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Brother, Sister, Rape: Hebrew Bible and Popular Culture

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In both contemporary contexts and in the contexts reflected in and by the Hebrew Bible, rape is routinely depicted in ways that downplay violence. For all the profound differences between ancient and contemporary contexts, it is appropriate to speak of rape culture with regard to both.[1] My aim here is to demonstrate that in both the Hebrew Bible and in contemporary popular culture the brother-sister relationship is eroticized and, disturbingly, this eroticization has overtones of rape and of legitimating rape. While I am not suggesting direct influence between biblical text and present-day cultural manifestations (notwithstanding the Bible's considerable and abiding influence and impact), the parallels are disquieting. Whatever the precise provenance and reason for eroticized sibling relations in, on the one hand, the Hebrew Bible and, on the other, contemporary film and television, drawing attention to the troubling implications of these depictions (in particular with regard to compromised consent) is the first step in detoxifying them.

Rape Culture

Rape cultures are diverse. The term can refer to settings where rape (predominantly of women) is a routine weapon of war, as well as to places where rape in marriage is not

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[1] My intention here is to identify points for comparison and interfacing. In doing so I am cognizant of the profound distinctions between 'biblical worlds' and 'contemporary worlds' in terms of cultural contexts and expressions. While each set of worlds is immensely internally complex and nuanced, and though it is beyond the scope of this investigation to analyze this fully, the two can and have been juxtaposed and explored together effectively (e.g. Smith 2009).

classified a crime.[2] While neither applies to the present-day UK, rape culture,

nevertheless, is our culture.[3] According to Ministry of Justice Home Office for National

Statistics, 85,000 women and 12,000 men are raped annually in the UK – a statistic that is

(shockingly) likely to be conservative. The overwhelming majority of rapes are not

reported.[4] Operation Yewtree has brought into the media spotlight numerous cases of

sexual exploitation by celebrities and figures in authority. In Oxford, Rochdale, and

Rotherham hundreds upon hundreds of cases of on-street grooming of often very young

girls, ignored and even suppressed over many years, have come to light. We live *in* a rape

culture and, disturbingly, the mainstreaming of rape is not only evident in the staggering

statistics but in the sexualization of children in the fashion industry,[5] in the prevalence of

rape motifs in advertising (Dostis 2015), as well as in music videos (Clifton 2014), to cite

but a few examples. The sheer ubiquity, constant battery, and insidiousness of rape, rape

imagery, language and motifs are sense-numbing.[6]

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[2] Both are represented in the Hebrew Bible. Moses orders his army to slaughter everyone except *hattap bannāšîm* ('children among the women' – presumably, 'female children') who have not known a man carnally (the expression used is *miškab zākār,* 'lying of a male'). They shall be kept alive 'for you' (Num. 31.18; cf. Judg 21.11-12). Michel points out that 'in a horrifying way there is no limitation of age in the direction of small children. The lack of such a limitation, the clear sexual connotation ("who have not known a man") together with the "for you", and additionally the fact that this is a positive instruction or permission given by Moses characterize the verse in the context of sexual violence against children as markedly harsh' (2004: 57). With regard to marital rape, there is the scene where Isaac is acting sexually with Rebekah, his wife (Gen. 26.8). As Scholz points out, the verb used here (from √ *ts-ch-q)* is sometimes translated 'fondling' (e.g. NRSV), but may well have 'less playful' and even overt 'rape-prone' connotations (2010: 91). The same verb appears in Potiphar's wife's accusation that Joseph attempted to rape her (Gen. 39.14, 17). Rape can also be a strategy to get a wife (see below).
[3] Most of my examples are drawn from Anglophone Western contexts most familiar to me.
[4] See Rape Crisis England and Wales.
[5] On sexualization of preadolescent girls in fashion, see Merskin 2004. On vulnerability (including to sexual exploitation) of underage girls deriving from such sexualization, see Holland and Haslam 2016. When apparent consent to sex is given by someone too young to give it legally, resulting sex acts are classified as statutory rape. Arguably, the sexualization of children below the age of consent (16) incites to or mitigates statutory rape.
[6] For a book full of examples, see Bates 2014. For examples from US contexts with particular emphasis on perpetuation of rape myths, see Edwards et al 2011.

The contemporary UK can be classified a rape culture in which rape is normalized as well as commercialized and the Hebrew Bible, too, trivializes the violence of rape and depicts females as property and female virginity as commodity. While in modern definitions for 'rape' absence of consent is one determining factor,[7] any mention of women's consent to sex is not prominent in the Hebrew Bible. A few examples suffice to illustrate this. Deuteronomy 22.23-4 relates that if a virgin who is already betrothed is 'met' by a man who 'lies with' her, if this occurs in a town both shall be executed – the woman because she did not cry out for help and the man because he violated another man's woman. By implication the virgin belongs to a man and is damaged goods if a different man has sex with her. If sex occurs in the open country, only the man shall be executed, because no one could have heard the woman's cries (vv.25-7). Before we think that this indicates that rapists were dealt with harshly and victims of rape with compassion, the 'solution' proposed if a raped woman is *not* betrothed is for the rapist to pay the woman's father a fee and marry her, without the possibility of divorce (vv.28-29). This is virtually an invitation to rape marriage. Rape or abduction marriage is also advised in Judges 21.20-24[8] and might be in the background of Genesis 34[9] and, if Wil Gafney's reading is correct, also of Ruth.[10]

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[7] In modern definitions 'rape' constitutes the sexual (usually penetrative) assault of a person against that person's will. In archaic parlance rape (from Latin *raptio,* 'abduction') pertains to the seizing of a person (most often a woman) for the purpose of having sexual intercourse. Consent or otherwise is not determinative of *raptio* but instead the removal of a person (usually from the sphere of protection of either the natal family or spouse).

[8] Abducting the women of Shiloh is depicted as preferable to the demise of Benjamin or the breaking of an oath. Rape, in effect, is collateral damage. Fathers and brothers of the victims of rape marriage are pressed upon to be 'kind' (NRSV 'generous'). The final verse (v.25) strikes a note of disapproval but violence against the women receives no mention.

[9] For Zlotnick, Genesis 34 depicts tensions between two different marriage strategies: first, marriages negotiated and arranged by families and second, marriages by abduction or elopement (2002: 39–46).

[10] Gafney (2009) argues that Ruth and Orpah are victims of abduction marriage, as indicated by the verb from the root *n-ś-'* ('to lift up') for acquiring a wife (Ruth 1.4; cf. Judg 21.21).

Until relatively recently, few accounts in the Hebrew Bible were explicitly called rape stories by interpreters. Genesis 34, the story of Dinah and Shechem, is sometimes entitled 'The Rape of Dinah', although, indeed, nothing is said of Dinah's perspective, let alone consent.[11] Amnon's rape of his half-sister Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is clearly a rape – the (rarely made) counter-argument, such as Pamela Tamarkin Reis's (1998), is unpersuasive and acutely disturbing in its blaming of the rape victim (see Scholz 2010: 41). The brutal story of the gang rape of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 is another rape text (see Trible 1984: 65–92). Elsewhere, however, the cavalier taking of women for sex is rarely depicted with outrage in either the biblical texts or their interpretations, nor is it called what it is: rape. Only in the wake of second-wave feminism (thank you!) is the taking of the beautiful captive woman (Deut. 21.11-14), or of Sarah by Pharaoh (Gen. 12), or Hagar by Abraham (Gen. 16), or Zilpah and Bilhah by Jacob (Gen. 30), or (again) Bilhah by Reuben (Gen. 35.22), or Bathsheba by David (2 Sam. 11), or David's concubines by Absalom (2 Sam. 16.22), among very many other such accounts, called rape.[12] It is difficult to substantiate if there exists a line of influence between, on the one hand, the normalizing of rape implied in such biblical depictions, as well as by their often uncritical reception and reluctance to call them rape, and, on the other, the somewhat

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[11] Whether Shechem rapes Dinah has been widely discussed but not resolved. The majority of feminist commentators argue that he does: e.g. Rashkow 2000: 144–6; Graetz 2005: 28; Blyth 2010; Klopper 2010: 652–65 and Scholz (who specifies acquaintance rape) 2010: 32–8. But modern understandings of rape highlight consent – and Dinah's consent or otherwise is not mentioned in this story. Sex between Dinah and Shechem is depicted as defiling (from *t-m-'*, Gen. 34.13) and an affront to her brothers' honour. Frymer-Kensky is probably correct that it would most likely be so irrespective of whether Dinah was raped, or a willing participant in sex (1998: 89). The verbs describing Shechem's actions (34.2) are √ *l-q-ch* ('he took', possibly describing the movement of Dinah from one location to another – possibly, to Shechem's home), √ *š-k-b* + object ('he had sex with') and √ *'-n-h* + pronominal suffix ('he debased/humiliated/shamed [her]'). The last word can sometimes denote rape and/or connote a lowering of Dinah's status. Both Bechtel (1994) and van Wolde (2002) argue that the conclusion that Shechem rapes Dinah cannot be established. Zlotnick points to an accumulation of ambiguities and places the word 'rape' in inverted commas (2002: 35–42).

[12] For one full examination, see Scholz 2010.

comparable normalization of sexual violence in certain contemporary contexts. Given the considerable and pervasive influence of biblical texts, there is, however, a possibility.

Having argued that the designation 'rape culture' applies to both biblical and contemporary settings, let me examine next an intriguing prevalence in contemporary media and popular culture concerning the eroticization of brother-sister relations. Following this, I will demonstrate a similar tendency to eroticize sisters in the Hebrew Bible. In both contexts, moreover, there are over-shadowings of rape.

Brother-Sister Sex in the Contemporary West and Popular Culture

Sexual relations between a biological brother and sister constitute first-degree[13] sex. In many societies and legal codes, such are designated incestuous: because 'incest' refers to sex between persons deemed too closely related for marriage and/or sex to be permissible. Incest is a widespread but culturally variable phenomenon; hence, what is deemed incestuous and illegal in one setting may be a legal close-kin marriage in another. First-degree unions, however, are most widely deemed incestuous.

Of all the possible first-degree dyads, brother-sister sex is the most prominently eroticized and romanticized in popular culture, as well as the least vilified in actual occurrence. To illustrate the former, the extensive archive of first-degree incestuous relations portrayed in mainstream and arts films or television shows, compiled by 'begy' for the Internet/Movie Database (2012), shows that depictions of sex between different-sex siblings far outnumber depictions between either same-sex first-degree relative pairings (sister-sister, brother-brother), or between inter-generational first-degree

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[13] Relatives in the first-degree are the members of one's nuclear family: namely, one's parents *(ascending* lineal kin); one's children *(descending* lineal kin) and one's full siblings (parallel kin).

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relations (father-daughter, mother-son), or a combination of both (father-son, mother-daughter). One reason for this is likely to be that while sex between a brother and sister toys with taboo sex and the titillation such generates, adding non-normative same-sex or age-discrepant dimensions is venturing a taboo too far.

Let me step outside fictional depiction to mention the case of German siblings Patrick Stübing and Susan Karolewski. These siblings were raised apart and met when Stübing was adult and Karolewski teenage. They are now a couple and have four children together. Their case came before the European Court of Human Rights following Stübing's two-year prison sentence for incest. Stübing argued that the law infringed on his right to 'respect for private and family life'. Although in April 2012 the Court ruled against him, his case received widespread media attention and, particularly after Stübing had a voluntary vasectomy (because much of public condemnation at consensual incest focuses on deleterious consequences for children of such unions), public support for the couple was quite considerable. Any comparable measure of support has not been forthcoming for the isolated cases of consensual adult father-daughter or mother-son couples that have hit the media, such as the case of father and daughter John and Jenny Deaves, subjects of *Forbidden Love*, a '60 Minutes' television programme, aired in their native Australia (2008), and the case of mother and son Kim West and Ben Ford (Bucktin 2016).

All three cases of first-degree sex are examples of what is called Genetic Sexual Attraction Syndrome (GSA), which pertains to erotic attraction between close biological relatives who meet first in adulthood. In situations of reunion in later life, GSA and incest

are said to occur quite commonly.[14] But where persons *do* spend their formative

(particularly early childhood) years in close proximity, as applies to many biological

siblings, sexual attraction is highly *unlikely* to occur due to another psychosocial

mechanism called the Westermarck effect. This mechanism brings about reverse sexual

imprinting, and ensures that children who grow up together become desensitized to

sexual attraction. For Edvard Westermarck, the first to expound on this, the mechanism

ensures against inbreeding. Crucially, the Westermarck effect is triggered, not by

awareness of biological relationship but by proximity in early life. Given this emphasis

on proximity, the Westermarck effect is discernible not only among siblings reared

together but also among persons raised together *like siblings*, such as on kibbutzim (Spiro

1956).[15]

    Interestingly, in some countries (e.g. Turkey, Israel), there is no penalty for

consensual incest between adults – and again, there is a tendency to a higher degree of

accommodation when sex is between siblings, or cousins, as opposed to inter-

generational. Hence, the criminal code of Ohio targets only parental figures, while in

Sweden, half-sibling marriage is now legal. There is also some move towards keeping the

topic of consensual consanguineous sex firmly separate from incestuous child abuse and

rape. As James Twitchell puts it, 'justice may be more appropriately served by

prosecuting acts of rape, fornication, seduction, or sexual battery than by making a legal

case of incest' (1985: 309, n.12).

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[14] Greenberg and Littlewood's study estimates prevalence of GSA among reunited relatives to exceed 50% (1995).

[15] The Westermarck effect is implied in the Hebrew Bible. First, in Abimelech's reaction to observing Isaac acting sexually with Rebekah (Gen. 26.8-9): Abimelech does not conclude that the two are in a close-kin marriage but that they are husband and wife and *ipso facto* not brother and sister. A second indication is the expressed desire of the woman in Song of Songs that her lover were her brother (8.1), so that she could be affectionate with him without incurring public disapproval: presumably, because sibling affection is considered non-erotic and therefore (unlike lovers' affection) not inappropriate when expressed publicly.

In popular culture, meanwhile, there are abundant examples in filmic media of eroticized brother-sister relations. In the Internet/Movie database (2012), these depictions far outnumber any other first-degree pairing. There are dozens of depictions of implied, resisted, and consummated sibling incest, of forced, unknowingly entered into, and of idealized brother-sister sex; of step, half and full sibling sex – not infrequently of twincest. The topos, familiar and persistent since antiquity, that incest is an indicator of acute depravity ascribed to foreigners is there:[16] to give one example, in *Game of Thrones*, the hideousness of the dastardly Lannisters is quickly established and signified by the coupling of Jaime and Cersei.

Another popular sibling incest motif – resonant with all sorts of claims made about the close-kin unions of ancient Egyptian and Persian royal families, is that of maintaining family purity (Stiebert 2016: 26, 80, 175). It has been proposed that elite families (rather like the gods of ancient Near Eastern mythology), exceptionally, could enter into sibling marriages. Again, in *Game of Thrones*, the purity of the Targaryen bloodline is maintained through close-kin unions.

Represented, too, and in line with GSA, are star-crossed sibling romances between a brother and sister who first meet in adulthood. In films and especially soap operas there are quite a number of examples of siblings meeting later in life, or after a lengthy hiatus, only to experience overwhelming attraction. Yet what is most surprising – because it goes against both the aforementioned Westermarck effect *and* resists also the notion of incest being depraved and perverse – are the *many* filmic examples depicting brother-sister sex as entered into knowingly and consentingly, as erotic, romantic, even

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[16] In the Hebrew Bible the proscriptions of Leviticus 18 (many of which pertain to off-limits family members) are preceded by the statement not to act like Egyptians and Canaanites (18.3).

sometimes as a romantic ideal. There is no strong suggestion that brother-sister incest is
actually very common – instead, it is something more probably *unusual.* But there is,
nevertheless, evidently, a demand for its depiction. Hence, brother-sister sex seems to
compel, titillate, push boundaries, and inspire fantasies.

I would like to point out some particular, striking and often disturbing elements
and tendencies in these depictions in film – before turning to brother-sister relationships
in the Hebrew Bible. First, not only is the brother-sister dynamic the most widely
depicted of first-degree sexual unions, it is the only one somewhat regularly depicted in
romantic and even humorous terms. If the sister is 'up for it', sibling sex is the stuff of
quirky comedy – such as in *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1984) and *The House of Yes*
(1997) – as well as of intense passion, such as in Nick Cassavetes' film *Yellow* (2012). In
all of these films – be the genre comedy or subversive romance – the sister is very
beautiful and her insubordinate daringness is something that adds to her erotic appeal.
Hence, in *Yellow*, Heather Wahlquist plays Mary, a drug-taking, bipolar woman whose
incestuous relationship with her half-brother lies in her troubled past. constantly pushes
the boundaries of subversion. She is fired from her elementary school job after having
sex with a father on a parent-teacher evening and later, in a tender scene, visits her lover-
brother in prison. The film revels voyeuristically in Mary's disastrousness and crazy
choices. Director Cassavetes comments, 'She's a walking dead … She's a wipeout of a
mess. But I hope people root for this character, damaged or not.' He continues, 'Who
gives a shit if people judge you? … Love who you want. … If it's your brother or sister
it's super-weird, but if you look at it, you're not hurting anybody…' (Waxman 2012).
But one question remains: is Mary really able to give consent or make responsible

choices?[17] In *The House of Yes*, the beautiful and highly imbalanced Jacqueline who seduces her twin brother Marty has borderline personality disorder. In *The Hotel New Hampshire* incest occurs between the narrator John Berry and his sister Franny. John has always desired his sister and the one-off consummation is essentially a way to get his sexual longing out of his system. Franny has, prior to this event, been raped and is emotionally fragile. The emerging pattern here is that if the sister is attractive and consenting, then sibling incest is fair game for fantasy, quirky humour, and intense drama. But it is also the case that sibling incest occurs when the sister is first rendered in some way acutely vulnerable (whether due to some form of mental illness, or following rape), which is profoundly disturbing – and also throws into serious ambivalence the notion of consent.

Brother-sister sex and the Hebrew Bible

Sisters alongside brothers are not well represented in the Hebrew Bible. Strikingly, however, when they are, they are almost invariably sexualized. Leviticus proscribes sex with a (half) sister (18.9; 20.17), whether raised in one's home or elsewhere (18.9). Alongside this, there are sustained stories about the following brothers and sisters: ; and ; ; Abraham and Sarah[18] are married (Gen. 11.29; 12.10-20; 13.1; 16.1-6; 17.9-21; 18.1-15; 20.1-18; 21.1-13; 23.1-19); Laban negotiates his sister Rebekah's marriage (Gen. 24.29-61); Dinah's full brothers, Simeon and Levi, lead the attacks to avenge Dinah's 'defilement' by a prospective husband (Gen. 34); Aaron and Miriam act together in

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[17] There are parallels also with Bergman's atmospheric film *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), which hints at brother-sister incest between Karin and Minus. Again, the sister is ill – in this case, schizophrenic.
[18] Prior to Gen. 17 Abraham is called 'Abram' and Sarah 'Sarai'. In order to avoid confusion, I will use the later and better-known names in discussing both Gen. 12 and Gen. 20.

rebellion against their brother Moses on account of his Cushite wife (Num. 12); Absalom

avenges his full sister Tamar by arranging the murder of their rapist half-brother, Amnon

(2 Sam. 13). All of these stories negotiate sexual relations, in most cases something to do

with marriage. Some bond between brothers and sisters is discernible. The interactions

between Laban and Rebekah, Simeon, Levi and Dinah and Absalom and Tamar all

suggest bonds of duty or family honour. Relations between Aaron and Miriam suggest

sibling collusion and an argument can be made for an affectionate bond between

Absalom and Tamar[19] and a protective bond between Laban and Rebekah.[20]

Let me focus next on the two cases where the relations between brother and sister

involve sex: Abraham and Sarah are (apparently) married siblings; Amnon sexually

desires and rapes his sister Tamar. It is notable that both pairs are paternal half-siblings –

this is made explicit in the case of the former (Gen. 20.12) and, as Amy Kalmanofsky

puts it, '[Tamar too] is marked more directly as Absalom's sister' (2014: 104; cf. 2 Sam.

13.1, 4) – most probably, because they share a mother as well as a father, whereas Tamar

and Amnon share a father only.[21]

The story of Abraham and Sarah features two of the Hebrew Bible's three sister-

wife stories.[22] In the first (Gen. 12.10-20), Abraham asks Sarah to tell the Egyptians that

she is his sister, so that they not kill him when they desire her on account of her beauty.

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[19] Absalom's words to Tamar (2 Sam. 13.20) may not sound kind or comforting but Trible nevertheless makes the case that in Absalom's articulation 'tenderness dictates the counsel' (1984: 52).

[20] Laban is depicted as submitting to the will of YHWH (Gen. 24.50), as asking for Rebekah's consent and he sends her away with her nurse and a blessing (Gen. 24.57-60). While Laban's and his mother's request for Rebekah's consent may have been little more than a formality (Stiebert 2013: 38, n.66) the overall tone is of a careful, honourable and properly conducted marriage negotiation.

[21] In Greek sources indications are that paternal sibling marriage (while probably rare) was not unheard of and that *homomatrioi* (those sharing a mother but not a father) are more closely related and bonded than *homopatrioi* (those sharing a father but not a mother) (Stiebert 2016: 168). While marriage to a maternal (or full) sibling, therefore, was deemed incestuous, marriage to a paternal sibling was more probable.

[22] In the third (Gen. 26) Isaac passes off Rebekah (his cousin-wife) as his sister.

Sarah is taken ($\sqrt{\ }$ *l-q-ch,* Gen. 12.15, 19) by Pharaoh, which at least strongly implies sex – or better, rape (Keshet 2013: 34) – and is only returned to Abraham following plagues. In the second version (Gen. 20.1-18) Abraham says of Sarah that she is his sister. She is taken to Abimelech but God visits him in a dream and so prevents Sarah's rape. Next, Abraham discloses that Sarah is his half-sibling, the daughter of his father but not his mother (Gen. 20.12). His careful qualification of their relatedness may indicate that paternal sibling marriage was (at least in this case) permissible, whereas relations between maternal (and, therefore, also between full siblings) was not. Of course, much more could be (and has been) said about Abraham's less than exemplary conduct, not least of all his willingness to hand over and pimp out his wife.[23]

The legality of Abraham and Sarah's union – in terms of how the narrative relates events – is not in dispute. Theirs is a close-kin union, not an incestuous one. A number of reasons have been suggested for this odd state of affairs, whereby Abraham announces his marriage to his sister, while the people of Egypt and Gerar (for all the lambasting of deviant foreigners) appear not to have expected such. Moreover, sibling unions came to be outlawed. Ilona Rashkow asserts that Abraham is lying. As she points out, he is acting deceitfully in both Genesis 12 and 20, leading her to pronounce that 'Abraham's words [at Gen. 20.12] are suspect. He claims that Sarah is actually his half-sister, but this is not confirmed by the narrator nor by any other dialogue or genealogical source either before or after this scene' (1992: 67). This may be so but it is unclear *why* Abraham would make this assertion. Granted, biblical narratives do not always 'make good sense' but he has just been caught out for passing his wife over to another man, eliciting horror from

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[23] Keshet is dismissive of any 'feeble attempts of commentators to interpret … [Gen. 12.13] as if Abram did not really intend to get anything but only to save his own life', arguing instead that the story presents him 'as a sort of procurer, and the marriage price as his payment' ([2003] 2013: 35).

Abimelech. Moreover, he has confessed that he considered Gerar a place where there is no fear of God and where people are murderers (Gen. 20.11) – at such a juncture, is he really worried about being considered a liar? If Abraham is lying, it is a peculiar lie that affords him no obvious advantage.

Seth Kunin (1995), on the other hand, takes the statement at face value. He argues that in the chosen lineage, Sarah as sister-wife fulfills a fantasy and ideal. In the later lineage, too, a wife has to be a close relative (e.g. a cousin) and, effectively, become a sister symbolically in order to be mythically acceptable. Hence, for Kunin, it is significant that, only once the wife (Sarah, Rebekah) is identified as sister, does she become pregnant with the child of promise. In the case of Rachel, the myth departs from the earlier pattern: here Jacob marries first Leah and then her sister, Rachel. According to Leviticus 18.18, this constitutes an incestuous union and, in Kunin's argument, incest is precisely the point: thus, when Jacob marries Rachel, Rachel becomes not only his wife but, through Leah, also his sister. In this way, Jacob's union with Rachel fulfills the fantasy of sibling marriage and again, Rachel becomes mother to the chosen son, Joseph.

In J. Cheryl Exum's compelling reading, the fantasy operates differently. Exum, like Kunin, takes a psychoanalytic-literary approach, and argues that the threefold repetitionwithchanges of the sister-wife story 'encodes unthinkable and unacknowledged sexual fantasies' alongside efforts to resolve them (1993: 154). The crux of the fantasy is a man's unconscious and taboo desire that his wife have sex with another man. According to Exum, it is irrelevant whether Abraham and Sarah are *really* brother and sister but instead 'the important issue is … that in all three versions the brother-sister relationship is imagined' (1993: 167). Abraham and Isaac's imagining that the wife is

sister could be 'a narcissistic striving toward completeness or wholeness, whose realization can only be imagined in his mirror-image from the opposite sex (she is what he would be if he were a woman)'.[24] For me, another possibility is that alongside these stories exploring the fantasy and fear-mixed-with-enjoyment of imagining one's wife with another man, the stories might also probe the fantasy of sex with one's sister. Exum, focusing on the former, describes how each story moves forward in terms of dismantling the taboo desire and imposing conventional order: in the first story (Gen. 12) Sarah *is* taken by Pharaoh (in psychoanalytic terms, the id wins) and only then is she returned to Abraham, her husband; in the second, Sarah is also taken but Abimelech is prevented by a dream and by plagues from violating her (in psychoanalytic terms, the super-ego wins) – but still, Exum notes, a 'morality based on external authority is not the best solution for the patriarchal neurosis' (1993: 168). Only in the third story is the fear resolved; only here is the patriarch reassured that there is nothing to fear; only here does he keep his wife to himself. Moreover, it is the other man who sees Isaac having sexual dealings – possibly, violent ones – with Rebekah.[25] In the earlier two versions, the sexual knowledge and prowess of the other (powerful foreign) man is feared; in the third it is defused, as Abimelech recoils upon witnessing the sexual forcefulness of the patriarch. Instead of imagining another man having sex with one's wife, the other man now watches the patriarch's performance of conjugal sex.

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[24] Notably, the sister is very beautiful (Gen. 12.11; 26.7), which could either confirm the narcissism or suggest that 'the patriarch wants to know that his wife is attractive to foreigners' (Kalmanofsky 2014: 88).
[25] Scholz emphasizes that this is a fantasy centred on marital rape. Hence, in her interpretation the three stories are about 'a husband [worrying] about losing sexual control over his wife when she is handed over to another man who is more powerful' (2010: 93).

Kalmanofsky resists the notion of fantasy at work in these stories. She states that the sister-wife stories 'offer the Bible's most positive narrative representation of incest'[26] but also that the narratives of brother-sister relationships ultimately reveal 'incest to be a destructive force' (2014: 87). In her argument Abraham is not portrayed in Genesis 20 as an innocent victim. Moreover, she claims, he is incriminated on account of his incestuous union. This is indicated, she argues, by two distinct verbal echoes between the narrative in Genesis 20 and the prohibition against sex with a half-sister in Leviticus 20.17: first, Abraham's words to Abimelech ('…she is my sister, the daughter of my father') are reminiscent of the wording of the Leviticus verse ('…a man who marries his sister, daughter of his father…') and secondly, both feature the word *chesed*. This common Hebrew Bible noun by far most often means 'goodness, kindness', or similar, but in Leviticus 20.17 (possibly uniquely, or only here and at Prov. 14.34, see BDB) it means 'disgrace' (NRSV) or 'shame, reproach' (BDB). In Genesis 20.13 the noun refers to the 'kindness' (NRSV), or 'favour', Sarah must perform at every place: namely claiming she is Abraham's sister – which, in turn, makes her vulnerable to rape. For Kalmanofsky, however, *chesed* here, too, has overtones of the pejorative meaning in Leviticus 20. In other words:

> *chesed* links Genesis 20 to the incest prohibition. It alludes to a shared meaning and implies that Abraham violates the incest prohibition whether in deed, by actually marrying his half-sister, or in kind, by presenting his wife as his half-sister. In this reading of *chesed,* Sarah's act of grace is, in truth, an act of disgrace

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[26] Given that these stories are shot through with discrimination against foreigners, handing women over to be raped and suggestions of marital rape, this 'most positive' label is especially depressing.

that reflects poorly upon Abraham and works to his detriment and not to his

benefit. Abraham should not have married his sister or even presented Sarah as

his sister. Such behavior compromises and shames the patriarch (2014: 96).

The only way, for Kalmanofsky, that Abraham can reclaim his standing is by affirming

Sarah as wife and wife only; and only then can she conceive and bear Isaac.

Kalmanofsky, therefore, does not regard this as a story that legitimates, let alone

idealizes, sibling union. She is non-committal, however, as to whether Abraham violates

the prohibition of Leviticus 20.17 'in thought or in action' (2014: 98).

    As I see it, there is some confusion with Kalmanofsky's argument. If Abraham's

statement that Sarah is his sister as well as his wife is some kind of 'blip',[27] rather than a

reference to an actual sibling marriage, it is, once more, a rather odd statement to make.

Unless they *are* paternal siblings it seems peculiar that Abraham would make the claim.

And if they *are* siblings then the union appears to be (at least in this instance) acceptable

– otherwise, it would jeopardize Abraham's role and status as – in Kalmanofsky's words

– 'designated patriarch'. Kalmanofsky is correct that Sarah's status as Abraham's wife is

emphasized more than her status as his sister, which receives mention only in Genesis

20.12. It is true, too, that at the conclusion of the story (just before the birth of Isaac),

Sarah is called Abraham's wife (20.18). However, it is also the case that Abimelech, in

addressing Sarah, refers to Abraham as 'your brother' (Gen. 20.16) – once more stressing

the *sibling* relationship. Moreover, in the entire account of Isaac's birth and early life

(Gen. 21.1-14), Sarah, while mentioned frequently (Gen. 21.1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 12), is *not*

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[27] Kalmanofsky proposes that Abraham, like a sister, feels vulnerable and that his statement is possibly indicative of anxiety rather than incest or incest fantasy.

once called Abraham's wife – which is surprising if the point of the preceding chapter is to clarify her status as wife and wife only. Hence, the reference to a wife who is also a paternal sister remains. And this sister-wife, a beautiful alluring woman, is handed over for sex with other men – she is, and she is imagined as, sexualized sister. Sex with Pharaoh, moreover, is apparently consummated (Gen. 12.15) and very probably constitutes rape, though this is trivialized in terms of a 'favour' or 'kindness' she *must do* (Gen. 20.13). Sarah's perspective, let alone consent, is (like Dinah's) absent.

The second reference to sex between paternal siblings occurs in 2 Samuel 13. In this story David's firstborn Amnon desires Tamar. Feigning sickness, Amnon contrives that David sends Tamar to him to make his food. Together in Amnon's chamber, Amnon propositions Tamar and she rejects him, proposing that he speak to the king 'for he will not withhold me from you' (2 Sam. 13.13). Thereupon Amnon rapes Tamar and then casts her out. After two years Absalom arranges for the murder of Amnon.

Rape and rape fantasy are peripheral and downplayed elements in the story of Abraham and Sarah (Exum 1993: 148–69; Scholz 2010: 88–93), with Sarah's perspective receiving no mention. In this story, rape is central and Tamar's resistance and distress are acknowledged. There is widespread agreement that Amnon is cast as the villain of the piece (e.g. Fuchs 2003: 202; Trible 1984: 45–46), Tamar as tragic victim (e.g. Trible 1984: 48), and Absalom as righteous avenger. Unlike Dinah (apparently) (Gen. 34.1),[28] Tamar does not leave her home of her own accord 'but rather was ordered by her father and manipulated by her half-brother' (Fuchs 2003: 208). This is unusual in that Tamar (unlike Lot's daughters in Sodom, or Dinah in Hivite territory) is at risk not from an

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[28] Gen. 34 and 2 Sam. 13 are widely compared, as both foreground a sexualized and violated sister alongside 'honor-driven fraternal vigilance' (Stone 2005: 104; cf. Reis 1998: 57; Rashkow 2000: 142–6; Zlotnick 2002: 38–42; Fuchs 2003: 200–24).

outsider but from someone who might be expected to be her male custodian and protector (Fuchs 2003: 209). Tamar, in other words, had reason to feel safe, and did not invite her fate, as is sometimes implied of Dinah. Absalom is widely regarded as the hero (Fuchs 2003: 201) or 'the advocate of Tamar' (Trible 1984: 51), but numerous commentators also acknowledge the presence of fraternal competition (Trible 1984: 38; Schwartz 1997: 101–02; Rashkow 2000: 148–49; Fuchs 2003: 201–05). Some express surprise or outrage at David's peripheral and ineffective role. For Kalmanofsky, he plays the role of 'compromised father' who 'is unable to protect [his daughter]' (2014: 105). Several commentators use the word 'unwitting[ly]' of David's procurement of Amnon's sexual access to Tamar (Trible 1984: 42; Reis 1998: 47, n.22; Fuchs 2003: 210). Kalmanofsky, on the other hand, argues that David suspects Amnon's motive and 'knowingly relinquishes [Tamar] to Amnon' (2014: 106). She speculates that his is 'a misguided attempt … to assert control over and to protect his household' by acquiescing to his son's desire (2014: 106).

This rape story, again, is suggestive of legal close-kin marriage between paternal siblings, rather than of (illegal) incest. Striking for sure is the sheer emphasis on family relationships in this chapter. Almost every single verse contains a term pertaining to first-degree relationships.[29] This is clearly, therefore, a story of *family* strife, exploring boundaries and loyalties within the first family. One further point to make is that this is a story about men and men's concerns, with Tamar functioning as conduit, or catalyst – much in the way Bathsheba functions in a story about men: David, Uriah and Nathan (2

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[29] Following the rape Amnon calls Tamar 'this [female]' *(zō'ṯ*, 13.17). On the heels of the abundance of close-kin terminology this comes across as dissonant and distancing, 'as if absolving a familial relationship with her' (Kalmanofsky 2014: 109).

Samuel 11). After this, Tamar – but for the memorial in the form of her niece named after her (2 Sam. 14.27) – fades completely from the narrative.

For all its many relational terms, this story does not spell out quite why Absalom, the younger brother, has fraternal precedence to Tamar over his older brother Amnon, the royal firstborn. The usual explanation is that Absalom and Tamar are full siblings, whereas Amnon and Tamar (and, therefore, Amnon and Absalom) are paternal siblings. This might confer closer intimacy on Absalom and Tamar – and also exclude the possibility of *their* marriage. As noted, the only other reference to sibling marriage is between paternal siblings, Abraham and Sarah. It might also explain Absalom's act of blood vengeance on Amnon (that is, because his loyalty to and association or honour-tie with Tamar is stronger than with Amnon).

The notion that Tamar's appeal to paternal sibling marriage (2 Sam. 13.13) is less of a stalling tactic and more of a genuine alternative is widely advocated. Adrien Bledstein argues that Tamar appeals to Amnon's fantasy and 'either knew the law [of sibling marriage] or set the precedent' (2000: 82; cf. Trible 1984: 45 –46 and n.35; Schwartz 1997: 98; Kalmanofsky 2014: 108). J. P. Fokkelman finds support in Genesis 20.12 and considers any impasse to derive from Tamar's virginity, not consanguinity (1981: 103). According to Helena Zlotnick, '[e]ven the tale of Amnon and Tamar could have ended happily but for Amnon's change of heart from love to hatred (2 Sam. 13.15)' and 'David's … presumed assent to a mediated marriage between his two children [is notable]' (2002: 41).[30]

For Reis, Amnon and Tamar's sex act constitutes incest and, as such, a shocking and taboo crime. Yet if paternal sibling sex were (in terms of the narrative world) really a

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[30] The suggestion that marriage to one's rapist constitutes a 'happy ending' rankles.

despicable crime, then both David's mere anger without blotting out the offender and Absalom's biding time for two years are surprising. Instead, it appears as though the rape of an unbetrothed woman, even a virgin sister, while an offence, is not in the same league as adultery, or as sex with close family members, as it came to be depicted in Leviticus 18 and particularly 20 with its vomiting land, expulsions, and executions. What is instead foregrounded here is not incest but, instead, rape, dishonour, and a profound lack of social decorum. Otherwise, why would Absalom, in addressing a distressed Tamar, refer to Amnon *twice* as her brother (13.20)? If *incestuous* rape were the primary offence this would be acutely insensitive.

My interpretation is also discomforting: what I discern is that Absalom is appalled at Amnon's action and (as Tamar's full brother) interprets it as dishonouring him (hence his vengeance). But the action is not depicted as illegal. This is why Absalom consoles Tamar with 'he is your brother': it is a reminder that as distressing as the consequences are, as paternal half-brother, perhaps also, as royal firstborn, Amnon has powers and privileges.

Amnon is depicted as a nasty character and what he has done to Tamar is dishonourable and goes against social mores – he has raped a virgin and then refused to marry her. Absalom's vengeance is depicted as defensible, even predictable (13.32-3). Somewhat analogously, the man in Deuteronomy who refuses to marry his brother's widow is depicted as behaving dishonourably and as deserving (proportionate) humiliation – namely, in this case, being spat at publicly (Deut. 25.7-10). But neither Amnon, nor the refusing brother is acting illegally. This might also account for David's inaction: within the parameters of social acceptability reflected in this story, Amnon has

exploited his power and behaved badly (hence, David is angered) – but Amnon has not committed a crime (hence, David does not punish him). If sex between half-siblings were incestuous and, moreover, a serious criminal offence (like adultery appears to have been), then the expectation might be that Amnon would be punished with commensurate severity. After all, King David himself is accountable for adultery and the murder of Uriah (2 Sam. 11–12).

It appears, then, that Amnon's deed is a breach of honour but *not* a serious crime. Absalom urges Tamar to calm herself, precisely because there is no legal recourse here: Amnon is not guilty of incest (because paternal sibling marriage is – at least in exceptional cases – legal) and, as royal prince he can take a woman, as long as she is not betrothed or married to another. Presumably, the social expectation is that a man would not rape his half-sister. Amnon probably uses the designation 'my sister' (rather than 'your daughter', or 'the maiden', 2 Sam. 13.6) strategically in his words to David to impart that the request he is making is innocent. Amnon, therefore, disregards decorum and does so not with impassioned spontaneity but with stealth. He is ignominious but his rape is not incestuous and not illegal – an indication of rape culture. Amnon works through David to procure a situation where he can rape Tamar; similarly, Absalom works through David to engineer an opportunity for fratricide. Where Amnon asks 'let my sister Tamar come' (13.6), contriving a sense of intimacy and of proximity without threat, so Absalom asks David, 'let my brother Amnon go with us' (13.26), probably with similar intentionality.

My interpretation is that Amnon rapes Tamar. The rape is, in Tamar's own words, 'a thing that should not be done in Israel' (13.12) – it defies social convention and

decency. Paternal sibling marriage, however, appears to be – while probably not common – a possibility (13.13). Tamar herself proposes such a marriage (terrible as it is to imagine this prospect): it offers a way forward that could postpone rape, could provide her with a husband (including after rape, which is depicted as rendering a woman defiled and as a less desirable prospect for marriage, 13.16) and could have prevented the blood vengeance Absalom comes to exact.

In terms of all the various first-degree permutations, brother-sister unions are presented in the Hebrew Bible as the most sexually desirable and most probable. There are not many accounts of brothers and sisters but what there is suggests some tendency to sexualize the sister: hence, sisters are most often discussed in the context of either marriage, or a sexually charged threat (of rape and/or seduction). While there is little evidence for regular sibling marriage, the sister-fantasy is nevertheless entertained. Indications are, moreover, that paternal sibling marriage was not always considered illegal. Abraham mentions his marriage to his paternal half-sister Sarah rather casually; Tamar suggests marriage to Amnon as a viable option. In both stories either rape, or the threat of rape, looms large.

Conclusions

Both the Hebrew Bible and some expressions of popular culture present us with sexualized sisters, sisters imagined as enticing sexual partners. In the case of the two most explicit biblical accounts – of Sarah and Tamar – the sister is beautiful, desirable to and wanted by men. The suggestion is that rules can be adapted so the brother can have her. Distressingly too, rape overshadows these stories even where marriage is in place or

contemplated: Abraham gives Sarah over to other men; Tamar is raped by her brother as she pleads for legitimate union. In the case of Abraham and Sarah, the offering up of Sarah for rape is shockingly casual. In the case of Tamar and Amnon rape is committed – and poses no obstacle to marriage.

In popular culture, too, rape overshadows brother-sister sex – even in depictions that aim to be titillating, humorous, or romantic. The 'up-for-it sister' is a figment of voyeuristic fantasy. What is especially disturbing about the filmic examples explored here is that the 'consent' of the sister is so often undermined, rendered dubious by her vulnerability. Rape is normalized; the depictions reflect and underscore rape cultures.

If we accept that popular culture to some extent reflects popular fantasies and social mores, confronts social tensions, and seeks to cater to what audiences want, what are we to make of the brother-sister incest depictions in modern film and fiction? And do these relate to the sexualized sister of the Hebrew Bible? Given the various, including pernicious and subliminal influences of the Bible, the lines of influence may indeed be there.

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