

Gender, Class, and Androcentric Compliance in the Rapes of Enslaved Women in the Hebrew Bible

Susanne Scholz, Merrimack College, North Andover, Massachusetts

Die Hebräische Bibel enthält sechs Erzählungen, die von Vergewaltigungen versklavter Frauen berichten. Dieser Artikel untersucht diese Texte literarkritisch und mit Hinweisen auf die Auslegungsgeschichte. Da die Perspektive von versklavten Frauen in diesen Geschichten bisher weitgehend ignoriert wurde und mehrere von ihnen nicht als Vergewaltigungstexte bekannt sind, verdeutlicht die Bezugnahme auf einige Berichte von versklavten Frauen in den Vereinigten Staaten des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts die feministisch kritische Perspektive, mit der die sechs Erzählungen hier gelesen werden. Die Exegese beleuchtet eindrücklich den Zusammenhang von Geschlechter- und Klassenanalyse in biblischen Vergewaltigungsgeschichten von versklavten Frauen. Die Untersuchung zeigt auch auf, inwiefern diese und andere biblische Texte gerade wegen ihrer androzentrischen Perspektive für ein feministisches Verständnis von Religion und Gesellschaft weiterhin wichtig sind.

Rape has a long history even though this kind of sexual violence has taken on different meanings in different times and places. It also appears in stories of the Hebrew Bible, and we keep struggling to understand its importance there. Can we use the contemporary term “rape” for literature thousands of years old? Scholars disagree. Some object to the terminological anachronism whereas others accept more freely the fact of readers creating biblical meaning. This article follows the latter position, and goes even further; it examines a particular set of rape stories, those of enslaved women, in light of questions about gender and class. The task is controversial because several of the stories are not often classified as rape stories and almost never viewed as rape narratives centered on enslaved women. One story that is sometimes recognized as a rape text is not usually read in light of class. Yet in all of the stories studied here,

enslaved women are forced to sexual intercourse since their class status makes consent a non-issue. The telling of these narratives is challenging because sometimes women enable the rape of the enslaved women although, to be clear, men are always the ones who rape.

Altogether there are six stories about the rapes of enslaved women. Five are extensive narratives while one is very brief. These are the stories of Hagar (Genesis 16:1-16; 21:9-21), the narrative of Bilhah and Zilpah (Genesis 29:31-30:24), a brief verse on Bilhah (Genesis 35:22), and three stories about women commonly known as “concubines” (2 Samuel 3:6-11; 2 Samuel 15-19; 1 Kings 2:13-25). In various ways, a closer look at these texts demonstrates that biblical rape stories of enslaved women illuminate issues of resistance, competition and cooptation among women, as well as androcentric ideology. As such, the selected biblical narratives shed light on rape, gender, and class, and help us understand why it is so difficult for women privileged by class to avoid being co-opted into androcentric standards and morale.

Since in biblical literature enslaved women do not speak about the experience of forced intercourse, women from a different time and place have to speak for them. Here the words of nineteenth-century African-American women give witness to their opposition and dissent to forced sexual intercourse. The testimonies establish the perspective from which the biblical texts are read: from the one of enslaved women whose consent is not asked for or reported. They have to submit whether or not they like it. After the perspective is established, the analysis moves to an extensive discussion of the six stories according to the literary order in which they appear in the biblical canon. Remarks on resistance, hierarchies of women, and androcentrism conclude the article.

Establishing a Perspective: Enslaved Women and Rape in Nineteenth-Century America

In nineteenth-century America, female slaves of African descent articulated the pain and suffering caused by the repeated sexual violation of their bodies. One of them, Harriet A. Jacobs characterized rape as the “trials of girlhood” when she wrote:

I was compelled to live under the same roof with him — where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black

as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men.¹

Jacobs did not receive support from other enslaved people on the plantation. Although everybody knew “the guilty practices under that roof,” nobody asked her about it. The slave owner was, of course, never held accountable. Jacobs exclaimed: “O, what days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused me!” When her rapist and master built a small house to have constant and private access to her, she swore never to enter it:

I vowed before my Maker that I would never enter it. I had rather toil on the plantation from dawn till dark; I had rather live and die in jail, than drag on, from day to day, through such a living death. I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospects of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet. I would do nay thing, every thing, for the sake of defeating him. What *could* I do? I thought and thought, till I became desperate, and made a plunge into the abyss.²

Jacobs found a way to resist her master. To scare him off from placing her into “the lonely cottage,” she “made a headlong plunge.” She gave herself to “a white unmarried gentleman” who had become interested in her. Her grandmother was incensed about Jacob’s decision when she found out about it. She sent her granddaughter away and told her never to visit her again. However, later the grandmother took pity when she heard the whole story. “She laid her old hand gently on my head, and murmured, ‘Poor child! Poor child!’”³

Enslaved women in America lived with the constant reality of rape because they were property to their white male masters. Laws accommodated the status quo, classifying the progeny as children of the mothers only. Black women were called seducers, “Jezebels,” as if they were the ones tempting the rapists into the encounter. Sympathetic observers recorded a different reality. One of them remembered:

Oh, how often I’ve seen the poor girls sob and cry, when there’s been such goings on! Maybe you think, because they’re slaves, they an’t got no feeling and no shame? A

¹ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 27.

² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

woman's being a slave, don't stop her having genteel ideas; that is, according to their way, and as far as they can. They know they must submit to their masters; besides, their masters maybe, dress'em up and make'em little presents, and give'em more privileges, while the whim lasts; but that an't like having a parcel of low, dirty, swearing, drunk patter-rollers let loose among'em, like so many hogs. This breaks down their spirits dreadfully, and makes 'em wish they was dead.⁴

Enslaved women had little choice but to obey. Yet some of them resisted fiercely the sexual exploitation. One, Jermain Loguen, attacked a would-be rapist with a stick and a knife to chase him away from her mother. Two other women who were approached by an overseer wrestled him to the ground and ran away. When they served as cooks and nurses, enslaved women took recourse to poison. They feigned illness and, when they did not succeed in time, they resorted to birth control and abortion.⁵ They did not easily give up their rights over their bodies if they could help it.

Biblical Stories about the Rape of Enslaved Women

The Hebrew Bible contains several passages on the rape of enslaved women when these texts are read in light of feminist theoretical discourse on rape, class, and race.⁶ Although these debates have developed since the 1970s, many of the following biblical narratives have rarely been considered as stories about rape of enslaved women. The question is, of course, why biblical scholarship has not identified most of the following stories as rape stories of enslaved women. One reason relates to the fact that some academically trained interpreters find it anachronistic to use the term "rape" in relation to discussions of class or race, as understood from today's analytical perspective. They seek to establish authorial intention, sometimes neglecting the issue of rape in biblical texts.⁷ This article argues otherwise. Exegetical observations and references to

⁴ Quoted in Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 40.

⁵ Mentioned in Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), pp. 78ff.

⁶ For a short description of this discourse, see my *Rape Plots: A Feminist Cultural Study of Genesis 34* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000/2002), pp. 35-40. Two important studies in this area are Angela Y. Davis, "Rape, Racism and the Capitalist Setting," *Black Scholar* 9, no. 7 (1978): pp. 24-30, and Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-920.

⁷ See, e.g., Carolyn Pressler, *The View of Women Found in the Deuteronomic Family Laws* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1991), esp. pp. 31-43; idem, "Sexual Violence and Deuteronomic Law," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 102-112.

the history of interpretation provide substance to the discussion so that a complex reading emerges.

The Story of Hagar (Genesis 16:1-16; 21:9-21)

The first story is about Sarah and Hagar, the latter an enslaved Egyptian,⁸ who is mistreated by Sarah and raped by Abraham, Sarah's husband. This story has attracted the attention from feminist scholars, such as Phyllis Trible and Elsa Tamez, as well as womanist theologians, such as Delores S. Williams and Renita J. Weems. All of them sympathize with Hagar, but for different reasons. Trible uplifts Hagar as the first person in the Bible who names God.⁹ Tamez values Hagar as a slave woman of African descent who receives God's word of liberation.¹⁰ Williams empathizes with Hagar because she has provided hope to generations of black women in America and taught them to trust their survival skills.¹¹ Weems praises Hagar because her story teaches contemporary women, white and black, to connect sexism, racism, and classism. To all of them, the Hagar-Sarah story provides significant insights to feminist and womanist discourse.¹²

Enslaved, raped, but seen by God, Hagar has been a cherished biblical character in African-American communities. Womanist theologian Delores S. Williams explains:

The African-American community has taken Hagar's story unto itself. Hagar has 'spoken' to generation after generation of black women because her story has been validated as true

⁸ These and other passages in the book of Genesis (chap. 29:31-30:24) refer to enslaved women as *šiphah* and *amā*. Some interpreters insist on difference of meaning, e.g. Karen Engelken, *Frauen im Alten Israel: Eine begriffsgeschichtliche und sozialrechtliche Studie zur Stellung der Frau im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990), pp. 127-169, esp. 132-139, 166, 185. Others emphasize the terminological commonality, e.g. Raymond Westbrook, "The Female Slave," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews a.o. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 232 footnote 50: "Whatever else they [*šiphah* and *amā*] mean, they certainly both mean female slave."

⁹ Phyllis Trible, "Hagar: The Desolation of Rejection," chap. in *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 9-35.

¹⁰ Elsa Tamez, "The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation," in *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women of the Third World*, ed. John S. Pobee and Bärbel von Wartenberg-Potter (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), pp. 5-17.

¹¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), esp. pp. 15-33.

¹² Renita J. Weems, "A Mistress, a Maid, and No Mercy (Hagar and Sarah)," in *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego, CA: LuraMedia, 1988), pp. 1-21.

by suffering black people. She and Ishmael together, as family, model many black American families in which a lone woman/mother struggles to hold the family together in spite of the poverty to which ruling class economics consign it. Hagar, like many black women, goes into the wide world to make a living for herself and her child, with only God by her side.¹³

The story of Hagar demonstrates that survival is possible even under harshest conditions. When the divine messenger sends the woman back to the house of the enslaver (Genesis 16:9), God does not liberate her. Instead Hagar learns to recognize that she and the child-to-be cannot survive in the desert. Caring for Hagar and Ishmael, God shows the mother how to “make a way out of no way.”¹⁴

The other woman, Sarah, has been the model for many Jewish and white Christian women. Sarah takes her destiny into her own hands because she sees God as preventing her from bearing children. Her husband is to impregnate her slave-maid so that “perhaps I shall be built up from her” (Genesis 16:2). Scholars have long pointed out that the Nuzi tablets, ancient Near Eastern texts discovered in the early twentieth century, mention this practice. An infertile woman gives a slave-maid to her husband and so provides him with offspring. Whether routine among upper-class citizens or common practice among all citizens, this ancient Near Eastern custom is usually not called “rape.”¹⁵ Instead, scholars often advise to “lay aside our cultural biases long enough” and to appreciate the way of life from a different time.¹⁶

Yet, even if Sarah’s decision is reminiscent of an ancient Near Eastern custom, the practice must still be translated to current sensibilities. When the perspective of the enslaved woman is considered, this form of surrogacy comes close to — what we today call — rape. A woman, in fact an enslaved woman, is forced to sexual intercourse since she never consents to sex with Abraham. Moreover, why should we assume that enslaved women in the ancient Near East did not feel violated to the core of their being when they had to submit sexually to the husband of

¹³ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, p. 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁵ Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 119-121; John van Seters, “Jacobs’ Marriages and Ancient Near East Customs,” *Harvard Theological Review* 62 (1969): 377-395.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Weems, “Do You See What I See?,” p. 35.

their owner? Both Genesis 16:2 and Genesis 30:3 mention this practice, but none of the narratives depict the enslaved women's reaction to the rape. In Genesis 16, Hagar responds to Sarah only after she becomes pregnant. She despises her owner. "But when Hagar saw that she had conceived, her mistress was slight in her eyes" (Genesis 16:4).

Hagar's reaction shows that like Sarah she, too, is co-opted into the hierarchies of patriarchy. Pregnant in a society that values women for their fertility, Hagar has internalized sexist oppression. Does Hagar's response represent a realistic description of an enslaved woman who is raped by her husband's owner? Or does this verse give evidence of an androcentric strategy that legitimates the rape of Hagar by showing that the pregnant woman gained new confidence from her changed circumstances?¹⁷ After all, it is ultimately the husband who benefits most from the arrangement. He has sexual access to two women and will have a son (Genesis 16:15-16). In the story Abraham appears as a player in the background. When Sarah complains to him about the tension between her and her slave, he relinquishes his responsibility saying: "Since your slave is in your hand, do to her the good in your eyes" (Genesis 16:6). When the husband withdraws, the woman in charge exerts her power over the woman enslaved. Does the narrative attempt to blame the wife for a practice which the husband, in fact, enjoys? In response to Hagar's contempt, Sarah "afflicted (*'innah*)" her slave (Genesis 16:6). Abraham is off the hook while the women compete against each other.

What did Sarah do to Hagar? The Hebrew verb *'innah* has many shades of meaning. Generally, it refers to the physical oppression of slaves or people in general. The Egyptian taskmaster oppressed (*'nh, pi'el*) the enslaved Israelites (Exodus 1:11-12). In the so-called "Dynastic Oracle," God tells prophet Nathan that the people of Israel will not experience oppression (*'nh, pi'el*) during King David's reign (2 Samuel 7:10). The verb also connotes rape, such as in the stories of Tamar and Amnon (2 Samuel 13:14) or the unnamed concubine (Judges 19:25). Can Sarah "rape" Hagar? Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible rejects the idea. To her, the verb depicts the intensification of the oppressive system in which Sarah and Hagar live.¹⁸ To other interpreters,

¹⁷ In contrast, Wilma Ann Bailey suggests that in Genesis 16:4 the narrator sides with Sarah against Hagar, and so a reader's sympathy is manipulated to side with Sarah against Hagar. See Bailey's article "Black and Jewish Women Consider Hagar," *Encounter* 63 (Winter 2002): 37-45.

¹⁸ Trible, "Hagar," p. 13.

Hagar's violation and torture can be specified as the sexual violation of her physical integrity. Hagar was raped.¹⁹ Still another meaning is possible. It emphasizes that androcentrism makes Sarah the subject of the verb "to rape" while Abraham executes the sexual violation. The problem is whom to hold accountable for the rape: Abraham, Sarah, or both? Or is it God when God does not provide fertility to Sarah (Genesis 16:2)? The story does not provide a clear-cut answer, but challenges readers to wrestle with the brutality of Hagar's predicament.

The story thus continues with Hagar. After she escapes from the house of her owners, she reaches an oasis in the desert where she encounters a divine messenger. The presence of water signals her relative safety; she will not die of thirst. Strikingly, the messenger of God asks her the obvious: "Hagar, slave of Sarah, from where have you come and where are you going? (Genesis 16:8). Answering only the first part of the question, she replies: "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarah" (Genesis 16:8). Having fled into the desert, pregnant, she knows from whom she runs. Does she know where she goes next? The messenger does not sympathize with her condition, but tells her what to do. "Return to your mistress, and suffer affliction ('*nh*, pi'el) under her hand" (Genesis 16:9). What a tormenting advice! The divine messenger orders the raped and pregnant slave to return to the master and to endure further maltreatment, "rape."

On whose side is God? Interpreters have sometimes glossed over the difficulty of this verse. Phyllis Tribble links the messenger's statement to the two following promises: Hagar will have uncountable descendants (v. 10), and she will give birth to a child, a son (v. 11-12).²⁰ Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, too, evades the glaring problem. She characterizes the divine promises as "indeed a panacea for her pain" and only briefly wonders whether this is God's way of sanctioning "abuse." Still Darr believes that the messenger tries to comfort Hagar.²¹ Renita J. Weems goes even so far as to blame the slave for her misery. With a "pathetic sense of herself," Hagar accepts

¹⁹ See, e.g., Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, p. 17.

²⁰ Tribble, "Hagar," p. 16.

²¹ Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, *More Precious Than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), p. 139-140.

her status as a slave and Sarah as her “mistress.” Thus, to Weems, “the angel had no other choice but to send the runaway slave back to the reality in which she had defined herself.”²²

Sometimes, however, interpreters discuss explicitly the theological problem posed by the messenger’s command. Delores S. Williams, for example, questions why God sent back the slave to the slave owner, and wonders about divine prudence: “Did God not know about Sarai’s brutal treatment of Hagar?” The divinity appears to side with the oppressor, and so Williams asserts, “The angel of Yahweh is, in this passage, no liberator God.”²³ The personal encounter with God does not release Hagar out of oppressive structure but makes her submit until her owners chase her away for good (Genesis 21:10-14). Not supporting the raped and enslaved woman to build a life of her own, the God of this story privileges the future over against the present. Soon Hagar will have a son and uncountable progeny. In the meantime she has to be a slave. Does the story, perhaps, criticize a doctrine that tolerates conditions of oppression for a promise of future bliss?

Yet the interaction between the messenger and the raped slave has not ended. Listening to the command and the promises, Hagar responds by naming the divinity: “You are a God of seeing” (Genesis 16:13). Is this name meant ironically? After all, God has not “seen” Hagar except in her status as a slave. God only sees her condition but does not deliver her from it. Does the name suggest that Hagar recognizes God not as “a God of deliverance,” but only as “a God of seeing”? Understood this way, the name proves that God’s presence awes Hagar while she is aware of the limitation of the divine command. God only “sees” her situation, and thus sends her back, not freeing her.

Despite this problematic and limiting order by God, the story shows that an enslaved and raped woman names God. When Hagar continues to speak, the Hebrew syntax is obscure. Does Hagar speak gibberish, as Phyllis Tribble believes: “Have I even here seen after the one who sees me?” (Genesis 16:13).²⁴ Perhaps Hagar reflects on her newly attained insight, as Nahum M. Sarna proposes: “Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!”²⁵ Or she proclaims her awe about

²² Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, p. 13.

²³ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, p. 21.

²⁴ Tribble, “Hagar,” p. 18.

²⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), p. 121.

surviving an encounter with God, as translated by Gerhard von Rad: “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?”²⁶ Whatever the meaning of the cryptic Hebrew, the ambivalence of the text relates well to the complex relationship between God and Hagar. Verse 13 does not simply depict Hagar as praising God, but hints at the theological problem of the encounter. God engages Hagar, even “sees” her, and still orders her to return to her owner. The obscurity of the Hebrew illustrates that Hagar understands: God is not unequivocally on her side.

Neither is God always on the side of Sarah. The other woman, Hagar’s owner, Sarah, disappears completely toward the end of Genesis 16 while patriarchal order dominates. When Hagar returns from the desert, Abraham becomes father of “his” son: “Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave his son borne by Hagar the name Ishmael” (Genesis 16:15). Hagar is reduced to giving birth whereas the father names Ishmael. Genesis 16 emphasizes male lineage, upholding Abraham’s paternal rights. The question arises: Is patriarchy “well in control” only at this point in the narrative, and not already earlier when God commands Hagar to return to her mistress (v. 9)?²⁷ After all, Hagar’s return does not secure Sarah’s or Hagar’s future. It is Abraham who benefits from the slave in the slaveholder’s house. Hagar gives birth to “his” son, and so his future looks bright. God seems to side with Abraham throughout the story.

The second part of the Sarah-Hagar story suggests that, indeed, God supports the man (Genesis 21:9-21). When Sarah does not tolerate anymore that Ishmael and Isaac play together, she instructs her husband: “Cast out this slave woman and her son. For the son of this slave woman will not inherit with my son, Isaac” (Genesis 21:10). For the first time in Abraham’s interactions with his wife and her slave, the father reacts emotionally. “This thing was evil in the eyes of Abraham on account of his son” (Genesis 21:11). He agonizes over the fate of Ishmael, but God changes his perception of his wife’s request (Genesis 21:12.13). Distancing Abraham from Ishmael, God does not identify Hagar’s child as “Abraham’s son.” God calls Ishmael “the boy” or “the son of the slave woman” (vv. 12, 13) as if to restrict Abraham’s children to Sarah’s line and to refer to Abraham as the father of Isaac only. Still, God also supports Hagar, the mother, when God advises Abraham: “Do not feel evil in your eyes on account of the boy *and* on account

²⁶ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 190.

²⁷ Tribble states that “patriarchy is well in control” in Genesis 16:15-16, cf. Tribble, “Hagar,” p. 19.

of your slave woman” (v. 12). Although God tells Abraham to obey Sarah and not to worry about Hagar or her son, God does not forget the enslaved woman. Consequently, Abraham takes care of her and her son, providing her with water when he sends them off.

So Abraham rose early in the morning,
and took bread and a skin of water,
and gave it to Hagar,
putting it on her shoulder, along with the child. (Genesis 21:14)

In the desert God shows concern again when the mother despairs over the fate of her son. Sitting “a good way off, about a distance of a bowshot” (Genesis 21:16a), Hagar watches her son dying. She raises her voice in grief when little Ishmael cries in pain. Responding to the baby’s cries (Genesis 21:17), God helps Hagar to find water for the child (Genesis 21:19), and so the mother is able to keep her child alive.

The story ends with a focus on Ishmael. “God was with the boy; and he grew up and lived in the wilderness, and he became an expert with the bow. He lived in the desert of Paran; and his mother took for him a wife from the land of Egypt (Genesis 21:20-21). Hagar’s son grows into “an expert of the measuring tool” that once measured the distance between his mother and him when he almost dies as an infant. When Ishmael is an adult, his mother still provides for him, finding him a wife from her native country (cf. Genesis 25:12-18). This comment reveals that Hagar shares the male-dominated view of her previous owners. She, too, has not overcome the patriarchal and ethnic order although she triumphs over her class status. Hagar wants her son to be married to a woman from Egypt. Could there have been a different end, one that does not try to make believe that women, enslaved or free, live through their sons only?

The Story of Bilhah and Zilpah (Genesis 29:31-30:24)

Women also play center role in a narrative in which the prominent characters are Leah and Rachel competing with each other for children and husbandry love. In the process, they force their slaves, Bilhah and Zilpah, to become pregnant by Jacob (Genesis 29:31-30:24). The story is painful: One of the sisters, Leah, is “hated” by the husband, but gives birth to six sons and one daughter. When her fertility ceases, she gains two more sons from her slave, Zilpah. The other sister, Rachel, loved by her husband, is infertile. She competes with her sister’s fertility by forcing her slave, Bilhah, to become pregnant by Jacob. Consequently, Bilhah gives birth to two

sons. Only toward the end of the story does Rachel herself give birth to a son, and in a later chapter she has another son (cf. Genesis 35:16-20). In the story of Genesis 29-30 two women are the main actors, and two women are their slaves. Husband Jacob appears only on the margins, speaking once (Genesis 30:2) while his wives do not stop talking. The story is troubling because, like Sarah, the sisters Leah and Rachel use enslaved women to secure their progeny. Sometimes, scholars argue that this custom was common in the ancient Near East, as if to normalize a horrendous practice.²⁸

Perhaps surprisingly, the narrative has not gained much scholarly recognition. Whether readers subscribe to traditional, feminist, or womanist perspectives, the tale about two free and two enslaved women has not interested them much. Neither the sisters Leah and Rachel, both married to Jacob, nor Bilhah and Zilpah, the slaves of the two sisters, figure prominently in Jewish or Christian imagination. For instance, none of the feminist and womanist writers who worked on the Hagar story dealt with Genesis 29-30 even though the latter narrative compares and contrasts well with Genesis 16. Like Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah are slaves of Israelite matriarchs. Bilhah is the slave of Rachel, and Zilpah is the slave of Leah. Like Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah are raped by the husband of their enslavers. Like Hagar, they give birth to sons. But the stories are also different. Bilhah and Zilpah do not protest their treatment. They do not run away, and they do not encounter the divinity. Unlike Hagar, they never speak. Their sons become equal members of the twelve tribes of Israel whereas Hagar's son, Ishmael, becomes a patriarch of another religion, Islam. The differences between the narratives are striking, but so are the similarities. Yet feminist and womanist readers have rarely dealt with the story of Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. Why?

Three reasons come to mind. The first reason relates to the marginalized status of Genesis 29-30 in the history of interpretation. Renowned biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad provides a clue why traditional research has ignored the story when he commented:

This narrative — completely without any helpful interpretation for the reader, without a religious framework, which presents religious ideas with the same reserve and the same daring objectivity as it does worldly ones — this narrative is nevertheless not profane in the last analysis. Here are the same narrators who told of Abraham's call and the renewal of the

²⁸ See, e.g., Westbrook, "The Female Slave," pp. 214-238, esp. 224-229.

promise to Jacob. But these same narrators, who are occupied with the great words of God, are also able to give long descriptions of an event upon which they do not comment theologically.²⁹

To von Rad, this story does not present “the great words of God.” It stands in the context of great narrative but in itself it is not theologically important. A quick look into several commentaries confirms von Rad’s assessment. Other interpreters, too, have little to say about a story which they call, “The Birth and Naming of Jacob’s Sons: Genesis 29:31-30:24,”³⁰ “The Birth of Jacob’s Children (29:31-30:43),”³¹ or, sometimes including a mother’s name, “Jacob’s Four Sons by Leah (29:31-35)” and “Jacob’s Children by Bilhah (30:1-8).”³² Highlighting the sons of patriarch Jacob, most interpreters neglect the women, free or enslaved, raped or not. They focus on other passages in Genesis and minimize a narrative on slave owners and their slaves, all of them women. One would, of course, expect that feminist and womanist scholars remedied the situation. After all, many once neglected passages benefited from their attention, which made known numerous unfamiliar and hidden texts. This, however, did not happen in the case of this text.³³

A second reason explains why feminist and womanist readers have been reluctant to work with Genesis 29-30. The passage tells a painful story about women: two of them are willing, even eager, to participate in patriarchal structures, and the other two are forced to submit to the

²⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p. 335. For a different view, see Mar Jacob, Bishop of Serugh, “A Homily On Our Lord and Jacob, On the Church and Rachel, and On Leah and the Synagogue,” *The True Vine* 4, no. 4 (1993): pp. 50-64. This Christian interpretation offers an allegorical anti-Jewish perspective on Genesis 29-30: Leah stands for the synagogue, Rachel for the church, and Jacob for God, see, for example, the following quotes: “How glorious is her sister Rachel in the readings! The beauty of the Church was hid in her, wherefore great is her glory,” “Jacob portrayed the entire path of the Son of God,” “The Synagogue and Leah could not enter without a veil, for they had no beauty for which to be loved. Devices, deceits, and cunning did they employ with God, as also with Jacob, who bore His likeness. But since artifice cannot stand before the truth, the Cross and the dawn exposed what had been done with guile. At daybreak Jacob saw Leah, that she was unsightly, and the dawning of the Son revealed the Synagogue, that she was double-minded. The Church’s face was revealed and she stood before the truth.... She was depicted in Rachel, who was beautiful of appearance and fair of face,” *ibid.*, pp. 53, 60, 63.

³⁰ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), p. 469.

³¹ Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 206.

³² Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 265, 269.

³³ Sometimes references to Genesis 29-30 are part of discussions on motherhood, see, e.g., Ilana Pardes, “Rachel’s Dream: The Female Subplot,” chap. in *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 60-78.

authority of the former. More specifically, the story demonstrates that Leah and Rachel actively conform to patriarchal and classist expectations. Leah tries to gain the love of her husband by giving him sons, and Rachel hopes to win societal acceptance by overcoming her infertility. In the process, they compete against each other and force their slaves to have sex with their husband. One woman hopes for the love of her husband by giving birth to sons (Genesis 29:32.34) whereas the other rejoices in having defeated her sister (Genesis 30:8). When the same characters employ their slaves to increase the number of their children, feminist and womanist sensibilities are repelled. Some interpreters characterize such action as “nothing less than reprehensible.”³⁴ Yet how should one interpret a story that so clearly portrays women, on the one hand, as co-opted to androcentric and classist structures and, on the other hand, as experiencing the full force of societal oppression through their female slave owners? The lack of feminist or womanist interpretations indicates the extent of the problem. To many, it is easier to ignore the story than to engage it.

Still a third reason sheds light on the interpretive neglect of Genesis 29-30. In stark contrast to the Hagar story, God never attends to the enslaved women, Bilhah and Zilpah. Although both women are repeatedly mentioned as the mothers of the four Israelite tribes Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher (cf. Genesis 37:2; 46:18.25; 1 Chronicles 7:13), feminist and womanist scholars do not empathize with the enslaved mothers. To them, Bilhah and Zilpah are the progeny-producing “handmaids” of Leah and Rachel. This attitude toward Bilhah and Zilpah is supported by a depiction of God who is seemingly indifferent to the fate of the women slaves.

Here then lies the theological crux of the story: On whose side is God? The beginning of the story suggests that God supports Leah. “When Yahweh saw that Leah was unloved, God opened her womb” (Genesis 29:31). Later God also “remembers Rachel” (30:22), which leads to her long-awaited first pregnancy and the birth of Joseph. Yet no reference is made to Bilhah and Zilpah. For the enslaved women, raped and silenced, God is absent. Womanist theologian Delores S. Williams proposes in her discussion on Hagar that biblical narratives depict God as choosing

³⁴ Renita J. Weems, “Do You See What I See? Diversity in Interpretation,” *Church & Society* 82 (September-October 1991): p. 34.

when to side with the oppressed and when to side with the oppressor.³⁵ In Genesis 29-30, God sides with the slave owners, first with Leah and later with Rachel (Genesis 29:31; 30:22). Is it thus surprising that Genesis 29-30 has not attracted much attention from feminist or womanist scholars of the Bible?

An exception is the interpretation of Esther Fuchs.³⁶ This feminist researcher discusses the story in a larger study on the inherent androcentrism of biblical narrative. To Fuchs, the literary characteristics of Genesis 29-30 belong to a genre of stories that justify polygamy with a reference to a barren wife. Such stories portray men as forced to marry several women because their first wife is infertile. To secure the necessary progeny, a husband has to be with other women, as in the case of Hagar and Leah. Abraham and Jacob have sex with Hagar and Leah because both women are “naturally” fertile. Interestingly, they also share “a rather dubious array of characteristics, like foreignness, pridefulness, unattractiveness.”³⁷ To Fuchs, these stories exemplify the relentless biblical androcentrism which always centers on men and their concerns.

Fuchs has to be commended for dealing with Genesis 29-30 but the lack of class analysis is problematic. It is awkward to compare Hagar with Leah on the basis of fertility and to ignore their different social positions. Unlike Hagar, Leah is not a slave who is raped by the husband of her owner. She is a slave owner who happens to be fertile. Like Sarah, she forces her slave, Zilpah, to have sex with her husband. Thus Hagar’s situation is better compared to the slaves, Zilpah and Bilhah, rather than to Leah.³⁸ Fuchs ignores this complicating factor based on class, which turns Leah into more than a “victim” of patriarchy. She participates and benefits actively

³⁵ Williams, *Sister in the Wilderness*, p. 199.

³⁶ For other feminist interpretations, see, e.g., Irmtraud Fischer, “Genesis 12-50: Die Ursprungsgeschichte Israels als Frauengeschichte,” in *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, ed. Luise Schottroff und Marie-There Wacker, 2nd ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), p. 19.

³⁷ Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 63.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 154-155, 158. For a parallelism of Hagar and the two enslaved women, see, e.g., Cynthia Gordon, “Hagar: A Throw-Away Character Among the Matriarchs?” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1985 Seminar Papers*, ed. Kent H. Richards (Cambridge, MA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1985), p. 273; Renita J. Weems, “Do You See What I See? Diversity in Interpretation,” *Church & Society* 82 (September-October 1991): p. 35; Ina J. Petermann, “‘Schick die Fremde in die Wüste!’ Oder: Sind die Sara-Hagar-Erzählungen aus Genesis 16 und 21 ein Beispiel (anti-) rassistischer Irritation aus dem Alten Israel?” in *(Anti-)Rassistische Irritationen: Biblische Texte und interkulturelle Zusammenarbeit*, ed. Silvia Wagner, Gerdi Nützel and Martin Kick (Berlin: Alektor Verlag, 1994), p. 140.

from patriarchal society because her economic situation allows her to submit another woman to her will.

Whether one stresses the issue of fertility, as Fuchs does, or whether one insists on the connection between fertility and class, the story raises difficult issues. For instance, the story shows that God sides with the slave owners in Genesis 29-30, clearly a theological problem. Interceding on behalf of Leah and Rachel's fertility and so indirectly contributing to the rapes of the enslaved women, God does not attend to Zilpah and Bilhah. They are forced to become pregnant, give birth four times, and live without divine support. Ultimately, however, divine care does not benefit Leah and Rachel either, as Fuchs points out. Communication between God and the women functions merely as divine justification for the institution of motherhood. Like other stories, Genesis 29-30 describes the androcentric order as divine order. According to Fuchs, then, this story does not endorse feminist values, except perhaps when it is understood as an illustration about the traps of androcentric ideology for women, free or enslaved. Perhaps, the anti-feminist values are also the reason why feminist and womanist interpreters refrained from interpreting Genesis 29-30.

From the start, the story connects God with fertility, and so the first verse reads: "When Yahweh saw that Leah was hated. Then God opened her womb, but Rachel remained barren" (Genesis 29:31). God causes Leah's pregnancies in compensation for her secondary status. Is the moral: "If Leah is not loved like Rachel, should she not at least have children?" Such a lesson would be disturbing since divine intervention not only heightens the conflict between the sisters, but leads to repeated rapes of the enslaved women. Prior to Genesis 29:31, God intervenes in fertility issues only once, namely when God diminishes the fertility of king Abimelech, his wife, and female slaves in Genesis 20. God restores fertility after Abraham intercedes on behalf of the king (vv. 17-18). Fertility and infertility thus are a divine response to other matters. In the case of Genesis 29-30, God makes Leah fertile to compensate her for being unloved, "hated," by Jacob.

Interpreters do not always comment on God's role in Genesis 29:31. When they do, they approve of the divine support for Leah, but ignore the consequences of the divine attention. Commentator Hermann Gunkel maintained: "That Yahweh cares for the despised is a comforting belief: Yahweh helps the poor, the despised, the despairing, the fugitive slave (16:7ff), the rejected child

and his unfortunate mother (21:17ff), the shamefully sold and slandered (39:2, 21ff).”³⁹ Gerhard von Rad observed: “After all the thoroughgoing wordliness of the previous story, God is again the subject of the event. He is the one who blesses and comforts the neglected wife.”⁴⁰ Elyse Goldstein explains: “God rewards Leah with fertility to make up for her troubles with her husband, and the women are now equalized. One gets a man’s love; the other gets a child’s love. One woman gains status through her husband, the other woman status through her children.”⁴¹ These and other interpreters appreciate God’s option for the “despised.” They find Leah’s fertility a blessing, and approve of the equalizing status given to Leah and Rachel. However, none of them considers the consequences of God’s activity, which leads to sibling rivalry and repeated rapes of the enslaved women. In other words, scholars do not often relate the divine gift of fertility to the whole story. Does their silence indicate that the theological consequences are too threatening since, at best, God ignores the abusive relationships among the four women when fertility is at stake?

Yet, when the notion of God as fertility giver is related to the whole story, another reading becomes possible. The story then challenges the notion of God as the giver of fertility because it leads to rape. Accordingly, Genesis 29-30 illustrates how far people, women and men, are willing to go when they conform to patriarchal expectations. Their willingness to comply to the societal pressures has destructive consequences, especially for those on the bottom of society. Women, competing for male approval, contribute and keep alive the oppression of less privileged women. The story about Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah illustrates the damaging interconnections between androcentrism, gender, and class, particularly among women.

There is little dispute over the fact that Genesis 29-30 represents an androcentric story *par excellence*. Scholars assert that the narrative depicts Leah and Rachel as embracing androcentric values in their struggle for children and husband. Athalya Brenner holds that the story is a “male-oriented, male-written judgement on female sociability and potential of socialization.” To

³⁹ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997), p. 324.

⁴⁰ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 294.

⁴¹ Elyse Goldstein, *ReVisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), p. 65. For the idea of God as the equalizer between the women, see also John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. John King (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), p. 140.

Brenner, Leah and Rachel are like other biblical mothers who eventually give birth to “heroes,” and are portrayed as rivals who are mostly concerned with motherhood.⁴² Sharon Pace Jeansonne also maintains: “The struggle between Rachel and Leah clearly arises from a context of patriarchal structures and expectations.”⁴³ Similarly, Peter Pitzele, recognizes that Genesis 29-30 “dramatize[s] in the starkest possible terms the worst features of the patriarchal system. Women bear sons for men. Motherhood has been co-opted in the interests of lineage and class.... Two sisters are corrupted by a system that prizes sons.”⁴⁴ Also Francine Klagsbrun acknowledges the androcentric character of the narrative when she writes: “From a feminist point of view, we would say that they [Leah and Rachel] have incorporated patriarchal values, and certainly their stories are presented from a male perspective.”⁴⁵

Yet the last mentioned exegete, Klagsbrun, also hesitates to “dismiss these women simply as products of patriarchy.” Do Leah and Rachel sense that they follow “a divinely directed destiny” which would make their children into the founders of a great nation? Klagsbrun believes so, alleging that “an intimacy with the divine...perhaps lay at the heart of their desire for children.”⁴⁶ Leah and Rachel are figures full of strength and determination who play crucial roles for the destiny of their people. Offering an important objection to the dismissal of Genesis 29-30 as thoroughly androcentric, Klagsbrun cautions that one may learn a great deal from this story despite or, rather, because of the obvious androcentrism. Although her position tolerates, perhaps, too easily Leah and Rachel’s co-optation into androcentric and classist oppression, Klagsbrun’s concern is important. The story is open for interpretation, illustrating why some women endorse patriarchal structures. Because of class privilege, Leah and Rachel are eager to conform to the patriarchal goal of giving birth to male babies. As such, the narrative illuminates the societal forces that make women accept and actively support androcentric hierarchies.

⁴² Athalya Brenner demonstrated that Genesis 29-30 follows the “birth-of-the-hero” paradigm, which pursues androcentric interests, cf. her article “Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns Within the ‘Birth of the Hero’ Paradigm,” *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1986): 273.

⁴³ Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah To Potiphar’s Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 79.

⁴⁴ Peter Pitzele, “The Myth of the Wrestler,” chap. in *Our Fathers’ Wells: A Personal Encounter with the Myths of Genesis* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 181.

A closer look at the literary structure uncovers the particularities of this dynamic. Four literary scenes structure the story. The first scene, Genesis 29:31-35, sets up the situation: Leah is unloved, but fertile, giving birth to four sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Their names receive explanatory comments from the mother. Although the relationship between the sons' names and Leah's explanations are etymologically mostly incorrect,⁴⁷ Leah's statements are significant. Except for the explanation of the name of Levi (v. 34), they refer to God. After the first birth, Leah acknowledges, "Yahweh saw my misery; now my husband will love me" (v. 32). After the second birth, she remarks: "For Yahweh heard that I was unloved, and so God has given me this one too" (v. 33). After the fourth birth, she exclaims: "Now I shall praise Yahweh!" (v. 35). In other words, Leah correlates her fertility to the divinity although her goal — to gain the love of her husband — remains unattained. Initially, Leah believes to gain love for her fertility, but after the fourth son she recognizes that fertility will not bring her Jacob's love. Leah praises God without a reference to her husband (v. 35).

The second scene, 30:1-8, reports of Rachel's infertility which leads to Bilhah's rapes. When Rachel realizes that she does not become pregnant, she instructs Jacob: "Give me children, or I shall die!" (v. 1). He, however, seems to be more cautious than his wife: "Am I in the position of God, who has denied you the fruit of the womb?" (v. 2). Jacob does not respond to his wife's sorrow, refusing responsibility for her infertility. He defends himself because infertility is not his problem but ultimately God's. His brisk response startled the rabbis of the early centuries C.E. A midrash lets God intervene: "Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Jacob: Is that a way to answer a woman in distress?"⁴⁸ The rabbis reprimanded Jacob for his unsympathetic response. Yet in the narrative Jacob's answer leaves it up to his favorite wife what to do next.

She takes action. "Here is my slave, Bilhah. Sleep with her, and let her give birth on my knees. Through her, then, I too shall have children" (v. 3). Without another comment from her husband,

⁴⁵ Francine Klagsbrun, "Ruth and Naomi, Rachel and Leah," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, ed. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), pp. 271.

⁴⁶ Ibid., "Ruth and Naomi," p. 271.

⁴⁷ For a discussion about the etymologies of the names, see, e.g., Speiser, *Genesis*, pp. 231-233; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), pp. 473-477.

⁴⁸ Isaac Unterman, *The Five Books of Moses: The Book of Genesis: Profoundly Inspiring Commentaries and Interpretations Selected from the Talmudic-Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Bloch, 1973), p. 250.

the deal is done. “Jacob slept with her” (v. 4). When Bilhah becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, Rachel invokes the divinity for the first time. “God has done me justice. Yes, God has heard my voice, and God has given me a son” (v. 6). Rachel learned her lesson. The divinity provides offspring through any means available. Forcing another woman to intercourse with her husband, Rachel takes advantage of her class status and later thanks God for the child. Rachel’s theology is disturbing. Is God, indeed, the provider and denier of fertility under such conditions? Rachel affirms this idea which demonstrates her cooptation into androcentric ideology. She wants a son, no matter what, and since the process works for her, she forces Bilhah a second time to have intercourse with the husband (v. 7). After the birth of another son, Rachel invokes God again, exclaiming: “I have wrestled a wrestling of *Elohim* with my sister, and I have won” (v. 8). To Rachel, her success in fulfilling patriarchal expectations means that God is on her side. This theology is not only disturbing but, worse, dangerous.

Rachel’s exclamation in v. 8 has raised many questions. At stake is the noun “God/*Elohim*.” Interpreters often reject translating the Hebrew phrase as “a wrestling of Elohim” and recommend alternatives. For instance, Nahum M. Sarna proposes: “A fateful contest I waged with my sister,” explaining that his translation is based “on the occasional use of ‘elohim, ‘God,’ as an intensifying or superlative element.” He, however, also contends that the phrase could be translated as “a contest for God.”⁴⁹ Many interpreters follow Sarna’s grammatical advice and consider the noun “God” in v. 8 as an intensifying adjective.⁵⁰ One of them is Terence E. Fretheim whose translation attempts to communicate the intense effort of Rachel. Deleting the terminological reference to the divinity in Hebrew, Fretheim translates the sentence as, “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister.”⁵¹ Likewise Victor P. Hamilton compares Rachel’s experience of wrestling “with Jacob’s in Genesis 32:25f and considers God in v. 8 ‘as an intensifying epithet’.” He translates v. 8: “I have been entangled in a desperate contest with my sister.”⁵² Other interpreters, such as Everett Fox, suggest a translation closer to the Hebrew

⁴⁹ Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 208.

⁵⁰ For a summarizing comment, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 271-272.

⁵¹ Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al., vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), p. 546.

⁵² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, p. 271f.

text: “A struggle of God have I struggled with my sister.”⁵³ It is indeed remarkable that the narrative relates the conflict between her sister and herself to the divinity. Does the Hebrew indicate more clearly than many vernacular translations that the women are co-opted into androcentric theology?

The third scene, 30:9-13, switches back to Leah who, now infertile, resorts to having her slave raped twice. Unlike Rachel (Genesis 30:1), Leah does not react to her sister’s success in getting two sons; she worries about herself. Thus, v. 9 does not state: “When Leah saw that Rachel had two sons,” but observes instead: “When Leah saw that she had ceased to bear children.” Hated by her husband and co-opted into androcentric values, Leah has learned to establish her social status through fertility. For different reasons, then, Leah resorts to the method applied by Rachel earlier. “Leah took her slave, Zilpah, and gave her to Jacob as a wife (*‘issah*)” (v. 9). One interpreter, the Jewish medieval commentator Nachmanides (Ramban) points to the unusualness of Leah’s decision, commenting: “I do not know what motivated this deed of Leah and why she gave her handmaid to her husband for she was not barren that she should hope to have children through Zilpah, and it is not natural for women to increase the number of their husbands’ wives.”⁵⁴

The terminology of v. 9 relies on the slave owner’s perspective. Zilpah, the slave, is not treated like a wife but reduced to the physical functions of her body. Sexually violated, she gives birth to a child that she probably does not want and is not able to call her own. Later, Zilpah is raped another time (Genesis 30:12). Both times, Leah names the child and comments on the name. Similar to her statement for her fourth son, Leah does not invoke the name of God (Genesis 29:32-35). She refers only to luck and her social recognition: “What good fortune!” and “What blessedness because women will call me blessed!” (30:11.13). The enslaved woman herself does not speak since she is a prop giving birth to two sons. Even Jacob seems to quietly obey. If he likes to have sex with so many women or not, the narrative does not tell. Does this silence expose

⁵³ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 139. Francis I. Anderson also argues that the noun “God” should remain visible in Genesis 30:8, see his brief comment, “Note on Genesis 30:8,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (June 1969): p. 200.

⁵⁴ Ramban (Nachmanides), *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, translated and annotated with index by Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo, 1971), p. 368.

Genesis 29-30 as an androcentric fantasy that imagines wives inviting the husband to have sex with enslaved women?

The fourth scene, 30:14-24, depicts the negotiation between Leah and Rachel that leads to more children for Leah and, eventually, to a son for Rachel. The severity of the hostility between the sisters finds expression in their first and last conversation. When the eldest son of Leah, Reuben, finds a special fruit and brings it to his mother, Leah exchanges the fruit for a night with Jacob. When Rachel wants the fruit, Leah replies bitterly: “Is it not enough to have taken my husband? You take my son’s mandrakes as well?” (v. 14). Embroiled in rivalry over husband and children, Leah vents her feelings of loss. Rachel hears the disappointment in her sister’s voice and easily relinquishes the man for the fruit: “Very well, he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son’s mandrakes” (v. 15). Without objection, Jacob obeys Leah’s order at the end of the day: “You must come to me” (v. 16). In this narrative the husband does not mind with whom he sleeps, going wherever his wives tell him. Surely this text is an androcentric fantasy rather than a realistic description of slave-owning women. Jacob must have gone to Leah at least twice more because Leah gives birth to another son (vv. 19-20) as well as to her first and only daughter, Dinah (v. 21). After the births of the sons, Leah praises the divinity again. She believes that God rewarded her (v. 18), having given her a true gift (v. 20). The birth of her daughter, Dinah, does not receive such praise (v. 21). Does this omission demonstrate the narrative’s or Leah’s androcentrism?

When the scene turns again to Rachel (v. 22), she becomes pregnant herself. “God remembered Rachel; God heard her, and God opened her womb; and she became pregnant, and she gave birth to a son” (v. 23). The race for fertility has found a preliminary end. Rachel names the son “Joseph” and exclaims: “God has taken away my disgrace!” and “May Yahweh add another son for me” (vv. 23, 24). The painful story about the co-optation of two sisters into patriarchal and classist structures ends with the request to God for yet another son. Leah and Rachel are portrayed as thoroughly embroiled in a struggle for patriarchal recognition that makes both women unhappy and dangerous to themselves and other women. They force their female slaves to endure repeated rape by their husband, all in the name of God. The human devastation of patriarchy and classism could not be depicted more drastically. When Rachel gives birth to her second son (35:16-19), she dies in labor. The belief in God as the provider and denier of fertility

eventually destroys the enslaver. The story of Bilhah, her slave, however, continues in another fragmentary narrative.

Another Story of Bilhah and Some Royal Concubines
(Genesis 35:22; 2 Samuel 3:6-11; 2 Samuel 15-19; 1 Kings 2:13-25)

Bilhah appears again in one verse, in which the destructive relational pattern of Leah and Rachel moves reportedly to the next generation. This, at least, is the sad conclusion based on an incident that involves Reuben, the oldest son of Leah, and Bilhah, Rachel's slave. The story demonstrates what Reuben learned: Enslaved women are property to be raped without repercussion. Here is the short description of the event:

It happened when Israel lived in that land,
Reuben went,
and he laid Bilhah, the concubine of his father,
and Israel heard of it. (Genesis 35:22a)

Rarely mentioned in scholarly discussions, this brief report about Bilhah appears after Rachel dies during the birth of her second son. Indirectly the verse refers to rape. The Hebrew verb, *šakab*, is not followed by the preposition "with" ('*im*) but by the Hebrew object marker '*et*, as in other other rape stories, such as the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34:2) or the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:14). The grammatical observation has consequences for the verse's meaning. Reuben does not sleep "with" Bilhah, a translation that feigns consent by Bilhah. Rather he laid her. He is the subject of the action and she the object. As a concubine and slave, Bilhah is sexually violated, raped.

Two interpreters discuss the verse in some detail and thus merit closer scrutiny. One is George G. Nicol who rejects E. A. Speiser's idea that Genesis 35:22 is an ethnographic explanation for the decline of the tribe of Reuben in the course of Israelite history. Speiser proposed that "[t]hese scattered hints suggest that the tribe of Reuben once enjoyed a pre-eminent position, only to fall upon evil days."⁵⁵ Nicol claims instead that the story remembers how Reuben revenges his mother whom Jacob never loved. Bilhah was the slave of Rachel, the loved wife. By raping Bilhah, Reuben challenges his father's authority, as other royal sons do when they "take

possession” of another man’s concubines. Nicol elaborates: “This incident must therefore be considered to have caused deep humiliation to Jacob, who... had been usurped in the bed of [Rachel’s] slave.” Reuben introduces “an element of justice into the narrative” by taking revenge in unexpected ways. Earlier, Leah called the birth of Reuben “the reversal of my humiliation” (Genesis 29:32). Even though Reuben is not able to reverse Jacob’s hatred for her into love, the son reverses his father’s fortune by humiliating his father “at precisely the time when he is emotionally at his weakest and least able to resist.”⁵⁶ Reuben tries to destroy his father when he attacks Bilhah.

To Nicol, then, Genesis 35:22 depicts a struggle over power between two men, son Reuben and his father Jacob. Showing no concern for Bilhah’s perspective, Nicol calls Reuben’s activity “sexual intercourse,” “his offence against his father,” or “taking possession of Bilhah.” Indeed, in Nicol’s view, the story demonstrates “a certain tastefulness in the fact that Genesis xxxv. 22a associates Rachel’s slave, and not Rachel herself, with Reuben’s action.” Reuben challenges Jacob’s authority by “committing his offence.” That the son is a rapist does not matter to this scholar who praises the “good taste” of Genesis 35:22 because the story has Reuben choose his aunt’s slave and not the aunt, Rachel. To this interpreter’s explanations, then, the women play a marginal role in the power struggle of the men.

Mordechai Rotenberg presents yet another interpretation when he discusses the “rehabilitative story telling” method of the ancient rabbis.⁵⁷ They observed that certain stories report particularly troubling activities of central biblical figures, one of which is Reuben whose “sin” is explicitly described in Genesis 35:22 and remembered by Jacob in Genesis 49:3-4. In other words, the rabbis were aware of Reuben’s problematic behavior and tried to “rehabilitate” him. They wanted the story to be seen as “a righteous deed of honoring his [Reuben’s] mother Leah,” and so they explained: “He stood up against the humiliation of his mother by saying: If my mother’s sister was a rival to my mother, shall the bondsmaid of my mother’s sister be a rival to my mother? He

⁵⁵ Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 274.

⁵⁶ George G. Nicol, “Genesis xxix. 32 and xxv. 22a Reuben’s Reversal,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 31 (1980): pp. 536-539.

⁵⁷ Mordechai Rotenberg, “The ‘Midrash’ and Biographic Rehabilitation,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25, no. 1 (1986): pp. 41-55.

thus arose and transposed the beds.”⁵⁸ Reuben defended his mother by raping Bilhah, a precarious “rehabilitative” effort on the part of the ancient rabbis. They excused Reuben for “his deed.”

Many centuries apart, the interpretations of George G. Nicol and the ancient rabbis are quite similar. Both focus on the male characters and soften the sexual violence perpetrated by Reuben. Both attempt to reinterpret Reuben’s rape and ignore Bilhah’s perspective. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Genesis 35:22 belongs to a list of biblical texts, so-called “forbidden targumim,” that rabbis advised not to explain to lay people in the synagogue. These “forbidden” texts “may be read [in Hebrew] but not translated [into the language of the congregation, e.g. English].”⁵⁹ This approach has not been dissimilar from the Christian strategy. Even today, Christian lectionaries exclude Genesis 35:22 from the recommended list of sermon texts so that the verse is never read aloud during Christian worship. An influential interpreter like Gerhard von Rad indirectly endorsed this ecclesiastical silence when he commented: “The crime itself is condemned by the narrator, without the necessity for his expressly stating it. The note is brief and fragmentary that one can form no opinion about what is told in vs. 21f.”⁶⁰ Other Christian scholars, such as Richard J. Clifford and Roland E. Murphy, avoid any direct reference to the content of v. 22: “The details of this ugly incident are not given; in fact, the text breaks off at this point.”⁶¹ To these Christian scholars, Genesis 35:22 is too short, unclear, and “ugly” to merit further clarification. Neither interested in Bilhah nor the issue of rape, many Jewish and Christian readers silence the rape of Bilhah by Reuben.

Another aspect of the verse deserves mention. Bilhah is characterized as Jacob’s “concubine” (*pilegesš*) The terminology is unusual since Bilhah is Rachel’s slave and the majority of biblical references consider her “a slave of Rachel.” In Genesis 29:29, Rachel’s father, Laban, gives Bilhah as a slave to his daughter Rachel when she marries Jacob. In 30:3.4.7 and 35:25, Bilhah is called Rachel’s slave. Also Genesis 46:25 refers to Bilhah as a slave of Rachel, given as a

⁵⁸ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 46. The quote from the Babylonian Talmud is in bShabbat 55b.

⁵⁹ Michael L. Klein, “Not to be Translated in Public,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1988): pp. 80-91.

⁶⁰ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 341.

⁶¹ Richard J. Clifford and Roland E. Murphy, “Genesis,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 36.

wedding gift. Yet in 1 Chronicles 7:13, Bilhah is neither Rachel's nor Jacob's possession. There her sons are identified as "the descendants of Bilhah." Bilhah appears in relationship to Jacob only one more time, namely in Genesis 37:2. The verse calls her and Zilpah "the wives of his [Joseph's] father."

Immersed in androcentric bias, commentators take the term "concubine" for granted. They presume that Bilhah turns automatically into Jacob's concubine after Rachel's death, and so the switch from "slave" to "concubine" does not bother them. Has she not "slept with" him before? Indeed, the difference between an enslaved woman and a concubine is small. Like concubines, enslaved women are used to give birth to children who will be taken from them.⁶² Both concubines and slaves have to submit to the orders of their superiors, whether this person is a slave owner, a husband, or a king. Sometimes the tasks of concubines and slaves can also be different. A concubine's primary role is to provide children whereas a slave also fulfills other functions. Furthermore, a concubine gives a man more prestige than a slave. A concubine may also reconcile political power struggles at the royal courts whereas a slave never interferes into such affairs.⁶³ Overall, however, the roles of a concubine and a female slave are similar so that the term "concubine" in Genesis 35:22 does not necessarily indicate a socially higher status than the term "slave." Even as a concubine, Bilhah is owned by Jacob who has unrestricted sexual access to her. She remains the property of the Jacob family whether she is a concubine or a slave. Accordingly, Reuben challenges his father's property rights when he rapes Bilhah. The narrative thus illustrates an important idea about rape: men rape women to mark their territory over other men, which makes the raped women arbitrary in the androcentric story world and in the world of interpreters.

Three other passages mention sons who rape or attempt to rape concubines. One narrative, 2 Samuel 3:6-11, describes the power struggle between king Ishbaal and commander Abner. The

⁶² For a brief discussion on "slave concubines," see Westbrook, "The Female Slave," p. 215-220.

⁶³ For further explanations, see Karen Engelken, "*pilaegaes*," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, et al., vol. 6 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987), pp. 586-590. See also Engelken, *Frauen im Alten Israel*, p. 101, 124 where Engelken argues for a sharp distinction between the position of a concubine and a slave. For the opposite view, see Westbrook, "The Female Slave," p. 233, who finds the term *pilegeš* "totally inappropriate" and considers it as the author's effort "to spare Reuben, whose crime in sleeping with Bilhah would have been far more heinous if she were Jacob's wife."

woman involved is Rizpah, the concubine of Saul, Ishbaal's father. A second story is scattered throughout 2 Samuel 15-19 and illustrates the conflict between king David and his son Absalom. The son rapes ten unnamed concubines of his father. A third story is in 1 Kings 2:13-25 and exemplifies the power struggle between king Solomon and Adonijah. Abishag, the Shunamite, is the object of their dispute. Scholarship has not identified these passages as rape texts, but as depictions of disloyalty or claims upon the throne. To many interpreters, the three narratives describe how one man challenges another more powerful man by "sleeping with" the latter's wives or concubines. Yet whenever interpreters consider these texts, neither the women nor the rapes focus their discussions, which are usually limited to brief references concerning the defeat or success of one or the other man.

A closer look at the three stories shows the male self-centeredness. According to the first story in 2 Samuel 3:6-11, Abner is the army commander of king Saul. After the death of the king, he stays under the command of Saul's son. Ishbaal is the king of Israel for two years but his reign excludes the territory of Judah over which his enemy, David, rules. When the army of David expands successfully beyond the Judean borders into Ishbaal's territory, Abner switches his loyalty (2 Samuel 2:8-3:1). He begins supporting David.

Abner's allegiance to the Davidian empire finds expression in a dialogue between Ishbaal and Abner. When Ishbaal accuses Abner of having "come into" the concubine of his father, Abner is furious. He realizes that Ishbaal reprimands him for his attempt to gain royal authority. At the same time Abner hides his real motives. He argues that Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, is just a "woman," not worthy of the dispute between them. Then he turns against Ishbaal: "Here am I, full of faithful love towards the House of Saul your father, his brothers and his friends, not leaving you to the hands of David, and now you find fault with me over a woman!" (2 Samuel 3:8, NRSV). He claims innocence, not having done anything wrong with "a woman." The second part of Abner's reply continues the lie. He pretends that the king's distrust justifies the withdrawal of his support. "May God bring unnameable ills on Abner, and worse ones, too, if I do not bring about what Yahweh has sworn to David: to take the sovereignty from the House of Saul, and establish David's throne over Israel as well as Judah, from Dan to Beersheba" (2 Samuel 3:9-10, NRSV). The dialogue demonstrates that the concubine is secondary to both men.

She is an object through which they understand the other man's intention. In the end, they are interested only in themselves.

Ishbaal recognizes the difficulty of his situation, but he is a weak king and thus fails to take immediate action: "Ishbaal dares not say a single word to Abner in reply, as he was afraid of him" (2 Samuel 3:11, NRSV). The king of Israel understands that Abner has become his enemy. Missing his opportunity to get rid of the commander, Ishbaal is later killed by the succeeding Davidian army (2 Samuel 4:1-12). Abner, too, does not live much longer despite his deceit. He is killed by David's supporters in 2 Samuel 3:22-39.

The short episode of Abner and Ishbaal illustrates that a powerful man rapes a concubine as a sign for his disloyalty to his king. Abner's act is not only "an insignificant indiscretion" or "adultery,"⁶⁴ but part of the male game for power. Whether or not the concubine consented remains insignificant to the androcentric perspective. She has to submit to powerful men who claim her, whether she likes it or not, and so this text, too, is a story about rape.

Read accordingly, the narrative turns into a lament about the fate of enslaved women who are raped and made into objects by men. Is it just a coincidence that the narrated discourse names the concubine quite carefully as "Rizpah, daughter of Aiah" (2 Samuel 3:7) whereas the male characters do not once use her name? To them, she is "my father's concubine" (v. 7) or "the woman" (v. 8). God, however, appears only in the words of Abner, the rapist, who swears that "God may bring unnameable ills on Abner, and worse ones, too" (2 Samuel 3:9) if he does not support David. Abner does not survive his loyalty to this new king (2 Samuel 3:27). Does the murder indicate that God disapproves of Abner, the rapist? Indirectly, the story can be read in support of Rizpah even though she disappears from the narrative as quickly as she came into sight. After this brief incident Rizpah is never mentioned again. In an androcentric story world concubines and enslaved women are secondary characters, living outside the text and far away from the centers of the world. At best, Rizpah survives in the memory of a sympathetic reader.

⁶⁴ Albert A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, World Biblical Commentary, vol. 11 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), p. 56.

The other story about the rape of concubines centers on a conflict between king David, his son Absalom, and ten unnamed concubines (2 Samuel 15-19). When David realizes that his son has won the solidarity of “the men of Israel,” he decides to flee Jerusalem. “So the king set out on foot with his whole household, leaving ten concubines to look after the palace” (2 Samuel 15:16, NRSV). Later, Absalom’s army occupies Jerusalem, and his adviser Ahithophel recommends to Absalom: “Go to your father’s concubines whom he left to look after the palaces; then all Israel will hear that you have thoroughly antagonized your father, and the resolution of all your supporters will be strengthened” (2 Samuel 16:21, NRSV). Absalom accepts the advice and rapes the women in a tent placed on a flat roof so that the population is the witness (2 Samuel 16:22). Are the rapes of David’s concubines indeed part of the realized prophecy to David, as some commentators claim (without calling Absalom a rapist)? Once prophet Nathan warned David: “Before your very eyes I shall take your wives and give them to your neighbour, who will lie with (*im*) your wives in broad daylight” (2 Samuel 12:11). Nathan’s prophecy predicts that David will be punished for his rape of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband (2 Samuel 11:2-27), a situation different from the sexual violation of David’s concubines by his son Absalom. The prophecy states clearly that God will initiate the punishment but the narrative does not present God as the cause for the rape of the ten concubines. And even if the prophecy is read as such a prediction, the reading creates a serious problem. It holds God responsible for the violence endured by the concubines.

But what happened to the concubines? Commentators do not specify Abner’s activity. When they do, some maintain that Absalom “has taken” the concubines to claim the royal throne.⁶⁵ Others suggest that Absalom’s action represents a “final humiliation of David” and thus “strengthen[s] the resolve of Absalom’s supporters.”⁶⁶ When David takes the concubines back upon his return (2 Samuel 20:3), scholars see the king re-establishing his royal authority. Only one interpreter, John Rook, focuses on the fate of the women. He points out that according to 2 Samuel 20:3, the concubines “were shut away until the day they died, widows, as it were, of a living man”

⁶⁵ See, e.g., P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), p. 384-385; Fritz Stolz, *Das erste und zweite Buch Samuel*, Zürcher Bibelkommentare (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981), p. 199.

⁶⁶ See, e. g., Anderson, *2 Samuel*, p. 214.

(NRSV). Rook maintains that in ancient Israel a “widow,” *‘almanah*, is a woman who is no longer sexually active and lacks a male guardian. Accordingly, the king’s ten concubines become “like widows” because they have no longer intercourse with men, not even with king David. When the king returns to the palace, he takes care only of their economic and legal status. This interpretation regards the story as an illustration of male dominance in ancient Israelite society. A male guardian determines a woman’s role in this society, and so, in 2 Samuel 20:3, king David relegates his concubines to the marginalized roles of widows and lowers their status “to the basest level.”⁶⁷ As Hans Wilhelm Herzberg suggests, their lives turn into a “human tragedy.”⁶⁸

Interestingly, a few interpreters sympathize with the concubines because they have to live the rest of their lives without male attention. But why would the women want to be with David who had abandoned them earlier? The women were used to endure a marginalized and insecure status their entire lives. Most importantly, they were collectively and publicly raped, which makes them unlikely to enjoy male company. Perhaps, they are relieved to be finally left alone, a possibility unthinkable to interpreters who do not even consider the women as raped. They suggest that Absalom “illegally claimed” or “royally married” the women,⁶⁹ vocabulary that obfuscates the sexual violation carried out in public. Only Ken Stone entertains the possibility that Absalom raped the women when he writes: “The sexual relations between Absalom and David’s concubines, for example, can be considered rape. There is no reason to think that these women would have been willing participants.”⁷⁰ It seems likely that, after all, it was not a “human tragedy” for the concubines to be left alone. Is it the ongoing androcentrism of the narrative or the interpreters that prevent the latter to view the concubines as finally freed from male sexual demands and violence?

The story illustrates that male competition is fought upon the bodies of the concubines. A son rapes ten concubines of his father whereupon the father dismisses the women. They depreciate his status. Typical for an androcentric perspective, responses of the concubines are absent from

⁶⁷ John Rook, “Making Widows: The Patriarchal Guardian at Work,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27 (Spring 1997): p. 14.

⁶⁸ Hans Wilhelm Herzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 371.

⁶⁹ McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 423; Anderson, *2 Samuel*, p. 214.

⁷⁰ Ken Stone, “Sexual Power and Political Prestige,” *Bible Review* (August 1994): p. 53.

the narrative. Rook observes correctly, “The women are offered no say in what happens to them, and we are not told how they felt or what they might have chosen for themselves had they been consulted.”⁷¹ The concubines do not speak, but are their feelings really so unknown? They seem obvious once Absalom’s action is identified as rape. Although the women’s reactions are part only of a reader’s imagination, the story depicts quite vividly the dire consequences of male domination. Androcentrism crushes women’s bodies and spirits persistently and relentlessly. What else is needed to understand the impact of androcentric theory and action on enslaved women’s lives?

Yet another story illustrates that biblical rape stories have the potential to uncover the destructiveness of androcentric dominance on women’s lives. In 1 Kings 2:13-25, Adonijah, the older half-brother of Solomon, requests marriage to Abishag of Shunem who was previously forced to serve old king David (1 Kings 1:1-4). When Bathsheba delivers the request to her son, Solomon becomes furious. He immediately orders to kill the man who challenges his royal authority. Similar to Abner, Solomon swears: “May God bring unnameable ills on me, and worse ills, too... if Adonijah does not pay for these words of his with his life! As Yahweh lives who has set me securely on the throne of my father David, and who, as he promised, has given him a dynasty, Adonijah shall be put to death this very day” (1 Kings 2:23-24). And so it happens (1 Kings 2:25). Solomon understands his brother’s intentions: Adonijah attempts to claim the throne by marrying the young woman who served king David. The marriage would give him primacy for the crown. Solomon arranges the murder of Adonijah to prevent the completion of his brother’s plan, but Adonijah’s death also saves Abishag, the concubine, from getting married to a man who would use her only for his political advancement.

In conclusion, in all of these stories, men regard women as objects to be violated sexually. The focus on the men and their behavior exposes the destructive consequences of androcentrism. Women, especially as slaves and concubines, are acted upon by men who view them as symbols of male power. Whether raped or not, the women are quickly forgotten, as the long history of androcentric interpretations demonstrates abundantly. Yet when we identify these texts as rape stories the fate of the women is exposed for what it is: a fate that either destroys women’s lives or

⁷¹ Rook, “Making Widows,” p. 13.

co-opts women into androcentrism. The tales do not offer optimistic answers, but, to their credit, they make visible some of the dynamics that shape many women and men's lives even today.

Resistance, Hierarchies of Women, and Androcentrism: A Conclusion

This article began with the words of women enslaved in nineteenth-century America, which provided the perspective for the examination of the biblical stories. There are, however, remarkable differences between the two, and three differences shall be highlighted here. A first difference relates to the issue of resistance. Nineteenth-century enslaved women, suffering numerous rapes from their slave masters, made many attempts to resist their rapists. In contrast, biblical stories do not portray enslaved women as actively defiant to the various forms of rape to which they are coerced. Not even Hagar, who finds a sense of pride in her pregnancy resulting from the forced intercourse with Abraham, resists the rape as such. When she becomes pregnant after the rape, she conforms to the androcentric standards of her world in which fertility gives women societal recognition. She ends up not opposing Abraham but competing with the slave owner's wife, Sarah. Nineteenth-century enslaved women display a remarkably different attitude when they identify the slave owner as the perpetrator, and not his wife, and resist their attackers as much as possible under the conditions of enslavement.

A second difference relates to the issue of competition and cooptation of women. Some biblical stories emphasize this problem but it does not feature prominently in nineteenth-century reports. Although one may wonder whether a slave-owning wife would indeed give her slave to her husband for reproductive purposes, the biblical narratives leave little doubt about the impact of class on women. The rape story of Bilhah and Zilpah demonstrates clearly that male privilege remains in place when women are co-opted into androcentric and classist structures. Under such circumstances, women take advantage of less privileged women. Since interpreters often take for granted such hierarchies, the enslaved women whom Jacob rapes are successfully marginalized in discussions on Genesis 29-30. Accordingly, the history of interpretation is an illustration for the difficulty of recognizing and dismantling class privilege in the androcentric lives of women.

Finally, perhaps more than nineteenth-century tales, the biblical stories ask readers to confront androcentric perspective and interpretation. Is it the text itself that creates the problem of

oppression, or can we read the text, even an androcentric one, to understand the experiences of women living within a patriarchal world? Obviously, this article argues for the latter. Readers create textual meanings, and so it is up to a reader to read the Bible as a book of feminist politics or not. This conviction is, of course, largely marginalized in contemporary hierarchies of religion and society. Nevertheless, this position can and should guide interpretive endeavors, especially in light of the painful stories about women who suffered repeated rapes during their enslavement, whether in biblical narrative or nineteenth-century America.

Susanne Scholz is the author of "Rape Plots: A Feminist Cultural Study of Genesis 34" (Lang, 2000), editor of "Biblical Studies Alternatively: An Introductory Reader" (Prentice Hall, 2003), and co-editor of "Zwischen-Räume: Deutsche feministische Theologinnen im Ausland" (LIT, 2000). She is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts, U.S.A.
