

4 Sexual Abuse and Violence in the Hebrew Bible

Terminology, Masculinity, and Intersectionality, Reprised¹

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Sarojini Nadar/Barbara Thiede with
Johanna Stiebert*

Introduction

Scholarship on sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible was already well established by the 1990s. And yet, some critical issues remained controversial. Translation and terminology continued to be a source of debate; because biblical Hebrew does not have an exact lexical equivalent for the term *rape*, multiple scholars argue that those who use the word to describe the Bible's scenes of sexual assault or sexual violence are imposing modern ideas onto ancient texts. Clarifying the terms of engagement was, therefore, a critical piece of the scholarly project, particularly for feminist scholars.

Today's scholars can draw on a rich trifecta of associated fields for their academic inquiry into sexual violence in the Bible: feminist, masculinity, and queer studies. Moreover, intersectional sensibilities have become increasingly prominent, further nuancing investigations.

Sandie Gravett's work on terminology forms a key piece in helping to establish parameters in discussions over terminology. Ken Stone's observation that sexual activity is important to biblical narrators "almost entirely because of *its possible consequences for relationships between men*" (1996: 136) lays the foundations for students of masculinity studies to examine how male characters manipulate female bodies in their contests for power, authority, and control. Sarojini Nadar's work has expanded and developed the intersectional approach that reveals how racism, colonialism, economic violence, and sexual violence intertwine both in biblical texts and in their use by scholars, religious leaders, and politicians.

Sandie Gravett is Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Appalachian State University. Gravett works on issues of biblical interpretation and the teaching and practice of religious

studies. Throughout her career, Gravett has focused on creating spaces for students as well as general readers to investigate and interrogate biblical texts and the violence they depict. Her foundational article, “Reading Rape in the Hebrew Bible: A Consideration of Language” (2004), provides a powerful and detailed analysis of Hebrew terminology of sexual violence and sexual assault.

Gravett’s commitment to making the text accessible to a variety of audiences extends beyond the classroom and her publications; she also accepts over fifty public speaking engagements a year.

Barbara Thiede: Sandie, I was reading your article again. This is work that takes time to unpack concerns in an extremely detailed and careful way. What was it that drew you to this topic to begin with?

Sandie Gravett: [As a graduate student] I recall wanting to explore something that felt relevant and pulled on what I consider to be my strengths—doing a close reading of the text. But I didn’t expect to do anything that was explicitly feminist in my dissertation. In fact, at Duke [University] I had resisted earning a women’s studies certificate in the graduate program because it felt very much like [to do so] might be limiting my professional options. It would pigeonhole me in a way that already being really young and female was going to pigeonhole me. And I will add this piece: I ended up in my appointment at Appalachian State University in my second, third, and fourth years directing the Women’s Studies Program and it *did* pigeonhole me on that campus. My fear ended up being true.

But when I step back from it and think about it, I am certain that my choice of topic had to do with being young and female and navigating through an incredibly traditional field and some pretty conservative institutions. I am a graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. That was where I got an M.Div. I was in the last class to graduate before fundamentalists took over and forced a lot of the faculty to resign. At Duke there were only a handful of women in my PhD program, and it was a deeply conservative institution. SBL [Society of Biblical Literature] was even more overwhelmingly male than it is now. I remember going to conferences and being one of the few—if not the only woman—at a lot of sessions.

I had amazing support from mentors [and] colleagues for my dissertation. But I know now that I was finding

my own academic voice in a way that felt relevant to the issues that concerned me and resonated with who I was.

Barbara Thiede: Can you remember back to what it was like to be part of foundational early efforts on sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible?

Sandie Gravett: My work came into a conversation that was already lively and ongoing. The bibliography of my dissertation [included] Phyllis Tribble, Phyllis Bird, Mary Daly, Nehama Aschkenasy, Renita Weems, Mieke Bal, Cheryl Exum, Carol Newsom, Susan Niditch... I could go on and on and on. While I was working, Julie Galambush published her work on Jerusalem as a wife in Ezekiel. It was amazing what was coming out in the late 80s and early 90s. What I was doing was just a small part of a really strong wave of women writing at that time.

My dissertation was defended in December 1994. The *JSOT* [*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*] piece didn't come until ten years later. A lot of my foot-dragging had to do with the fact that I just didn't want to pick up that writing. It carried such an emotional freight for me. I often tell the story about the morning I sat down after my defense to do the corrections. I understood for the first time what the phrase meant, "to have a weight lifted off your shoulders."

I didn't realize what living with sexual violence and gang rape had done to my psyche. It took ten years in the classroom, working with students, thinking about it, directing the Women's Studies Program, to, first of all, get frustrated that nobody had written all the translational stuff in one place. It was very hard to find something to assign, so I just wanted to write that. But also, my students were reminding me all the time that [my work] was still relevant and important and that I needed to be a part of the conversation.

Barbara Thiede: We've talked before about feeling like you had to modify your language or change your approach in order to be publishing at all or even getting your dissertation through the system. Was that part of the weight that came off your shoulders?

Sandie Gravett: My advisor, Jim Crenshaw, was completely supportive every step of the way. He didn't always agree with me—he still doesn't always agree with me. But he kept pushing me to be better. It was, "it's your work, you go for it and let's push it to the limits." Some of the tension

was around my willingness to veer from a way of doing biblical scholarship that privileged the writers of the biblical text and to conjecture about their world above everything else.

That tension was consistent throughout my graduate school experience, on my committee, and in sessions where I was presenting my work formally. I think what it was really cloaking was arguments about biblical scholarship itself and the relationship between biblical scholarship and religious institutions and theology, at least in my setting. But it was also about any approaches to the text that hinted at the political. It was before academic biblical scholars had their own conversation about just how political scholarship is and what voices it privileges and what this idea that we were being “neutral” was *really* all about.

We knew we were not being neutral when we read the text, but the field hadn’t grappled with the issues in its own history, its own construction of whose voices were privileged and why. My dissertation was fighting that battle, even though I really didn’t understand [what] battle it was fighting.

Barbara Thiede: You looked at “normal words,” words that we didn’t see as being charged with potential in texts of violence. All these “little” words—“take” and “lie”—words like *lakah* (לקח) and *shachav* (שכב) might be read differently now. Have biblical scholars internalized the need to be attentive to the way those “normal” words work in texts of sexual violence?

Sandie Gravett: I was writing in an interesting time. Precision of terminology was really important—and I still think it is. I’m a traditionally trained biblical scholar, and so that meticulous kind of effort is still crucial [to me]. But what helped open it up was the time period. We had this changing understanding of sexual violence coming to the fore.

In the mid-1980s and forward we started talking about things like date rape—maybe these encounters that lots of women were having in their social lives weren’t okay. It was, “I’m not sure that sex was what I wanted... we had gone three steps further than I wanted to go, but I couldn’t say no at that point.”

In North Carolina when I was writing, they were in the process of outlawing marital rape. It happened in 1993—we were the last state to do it. All these people

that were going, “but wait a minute... you could rape your *wife*? You could be charged with that?” It was this big revelatory moment. A lot of assumptions about what constituted rape legally [were] entering into national consciousness.

This is, of course, the issue where a lot of the biblical material is stuck: what do the “laws” say? We are also dealing with how a term like *rape* might function *outside* of a legal context, how it would encapsulate a person’s experience of sexual violence. Can I use the word *rape* even when it doesn’t rise to the legal definition of the word *rape*?

When we think about common words and how we use them, I think scholars are far more attentive to that now. Are they on top of it all the time? No. I still see too many introductory textbooks that don’t even think about this issue. I see students who’ve gone through foundational courses and have never been introduced to these kinds of thoughts. I think there’s still an awful long way to go even though the conversation in scholarship may have gotten better.

Scholars spend a lot of time talking to each other but don’t do a very good job of putting out material that’s publicly accessible. That market has been sucked up by a lot of happy religious stuff. What you get on a Google hit is very much controlled by evangelical religious folks.

I go to theological communities all the time. I gave fifty external talks last year. I do a lot of work with adults and especially older adults. They receive this work really well. They are very excited about it, and they almost have the same reaction our introductory students have. “Why have I never been told this? Why has this never been accessible to me? What can I read that I will understand?”

Johanna Stiebert: When you talk to people, do you do take them on a journey of the vocabulary?

Sandie Gravett: Yes! I just finished up a biblical study with an Episcopalian group on the Bible and slavery. We did feminist work; we did womanist work; we did this really amazing unit on queer theology. They were so excited, and they asked, “why can’t we find this?”

Johanna Stiebert: There is real underestimating of people in [the] public. Some academics want to be territorial about the text and about the space. It’s a real shame.

Sandie Gravett: It helps to think about what it is to read in translation and how interpreters often shape their view of what the text actually says.

Johanna Stiebert: Absolutely! When I have brought Hebrew into discussion of the text, most of the people I talk to feel empowered by it; similarly, when I say that we don't really know exactly what a word or text means. We often underestimate non-academics.

Barbara Thiede: I also have the experience that Sandie is describing—people saying, “How is it that I was basically given an [interpretation] that cleaned up the text so I don't have to be troubled? You are giving me a text that looks radically different than the one I thought I knew!”

You've written about the need for resistance. Has the need to adopt this role changed in the last twenty years or since you wrote your dissertation?

Sandie Gravett: No. That passage in my work is followed by a quote from Esther Fuchs. What she says is [also] my contention. The Bible does not merely project a male consciousness; it promotes a male supremacist social and cognitive system. I reflect on how most biblical critics know this situation to be true but often don't let it interfere with how they do their work. There is still a real need for voices that do that political resistance.

Right after I was finished with [my dissertation] was the Bosnian war and the use of rape as a weapon of war. Rwandan genocide and rape were happening. We moved from Bill Clinton to MeToo. Those are all questions that are in the public consciousness and with readers. One of the things that you are seeing after MeToo in religious communities [are] frustrated people saying, “we need to be interrogating this text too.”

The very structures of the systems have been problematic. How do we find a way to resist that that feels okay and yet still have some place in institutional structures? I don't think we've figured that out yet.

Barbara Thiede: Is the need to read these texts with resistance and to think about male structures as important as it was when you wrote your dissertation?

Sandie Gravett: It is *more* important. Laws have changed. Conversations are different. But these battles are still relevant. We are not addressing the structures very well. I have male colleagues with whom I share teaching biblical studies as well as other religious studies classes. The

level of privilege that they enjoy—even at earlier points in their career, in comparison to me in a very senior moment in my career—is still breathtaking. I am almost retired, and I still don't have the level of privilege that some of them do.

Johanna Stiebert: When we started our conversation and you spoke about not wanting to be pigeonholed as a feminist, that resonated with me. You somehow internalize and receive the message that that made you one particular kind of scholar to the exclusion of other kinds of scholarship. That's still there and that's there for queer scholars now.

Sandie Gravett: I don't think that we've started to deal with the ripple effects you are talking about. I'm someone who never married, never had children, someone who now cares full-time for two ninety-plus year-old parents who are still living at home. I don't get to rely on a partner who picks up the slack when I can't do it.

It's going to be even more of a problem because the field of biblical studies is contracting. It's almost inevitable that religious studies programs are going to start shutting down more and more at regional universities like ours or at smaller places. The field is going to exist in America at very elite institutions or in religious institutions, which is going to complicate this conversation yet again.

Johanna Stiebert: That is exactly what's happening here, sadly, and at a time when there is more acknowledgment than ever that there are many conversations that cannot be held without some knowledge of religious dynamics. Biblical studies is moving into a few locations—Oxbridge, Edinburgh...—and being wiped out everywhere else with the exception of a few theological colleges, which are almost all Christian.

Sandie Gravett: So, to me the issue is: where does the public work happen? Is there a place for public scholarship that's not attached to a university? I've often wondered if I would make it to my retirement before my program shuttered. It's going to be close.

I was really taken about your question about scholars suffering from exhaustion on issues of sexual violence in the texts and the feeling that there's nothing left to say. I wondered: "where the hell are you? Look at October 7. How is this still not relevant? Look at what's happening with women's bodies in this country and the way that

women's bodies are being talked about. How is this work not relevant?"

If this stays in the scholarly community alone and is not made part of the public discourse, you can't make change. For goodness' sake, we are getting ready to outlaw IVF [in-vitro fertilization] in places because we are so anxious to control what women do with their reproductive capacity.

These kinds of thinking are also a form of sexual violence and a form of control... One of the things that is also under attack is scholarship from a vantage point. You can't teach race anymore because that's not "objective."

We're increasingly finding ourselves in the position where the kind of work that we do is under attack. And because of the field contracting, it is going to be harder to hire us and harder for people to publish the kinds of things we would want to publish. The publication barriers in my time were different, more about delicacy. In my *JSOT* article I fought for the f-word. I also fought for the c-word in my dissertation and lost.

My committee asked me, "why are you so committed to this offensive word?" And I said, "I think the text is offensive and there is nothing that conveys that level of offense other than this word." If you've got to be shocked by it, be shocked by it. Let's be uncomfortable with it. Those were the battles I fought.

Now, you can say anything, but we're fighting the battle that you will never get a job if you say that. You'll never get promoted if you say that.

Barbara Thiede:

Sandie, is there anything you would have done differently looking back?

Sandie Gravett:

Young scholars now are so pushed to publish. I wrote this dissertation in a time only certain humanities scholars could enjoy [nowadays]. I had years to study and think about it. Then I took years before I picked it up again and wrote about it. How many of us can say we spend that kind of time thinking about an issue, pondering it, working with the language, and honing in on it? That's why I think I like it. It was well thought out.

We don't have that kind of space now. You've got to get two peer-reviewed projects every three years, while you're teaching, while you're speaking, while you are living your life, and while you're doing all these other things. You don't get that sort of time to write thoughtful pieces.

I would much rather be focused with a group of people thinking about the same issues pushing each other more slowly. If I were writing on this topic again and with, for example, the two of you to push and think and ponder—that might produce something interesting.

And now we're in a time when you have to have so many publications to clear the tenure hurdle and that, to me, is antithetical to what *really good* scholarly reflection should be about.

The one great experience of my time in this field has been just terrific colleagues all along the way who are going through many of these things at different places and in different ways. I just want to say I appreciate you asking these questions and writing this book and thinking of me when you did it. That means the world to me.

Barbara Thiede: The honor is ours, and we want to thank you for taking the time to speak with us. We are incredibly grateful.

Sandie Gravett: Thank you again for this time. It's been terrific.

Ken Stone is Professor of Bible, Culture, and Hermeneutics at Chicago Theological Seminary and winner of a Lambda Literary Award. His first book, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* (1996), explores the way male sexual practice undergirds struggles for honor and power. Stone has gone on to produce a rich corpus of work that contends with the relationships between biblical hermeneutics and matters of gender and sexuality. His books and articles often directly address sexualized violence in biblical texts.

Stone's work has been foundational in three fields of biblical study: masculinity studies, Queer studies, and animal studies; and formative for the academic study of gendered violence in the Hebrew Bible and the rape cultures it supports. Stone himself argues that students of the Bible must both acknowledge the diversity of its writings and their historical contexts, while ensuring that they reflect critically on the process of interpreting and teaching them. The latter, he believes, is essential for transforming our contemporary world toward greater justice and mercy.

Barbara Thiede: Let's get started! What drew you to all topics around honor and the performance of masculinity in the 1990s, and how compelling do these topics remain for you?

Ken Stone: I was a PhD student at Vanderbilt in the early 1990s. At the time there was a big emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches to biblical interpretation. My advisor, Douglas Knight, was especially interested in the use of the social sciences in Hebrew Bible scholarship. That intrigued me as well, because I had come to my

PhD program with some prior education in cultural anthropology.

Carol Meyers' book *Discovering Eve* had just come out. It made some use of the social sciences, including anthropology, and applied them to matters of sex and gender so that these were seen not just as natural matters but products of culture. Of course, she was focused on reconstructing the lives of women. But I wondered what it would mean to turn the anthropological lens back onto men and to denaturalize male sexuality and masculinity.

I was also already openly gay. I didn't enter PhD studies with the intention of studying that in any way in relation to the Bible, but in retrospect I do think that it drove my interest in denaturalizing male sexuality and masculinity.

I found the work of Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead very important. Their idea of sex as a prestige structure preceded my interest in honor and shame. In fact, I think that it was their reference to honor and shame as a prestige structure that got me interested in honor questions. They were already talking about sex and gender as something one had to display. Men in particular had to display it to other men. So, that notion of sex as a prestige structure and its implications for the study of male characters and female characters, male voices, female voices, and so forth captured me first.

It so happened that honor-and-shame was one of the anthropological models that was getting more attention among some biblical scholars, especially New Testament scholars. But it was often being applied, at least I thought so, in a kind of wooden way, and not so much to matters of gender and sexuality. There was a big focus on things like hospitality as a question of honor. Scholars who were using the honor-and-shame paradigm to read the New Testament didn't really want to deal with the sex stuff even though it was part of their anthropological paradigm. They were interested in whether Jesus was acting like an honorable man [i.e. not a masculine, or sexual, man].

I was really interested in the ancient protocols of sex and gender, masculinity. The honor/shame literature gave me a handle on that while allowing me to pursue the question of using the social sciences to read the Bible. A key text for me here though—that isn't very well

known in biblical studies but allowed me to see the honor and shame literature in a new light as something that could be applied to an ancient text—was a book by the late Classics scholar John Winkler, entitled *The Constraints of Desire*. It wasn't focused on the Hebrew Bible, but it was focused on ancient literature. Winkler wrote an explicit dialogue with the schools of thought around honor and shame that involved people like Michael Herzfeld and David Gilmore, [producing] this whole body of literature by people who were working on manhood and what it meant to be "good at being a man," not just "a good man." Also, working with them at the time was Carol Delaney, a feminist anthropologist, who was already doing some work on the Hebrew Bible. All that came together for me as a way to construct my own interpretive lens.

There wasn't really a very large literature at the time on cultural constructions of manhood and masculinity in the Hebrew Bible. There was a growing and already vibrant feminist literature looking at women in the Hebrew Bible that was very important.

I still find the study of honor and the performance of masculinity important—especially in the sexual realm. It shapes how I read much of the Hebrew Bible, and it definitely shapes how I teach it.

Biblical scholars have put the performance of masculinity on the table, but I don't think very much has been done to communicate it beyond biblical scholars. I think there's a lot more work to be done in the realm of public communication.

Barbara Thiede:

Are there key trends or developments that have been fundamental to your understanding of sexuality, gender, or other kinds of gender performance and expression since the publication of *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*?

Ken Stone:

There's a lot more work out there that has been done related to sexuality—not only the work both of you have done on rape culture but also the kind that Cynthia Chapman has done on Assyrian masculinity and warfare. I think that the kinds of questions I was asking could be answered in a more well-rounded way now because of the work that people like Cynthia have done.

A shift in my thinking had to do with my taking more intentionally into account what is now this huge

literature in LGBT studies and Queer theory. That was already in the background of my work when I wrote *Sex, Honor, and Power*. But I did go [into that] more explicitly in my subsequent work.

One of many things I appreciate about LGBT studies and Queer theory is that it gives me an explicitly critical perspective on the Bible's approaches to sexuality and gender. In that respect, I would not compare it to the work using anthropology. I would compare it to feminist approaches and your own rape culture framework. Barbara, you talk about rape culture and using that terminology as a judgment call, as a term of resistance. Resistance is also emphasized in Queer studies, and it seems to me that we need those critical points of resistance, given the ongoing influence of Bible and the way parts of it are appealed to by those who want to defend conservative positions.

Also, under the influence of LGBTQ studies, I would want to emphasize—more than I did at the time—the kind of heterogeneity and instability that are inherent in phenomena associated with sex and gender.

I would have to say that my own work on sexuality has been more shaped by Queer studies than by the work that I was influenced by when I wrote *Sex, Honor, and Power*.

Barbara Thiede: I sent you some quotes from *Sex, Honor, and Power*. Is there anything you would change about these three quotes?²

Ken Stone: I would still make those statements. I might be more cautious about how I put them. Thanks to Queer studies, I'm a little more attentive to the instability of these structures and power relations than I was when I wrote *Sex, Honor, and Power*. Reading the first two quotes out of context, they sound kind of rigid.

I was curious enough to go back to see the context. I was trying to make a point about the way sexual activity is represented in the narrative text. I think they're still accurate representations of what I see. I would just want to be clearer about the fact that I'm aware that there are other texts and perspectives in the Bible. The statements I made aren't necessarily equally applicable to all other texts and perspectives in the Bible.

I wouldn't say they're entirely irrelevant even to a text like Song of Songs. The woman speaker's brothers

were concerned about her sexuality, and she apparently gets beaten for being out and about in the city. Both of those moments could easily be read as a reflection of the views on sex and power that I talk about in *Sex, Honor, and Power*. But at least the Song of Songs offers us a more critical perspective on those views, right? So, I would tread a little more lightly in terms of how I put it.

On the flip side, there are other biblical texts that I didn't talk about that could be described in ways similar to descriptions I gave for those narrative texts. This is not a novel thing to say, but a lot of prophetic texts involve sexual violence. When I was writing the dissertation that became *Sex, Honor, and Power*, Renita Weems was at Vanderbilt, working on her book about the prophets,³ and we had some cross-fertilization of ideas about how power and honor and manhood influence the shape of those biblical texts. The third quote you mentioned—I don't think I would change a thing in that statement. I still think it's true, and true today also. I don't think it's just a statement about the ancient world but still true for contemporary dynamics.

Speaking of sexual violence, I always think about a scene in [the film] *Thelma and Louise*. There's a scene where neither are actually in the frame, but Brad Pitt is being brought in for questioning. He sees Gina Davis's lousy husband there and he finds out who he is, and when he comes out of the interrogation, Brad Pitt does this whole little thing where [he says], "I like your wife," and he starts doing these body movements that are basically kind of simulated intercourse without Gina Davis being in the frame. It's obvious that he's using his relationship to get at the husband of Gina Davis.

And you know, that's a contemporary piece and everybody immediately knew what was going on there, whether they would admit it or not. Guys knew as much as women watching that, and at that moment, Brad Pitt simulating sexual intercourse with this woman was not about her but about his relationship with this guy, his way of taunting this guy. Those are still very contemporary dynamics.

I see what looks like examples of that sort of thing in popular culture and daily living, hearing what men say to other men when women aren't around, sometimes when women *are* around. They still manipulate

their relationships with women as a way to achieve some kind of goal in their relationships with men—sometimes *violent* relationships with men—but using the bodies of women to do that.

Barbara Thiede: That leads us into this next question. What is your position on the use of terms such as *rape* or *rape culture* in regard to the Hebrew Bible?

Ken Stone: I know that the use of the word *rape* has been controversial among some scholars. I find it hard to find a difficulty with the use of the word *rape* to describe the sexual violence we see in certain biblical texts. I understand the arguments that are being made, but it seems entirely appropriate to me not only with texts that are often referred to as rape stories in popular culture—the story of the Levite’s concubine, Tamar, the daughter of David—but also, for example, the so-called concubines of David, whose story I find to be an even more horrifying story for the reason that there’s a role implicitly played there by God, the character. So, it’s hard for me to know why one would resist using the word *rape* to talk about those types of texts. The argument that there’s no word for *rape* in the Bible doesn’t seem very persuasive to me.

There is certainly a semantic field in the Hebrew Bible that describes what we would call rape—a whole language of humiliation and violence. So, I don’t find that argument compelling. As for the phrase *rape culture*, I feel like I’m still learning from scholars like both of you about its utility in biblical interpretation.

I assume that *rape culture* indicates that you can’t really understand rape as a phenomenon if you only study it as an isolated act. You’ve got to look at larger social, cultural, and religious assumptions that undergird it. Rape is still obviously a big problem, and you’ve also got now the resurgence of men on the right. You see them on Twitter all the time—men who are claiming to promote biblical manhood, biblical womanhood. Attention to which biblical texts are being used, and how rape or its representation functions in those texts, is still critical.

Johanna Stiebert: I think what Ken was saying really captured it well, the kind of bigger setting that enables not just rape to take place but the things that normalize it.

Ken Stone: I’m happy that biblical scholarship on sexual violence has grown the way it has. I wish there was more attention

now that there is this rich body of literature out there—it should still grow, but it also needs to be communicated more.

I don't have a view on the most effective ways to communicate biblical scholarship at more popular levels. But I do wish for that.

There could be more attention given by biblical scholars to the history of reception around these topics. Now that we have a somewhat more robust body of literature dealing with the biblical text, it would be useful not just to jump to contemporary culture in terms of communication but to be able to do that as part of a process of looking at the longer history of interpretation around these types of issues.

I would like to see an attempt to communicate both the ancient stuff and that history and the contemporary impact—maybe working with other scholars.

Johanna Stiebert: Is that interest partly driven by the kind of importance you see in this kind of work? By a kind of activism?

Ken Stone: The importance of work on sexual violence in the Bible? Absolutely! In terms of its relevance, it seems as relevant as it's ever been. We could point to some of the images we've seen coming out of Israel and Gaza to know just how relevant it still is.

I brought up the Israel/Gaza situation. One dynamic [is] mentioned in passing in news stories, where they talk about men raping women in the presence of other men. What is the function of sexual violence in that kind of moment? Sexual violence comes to play a role that involves not only the two individuals involved in it, but the audience who's seeing it. That seems a through-line to what we already see in the Bible. It's troubling that that's still the case and that we have that kind of shock of recognition. We've done this kind of work already with the ancient world and ancient texts, and [we see] it happening now.

Johanna Stiebert: I think biblical scholarship is sometimes going off into a direction where the level of critical empathy and feeling for the terror of it is disappearing in the conversation around rape. I find that really distressing. You just articulated really well why it's still important to speak about it, including in relation to the biblical text.

Barbara Thiede: It is reassuring to feel that this work is legitimate. Would you do anything differently?

Ken Stone: I have already mentioned that under the influence of Queer studies I would try to pay more attention to heterogeneity and instability in the text, though not to change the major points that I made.

I might rely a little bit less on the language of honor and shame—not because I think it’s irrelevant or unimportant, but because it seems to be more tame than it needs to be. I might want to go back and place more emphasis on prestige.

I don’t think I paid enough attention to the violent aspects of the texts I was talking about because I was so focused on making the point that sexuality and gender were understood differently than we often assume when we think of the Bible and sex. I don’t think I stressed enough the kind of horror of some of the violence.

Johanna Stiebert: Do you do that in your teaching now?

Ken Stone: I have to think a lot more carefully. Every single time I talk about the story of the Levite’s concubine, I wrestle with how I’m even going to talk about it in class. It’s such a horrifying story that most students still don’t realize is in their Bible, some of whom are probably victims of sexual violence.

It’s all very well to say we’re going to look at this awful text, but you still can’t predict how that’s going to land and affect them after they walk out of the classroom.

Johanna Stiebert: Can you identify when that became much more in the forefront of your awareness?

Ken Stone: It happened over time. Just the actual experience with students made me realize that [even though] I had spent all this time working on this text, I was not in a position to gauge the impact that reading it was going to have. I’ve not myself been a victim of sexual violence in any way and to watch students—especially women, though not only women... Over the years it’s become more of a challenge. I don’t have a neat formula even all these years later.

Barbara Thiede: We rarely get the time to say personally, face-to-face, to a scholar: “I owe you.” I’m very grateful for how careful you have always been in your research and how illuminating and clear it is not only for my own work but also for my students.

Johanna Stiebert: I agree. I love your wit. I really appreciate good writing.

Ken Stone: Thank you for that.

Barbara Thiede: And thank you, Ken, for your time today.

Sarojini Nadar is the Desmond Tutu Research Chair in Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. She is the editor of the *African Journal of Gender and Religion* and serves as a section editor for *Oxford Intersections: Gender, Religion and Culture*, a digital publication of Oxford University Press.

Her scholarship engages the intersections of gender, race, and class, and she explores how sexual, structural, and epistemic forms of violence are legitimized through cultural texts and traditions. Drawing on intersectional feminist theory, critical discourse analysis, and decolonial thought, she investigates how sacred narratives and systems of belief reinforce injustice while also creating space for alternative, liberatory ways of knowing rooted in resistance and ethical accountability.

Her most recent publication is *Gender, Genocide, Gaza, and the Book of Esther: Engaging Texts of Terror(ism)* (Routledge, 2025), a decolonial feminist analysis of biblical violence and its contemporary political ramifications.

Barbara Thiede: I'm truly honored that you took the time to be part of this project. I'm going to start by asking: can you give us an idea what the terms *rape* and *rape culture* actually mean to you; what associations do you have?

Sarojini Nadar: I've been distinctly uncomfortable with this term. I had to think carefully and intentionally for the first time about where that discomfort comes from.

For me, it stems from the recognition that culture is often assumed to belong exclusively to people who are regarded as "exotic," mostly those from the majority world, or Global South, rather than the West, the Global North, or to white people—a notion I resist.

For example, about a decade ago now, I was invited to facilitate Contextual Bible Study for a European faith-based organization. It was on the book of Esther. I had brought up themes of rape. One of the features of Contextual Bible Study is that, at the end, you ask people to reflect on what this text means for their lives in their current moment. It was fascinating to hear from people—and I've heard this before, having done it in other contexts in the Global North—"I can understand that there's a lot of that rape stuff in your context. But in our context, we don't have this. So, this kind of methodology can work for your context, but not our context."

I think my discomfort from the phrase comes from the understanding that *rape culture* may be the preserve of people in Africa, maybe the preserve of people of

color. That's "you people down there." Black men are disproportionately accused of rape, as we know.

Let me just say this clearly. I think it's really important that we acknowledge the ways in which systems coalesce to sustain rape culture, right? Tinyiko Sam Maluleke and I wrote a piece called "Breaking the Covenant of Violence Against Women," where we spoke about religion, culture, and the subsequent power of gender socialization as the unholy trinity underwriting violence against women.

So, I understand the system. It's the *term* that makes me a little bit uncomfortable.

Johanna Stiebert: I find it interesting because I see *rape culture* discussed so much more in Western and Global North settings. But I was in Ghana doing some work on Contextual Bible Study and *rape culture*. When I was talking about the prevalence of rape and *rape culture* in the UK, people were stunned. They themselves had believed that it was a problem that *they* had, but *we* did not have. This kind of internalizing of just the kinds of things you were talking about was really very shocking.

Barbara Thiede: What drew you to the topic of sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible?

Sarojini Nadar: It was never a career aspiration to become a Hebrew Bible scholar. I was studying English literature and African literature. I wanted to be a high school teacher, but when I got to my final year, I was told that African literature, go figure, in South Africa in 1995, was not regarded as a teaching subject in high schools. This was because of the apartheid-era Christian National Education system, which mandated a particular theological framing within public education.

I was on scholarships and I needed to finish my degree, and it was my final year and *now* they tell me this! I needed to scramble and find a subject very quickly. In my prior years, I had, just for the heck of it, chosen Hebrew as an elective. I met a wonderful mentor who introduced me to feminist biblical studies, actually. She asked me, "aren't you interested in pursuing this further?" And I didn't think I was, until I got to my third year and discovered that I couldn't do African literature as a teaching subject.

Biblical studies was a teaching subject in high school. They saw that I had Hebrew on my transcript, and they

said I could get biblical studies as a major or religion, but I'd have to do a little bit of religious studies as well. That's how I got into the study of Hebrew Bible. Then, I loved it so much and went on to do postgraduate studies and didn't end up being a high school teacher.

My engagement with this topic is deeply personal. I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. The man who harmed me was not a stranger—he sat comfortably in the pews of our church. He drove the church bus. He was seen as a spiritual leader, someone who quoted scripture with ease. But he was not the only one. There were many men who passed through our home—men who were considered godly, trusted, respected. I speak of him because the abuse he inflicted was the most severe, but the culture that enabled him was much broader.

My father died when I was eight. I am the youngest of seven children, and the first in my family to complete high school—never mind go to university. My mother had been married off in an arranged marriage at fourteen, had her first child at seventeen, and went on to have six more children. When my father—a builder and bricklayer—fell from a scaffold and died, my mother was left with no income, no support, and no way forward. She had a breakdown. In the wake of his death, men from the church came forward—supposedly to care for the widow and her children. But their care came with conditions. They helped themselves to the vulnerable bodies in our home, cloaking their abuse in the language of faith. A touch here, a squeeze there, all justified through scripture and spirituality.

This is what led me to study the intersection of religion and sexual violence; my scholarly interests are shaped by lived experiences and my earliest experiences of power and survival. It is in this terrain that I do my work: from within the wound, so to speak.

Barbara Thiede: Can you speak, even a little more, to how critical that acknowledgment of being a survivor is for your own work and for biblical scholarship as a whole?

Sarojini Nadar: Writing about oneself is never easy, right? In biblical studies, the accusation against those of us who write and speak from an *intentionally* located place—because everyone's writing from a located place—is that it's so self-indulgent or it's navel gazing.

What is so damn self-indulgent about going into the very recesses of your being and unearthing things that

have caused so much trauma in your life? There's nothing self-indulgent about that. It's actually incredibly difficult and challenging and courageous and heart-wrenching and gut-wrenching at the same time. It does all sorts of things to your body.

Acknowledging survivorship, if you want to call it that, is not just an act of personal truth but a scholarly declaration. I don't know if that makes sense. It's a way of saying, "this is my way of doing scholarship with my body, that's broken for scholarship, that's revealing truth. It creates space for embodied forms of scholarship where narrative memory and trauma are not *distractions* from the work, or an *aside* to the work, but it *is* the work."

In a field that's valued disembodied exegesis so much, where disembodied exegesis is held up as the norm, the universal gold standard, lived experience is a form of theory. It is a form of meaning-making. It opens up the space for us to theorize lived experience in a field that's so textual, that's so written, and that's so canonized.

That story then becomes the method.

Barbara Thiede: The lived experience is absolutely directly connected to those textual sources. They're not disconnected. You can't disconnect those things without doing an additional violence, not only to your own body but to the actual texts.

Sarojini Nadar: Absolutely. Epistemic violence is exactly one of the things that I'm more and more focusing on in my own work, the kinds of epistemic violence that happens through the silencing of those lived experiences.

Barbara Thiede: Your work brings together multiple theoretical concerns: the intersection of race, rape, womanist perspectives, critical discourse analysis, and theological assessments—both of the biblical text and how it's received. Can you unpack this approach and explain the questions which drive the inquiry in your work?

Sarojini Nadar: It was the work of Black feminist scholars that made me feel at home. I'm paraphrasing here, but bell hooks says, "I came to theory because I was hurting. I wanted to understand my pain." That's the best explanation of theory I can find, because theory can help you stitch together fragments and turn them into maps for how to chart the various dimensions of your work. My work sits at the intersections of race, rape, womanist, and African feminisms, between discourse and doctrine. I'm driven

by the question of how religion functions not just in text but in life.

It's important that I take popular culture seriously, because it shows us not just how biblical texts are received but how they are recycled and weaponized in real time. I resist narrowing text to canon alone. A sermon, a meme, a protest sign, and a Facebook post—I consider it all as legitimate texts.

Barbara Thiede: This leads me to ask about the kind of reaction that you've had to your work. How do people respond?

Sarojini Nadar: There are wonderful spaces of joy and solidarity and sisterhood. But I do think it is impossible to do the kinds of research that we do and not experience resistance. I don't think there's anyone who does feminist work who says, "oh, the academy has been so welcoming of my work." We know it's questioned. Gender studies is now pejoratively termed "grievance studies."

Let me name one form of resistance: the defensiveness and the policing around intellectual borders of disciplines. I constantly get asked, "are you a biblical scholar? Are you a theologian? Are you a social scientist? Your work is never squarely in biblical studies."

It's not. The world doesn't work like that. And if I want to address myself as a scholar to the issues of the world, there isn't one particular angle that I can come at it from.

Disciplines are crafted to classify, to control, and to contain, which is really the ultimate colonial mindset to have, right? And I see much of my work as a refusal of that containment. I refuse to be contained in those boxes.

I get that content knowledge matters. But we need courageous thinking that isn't afraid to cross the lines and to do the work and to do it well. Why do people have PhDs if they haven't acquired the analytical skills to think across disciplines?

My work insists that the academy must make space for messier truths, for truths that don't color within the lines, and for truths that are not confined by disciplinary boxes.

Barbara Thiede: If you were to assess the question of how people are acknowledging, exploring, or dealing with the connections between race and sexual assault, could you give us a grade or an assessment or say how you think the field is doing on this?

Sarojini Nadar: I despair. The field is waking up, but slowly and painfully. There's a willingness to engage race. But it's in very polite and surface-level ways, because the minute race and sexual violence collide, things get uncomfortable.

Rape is weaponized. The West has been complicit in trying to save the brown women from the brown man. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks specifically of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1988, 297).

My work insists that we can't speak about rape without also speaking about racism, without speaking about colonialism, and without speaking about economic violence. And I think in the field, if I had to do an assessment of the field, intersectionality is a buzzword. But intersectionality can't just be a buzzword. It's a demand. Feminist scholars are willing to say that intersectionality provides us with opportunities to recognize that there's complexity. But scholars are still picking and choosing which intersections matter. There are a whole lot of scholars who can be very progressive, except when it comes to Palestine. The silence has been deafening. People are starting to wake up to the idea of intersectionality and decoloniality, but not in ways that are more politically committed. I think it's still stuck at a very scholarly level.

I have to be equally committed to racial justice, to disability justice, and to all of those intersections. All of them rest on axes of power. Intersectionality is about power, and we have to address that head-on. Intersectionality has to be the starting point.

Barbara Thiede: Some scholars have expressed exhaustion around the topic of sexual violence. They ask, "have we really got anything more to say? Have we done all the work?"

Sarojini Nadar: People have been saying this for a long time, not just about whether the topic of sexual violence is done but whether feminism is done. I saw an interesting meme once. "I'll be post-feminist when the world is post-patriarchal." I'll stop working on sexual violence when it stops structuring our world.

I'm not just talking about those of us who are survivors and who feel the pain in our bodies and speak from that pain. I'm also talking about those of us who are so committed, who are so empathetic, that we literally feel sick to our stomachs—that we could literally go vomit in a bucket—every time we hear about another case.

Exhaustion is a luxury that many of us can't afford in this moment. I'm still exhausted, but I'm showing up because this conversation is so important. People who say, "oh, there's nothing more to say," are people who themselves might have been doing very disembodied work. If you are embodied in your scholarship, it would be very difficult to say we've said enough.

Barbara Thiede: Sarojini, thank you for so many important and insightful moments. Thank you for participating in this project.

Sarojini Nadar: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

Notes

- 1 A video with extracts from these interviews is available at <https://youtu.be/YaGIT7xoDDI>.
- 2 "Other male characters are, so to speak, the initial audience of the sexual events that take place.... If we wish to understand the possible meanings of the text, we must first understand the possible meanings of the sexual acts for the characters who interact with one another in the story." Sexual activity of any kind is important "almost entirely because of its possible consequences *for the relationships for men*" (136; *italics* Stone's). Sexuality is "a primarily homosocial affair" (136; *italics* Stone's). "[M]en often manipulate their relations with females to achieve particular goals in the realm of their relations with other men.... All sorts of male-female relations can be interrogated for what they tell us about all sorts of male-male relations" (48).
- 3 Weems (1995).

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