost, a region in the upper area of Hades. Augustine refuses to interpret it as a place in the material sense and stressed its 'mysterious' nature, associating it generally with idea of paradise. Tertullian, on the other hand, seems to have interpreted the parable as a real event; emphasising the corporeal nature of the soul after death, he points out that, in Luke 16, Dives in the afterlife has a real tongue, Lazarus a real finger and Abraham a real bosom. In Tertullian's view, therefore, Abraham's bosom had to be a physical attribute of his person, as well as a region. Consistent with his view of the corporeal nature of the soul, Tertullian emphasised Lazarus's constant need for refreshment and nourishment in the bosom. An aspect that apparently appealed greatly to him was the idea of a *refrigerium*, the refreshment of the dead in the afterlife, important in ancient Egypt and also widely disseminated in Rome. This ancient Egyptian concept became associated with the image of Abraham's bosom in early Christian times, according to Van der Lof. [22] Thus, Lazarus experiences a delicious coolness in Abraham's bosom as opposed to the burning fires of hell experienced by Dives; Lazarus has an everlasting fresh water supply while Dives is eternally parched with thirst. The streams of water flowing from paradise can be seen in fig. 1 and the nourishment of Lazarus by Abraham in fig. 6.

Whatever the difficulties and ambiguities philologists may find in the phrase, the metaphor of Abraham's bosom clearly provided an opportunity for artists and iconographers to demonstrate Abraham's paternal function visually. Abraham is mentioned more often in Luke than in any other New Testament book and on almost all occasions in

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[21] L. J. van der Lof, 'Abraham's Bosom in the Writings of Irenaeus, Tertullian and Augustine', *Augustinian Studies* 26 (1995), pp. 109-123.

[22] Van der Lof, 'Abraham's Bosom', p. 120.

vocabulary that indicates paternity: he is the only one of the ancestors (τοὺς πατέρας ἡμῶν) mentioned by name in Mary's magnificat (1:55); in Zechariah's speech, he is described as 'Abraham our ancestor', Αβραὰμ τὸν πατέρα ἡμῶν; he is the father of Jesus in the Lukan genealogy (3:34); the woman with the evil spirit is the daughter of Abraham (13:16) and Zacchaeus, the tax collector, is his son (19:9). So in expressing the fatherhood of Abraham visually, there was much more to incorporate than simply the cherishing of the soul of the dead Lazarus. Certainly the visual possibilities inherent in Luke's use of this rich metaphor, especially its terminology that appeared to blur gender boundaries with respect to the fatherhood of Abraham, were not lost on them.

The Bosom of Abraham as Visual Metaphor

In the 1990s, the medievalist Jérôme Baschet carried out a comprehensive study of the significance of the bosom of Abraham in the Western Christian world, basing his conclusions on a detailed analysis of some two hundred images from the Middle Ages.[23] According to his findings, depictions of the subject begin to appear around 1000 CE, develop considerably until the thirteenth century, and then decline in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They appear in manuscripts, in painted or carved monumental ornamentation, in stained glass, on plaques on tombs and on liturgical items. There are three distinct contexts in which the image occurs: in the Parable of Lazarus, the Last Judgment and independent images of heaven. Baschet's hypothesis is that the bosom of Abraham, insofar as it shows heavenly reward in terms of a reunion with the father, should be considered not in isolation but as part of the medieval system of kinship. Abraham fills a strategic position in that he is involved across three domains: fleshly, spiritual and divine kinship.[24]

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[23] Jérôme Baschet's study of the importance of the image of Abraham's bosom within the social and religious contexts of the Middle Ages is the only one that has been undertaken for this period. See his two comprehensive studies, 'Medieval Abraham'(1993) and *Le Sein du père* (2000).

[24] Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 742.

Often visual images of Abraham's bosom reinforce his identity visually with the words 'Pater Abraham', but even when there are no scriptural quotations, it is the expression of the paternal relationship between Abraham and Lazarus, where Lazarus is shown as a child in his father's arms, that gives images of the bosom of Abraham their forcefulness. The close connection is sometimes reinforced by Abraham's beard which joins Lazarus pictorially to the head of the figure of Abraham. In an illustration from a fifteenth century Book of Hours, the cloth holding Lazarus is held at an angle to indicate a rocking movement and suggests that Abraham is concerned to give Lazarus an ever more perfect rest.[25]

Figure 3. Abraham Rocking the Souls of the Just
Book of Hours, Utrecht, Wittert 3, f. 195 v.
Liége University Library

[25] Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 746.

The image of the bosom of Abraham facilitated the notion of Abraham as spiritual father, promulgated by Paul (Rom. 4:1-25; 9:7-9 and Gal. 3:6-29) and developed by the Church Fathers, especially Augustine. The souls depicted in his bosom are to be imagined as his spiritual children.

There is a dense network of images that mirror the bosom of Abraham in the Middle Ages, sometimes in a very striking way: among these are the Virgin and Child, or the trinitarian version of divine fatherhood.[26] Clearly, therefore, the iconography associated with Abraham's bosom is vast (extending far beyond the medieval period to which Baschet restrict himself and including the early Christian monastic and Eastern orthodox traditions) but, for the purposes of this article, I want to focus chiefly on three aspects of the image that help illumine the significance of the phrase as we find it in Luke: the contrast between the image of Abraham as sacrificial and benevolent father; its associations with images of motherhood, and the parallel drawn between the spiritual fatherhood of Abraham and Simeon.

Sacrificial and Benevolent Father

For the reader of Luke, the image of Abraham cradling Lazarus in his bosom must surely contrast dramatically with the image of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac in Genesis 22—the two scenes that feature most prominently in the iconography of the patriarch. Visual representations of the sacrifice of Isaac came into existence very early in the history of Christian iconography and quickly became one of the most frequently painted of biblical subjects. That Gregory of Nyssa should comment that he could not look at representations of the sacrifice of Isaac without being overcome with sadness suggests that such images were being used widely for contemplation by the sixth century.[27] Another popular, though later, subject in Western art was Abraham's dismissal of his son Ishmael (Gen. 21:14) that conveys yet another troubling incident in the patriarch's custodianship of his children. Artists and craftsmen, even from early Christian times, who depicted the

[26] Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 743.

[27] Gregory of Nyssa, 'De deitate filii et spiritus sancti', *Patrologia Graeca*, 46.

parable of Lazarus and Dives would certainly have been familiar with at least a range of images of the Akedah, if not the dismissal of Ishmael as well. That Abraham should be depicted not only as the cruel and pitiless father of Isaac but also as the protector and cherisher of his son Lazarus must have conveyed to viewers through the centuries just how enigmatic and contradictory Abraham's modelling of fatherhood could be.

Jérôme Baschet provides three superb examples from the Middle Ages illustrating how the image of Abraham sacrificing Isaac and the image of Abraham's bosom were depicted alongside each other to suggest two contrasting facets of one and the same person.[28] The first example is taken from an illustrated Bible (early thirteenth century) where, under the initial G in Genesis 22, a depiction of Abraham holding three small figures on his lap is included alongside an image of the Akedah. Baschet notes the sheer unexpectedness of the image here since it appears so incongruous with the text it seeks to illustrate. His second example is taken from the entrance to the church of Saint-Michel-de-Lescure near Albi where the same two biblical scenes are featured as sculptures on facing capitals and presented in such a way that the viewer cannot fail to make a connection between them. On one capital, Abraham brandishes the knife and grasps Isaac by the hair while an angel raises his hand to prevent him killing Isaac. The opposite capital depicts an intense struggle as the devil drags Dives to hell while Abraham grasps Lazarus closely to his bosom. The figures are carved and positioned in such a way that the viewer associates Isaac with Lazarus, both sons of Abraham, but who receive different treatment at his hands.

In the first scene, Abraham, the sacrificing father, raises a murderous hand over his son while in the second, the protective father embraces his son Lazarus in his arms. The first sculpture expresses unambiguously the notion of paternal aggression against a son which the angel tries to prevent while the second portrays the aggression of the devil from which Abraham decisively snatches Lazarus. Baschet takes his third example from the altar of the church at Lisbjerg in Denmark. Here, on each side of the altar are two medallions depicting the sacri-

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[28] Baschet, *Le Sein du père*, pp. 150-53.

fice of Isaac and Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. There is a direct and intentional rapport between the two medallions: Abraham is at the centre of both images, grasping Isaac tightly in one and nursing Lazarus on his knee in the other. Unusually, the first depicts Abraham grasping Isaac not by the hair but by his leg and depicts Isaac putting his foot on Abraham's lap as if he is about to climb onto his knee (where Lazarus is already firmly installed in the second medallion).

Apart from these examples where the viewer is presented with two contrasting biblical scenes side by side, Baschet also points out, as I have done above, that even when the parallel between the two scenes is not explicitly drawn out or is absent altogether, one image still calls the other to mind. Baschet attributes the importance given to the linking of the two scenes to Augustine who interpreted the second biblical passage in the light of the first: Abraham proved himself to be a worthy host to the souls of the virtuous, such as Lazarus, through his total obedience and faith in God, demonstrated by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac.[29] Despite Augustine's explanation and assurance, however, we get the impression from the three examples above that the contrasting actions of Abraham portrayed in Genesis 22 and Luke 16 still remained difficult to reconcile and that the craftsmen and artists commissioned to represent the bosom of Abraham in the Middle ages felt the need to try to resolve the dichotomy that existed between the two images of Abraham's fatherhood. Their solution was to focus the viewer's attention on the final (and happy) fate of the two sons, Isaac and Lazarus, rather than on the ambiguous role played by their father Abraham in bringing that fate about.

Abraham's Bosom and Associations of Motherhood

There are several interesting visual examples where the bosom of Abraham (or images of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob collectively) are associated with female imagery. They do not depict Abraham as a mother figure in any explicit way but they do draw attention to

[29] Cited by Baschet, *Le Sein du père*, p. 154.

the female connotations that the term κόλπος (or *sinus* in the Vulgate) in Lk. 16:22 was given in the iconographical history of the image.[30]

The thirteenth-century roof painting of the church at Dädesjö, Sweden, shows how the image of Abraham's bosom was closely associated with images of motherhood that occur in the infancy narrative of the gospel of Luke. The paintings on the roof depict scenes from the life of Christ in six large panels. As E. W. Tristram notes,[31] there is a clear sequence and orderliness in the arrangement of events that essentially follow the chronology of the Gospel, yet one particular episode seems quite out of place: in the panel relating to the infancy of Christ, there is an unexpected depiction of Abraham rocking a child. It occurs in the second medallion, next to that which shows an angel holding a scroll on which is written the name Luke. All the other medallions surrounding Abraham depict incidents referring to the announcement or birth of Jesus (the annunciation, visitation and nativity). The inclusion of the bosom of Abraham in the nativity sequence illustrates clearly the artist's intention to juxtapose Abraham, father of Lazarus, with Mary, mother of Jesus but it could also indicate that the artist, by explicitly naming Luke, is also making a statement that this juxtaposition was in fact the intention of the evangelist himself. It is interesting to note that while Abraham affectionately rocks the child, Mary remains more detached and aloof, giving the impression that, of the two, Abraham is viewed as the more important parental figure. In addition, it may be that Joseph, too, is contrasted with Abraham. The subject of the medallion directly above the scene of Abraham rocking the child is disputed: Tristram argues that it is most likely either an image of Joseph and Mary (with no specific biblical reference) or Joseph and Mary in the temple (Lk. 2:33).[32] The artist may be drawing a clear distinction for

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30) In two illustrated manuscripts of the Septuagint (Vat. 746, fol.79v. and Vat. 747, fol.42 r.), Abraham (and not Sarah) nurses Isaac in his lap at a feast prepared for him after his circumcision. The image, which is identical to medieval images of Abraham holding Lazarus, illustrates Gen. 21:6-7. See Kurt Weitzmann and Massimo Bernadò *The Illustrations in the Manuscripts of the Septuagint* (Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 98.

31) E.W. Tristram, 'The Roof Paintings at Dädesjö, Sweden: A Note', *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 31 (1917), pp. 111-16.

32) Tristram, 'The Roof Paintings at Dädesjö', p. 115.

the viewer between Joseph, the earthly father, and Abraham, the spiritual heavenly father. Indeed, it is even possible that Abraham in this medallion may be a substitute for God the father, thus settling definitively the question of Jesus's paternity. That Abraham, the spiritual father, could substitute for God the father was a common theme in medieval art as Jérôme Baschet has amply demonstrated and which I discuss below.

Figure 4. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Paradise with the Virgin Mary
Monastery of Mar Musa al-Habashi, Syria

The second example comes from a very different social and religious milieu. In a mural from the monastery of Mar Musa al-Habashi in Syria from the thirteenth century (fig. 4), the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, gather the righteous souls in their bosom in paradise and sit alongside the figure of the Virgin Mary. The colour and design of the garments alternate between the four figures, those of Abraham and Mary being identical, indicating a particular association between Abraham and the Virgin. The depiction of the three patriarchs in this seated position is a frequent one but the addition of the Virgin changes the way we view the mural. The emphasis on maleness and fatherhood (intensified by having grandfather, son and grandson seated alongside each other) becomes less pronounced with the introduction of the Virgin who plays exactly the same role as the three males. The introduction of the mother figure and the fact that the righteous souls in her lap are depicted in exactly the same way as they are in the laps

of the three patriarchs raises the question as to whether the artist wanted intentionally to suggest a maternal role for the patriarchs too. The mural, coming from the Eastern tradition, clearly illustrates some of the implications with regard to gender that surrounded the image of the bosom of Abraham and shows that imaginative ways of expressing the image visually were not restricted merely to the Western artistic tradition.

Figure 5. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Paradise
Coptic Monastery of Deir al-Surian, Egypt
© Photo: Karel C. Innemée, Leiden University

An early eleventh-century wall painting in the Coptic monastery of Deir al-Surian in Egypt shows Abraham, Isaac and Jacob nursing the souls of the just (fig. 5). The painting reflects the prayer commonly found on eighth and ninth-century Coptic gravestones, 'May God repose his soul in the bosom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', a sentiment which accounts for the popularity of the image in Egypt.

Each patriarch holds one child in his arms and feeds him with the fruits of paradise while two other children sit on their lap. Abraham is in the centre, distinguished by his white tunic or apron, with his son and grandson on either side. The two children that sit on each of the patriarchs' laps have the appearance of embryos or unborn children in the womb; this must be the only explanation since they are depicted in

such an unnatural and artificial posture. It is clear that the folds of the garments would be unable to support or contain the children and so we must imagine that they are within the bosom of the male figures and not external to them. This gives the impression that not only do the patriarchs act as fathers to the children but they are also given a maternal role. There is also something artificial in the way the patriarchs stare straight out at the viewer rather than focusing on the children in their care; in fact, we would expect that their attention should focus all the more on the children, given the precarious position in which they are perched. This attitude of detachment might suggest that they are seen as 'spiritual' rather than 'fleshly fathers', as Baschet suggests is the case in several Western images, or it could simply mean that the artist wanted the viewer to concentrate on the bosoms of the patriarchs where the souls of the virtuous reside rather than on the patriarchs' facial expressions. The familial or genealogical aspect is brought out in the painting by the fact that the patriarchs are presented as stern old men, grandfather, father and grandson, who create and nourish their descendants, the souls of the virtuous, depicted as their children.

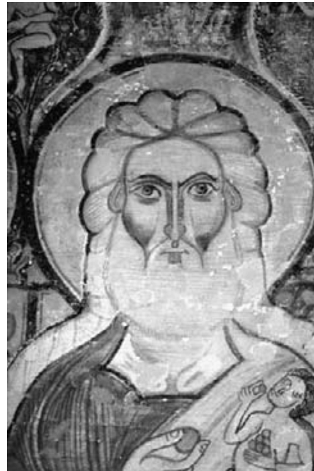

Figure 6. Detail of Abraham with One of the Souls of the Just
Coptic Monastery of Deir al-Surian, Egypt
© Photo: Karel C. Innemée, Leiden University

A fourth and final example of how the bosom of Abraham is closely associated with a female image can be found in the eleventh-century church of San Pietro al Monte at Civate in Italy.[33] In this church, murals of Abraham's bosom and the vision of the seventh trumpet (Rev. 11:15–12:17) stand above the entrance doors of the church on the inside, and are just two among the many biblical paintings that the church contains. They are in a prominent position and the fact that the faithful could see both of them simultaneously as they left the church may indicate that they were intentionally designed to serve as the main focus of the church's entire pictorial programme. The visual representation of the text from Revelation has been restricted to include only the confrontation of the woman and her son with the dragon, the raising up of the child to God and the war in heaven. Naoimi Meiri-Dan argues that in the mural the woman should be interpreted as Ecclesia, rather than Mary, since pregnancy, labour and motherhood were associated as much with the Church as with the Virgin.[34] The medieval Church conceived itself as engendering, raising and nourishing penitents within its womb through sermons, preaching and the instruction of the believer's soul. Two of the tituli over the painting, Meir-Dan argues, refer to the everlasting struggles and trials of the church: while Mary was free from the agonies of labour, Ecclesia never ceases to give agonizing daily birth to her spiritual offspring and to cry to God to deal kindly with humanity. It seems probable that the patron who commissioned the pictorial programme had relied on the *Explanatio Apocalypsis* of the venerable Bede (c. 673-735), a copy of which was kept in the scriptorium of the monastery. Bede viewed the woman of the Apocalypse as *Ecclesia Christi* which gives daily spiritual birth to the Christians whose souls will ascend to the divine presence.[35] The child, according to Meiri-Dann, should be interpreted as the soul who faces the danger of spiritual death but is reborn through baptism and who will be granted redemption and be brought close to God

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33) The church murals receive detailed treatment from Naomi Meiri-Dann, 'Ecclesiastical Politics as Reflected in the Mural Paintings of San Pietro al Monte at Civate', *Assaph: Studies in Art History* 6 (2001), pp. 139-60.
34) Meiri-Dann, 'Ecclesiastical Politics', p. 143.
35) Meiri-Dann, 'Ecclesiastical Politics', p. 146.

through faith and penitence. That the child alludes to the Christian believer is also supported by his visual appearance. He is an anonymous representative of the common people: his diminutive size and his nakedness, being conventional medieval artistic elements to characterise the soul of the believer destined for redemption, reinforces the claim that he represents the faithful soul. There is no hell represented in this image, only small devils depicted as shadows but God is shown in the centre of the composition, reigning in heaven. The child is shown twice in order to represent the chronological development from danger to deliverance. He is placed beside God, within the realm of the same huge mandorla. In this vision of the seventh trumpet, the catastrophic elements disappear or are subdued and replaced by a more optimistic spirit in order to stress the victory of the righteous rather than the fate of the damned.[36] In the mural on the parallel portal, Abraham is depicted clasping to his bosom the three tiny figures of the righteous souls.

Meiri-Dann explains that the focus here lies firmly on the reward of the righteous whose sins have been forgiven. Abraham does not appear among the trees of paradise or within an architectural framework. Rather he is shown against a neutral background, explained by the fact that in several medieval exegeses, Abraham's bosom is not considered as paradise but as the temporal abode of restorative repose for the righteous souls between their bodily death and their final resurrection.[37] Here, Abraham's bosom is a place half way between hell and heaven, thus the neutral background; it accentuates the fact that Abraham's bosom is but a half way stage for the righteous soul and that the ultimate and final destination is, as depicted in the first painting, the Heavenly Jerusalem. San Pietro al Monte was a pilgrimage church and both images visually unfold the long road of the pilgrim from sin to salvation. Their purpose was to remind the viewer on leaving the church the final reward that awaits the virtuous soul.

Meiri-Dann does not discuss the correspondence in these two images between the figures of Abraham and God the father nor how the two biblical texts are used here to interpret one another. The fact

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36) Meiri-Dann, 'Ecclesiastical Politics', p. 150.

37) Meiri-Dann, 'Ecclesiastical Politics', p. 152.

that Abraham in the mural is given the title 'father of many nations' invites the viewer to make a comparison with God the father in the parallel image. In particular, the verse 'her child was snatched away and taken to God and his throne' may relate to Lk. 16:22, 'The poor man died and was carried away to the bosom of Abraham', and provide the key to the interpretation of the two images. There is also, most probably, an intentional comparison between Abraham and the woman of Revelation 12. Bede interprets the woman as Ecclesia who gives birth daily to spiritual offspring; it may be that the viewer is expected to see in Abraham a kind of spiritual mother who, like Ecclesia, gives birth to spiritual children prepared to follow his example of faith. The comparison between the life-giving and life-nurturing role of Ecclesia, personified by the woman of Revelation 12, and Abraham would suggest that those responsible for the murals at the church of San Pietro al Monte were aware of an important visual tradition that interpreted the bosom of Abraham as akin to a womb with the ability to create and nurture life.[38]

Abraham and Simeon

As I mentioned in my introduction, Karlsen Seim makes the interesting point that in the infancy narrative the role of fathers, diminished in the case of Joseph and Zechariah, is reintroduced in Luke 2 where it now signals a spiritual fatherhood represented by the prophet Simeon who frames Mary as *mater dolorosa* in 2:35.[39] Does Luke intentionally draw a comparison between Abraham the spiritual father holding Lazarus in his bosom and Simeon holding the infant Jesus? As I pointed out earlier, both stories are unique to Luke and the fact that the two parallel phrases used (εἰς τὰς ἀγκάλας in 2:28 and εἰς τὸν κόλπον 'Αβραάμ in 16:22) appear similar and are not found elsewhere in the

[38] Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 755, notes: 'The bosom of Abraham, one could say, is a masculine equivalent of the Ecclesia, a body to which all Christians belong. The Mater Ecclesia includes all the righteous from the moment they are baptised until their entry into the triumphant community of heavenly Jerusalem'.

[39] Karlsen Seim, 'The Virgin Mother: Mary and Ascetic Discipleship in Luke', pp. 89-105.

New Testament suggests, to me, a link between the two stories. At any rate, this was certainly the case in Christian iconography.

Figure 7. Simeon Holding the Infant Jesus
Early Roman wall painting

As in the case of the Akedah, the history of the iconography of Simeon in the temple goes back a very long way and would certainly have been a well known image to iconographers from the early Christian centuries. The presentation is one of the great feasts of the Orthodox liturgical calendar and is known from at least the fourth century while its iconographic tradition was fully established by the ninth. The prominence given to Simeon stems from ancient liturgical texts where he is described as one of the greatest of the prophets, more important than Moses, 'who has seen God', because Simeon actually 'received' God in his arms. For this reason he is known in Orthodox tradition as the 'God-Receiver'.[40] There are numerous versions and adaptations of the presentation scene through the centuries, especially in the history of manuscript painting: while some focus on Mary holding the child or the ceremony of the presentation itself, the main focus tends to be on Simeon holding the child in his arms. The scene continued to remain popular in art during the period of the Renaissance as detailed by Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons in their analysis of Lorenzetti's *The Presentation in the Temple* (1342)[41] and right up to seventeenth-century

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[40] See the Orthodox website (www.orthodoxworld.ru) for Simeon's importance as the God-Receiver in Orthodox tradition: in Greek, *Hypapante;* in Russian *Sretenie Gospodne* and *Bogoprimyets* in Old Slavonic.

[41] Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting* (London and NY: Trinity Press International, 2003).

Holland where Simeon holding the child in his arms became one of Rembrandt's favourite subjects.[42]

Depictions of Simeon, in general, tend to portray a more sympathetic and kindly father figure than Abraham: for example, in this early Roman wall painting in fig. 7.

Figure 8. Icon of the Presentation of Christ
Written by Athanasios Clark
© Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

Figure 9. Simeon Holds the Child Jesus
St. Mary's Church, Snettisham, Norfolk, England
© Photo: Simon Knott, www.norfolkchurches.co.uk

[42] In his version of the subject, now in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Rembrandt famously conveys the gravitas of Simeon as a spiritual father and the vulnerability of the child.

He continues to display a similar affectionate disposition in contemporary representations, whether in the Orthodox (fig. 8) or Western tradition (fig. 9) and it is this aspect that makes Simeon instantly recognizable even when detached from the biblical narrative of the presentation. Given the iconic status of the image of father and child represented by Simeon, it is not surprising, then, that in Christian iconography, he should be closely associated with the figure of Abraham and Lazarus. One of the finest examples of this association can be found in the abbey church at Moissac in France.

As medievalists point out,[43] the porch of this medieval abbey church contains one of the most extraordinary examples where the image of the bosom of Abraham mirrors intentionally an image of Simeon holding the child Jesus. Two depictions of the patriarch and Simeon are shown opposite each other but they differ substantially in some details. Simon's bodily gestures are full of tenderness and the closeness of his face with the child's expresses affectionate intimacy. In Abraham's case, the affectionate sensitive aspect is missing and the stiffness and impassiveness of Abraham's posture dominate while the geometric designs of his cloak gives him an abstract, almost disembodied quality.

Figure 10. Lazarus in the Bosom of Abraham
Detail from the west wall of the abbey of St. Peter, Moissac, France

43) See Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 751.

Figure 11. Simeon Holds the Child Jesus at the Presentation
Detail from the west wall of the abbey of St. Peter, Moissac, France

In the presentation scene in which Simeon with the child appears, the sculptors deliberately inverted the nearest figure, Anna, and made her the shortest figure so that she appears less important while Simeon who is the most remote is made the tallest in order that he can stand out in sharp profile.[44] The heads of the characters in the presentation scene are carved with a peculiar expression of excitement: the brows are lifted up, the eyes are wide open and the mouths turned at the corners in a faint smile. On the opposite side, the scene depicting Abraham and Lazarus is, by contrast, serious and subdued.[45] Baschet suggests the reason for this is to demonstrate how Abraham exemplifies spiritual fatherhood in a detached, other-worldly manner while Simeon's more human gestures draw attention not only to his own humanity, but more importantly, to the humanity of Jesus, the child in his arms.[46] But, there may be more to it than this. To the visually literate of the Middle Ages, the presentation scene might well have called to mind various representations of the Akedah: from a distance, Simeon placing the child on the altar of the temple is not dissimilar to representations

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44) Meyer Schapiro, 'The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac', *The Art Bulletin*, 13.4 (1931) pp. 464-531.
45) Schapiro, 'The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac', p. 518.
46) Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 751.

of Abraham building an altar and laying his son Isaac on top of it (Gen. 22:9). The joy, expressed on the faces of the characters, however, clearly indicates that this is an altogether happier scene. Yet the iconographers may have used the setting of the temple altar in the presentation scene to allude to the sacrifice of Isaac; the image of the distant, remote Abraham, now cradling Lazarus impassively, and situated right opposite the scene of the presentation, serves to remind the viewer of another, more sinister, aspect of Abraham's fatherhood. In some cases, especially in the late Middle Ages, the figures of Abraham and Simeon become almost interchangeable, as in an image in the Metropolitan Art Gallery, New York, in which it is Abraham who holds the infant Jesus, identifiable by his cruciferous halo which is usually exclusively reserved for deity, and not Simeon.[47]

Following on from Abraham and Simeon, and before drawing together my conclusions, I want to make some final points regarding the similarities in iconography between figures of Abraham and God the father, who in several instances appear indistinguishable. The patriarch is sometimes shown with a cruciferous halo as in fig. 3;[48] yet this figure is not God the father as an inscription usually recalls that it is indeed an image of the bosom of Abraham. There are many examples where Abraham and God the father are combined into a single image, which Baschet refers to as the God-Abraham figure. Part of the reason, at least, why this is so is that in traditional Christian exegesis Abraham sacrificing Isaac is compared with God the father sacrificing his son. In Augustine's exegesis of the parable of Lazarus and Dives, Lazarus at the door of the rich man is the figure of Christ suffering the passion while Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham is Christ reunited with his father after his resurrection.[49] As the image of Abraham blended with that of God the father, iconographers also drew parallels with another text where κόλπος appears, namely Jn. 1:18 which pictures Christ in the bosom of God the father. The trinitarian expression of the image where God the father holds the crucified Christ with the dove representing the Holy Spirit resting between them, frequently resembles the posture

47) Displayed on the Biblical Art website, www.biblical-art.com.

48) Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 755.

49) Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 756.

and attitude displayed by Abraham as he holds Lazarus in his bosom. A fine example of this is the fresco by Masaccio in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence. In a more recent example from the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, the traditional image of the three patriarchs holding the souls of the just is now interpreted as the trinity, each figure clasping the world as a globe to his bosom, as in this painting from 1973, now hanging in the Ethiopian chapel of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Figure 12: The Trinity Holds the World in their Bosom
Azeka Mezmour Zed-Awit, Ethiopia (1973)
The Ethiopian Chapel of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem

Finally, one begins to wonder just how pervasive the influence of the image of the bosom of Abraham in iconography actually was. For example, in an image from the medieval St. Albans Psalter, illustrating Ps. 61 (62 in English) where David in anguish pours out his soul to God, God bends down graciously either to bless or to take his soul, represented as a vulnerable and naked child, to himself. Granted, the soul is generally depicted in medieval times in this way, but the depiction of God as a benevolent father figure in this psalter and in many

other illuminated manuscripts, may have been at least partly inspired by the ubiquitous image of the bosom of Abraham.

Figure 13. David Offers his Soul to God (Psalm 61)
St. Albans Psalter

Conclusion

In conclusion, the first point to make is that, despite the view of many commentators on Lk. 16:22, Lazarus is not depicted in iconography as reclining against Abraham's breast as at a meal. Rather, the image is overwhelmingly one of a father holding or cradling a child in his lap; but, despite the connotation of intimacy that the term κόλπος denotes,

the poise and demeanour of the figure of Abraham suggests a father that is reserved and remote. If we compare Abraham to the figure of Simeon with the child Jesus, the warmth and humanity of Simeon as a father contrasts with the coldness and aloofness of the other-worldly Abraham. Perhaps, as Jérôme Baschet suggests, this may be intentional, indicating that we should see Abraham as a spiritual rather than a 'fleshly' father. But there may be a further reason: it is clear from Baschet's comprehensive studies of the image in the Middle Ages that, in portraying the image of Abraham as father of Lazarus, artists and iconographers were conscious of the ubiquitous image of Abraham and Isaac from Genesis 22, and so were faced with having to create an image that was consistent with, or at least corresponded to, the troublesome picture of Abraham as father that emerges from that scene. Augustine explains away the dichotomy between the two contrasting images of Abraham as father by suggesting that he is worthy to receive the souls of the just into his bosom in Luke 16 because he has proved his obedience to God in Genesis 22. Nevertheless, we still get the impression from several visual representations of Luke 16:22 that artists were not entirely persuaded by this explanation and that the coldness and remoteness with which they depict Abraham may serve to draw attention to how incongruous they felt the two biblical portrayals of the patriarch as father really were.

Should we see reflected in the image of Abraham's bosom an interest in gender or associations of motherhood? Certainly the noun κόλπος is used frequently elsewhere to denote the close relationship between mother and child and I have included iconographical examples where, first, Abraham's bosom is included in the nativity story from the infancy narrative of Luke; second, where the image is paralleled with the woman in labour from Revelation 12, and third, where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob appear as if pregnant with the souls of the just. Whether Abraham was consciously perceived by these artists as a mother we do not know, but it is clear that they wish to make a very explicit association between the image of the bosom of Abraham and the traditional Old Testament concept of Abraham as the father of many nations: it is his male function of fathering and his female function of giving birth that artists seek to combine in one image. The title, *Pater multarum gentium*, that frequently accompanies the image of Abraham holding Lazarus in his bosom is really an inappropriate title,

when we think about it; but the effect of the title is to draw attention to the procreative function of Abraham which is presented to us in this image under the guise of a maternal and life-nourishing figure. It may be simply an accident of bad translation but the Vulgate, very uniquely, uses the phrase *de utero tuo*, to translate the idea in Gen. 15:4 that no-one except from Abraham's own issue (*de utero tuo*) shall be his heir. The same female imagery is implicitly contained in the Vulgate's phrase *in sinu Abrahae* in Lk. 16:22, the biblical version most widely used in the Middle Ages.

Mary Rose D'Angelo's conclusion that Luke is concerned with gender roles and that issues of gender surface in very complex ways throughout his gospel is supported by the way Lk. 16:22 was perceived in the iconographical tradition of the bosom of Abraham. The important role (and the memorable words) that Luke assigns to Simeon assures his role as spiritual father and, along with Abraham whom Luke mentions most frequently in the New Testament, he overshadows the maternal roles of the women of the infancy narrative. In iconography, too, for many centuries, the paternal roles of Simeon and Abraham outnumbered and overshadowed representations of the Virgin and child. It was really only with the start of the Italian Renaissance that the mother and child image became hugely popular and replaced that of the father and child. Yet, it is ironic that in commentaries that use visual images to illustrate the message of Luke, there are normally several of the Virgin and child, perhaps one of Simeon and usually none of Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. This reflects neither the priority that Luke gives to his male and female characters nor the subtle distinctions within the iconographical tradition of the gospel.

Abraham with the souls of the righteous in his bosom is frequently flanked by Isaac and Jacob. Van der Lof describes how the early Church Fathers were keen to extend the number of those in paradise who were suitable to receive the souls of the just into their bosom and, in the light of Mt. 8:11, began with Isaac and Jacob. But why the artistic convention of depicting all three as looking exactly alike? It may be that this is to indicate that both Isaac and Jacob are of equal importance to Abraham but it also underscores the idea of fatherhood: the father-son theme is reflected in the presentation of the trio of patriarchs itself as well as in the relationship between the patriarchs and the souls they hold in their bosoms.

Two recent examples confirm how the image of the three patriarchs are still used in contemporary settings. Baschet includes in his book an illustration of the bosom of Abraham from the front cover of *Le Monde Diplomatique* (October, 1991) in an article dealing with the future of Palestine.[50] The image expresses the wish that Abraham, figurehead of the three monotheistic faiths, might unite all the peoples of the region in harmony within his bosom.

Figure 14. Ieud-Deal Church, Romania
18th century
© Photo: Radu Lissner

Figure 15. Romanian Coin
© Photo: Radu Lissner

[50] Baschet, *Le Sein du père*, p. 20.

Second, in 2006, the Romanian government incorporated a depiction of the three patriarchs with the souls of the just in their bosom from the famous eighteenth-century church at Ieud-Deal into the design of one of their coins (figs. 14 and 15).

The final word is best left to Jerome Baschet who has surveyed hundreds of representations of the subject from the Middle Ages, a time when the numbers of images being produced was at its greatest. He suggests a Freudian explanation for the enormous popularity of the subject in iconography: in establishing an inseparable link between the idea of an everlasting paradise and that great and final paternal reunion, he concludes, the image of Abraham's bosom confirms completely Freud's claim that at the very core of all religious sentiment lies a need for paternal protection and reassurance.[51] Perhaps he is right, but, however we explain it, the bosom of Abraham continues to be one of the most intriguing and engaging of images in the entire repertoire of Christian iconography.

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[51] Baschet, *Le Sein du père*, p. 22.

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The Big Sleep: Strategic Ambiguity in Judges 4-5 and in Classic *film noir*

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Abstract

Ambiguity is a driving force of the narrative world of *film noir*. It is expressed through unconventional characterization as well as innovative and excessive visual and narrative techniques. Through all of the gaps and unanswered questions *film noir* poses, viewers are engaged in an intellectually demanding process. The book of Judges makes similar demands of its readers and shares a number of the concerns found in *film noir*, such as: anxiety over constructs of masculinity and normality, interest in ritualized violence, fetishization of women, existential deliberation over character, resignation to the fate of the individual (and by extension the nation), withering acknowledgment of the façade of material progress—all expressed with indeterminate narrative modes that frustrate attempts at making meaning. My argument in particular is that *film noir* and the Jael episode (Judg. 4; 5:24–31) share a remarkably similar rhetoric of ambiguity, and that examination of their correspondences, by an evidence-based comparison, can lead to fruitful hypothesis regarding the social context from which the Judges stories emerged.

Keywords

ambiguity, Jael, Sisera, Judges, film noir

The shady characters who inhabit the dark corners and wet streets of *film noir* are invariably troubled. As the films themselves are played in retrospectives and (probably more often than we realize) on television, their gritty people and hard-boiled dialogue become even more deeply embedded nostalgic icons, signs for coping with the uncertainty of dangers long gone and yet strangely familiar. André Bazin captured it in his eulogy to *noir* icon Humphrey Bogart, who was important because 'the *raison d'être* of his existence was in some sense to survive',

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and because the alcoholic lines visible on his face revealed 'the corpse on reprieve within each of us' (quoted in Naremore 1998: 25). Through all of the gaps and unanswered questions *noir* poses, viewers are engaged in an intellectually demanding process. The book of Judges makes similar demands of its readers. As Cheryl Exum puts it, the book 'exhibits an enigmatic complexity' (1990: 410). Questions reach beyond the immediate narrative context to address issues of leadership, of access to the land, and as I have argued elsewhere, of the complexity of morality and the merits of violent justice (Christianson 2003). My argument here is that *noir* and the Jael episode (Judges 4; 5:24–31) share a remarkably similar rhetoric of ambiguity,[1] and that examination of their correspondences can lead to fruitful hypothesis regarding the social context from which the Judges stories emerged.[2]

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[1] I take ambiguity to refer to indeterminacy of meaning at the level of semantics as well as narrative devices. This textual feature, to borrow William Empson's classic definition, 'gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language' (1960: 1; cf. Ingram 2006: ch. 1, and Firth, forthcoming). Ingram draws a very useful distinction between this understanding and 'ambivalence', which refers to meanings that may be in opposition but that are more easily fixed/determinate than ambiguous meanings (2006: 12–13). I will argue that *noir* and the Jael episode share indeterminate meaning. The nuances I apply to 'ambiguity' should become clear as the article progresses, and will be discussed more explicitly in the concluding section.

[2] I will be developing the method I am undertaking here (and undertook previously in the 2003 article) at length in a forthcoming piece, '"Lights, Camera, Achsah!"? On Comparing the Hebrew Bible to Film' (part of a forthcoming book, *Charismatic Killers: Reading the Rhetoric of Judges on the Silver Screen* [Equinox Press]). The social forces that in some way shaped *film noir* are not hypothetical but are at least theoretical, based on evidence (primary material such as viewing figures, rentals statistics, scripts, interviews, and a wealth of other documentary evidence, particularly as relates to censorship and the political landscape of the period). This allows for a base of comparison that can lead to hypothesis regarding the social forces that in some way shaped the Judges stories. In the forthcoming article I term this approach 'intertextual hypothesis', which is undertaken primarily as an exercise in intertextuality, but one in which biblical scholars may locate (and have located) *a dimension of correspondence* between some historical or social aspect of the Bible and that of the mainly American cinema. This is defined in distinction to the other main comparative approach to the Bible and film in recent years, which I term 'intertextual conversation'.

The Ambiguity of *film noir*

In classic *film noir* (what the film industry termed the 'psychological thrillers' of the 40s and 50s)[3] ambiguity appears in many forms. For example: its visual style (unusual and unexpected camera angles with unconventional frame composition), absence of narratorial judgment, story gaps and linguistic play. In one of the first and most influential studies of *noir*, Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton concluded that 'the moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are the true emotions of contemporary [1955] *film noir*' (1996: 25). Their study recognized ambiguity as the core factor of characterization across *noir* types: victims, protagonists and *femme fatales* (22). Infamously full of bewildering moments, *film noirs* express the simple experience of disorientation, of ambiguity, often with sublime poignancy. Such moments do not make for passive spectatorship, but engage viewers in a risky negotiation of meaning. In *noir* ambiguity might be understood as a lens through which characters struggle to make sense of the world, themselves and each other, an intellectual and spiritual *condition*, a stance of being in relation to others. That condition serves to frustrate assessment and true knowledge of the person. This is particularly well illustrated in the closing scene of the 'swan song' of classic *film noir*, Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958). As the body of Quinlan (Welles) floats down the river, Tana (Marlene Dietrich), his long-time enigmatic confidant, declares, 'He was some kind of a man. What does it matter what you say about people?'

There is ample evidence that *noir*'s dark themes in some way reflected social anxiety, and at an historical moment that exposed America to the brutalities of war in a way it had not previously experienced at the level of popular culture. Typical is the recent suggestion of Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo that the 'moral ambiguity of the narrative of noir is a screen for concrete anxieties over race, sex, and (national/maternal) ori-

[3] Critics often refer to the 'classic *film noir*' period as being inaugurated roughly with John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and ending roughly with Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958). However, there are clear forerunners of the genre as early as 1931, and most critics agree that its key themes have never left the cinema.

gin' (2003: 5). In the context of post-war America in which *noir* ultimately thrived (many see 1946–51 as *noir*'s heyday), such anxieties surface regularly. Questions, therefore, about male and female identity are a thematic feature. In reality many women were no longer expected or enabled to continue in the employment they had undertaken during the war, and soldiers were experiencing social dislocation, unable to carve out a new life. Other recurrent themes include the 'dream' of personal prosperity and security (we note its overwhelming deconstruction in the *noir* genre, as I will discuss below), and the reliability of personal alliances. *Noir* reflected all of these themes in creative and indirect ways.[4]

Noir and the Hebrew Bible

Near the end of *Born to Kill*, a 1947 B-*noir* thriller, über-*femme fatale* Helen Brent (Claire Trevor) has a decisive phone conversation with a private eye, Albert Arnett (Walter Slezak), in which the two seek to outfox one another (all you need to know is that money and murder are the key issues!). With a wicked smile, Arnett finishes the conversation on a note of admonition: 'You remember the verse from the Bible, Mrs Brent? I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is

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[4] Spicer's section, 'Film Noir as a "Dark Mirror" to American Society' (2002: 19–24) shows that the majority of film scholarship sees a clear if complex relationship of *noir* to (1) postwar readjustment, (2) McCarthyism and (3) Existentialism and Freudianism. He notes as well the vociferous objections of R. Maltby to the *Zeitgeist* theory of culture. Maltby argues that the anxious 'liberal intellectuals' who commented on (and often made) *film noir* were not representative of American society at large (see Maltby 1992). This view appears to remain in the minority and does not account well for the fact that *noir* did thrive during periods of ideological uncertainty, and died out precisely when certainty returned to the frame (see Biskind 2001 on the rising ideological certainty of Hollywood narratives in the 1950s). Indeed, it is interesting to note that *noir* enjoyed a revival in the ideologically uncertain climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and as is well documented this is the period in which young filmmakers found inspiration in *noir* and made a number of films influenced by it (e.g. *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Godfather*, but most significantly, *Chinatown*). Further on *noir* as a response to and reflection of social anxieties, see Porfirio 1996, Oliver and Trigo 2003 (ch. 1 especially) and Schrader 1996. As Schrader suggests of *noir*, 'audiences and artists were now eager to take a less optimistic view of things' (55).

snares and nets, and he who falls beneath her spell has need of God's mercy'. When the camera cuts back to Mrs Brent we can see the palpable effect of Qoheleth's words (a liberal adaptation of Eccl. 7:26), a melodramatic lift of the eyebrow followed by an even more theatrical clasp of the temples. I would not wish to exaggerate its significance, but it tells me that at least in this instance the screenwriter found an apropos figure in what some scholars do think is Qoheleth's nod to the foreign/strange woman of Proverbs, the woman who traps the witless and wayward young man. You have to see Claire Trevor's behaviour, her fetishization and 'strangeness' rendered throughout the film to realize just how apt the choice is. More significantly, however, I have no doubt that the scene could be reworked into any number of *film noirs* without a hitch.

This brings me to some correspondences between *noir* and the Hebrew Bible that have been recognized independently by three scholars. Carol Newsom recognizes in the neo-*noir* film, *Fatal Attraction* (1987), the 'strange woman' of Proverbs 1–9:

> The 'strange woman', Alex, is portrayed as belonging to the margin in many ways… She has no husband or recognized lover. She stands outside the realm of socially ordered sexuality… Like the strange woman of Proverbs 7 she has a brilliant power of speech, always more than a match for her male victim… It is 'the wife of his youth' who must rescue him. The wife has been presented, as is the wife of Proverbs 5, as herself a deeply erotic, desirable woman… Her symbol is the house, where, more than once, we see the brightly burning kitchen hearth. (1989: 157–58)

For Newsom, this correspondence leads to the hypothesis that patriarchal cultures naturally produce and maintain this typology in order to protect male interests.

Although Cheryl Exum's exhaustive treatment of Delilah's cultural manifestations in her book, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, is of course about the Bible in film, Exum makes a number of relevant observations in relation to historical correspondences. As in the method I am applying here, Exum allows for, as she puts it, 'a degree of free-play of and between metatexts' (1996: 177). Exum examines at length the degree to which cultural appropriations of Delilah conform to the characteristics of the *femme fatale*, such as sexual availability, threat of castration,

fetishization. What interests me here, as it does Exum, is the choice of DeMille in his 1949 film *Samson and Delilah* to cast Delilah/Hedy Lamarr so clearly in the *noir* terms of *femme fatale*, at a time indeed when *noir* had reached a creative zenith of sorts (the same year sees such classics as *The Third Man*, *Act of Violence* and *Criss Cross*). DeMille's choice makes ultimate sense and offers a compelling correspondence (interestingly, Lamarr herself starred as a noirish *femme fatale* in Edward G. Ulmer's *The Strange Woman*, 1946). As Exum puts it, DeMille 'is not just adopting the biblical ideology… In making Delilah a consummate *femme fatale*, De Mille is simply exaggerating the gender ideology implicit in the biblical story and other versions of the fabula, pushing it to its (il)logical conclusion' (1996: 229).

The most sustained theological dialogue with *noir* appears in Christopher Deacy's *Screen Christologies.* Starting by recognizing film as both a bearer and locus of religious meaning and reflection, Deacy develops the idea of *film noir* being particularly concerned with the *activity* of redemption and further relates that concern to the book of Ecclesiastes. Deacy suggests that for Qoheleth, as in *noir*, there is little hope under the sun except for finding a way out through the transformation of everyday existence (2001: 59–64)—what Qoheleth would call enjoying all the days of your absurd life under the sun. To his analysis I would add that particular existential themes have been identified in Ecclesiastes by numerous scholars, such as the experience of extreme circumstances and the judgment of the world as absurd. Perhaps most interestingly, however, Ecclesiastes presents a developed attempt at asking what the self is made of, and it does so through a disjunctive and radical use of first-person narrative—a melancholy investigation into the protagonist's past. Like Robert Mitchum's Jeff Bailey (*Out of the Past*, 1947) or Bogart's Dix Steele (*In a Lonely Place*, 1952), Qoheleth is brought tantalizingly close to his own redemption and finds it always beyond his reach. Finally, just as in *noir*, in Qoheleth's emphatic judgment of the absurdity of the world is implied a desire for something better (further on Qoheleth's existential themes, see the material referred to in Christianson 2007: 86).

In the same way that the *noir* world, as we shall see, threatens the stability of the American dream, Judges threatens the stability of Israel's covenantal relationship and exposits the contingency of access to

the promised land. The cycle of judges stories in particular destabilizes the reader's ability to come to a positive assessment of Israel's relationship to the land because of the fundamental ambiguity of its stories: narrative gaps, lack of narratorial judgment and conflicting testimony all mean that we cannot know whether the 'judges experiment' was ultimately good. The judges of Israel, even Gideon and Samson, deliver at the micro-level, specifically not the macro. That is, the scenarios in which they deliver are localized and, as has long been recognized, the periods of the 'rules' of individual judges overlap at several points. There is, in the end, resignation to Israel's reliable rebellion and the consequent transient nature of deliverance 'for a time' (further, see Christianson 2003, esp. pp. 72–73, 75–77). This social observation is present in *noir*. Describing Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Andrew Spicer suggests that unlike 'Sherlock Holmes, Marlowe realizes that although he may solve an individual case, it is part of a wider corruption that is too deep to be eradicated' (2002: 7). And right through the classic *noir* cycle, those who represent the law usually fail spectacularly.

The many shades of ambiguity in Judges contrast sharply with the confident narrative of promise and conquest in Deuteronomy and Joshua. We might take one of Joshua's concluding notes (21:43–45) as exemplary:

> Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to their ancestors that he would give them; and having taken possession of it, they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their ancestors; not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

To be sure, Joshua anticipates what will unfold in Judges (e.g. Josh. 23:13), but the difference is that in Joshua the promise that God will sustain and honour the code of reward and punishment is certain. At the beginning of Judges it looks as if that confidence will continue in the cycle of apostasy (2:1–3:6), but it soon disintegrates as the judges fail in their tasks. As Robert Polzin puts it, 'Judges is a major turning point in the narrative [of Deuteronomy and Joshua] because it self-consciously reveals the weaknesses and limitations of all ideologies…

[and engenders] a feeling of confusion concerning the basic ideological positions of the preceding books' (1993: 162, 167; cf. 210–11). We might note features that support this assessment. For example, Judges repeatedly exposes readers to unexpected gender roles (e.g. Deborah as Judge, Jael as warrior, Manoah's wife as insightful recipient of theophany), and of course critics have understood sex to be obliquely insinuated on most of its pages (from Ehud's 'dagger' to Delilah's sleepy encounter). To note a contrast to Exodus, a book whose central 'judge' the rabbis described as its 'diminished hero', the characters of Judges are sketched in hyper-real terms, their encounters rendered with excessive rhetorical flourishes, their violence made memorable with weird twists such as hidden daggers, airborne millstones, tentpegs and jawbones. Judges also foregrounds, through a number of narrative devices (as we will see in the case of the Jael episode) the normally violent fate of *individuals*, which is relatively new to the story 'so far'. We need only think of Eglon, Sisera, Abimelech and the fate of three unnamed women, Jephthah's daughter, Samson's wife and the Levite's concubine. These distinctive features leave readers with unresolved questions and sit uneasily with what precedes.

Like the Hebrew Bible, indeed, 'like every cultural praxis', as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam put it, 'Hollywood is the site of tensions and contradictions' (1994: 7). Yet we must think about what makes tension and contradiction possible in this cultural praxis. Conflict is present in genre cinema precisely because there is a mainstream and a 'counterstream', and I have yet to read a treatment of film genre that does not refer to the Western and to *film noir* as archetypal. It was mainly due to the creedal cohesion, financial coherence and censorial pressures on the studios[5] that these films had an ideology to which they could respond. Note prolific film critic David Thomson's rueful discussion of films that no longer possess the pulse of subversion:

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[5] On censorial control in relation to *noir*, see Buhle and Wagner 2001: 3, 8, 53, and ch. 4; Naremore 1998: ch. 3; Spicer 2002: 36–39. It is worth noting that although censorship undoubtedly shaped the elliptic *noir* style, there was often a great deal of fruitful cooperation enjoyed between censorial bodies and filmmakers (a point made iteratively in Prince 2003).

> The most shocking thing about films made today is how that pulse is gone, that steady, defiant singing of the imprisoned soul. There was an age in which, consciously or not, some filmmakers saw the [Hollywood] factory as a metaphor for the state of the nation. And a sufficient number of the movies made then were filled with the passionate responses—whether anger, black humor, violence, or outrage—of prisoners. So, within the genre of Hollywood storytelling, within the confines of censorship and the upbeat ending, within the grid of films as 'entertainment', the movies came so close to being an art that the history of it all, the looking back, can still move you to tears. (2006: 192) [6]

The conflict suggested here is the real nub of correspondence between the things we call ancient Israel and Hollywood. This is about conflict between a fixed and interested form of discourse *vis-à-vis* a discourse that is struggling to cope with the ideology of its 'precursive' texts (a term Jennifer Koosed and Tod Linafelt use in their comparison of Judges to the Western *Unforgiven*: 'Judges functions in relation to Deuteronomy in a way similar to how *Unforgiven* functions in relation to other Westerns: both incorporate structural elements from their precursive texts, while making manifest the cracks and gaps in the ideology of those texts'; 1996: 179).[7]

Perspectival Uncertainty

The *mis-en-scène* of most *film noirs* contributes to the perspectival uncertainty of its characters and, most effectively, of the audience. We are left in the unlit corners where darkness gathers. *Chiaroscuro*, the play between darkness and light, does not serve to clarify morality, but

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6) Compare Robert Porfirio's remarks on the instability that *noir* embodied: 'What keeps the *film noir* alive for us today is something more than a spurious nostalgia. It is the underlying mood of pessimism which undercuts any attempted happy endings and prevents the films from being the typical Hollywood escapist fare many were originally intended to be' (1996: 80; similarly, cf. Buhle and Wagner 2001: 82, 132).

7) Like Koosed and Linafelt, I am treating the Deuteronomistic History (DH) in its final form. This relates to the intertextual hypothesis approach that I referred to above, which hypothesizes about the social function of texts in the face of a lack of evidence as to the details of their compositional history and immediate reception. In other words, *hypothesis* is demanded by a lack of evidence (as opposed to evidenced-based *theory*).

renders it complex and problematical.[8] Modes of narration are tenuous linchpins for the viewer's grasp on competing claims to truth. The voice-over, which finds unrivaled expression in *film noir*, often shapes the ambiguous and pervasive quest (usually for the truth about the past) so common to *noir*. Time shifts between the 'real' present and a much less stable remembered past. Some *noir* films invite us, as Michael Mills puts it,

> to inquire about the motives of narrative voices, how much they know and whether they are telling the truth, when and to whom they are speaking. If the dominant Hollywood style provided all the information spectators would need to follow the narrative, Film Noir seems to emphasize narrative gaps, and even the possibility of narratives that can deceive. (2003a)

The flashback structure engendered by this device also has the effect of alienating the viewer and producing a distinctly 'detached', almost semi-documentary style (Porfirio 1999: 179). In such experimentations with classical modes of linear narration, in which gaps and ambiguities are minimized, the *noir* style succeeds in questioning our grasp of the past.[9]

The Jael narrative also exudes uncertainty through multiple perspectives. Johanna Bos recognizes in ch. 4 an account that 'shows events from different points of view' (1998: 56). We are 'with' Sisera as he flees on foot for his life (and to his death), and as he approaches he 'sees' Jael's tent (4:17). In fact he 'sees' shelter in the form of the Kenite's house who is 'at peace' with his king. But as Bos points out, he 'sees falsely, for he is looking in the direction of her clan and not of Yael herself' (1998: 56). We are 'with' Jael as she murders Sisera, who is now asleep. And we will 'see' quite forcibly from Barak's perspective.

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[8] Compare Paul Schrader: '…*film noir*'s techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity; then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style' (1996: 58).

[9] *Film noir* also developed a subtle visual form of identification with its characters, well represented by the comments of prolific *noir* director Fritz Lang: 'I use my camera in such a way as to show things, wherever possible, from the viewpoint of the protagonist; in that way my audience identifies itself with the character on the screen and thinks with him' (quoted in Spicer 2002: 13). With its subtle positioning of *individual* characters' point of view, Judges represents a similar innovation in the DH.

Indeed, it is only with respect to Barak that the הנה focalizer appears, and twice: 'Look [והנה], Barak pursued Sisera, and Jael came out and called to him, and she said to him, "Go, and *I will make you see* [ואראך] the man whom you seek", and he came to her, and look [והנה], Sisera, fallen dead, the tent peg in his temple' (v. 22).

Read together as parts of a whole,[10] the competing accounts of prose (ch. 4, esp. vv. 17–24) and poem (ch. 5, esp. vv. 24–31) offer different foci and can function as prompts to question our grasp of the narrative. As Marc Brettler puts it, they make us 'wonder such things as "How was Sisera killed?"… "Was Jabin involved or not?"' (2002: 78). The differences are substantial. In the prose Jael's actions are presented as neither negative or positive, 'nor is there an evaluation of her actions' (Schneider 2000: 92). In the poem it is clear that she is (has become?) venerated: 'Most blessed among women is Jael…' (5:24). In the prose Jael is at the door 'protecting' Sisera (note what will become the ironic *shalom* of 4:17). In the poem he is presumably standing, as he *falls* dead between her legs (5:27).[11] The poem is also far more graphic, a near meditation on the violent act:

> Most blessed among women is Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite.
> Among women of tents she is most blessed.
> Water he requested, milk she gave,
> in a princely bowl, she brought him curds.

[10] I am here following the lead of Athalya Brenner: 'Chs iv and v beg to be considered as a narrative unit, a Rashomon-type story whose constituents deliver a picture only when pitted against each other. Neither has validity on its own, in the sense that it does not afford us enough scope for listener/reader judgement' (1990: 137; similarly, Alter 1983: 635–36). Brenner is not the only critic to draw on film concepts to critique the Jael episode. Alter describes the abrupt change of focus to Sisera's mother in v. 28 as a filmic *faux raccord*, the deliberate mismatch of images in order to question what the viewer is seeing, for readers might mistake the 'unspecified "she" looking out the window in the first verset [v. 28]…for Jael', an image only dispelled by further detail (1983: 632). Compare Sternberg's comments below, n. 21.

[11] The only other combination of רגל and בין when the 'feet' are those of a woman is Deut. 28:57, which can only refer to the legs (or 'thighs', so NRSV; cf. the coupling of the terms in Gen. 49:10, which describes the ruler's staff 'between [Judah's] feet'). 'Legs' also helps to make sense of the narrative action and widely acknowledged sexualized context.

Her hand to the peg she set forth,
her right to the workmen's hammer.
She hammered Sisera, crushed his head.
She wounded and pierced his temple.[12]
Between her legs he sank, he fell, he lay.
Between her legs he sank, he fell.
And where he sank, there he fell, destroyed. (5:24–27, my trans.)

This is remarkably different to the prose in which the violence takes place 'off screen'. There it is by 'stealth' Jael 'struck' the tent peg, which 'passed down' into Sisera's temple, into the ground—he was asleep, weary—and he died (4:21). But in the poem Sisera is not just killed, he is hammered, crushed, wounded, pierced and finally destroyed. This is the activity that provides reference for the 'blessed' of 5:24 (as does the contrasting image of Sisera's unwittingly vanquished mother in vv. 28–30). The first word of 4:17 is 'Sisera', and it is around him that the action consistently revolves (in ch. 4 his name appears 13 times). In the poem he is a gap. He first 'appears' in 5:25 (though cf. 5:20): 'Water he requested, milk she gave.' His name then appears only once in this stanza and not until its seventh line, 'She hammered Sisera'. This gapping serves to focus our attention on Jael and the act of violence she inflicts on Sisera, violence that *demonstrates* her character. Other omissions serve to focus our attention on Jael's *act*. Here Jael's suggestive invitation is gone. So too are the carefully delineated political complexities and suspenseful narrative, which are now whittled down to two moments: the provision of milk and the 'sinking' of Sisera. In light of the relatively realist narrative of ch. 4, ch. 5 is an oddly dreamlike flashback that replays the narrative's most decisive moment in slow motion, lingering on its violence.[13]

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12) The sequence here is unusual, and includes the *hapax* מחק (which I have rendered 'crushed'). The last line of v. 26 may reflect a narrative-like progression and intensification: she wounded (מחץ, wounded fatally by striking) and then *pierced through* (חלף) his temple.

13) Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn arrived separately at a similar conclusion: 'Sisera falls and dies in slow motion—in deadly orgasm, in aborted birth. The song magnifies Jael's courageous violence as well as Sisera's helpless agony. It lingers over the violence, the injury, the convulsive last moments of the man' (1990: 405; cf. Sternberg 1987: 282).

The cumulative effect of these multiple perspectives is to provoke reflection. While ch. 4 provides mostly the perspective of the victim (see below), ch. 5 is a very deliberate move of the camera (now accompanied by the 'soundtrack' of Deborah and Barak's singing) to the -victor, centre-frame, who is 'blessed among women' (v. 24). Jael's duplicitous hospitality, so foregrounded in ch. 4, is only vaguely hinted at in 5:25. But both Jaels leave the reader with unsettling reversals, with the threatening spectre of female violence that is entirely new to the DH (and will be repeated by another female crusher of men's skulls in Judg. 9:50–54). Both sequences leave readers to puzzle over characters' motives; to wonder why we are seeing *women* do these things in the context of this text's larger discourse; to be exposed to the prolonged demise of an ambiguously drawn victim; to reflect on the worth of the protagonist's actions and on the purpose of her violence (and that sentence describes precisely the lingering questions that a good *film noir* leaves the viewer).

Threatening Gender

In its visual and narrative modes, *noir* reflected a shift from certainty to uncertainty, with a newfound 'pronounced interest in the characters' "uncertain psychology"' (Spicer 2002: 2). Men in particular seem at odds about their place in the world. As such *noir* can be characterized 'by a certain anxiety over the existence and definition of masculinity and normality' (Dyer 1998: 115). There are few better examples of such uncertainty than the nameless man who (seems to) live in the apartment of 'tart-with-a-heart' Ginny (*noir* regular Gloria Grahame) in *Crossfire* (1947). In pre-production the nameless man troubled the censorial regulators at the Breen Office. The script suggested that Ginny is a prostitute and the man is her customer. Joseph Breen granted approval of the film on the condition (among others) that 'this man…should definitely be indicated as Ginny's divorced or separated husband who is trying to win her back' (quoted in Naremore 1998: 117). In the film, however, the man arrives when another haunted man, Mitchell, is waiting there for Ginny, at her invitation. 'You're wondering about this set up, aren't you?', the man asks. He then spins

one feasible scenario after another and calmly declares them each a lie. Naremore's comments are worth citing:

> 'I want to marry her', he says to Mitchell at one point. 'Do you believe that? Well, that's a lie, too. I don't love her and I don't want to marry her. She makes good money there. You got any money on you?' By turns sinister, pathetic, and comic, he seems to mock the conventions of realist narrative, and as a result he opens his part of the story to all sorts of scandalous interpretation. (1998: 119)

Is the nameless man not in his right mind? Is he a defiant statement to Joseph Breen? Is he capable of believing anything? Does he function as a sign of a broader, systemic uncertainty? At points he mentions he is a soldier, that he has 'gone to the war' (do we believe him?) His final words (spoken for the first time with anxiety) are 'I'm so restless. I don't know what I want to do.'

As is widely recognized, Judges is riddled with anxiety over the construction of gender, particularly in chs. 4–5. Unusually, Barak is militarily summoned by a woman, Deborah. Already Deborah is, as it were, dressed in men's clothes. Like Moses, she is one who 'judges' officially and in a particular location (4:4–5; cf. Exodus 18). She is, like Solomon, one to whom the Israelites come in order to receive justice (משפט, 4:5; cf. 1 Kgs 3:9). Like any number of military commanders, she sends for (שׁלח + object) and summons (קרא) Barak to war (cf. David's 'sending for' Bathsheba, 2 Sam. 11:4). She is decisive about her own role. As prophetess (נביאה, 4:4) she delivers Yahweh's command to Barak: 'Go!...' and make preparations for war (4:6; cf. Jael's 'Go!' command to Barak in 4:22). His reply is conditional, making his distinctly male occupation as army general contingent entirely on Deborah's presence. He is, for whatever reason, at odds with his place in the male world of the army.

In the *noir* world, Jael would raise the spectre of gender confusion in post-war America. Indeed, the film critic's description of the *femme fatale* can in some sense apply to Jael: 'the *femme fatale* has been interpreted as a symptom of male anxieties about women, a creature who threatens to castrate and devour her male victim… She represents an explicit challenge to the postwar consensus that women should be fulfilled by the roles of wife and mother' (Spicer 2002: 90–91). Jael's actions proper are clear, but her motivation is as shrouded in secrecy as

her hammering (which was done 'in secret', בלאט, in the way that Ruth encountered Boaz [Ruth 3:7] and that David cut Saul's cloak [2 Sam. 24:4]). When Jael invited Sisera in he should have been wise to her immediately. Two phrases help us to clarify the codes with which she operates. The first is in 4:18: 'And Jael *went out to meet* [יצא + קרא (infinitive construct)] Sisera', which implies a sense of purpose. Elsewhere this construct can signify the sexual intent of the female speaker (Gen. 30:16; Prov. 7:15)—although in these examples the intent is explicitly stated (by Leah and the 'strange woman' respectively).[14] Much more common is the almost exclusive sense of the construct found from Deuteronomy to Judges, the intent of the male speaker for a call to war.[15] Significantly, together the two senses combine the gender codes of female sexual promise/danger and of male war. Given the intimate setting it may be that both senses are hinted at here, and that Sisera is simply too weary to be cognizant of the dangers implied by both. The other informative phrase follows straight on: 'She said to him, "*Turn, my lord, turn to me* [סור + אל], and do not fear". And *he turned* to her, and she covered him with a rug.' Most (in)famously, in Gen. 19:2–3, these words ('turn to [me/my house]') form an invitation to hospitality (from Lot to his angelic visitors) that leads to disturbing violence.

As is the case with many of *noir*'s deadly *femmes*, Jael is not all she appears to be. Like most women in Judges she is, in prose and poem, introduced 'safely' and traditionally; i.e. relationally, as the wife of

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14) Edwin Good sees in Jael's invitation to Sisera something 'more pressing than mere politics would dictate'. Considering whether Jael employs deception, he continues, 'And does not the combination of that warmly repeated invitation to "turn to me" with the verbs of opening and closing suggest an implicit sexual promise? Perhaps that is where the deception enters' (1988: 119). Fewell and Gunn share Good's proclivity to see the double meaning of words such as 'open', suggesting a woman 'opening' herself to her lover: 'With this verbal play and visual display [opening the skin of milk], the narrator constructs a symbolic picture in which the tent and its opening become uterine and vaginal images respectively' (1990: 393).

15) Deut. 2:32; 3:1; Josh. 8:5, 14, 22; Judg. 20:25, 31; cf. 1 Sam. 4:1; 2 Sam. 18:6. The only other uses in Deuteronomy–Judges are Judg. 11:31, 34, where the phrase is used of Jephthah's daughter coming out to meet him, and the other occurrence in this passage, Jael's invitation to Barak to find the one he seeks (4:22).

Heber the Kenite (4:17; 5:24). Indeed, just before her violent outburst we are reminded of her status in 4:21, as if to buttress the jarring effect. Her relationality is also troubled by hinting at Jael's independence through the explicit identification of the tent as Jael's (4:17a), which is semantically distinct from the 'house of Heber' (4:17b), of which her tent is a part. Even her name, the masculine third-person singular form יעל (not תעל), is a disruptive factor in the construct of her gender. As Ellen van Wolde argues, all 'five actions performed by Ya'el (...in the foreground of the narrative) [grasping, penetrating etc.] bear a strong resemblance to the male sexual act. One might conclude that the proper name of יעל, marked as masculine, is symbolic of the nature of her actions' (1996: 293).

Jael's perceived threat to the male has, as Gale Yee has shown, perennially (and intriguingly pretty much equally) divided readers in their response to her gender codes:

> As a warrior she acquires the status of the man in his domain, although she is female. She is thus ultimately dangerous and...she occupies a structurally anomalous position within the human domain and is thus potentially and actually disruptive. She takes on the attributes, roles, and accompanying prestige that are usually reserved for the male, but still remains female. (1993: 105)[16]

[16] For Yee it is about how women readers respond to the *woman warrior* metaphor: 'For [some] feminists...the metaphor is threatening because it seems to be so identified with male values. Hence, they feel they must reject the woman warrior completely in order to reject all forms of patriarchy. However, for other feminists the woman warrior metaphor can be a source of empowerment. Stories about the courage, strength, and resourcefulness of these women can become models for rejecting patriarchy' (1993: 108). For Susan Niditch, Jael is 'a warrior and seducer, alluring and dangerous, nurturing and bloodthirsty' (1989: 45). For Pseudo-Philo she was clearly a figure of emulation, and interestingly, she is more overtly sexualized in his retelling ('Jael...adorned herself with ornaments and went out to meet him. Now the woman was extremely beautiful in appearance'; quoted in Burnette-Bletsch 1998: 57). Readers have also identified with ch. 5 in its making explicit Jael's piety: 'Jael has identification power for the early Israelite audience, for in a sense Israel is Jael; she becomes an archetype or symbol for the marginal's victory over the establishment' (Niditch 1989: 52).

Of course, Sisera's trusting response to her deceptively maternal nurturing has deadly consequences. As Fewell and Gunn put it, 'By playing upon his expectations, she sets him up—she sets him up to hammer him down. And for the singers, the hammering down is more important than the set up' (1990: 404). This complex interaction between expectations about gender and the anomalous position that female characters actually inhabit is frequently explored in *film noir*, whose women often transgress and defy cultural codes.[17]

Sex and Violence

As well as in the transgression of gender codes, Jael shares other tropological features with the *femme fatale*, namely deception and a deviant pleasure in exotic, ritualized and sexualized violence. Examples of ritualized violence in *noir* are legion. They range from austere professional execution (*The Killers* is a locus classicus; Naremore 1998: 20) to sadistic ritual (e.g. *The High Wall*, *Brute Force*, *Kiss of Death*, *Border Incident*). In *film noir* sex and violence are frequent bedfellows (so densely entangled in e.g. *Gun Crazy*, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, *Double Indemnity*), and their coupling serves to accentuate the deceit of the *femme fatale*.

In Judges the ch. 5 account especially eroticizes the slow murder. To use the language of *film noir* criticism, it is a 'richly elaborated ceremony of killing' (Naremore 1998: 20, with reference to Borde and Chaumeton). I have already noted the way in which the poem of ch. 5 lingers on Jael's act of extreme violence. As Niditch says of 5:27, it 'has the intoning repetitive quality of sacrificial or ritual death… Double meanings of violent death and sexuality emerge in every line' (1989: 50). Judges 4 does not lack for hints about Jael's sexual strategies either. Jael, clearly aware of what she will do, is offering a false sense of security.[18] This is underscored if, as Soggin, Bal and Matthews all suggest,

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[17] For a useful overview of women in *film noir* and the way in which they transgress the cultural codes of their day, see Place 1998.

[18] As Bos suggests, 'Most commentators view Yael's covering of Sisera as creating a false sense of trust once she has lured him into her tent' (1998: 51; cf. Fewell and Gunn 1990: 396).

the 'rug' or 'blanket' of 4:18 is in fact a curtain dividing the public and private spaces of the tent, which would 'further hide his presence' and give him a 'false indication of safety, or even of welcomed sexual advance' (Matthews 1991: 17). The sense of intimacy is further compounded by the explicit identification of the tent as Jael's (as discussed above). Finally, the maternally nourishing offer of milk (overriding Sisera's more 'innocent' request for water) acts like some poison vial: 'The milk, plus [Sisera's] own exhaustion, sealed his fate as he fell into a deep sleep… [Jael provides] an alluring and beguiling picture to further cloud [her] victim's mind' (Matthews 1991: 18).[19]

Existential Entrapment

It is the protagonist in some excessive and dangerous situation, caught in a trap not necessarily of their own making, that is often central, even archetypal, to the *noir* plot. To account for this entrapment, sociological arguments are sometimes (and then awkwardly) articulated in the films themselves (e.g. *Criss Cross*, *Gun Crazy*, *Try and Get Me*), and often there is a sense that evil is endemic, insidious and irretrievable, embedded in unchangeable systems that can entrap (e.g. *Force of Evil*, *Touch of Evil*). The *noir* protagonist sets themselves against such a fate, but rarely successfully. Where there is some success it is always tempered by ambiguity. So in the conclusion to *The Maltese Falcon*, when Sam Spade (Bogart) 'turns over' his lover, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, for killing his partner, he is doing the right and noble thing. But even in this case the ending is boldly cracked open when Spade expresses his insecurity over what it means to love a woman and also to avenge his partner.

Noir protagonists often simply resign themselves to their fate. One of the finest examples is found in the opening of Robert Siodmak's marvellous 1946 *noir*, *The Killers*. Two professional killers arrive in a sleepy town to kill the Swede (Burt Lancaster). In establishing the Swede's whereabouts they manage to bewilder and terrorize the two staff and the customer of a small diner. When the customer runs ahead

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[19] Boling notes the 'soporific effect' of goat's milk, which suggests that in both the prose and poetic accounts 'she duped him and doped him' (1975: 97–98).

to warn the Swede of his imminent execution he finds him lying on his bed, still and lifeless,[20] his face obscured by dark shadow, seemingly aware of his impending fate. The customer, who knows the Swede, is unable to comprehend his apathy. As the Swede is dispatched with grim efficiency, he remains motionless, and we see only his hand losing its grip on the bedpost. (This whole opening sequence is a remarkably faithful adaptation, in its entirety, of Ernest Hemingway's 1927 short story of the same title.) Throughout the rest of *The Killers*, the Swede's past is under constant interrogation from a range of perspectives. As Mills suggests, the 'disjunctive use of time, the unrelated flashbacks, all combine to put us in the voyeuristic position of knowing not only what will become of him, but more importantly why' (2003b). Nearly everyone in the film gets their chance to put forward their spin on the Swede's life, everyone, that is, but the Swede himself. His fate has been commandeered by the subjective position of others and by overpowering circumstance.[21]

Now if there is a marked man in Judges, it is Sisera. He is marked from the initial pronouncement of Deborah to Barak that 'the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman' (4:9). The reader is left to guess which woman, and Deborah would seem a logical choice. Battle ensues, and Sisera's army is thwarted by Yahweh's own form of 'shock and awe' psychological warfare, throwing Sisera's troops into a panic (v. 15). Fleeing on foot, Sisera's first sight is the tent of Jael, with whose clan, it was rumoured, his king enjoyed peace. As Matthews suggests, 'Sisera was unknowingly a dead man from the moment he entered the area of Jael's tent… His death was not only inevitable, but expected. All that was required to complete the narrative was to develop the means of his deception and demise' (1991:19).[22] His doomed state

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20) Here, as in his other *noir* films, Lancaster 'kept his energy levels under rigid control, rarely extending himself and then only to withdraw quickly like a hunted animal' (Porfirio 1996: 85).

21) Rather serendipitously, in discussing the forms of gapping in complex biblical and non-biblical narratives, Meir Sternberg suggests that 'The reader cannot take in [… their] stride such problems as: Why do the two Hemingway gangsters…want to kill… the Swede?' (1987: 187).

22) For Matthews his demise is brought about by the violation of hospitality codes, signaling Sisera's flagrant disdain for honour, and indeed the person of Jael. Sakenfeld

is ironically anticipated by his own request to Jael that if anyone asks if there is a man here, say 'there is no [man]' (4:20). 'The man who, even as a fugitive, spoke as one in charge is, in reality, a dead man, "not there"' (Bos 1998: 54). Sisera's fate can be seen from another angle: he is caught up in the kind of web of betrayal and "selling out" that is worthy of a fine *noir*. It may be, as Baruch Margalit argues, that Jael is selling out her husband, Heber, and that there is consequently a political and ideological tension in their relationship.[23] As such Jael may resent Heber's discordant fracturing (פרד) of her family from the Kenites (4:11). The '"separation" was not only physical and geographic, but also "political"... Thus the blow struck by Jael against Sisera, psychologically viewed, was a blow struck at husband Heber' (Margalit 1995: 640). And of course, Yahweh, the boss, 'sold out' Israel into the hand of King Jabin (4:2), and will 'sell' Sisera into the hand of a woman. Finally, Sisera's fleeing on foot is a remarkably *noir* moment, evoking the metaphor of the road as place of imminent danger, usually death.[24] And where will Sisera go? Now bereft of his exorbitant technology ('900 chariots of iron', 4:13), his flight 'on foot' (נס ברגליו, twice emphasized in 4:15, 17) emits not only uncertainty but also the sense of mortal fear associated with other instances of the verb נוּס: Pharaoh and his armies *flee* before the closing sea to meet their death (Exod. 14:25, 27); David *flees* the deadly presence of Saul and his spear (1 Sam. 19:10); Joab *flees* (to the *tent* of Yahweh) Solomon's wrath, to meet his death (1 Kgs 2:28–29). Deborah has also scripted the

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also recognizes a transgression of social codes in Sisera's visit, despite Jael's invitation: 'the reference to the tent of Jael can be interpreted to mean that Sisera entered "women's quarters", properly off limits for male guests... Jael may well have anticipated rape' (Sakenfeld 1997: 20).

23) Margalit sees behind the *shalom* that Heber has established with Jabin a role as a 'nomadic mercenary charged by the king of Hazor with policing the area' (1995: 640).

24) The road is a significant visual metaphor in *noir*. Several key *noirs* open with our point of view fixed on its ominous boundaries as an unforgiving destination, e.g. *Fallen Angel*, *The Killers*, *Out of the Past*, *Sunset Boulevard*. In other *noirs* it is a nearly overbearing image, e.g. *Detour*, *Gun Crazy*, *The Hitch-Hiker*. These films especially explore the road as a place of imminent flight from danger or death (cf. *Kiss Me Deadly*'s opening in which extreme violence is inflicted on a woman who is seeking her escape by foot, on a road).

inexorable death and inglorious end of the road, when to Barak she says, 'the road [הדרך] on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman' (4:9). The road on which Barak discovers his pilfered glory is of course the same as that on which Sisera meets his doom.

Like the casting of Sisera in Judges, in *noir* the entrapped protagonist is not necessarily cast as 'hero' (it would be fair to say that *noir* is heroless). In fact entrapped characters are often somewhat underdeveloped, acting as foils to main protagonists. Alternatively, the sense of entrapment simply casts a pall over all the characters of a given *noir* (as film editor Carol Littleton says of *noir* in a recent documentary, 'The star of *film noir* is fate, it just doesn't get a screen credit').[25] In Judges, as Sisera may well be representing, there is a similar sense of unresolved dread. Entrapment is symptomatic of a malaise in Judges, in which the same 'road' is habitually taken with worsening results.

The Façade of Progress

One of *noir*'s most outstanding and overwhelming themes is the systematic disenchantment with the façade of progress, of the possibility of 'making good', of finding something of lasting worth in America. Although it is there in the fatalist and 'social problem' films of the 1930s (e.g. *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, 1932; *Fury*, 1936) and in a smattering of war-time films (e.g. *They Drive by Night*, 1940; *I Wake up Screaming*, 1941), it comes breathtakingly to the fore in post-war films (e.g. *Mildred Pierce*, 1945; *Scarlet Street*, 1945; *The Killers*, 1946; *Out of the Past*, 1947; *Force of Evil*, 1949; *Gun Crazy*, 1949; *Sunset Boulevard*, 1950; *Try and Get Me*, 1950; *In a Lonely Place*, 1952; *The Big Heat*, 1953), some of which also deal with the ex-soldier's sense of dislocation (e.g. *Crossfire*, 1947; *Act of Violence*, 1949). Notable from the above are Edward G. Robinson's Christopher Cross (whose name itself condemns him!) in *Scarlet Street*, Burt Lancaster's the Swede in *The Killers*, Robert Mitchum's Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past*, Frank Lovejoy's Howard Tyler in *Try and Get Me*, and William Holden's Joe Gil-

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[25] In *Film Noir: Bringing Darkness to Light* (Warner Bros, 2006), part of the Warner DVD box set, *Film Noir Classic Collection*, vol. 3.

lis in *Sunset Boulevard*. Each of these show a nuanced side to the *noir* cycle, a development that creates, as Spicer says of *Out of the Past*, 'through the careful tonal shadings of its black and white cinematography, a melancholy romanticism that shifts noir's axis away from the toughness of Powell's Marlowe to the desolate fatalism of Mitchum's Bailey' (2002: 56). In all of the above films the protagonist fails to attain a personal material goal, forever desiring something better than their current condition. In *Try and Get Me*, the protagonist's loss of self-potential is expressed as an oppressive social structure that produces unachievable material objectives, and that is at least partly responsible for crime culture. After being villainized by the press, two petty thieves (Frank Lovejoy and Lloyd Bridges) are lynched in one of the most terrifying sequences in *noir*. It is made all the more frightening by its semi-documentary style and the fact that it is based on real events in California in the early 1930s.

While the Jael episode does result in the destruction of King Jabin (cf. Joshua 11, in which Jabin is annihilated by Joshua), the worth of the outcome is ambiguous. Indeed, although Yahweh 'cut down' Jabin 'that day' (4:23), Jabin's subsequent demise seems to have been achieved through struggle over an unspecified time ('The hand of the Israelites bore down harshly on King Jabin of Canaan, until [עד אשׁר] King Jabin of Canaan was destroyed'; 4:24). The poem seems clearer in that 'the land had rest forty years' (5:31), but the value even of that peacetime is questionable. The statement, '…rest for X years', rings with fatalistic resignation (this is not the rhetorical flourish of a spin doctor!).[26] As I have noted above, the micro-scale justice meted out by the judges and Yahweh is always 'for a time', and successfully exposes the question of whether any lasting peace, any release from social oppression, is achievable. Partly the 'system' is at fault, for it is Yahweh himself who 'sold' (מכר) Israel, as elsewhere in Judges (2:14; 3:8; 10:7), into the hand of their oppressor—in this case to a ruler who with 900 chariots of iron oppressed them for twenty years (4:3). Although else-

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[26] Compare Polzin, who sees the recurrent notices of 'peace' in Judges as an ironic comment on the breakdown of Yahweh's promised scheme of reward and punishment: 'Why does apostate Israel not only continue to exist but more often than not exist in peace?' (1993: 167).

where Israel's 'evil' is defined as their worship of other gods (2:11–13; 3:7; 10:6), here it is left unspecified (4:1, as it is in the Ehud, Gideon and Samson narratives), which places the narrative's focus more squarely on the (disproportionate?) punishment of Yahweh. The broadly threatening and unstable context in which the Jael and Sisera episode takes place, and on which it may be seen to comment—the disintegration of covenant, the disenchantment with charismatic rule and the systematic failure of the 'progress' of the judges' experiment—is rendered as an oppressive social structure that produces unachievable material objectives.

The Cultivation of Ambiguity

In his absorbing study, *The Flight from Ambiguity*, Donald Levine suggests that ambiguity offers a positive model for reflection: 'it appears that to become aware of the multivocality of certain central concepts is not necessarily to identify a need to eliminate their ambiguities… The toleration of ambiguity can be productive if it is taken not as a warrant for sloppy thinking but as *an invitation to deal responsibly with issues of great complexity*' (1985: 17, my italics. Of the Hebrew Bible, Levine suggests that its 'sparse detail has been a standing invitation for evocative interpretations' [24].) Helpfully in relation to *noir*, Levine identifies an 'American aversion toward ambiguity' (31).[27] He traces the particularly extreme forms of this aversion to Puritanism, which 'discouraged aesthetic pleasures, including the enjoyment of ambiguous figures in repartee… Puritanism stressed the moral imperative of honesty…that came to be cherished to a remarkable degree in American society' (37). Univocal and unambiguous discourse are to be aligned with human 'capabilities for gaining cognitive mastery of the world' (39). Ambiguity answers 'the need for expressivity under a regime of…

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27) Citing a 'Nigerian novelist' who had lived in the US for more than twenty years, Levine suggests that 'Americans tend to be direct and literal rather than allusive and figurative, stark rather than subtle. They are happier dealing with statistics than with nuances' (1985: 28). He further points to tendencies in governmental policy towards the openness of information and privacy: 'Americans resent esoteric knowledge of any sort as symptomatic of "undemocratic" snobbishness' (33).

formal rationalities, and *the need to protect privacy in a world of extended central controls*' (40, my italics). (This latter descriptive fits perfectly the *noir* response to censorial controls; on which see above, n. 5.)

The Jael episode presents to readers the question, *inter alia*, of 'which?' Is Jael a figure of emulation or of resistance? She is 'blessed', but for which reason? Her deceit? Her war-like action? Is Sisera a figure of empathy or derision? This is compounded by the iterative presence of competing points of view: of Sisera, Jael, Barak and the combined poetic voices of Deborah and Barak. Yet 'which?' need not be a closed question. Paul Dixon, in his study of ambiguity in Latin American novels, argues that, unlike the kind of equivalent or double meanings created by metaphor or allegory, ambiguity is borne of tension between opposing meanings, meanings in which propositions are 'equitenable', co-existing and mutually exclusive (1985: 5–11). As Gale Yee has shown, readers have habitually responded to Jael in just such oppositional terms (1993). For Dixon these competing meanings must in some sense be irreconcilable, posing the question of 'which?' (18). As Rimmon-Kenan explains,

> In life we cannot allow equal tenability to contradictories… Art…makes the coexistence of contradictories possible…the triumph of art, rather than its bankruptcy, is celebrated by…ambiguity, showing not simply how the possible is rendered impossible by art, but mainly how the impossible becomes possible in it. (quoted in Dixon 1985: 22)

Like *noir*, the Jael episode 'carries' systemic ambiguity, a feature that has been recognized to varying degrees.[28] More than appearing in isolated moments, ambiguity is a deep-seated feature of its prose and poetic expressions, particularly when these are read as parts of a whole. Partly because of this pervasive and coherent quality, the provocative

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[28] That the language of the episode is characterized by ambiguity is recognized, for example, by Alter (1992: 41–42), Guest (2005: 152–53) and Bal (particularly regarding the necessarily ambiguous nature of Deborah's prophetic discourse; 1992: 115–20, but also *passim*). Polzin suggests that the body of stories in Judges 'puts the reader into the very experiencing of chaos and ambiguity that is portrayed as the inner experience of Israel during this period' (1993: 166). Exum's article explores the instability of the whole of Judges in similar terms (1990).

stories of *noir* and of Jael are both valuable prompts for reflection. To 'read' them closely is to engage with ambiguity borne not of 'sloppy thinking', but of rigor, tolerance of multivocality and willingness to question conventions and norms. They stand as invitations *to deal responsibly with issues of great complexity*, such as gender, violence, justice and human fate. These stories will of course remain enticingly obtuse. And as Mieke Bal comments in relation to the Jael story, their ambiguity ought to be embraced: 'It seems…fruitful to leave the ambiguity intact, to adopt it, to let coexisting meanings raise the problem that it is the interpreter's duty to cultivate—since this is his/her garden' (1992: 105).[29]

Along with the majority of film scholarship on *noir*, I have taken the overwhelming presence of ambiguity (e.g. indeterminacy over gender 'roles', over the moral authority of protagonists, over the reliability of witness and perspective, over the worth of violence) to be indicative of a social malaise. I have also taken that ambiguity on the whole to be deliberate, which is not to say that the makers of the ambiguous *noirs* had cognizance of a 'genre', or of the term *film noir*. As Robert Mitchum put it, 'Hell, we didn't know what film noir was in those days. Cary Grant and all the big stars got all the lights. We lit our sets with cigarette butts' (quoted in Lyons 2000: 2). *Noir* arose naturally from the swirling eddies of American culture in the wake of the War.[30] Similar conclusions can be drawn with regards to the malaise that the author(s) of the Jael episode may have been reflecting. Like *noir*, it may be that the ideological turn of Judges, particularly in its most devel-

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[29] Similarly, note the conclusion at which Firth arrives: ambiguity is 'not something to be feared by readers of the Bible as something to be removed in every instance. Rather, its presence can be a sign of a skilful writer who invites readers to enjoy and play with the text. A proper appreciation of the text thus requires both that we recognise the existence of this ambiguity and that we take time to note the ways in which it works' (forthcoming).

[30] Note David Aaron's comments in his recent study of the Hebrew Bible, *Biblical Ambiguities*: 'One generation's solutions to the unknown become another generation's source of uncertainty… The tolerance for uncertainty constantly shifts with an era's preferences. There is no progression from concrete to abstract, literal to metaphorical, plurality of meaning to singularity of meaning. All of these are natural by-products of the human struggle to make sense' (2001: 199).

oped episodes of individuals inflicting violence, was intended to force reflection on its 'precursive' texts. More specifically, perhaps the Judges storytellers introduced uncertainty into characters' points-of-view (and let those perspectives face competition from the perspectives of other characters on the same events) in response to the needs of an 'audience' that was in some sense ready for more complexity and for disorientation (perhaps it was an exilic audience that had grown accustomed to disorientation). The narratives of Judges could make the audience/reader question their grasp of the present and past situations. Perhaps the male scribes of Judges felt at odds with their place in the scheme of things, and sought to expurgate that malcontent by showing men and women execute contradictory and opposing actions. Perhaps they felt trapped as well, unable to obtain material objectives in the culture in which they found themselves, and so rendered a number of memorable cases of entrapment (in this study we have seen it with Sisera, but we should not forget the cyclical entrapment of Israel itself, from which the protagonists consistently fail to break Israel free). I offer these as hypotheses about an historical world of which we can never be certain, and that is an ambiguity the guild will no doubt continue to cultivate, and maybe even enjoy.[31]

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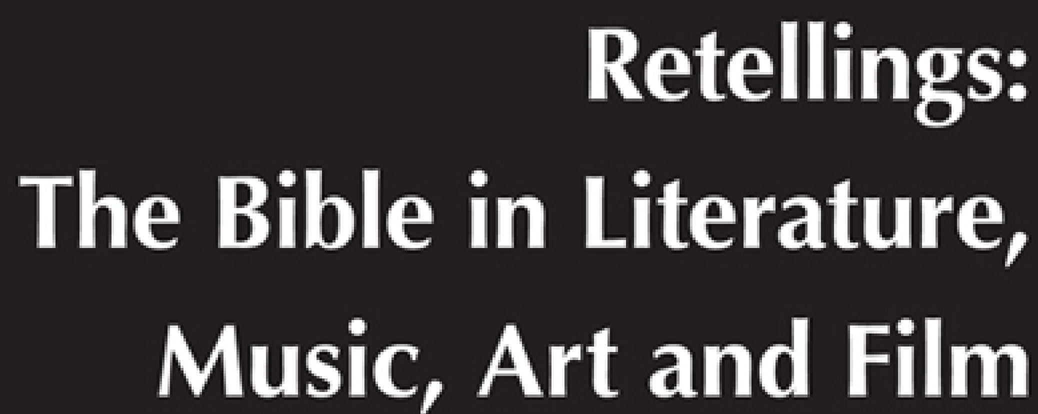

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