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Expressions of Female Power within the Patriarchal Etiquette: The Portrayal of Ruth and Other Biblical Women

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Preface

As for many for whom the Bible occupies a curious position, balanced at the intersection of personal belief, public discourse, and scholarly criticism, my exposure to the biblical text has, over time, been characterized by changing circumstances of medium, language, and context of study. Reading at times for personal fulfillment, at others for the sake of academic debate; here in English, there in Biblical Hebrew; often with a print copy, but increasingly from a digital one, I have found that the threads which I find most compelling in the text relate highly to the mindset with which I return to it. In turning to write this thesis, I had most prominent in my mind the reading material of an undergraduate course on gender and anthropology, and it is in the context of these that I found myself approaching the text once again, with questions about societal expectations of women, their role in popular ideology, and the construction of male ascendency in the biblical narrative. I had a sense of the reputation which the Bible had for its treatment of women, but I wanted to know whether this differed at all in cases where women were primary agents and not just passive characters.

In beginning to do this, however, I found myself unable on my own to recall much about such cases. Very few of the stories with which I was most familiar, it seemed to me, properly centered female agency and experience. I took this as an opportunity to familiarize myself with parts of the Bible with which I was less acquainted. I knew the stories of David, Moses, and the Patriarchs, but my knowledge of books such as Ruth, Esther, and Judith were more limited. When I thought of these, I could recall only vague images with no reference to plot, setting, or chronology. Somewhat comically I came to realize that these images originated not out of my imagination but rather directly from a small, illustrated book of Bible stories which I received as a child and which represented my first exposure to several such stories. Returning to peruse this

children's book, I came across the short passage included about Ruth. In addition to the familiar illustration was the title, "Unselfish Ruth," and a prompt undoubtedly meant for young children to discuss with their family: "In what way was Ruth unselfish?" I found this a particularly evocative question, and one to which the answer might not be so explicit in the text. If the popular conception of Ruth is characterized by uprightness and virtue, her actual role in the story does not immediately make clear the reason. Why are her actions construed as unselfish, and how does the construction of her virtue relate to the portrayal of women in other biblical stories? These were the initial questions which guided my reading and my writing.

Introduction

Ruth is in many ways a unique text. It is one of the few female-titled books in the Bible and centers on a woman and her experience in a way that most biblical stories do not. Moreover, it features direct female interaction in dialogue and positive female-to-female relationships, which are relatively rare in other places. For these reasons, an exploration of female virtue and experience in the Bible with such a starting point seems well-positioned.

However, this uniqueness also suggests the need for a certain amount of caution. A conclusion which comes solely out of such a unique example might want for a broader base of support if it seeks to make a more general claim about women and their role in biblical narratives. Where points of interest arise in the contemplation of Ruth, this essay attempts to see as patterns across other biblical stories such as those in Genesis, Esther, and Judith.

In attempting its argument, this essay approaches discussion of women primarily against the backdrop of patriarchy[1]. This is not to assume that this is the only frame for women's experience, nor that patriarchy is a pure concept easily separated from race, class, and other dynamics. However, the use of this backdrop evokes questions which are of primary importance regarding the nature of these stories. If the biblical texts were written by men and made popular in a male-dominated world, they might be expected to feature certain inaccuracies or deficiencies in terms of the literary and ideological treatment of women. Phyllis Trible, for example, in discussing Ruth in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, notes that the patriarchal atmosphere constantly threatens to overcome the women of the story and their destinies: "After all, it is a man's world, and concerns of women may well be subsumed, perhaps even subverted, by this

[1] "Patriarchy" here and elsewhere is used to refer to the social and ideological system in which men are afforded ascendency and women are subordinated.

patriarchal climate. The women of Bethlehem do not permit this transformation to prevail. They reinterpret the language of a man's world to preserve the integrity of a woman's story."[2] For Trible, these women successfully challenge the culture which they reflect and carve out for themselves a radical independence from men. Esther Fuchs, on the other hand, while reiterating the pervasiveness of the patriarchal frame, argues that these female characters are not only deficient in their portrayal but actively serve to promote patriarchal ideology: "Although certain female biblical characters create the impression that 'the story belongs' to them and to 'chance' as Phyllis Trible asserts, they are for the most part a product of biblical patriarchal legislation."[3] She sees these women as figures which serve mainly to further the plot for their male counterparts and generally amount more to didactic types than to realistic, humanized characters.

In this vein, this essay considers the significance of these portrayals in the context of their male authorship. Are they meant to be portrayals which men see as ideal, in the hope that women might emulate them? Are they depictions which attempt to defend the nature of women's subordination? Or are they expressions of a fantasy which men are attempting to draw out over the reality of the situation? To approach these questions and deepen the exploration of this topic, comparisons are drawn to anthropological studies which feature other examples of male-orchestrated attempts at these kinds of ends. In particular, these additional accounts give unique insight into the relationship of myth to reality and the role of social institutions in supporting ideology, and suggest a pattern of threat and subordination which appears relevant to the biblical text but might otherwise be overlooked.

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[2] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 241.
[3] Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985), 117.

Chapter 1. Seduction as an Accepted Tool for Women

In the introduction to his commentary on the book of Ruth, Robert L. Hubbard describes it so: "Ruth is an absolutely delightful little book. Mention its name and Bible readers gently smile, warmly praise its beauty, and quietly tell what it means to them personally. . . . They quickly admire Ruth, her commitment, courage, and cleverness."[4] It is a sentiment which is shared by a great deal of people, [5] some of whom have read the story themselves and others who have been exposed to it through discussion or popular depiction.[6] In whatever way one comes to know it, the household characterization of Ruth is one of a virtuous and praiseworthy young woman, and this for good reason. At its most basic, the story of Ruth deals with a pair of women down on their luck, who are saved by the virtuous action of the younger, and for whom loyalty and courage are the tools of survival. However, a closer look at the exact nature of this virtue and the actions which Ruth takes suggests that this positive reception is somewhat surprising. While she does appear to act selflessly with regard to caring for her mother-in-law, Ruth's approach of her benefactor takes particular advantage of his vulnerability and carries a distinct tone of deviousness. This type of scene is common to other young women who take initiative within the biblical narrative, and the shared context of childbearing suggests a meaningful pattern of female agency in relation to their sexuality and fertility.

a. Ruth's Virtue

Ruth is introduced, with no reference to her own family or background, as a Moabite woman who has married a foreigner, Mahlon, an Ephrathite. He and his family came east into the kingdom of Moab as they were fleeing a famine in the kingdom of Judah, but his father died

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[4] Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 1.
[5] Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn. *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1990), 11.
[6] e.g. John Milton, "To a Virtuous Young Lady": Mary and Ruth are used as examples of virtuous women.

before the marriage. Mahlon's brother also took a Moabite wife, but both brothers have died and left their wives with their already widowed mother, Naomi. Following this development, Ruth decides to accompany Naomi in her return to Judah, and upon their arrival she becomes instrumental in securing a comfortable and happy existence for herself and Naomi. This she does by seeking out the fulfillment of a particular Israelite custom in which she marries a kinsman of Naomi's and bears him a son.

Throughout the story, Ruth is described in positive terms, almost to a fault, and with constant reference to her personal virtue. When her mother-in-law Naomi decides to return to Judah, she attests to the kindness of Ruth and her sister-in-law: "may the Lord act out kindness (*ḥesed*) with you, as you have done with the dead, and with me" (Ruth 1:8). The kindness with which Ruth acted towards her husband and his brother before their deaths, and towards Naomi, is undeniable. However, this kindness does not appear to be the cause of her praise. When Naomi's kinsman Boaz later speaks to Ruth in the field, he explains to her the reason for his attention to her: it is specifically everything she has done "since the death of [her] husband" (Ruth 2:11), not before. Of interest, then, are the actions which she takes in the period between the death of her husband and her meeting Boaz.

The sequence begins with Naomi's decision to return to Judah. While her sister-in-law agrees to return home, Ruth chooses to follow Naomi, telling her: "where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your god will be my god" (Ruth 1:16). This pledge comes in three parts: the first states a personal loyalty to Naomi and a promise to remain close to her wherever she goes. The second refers to Naomi's 'people'. While this can be construed as a continuation of the first part of the pledge, it extends its reference to the whole nation to which Naomi belongs, or perhaps more important, to which Ruth's late

husband belonged. And the third displays a certainty piety, a conversion of sorts, in which Ruth expresses her wish to worship a foreign god, that of Judah.

The set of actions which Boaz praises encompasses, then, Ruth's promise to remain with her mother-in-law, her decision to be part of her late husband's people, and her wish to worship the Israelite god. Of these, the latter two are more subjective in their demonstration of virtue. Loyalty to a living person is easily praised; loyalty to a dead person and his nation, if that loyalty is detrimental to the one still living, may be less so. It is, to be sure, unselfish, but for whom exactly it is beneficial is an important point to explore. Likewise, worship of the god of Judah may be tagged as virtuous for the Israelite reader, but not necessarily for another.

Beyond these promises, there are also more corporeal actions Ruth takes to display her loyalty and help Naomi. After meeting Boaz, for example, she returns to Naomi and shares the fruit of her labor with her: "she brought forth and gave to her that which she had left after she was satisfied" (Ruth 2:18). As a younger and more able-bodied woman, she takes care of her mother-in-law directly through the labor of her gleaning. Although this description occurs after Ruth's first meeting with Boaz, this might be an eventuality which he assumes and also includes in his praise.

Afterwards, Naomi encourages Ruth to approach Boaz at the threshing floor in the hope that she can secure his help in rectifying their situation through marriage. When Ruth goes to him, he again praises her: "Blessed are you of the Lord, my daughter. You have been more pleasing in kindness (*ḥesed*) at the end than in the beginning, in that you did not go after the young men, whether poor or rich" (Ruth 3:10). This statement is surprising, given the circumstances. The nature of kindness associated with approaching the man for marriage, Boaz specifically out of all the men, is not immediately apparent. Ostensibly it is the way in which the

arrangement helps Naomi which lends it the label of 'kindness'. Later on, in the women's conversation with Naomi, Ruth is described as "better to you than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15). Certainly this can be a simple reference to Ruth's earlier care and her increased ability to provide for Naomi following her marriage. However, Boaz's statement suggests that Ruth would not be demonstrating the same kindness, had she looked to marry a different man. It appears that it is Ruth's marriage and birthing a child to Boaz that particularly helps Naomi.

The legal background of the story clarifies the significance of this situation. Throughout the story, Boaz is described as *gō'ēl*, a 'kinsman-redeemer' (Ruth 2:20; 3:12; 4:14). In the Israelite custom, this role was one of a close male relative, who took on the duties of *g^{e}'ullâ* ('redemption') in order to help a family member in need.[7] Hubbard makes particular emphasis that it is this custom, not levirate marriage (in which a brother-in-law marries the widow of his childless brother in order to produce an heir for him[8]), which dictates the sequence of events in Ruth.[9] In response to this, K. Lawson Younger suggests that it may not be an important distinction: in this case, the intent to fulfill the *gō'ēl* tradition necessitates the levirate marriage. In particular, he notes that the Hebrew levirate custom (*yā-bam*) may well have extended further than merely to brothers, despite what is connoted by the Latin term.[10]

With regard to the story of Ruth, the responsibilities that Boaz takes on as *gō'ēl* and *yā-bam* are the redemption (by repurchasing) of property sold out of economic need (Lev 25:24-34) and the redemption (by marriage) of the wife of a deceased man (Deut 25:5-10). These are the actions which Boaz outlines to the near kinsman and the ten elders of the city (Ruth 4:9-10) and

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[7] Robert L. Hubbard Jr., "The Go'el in Ancient Israel: Theological Reflections on an Israelite Institution," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1 (1991): 4.
[8] Edward F. Campbell Jr., *The Anchor Bible Ruth* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), xix.
[9] Hubbard, *Ruth*, 50-51.
[10] K. Lawson Younger, *Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2002), 409.

completes at Ruth's request.

A primary part of Ruth's kindness to Naomi, then, is her attention to the welfare of her mother-in-law by securing the redemption of her land by Boaz. However, it also appears to be to Naomi's benefit that Ruth marries Boaz and has a child by him. Upon the birth of Ruth's son, the boy is described as "a restorer of life, a nourisher of [Naomi's] old age" (Ruth 4:15) and as "a son born to Naomi" (Ruth 4:17). Ruth's ability to bear children is directly related to her ability to help her mother-in-law. Without this childbearing ability, Ruth would not be able to act out this *ḥesed* to Naomi in the same way, and so is her virtuousness tied up with her fertility.

Moreover, the kindness which Boaz ascribes to Ruth on that very night is complicated by Naomi's instructions and the nature of Ruth's approach to Boaz. After learning of their first meeting in the field, Naomi directs Ruth in her next actions:

> And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her: my daughter, shall I not seek rest for you, so that it may be well with you? And now is there not Boaz our kinsman, with whose young men you were? *Hinneh!* He is winnowing barley at the threshing floor tonight. You shall bathe and anoint yourself and put your garment on yourself and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, you shall know the place where he lies, and you shall go in and uncover his feet and lie down there, and he will tell you what you should do. And she said to her: all that you say to me, I shall do. And she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had instructed her. After Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was joyful, and he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain, she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. And at midnight, the man shook and turned himself, and there was a woman lying at his feet. And he said: who are you? And she answered: I am Ruth, your maidservant. Spread your wing over your maidservant, for you are a kinsman-redeemer. (Ruth 3:1-9)

There is a certain ambiguity as to the events that occur. In both Naomi's direction and the description of the action, Ruth "uncovers Boaz's feet", a phrase which could defensibly be read as referring to his sexual organs.[11] Throughout, terms are used which tend in Hebrew to connote sexual activity: to know (ידע), to go (בא), and to lie down (שׁכב). However, none of them is used

[11] Campbell, *Ruth*, 121.

with its typical context. For example, Ruth is directed to "know the place" (תֵּדָעִי), but Boaz does not "know her" (יָדַע אֹתָהּ). Likewise, she "goes in" (וּתְבֹא), but he does not "go in to her" (וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ), and she "lies down" (וְתִשְׁכָּב), but he does not "lie with her" (וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּהּ).

The scene appears to evoke these parallels intentionally. Although the language may not imply that any particular sexual activity occurred, the arena is one which is typically occupied by sexual action, and the sequence of events is unmistakably one of seduction. Naomi marks Boaz as being isolated for the night, and Ruth seeks to find him alone in this private space. She waits until he has eaten and drunk and is happy, and approaches him when his guard is down, not just full and content but asleep.

Consider also the structure of Ruth's request. Ruth urges Boaz to "spread your wing over your maidservant, for you are *gō'ēl*" (Ruth 3:9). This presupposes that the *gō'ēl* responsibility extends to marrying her. Younger suggests that the duty to redeem Naomi's land comes first, and 'triggers' the levirate duty.[12] Certainly, Boaz presents it this way to the near kinsman (Ruth 4:5). Ruth, however, makes no reference to the redemption of Naomi's property, but appears rather to ask primarily for marriage (or whatever exactly is meant by פרשׂ כנף). She does not ask Boaz to redeem the land, only to marry her as part of *g^{e}'ullâ*, but neither is there any indication that he was planning to redeem it before this encounter. In other words, Ruth appears to be offering her marriage as a means of convincing him to do his part for Naomi.

Naomi's original instruction adds even another slant. If Ruth asks only for marriage, and not repurchasing of land, Naomi instructs her to ask for neither. Rather, she tells Ruth to present herself, to "uncover his feet and lie down there" (Ruth 3:4), and wait for Boaz to tell her what to do. Here is even more emphasized that Ruth goes not to ask for anything relating to *g^{e}'ullâ*, but

[12] Younger, *Ruth*, 409.

instead merely to offer herself with this sexually charged action, in the hope that it leads to the security (מניח) which Naomi promises (Ruth 3:1).

In this context, the sequence—waiting for Boaz to be alone and in a good mood as a result of his meal, before approaching him and exploiting a general weakness of men for women (in terms of sex)—is highly reminiscent of seduction. It might be expected that these methods would be viewed negatively. However, there is little indication that it is. In fact, this series of events appears to involve a very standard agency for women of Ruth's age and status.

b. Female Agency

Ruth's virtue is described primarily as kindness (*ḥesed*). The word is used to refer to her decision to approach Boaz for marriage (Ruth 3:10), specifically to the extent that she is then able to arrange for the redemption of Naomi's land and bear a son who is ascribed to Naomi (Ruth 4:17). The nature of Ruth's agency, however, is one of seduction, in which she waits for Boaz to be at his most vulnerable to get what she wants from him.

This pattern is by no means unique to the book of Ruth, but appears in other context as well, such as in the story of Lot's daughters (Genesis 19) and in the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38). The female characters in these stories utilize devious methods to achieve their goals despite the unwillingness of the men around them.

After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the death of his wife, Lot decides to isolate in the mountains. His older daughter fears that there is no man who can father children for her and her sister. As a result, she decides that the only way to have a child and continue the bloodline is to have a child by her father. She plans to get her father so drunk that he is no longer aware of himself, after which she can lie with him without his knowing. After she succeeds in doing this, her younger sister does the same, and they both become pregnant by Lot. (Gen 19:30-

36).

To be sure, the actions of Lot's daughters here are of the most desperate type. However, one might still imagine that their incapacitation of their father and their willful commission of incest would amount to some criticism. On the contrary, Speiser notes that "all of this adds up to praise rather than blame",[13] and their exploitation of their father is excused due to their ultimate intention.

A similar situation arises with Tamar. She is married first to Judah's eldest son Er, and when Er dies, Judah calls upon his second son Onan to fulfill the levirate duty. However, he does not do so properly, and also dies. Judah, not wanting to lose another son, refuses to give his son Shelah to Tamar (Gen 38:6-11). As a result, Tamar must obtain what is owed her by other methods:

> And it was told to Tamar: *hinneh*! Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep. And she took off the garments of her widowhood from herself and covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself in the entrance of Enaim, which was on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown and that she was not given to him as a wife. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, because she had covered her face. And he turned to her on the road and said: come, let me come in to you. For he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said: what will you give me, so that you may come in to me? And he said: I will send a kid of goats from the flock. And she said: if you will give me a pledge until you send it. And he said: what is the pledge which I shall give you? And she said: your signet and your cord and your staff which is in your hand. And he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived to him. And she arose and went away and put aside her veil from upon herself and put on the garments of her widowhood. (Gen 38:13-19)

This passage contains important parallels to the narrative in the book of Ruth. Naomi announces to Ruth (*hinneh*!) that Boaz is going to be alone at the threshing floor (Ruth 3:2), just as Tamar is told that Judah will be isolated on his way to Timnah. These announcements set the tone for the sequence in which the woman ensures that the man is alone before approaching him.

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[13] E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday 1964), 145.

The vulnerability of the men is also a consideration, but of different kinds: where Boaz was content and full from his meal (Ruth 3:7), Judah is mourning and in search of comfort (Gen 38:12). Then, as part of their approach, the women seek to make their intention clear: where Ruth uncovers Boaz's feet, Tamar covers herself in a veil, in imitation of a harlot. Both actions, although opposite in description, appear tantamount to sexual invitation.

In each of these stories, childbirth is the desired outcome. But while the women carry the major burden of childbearing, they tend not to have ability to initiate intercourse outright. Rather, they find themselves needing to resort to devious or deceptive methods, and these methods are not seen as entirely negative, but are often rather praised as necessary and even virtuous. If childbearing is the primary tool by which women exert their presence in these stories, seduction is the means by which they are able to bring it about.

Chapter 2. Autonomy in the Absence of Childbearing Ability

The book of Ruth focuses on its nominal protagonist, and the narrative primarily follows her actions and agency in helping herself and her mother-in-law. These actions, as discussed in chapter 1, follow the pattern of women in other biblical stories: they are portrayed as seeking to bear children as their primary tool, and their means of initiating this end is seduction. Even when these methods appear to transgress typical notions of propriety or morality, they are generally seen as virtuous.

However, for most of the book of Ruth, the character of Naomi is unable to use either of these tools, and her situation is by no means unique. Women past the age of childbearing, or without a husband, or without the means to come to have one (i.e. attraction or seduction) find themselves with a similar predicament. Many address the situation by delegating the childbearing role to another woman, as Naomi does. However, the inability to bear children still tends to be accompanied by particular change in status. In Genesis, Rachel sees herself as diminished in the eyes of Jacob due to her barrenness, and Leah as elevated due to her fertility. In the context of other stories, such as Sarai and Hagar, it appears that this same childbearing ability can also lead to the fertile woman being less autonomous, and the infertile woman more so. A pattern of control of women which is linked to childbearing ability has important implications in evaluating the significance of their portrayal in the biblical narrative.

a. Barrenness, Agency, and Status

When Naomi is introduced, her roles of wife and mother are already set. She has traveled with her husband and two sons into the land of Moab to escape the famine in Judah, and although her husband dies, she still has a stable existence with her two sons alive and able to provide for her. However, when her sons also die, she is left with only her daughters-in-law.

As a woman, it appears, she is unable to provide for herself and for them, and neither they for her. She is in a foreign land with no relations, aside from these two young women with whom she is connected through her deceased sons, and it does not appear that this unique arrangement, in which three women exist in the absence of any male participation, is sustainable. The only option is for them to go their separate ways: the two younger women back to their families, and Naomi back to Judah. As they part, Naomi expresses the difficulty of her predicament:

> And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law: go, return each of you to the house of your mother. May the Lord be kind with you, as you have been with the dead and with me. May the Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband. And she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her: we will return with you to your people. But Naomi said: turn back, my daughters! Why would you go with me? Are there yet sons in my womb, that they may be husbands to you? Turn back, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I say I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you wait for them, until they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters, for it grieves me very much for you, that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. (Ruth 1:8-13)

In this situation, Naomi appears powerless. This would not be the case if she had a husband or sons, as they would be able to provide for her, but she has neither. When she instructs her daughters-in-law to return home, she wishes them to find security and comfort "each in the house of her (future) husband" (Ruth 1:9). This formulation emphasizes the relationship between comfortable survival and having a man to provide for them. This perspective is supported by Naomi's comment when she returns to Beth-lehem: "the Lord has brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:21). Ruth has just chosen to abandon her homeland in order to stay with Naomi and now stands by her side, yet Naomi considers herself alone and worthless.

The lack of a providing figure is a major source of anxiety, and Naomi's powerlessness is completed by her inability to bear children. She asks the young women: "why would you go with me?" (Ruth 1:11) and points out that she will not be able to provide them with husbands,

suggesting that the only reason for them to remain with her would be if she were able to bear more sons.

The exact nature of this inability is uncertain. Naomi notes that she is "too old to have a husband" (Ruth 1:12), but still describes a hypothetical situation in which she might have one (Ruth 1:12) and then bear more children. This suggests that what she lacks is not the ability to bear children physically, but the ability to attract a husband and thus initiate childbearing.

Without the ability to initiate childbearing on her own, Naomi instead resorts to instructing a younger woman to carry out the initial steps of seduction and then childbearing in her place. While these were the primary tools for Ruth and the other young women identified in chapter 1, it seems now that Naomi's primary agency is in a sort of social control. Once they are in Beth-lehem, Naomi encourages Ruth to glean and also directs her to approach Boaz, who marries her and fathers a child for her. Naomi claims that it is for Ruth's own good (Ruth 3:1), but Ruth's child is described as "a restorer of life, a nourisher of [Naomi's] old age" (Ruth 4:15), and is attributed to Naomi herself (Ruth 4:17). That Naomi is able to give such guiding input and effect this sequence of events beneficial to herself by the direction of another suggests an agency which does not seem to be available for younger women.

In the end, this surrogate birth remedies her tricky situation and is considered almost equivalent to Naomi herself bearing a child. Lacking, in one way or another, the ability to bear a child and the agency to initiate it, Naomi instead directs Ruth, who carries out these actions and bears in her place. This need to delegate the action of childbearing appears in other stories as well, but in these the arrangement transpires with a great deal more turmoil. Consider the story of Rachel and Leah, in which both women figure their approval in the eyes of Jacob according to their ability to bear children (Genesis 29-30). Having been instructed by his father to go to

Paddan-aram to find a wife, Jacob works for seven years for Laban, his mother's brother, in order to marry his daughter, Rachel. However, after this time Laban instead gives him Rachel's older sister Leah, and requires that Jacob serve him for seven more years for the younger sister. Jacob never intends to marry Leah, and the narrative confirms that he loves her less than Rachel. When the Lord sees that Leah is unloved, he allows her to bear many children, but keeps Rachel barren (Genesis 29). Rachel realizes this and tells Jacob to go in to her handmaid instead. When her handmaid bears a son, Rachel reckons it as her own: "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice, and has given me a son" (Gen 30:6). Then Leah, seeing that she herself has stopped bearing, also gives to Jacob her handmaid, who bears more sons to him.

In this sequence, Rachel and Leah both resort to a similar action to the one which Naomi takes. When they are unable to bear children themselves, they pass on the responsibility to another woman. It also reveals another dynamic: a correlation between childbearing ability and status. When Leah bears her first child, she says "because the Lord has looked on my affliction, now my husband will love me" (Gen 29:32). She is initially unloved, but when she begins to bear children, she feels that her status in the eyes of Jacob will be improved in relation to Rachel, since Rachel is not bearing. Likewise, when Rachel sees that she is not able to bear children, she envies her sister and complains to Jacob that she will die if she does not bear (Gen 30:1). Then, when Rachel finally bears, she remarks that "God has taken away my reproach" (Gen 30:23). That her lack of childbearing ability could cause her to consider herself the object of reproach in comparison to Leah, in spite of the fact that Jacob had no interest in marrying Leah at all, speaks to relevance of this connection.

In the story of Ruth, Naomi emphasizes her own feeling of powerlessness in being unable to bear children (Ruth 1:11-13). For Rachel and Leah, the unloved woman feels that she can be

elevated by her childbearing ability, and the loved woman likewise feels that her position is diminished for her inability to bear. In both examples, a lack of childbearing ability results not only in a lack of agency but also a loss of esteem.

b. Fertility and Autonomy

This pattern is deepened in the story of Sarai and Hagar. Like Naomi, the character of Sarai is also introduced as a wife, with no description of her previous life, and the first detail given of her is her inability to bear children (Gen 11:29-30). When she recognizes this, it appears that she has only one option, just as the examples already discussed, to pass on the role of childbearing to a younger woman:

> Sarai the wife of Abram had not given birth for him, but she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, and her name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram: the Lord has restrained me from giving birth. Go in to my handmaid, perhaps I will be built up from her. And Abram heard the voice of Sarai. And Sarai the wife of Abram took Hagar the Egyptian, her handmaid (after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan), and she gave her to Abram her husband to be his wife. And he went in to Hagar and she conceived. But when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes. And Sarai said to Abram: my wrong is upon you! I gave my handmaid into your bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived I became despised in her eyes. The Lord judge between me and you! And Abram said to Sarai: your handmaid is in your hand; do to her that which is good in your eyes. And Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from before her face. (Gen 16:1-6)

Like Rachel and Leah, Sarai's decision to give her handmaid to bear a child for Abram appears at first to be a solution for her infertility. She uses the same language which Rachel will use: "I will be built up (אבנה) from her" (Gen 16:2; 30:3). However, unlike Rachel, who finds this vicarious birth satisfactory (Gen 30:6; 30:8), Sarai encounters additional consequences. She is described as losing esteem in the eyes of Hagar when, unlike her, the younger woman is able to conceive and bear a child to Abraham (Gen 16:4). Sarai's loss of status is in relation to her handmaid who bears for her. This is in comparison to Rachel, who feels that her position in Jacob's eyes is compromised when she is not able to conceive, but her sister is (Gen 30:1). While

these status changes are of different types, the common thread is that the inability to bear children corresponds with a loss of esteem.

However, the story of Sarai and Hagar reveals another facet of this status dynamic. On the one hand, the inability to bear children is clearly not desirable in terms of the stigma that it represents. On the other hand, it appears to afford an unusual autonomy: when Sarai complains to Abram about her grievance regarding Hagar, he tells her that she can do whatever she wishes to Hagar (Gen 16:6). This could be construed as merely the right of a woman over her handmaid. However, Sarai does not immediately mistreat Hagar, but rather goes to Abram first. This suggests that this prerogative is not one which she has previously had, but is newfound with the recent events. It appears, then, that the woman who enters the childbearing role suffers an additional subordination to the woman who cannot bear. As a result of her ability, the childbearing woman is elevated in esteem, but simultaneously diminished in autonomy. She is placed under the control and whim of the non-childbearing woman, even as she carries out exact that which the other woman asks. As noted above, a similar occurrence characterizes the relationship between Naomi and Ruth: Naomi, as the non-childbearing woman, exerts control over Ruth in a parallel fashion to Sarai and Hagar, albeit without the same antagonism.

The nature of this dynamic is also demonstrated in the story of Judith. A widowed Israelite woman in control of her late husband's riches, she watches as the Assyrian general Holofernes surrounds her mountain village of Bethulia. Their supply of water is cut off by the enemy, and the people of the city approach the elders of the city and ask them to surrender. The elders respond that they will wait five days for God to save them, and if by that time he has not, then they will deliver the city to the Assyrians (Judith 4-7). When Judith hears this, she takes direct action:

> And she sent her waitingwoman, who governed everything which was hers, to call Ozias and Chabris and Charmis, the elders of the city. And they came to her, and she said to them: hear me now, governors of the inhabitants of Bethulia, your words, which you have spoken before the people on this day, are not right (οὐκ εὐθης). (Jdt 8:10-11)

She goes on to lecture them about testing God, and reminds them of the history of God's salvation of his people. She then tells them that she is going to depart and take action to save the city and its inhabitants from the Assyrians. However, she warns the elders not to ask what her actions will be, and informs them that she will not explain herself. They do not argue with her, but rather give their blessing: "And Ozias and the rulers said to her: go in peace, and may the Lord God be ahead of you, for punishment of our enemies" (Jdt 8:35).

The action which she takes is to approach the enemy camp under the guise of fleeing her people, whom, she tells the Assyrians, she expects to be defeated. She is taken to Holofernes, and she explains to him that the Hebrews can only be defeated if they sin against God. She tells Holofernes that she will pray each night and relay to him when they do so. He agrees to this arrangement, and soon invites her to dine with him (Judith 10-12). When she arrives, "the heart of Holofernes was amazed with her, and his mind was shaken, and he was very eager to be with her, and he was watching over the right moment to trick her from the day he saw her" (Jdt 12:16). He asks her to drink with him, and as a result ends up drunk and incapacitated:

> And Holofernes delighted in her, and he drank so much wine, as much as he had never drunk in one day since he was born. And when evening came, his servants endeavored to depart, and Bagoas shut the tent from outside and shut out the bystanders from the face of their lord, and they went away to their beds, for they were all tired because the drinking had gone on long. And Judith was left alone in the tent, and Holofernes was spread across his bed, for he was filled with wine. (Jdt 12:20-13:2)

Then, once she is alone with the unconscious Holofernes, she takes Holofernes's sword and beheads him (Jdt 13:8).

Like Naomi, Judith is a widow and for that reason unable to continue bearing children. However, she is also emphasized throughout the story as being still very beautiful (Jdt 8:7;

10:19; 11:23; 16:22). As a result, she is able to pass as an unmarried woman and use seduction to achieve her goals. Whereas previous examples have found women restricted to a particular type of agency based on their childbearing ability and marriage status, Judith finds herself able to access both sets of tools depending on the way in which she is perceived by her audience.

Among her own people, Judith is able at whim to call the elders of the city to appear before her (Jdt 8:10). She speaks to them in a manner which in other contexts might be considered impudent for a woman, criticizing their handling of the citizens and questioning their piety (Jdt 8:11-13). When she tells them that she is taking matters into her own hands, they do not contradict her, but give their blessing for her to do as she wishes (Jdt 8:35).

On the other hand, when Judith appears before Holofernes, she speaks and acts entirely differently. She bows down to him (Jdt 10:23), and says to him: “receive the words of your servant, and allow your maidservant to speak in your presence” (Jdt 11:5). In this context she no longer appears to have the social influence which she held among her own people, and resorts to seduction and charm to achieve her goals. She weaponizes the sexual desire which Holofernes feels towards her (Jdt 12:16), uses wine to incapacitate Holofernes (Jdt 12:20), and waits to be alone with him to strike (Jdt 13:1-4).

Certainly, the primary consideration for this change in demeanor relates to the military context in which the events take place. When she is speaking to the elders of her city, she is a rich, respected woman among her own people. When she speaks to Holofernes, she is a foreign woman fleeing to the general of an invading army.

However, it does not appear unrelated that the dynamic correlates to the pattern already discussed, in which a woman of non-childbearing status is afforded additional autonomy and control. When Judith is known to be a widow, she acts as she wishes and directs others openly.

When she sheds her widow status and takes on the guise of an unmarried woman, as she does before the Assyrians, she must resort to devious methods instead.

To a certain extent, then, the ability to bear children appears to correlate to a complex shift of status. While the inability to bear children is a source of anxiety and viewed as cause for reproach, the removal of the possibility of childbearing appears to lend a certain autonomous status to women, in which they are given the ability to direct others and act more freely. Women who can bear children, on the other hand, are praised and valued, but find themselves the most controlled by external authorities.

Although these authorities are almost invariably men, they can also be non-childbearing women, as demonstrated in this chapter. The additional autonomy which these women receive and the control which they exert over their childbearing counterparts are prerogatives typical of men. With the loss of their childbearing ability, these women find themselves able to act like men—or rather, forced to act like them. Unable to bear children themselves, they resort to the control of those who are.

Chapter 3. Subordination as a Response to Female Power

That childbearing and seduction are the foremost tools of women, and that those who cannot wield these find themselves somehow lacking as women, are sore claims for the modern ear. While the ability to gestate is certainly one shared by many women, and perhaps the ability to attract others in a sexual fashion as well, these are hardly definitive of womanhood.[14] Furthermore, while the patterns within these texts suggest that these ideas about women were common around the time of composition, one has to wonder whether they were truly representative of the experience of contemporary women. Did Israelite women often feel worthy of reproach for being unable to bear, as Rachel does? Were they always eager for their husbands to take other wives and bear children through them, as Sarah (at least initially) appears to be? And if women who were unable to bear children were truly powerless, as the character of Naomi seems to suggest, why was this the case?

These are uncomfortable questions to contemplate, and tackling them directly is beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless of the accuracy of these portrayals, however, their inclusion in the biblical canon is telling. Real or imagined, these stories and depictions were found to be desirable to retell and proliferate within the male-dominated societies which produced them, suggesting that they were meaningful, at the very least, in the context of male interest. Exactly the nature of this interest is subject to speculation, and there are many possibilities which can reasonably be suggested. For example, these stories may have been chosen to promote specific ideas about the societal structure among the Israelite populace. Or the stories may have been subconsciously preferred as being comforting or reassuring, perhaps as a result of a widespread anxiety or prejudice.

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[14] Judith Lorber, "Believing is Seeing: Biology as Ideology," in *The Social Construction of Women's Bodies*, ed. Sylvia K. Blood (London: Routledge, 2004), 13.

Consider once again the book of Ruth. After all, whose story is it? For whom has it been composed, and by whom? Is it, to paraphrase Geertz's description,[15] a story women tell themselves about themselves? Certainly it features, more than just about any account in the biblical canon, the perspectives and experiences of women. However, it is still a narrative fabricated and told not by women, but by men. As a result of this, it may be that this story and others tell us less about the women they describe, and more about the men who have constructed the descriptions. The choice of topic and the nature of the treatment by such authorial figures can be indicative of the way they see the world. Similarly, the social constructions and methods of suppression promoted by groups in power can reveal what they see as most threatening to their position.

In pursuing this perspective, this essay turns to a couple anthropological texts. The first is an ethnography which contemplates the relationship between myth and anxiety and describes the threat that childbearing and sexual initiative represent to men of an eastern Amazon people. The second is a study of ritual sacrifice across cultures and its use as a method of addressing the power that childbearing affords women. These texts provide a deeper backdrop for the relationship between male anxiety and methods of maintaining male ascendency and offer a lens through which biblical examples of similar phenomena can be viewed. In particular, the context of power and suppression evokes a connection between Eve in Genesis and the queen Vashti in the book of Esther, which can ultimately be extended to the other Genesis stories and to Ruth.

a. Authority and Ethnography

The male priority is not unique to biblical texts, nor to religious or historical accounts. It is a feature shared by a great deal of literature, and reports of people around the world and

[15] Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973), 448.

through time, especially those collected before the mid-twentieth century, have been severely lacking in their attention to women. In one way, this is a result of the pattern of male ascendency in almost every society and the tendency for males alone to be afforded contact with outsiders such as ethnographers. It is also the result of a long-held bias among historians and anthropologists towards male activities and attitudes over those of women.

As a result, the conversations of ethnographers would tend to take place almost exclusively with men, about men, and about their understanding of the norms and expectations of their culture and the structure of their society.[16] And while this male account undoubtedly included the doings of women, it would necessarily be a description of women as the men imagined them and would completely disregard how women saw themselves. We have reason, then, to question the trustworthiness of such a story, a man's story of a woman's life, not necessarily because he intends to distort it, although this may be the case, but because his expectations and anxieties push him to do so.

One of the first ethnographies to tackle the flawed nature of this trend was composed in the 1950s by an American couple at Columbia University. During their year of fieldwork, the Murphys lived among the Mundurucú of the eastern Amazon, who inhabit the upper Tapajós River with a total population of around a thousand at the time of writing. Traditionally, the Mundurucú live in village communities of 50-100 people and subsist mainly with swidden agriculture and hunting. Kinship is the primary factor in determining social relationships, and the whole population is divided into two social moieties. In everyday life, however, the most salient group division is between genders. Men and women are constantly separated; their daily chores are different and rarely overlap, and their night lives involve entirely segregated living

[16] Yolanda Murphy and Robert F. Murphy, *Women of the Forest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 78.

conditions, in which all the men of the village share a house, and the women and children are separated into dwellings according to kinship.

Of particular note for this paper is the interaction described by the Murphys between the male ideation about the structure of Mundurucú society and the reality of it. In both the male creed and the practical reality of female life, women have inferior status. They are forbidden from holding any public position of leadership or authority, and are expected at all times to be "retiring and demure".[17] Whenever the Murphys would meet with them, the men would sit on chairs in the front of the room, and the women on the floor behind. This backseat status extends to other situations as well: not only do women sit in the rear, but they walk there as well, and can only eat after men have already done so. In addition, a woman cannot wander alone, and when she is unaccompanied by a man or another woman, she can be approached by any man and cannot refuse intercourse with him.

At the same time, however, a woman may act in no way sexually suggestive or inviting; she may not make eye contact with a man, laugh with her mouth uncovered, or sit with her legs apart. These expectations reiterate the submissive role of women which Mundurucú men proclaim, but they also reveal a paradoxical standard: men see themselves as being sexually dominant and require that they, not women, are the sexual initiators. At the same time, however, they find themselves in serious danger of being attracted and lured into sexual liaisons by women. Because the men see a correlation between ascendency and sexual initiative, they must set these social strictures to approximate the experience which corresponds to their ideology.

In this vein, even a cursory look at the mythology of the Mundurucú suggests that the superiority of men over women is tenuous at best. The dynamic of gender in Mundurucú society

[17] Murphy, *Women*, 131.

is encompassed almost entirely by a single myth, that of the discovery of their sacred trumpets, the *karökö*. In present day, these trumpets can be played exclusively by men, and women are not allowed even to see them. However, in their mythology, it was a group of women who first found the *karökö* in the forest, and while they possessed these instruments the women held ascendency over the men. This period was marked by a nearly complete inversion of sex roles: the men performed the household tasks, such as carrying water and making cakes, while the women took the active role in sexual relations.[18] It was only once the men managed to wrest control of the *karökö* from the women that they became the dominant sex.

This past ascendency of women is a particular point of anxiety for Mundurucú men, for there is among them no notion of an inherent or genetic inferiority of women. Rather, it is only out of the particular sequence of events, mythological or historical, that women came to be in the inferior position in which they are today. As a result, women must be vigilantly suppressed in order that they not regain their previous ascendency.

The Murphys suggest that the myth can be read as an allegory of man's developmental experience: he is born of a woman and raised by her, and as a young child he remains entirely dependent on her for survival and emotional support. If he wishes to become a man, he must assert his autonomy and escape her authority. Even if he does, however, he remains conscious that he was once under her female control and could come to be so again. In this way, the basic fact that every man is born of woman and dominated by her as a child is a major inconsistency in the narrative of male ascendency.

This anxiety about the power of childbearing is present in the norms of Mundurucú society. While childbearing women are restricted by their backseat status (as described above),

[18] In blatant phallic symbolism, it is possession of the long, tubular instruments which afford sexual domination.

the requirements placed on their behavior are lifted for menopausal women. “An old woman will sit where she pleases, and men will actually defer by making room for her. She may talk on whatever subject interests her, and if this requires that she interrupt the men, then so be it.”[19] Socially, with the removal of her childbearing ability, the menopausal woman has become comparable to a male, and does not suffer the same suppression as her childbearing counterparts. Just as in the context of sexual initiative, the oppression is not arbitrary, but correlates directly to the threat which is represented. And for Mundurucú men, the nature of childbearing appears to be one such threat.

A similar situation, in which childbearing poses a particular obstacle for men, can been observed in primarily religious contexts. In her piece in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, Nancy Jay notes that sacrificial rituals around the world share particular features with relation to gender, most notably a tendency to place sacrifice and childbirth in opposition with one another, the former being construed as pure and the latter impure, as well as a rule that only males are allowed to participate in sacrificial ritual. However, she points out that virgins or other non-childbearing women are at times actually permitted to participate in sacrifice. The women who are more consistently prohibited are those who are childbearing, or potentially childbearing.

In unraveling the significance of this pattern, Jay mentions that sacrificial practices appear most important in societies organized around patrilineal descent. She also notes that such descent systems are particularly useful when it is desirable to regulate and transmit productive property across generations. When a society seeks to control the means of production, she argues, it naturally seeks as well to control the means of reproduction, that is, childbearing women. This control is achieved by “formally connecting men to women as childbearers, that is,

[19] Murphy, *Women*, 131.

organizing intergenerational continuity between men and men in the face of the fact that it is women who give birth and with whom the next generation begins life already in close relation."[20]

If this arrangement allows for men to supervise women's childbearing ability, it poses the issue of figuring membership of each descent group. In matrilineage, male descent from uncle to nephew is easily confirmed due to the surety of motherhood—birth alone demonstrates the mother-son (and thus uncle-nephew) relationship. In patrilineage, on the other hand, this certainty is absent, since the father-son relationship cannot be founded on the same unequivocal evidence of childbirth.

Rather than rely on biological paternity, then, a type of jural paternity is pursued instead, in which participation in blood sacrifice is evidence for membership in a line of patrilineal descent. This bypasses one of the fundamental disadvantages of men and allows for a male-dominated social order to be maintained in spite of the fact that the mother ultimately holds the most control over reproduction.[21]

These examples emphasize a pattern of male anxiety about the power that childbearing affords women and a concerted effort to offset this advantage by a combination of suppression of females and consolidation of authority for males. However, these attempts to address (what they see as) the problems of reality appear less as actual solutions or improvements and rather more as merely fictions which serve to appease the self-image of men.

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[20] Nancy Jay, "Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman," in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, ed. E.A. Castelli (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 179.

[21] A similar attempt to supplant the mother-child bond may be found among the Mundurucú. Although young children are housed with their mothers, all males with teenage or adult status live together in the men's house. This may be seen as an attempt to create continuity between males where the natural loyalty is to the mother.

b. Myth and the Bible

The application of this context—in general, the relationship between a fiction and the reality it is meant to describe (or bely), and more specifically, the relationship between threat and suppression—to the biblical text gives a unique insight into the significance of its male authorship. Before returning to treat Ruth with this in mind, however, it may be evocative to pause and consider other biblical stories which afford direct comparison to the Mundurucú myth, particularly in their depiction of expressions of female power and subsequent subordination of women.

A facile starting point is perhaps the most famous mythological sequence in biblical canon: the creation accounts and the garden of Eden story in Genesis. While the myth has come to be attributed around the world with a myriad of (primarily Christian) interpretations, Marc Zvi Brettler suggests that the interaction in the garden is primarily related to mortality and reproduction. He notes that in the second creation story, man and woman are not commanded to reproduce as they are in the first (Gen 1:28). Rather, it is only after they eat from the forbidden tree that they realize "that they were naked" (Gen 3:7), and likewise that the man names his wife "the mother of all the living" (Gen 3:20). Thus sexuality and reproduction are gained from eating from the tree.

The act has, however, been previously marked with threat of punishment. Traditionally, God's warning has been read as "on the day that you eat from [the tree], you will die" (Gen 2:17). It has been undoubtedly noted that this consequence does not actually occur with the immediacy which the wording implies, and Brettler suggests that the final phrase (מוֹת תָּמוּת) ought rather to be read "you shall become mortal."[22] In this way, Brettler paints the consequence

[22] Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 45.

as less an obsession with control and rather as a necessity: if humans have gained the power of reproduction, they can no longer retain immortality but must die in order to make space for future generations.

This reading of the garden story places it squarely in the context of male fear about the power of childbearing. Humans, and specifically women, have now been afforded the ability to carry out reproduction. In his response to these events, the Lord says to the woman: “I will make most intense your pain in childbearing; you will bear children in pain. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16). He affirms that it is the woman who carries out childbearing, and in the same breath places her subordinate to her husband. As soon as the unequal power is shown to rest with the woman, she is placed in seemingly arbitrary manner under the control of men. In our reading, it is anything but arbitrary: it is an attempt to subvert the biological nature of the male-female relationship with social construction which favors the man.

This is mirrored strikingly in the book of Esther. When King Ahasueros calls for Queen Vashti to appear before him and his court, she refuses, and his anger is kindled against her. The punishment he then enacts is not only against her but against all women: “And he sent letters to all the provinces of the king, to each province in its own script, and to every people in its own language, that each man should be master in his own house” (Esth 1:22).

The nature of the queen’s transgression is also one which expresses a form of female advantage: the king wishes for her to come before him and the other men because they are attracted to her beauty. She, however, finds no such interest in return. This seems to follow a pattern in biblical stories, in which women hold sexual attraction over men, but not the other way around. The king’s attraction is thus limited to his power and riches. These, however, are not

enough to convince the queen to appear, and this makes the issue even more apparent for men who do not have the resources of a monarch: “For the matter of the queen will be known to all the women, to make them despise their husbands in their eyes, when it is said: the king Ahasuerus commanded the queen Vashti to be brought in before him, but she did not go” (Esth 1:17). If even the king could not draw a woman to himself, the male narrative of superiority is damaged: in the correlation of sexual initiative and ascendency, affirmation of this narrative would require that the man chooses when sexual interaction takes place. Here, the prerogative appears to be entirely the woman’s.

These examples highlight the relationship between the threat which women represent to the narrative of male ascendency and the nature of the subordinate female position which has been weaved into biblical stories. In particular, the pattern of anxiety about childbearing and sexual initiative, which were the tools identified as being utilized by biblical women in chapter 1, calls attention to their portrayal in the stories of Ruth and others and the way in which the interpretation of such stories might benefit from these considerations.

Conclusion

As we search the biblical text for the characterization of the female experience, particularly as active characters, we find their actions most often consist of bearing children and seducing or otherwise tricking men. The latter affords initiative—Ruth seduces Boaz, Tamar seduces Judah, and Lot's daughters incapacitate their father in order to lie with him—and the former facilitates a permanent effect: their childbearing is portrayed as their most significant mark on the world. Their value and virtue as women are attached to these abilities: a woman evaluated as good or virtuous is often one who is beautiful or can bear children. Leah sees her position as elevated as a result of her childbearing ability, and Rachel sees hers as diminished for her lack. However, the loss of this ability and the corresponding loss of status also appears to free women from many of the restrictions on childbearing women and allow them to explore other tools. Judith is afforded additional autonomy in her dealings with men, and Sarah is seen controlling the actions of her childbearing counterpart in much the way that men typically do.

The nature of this freedom can take on a particular meaning in the context of mythological stories which tend to correlate threat with the punishment of subordination. Eve, for example, is subject to the subordination of women following her assignment to the primary role in reproduction, and likewise Queen Vashti's expression of the unequal dynamic of attraction between men and women results in a similar announcement of male domination. Patterns from anthropological accounts suggest that childbearing and sexual initiative are prerogatives of women which are powerful and often threatening to men, and that myth and social institutions often serve to counteract these threats. In this context, blood sacrifice among many peoples is described as a method of establishing lineage which prioritizes male social relationships over woman's natural reproductive relationship, and myth and social convention

among the Mundurucú portray men as the sexual initiators. In this context of male anxiety, the way in which women use their power is subject to the paradox of the male position. Childbearing is necessary but threatening, and as a result must be allowed only under the supervision of men. Likewise, seduction takes advantage of men's sexual weakness, but its usage is a direct result of women's subordinated position and often serves men's goals in the end. These patterns highlight the male interest in portraying acceptable expressions of female power.

Childbearing, for example, is not portrayed as significant in terms of the experience of motherhood as "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children" as Adrienne Rich describes, but rather motherhood as "the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control".[23] When Hagar flees from Sarai, the angel of the Lord tells her: "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand; for I will greatly multiply your offspring, so that it will not be numbered in multitude" (Gen 16:9-10). The angel insists that she bear the mistreatment of Sarai because of her son and his fate as the father of a nation. Rachel, similarly, in her fatal labor, is offered the consolation that she is having another son, in the words of the midwife: "Do not fear, for this is also a son for you" (Gen 35:17). Fuchs notes that barren women are always given sons to remedy their barrenness.[24] The implication is that barrenness is an issue not because the woman lacks the relationship with a potential child, but rather her inability to continue a male lineage.

In other places the use of seduction tends to be construed as negative in the way it takes advantage of male vulnerability. In these stories however, it is portrayed as acceptable, and the salient point seems to be that the seduction (and subsequent childbearing) ultimately leads to

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[23] Adrienne. Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), 13.
[24] Fuchs, "Mothers," 135.

outcomes which are favorable to men. Ruth seduces Boaz, but it leads to the fulfillment of the *yā-bam* marriage as part of *gō'ēl*, which has the primary interest of keeping property within the family.[25,26,27] Likewise, Tamar seduces Judah, and before their relationship is clear she is set to be punished for her pregnancy: "It was told to Judah: Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot, and also *hinneh!* She is pregnant by harlotry. And Judah said: bring her out, so that she may be burned." (Gen 38:24). However, when it is found that the pregnancy is in the custom of the *yā-bam* marriage and serves to keep a favorable pattern of inheritance, Tamar is praised as righteous (Gen 38:26). This use of this pattern is particularly powerful because these stories ascribe the desire and initiative to fulfill these traditions to Ruth and Tamar, while the primary beneficiaries of them are men.

Women are almost invariably pitted against each other, and positive relationships between women, whether sisters or mother and daughter, tend not to be portrayed.[28] On the one hand, this paucity might reflect the notion that the primary importance of woman is in the way they relate to men, specifically in providing sons for their husbands. On the other hand, it might reflect the desire not to portray the possibility of a stabilizing relationship other than that with a man. A notable exception to this is Naomi, whose relationship with Ruth appears overwhelmingly positive, but the underlying features fall in line with these same patterns. As previously noted, Naomi seems to see her own value (and Ruth's) as negligible in the absence of husbands or sons (Ruth 1:21). Also, she specifically directs Ruth to approach Boaz, whom she has already marked as a near kinsman (Ruth 2:20; 3:2) and who she knows can carry out the fulfillment of *gō'ēl*, which is primarily in the male interest.

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[25] Hubbard, "Go'el," 5.
[26] Campbell, *Ruth*, 136.
[27] Younger, *Ruth*, 409.
[28] Fuchs, "Mothers," 135.

Naomi believes that it is necessary for Ruth to get married to ensure her security (Ruth 3:1). Marriage in general (not just *yā-bam* marriage) is an institution which is desirable for men in the context of maintaining lineage: "Male control of female reproductive powers in conjunction with patrilocal and monogamous marriage (for the wife), secures the wife as her husband's exclusive property and ensures the continuity of his name and family possessions through patrimonial customs and patrilineal inheritance patterns."[29]

Marriage is, undoubtedly, also beneficial for the woman. As Naomi's situation demonstrates, it is difficult for her to provide for herself outside of marriage. However, this need for the support of a husband is not the natural order of things, but is rather a result of the inequality of men and women in their society. It is not that men inherently have the ability to provide, but that they have been afforded the ability to do so by society. Once again, the benefit of men, in this case the control of childbearing afforded by marriage, is artificially made into the benefit of women, projecting the desire of man onto woman.

What is the significance of this for the modern audience? Can we take Hubbard literally, that for readers "admiration easily yields to emulation"[30] of the character of Ruth, or likewise that "the biblical narrative creates a powerful role model for women"?[31] On the other hand, is it somewhat reductive to imagine that these stories are merely the fantasies and wishful thinking of ancient men, with no bearing on the present? Either extreme seems unlikely.

Perhaps more useful is to consider why the tools of seduction and childbearing identified in chapter 1 are primary for women in the biblical narrative. Seduction and deception are utilized because childbearing women do not appear to be afforded any more direct methods of taking

[29] Fuchs, "Mothers," 129.
[30] Hubbard, *Ruth*, 1.
[31] Fuchs, "Mothers," 130.

action. As Fuchs points out, "One of the things that the biblical text fails to make explicit in its treatment of deceptive acts perpetrated by women is their close relationship to woman's inferior social position and political powerlessness in patriarchal society."[32] Similarly, the biblical narrative portrays childbearing as useful primarily because of its emphasized importance to men in maintaining lineage and property. In this ideological approach, women such as Ruth are portrayed positively despite their expressions of female power because of the way in which their actions remain within the patriarchal etiquette. Throughout the Bible, their value is determined by the nature of their usefulness to men, and likewise their virtue,[33] a pattern which is still observable in portrayals of women today.

[32] Esther Fuchs. "Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985), 137.
[33] Fuchs, "Mothers," 119.

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