The Wife of Potiphar, Sexual Harassment, and False Rape Allegation

Genesis 39 in Select Social Contexts of the Past and Present*

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Abstract

The story in Gen 39 depicts Joseph as hero and Potiphar's wife as villain. Yet, because the story is sparsely told, it permits ambiguities. Consequently, while most biblical interpreters vilify the wife of Potiphar, she also has some staunch defenders – including among those who seek to reclaim her as an African woman who brings blessings to Joseph and Israel. This paper explores some details, subtleties and possibilities of the story before turning to its toxic interpretive potentialities in present time, more particularly the context of rape culture and the revelations of #MeToo.

Introduction

Gen 39 tells the story of Joseph in the service of Potiphar in Egypt, and of Potiphar's wife who desires Joseph and, when he refuses her aggressive advances, accuses him – falsely – of attempted rape.

This paper examines the story from a range of perspectives and explores first, how toxic attitudes and prejudices of times past are ingrained in the text and secondly, how present social climates continue to fertilize such attitudes and prejudices. As such, this paper attempts to make a contribution to biblical rape culture readings. While there exists a wealth of interpretive literature on violence in the Bible[1] – including on sexual violence – rape culture readings seek to navigate between the world of the biblical text and a discrete contemporary context. In this paper I will

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1 E.g. BiAS 20 (Hunter & Kügler, eds. 2016) as well as the literature listed there.

interface Gen 39 with rape culture phenomena of the present, focusing particularly on examples from my own UK context. I argue that rape culture manifestations of the past and present are broad in scope, insidious and damaging – not least, because rape culture contributes both to downplaying the harmfulness of sexual violence and to the perpetuation of rape myths.

The paper begins with a demonstration of how narrative elements such as characterization and intertextual verbal echoes consolidate negative stereotypes pertaining to foreign women. Ethnicity, I argue, is central to maligning Potiphar's wife. In spite of efforts to defend Potiphar's wife – on account of her husband's infertility, for example, which for some commentators justifies or mitigates her actions – the trope, familiar from folklore already, of the evil temptress or spiteful liar, persists.

Characterization

Joseph

It is clear from the way the story is told who of the three main characters is good and who is not. Joseph is clearly 'the good guy'. YHWH is with Joseph, bringing about his success (39:2, 5). Victor Hamilton points out that insistent mention of YHWH (eight times in vv. 2, 3, 5, 21, 23) is particularly striking, because outside of this chapter the tetragrammaton is almost entirely absent in the whole Joseph narrative (1995:459).[2] For Robert Davidson this is indicative of 'providence, which is silently, but surely shaping the unfolding drama' (1979:233). Judith McKinlay, in a similar vein, states that YHWH's care for Joseph reassures and prepares for a happy outcome (1995:71). Joseph's good looks (39:6) might also be a sign of his divine favour: after all, other men of the Bible who are favoured by God (most notably David) are also good-looking (1 Sam 16:12). Stuart Macwilliam refers to beauty applied in this way as 'a halo' (2009:285). He concedes that the beautiful may ultimately receive God's blessing but contends, too, that in the short term, beauty renders vulnerable. Examples are the beautiful Sarah and Bathsheba, for instance, who are rendered vulnerable to rape when powerful men – Pharaoh (12:11,

2 The one exception is Jacob's appellation in his deathbed blessings (49:18).

15), Abimelech (20:2), David (2 Sam 11:2-4) – desire them (2009:272).[3] Macwilliam also sees Joseph's beauty as signaling short-term threat and long-term blessing.

When his master's wife propositions him, Joseph refuses, telling her that his master has entrusted him with everything, withholding nothing, with the exception only of his wife and that to follow her command for sex would be a wickedness, a crime against God (39:9). Joseph does not succumb to insistent demands and runs away when Potiphar's wife propositions him again (39:12). Eventually, he goes to prison accused of something he did not do (40:15). Even in prison YHWH remains with him (39:21, 23), showing him *chesed* ('love, loving kindness') (39:21).

There is perhaps some of Joseph's familiar cockiness, which had already infuriated his brothers (37:8), in the words to his master's wife: 'Look, with *me* here, my master has *no concern* about *anything in the house*, and he has put *everything that he has* in *my hand*. *He is not greater in this house than I am*, nor has he kept back *anything* from me *except* yourself ...' (39:8-9, NRSV, italics added for emphasis).[4] Joseph was sold by slave traders and bought by Potiphar (37:36, 39:1) and the claim to autonomy of this slave when addressing his master's wife could be interpreted as unusually strident, even haughty.[5] Alternatively, it may convey Joseph's

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3 McKinlay also makes the connection between beauty and vulnerability, referring to the beauty of all of Sarah, Rachel and Joseph. The beauty of all three is enmeshed in stories of deception and trickery. Sarah is passed off to Pharaoh as Abraham's sister (12:10-20); Rachel is switched with her less desirable sister Leah (29:21-30); and Joseph is falsely accused of rape (Gen 39). As McKinlay points out, while Gen 39 shows gender-reversal in terms of the desiring gaze (see below), Gen 12 & 29 remind us that men can be devious and tricksters, too (1995: 76).

4 Hamilton, however, sees no arrogance here, only completeness, which is stressed through fivefold repetition of the word *kol* ('all'): the completeness of Joseph's dedication to Potiphar, of Potiphar's trust in Joseph and of YHWH's blessing (1995: 461).

5 Hagar after conceiving begins to despise her mistress Sarai (16:4). Sarai appears to regard this as insulting and insubordinate, because she first complains to Abram (16:5) and then abuses Hagar (16:6). Hagar's receipt of a theophany may signal that she has divine support (16:7, 10-11) but she is nevertheless addressed as the slave of Sarai (16:8) and told to return and to submit to her (16:9), suggesting that in the hierarchy deemed proper, slaves ought to remain subordinate and subservient. Also, while Hagar is promised abundant descendants (16:10) the generous blessing is tempered, given that her son Ishmael will be 'wild' and live in hostility with his brothers (16:12). Later, Sarah finds fault with Hagar's son because he is *mocking* her son (21:9). Again, it appears that the slave's son, like his mother before him, is deemed to be behaving in

confidence and righteous courage – even in the face of pressure and temptation. The Rabbis speculated that Joseph was tempted and that the story shows him overcoming his temptation. In the retelling of the Qur'an, too, it says 'She made for him; *and he would have made for her* had he not beheld the proof of the Lord. ... He was indeed one of Our dedicated servants' (Ibrahim 2017:80, italics added). Whatever the case, the story is clearly designed to demonstrate Joseph's piety – even under duress.

Potiphar

The second character, Potiphar, is also more good than bad. This is conveyed above all through his association with both Joseph and YHWH. Potiphar recognizes that YHWH is with Joseph (39:3) and Joseph finds favour in Potiphar's eyes (39:4). YHWH blesses Potiphar's house (39:5). The events that lead to Joseph's wrongful imprisonment, moreover, occur in Potiphar's absence, which has the effect of exonerating him. It is Potiphar's own wife who tells him that Joseph attempted to violate her and she can produce a garment that seems to provide hard evidence for her accusation. Given the seriousness of adultery,[6] Potiphar's reaction of anger seems reasonable and – while in line with – also more restrained than what it says in Proverbs: 'For jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he shows no restraint when he takes revenge. He will accept no compensation, and refuses a bribe no matter how great' (6:34-35, NRSV). Potiphar's imprisoning rather than executing Joseph might indicate either his capacity for leniency and mercy, or his believing and trusting Joseph, or mistrusting his wife's fidelity, as in Roger Young's film *Joseph* (1995) starring Ben Kingsley as Potiphar (cf. also Davidson 1979:235). Either would be another point in Potiphar's favour.

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a way that is perceived as inappropriate given his station. The verb 'to mock' has the same root that underlies the name of Sarah's son, Isaac. Ishmael's objectionable action, therefore, is literally that of 'Isaac-ing'. Sarah is angered by it to the point of insisting on the eviction of Hagar and Ishmael (21:10). It emerges clearly from Gen 16 and 21 that Hagar is expected to behave with submission. No such submission is evident in Joseph's words to Potiphar's wife. This could be in part because he is male, because he is Hebrew, and because he is expected to be obedient above all to his God.

6 The clearest indication of this assessment can be found, alongside the prohibitions in Torah (e.g. Exod 20:14), in Proverbs 6–7.

Potiphar's Wife

The bad character here is clearly Potiphar's wife. Her namelessness already may convey some measure of disdain – although it is not uncommon for women of the Hebrew Bible (whether named or unnamed) to be identified in relation to male relatives, most often fathers or husbands. Her being a *foreign woman* also plays on negative stereotypes that are well developed in the Hebrew Bible.[7] Potiphar's wife sees Joseph and commands him to lie with her. After he refuses her with a wordy and articulate rebuff and invokes his loyalty to his master and to his God, she pesters him day after day (Hebrew *yôm yôm),* indicating harassment (39:10), or, in Meir Sternberg's assessment, 'poisonous' conduct and 'sexual assault' (1985:424). One day, when there are no witnesses, she takes hold of his garment, indicating physical force, and again commands him to lie with her (39:12). After Joseph escapes, she calls out to her servants, in order to drum up support in the absence of witnesses. Finally, she concocts a lie, claiming that it was *Joseph* who wanted to lie with her and that he escaped when *she* cried out. The reversal, for Hamilton, serves 'to underscore the blatant nature of her lie' (1995:467). She repeats the lie to her husband, making him secondarily responsible, because it was *he* who brought Joseph into their home. Thus she sends an innocent man to prison for what was clearly considered a grave crime, namely attempted rape and adultery. If she ever admits her culpability, as in the Qur'an (Sura 12:51), where the wife says, 'It was I who sought to seduce him, and indeed, he is one of the truthful' (Ibrahim 2017:83), we are not told in Genesis. Instead, Potiphar's wife fades from the story completely, leaving Joseph in prison for years – before his meteoric rise to become Pharaoh's second-in-command. Most commentators pick up on all the clues – overt and covert – that cast Potiphar's wife in a negative light. Hamilton is one typical example, saying of her that she 'is not only seductress and prevaricator, but she is a "subtle mistress of syntactic equivocation"'[8] and someone who will resort to fiction and fabrication to get her revenge (1995:469).

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7 See below.

8 McKinlay also makes much of Potiphar's wife's subtle use of language. Hence, McKinlay sees considerable irony inherent in the reapplication of the word 'hand': in v.6 Joseph states that Potiphar left all in his hand but in v.12 it is he who leaves his garment in his master's wife's hand. According to McKinlay, 'repetition in v.13 makes sure that the point is not lost' (1995: 73). Moreover, 'hand' has multiple meanings, including

Characterization is clear-cut in Gen 39. There are three main characters[9] of which two – Joseph and Potiphar's wife – are particularly active. Whereas Potiphar is named and his wife is not, Potiphar has no speech, whereas she does. Only Joseph is all of named, subject of active verbs and a character whose direct speech is recorded. In this story Joseph emerges as favoured by Potiphar and YHWH, as well as self-controlled and pious. Potiphar's wife is a foil to Joseph and the villain of the piece. Her lies contrive a complication in the story, which temporarily suspends Joseph's success. But the clue that he *will* ultimately thrive is there all along in that YHWH is with him. This signals to the reader that Joseph's fortunes will improve. His story continues; the story of Potiphar's wife ends with her lies.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is understood here as a literary form of inner-biblical exegesis, whereby biblical texts are brought into relationship with and mutually illuminate each other – notably, through verbal echoes. This assumes a process where later texts deliberately recall earlier texts – or, where earlier texts are, possibly purposefully, edited to make links with later texts. I am in agreement with Michael Fishbane one of the chief proponents of inner-biblical exegesis that due to 'difficulties in assigning absolute dates to biblical texts', a historical sequence of such a process is unwise to delineate (1980:343).

Particular emphasis in this section is placed on biblical texts that pertain to sexual humiliation and rape. The purpose of this is to provide a fuller understanding of the sexual overtones in Gen 39, where the gendered directionality of sexual exploitation departs from the considerably more common pattern of male abusers and female victims.[10]

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that of power. Whereas Joseph asserted his power in the household, now the power has moved to his master's wife.

9 YHWH is another character. YHWH is with Joseph (39:2, 21, 23) and causes all in his hand to prosper (39:3, 23), blessing Potiphar's house (39:5) and disposing the chief jailer to favour Joseph (39:21). Peripheral characters, all of whom are unnamed, are the Ishmaelites who sell Joseph (39:1), other members of Potiphar's household (39:14), the king's prisoners (39:20, 22) and the chief jailer (39:21-23).

10 See below. Also less common in terms of its mention in the Hebrew Bible is male-male sexual violence. Such is threatened in isolated places – most clearly Gen 19:5 &

Genesis 37

Intertextual echoes add further layers of depth to the story. Hence, Joseph is twice endangered by a garment: the impressive robe given to him by Jacob his father (37:3) incites his brothers' jealousy and they bring this same garment, blood-covered, to their father as fabricated ' proof' of his violent death (37:23, 31-33). Two chapters later, Joseph's garment becomes a token of evidence of his alleged attempted rape. The word for garment in each story is a different one: the special robe Jacob gives to Joseph is a *kᵉtōnet passîm* (traditionally, a cloak of many colours, although the meaning of *passîm* is uncertain and it might also refer to many patterns or layers, or indeed to something else). The word for the garment Joseph leaves in Potiphar's wife's hand after escaping her aggressive advances is the much more common *beged*. Still, association between the two incidents is clear.

Sexual Violation in 2 Samuel 13 (Deuteronomy 22 and Genesis 34)

The uncommon noun pair *kᵉtōnet passîm* (construct + plural absolute) also creates one of several verbal echoes with another story of rape (this time not just an accusation of rape): namely the story of 2 Sam. 13 where David's firstborn son Amnon desires, deceives and then rapes his sister Tamar. Again, as in the Joseph story, the setting is one where witnesses are absent. The word *kᵉtōnet* occurs just seven times in the Hebrew Bible. It occurs five times to designate the robe that sets apart Joseph (37:3, 23, 31, 32, 33); it occurs once to describe the special tunic (*kᵉtōnet-bad qōdeš,* 'holy linen garment') worn by the high priest on the holy day of Yom Kippur, the Great Day of Atonement (Lev 16:4); and it occurs once more to describe the robe of David's daughter Tamar, adding that such a robe (*kᵉtōnet passim*) was worn in times past by royal virgin daughters (2 Sam 13:18). After she is raped and cast out by Amnon, Tamar tears this very robe (2 Sam 13:19),[11] puts ashes on her head and goes forth crying aloud in ways that express and perform her grief, desolation and

Judg 19:22. For some elaboration on this topic see Stiebert & Walsh (2001). The absence of female-female sexual practice, inclusive of sexual violence, is notable and I discuss this very fully elsewhere (Stiebert 2016: 114–32).

11 The garment once signified her status as royal virgin daughter (2 Sam 13:18). The tearing, or rending (from the verbal root *q-r-'*) of the garment, which traditionally signifies grief (cf. the actions of Reuben, 37:29 and Jacob, 37:34), also performs the loss of this status and, maybe, of the tearing of her hymen (2 Sam 13:19).

wrongful suffering. The rare word *ketonet* is one of several elements linking the stories of Joseph and David's daughter Tamar.

Another link is the word *yāphâ*, 'beautiful' (Gen 39:6; 2 Sam 13:1). It should not surprise that the same word is used for both Joseph, a male, and Tamar, a female. As David Clines (1995:214–43) explains, in modern societies, even where males and females mingle fairly freely, there is none the less pressure to think in binary gendered terms. This sometimes has the upshot of distinct vocabulary: for instance, to designate good-looking males or females. Hence, 'handsome' or 'rugged' is appropriate of a masculine male and 'pretty' or 'beautiful' of a feminine woman. The social contexts in the background of the Hebrew Bible appear to have separated male and female spheres much more rigorously than many modern social contexts. Both male and female beauty appear to have been admired (though there is more frequent reference to good-looking women) but there is no separate terminology and no implication that a beautiful male is feminine – as there is in English, for instance, with an expression such as 'the pretty man'.[12] Tellingly, the exact same descriptors are translated 'graceful and beautiful' of Rachel at 29:17 (NRSV) but 'handsome and good-looking' of her son Joseph at 39:6 (NRSV). Gender certainly has impact on translation!

Macwilliam, we recall, has pointed out that beauty can render a person vulnerable to sexual threat. While this applies to both Joseph and Tamar, it is also the case that their beauty makes them sympathetic victims. It is not the case that everyone in the Bible who is vulnerable to sexual assault incites sympathy. Joseph's sister Dinah, who is raped[13] by a local prince (Gen 34), or the virgins of Shiloh (Judg 21) are not specified as beautiful and the text accords them no sympathy on account of being violated. In these two narratives rape is above all a matter of male family members' compromised honour;[14] there is no focus on the female indi-

12 Some commentators do interpret Joseph as feminized in Gen 39 – both on account of his beauty and his being the object of sexual desire (see below).

13 As will be briefly discussed below, there is no complete agreement among commentators that Shechem rapes Dinah. For a summary and references, see Stiebert (2018: 32–33 and n.12).

14 Male honour comes to the fore in the details of Dinah's brothers' revenge: they retrieve their sister and kill all males among the rapist's people. Moreover, they do so on account of Dinah's defilement (34:7, 25-27). Their justification is that their sister was treated 'like a whore' (34:31). For Pitt-Rivers (1977) the notion of damage inflicted by

viduals, no insight into their perspective, and no acknowledgment of their suffering. But Tamar is described quite differently and with more detail: as a royal daughter, a virgin, as beautiful and obedient; after putting up resistance, she is physically overpowered by her brother who has deceitfully engineered a situation where they are left alone, with no witnesses or protectors. Pleading with her brother to negotiate a marriage with their father and not to cast her out, so as to right the wrong done to her as best as can be, Tamar is evicted. All these narrative elements serve to construct Tamar as a tragic figure, even an ideal tragic figure, who did nothing to incite or to deserve the violence and shame inflicted on her. The rape took place unobserved by any witnesses in Amnon's private chamber but the omniscient narrator tells it in a way that makes very clear that Amnon is the villain and Tamar the innocent victim (Stiebert 2016:189 and n.235).[15]

As already alluded to, other texts of the Hebrew Bible depict matters differently. The laws of Deuteronomy 22, for example, make a distinction between a situation where a man 'meets and lies with' a virgin woman who is already betrothed *in a town*, or *in an open field*. If the sex act takes place in a town, both the man and woman are to be stoned to death – because the woman could have cried for help and been heard. In an open field, however, because the woman might have cried out and not been heard, only the man is to be stoned to death. If a man 'meets and lies with' a virgin not yet engaged, however, the 'solution' is that the man pays a fine to the woman's father and marries her, without possibility of divorce (Deut 22:23-29). At least two things emerge from these laws:

– first, adultery is considered a very serious crime: hence, sex with an engaged woman incurs the death penalty for one or both parties;

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female shame on male honour is pivotal to the story. In Judg 21 it is also the male family members (fathers or brothers, v.22) who are mentioned as feeling slighted by the seizure of their women. The implication is again that male honour is central and must be appeased. Male honour is also a theme in 2 Sam 13 where Absalom takes vengeance on Amnon because he humiliated Tamar (vv.22, 32). Fuchs even argues that Tamar is little more than 'a catalyst for the conflict between villain and hero' (2003: 201).

15 Virtually all commentators are agreed on this point. The maverick reading by Reis (1998) is an exception. My rejection of Reis's argument is detailed elsewhere (Stiebert 2016: 189–91).

– secondly, men are considered initiators of sex and women as property of men.

Unlike in many modern definitions and codifications of rape, *consent* is not a topic. A woman not betrothed who is raped is married to her rapist without mention of her agreement and without possibility of divorce – a virtual invitation to rape marriage.[16] Also evident in Deuteronomy 22 is that the woman's collusion is to some extent assumed: hence, if a woman does not scream loudly, the indication is that she is co-responsible. The subtext is that there are victims of rape who are considered 'more deserving' than others. Tamar is decidedly undeserving of rape; the narrative portrays her as wholly innocent. The woman who lies with a man in the town but is not heard screaming is – by implication – co-responsible and deserving of capital punishment.

Aspersions are also cast about Dinah in Gen 34.[17] These go back as far as rabbinic interpretation and target particularly the detail that Dinah goes out to see the women of the land (that is, foreign women, 34:1). This is taken to mean that Dinah, essentially, has it coming. Dinah's consent or otherwise to sex with Shechem, a Hivite prince, receives no mention. The text provides no insight into her perspective. Indeed, some commentators have proposed that Dinah may not have been raped (Bechtel 1994; van der Wolde 2002).[18] Gen 34 uses three verbs to de-

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16 It is possible that the law covers also sex between a consenting man and a consenting unbetrothed virgin. Such might more appropriately be called marriage by elopement. Still, the fact that Deut 22:28 refers to the man seizing, or laying hold of the woman is suggestive of force and absence of consent. The meaning of 'rape' (from Latin *raptio,* 'abduction') has shifted over time. The word used to refer to the seizure of a person (most often a woman) for the purpose of sexual intercourse, e.g. 'The Rape of Helen', 'The Rape of the Sabine Women'. *Removal* of a person (most frequently removal from the sphere of protection of either the natal or spousal family), not *consent,* was determinative of *raptio* in this more archaic usage. With Helen, for instance, the fact that Paris of Troy *takes her away* from her husband, Menelaus of Sparta, is what constitutes the rape. According to some versions, Helen goes willingly, or consents. In modern understanding such would not qualify as rape. Nowadays, 'rape' pertains most often to the sexual (usually penetrative) assault of a person *against that person's will,* with consent being one determinative factor.

17 For a sample of the many studies that recognize and explore intertextual links between the stories of Dinah and Tamar, see Stiebert (2016: 183 & n.218).

18 The memorable retelling from Dinah's viewpoint in Anita Diamant's novel *The Red Tent* depicts the relationship between Dinah and Shalem of Shechem as a romance (1997).

scribe what Shechem does to Dinah: *l-q-ch*, 'he took', *š-k-b* 'he lay (with)', or 'he had sex (with)' and '*-n-h*, 'he debased (her)' (34:2). Technically, none of these three verbs means 'to rape' and Dinah would be debased, or lowered in status, whether she consented or not. This is so, because sex with someone other than one's husband and probably (given the dominant ideology of the Hebrew Bible) especially with a foreigner, lowers a woman's status and economic worth.

Lyn Bechtel argues that the reaction of Shechem after sex with Dinah is atypical of a rapist. Hence, 34:3 states that Shechem's being was drawn to Dinah, that he loved her and spoke to her heart. Again, there is no mention of Dinah's reciprocity, or otherwise. Bechtel considers Amnon's reaction following his rape of Tamar – of feeling intense loathing for his victim (2 Sam 13:15) – the likely response to rape. In both narratives, however, it is clear that the women are considered defiled and 'damaged goods' even though, in the case of Tamar, it is made abundantly clear that Tamar did all she could to avert rape (2 Sam 13:12-14). Also, there is in both stories a clear discrepancy of power. Not only are Shechem and Amnon men and both, presumably, physically stronger than their female victims (as is made explicit in 2 Sam 13:14), they are also both socially *powerful* men. Shechem is a prince of the land, or region (34:2) and Amnon is the royal firstborn (2 Sam 13:21).[19] Both are indulged by their fathers.[20] Shechem's father Hamor does all he can to negotiate a generous and accommodating settlement so that his son can marry the woman he wants (34:8-10, 24). In Amnon's case David does not punish his son; he is only said to be 'very angry'. As I have argued elsewhere, possibly even incestuous rape is – while considered acutely improper – not illegal when a woman is unmarried or unbetrothed (as Tamar ap-

19 The NRSV follows the Septuagint translation and one Hebrew manuscript from Qumran. The Masoretic Text does not mention that David would not punish Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn. Instead, the Masoretic Text only states that David was 'very angry'.

20 Joseph is also indulged by his father (37:3-4), as is Absalom (2 Sam 18:33). The daughters do not fare nearly so well. Jacob does nothing when he hears of Dinah's defilement (34:5) and rebukes his sons for taking violent revenge (34:30). David, meanwhile, visits Amnon who is pretending to be ill (2 Sam 13:6) but only sends for Tamar (2 Sam 13:7). His response to her rape is anger, not action (2 Sam 13:21). Vengeance is left to Absalom (2 Sam 13:28-29).

pears to have been).[21] Hence, while even King David is culpable for adultery, a powerful man like Amnon can have sex with whomsoever he chooses, even by force, even with a virgin sister, as long as he does not violate another man's wife (Stiebert 2016:192–94).

A further intertextual link between the two stories of sexualized violence in Gen 39 and 2 Sam 13 is the span of two years. After two years Tamar's other brother Absalom arranges for the murder of Amnon (2 Sam 13:23). Throughout this time Absalom has harboured ill feeling towards Amnon on account of the disgrace and rape (from *ʿn-h,* 2 Sam 13:22, 32) of Tamar. Joseph, like Tamar, is debased. He is not, like Tamar, raped – but he is accused of attempted rape and falls from his high status in Potiphar's household to be imprisoned. Where after two years Tamar was avenged, after two years (41:1) Joseph is restored.

A final intertextual link is that both sexual violators – Potiphar's wife and Amnon – utter the same command: 'lie with me!' (39:7, 12; 2 Sam 13:11). This is no invitation; it is an order. In response, Joseph and Tamar resist by invoking what is right and what is not. Joseph alludes to his master and his God, and reminds his abuser that she is his master's wife and obeying her suggestion would be improper, wickedness and a sin (39:9). Tamar addresses Amnon as 'my brother' – possibly to remind him what is proper of a sibling – and then implores him not to do something so vile, which would shame her and make him like one of the scoundrels in Israel (2 Sam 13:12-13). Joseph refers to his master, Tamar to the king: each invokes the authority immediately above the sexual violator.

Multiple verbal echoes establish a clear connection between the stories of Joseph and Tamar. Beauty renders both Joseph and Tamar vulnerable to powerful sexual predators. Beauty also renders both sympathetic. Both are entirely innocent and virtuous. Because Joseph is male and because YHWH is with him, he can escape sexual violation. Both Joseph and Tamar suffer disgrace but receive (at least some) restoration after an elapse of two years.

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[21] The clearest indication for this is that Tamar is identified with reference to her brother Absalom (2 Sam 13:1, 4) to whom she appears to be closest (most likely because they are full, not just half-siblings), as well as with reference to her brother Amnon (2 Sam 13:2) and, though less directly, with reference to her father (2 Sam 13:1, 18). There is no mention of a husband, or betrothed husband-to-be.

Genesis 38 (and the Motif of The Foreign Woman)

Intertextual links exist also between Gen 39 and the preceding chapter[22] where a foreign (that is, Canaanite) woman, also called Tamar,[23] practises deception (by posing as a roadside prostitute) and is successful, going on to bear two sons to Joseph's brother Judah.[24] In Gen 39, meanwhile, a foreign (that is, Egyptian) woman practises deception (posing as a victim of attempted rape) and sex does not take place. Intriguingly, Joseph does go on to marry a daughter of Potiphera, priest of On (41:45). Is this Potiphera the same man as Potiphar? The names are certainly very similar. Is Asenath, his daughter, even a daughter also of Potiphar's wife? The Rabbis speculated about this. Joseph and Asenath, like Tamar, have two sons. In both stories – whether the sexual wiles are ultimately admired (as with Tamar), or maligned (as with Potiphar's wife)[25] – a foreign

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22 Hamilton notes that the word *beged* ('garment') occurs with reference to both Tamar's (38:14, 19) and Joseph's garment (39:12). He notes, too, that a homonym *bagad* is used of marital unfaithfulness (e.g. Jer 3:7-8; Mal 2:14). This could hint, he proposes, at Joseph's temptation to commit adultery – especially if the garment he leaves behind is an undergarment (1995: 465). If the word is designed to create a verbal echo with Gen 38, however, it is unlikely to pertain to an undergarment: in Gen 38 *beged* refers to the garment that identifies Tamar to others as a widow. Joseph's *beged*, analogously, would be a garment that readily identifies him – perhaps a garment worn by household servants.

23 For possible intertextual echoes between Gen 38 & 2 Sam 13 (the two stories of different women called Tamar) see Reis (1998: 60), with whom I disagree (see Stiebert 2016: 187–88 & n.228).

24 McKinlay emphasizes different connecting elements, pointing out that Tamar uses Judah's garment (according to the text a cord and staff, 38:25) to prove her innocence, while Potiphar's wife uses Joseph's garment to attempt to prove his guilt. To me this is a less neat parallel. McKinlay's question concerning the juxtaposition of the two stories, however, is compelling: does Potiphar's wife deconstruct the positive act of Tamar, or does Tamar set up a standard by which Potiphar's wife is harshly judged (1995: 75)? For McKay, too, the two consecutive chapters are connected, with Gen 38 neither intruding on, nor disrupting the story of Joseph. Instead, both are parts of a sequence of women seeking elaborate ways to procure a child. The sequence begins with Sarah, Rachel and Leah and continues with Tamar and Potiphar's wife. Only Potiphar's wife is thwarted. McKay suggests the reason for this is ideological: because like (also Egyptian) Hagar, any child by her could never be deemed legitimate (1999).

25 Tamar is declared righteous (38:26) and her daring scheme is rewarded with twin boys (38:27). She is remembered and praised in later writings (Ruth 4:12). Potiphar's wife is unsuccessful in her scheme to lie with Joseph. If she does have a child (Asenath?) we are not told so explicitly. She fades completely from the story, never to be mentioned

woman is sexual, as well as suggestive of more than a hint of danger and of much deception.

The trope of the dangerous foreign woman is evident in many parts of the Bible, notably in Proverbs, where the seductive adulteress is depicted as 'strange' *(zārâ)* and 'foreign' (from *n-k-r)* (Prov 7:5). True, some chosen men of the Hebrew Bible do have foreign wives: hence, there is Moses' Midianite wife Zipporah (Exod 2:21) and his nameless Cushite wife (Num 12:1), as well as Joseph's Egyptian wife Asenath (41:45).[26] Moreover, David has a Moabite great-grandmother, Ruth, who married his Israelite ancestor, Boaz (Ruth 4:13, 22). But the dominant ideology is that foreign women are beguiling and dangerous and should be avoided. There are plenty of memorable examples to confirm this: Samson is defeated in part by his attraction to Philistine women (Judg 14 and 16), most famous among these Delilah; and wise King Solomon is brought low by his many foreign wives of whom it is said that they turned his heart after other gods (1 Kgs 11:1-10; cf. Neh 13:26). This is the age-old trope 'blame the woman!', familiar since Adam accused God with the words 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate' (3:12, NRSV).[27] Very often a woman blamed for something happens to be foreign. The 'foreign woman' is something of a double whammy: dubious on account of gendered and ethnic prejudices. Notorious examples are the Moabite women who seduce the men of Israel at Shittim, inviting them to worship their gods (Num 25), Phoenician Jezebel, a veritable byword of evil women, who is blamed for turning Ahab to the worship of Baal and Asherah (1 Kgs 16:31), and also the foreign wives who fan the wrath of Ezra, because they 'pollute' the holy seed (Ezra 9:1-2).

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again. If Joseph's wife Asenath is Potiphar's wife's daughter, this would be an ironic twist, 'rubbing in' Potiphar's wife's failure.

26 Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph and Asenath, moreover, are two of the twelve tribal heads of Israel. There are, indeed, two ways of attaining the number of twelve tribes: one counts all of Jacob's twelve sons (including Levi and Joseph), while the other excludes Levi (whose descendants receive no tribal lands) and counts Joseph's two sons with Asenath instead of Joseph.

27 There is a hint of reminiscence of these accusatory words also in Potiphar's wife's articulation to her husband, 'The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us...' (39:17, NRSV).

To be clear: Potiphar's wife is not the only sexually forward woman in Genesis and not *all* sexually forward women incite outrage or disgust. There are Lot's two daughters who ply their father with wine in order to conceive offspring (19:30-38); there is Leah who tells Jacob that she has acquired conjugal rights in return for her son's mandrakes (30:16); and there is the widowed Tamar who devises a daring plan to seduce her father-in-law to become pregnant with sons (Gen 38). Outside of Genesis we also have Ruth, who, adorned and anointed, positions herself, by night, in a private corner by the side of a possibly drunken Boaz, whose feet (or loins)[28] she uncovers (Ruth 3:3-8) – which is certainly suggestive of sexual possibility. Again, this plan transpires in marriage and the birth of a son, Obed.

Athalya Brenner (1985) points out that female sexual assertiveness in the service of producing a male heir for Israel is – in terms of the Bible's ideology – acceptable. Ideally – though there is some leeway in desperate circumstances[29] – this male should be a legitimate heir. This exonerates all of Leah, Tamar, Ruth and even Lot's daughters.[30] When the purpose is *not* the conception of a male Israelite, however, then female sexual

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28 The Hebrew word for 'feet' *(raglayim*, a dual form) can be a euphemism for genitals. Hence, 'hair of the feet' (Isa 7:20) probably pertains to pubic hair. Also, when David urges Uriah to go and wash his 'feet' (2 Sam 11:8), he is encouraging him to have sex with his wife (i.e. to ejaculate, in a bid to cover up David's adultery with and impregnation of Bathsheba). It is ambiguous whether Ruth uncovers Boaz's feet or loins.

29 Tamar should rightfully have been given to her deceased husband's brother Shelah in order to conceive a legitimate son. When Judah fails to arrange this, Tamar seduces him instead. Judah is not Tamar's legitimate sexual partner and does not lie with her again following the conception of Perez and Zerah (38:26). The sons are, however, regarded as rightful heirs to Judah's line (Ruth 4:12). Lot's daughters' scheme, which involves deception of their father by getting him drunk, can only be excused by their belief that there is no other man with whom to conceive offspring (19:31). The names of the sons, Moab ('from the father') and Ben-Ammi ('son of my people') hardly hide their incestuous origins, possibly suggesting that the daughters are proud of the lengths they were prepared to go to to have offspring.

30 The story of Lot's daughters can be (and has been) read in a variety of ways. On the one hand, the narrator expresses no explicit criticism of Lot's two daughters. Their risky plan succeeds and each gives birth to a son. This could be interpreted as divine reward for resourcefulness in difficult circumstances. On the other hand, there may be implicit criticism of the daughters in that their sons are the ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites, traditional enemies of Israel. I discuss the wide variety of interpretations of this story elsewhere (Stiebert 2016: 156–65).

assertiveness is associated with lasciviousness and rejected – as in the case of both the adulteress in Proverbs and Potiphar's wife. Moreover, to repeat a point just highlighted, sexual forwardness – whether of the approved procreative variety or not – is associated particularly with foreign women: Canaanite Tamar, the women of Moab, Ruth the Moabite, the Egyptian wife of Potiphar.

Race, Ethnicity and Africans in the Hebrew Bible

The distinction between 'race' and 'ethnicity'[31] is often blurred but relates to biological versus sociological factors.[32] Accordingly, 'race' refers to physical and genetically determined characteristics, including colouration of skin, hair and eyes, while 'ethnicity' refers to cultural factors, which include nationality, regional and religious customs, and language. 'Black', 'white', 'yellow' and 'brown' constitute racial categories. Race, therefore, is ultimately determined by how one looks, while ethnicity is determined based on the social and cultural groups to which one belongs.[33] A person can have more than one ethnicity but just one race, which may be 'mixed race'. Racial categories can be very imprecise and

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31 For a full discussion see Kivisto & Croll (2011).

32 Comparable with this in some ways is the distinction between biological sex (e.g. male, female, intersex) and socially constructed gender (e.g. masculine, feminine, gender fluid). Whereas gender but not sex has long been interpreted as highly variable, this has also come to be challenged, with the assertion that sex, too, is both socially constructed and spectral. Both sex and gender are increasingly becoming understood in less and less binary ways, including in biblical studies (Guest et al 2006; Hornsby & Stone 2011; Guest 2012). Race and ethnicity are becoming deconstructed in comparable ways, in that the essentialism of race in particular and the political, particularly colonialist, relationships with both concepts are being questioned and challenged (Kivisto & Croll 2011: 4–5) though not as palpably as yet in the context of biblical studies.

33 In practice there is frequent overlapping and blurring. Islamophobia may be an example of prejudice based on ethnicity, because Islam is a religion and has adherents all over the world and with markedly different appearances. But Islamophobia is often aimed particularly at persons of colour, including, sometimes, at persons who are not actually Muslim but who are perceived to 'look like Muslims' on account of being 'brown', or 'looking Pakistani', or wearing clothing identified (rightly or wrongly) as 'typically Muslim'. Technically, anti-Semitism is racism targeted at Jews (irrespective of their religious beliefs or practices), whereas anti-Judaism is ethnically motivated hatred of followers of the religion of Judaism. In practice, the two are difficult to separate. As has been pointed out, too, the Jewish people are difficult to classify as 'a race'. Both anti-Semitism (e.g. Patte 1988) and anti-Judaism (e.g. Levine 2007) have been identified in the New Testament.

persons designated 'black' may have a wide spectrum of colouration that might intersect with the colouration of persons designated 'brown' or even 'white', because other markers (e.g. of bone structure, hair texture and facial features) are also factored into assigning race.[34]

'German' or 'South African' are ethnic taxonomies and, while some may be widely (even reflexively) associated with racial categories (e.g. 'German' with 'white') these are nevertheless distinct from racial categories. 'African' is often applied to designate 'black' races. Among South Africans, however, there is some vocal resistance to this, on the grounds of ethnicity, with white South Africans also asserting status and identity as Africans (e.g. West 2018, *passim)*. South Africa, of course, has a history of institutionalized racism in the form of Apartheid policy, which categorized persons into 'black', 'white' and 'coloured'. Those who would be designated 'white' South Africans on the basis of this, are also claiming status as Africans, arguing that their identity is formed in crucial ways by their location. Hence, some resist being called 'European', because their association is with a location on the continent of Africa not Europe, regardless of where their ancestors may have come from. Similarly, there are different preferences concerning the self-designations 'Black American', 'African American' or 'Afro-American', with some emphasizing American and others dual ethnicity and/or race.

With regard to race, ethnicity and Africa in the Bible, this complex and important topic has been widely and deeply discussed. Critical race theory, with focus both on the Bible and on the dynamics between text and interpretive context, has emerged both in African settings (e.g. Mosala 1989; Adamo 2006) and among African American scholars in the USA (e.g. Wimbush 2001; Smith 2017). This includes also prominent womanist voices, again both from African (e.g. Oduyoye 1986; Dube 2000) and US (e.g. Weems 1988; Smith 2018) settings.[35]

It is certainly the case that African locations and African people 'played [both] a major [and] minor role in Israel's destiny' (Adamo 2001:3), even

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34 An extreme example is an albino offspring of black parents who has white skin but is nevertheless categorized 'black'.

35 For a single-volume work reviewing the presence of Africa and Africans in the Hebrew Bible, see Adamo (2001). Additionally, there are multiple collections providing ample evidence for the breadth and variety of African perspectives in biblical scholarship (e.g. West & Dube 2000; Page 2009), as well as Holter's excellent overview spanning several decades (2002).

if academic interpretation frequently plays this down, thereby effecting ' de-Africanization of the Bible' (Adamo 2001:1). In terms of race versus ethnicity, there are occasional suggestions in the Hebrew Bible that there is some awareness of people from Cush[36] looking distinctive. Hence, there is reference to the Cushite's distinguishing skin (Jer 13:23) and to a people tall and smooth (Isa 18:2, 7). There is no strong indication beyond such categorization, that either skin colouration, or other characteristics pertaining to 'race', has an attendant hierarchy, with some (cf. 'white' in the Apartheid hierarchy) being favoured, or privileged, or more empowered than others (cf. 'black' in the Apartheid hierarchy).[37] While some colouration appears to be admired (e.g. David's 'ruddy' look, which could pertain to a reddish or bronzed skin tone, 1 Sam 16:12), there is also indication that 'white' and 'black' in their biblical usage depart from the racist associations familiar in much of Western-centric history (see Edwards 2018).[38] Not only is there very little preoccupation with skin colour, but 'black' is associated with beauty (Song 1:5) and 'white' with skin disease (Num 12:10).

There is much more evidence of identifying and of differentiating between persons on account of ethnic markers – such as association with a region, language, or worship of a deity other than or alongside YHWH. And here we do see evidence of hierarchy. When the Ephraimites are targeted for destruction, they are identified on account of their pronunciation of the word 'Shibboleth' (Judg 13:5-6). Presumably, the Ephraimites could not be identified on account of just their physical features. There are also very many ethnic references in the Hebrew Bible and sometimes these pertain to groups of persons who are to be kept apart from the people of Israel. Ezra 9:1, for example, lists Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amo-

36 Cush is translated variously in the Hebrew Bible, including as 'Ethiopia' or 'Nubia'. Holter discusses the complexity of translating geographical terms such as this one (1997). I am leaving the term untranslated and transliterated here.

37 Kivisto & Croll also mention that with such racialized categorization the hierarchy also determines 'hypodescent', i.e. that mixed race aligns with the status assigned to the subordinate category (2011: 2). The opposite (i.e. assignment to the dominant category) would be 'hyperdescent'. Hyperdescent appears to have occurred when Joseph's sons by Egyptian Asenath become ancestors of Israel's tribes (see note 25, above).

38 It is certainly the case that enslavement of 'Africans' (or, descendants of Ham) was derived from and justified using the biblical text (Goldenberg 2003). On race, the New Testament and the anachronism of 'race', see Ehrensperger (2013).

rites, lamenting that intermarrying with women from these peoples has caused inappropriate mixing of the holy seed (v.2). Nehemiah adds that this has also transpired in offspring sometimes not speaking 'the language of Judah, but ... the language of various peoples', a clear ethnic marker (Neh 13:24).[39]

Much of the Hebrew Bible is specifically about projecting a strategy or ideology that favours and promotes one group – be this the Hebrews, the people of Israel, or the Judeans (there is some variety in this, depending on assumed historical backdrop and circumstance). I am in agreement with Cain Hope Felder in terms of how this operates and quote in full his words, pertaining particularly to Gen 10, which details the families of Noah's sons, according to genealogies and nations, and their geographical spread:

> Rather than any objective historical account of genealogies, the Table of Nations ... presents us with a theologically motivated catalogue of people. The Table not only ends with the descendants of Shem but does so in a way consciously stylised to accentuate the importance of the descendants of Shem among the peoples of the earth. About this, the author of the genealogy in 1 Chron 1:17-34 is most explicit inasmuch as of all the descendants of the sons of Noah those descended from Shem receive the most elaborate attention ... . In this long progression, the theological presuppositions of a particular ethnic group displace any concern for objective historiography and ethnography. The descendants of Noah apart from those of Shem are increasingly insignificant and gain access to the text only as they serve as foils to demonstrate the priority of the Israelites. The subtle process being described may consequently be called 'sacralisation' because it represents an attempt on the part of succeeding generations of one ethnic group to construe salvation history in terms distinctly favourable to it as opposed to others. Here, ethnic particularity evolves with a certain divine vindication and inevitably the dangers of rank racism lie just beneath the surface (Felder 2009).

In Gen 39, too, this dominant ideological thrust is in evidence. The opposition between, on the one hand, Egyptian Potiphar (39:1, 2, 5) and

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39 The story of the Tower of Babel (11:1-9), which tells of how one shared language became many, often mutually unintelligible, languages, is usually read at face value, as a story of punishment. For those who value diversity and consider the multiplicity of human cultures a gift, such an interpretation can be problematic. For a compelling alternative reading see Pyper (2018).

Potiphar's wife[40] and, on the other, Hebrew Joseph (39:14, 17), who is the recipient of YHWH's favour (signaling special status and election) drives home the point that this is another story illustrating the superiority of YHWH and – by implication – his people over other people and – by implication – their deities. This is in line with the 'we-are-better-than-you-and-our-God-is-better-than-your-God' stories. The antics of Moses and Aaron in the court of Pharaoh are another example (e.g. Exod 7), as are Samson's call-out to YHWH and his victory over the Philistines during celebrations of Dagon (Judg 16), the victories of YHWH, the ark and Samuel over the Philistines (1 Sam 6–7) and Elijah's show-down with the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18). In all of these, a Hebrew agent of YHWH (Joseph, Moses, Samson, Samuel, Elijah) triumphs over foreign persons (Egyptians, Philistines, Phoenicians). These foreigners, complete with their deities (though no Egyptian deities are mentioned in Gen 39), are inferior, even caricature-like. Given the ethnic particularity and attendant divine vindication identified by Felder, this does not work out well for the (Egyptian) Africans in this story, particularly for Potiphar 's wife, who is maligned on account of being a devious woman *and* a foreigner, and as such tainted by stereotypes of foreign women.[41] As will be discussed below, even a liberationist reading (Adamo 2013) cannot erase the negative subtext ascribed to Egyptians on account of their ethnicity.

Readings in Defense of Potiphar's Wife

Aside: Is Potiphar a Eunuch?

> Potiphar, who acquires Joseph, is twice called a *sārîs* of Pharaoh (37:36; 39:1). This is amplified with two additional descriptions for him: first, the construct-absolute *śar hattabbāchîm,* 'the high officer of guards' (cf. 37:36;

[40] The Egyptian identity of Potiphar's wife is implicit but not stated explicitly. Her referring to Joseph as a Hebrew man (39:14) and Hebrew slave, or servant (39:17) clearly demarcates him from her own and her husband's ethnic identity.

[41] See note 4, above. Whereas Joseph is, like Hagar, a slave, he is, unlike her, male and Hebrew. Whereas Potiphar's wife is depicted as exploitative and abusive, the exploitation and abuse of Sarai/Sarah and also Abram/Abraham (while present in the narrative of Gen 16 & 21) are very much played down in terms of how the story is generally interpreted. This is due in part to the clues given as to ethnicity and being bearer of promise.

39:1) and secondly, the gentilic *mitsrî,* 'Egyptian' (39:1). The designation *śar,* variously translated 'captain, chief, prince' or similar, alongside Potiphar's role of working directly to Pharaoh, indicates that he is of very high rank. Potiphar is also repeatedly referred to as Joseph's *'ādōn* (39:2, 3, 7, 8, 16, 19, 20) including by Joseph himself (39:8) and this is a term indicative of power and usually translated 'master'. Potiphar's status as *'ādōn*, moreover, is contrasted with Joseph's status as *'ebed* (39:17, 19) – that is, 'servant' or 'slave'. It is not at all surprising that Potiphar is Egyptian – the designation might even seem superfluous – although it is twice more repeated (v.2, 5) and, on top of that, it is twice more stated that events are taking place in Egypt (37:36; 39:1). The emphasis, consequently, as already stated above, is likely to be deliberate – possibly, to contrast with Joseph's *Hebrew* ethnicity, which goes on to be mentioned twice as the story progresses (v.14, 17).

The designation *sārîs* has piqued interpreters' interest – not least, the interest of those interpreters who seek to explain, justify and even defend Potiphar's wife's actions. As with other Biblical Hebrew vocabulary, the best way to probe this word's meaning, given that there is no recourse to native speakers, is to look at other occurrences, at cognates and at translations. The term *sārîs* is used again one chapter later, of two of Pharaoh's officials who are in prison with Joseph (40:7). Both are also – like Potiphar – designated *śar:* one is a chief of cupbearers, the other of bakers. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible *sārîs* is also the word used to refer to attendants of women, such as of Queen Jezebel (2 Kgs 9:32), and Queen Esther (Esther 4:4). It also pertains to the official appointed to restore the possessions to the woman whom Elisha has helped (2 Kgs 8:6), as well as to other, seemingly important, royal officials, such as of King David (1 Chron 28:1), of the king of Israel (that is, of the northern kingdom) (1 Kgs 22:9), of the king of Persia (Esther 1:10), of the king of Babylon (2 Kgs 20:18; Isa 39:7; Daniel 1:1-18), possibly the king of Assyria, who has a Rabsaris (literally, 'a chief *sārîs*', cf. also Isa 39:3, with reference to the king of Babylon) (2 Kgs 18:17), and of the king of Judah (2 Kgs 23:11; Jer 34:19), including of Jehoiachin (or Jeconiah) (2 Kgs 24:12; Jer 29:2). A *sārîs* is among those selected for execution by the king of Babylon at Riblah (2 Kgs 25:19) and several of them are captured by Johanan along with soldiers, women and children, after the slaying of Gedaliah (Jer 41:16). A *sārîs* is often associated with non-Israelite royal courts and with foreignness: hence, the *sārîs* in Isa 38:7 is identified as Cushite; *sārîs* is in a parallel construction with *nēkār* ('foreigner') at Isa 56:3; Jezebel is Phoenician, and others are functionaries in Egyptian or Persian or Babylonian or Assyrian courts. But association with foreignness is not consistent, because the role of *sārîs* also exists, according to Hebrew Bible accounts, in the courts of Israel, including in David's and in Jehoiachin's courts.

Sometimes, *sārîs* is translated 'officer', or 'official' or 'palace official' and sometimes it is translated 'eunuch' – not least, because the Hebrew term appears to be a loan word with cognates in both Syriac and Arabic that pertain to someone impotent, or emasculated. It is unclear whether these

special and high officials were actually and always eunuchs, who could be entrusted, for instance, with supervision of royal women on account of their impotence. Whether *sārîs* pertains primarily to a high official, or whether it has the specific meaning of 'eunuch',[42] whether there was a transition in meaning (e.g. from general to specific, or from specific to general) and when such a transition might have occurred, is not clear. There is disagreement among interpreters whether Potiphar was *just* a high official, *or* a high official who was *also* a eunuch. And, quite how 'eunuch' is understood is also significant for interpretation.[43] Potiphar *has a wife* – that much is clear – but it is not clear whether he could have penetrative sex, let alone father children.

Ron Pirson: Joseph in Potiphar's Fertility Scheme

A number of commentators make a case for Potiphar's wife as sexually frustrated and, possibly, as desperate to mother a child. Hence, whereas Hamilton rejects the translation of 'eunuch' *because* Potiphar is married (1995:458), Ron Pirson argues differently, that Joseph is caught in a fertility-scheme contrived by Potiphar in collusion with his wife. In Pir-

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[42] The word 'eunuch', referring to a castrated male, particularly one entrusted with guarding women's living areas, is from the Greek. It combines the Greek words *eunē* ('bed') and *ekhein* ('to hold') and, consequently, means, more literally, 'bedroom guard'. The English word 'chamberlain' also pertains to a servant of the bedchamber and is, similarly, ultimately derived from Latin *camera* and Old Saxon *kamera*, 'vault', via French *chambre,* with the meaning 'bedchamber'. While there is no evidence of castrated male attendants in English contexts, there was clearly some fascination with eunuchs here too. This is most in evidence in William Wycherley's Restoration comedy *The Country Wife* (1675). In this play rake Harry Horner pretends to be a eunuch in order to cuckold upper-class wives, who are readily seduced. The (rather daft) play is based on a much darker 'comedy', *Eunuchus,* by second century BCE Roman playwright Terence (which is apparently based on a yet earlier Greek play by Menander 342/41–290 BCE). In Terence's play Chaerea impersonates a eunuch servant in order to encounter Pamphilia, a slave woman with whom he is infatuated. Chaerea ends up raping her – which is 'resolved' with his feelings of shame and by eventually marrying her. The toxic subtext of this 'comedy' is acutely disturbing. Marriage may be presented as a 'solution' to the rape of an unbetrothed virgin in the Hebrew Bible, too (Deut 22:28-29), but from my own perspective it appears as nothing other than a prolongation and legitimation of sexual violence.

[43] McKay points out that 'eunuch' can refer to a male castrated before puberty, who is sterile and incapable of sexual arousal, or to a male castrated later in life and, while sterile, capable of sexual congress. McKay is correct that whichever we choose may affect our interpretation of Potiphar's relationship with his wife (1999).

son's scheme Potiphar, who is the first to notice Joseph,[44] creates excellent conditions for Joseph to sire a child with his wife – both through his promotion of Joseph and through his apparently frequent absences from the household. Both Pirson and Heather McKay note that Joseph finds favour in Potiphar's sight (39:4). McKay is right to raise this point:

> 'Interestingly, Esther is the only person other than Joseph of whom it is said she "found favour in his sight." As we are quite clear what the phrase means when it is applied to Ahasuerus and Esther, why are we less certain of its meaning for Potiphar and Joseph?'[45]

In other words why do we dismiss the idea that Potiphar, too, is attracted to Joseph? Pirson's argument goes as follows: he notes, first, that it is ' remarkable' that the biblical author 'grants Potiphar's wife so much space to ventilate her grievances', asking, 'why does he do so?' (2004:248). Next, he points out that Potiphar's wife makes the explicit accusation of Joseph's attempted rape *only* to the members of her household, stating that the Hebrew man came to insult (so the NRSV)[46]

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44 Pirson notes further that Joseph's beauty comes into focus *before* Potiphar's wife is mentioned (2004: 251). Bach points out that in a retelling of the story in Testament of Joseph it is Potiphar's wife who sees and rescues Joseph (1993: 334).

45 Esther makes a request in the form of a question, 'if I have found favour in the king's eyes...' (Esther 5:8; cf. very similar, 7:3). It is clear from 2:17 that Esther's beauty has caught the king's eye, so that '[he] loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favour and devotion...' (NRSV). Esther was, apparently, admired 'by all who saw her' (Esther 2:15) and the king's 'love' is probably better understood as attraction or infatuation. It is not impossible that Potiphar was similarly struck or enamoured with Joseph. While not denying homoerotic possibilities, another explanation could be, as Kügler proposes, citing also Dan 1:4 (referring to the handsome men selected for the service of the king of Babylon) and 1 Sam 16:18 (where the good-looking David enters the service of Saul), that rulers did not wish to have anything other than good-looking servants about them (2017: 2). Physical beauty in the Hebrew Bible is admired in both females (such as, Sarah, Rachel, David's daughter Tamar, Abishag, or Esther) and males (Joseph, David, and Absalom) – though more frequently in females. On male beauty, see Kügler (2017), Macwilliam (2009) and Clines (1995). The latter proposes (1995: 212–43) that beauty is a key marker of biblical masculinity.

46 The Hebrew verb here is from the root *ts-ch-q,* which is best known for the etymology of the personal name *Yitschaq,* Isaac (21:3, 6). This name is accounted for by Isaac's father Abraham's surreptitious amusement or disbelieving laughter, on being told his wife Sarah would bear a child in her advanced age (17:17-19). Sarah also laughs (derisively?) and then denies doing so (18:12-15). Occurrences of the verb are confined almost entirely to Genesis (i.e. 11 of a total of 13 occurrences, 17:17, 18:12-15, 19:14,

them, by attempting to lie with her, but that she cried out with a loud voice, so that he fled, leaving his garment behind (39:14-15). In her words to Potiphar, she says, instead, that the Hebrew slave whom he brought into their midst came in to her[47] to insult her but that when she raised her voice and cried out, he left his garment beside her and fled outside. Pirson proposes that, like the preceding chapter, where Tamar devises a clever and daring plot to conceive a child with Judah, this chapter is about a clever scheme to facilitate an offspring – this time, for Potiphar. As Potiphar is a eunuch, Joseph, like other (albeit female)

21:6-9, 26:8 and 39:14 & 17). The verb appears, as a participle, to describe an action of Ishmael's (21:9), of which Sarah disapproves so vehemently that she orders the eviction of Hagar and Ishmael. Ishmael's action is often translated as 'playing ' (NRSV) but literally means 'Isaac-ing': is Ishmael imitating Isaac, or behaving in a manner Sarah considers appropriate only of her own child, as opposed to her slave's son, who is, however, Abraham's first-born and thereby a potential rival? The verb appears again in the third of three occurrences of the wife-swap tale, where a local ruler is told that a patriarch's wife is his sister (see Gen 12, 20 & 26). In Gen 26 it is Isaac who tells Abimelech that Rebekah is his sister. But Abimelech observes Isaac doing something to Rebekah that leads him to conclude that Rebekah is not Isaac's sister but his wife (26:8). Again the verb describing Isaac's action (this time an imperfect) is from the root *ts-ch-q* and this time NRSV translates 'fondling'. The verb, consequently, is variously translated 'to laugh, mock, insult, play, fondle, joke'. Given the occurrence in 39:14 & v.17, where it clearly pertains to unwanted sexual advances, the suggestion has been made by Scholz that Isaac's sexual act with Rebekah is also 'less playful' and rather more 'rape-prone' (2010: 91). Moreover, Ishmael's action towards Isaac could also have been one of sexualized humiliation, which might account for Sarah's seemingly spontaneous and harsh demand for Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion. At 19:14 the verb applies to Lot's sons-in-law who believe Lot to be 'jesting' (NRSV) when he urges them to leave Sodom immediately. In two other occurrences, outside of Genesis, the verb appears to describe reveling (NRSV, *ad loc* Exod 32.6) and entertainment that is designed to humiliate (Judg 16:25). Kalmanofsky discusses another Hebrew verb, *y-n-h* [*sic* – to read, *'-n-h*], sometimes translated 'rape' and also used in the Samson story. She cites Scholz to suggest that this verb, too, is used in a deliberately ambiguous away to suggest that Samson is emasculated through Delilah and the Philistines' attempted rape (vv. 5, 6, & 19). For her Samson being forced to 'play' or 'perform' for the Philistines (vv. 25, 27) further accentuates sexual subtexts (2017: 11, n.9). The nuance of the verb *ts-ch-q* in its various occurrences is tricky. Sometimes, though not always, it incorporates sexual overtones, including sexually threatening ones.

47 Pirson points out that the expression 'to come in to' (39:17) echoes other descriptions of sexual intercourse, e.g. of Judah and Tamar (38:18), Abraham and Hagar (16:4), Jacob and Leah (29:23), Rachel (29:30) and Bilhah (30:4) (2004: 257 & n.32). Most of these instances of sex transpire in conception.

servants before him (namely Hagar and Bilhah) is expected to stand in for someone who is believed to be infertile. Pirson argues that Potiphar, who is first to appreciate Joseph's good looks, the one who purchases him and the one to entrust him with the running of his household (39:4) with virtually no restrictions,[48] is an active participant in the fertility scheme (2004:253, 256). Pirson also draws attention to the differences between the two statements Potiphar's wife makes. Talking to the household members, Joseph is the 'Hebrew *man*'; talking to Potiphar, he is the 'Hebrew *slave*';[49] talking to the household members she accuses Joseph of having come to 'insult *us*'; talking to Potiphar, Joseph has come to 'insult *me*'. The detail about Joseph's attempt to lie with her is included only in the words to the household members. Pirson's argument is that Potiphar's wife – following the failure of her plan to use Joseph for sex and conception – devises a way to save face before her household members: by accusing Joseph of attempted rape and retaining his garment as proof (2004:258-259). According to Pirson, Potiphar was in on the plan, and this is why Potiphar's wife expresses her annoyance at Joseph not 'doing his job' – but she does not accuse Joseph of attempting to lie with her in her words to her husband (2004:259). Potiphar, who had created an excellent setting for Joseph to impregnate his wife, is angry (39:19). Joseph's imprisonment – rather than the death penalty, which, so Pirson, would have been appropriate for attempted adultery – is the punishment. Pirson's interpretation is possible because this biblical story – like many other stories of the Bible – contains gaps

48 According to 39:6 the one matter not in Joseph's charge is Potiphar's food (cf. 43:32, where the notion of Hebrews and Egyptians eating together is designated an abomination to Egyptians). Joseph himself identifies the sole restriction on his life and activities in Potiphar's house to concern sexual access to his master's wife (39:9). Joseph identifies adultery as a great wickedness and sin against God (39:9). Presumably, because food and sex are frequently associated in the Hebrew Bible (notably, in Song of Songs), as is fully expounded by Stone (2005), rabbinical (see Gen. Rabbah 86:6) and modern commentators alike have argued that the two restrictions (pertaining to Potiphar's food and wife) are one and the same. Hamilton adds that at Exod 2:20-21 Jethro's invitation to Moses to eat bread is followed by marriage to one of his daughters, with food and sex (in marriage) again being associated (1995:461).

49 For McKinlay this change accentuates Potiphar's wife's clever use of language. Hence, the word 'slave' (or 'servant') adds also betrayal of his master's trust to the charge of sexual exploitation (1995:74).

and ambiguities that allow for a variety of ways to fill these gaps (McKay 1999).

David T. Adamo: Redeeming Potiphar's Wife for Africa

Alongside Pirson, there are other defenders of Potiphar's wife. For David Adamo, for instance, the end justifies the means. While he does concede that Potiphar's wife's actions constitute 'misbehaviour', even 'a total lie', he points out that the final upshot is blessing (2013). Events lead to redemption; prison leads to an opportunity to interpret dreams and to Joseph's rise in Pharaoh's court; the Hebrews are brought to Egypt and people are saved from famine. Adamo also exonerates Potiphar's wife on the grounds that she 'like any normal human being' has 'great desire for children'. The use of 'normal' (as so often) is problematic: is it *not* normal *not* to want children, for instance? Adamo also excuses Potiphar's wife because she has 'a handsome young man in her house and a misunderstood personal vision' – plus, in both Israelite and Egyptian culture, he asserts, 'a slave girl is automatically sexually available to her master': so, by implication, why should not Joseph be available to his mistress? (2013) Again, this is problematic. Is assault now Joseph's fault, because he is handsome? Is something acceptable just because it is a custom?

Adamo's ultimate agenda becomes clear when he admits to his 'effort to identify the presence of Africa and Africans in the biblical period' (2013). Adamo's contribution in this respect has been a very significant one (cf. Adamo 2001). He is indeed correct that the presence and contribution of Africa and Africans in the Bible has often been played down or ignored, and he is right that pointing out Africa and Africans in the Bible illustrates that Christianity is not a foreign religion but an African religion also. I also agree that contributions of African heritage and identity have been 'denied or unrecognised as a result of outright prejudice and ignorance' (2013). I am less sure, however, of his claim that 'the recognition of the African heritage of Potiphar's wife is not only gratifying but promotes African heritage and identity' (2013). Might Gen 39 not instead promote prejudices *against* Africans and anyone else labeled not-Hebrew and therefore 'foreign' for that matter (cf. Felder *op cit.)*? Such prejudices label anyone 'other' as deficient but especially foreign *women* as sexually uncontrolled, carnal, deceitful, not-of-God, nasty and vengeful. Indeed, othered women, African women, women of colour more generally, have suffered disproportionately from just such prejudice and ste-

reotyping. Hence, such stereotyping has justified the brutal treatment of black slave women in antebellum North America, for example, because they were typecast as bodily, carnal and more animal than human, therewith mitigating and justifying both widespread sexual and corporal abuse (Edwards 2018). While I sympathize with and applaud Adamo's purpose of drawing attention to Africa and Africans in the Hebrew Bible, I do not consider his attempt to liberate and celebrate Potiphar's wife successful. Instead, in line with Felder, I regard the story of Gen 39 to promote damaging prejudices and ethnic hierarchies detrimental to women labeled 'foreign', which includes Egyptian (that is, African) women.

Select Feminist Interpretations of Potiphar's Wife

There are other defenders of Potiphar's wife, notably, a number of feminist interpreters. One is Alice Bach who uses post-biblical texts 'to fill some of the gaps of the biblical story' and thereby 'to free the reader from the patriarchal codes that have controlled traditional readings' (1993:319). As part of her endeavour, Bach gives the name Mut-em-enet to Potiphar's wife, which confers a modicum of individuality. Bach also points out what she considers the injustice and double standard of praising Abigail in the David story (1 Sam 25), while vilifying Mut-em-enet. Both women have obstacle husbands – Nabal and Potiphar – who are in the way of a match with a more desirable man – David or Joseph.[50] But due not least to patriarchal ideology, Abigail's pursuit of David is deemed proper and Mut-em-enet's improper.

Heather McKay also names Potiphar's wife – calling her Rahpitop ('Potiphar' backwards), which, she points out, also happens to be a plausible Egyptian name. McKay also does not depict Rahpitop as evil villain but – rather like Adamo in some ways – as an ordinary woman, no worse, if also no better, than others.[51]

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[50] Before we claim that Potiphar's wife is 'obviously' horrid and Abigail not, it is worth pointing out that Nabal's sudden death is (almost suspiciously) convenient. Halpern (2001: 77) speculates whether Abigail murdered Nabal and considers evidence of such a deed to be only thinly veiled in the text. Abigail was the last to see Nabal alive, he died suddenly in reaction to Abigail's words, and she stood to benefit from his death (being now free to marry David) (1 Sam 25:36-38).

[51] In this highly imaginative analysis, McKay interprets the story through two different lenses: first, that of the dynamics of the management of a small hotel, or similar estab-

Judith McKinlay's feminist, gender-sensitive reading, meanwhile, demonstrates that our interpretation of Gen 39 is affected by other texts we read in and outside of the Bible. As she points out, no biblical text is read in what she calls 'solitary confinement'.[52] Because none of us live in a vacuum, when we pick up a Bible, whether we are conscious of it or not, we read its texts with an awareness that it is 'Scripture' – that is normative to oneself or to others in terms of faith and belief. McKinlay also points out the way the story prejudices us towards Potiphar's wife. She is a non-Hebrew in a text that favours Hebrews as the people of God; she is a woman in a patriarchal world and she sets the obstacle for Joseph, the Hebrew hero, who is singled out by YHWH. Moreover, she endangers two men: if sex had occurred, Potiphar would have been cuckolded, and Joseph would have fallen from God's favour. She is also a woman who abuses her power. Read differently – which we are not encouraged to do by the story – this could also, McKinlay suggests, be a story of a woman 'refusing to be a possession and taking upon herself the role of subject' (1995:73). Like Adamo, McKinlay, argues that Potiphar's wife could be seen as 'an agent of transformation' bringing long-term betterment for Joseph and for Israel (1995:74) – but McKinlay also raises questions that Adamo does not raise. Does not this story, McKinlay asks, 'reinforce certain assumptions and stereotypes' (1995:74)? And further, is not the reader at risk of going along with these? McKinlay does not resolve or answer the second of these questions – but it is one I will return to shortly.

For all these alternative readings – by Pirson, Adamo, Bach, McKay and McKinlay – negative evaluations of Potiphar's wife predominate. And, given the face-value reading of the text, this is legitimate. After all, Potiphar's wife abuses her power, demands sex with the crass command 'lie with me!' and pesters Joseph day in, day out. When Joseph refuses and

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lishment (therewith seeking to approximate the running of Potiphar's large household) and secondly, that of social anthropological explorations of aggression and violence, particularly low-level domestic violence. The effect is of turning the 'pasteboard figures' into psychologically plausible, life-like, three-dimensional figures.

52 McKinlay reads Potiphar's wife in relationship with other biblical women – Sarah, Rachel, Eve, Ruth, the temptress of Proverbs, Susanna – to make connections with and attempt to illuminate Potiphar's wife in a number of ways. In doing so she demonstrates convincingly that any biblical text is never just a story in isolation and also that biblical texts carry ideological subtexts.

escapes her demands, she becomes angry and lies about him, sending Joseph to prison on false charges.

Moving Towards the Present

Potiphar's Wife Imagined

All kinds of things are said or implied about Potiphar's wife in both scholarly interpretations and in the story's reception or afterlives, in retellings or in art – including that she is a beautiful, beguiling woman and a deceitful evil temptress. Some of this is reminiscent of the trope and public understanding of Eve[53] or Delilah (Blyth 2017) – even though Eve is nowhere in Gen 2–3 described as beautiful, or evil, or a temptress and Delilah in Judg 16 is hardly deceitful. Like Eve, Delilah and also Jezebel, Potiphar's wife is, without much more legitimacy, eroticized in art and popular culture.[54] Nothing is said in the text about Potiphar's wife's beauty or desirability. Elsewhere, maybe, adulteresses are temptresses – notably in Proverbs 6–7,[55] where the adulteress who leads men to the chambers of death (Prov 7:27; cf. 5:5), first stalks her victims (Prov 6:26), decked out like a prostitute (Prov 7:10) and then seduces them with her 'smooth tongue' and words (Prov 6:24, 7:5; cf. 7:21 and 5:3) and her enticing eyelashes (Prov 6:25). While Potiphar's wife with her blunt and rather unseductive 'lie with me!' is hardly smooth-tongued – until she concocts the lies that sentence Joseph – she resembles the adulteress of Proverbs in that she chooses her moment when her husband is not at home (Prov 7:19; Gen 39:11) and seizes her victim (Prov 7:13; Gen 39:12). Perhaps she even has Egyptian linen like the adulteress (Prov 7:16) – but eroticism is mostly read into this story.

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53 McKinlay, too, suggests Eve as another 'conversation partner' for Potiphar's wife, explaining that woman characters of the Bible conjure up other woman characters. She asks, whether this might be a 'Genesis-type story of sin avoided, and unsuccessful temptation, with Joseph a second-chance Adam?' (1995: 78).

54 McKay points out that 'what age and beauty we imagine for her' profoundly affects the way we interpret Potiphar's wife (1999).

55 McKinlay also recognizes affinities between Potiphar's wife and the strange woman of Proverbs (1995: 76-78).

Reasons for the Story's Existence and Sustained Popularity

So, why is this story there? Is it, because it is true? Davidson finds the events recounted perfectly plausible, 'a recurring human situation, one version of the eternal triangle theme' (1979:233). Did it happen just as it is written? There is absolutely no independent or extra-biblical proof for this. As with so much in the Hebrew Bible, there is no shred of evidence for the existence of such revered figures as Abraham, Joseph or Moses. Even where David is concerned, with some archaeological inscriptions referring to 'the house of David' – notably the Tel Dan inscription – there is nothing verifying any of the detail of the many vivid biblical stories of David. Moreover, the events of Gen 39 are depicted as occurring in private – with only Potiphar's wife and Joseph present. But the story is attributed to neither and is told by a nameless, omniscient narrator. Indeed, no part of Genesis gives any clue as to its authorship or divine origin. The tradition of including Genesis in the Torah of Moses, or of the Torah of Moses having equivalence with what are now the first five books of the Bible, is much later than anything in Genesis.

So, maybe the story of Gen 39 is just a good story. It appears to be a variant of a story that circulated widely in the ancient and less ancient Near East, as well as beyond: a story about scorned women crying rape when they are rejected. It is true that there are numerous such stories, as is fully explored by Shalom Goldman (1998). Goldman illustrates that the topos of the handsome young man desired by a married woman who tries to seduce him, whose advances are rejected and who, enraged, turns to her husband and accuses the young man of rape, for him to be punished, vindicated and going on to rise through the ranks, is among the oldest recorded ones of folklore. There are Egyptian variants about Bata and Anpu ('The Tale of Two Brothers', e.g. Papyrus D'Orbiney) that predate the story of Joseph and there is the story of Bellerophon in the Iliad (Book VI).[56] Other stories are decidedly later than that of Gen 39, such as the Qur'an version (Sura 12) and the Sefer HaYashar where the woman is called Zuleika. All these stories testify to the popularity and versatility of the topos.

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[56] The hero Bellerophon is desired by a royal woman called Anteia. When Bellerophon rejects her, she accuses him of attempted rape. First her husband and then her father is afraid to kill Bellerophon, because he has been a guest to them. Instead, Bellerophon is sent on an apparently impossible mission – which he, of course, achieves.

Wide circulation cannot affirm historicity. There are many other stories in wide circulation – such as of men slaying dragons and of daughters desiring and seducing their fathers. But we know that dragons – even dinosaurs – have not coexisted with humans. Clinical studies have also shown that daughters do not have erotic desires for or seduce their fathers – except in very rare and bizarre and pathological circumstances (Stiebert 2016:33–44). Instead, some such stories are widespread because they probe illicit fantasies or to work out anxieties.[57] It seems more likely that the topos is prevalent because of men's anxieties of their wives desiring younger more handsome and more virile men (perhaps, because *they* find themselves desiring younger, beautiful men or women!) – and that such anxieties are way more prevalent than wives attempting to seduce young men and then making false rape allegations.

Genesis 39 Today

In antiquity the story of a scorned woman who exerts revenge through a false allegation of rape was compelling and popular. Due to the gaps and ambiguities in Gen 39 there are multiple possibilities of interpretation – as already demonstrated. But how might the story resonate today and how might the gaps and ambiguities be filled now?

My vantage point is the present-day UK. I consider my own context to qualify as a rape culture – that is, a context where sexual violence occurs and sexual violence is widely normalized and sometimes, such as in popular culture, even glamourized.[58] Toxic attitudes that promote rape myths – including the suggestion that women very often lie about being raped – are part of rape culture. Kathleen Daly makes the point that the designation 'rape culture' can be very wide, referring to rape itself, as well as to a continuum of other sexual violence, and also to 'domination and exploitation in a diffuse and metaphorical sense' (cited in Phillips

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57 J. Cheryl Exum (1993) makes such a case for the three Genesis stories where a patriarch passes his wife off as a sister (Gen 12, 20, 26). Again, this is unlikely to have been a commonplace occurrence but, as Exum argues convincingly, the stories do probe men's fears and fantasies of their wives having sex with other men (cf. Scholz 2010: 93).

58 The designation 'rape culture' originated within the feminist movement of the 1970s. For a clear introduction to the concept of 'rape culture', including its manifestations in popular culture, see Phillips (2017: 1–34). For a succinct popular source, see also Walton (2017).

2017:13). The designation, albeit with qualification from context to context,[59] is none the less helpful and observations from my setting are likely to have application for other contemporary rape culture contexts also.

Sexual violence in the Bible has received plenty of scholarly attention (e.g. Trible 1984; Scholz 2010). The designation 'rape culture' has been applied to biblical texts before (e.g. Washington 1997; Kalmanofsky 2017). But rape culture readings of biblical texts, where an interpreter navigates between biblical texts and present-day contexts with a view to exploring the various ways in which rape culture, gender violence and religion intersect, are still new, with a just-published volume offering several examples (Blyth, Colgan and Edwards 2018). This paper offers an attempt to heed the volume editors' call and begin a conversation about Gen 39 in my present context, which is still reeling from the impact of #MeToo. I also hope that it will provide fillips for reflection in other settings, including African settings.

First, the story might tell us that rape in antiquity as now was considered a serious crime.[60] After all, even attempt of rape is punished by imprisonment. Given the wider context of both the Hebrew Bible and my own setting, this claim needs to be adapted. The text confirms, rather, that *adultery* is considered a serious crime – a notion widely supported by Torah, the David story, prophetic metaphor, and Proverbs. What *we* understand as rape, the violation through sexual force of a person's autonomy and integrity through disregard of their consent, is *not* either widely or explicitly condemned in the Hebrew Bible. Indications of this are multiple: the virgin women of Jabesh-gilead and Shiloh are abducted by the men of Benjamin, because this is preferable to the tribe of Benjamin dying out, or to breaking an oath (Judg 21); Bathsheba is 'taken' by David and David is punished for adultery and the murder of Uriah – but not for rape; female captives in war (Deut 21:11) are not asked or wooed:

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59 To give an analogy, the word 'democracy' can apply to classical Athens and modern-day India, while again demanding qualification to account also for marked differences. The term is nevertheless useful for designating multiple social structures.

60 That rape is considered a serious crime even in a rape culture context where arrest and conviction rates for rape are low and sexual violence mainstreamed is not a contradiction. The seriousness of the crime of rape is indicated, for instance, in that the maximum penalty for attempted rape in the UK is imprisonment for life (section 3/1 and 3/2 of the Sexual Offences Act 1985).

following a preparation ritual they are simply taken – that is raped – as part of the loot; female slaves are given to patriarchs to produce children – again, with no mention of consent. In all of these examples the victims are less empowered – because they are physically weaker, or classed lower in social terms.

It strikes me as valid to call the societies reflected in such texts rape cultures. The term, again, refers not only to rape itself, which takes place in all of these texts, but also to rape-supportive attitudes, such as the implication that the mass rape of women in Judg 21 offers a solution to a problem, or that David's later marriage to Bathsheba somehow makes amends. The application of 'rape culture' to biblical texts is not new. Harold C. Washington, uses it to argue that 'sexual assault is viewed as a manly act and women are regarded [in the Hebrew Bible] as intrinsically rapable' (1997: 252). Particularly if one accepts the Bible as a sacred and authoritative text it is important to be mindful of its toxic potential, such as its implications of rape being 'not so bad', particularly when the rape victim is not only a woman but also of lower rank (such as a captive or servant). This is particularly relevant because indications are that those more socially empowered (like Potiphar's wife in Gen 39) continue to be more widely believed than those who are not. Joachim Kügler (2017), among others, thus points out that even though there is a reversal here from the usual pattern, in that it is a *woman* who sexually harasses a *man* (see below), Gen 39 nevertheless demonstrates that sex and power are intimately entwined. The story confirms that sexual abuse is about abuse of power, be this physical or social power.

In England this is borne out by multiple scandals in multiple locations (of which Rotherham[61] and Rochdale[62] are among the most publicized), which all share in common long-term and highly-organized abuse of vulnerable girls and women. Contemporary statistics confirm what the

61 The Rotherham sexual abuse scandal was long-term and large-scale. Much of public attention has focused on ethnicity, because the majority of the abused girls were classified as 'white' and 'British', while the majority of convicted abusers were classified as 'Pakistani' or 'British Asian'. See, 'Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal'. The case has also revealed that the situation is more complex than this and that there also exist/ed organized networks of abusers who were not Pakistani/British Asian and victims who were.

62 The scandal has (finally) received public attention and several sex offenders have been prosecuted ('Rochdale Grooming Scandal' 2018).

Bible, too, imparts: namely, that women are more vulnerable to rape than men and that disadvantaged women are most vulnerable of all. In the Hebrew Bible these disadvantaged women are rendered vulnerable on account of their social class, or ethnicity; in my context, too, Black Minority Ethnic (BME) women and disabled women – that is, women who are especially vulnerable on account of intersectional factors[63] – are disproportionately at risk of sexual violence, as well as less likely to report rape or receive a hearing in court.[64]

Several commentators point out that there is a departure in Gen 39 from the usual gendering and directionality of rape discourses. More commonly male aggressors target females – the thugs of Judges 19 who gang rape the Levite's wife, Amnon who rapes Tamar, David who sees, desires and takes Bathsheba, for instance. Perhaps this reversal accounts for those commentators and artists who have feminized Joseph.[65]

Kügler, for instance, notes, 'Im patriarchalen Symbolsystem bewirkt der sexuelle Übergriff der Herren-Frau eine „Entmännlichung" Josefs und bringt ihn in die als „typisch weiblich" definierte Situation bedrohter sexueller Integrität' (2017).[66] Michael Carden, albeit with reference to Gen 37, goes even further, referring to Joseph as 'a flaming young queen… [a] prettified affront to normative manhood' (2006:53). Notable is that the aggressor – yes, unusually, a woman – is in a position of power over Joseph: she is Joseph's master's wife. While she may not be physically strong enough to overpower Joseph – as Amnon overpowers Tamar – she is like David and Amnon exploiting her social or class power.

In resisting her, Joseph, while socially inferior, is asserting his masculine autonomy: as Kügler puts it, 'Er nimmt sich als Mann das Recht se-

63 For examples of how and with what effect BME women are particularly discriminated against in the USA, as well as on intersectionality and discrimination, see Smith (2018).

64 For support, see the statistical analysis of callers to Rape Crisis UK.

65 Bach proposes that the verbal echo, with the same words of physical beauty applied first to Rebekah and then to Joseph, might serve to feminize the latter (1997: 47 n.13).

66 My translation is as follows: 'In the patriarchal symbolic system the sexual violation enacted by the master-wife effects the "demasculinization" of Joseph and brings him into the "typically feminine" sphere of threatened sexual integrity.'

xueller Selbstbestimmung, das ihm als Sklave eigentlich nicht zusteht' (2017).[67]

Maybe this story highlights the important truth that males, too, can be victims of sexual abuse. Maybe this story demonstrates that women can also be aggressors, perpetrators of gendered violence and abuse. Both are valid. While reliable rape statistics are notoriously difficult to obtain, there is no doubt that boys and men are victims of rape.[68] While reported rapes of females are considerably higher than those of males, there is some evidence to suggest that males also report less often even than females. Recent revelations by former child actors and footballers and from the contexts of churches, children's homes, and sporting clubs (both in England and well beyond), have made clear that males as well as females have been victims of very widespread sexual abuse, again underlining the validity that our context, too, is a rape culture.

By far most often sexual abuse is perpetrated by men. By far most often females are victims not perpetrators of sexual violence. A recent publication by Laura Sjoberg, entitled *Women as Wartime Rapists: Beyond Sensation and Stereotyping* (2016) is at pains to point out how rare sexual abuse by women is – but also that it does exist. Citing examples from Ilse Koch at Buchenwald to women as rape facilitators and rapists during the Rwandan genocide and wars of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Serbia and very recently in the context of ISIS, Sjoberg investigates this relatively rare phenomenon – which is not less dreadful for being rare. She also points out, however, that the victims of these women rapists are also most often *female* – not, as in the Joseph story, male.

So, there is something else (alongside the prejudices pertaining particularly to foreign women) that worries me in my contemporary context about the story of Potiphar's wife. And this brings me back to McKinlay's caution that we as readers need to be vigilant when reading Gen 39. There is no dispute that Potiphar's wife's behaviour is appalling: she is a privileged woman, the wife of a powerful man, who abuses her power over Joseph, a Hebrew slave, by commanding and pestering him for sex, seizing (or perhaps, groping) him and then accusing *him* of attempted rape and sending him to prison. As we have seen, the motif of the re-

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67 My translation is as follows: 'As a man he asserts his right of sexual self-determination, to which his slave status does not actually entitle him.'

68 One source of statistics and support services is Rape Crisis UK.

jected, angry, vengeful and deceitful woman is not uncommon in folklore.

Unfortunately, too, the myth of false rape allegation being widespread persists, even in the absence of any indication that such is actually common. The myth that women regularly accuse men falsely of rape – because they were sexually rejected, because they did not find sex enjoyable, or because they regret sex – is common right up until present times and has been markedly 'in the air' throughout the revelations of the viral #MeToo campaign. The accusation that women are revising the past to jump on a new bandwagon is sadly common – such as the suggestion that actresses were happy to advance their careers through sex with powerful men and then to cry rape when this was expedient.[69] The effect of this is to downplay sexual assault, to downplay the often very powerful role of the men in these cases, and to ignore the much more self-evident fact that women in particular have been harassed and raped over a long expanse of time and with alarming frequency.

Are there examples of women who have falsely accused men of rape? Yes. Do such allegations harm innocently accused men? Absolutely.[70] Not long ago Jemma Beale became a hate figure in the British Press for making multiple false rape accusations, one of which led to the imprisonment of a man whose name was later cleared. In eerie reminiscence of the Joseph story, Mahad Cassim, one of the accused and falsely convicted men was of a minority ethnic group and imprisoned for over two years.[71] The story of Jemma Beale created intense publicity in England and she was a target of the kind of hatefulness and vitriol usually reserved for child killers. Again – there is no dispute about Beale having acted despicably (although there were also some ameliorating circumstances in the case – Jemma Beale is highly likely to be acutely mentally

69 This is the implication of Harvey Weinstein's shrewd lawyer. See 'Benjamin Brafman: "If a woman has sex to help her Hollywood career, that is not rape"' (2018).

70 A moving letter illustrates the profound and lasting damage (Anonymous 2014). There are also support groups for men who have been wrongly accused of sexual violence (e.g. Accused.me.uk).

71 Noam Shazah, another man against whom Beale made charges, which were also subsequently dropped, fled (Metropolitan Police 2017) – again, like Joseph. It is not unlikely that both Cassim and Shazah fled because they did not expect to stand a chance in court – possibly, in part due to explicit or implicit bias on account of ethnicity.

ill)[72] – but the rarity of such cases needs to be kept in mind – especially alongside the great frequency of rape cases that are not reported, not brought before court, or which do not transpire in guilty verdicts even where evidence is quite strong.[73]

Conclusion

The story of Potiphar's wife is a good story, with a clear-cut hero and villain, with elements of tension, titillation, and a happy resolution. Here Joseph's early prospering in Egypt is threatened by Potiphar's wife's interference, which creates a narrative complication. Joseph withstands harassment and ultimately rises to even greater heights while Potiphar's wife fades from the story. The good win out; the bad disappear. Even with a good story, though, it is important to be mindful of its implicit assumptions and of the ideologies it conveys. In the case of Gen 39, these ideologies pertain to prejudices regarding women and ethnicity. Moreover, the story perpetuates a rape myth that has not by any means gone away – namely, that women lie about being raped because they regret having sex with someone, or, as in this story, out of spite or for attention. When this does happen in contemporary times – such as in the case of Jemma Beale – media focus is disproportionate. The effect of this is that the rarity of false rape allegation is downplayed. The much likelier scenario for which there is considerably more evidence, that the majority of rape survivors do not report rape to the police – not least, because of fear of not being believed also receives very little attention.

The Hebrew Bible confirms much else that is still relevant today in terms of sexual violence: that rape is most often perpetrated by men against women, that men can also be victims of sexual abuse, that socially disadvantaged women are more vulnerable to rape than socially empowered women or men, that rape is a crime of abuse of power, that rape is sometimes downplayed and even normalized. Because the Bible remains a book of influence and authority it remains particularly im-

72 As Williams observes, 'no one turns their life into a construct of bogus victimhood for fun' (2017).

73 For one of many articles calling out such discrepancy, see 'False rape allegations are rare – rape is not' (2017). For an independent fact-check, see 'False rape allegations: "serious, but rare"' (2013). According to one source, false rape allegation is pursued with particularly harsh rigour in the UK (Laville 2014).

portant to be alert to its toxic potential – especially in a context where harmful assumptions and ideologies continue to provide fertile ground.

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