



INTRODUCTION

A PROMISE FOR A BLESSING

The Sacred Scriptures of Christianity and Judaism play a marginal role in the social, political, economic, and religious affairs of everyday life in Western societies. Social institutions such as public schools or transportation facilities function without reference to biblical texts. In the United States, politicians are sworn into office by placing one hand on the Bible, but they do not follow the law codes in the book of Exodus or Leviticus. The capitalist formation of Western economies also progresses without considering biblical recommendations about the distribution of wealth. Christian and Jewish institutions are the only groups that regularly refer to biblical literature, but their approaches vary, and only some religious groups—mostly fundamentalist Christians—want to apply their literal readings to the public structures of society. Bible reading is usually relegated to the private realm of religious life and serves personal, devotional, and confessional purposes. Overall, then, biblical literature has little influence in contemporary society.

This book suggests that the intellectual marginalization of biblical literature is regrettable, because the Hebrew Bible has much to contribute to the historical, sociological, political, and religious understanding of rape. One does not need to adhere to a Christian fundamentalist approach to gain from reading the ancient texts, some of which even portray the divinity as a perpetrator of rape. No easy and simplistic answers are at hand: complexity of thought in reading highly ambiguous texts is needed because ambiguity teaches sensitivity, insight, and respect toward the multifaceted issues we face in a world in which sexual violence prevails. What is required is a willingness to wrestle with biblical “rape texts” and the history of their interpretation.

2 SACRED WITNESS

This suggestion may come as a surprise. Not many people know that the Hebrew Bible contains a wealth of rape texts. Even if they do, they do not relate them to contemporary discussions on rape. In Genesis 19, Lot's daughters are threatened with rape when their father offers them to the mob outside the house. In Genesis 34, Dinah is raped by Shechem, and in 2 Samuel 13, Amnon rapes Tamar, his half-sister. In Ezekiel 23, God condemns Aholah and Aholibah to sexual violations by their former lovers. Rape laws appear in the book of Deuteronomy, and the stories of enslaved women who are forced into sexual intercourse are detailed in Genesis and the books of Samuel. No single lesson emerges from this plethora of narratives and poems, but they demonstrate that the topic is of social, political, and theological importance, despite neglect in Christian and Jewish histories of interpretation. The present study invites readers, whether they identify as secular or religious, to engage biblical literature and to learn how to read it in conversation with contemporary debates on rape.

Engaging the Hebrew Bible in this way is not easy, nor is it done frequently. It demands that readers hold on to the ancient body of literature with the goal of gaining insight from it. Placing ourselves in a long reading tradition, we assert our hermeneutical positions as readers within contemporary cultures where rape and sexual violence are tragically prevalent. Like Jacob, whose engagement with the demon is chronicled in Gen 32:24-32, we wrestle with the demon and demand a blessing. Some argue that Jacob wrestled not merely with a demon but with God. When Jacob does not submit, the demon (or is it the divinity?) injures Jacob's hip socket. Still Jacob does not let go of the demon, who requests: "Let me go, for dawn is breaking," to which Jacob replies: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me" (Gen 32:27). Thereupon Jacob receives a blessing in the form of a changed name: "Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (Gen 32:28). As Jacob receives a blessing from the life-threatening force, so perhaps today's readers will gain a blessing from wrestling with biblical rape texts. Many meanings emerge because biblical stories and poems contain many possible meanings that depend on *who* is doing the wrestling.

The following pages and chapters present a wealth of possibilities as they have emerged over decades and centuries in the multigenerational reading process. They are juxtaposed with contemporary descriptions about various forms of rape because the goal is not only intellectual or theoretical but also practical. This study aims to contribute to the urgent task of ending rape wherever and whenever it continues to occur.

Rape Prose and Poetry in the Hebrew Bible

Rape texts are common, if not ubiquitous, throughout biblical prose and poetry. Among them are the stories of Hagar and Sarah (Genesis 16; 21), Bilhah, Zilpah, Leah, and Rachel (Genesis 29–30), Sarah and Rebekah (Genesis 12; 20; 26), Lot’s daughters (Genesis 19), Dinah (Genesis 34), Ms. Potiphar (Genesis 39), Delilah (Judges 13–16), the concubine and the daughters of Shiloh (Judges 19–21), Bathsheba (2 Samuel 13), and Abigail (1 Kings 1). Other rape texts are part of the legal codes (for example, Deuteronomy 22) and the prophetic literature (for example, Jer 13:22; 20:7; Ezek 16:6–8, 36–42). Several passages are well known; others are rarely mentioned. For instance, the tale of Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 12 (parallels in chapters 20; 26) is famous, though not usually understood as a story about a rape threat. For fear of death, Abraham introduces his wife to the Egyptian pharaoh as his sister. In the first version of the story (chapter 12), the king learns about the deceit only after terrible plagues hit his house. In the second version (chapter 20), another ruler, King Abimelech, has a dream that reveals to him the relationship between Sarah and Abraham. In the third version (chapter 26), King Abimelech accidentally looks out of the window when wife and husband, in this case Rebekah and Isaac, “caress” each other.

Another story—the narrative about Samson and Delilah (Judges 16)—is renowned, but rarely presented as a tale about a male rape threat. It is a famous story that made it even into a French opera, *Samson et Dalila*, composed by Camille Saint-Saens and first produced in 1877. There Samson is a tragic hero who falls in love with Delilah.

4 SACRED WITNESS

The opera tackles the question whether “she really love[s] him”¹ and conveniently ignores an ambiguity in 16:5, where the Philistines advise Delilah: “Coax him, and find out what makes his strength so great, and how we may overpower [ענה, ‘innā; possibly “to rape”] him, so that we may bind him in order to subdue [ענה, ‘innā] him; and we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver” (Judg 16:5). What does it mean that they want to “subdue” him (see also Judg 16:6, 19)? As we will see later, the linguistic ambiguity makes it possible to identify this text as a rape threat. Then there are rape texts that are largely unknown, such as poems about divine rape (for example, Jer 13:22, 26; Nah 3:4-7) or laws on rape in war (for example, Deut 21:10-14); they remain in the shadows of cultural creativity and scholarly discourse.

It was not until the late 1970s that feminist scholars focused attention on these disturbing texts in the Hebrew Bible and highlighted the fates of the unnamed concubine and the women of Shiloh (Judges 19–21) as horrific tales about gang rape. Yet these interpreters also disagreed on the meaning of other rape stories. Among them is Genesis 34, which features prominently in feminist scholarship and is portrayed in a novel, *The Red Tent*, by Anita Diamant, as a love story rather than a rape story.² Diamant’s novel tells the story of the “patriarchs” in Genesis from the women’s perspective, from inside their tents, and makes Dinah’s fate central to the events. In this version, Dinah loves Shechem but her brothers do not want to include strangers in the family.

The narratives about Sarah and Hagar also have posed challenges for feminist interpreters. Struggling against an androcentric history of interpretation that identifies Abraham and his son Isaac as main characters, feminist readers have successfully turned Sarah and Hagar into prominent figures, portrayed Hagar as the first biblical character who names God (Gen 16:13), and stressed that Sarah—and not Abraham—determines the future of the family. Yet their emphasis on Hagar and Sarah often misses that Hagar’s story is a rape narrative. Feminist interpreters rose from an androcentric history of interpretation and focused attention on some rape texts while overlooking others.

This book, remedying this uneven situation, benefits from forty years of solid feminist studies on the Hebrew Bible and offers a

comprehensive analysis of many, if not most, biblical rape texts. These texts are read within various historical-cultural contexts, as defined by contemporary feminist perspectives on rape, and they are presented as rape literature emerging from a long androcentric history of interpretation. The book is grounded in a feminist hermeneutic that honors the perspectives of raped victim-survivors. It turns the ancient literatures into sacred texts about rape.

Biblical Historicity of Rape

A word is needed, though, about the biblical historicity of rape because many modern readers assume that the Hebrew Bible is based on actual historical events. Since the seventeenth century C.E., scholars have examined the historicity of biblical texts, placed them into ancient Near Eastern and Hellenistic literary and archaeological contexts, and brought historical questions to the forefront of the Western mind. Consequently, today's readers are quick to relegate biblical texts to the distant past, assuming that the texts describe customs, habits, and events from "way back then." The historical emphasis results from the empiricist-scientific outlook of Western epistemology, which equates history with truth and considers a document to be "true" only when the described events can be shown to have occurred. Both the Christian fundamentalist position and the secular approach, insisting on the historicity of biblical literature, presuppose this modern worldview. They differ only insofar as the secular approach does not find "historical truth" in biblical texts and classifies them as fiction, as "not true." Yet neither view challenges modern epistemological assumptions, and both share the same basic premise that biblical literature is significant only as a document of history.³

The modern need to define biblical literature as historical literature also prevails when the topic is rape. Many modern readers wonder: Did biblical rape stories *really* happen? If they did, do they not contain androcentric views about gender and rape that we do not share anymore because "way back then women were the property of men"? This belief situates biblical meaning in a distant past, even though we do not know enough about the historical circumstances

of biblical authors to hypothesize about the original meaning of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, many androcentric interpreters do not discuss the topic of rape and relegate biblical rape texts to discussions about Israelite family life and marriage customs.

For instance, Johannes Pedersen's classic and often-cited study entitled *Israel: Its Life and Culture* does not refer to rape in biblical times, although his work contains an extensive section on "forbidden degrees of relationship."⁴ Pedersen's work mentions several rape texts in sections on "appropriate" or "inappropriate" marriage arrangements⁵ and prohibitions against incest. There he refers to Abraham and Sarah's scheme of introducing themselves as siblings to the king (Gen 20:12). He also discusses Tamar's proposal of marrying her brother (2 Sam 13:13). The potential for rape or the depiction of rape remain unacknowledged in Pedersen's treatise even when he writes about the story of Tamar and Amnon: "The story of Amnon who ravished [*sic*] his half-sister Tamar presupposes that he [Amnon] might make her [Tamar] as his wife, if his father's consent were obtained (2 Sam. 13:13)." Pedersen states that Amnon "ravished" Tamar, but he does not outline the sociohistorical ramifications of the fact that marriage after "ravishment" constitutes a "pronounced one-sidedness which places the center of gravity in the man only."⁶ To Pedersen, this story could have led to marriage, and this fact shapes his interpretation. Thus, rape is not mentioned even once in sections ranging from marriage to war.⁷

Nor has the historical development of rape in biblical times received much attention from feminist scholars. The omission reflects the fact that Israelite historiography in general is fraught with problems, but it is particularly problematic when it concerns Israelite women. We do not know, for instance, if women enjoyed equal status with men in the family-oriented and self-governed tribes of premonarchic Israel, as Carol Meyers maintains.⁸ Some scholars, among them the so-called minimalists, cast serious doubt on such historical reconstructions and move the reliable stages of Israelite historiography into the sixth century B.C.E. or even into the Hellenistic period.⁹ Historiographical problems seem insurmountable when the topic is rape. To what extent do biblical rape narratives relate to actual women's

or men's experiences, and how, for instance, should the story about Tamar and Amnon be read when the goal is the establishment of Israelite rape history? The precarious historiographical nature of biblical rape literature makes it difficult indeed to write about the history of rape in ancient Israel, and so it seems unlikely that a comprehensive history of rape in ancient Syria-Palestine-Israel will be penned any time soon.

Reader's Responses to Biblical Rape Poetry and Prose

When readers recognize that the Hebrew Bible contains numerous stories and passages about rape, they are often puzzled. They would not have expected the Sacred Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity to contain such texts. Consequently, their responses are often mixed because they wonder what to make of biblical literature giving rape more than a nominal recognition. The observation often leads to two responses. One response appreciates that the Hebrew Bible includes rape texts, whereas the other response is negative. People who respond appreciatively maintain that the presence of rape in biblical literature proves the seriousness of the topic. Not only do the rape texts demonstrate that rape has long been part of human experience, but the very fact that these texts exist proves the significance of the issue. The Bible deals with it, and so should we. Biblical rape literature is seen also as a pedagogical tool that strengthens our ability to confront sexual violence. Biblical rape texts *describe* human interaction as sexually violent but they do not *prescribe* it. These texts become important avenues by which to examine hermeneutical assumptions, to discover the history of interpretation, and to ponder marginalized perspectives such as those of raped victim-survivors. In short, to adherents of the appreciative response, biblical rape texts serve as learning opportunities about epistemologies and genealogies of rape discourse as it evolved in the Christian and Jewish traditions.

The other response articulates serious objections to the presence of rape texts in the biblical canon. It emphasizes that rape is a human problem that should not be related to religious teachings. People of this position often believe that the presence of rape texts makes it,

in fact, difficult to read the Hebrew Bible as a spiritually meaningful book because its androcentric attitudes and customs eradicate the perspectives of the raped victim-survivors. To people of this persuasion, particularly when they call themselves Christian, the underlying problem consists in dealing with the Hebrew Bible. Do biblical rape texts not illustrate that this is a book of violence and that the rape texts can teach us little because of their persistent androcentric viewpoints? The difficulties are many, and books of other religious traditions sometimes seem more attractive than the Hebrew Bible because they do not seem to contain any rape texts.

Indeed, the Hebrew Bible stands out among sacred writings for including rape prose and poetry. Rape is absent from the Qur'an, although Islamic societies certainly know of the issue.¹⁰ Hindu sacred texts contain some references to rape, such as the characterization of Lord Krishna as “a bold woman-snatcher,” and the Upanishads contain a passage that excuses the rape of a woman who is unwilling to consent to sexual intercourse.¹¹ The stories about Draupad in the Mahābhārata also mention several sexual assaults that the daughter of Drupada survives.¹² A Buddhist story tells of a nun struggling with male sexual force.¹³ None of these texts, however, plays a prominent role in the religious imagination. So how does one explain that the Hebrew Bible contains so many references to rape? Does it reflect biblical literature's unique character? Perhaps—but it is also possible to think that it is only a question of time until Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist feminist scholars emphasize rape in their sacred texts as well. After all, not long ago biblical scholars did not regard biblical texts as rape literature either.

The last claim is not entirely accurate. Some Christian theologians of old considered rape to be a Christian theological issue. This is the case with Augustine (354–430 C.E.), who made rape a theological problem when he argued against his Christian and Roman contemporaries. They required a woman to commit suicide after rape so that she would keep her honor. Among them is Jerome, a Christian theologian (347–420 C.E.) who advised a woman to commit suicide after her “chastity is jeopardized.”¹⁴ Augustine proposed a theological alternative that turned, however, into a precarious theological argument.

He maintained that rape represented an opportunity for a woman to repent for her sins before God. For Augustine, rape was God-sent, and thus he opposed a woman's suicide after rape because suicide would not give her the spiritual benefits of the God-sent rape. The benefits, as Augustine saw it, were that the rape would coach a woman to move away from future sinning. In Augustine's view, then, rape was a form of "prophylactic punishment."¹⁵ This argumentation is obviously problematic, not only because Augustine views God as the bringer of rape but also because he does not condemn the rapist, he holds the woman responsible, and he thus contributes to the stigmatization of raped women as sinners.

Despite these inherent problems, some feminist theologians and ethicists find value in Augustine's approach, among them Mary Pel-lauer. She points out that Augustine's position recognizes rape as a theological issue, saying that feminist theologians should emulate this strategy. Like Augustine, they ought to maintain the theological and biblical significance of rape, and, like Augustine, they should place their argumentation within the contemporary rape discourse. Since Augustine affirmed that rape belongs to Christian theological discourse, feminist theologians need to analyze biblical rape literature as part of feminist thought on rape and to provide theo-biblical opportunities for pondering, examining, and evaluating the ongoing presence of rape in today's world.

Feminist Discourse on Rape from Brownmiller to Postmodern Feminist Theory

Since the 1970s, feminists have investigated rape as an issue of theoretical significance and have created awareness about the prevalence of rape in human history and society. They have critiqued the prevalence of rape as a form of oppression that men have perpetrated against women over the millennia. Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* started the discussion in the United States.¹⁶ She postulated that since prehistoric times, men's physical nature has turned them into potential and actual rapists and a threat to women of all cultures and histories. Brownmiller's work is a classic in Western

feminist discourse, not only because it was the first on the subject but also because it created a storm of opposition. Some feminists objected to the biological reasoning. Catharine MacKinnon, for instance, maintained that “biology is not destiny” and analyzed rape as an expression of power “in its gendered form.” She defined rape as part of the continuum of sexuality, “the dynamic of control by which male dominance . . . eroticizes and thus defines man and woman, gender identity and sexual pleasure.”¹⁷ Other feminists challenged Brownmiller’s universalizing and timeless depiction of rape and urged that rape not be defined exclusively as a form of gender oppression but that it be connected with racism and classism.¹⁸

Grounded in this expanded notion of rape, feminist theorists began examining rape in relation to other social categories. One of them, Susan Griffin, categorized rape as an expression of a power structure that not only “victimizes women” but also engages in “raping Black people and the very earth we live upon.”¹⁹ Rape relates to all forms of violent oppression in the world that reinforce the hierarchical structures of human interaction, including gender relations. Another feminist thinker, Angela Davis, stated similarly that “[a]ny attempt to treat it [rape] as an isolated phenomenon is bound to flounder.”²⁰ In her view, rape has to be analyzed within a framework of racism, classism, and the economic system of capitalism.

Increasingly, therefore, feminists became suspicious of biological explanations and analyzed rape as a social construct. They published countless studies in the 1970s and 1980s which identified many different forms of rape, such as stranger rape, acquaintance rape, marital rape, date rape, or gang rape. They founded rape crisis centers, particularly in the United States, where the public recognition of rape increased dramatically. Psychological research exposed public assumptions about rape and discriminatory attitudes toward rape victim-survivors. Feminist historians wrote about rape in past and present societies, and international discourse emerged as a powerful means of criticizing the prevalence of rape in Western and non-Western countries.²¹

The proliferation of rape studies, however, did not expand much beyond the 1980s. The conservative backlash to the feminist movement

in Western societies stereotyped and also marginalized the feminist movement in general and rape studies in particular. Consequently, feminist theoretical debates on rape decreased. Postmodern feminist theorists were also reluctant to examine rape. To them, gender notions are “in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end.”²² Rape, as an enduring phenomenon in gender interactions, posed practical and epistemological challenges, and so postmodern feminists neglected rape as an issue.

Some postmodern feminists, however, articulated theoretical positions on rape. For instance, Sharon Marcus defined rape as a “gendered grammar of violence,” in which men are the agents of violence and women the subjects of fear. She stressed the postmodern conviction that all reality is constructed by language, and so rape-prone societies are “subject to change” if rape is understood as a “linguistic fact: to ask how the violence or rape is enabled by narratives, complexes and institutions which derive their strength not from outright, immutable, unbeatable force but rather from their power to structure our lives as imposing cultural scripts.”²³ In other words, she and other postmodern feminists asserted that Western culture, as it is manifested in art, literature, and music, has been complicit in producing rape, and this cultural complicity has to be exposed and its power dismantled. They opposed the idea that rape is a biological necessity and moved the understanding of rape far beyond Brownmiller’s initial position, which claimed: “In terms of human anatomy the possibility of forcible intercourse incontrovertibly exists.”²⁴ Postmodern feminists have rejected such biological essentialism because it does not sufficiently address the different kinds of past and present rape rhetorics.

In the 1990s, other scholarly voices, advancing cross-cultural and anthropological perspectives, emerged as a challenge to feminist rape discourse. Among them is that of Nigerian anthropologist O. Oyewumi, who criticized Western feminist discourse—postmodern or not—for the universal acceptance of gender as a social category. Oyewumi observed that Western feminists apply categories such as “woman” and “man” to studies of non-Western cultures even when gender does not characterize the social dynamics of these cultures. This is also the case when Western feminists studied pre-colonial

Yoruba society, and projected their notions of gender onto a differently located society. Oyewumi explained:

The potential value of Western feminist social constructionism remains, therefore, largely unfulfilled, because feminism, like most other Western theoretical frameworks for interpreting the social world, cannot get away from the prism of biology that necessarily perceives social hierarchies as natural. Consequently, in cross-cultural gender studies, theorists impose Western categories on non-Western cultures and then project such categories as natural.²⁵

Oyewumi showed in her work that Western notions of gender prevent Western feminist anthropologists from understanding the non-Western societies they investigate. They assume a Western “bio-logic” and apply it to non-Western cultures. In contrast, Oyewumi stressed that all gender categories are particular and contextual, emerging from specific historical and social locations. She maintained that one set of gender definitions, as it developed in the West, should not be imposed on other societies.

The cross-cultural challenge to Western feminist thought has also been part of the anthropological work of Christine Helliwell. She aimed to demonstrate that rape does not exist in every culture. For this purpose, she studied the Gerai people, “a Dayak community of some seven hundred people in the Indonesian province of Kalimantan Barat (West Borneo).” She discovered that the Gerai people were horrified about the very idea of rape²⁶ because, according to Helliwell, they find forced sex “unthinkable.” It would destroy the spiritual and communal balance between individual and community.²⁷ Helliwell also explained that the Gerai gender ideology of “biological sameness” makes rape impossible in this society. The Gerai people assume that women and men’s sexual organs share the same biological structure and form: women’s organs are inside and men’s outside. This biological sameness of women and men is the basis for women getting pregnant, and it also makes them convinced that some men menstruate like women. In addition, the idea of biological sameness promotes the notion of

women's and men's *social* sameness, which assumes that both genders have the same goal in life: to produce bountiful rice harvests every year and to raise several healthy children to maturity. According to Helliwell, this striking principle in the Gerai approach to life, "the identity between men and women at the expense of radical difference," explains why this society is rape-free.

Helliwell then made an unusual comparison between the Gerai people and Western feminism. Whereas the Gerai people emphasize sameness and live in a rape-free society, Western feminists assume a notion of gender that differentiates between femininity and masculinity. This idea about gender differentiation is problematic, Helliwell suggested, because it perpetuates assumptions about women and men that foster rape. In fact, Helliwell even argued that the feminist acceptance of the Western view of "men's genitalia and sexuality as inherently brutalizing and penetrative and women's genitalia and sexuality as inherently vulnerable and subject to brutalization"²⁸ supports the very practice of rape that feminism seeks to end. In other words, Helliwell holds feminist theorists responsible for the prevalence of rape in Western societies.

This is a serious charge that requires closer scrutiny, which exposes three problems in Helliwell's position. First, Helliwell does not address the practical gender inequality among the Gerai people when she explains that the Gerai people do not apply the idea of gender sameness to *all* aspects of their society and sometimes differentiate between women and men. For instance, Helliwell observes that they attribute a "higher" position to men than to women in public decision-making processes, in which women have less authority than men. Hence, Gerai women often remain silent and defer to men in legal disputes and community functions.²⁹ The women seem not to question this unequal arrangement, although men also seem not to use their privileged position to dominate the women. But perhaps this tolerance of practiced inequality in the public realm indicates that the Gerai people have not yet had their "feminist revolution." Another Gerai practice seems indicative of this possibility. Gerai female and male work assignments follow gender-specific roles, but Helliwell does not consider what might happen if Gerai

women refused being “responsible for rice selection and storage.”³⁰ Would Gerai men accept changed role assignments? At least in light of Western gender dynamics, a positive response from the men seems unlikely.

Second, even if the principle of gender sameness prevents the occurrence of rape in Gerai society, Helliwell’s advice that Western feminists relinquish “some of our most ingrained presumptions concerning differences between men and women”³¹ is suspect, and predictably some feminists oppose it. Among them is the Native American and feminist writer Paula Gunn Allen, who rejects the very idea of gender sameness because, in her view, gender sameness prevents women from realizing a “sense of self as women and as individuals” within the “patriarchal social contract.” Allen recommends an “uncompromising commitment to multiplicity, to the concept of difference.”³² In contrast to Helliwell, Allen sees a way out of “rape culture” only if we follow a “feminine” model, as suggested by Italian feminists or as traditionally practiced by the Laguan Pueblo. This model emphasizes difference between women and men with the goal of building a rape-free society. Allen explains:

If we are willing to make our membership in our common womanity the centerpiece of our lives, if we are willing to face the judgment not only of other women but of Femininity’s multiplicitous dimensions; if we take women as our models and female deities as our gods; if we are willing to make the principles of the ineffable Feminine our *modus vivendi* and our femininity our blazing signature while taking on the causes that are of urgent concern to women worldwide; if we will accept multiplicity, diversity, difference, and celebrate them . . . [violence against women will end.]³³

Third, Helliwell’s position is problematic because of the different scale of the Gerai society and Western societies. Gerai society is so small that it does not seem convincing to take Gerai culture as a model for millions of Western people. Can a small community of seven hundred people seriously serve as a standard for Western societies? It

is certainly appropriate to value the Gerai community as a rare case of a rape-free society, but the political, economic, and religious history and the social conditions of the Gerai people are so different from the West that a transfer of Gerai gender sameness seems awkward at the very least, if not improbable.

Still, it needs to be acknowledged that Helliwell does not disagree with the Western feminist agenda that rape is an important issue. In fact, Helliwell's study encourages the effort to understand the prevalence of rape without unduly generalizing about women or men whether they are of Gerai or Western origins. Similar to postmodern and other cross-cultural works, then, Oyewumi's and Helliwell's studies raise an important question: How can contemporary Western feminists talk about rape without disregarding women's diverse experiences? Linda Nicholson, a postmodern feminist, gives an answer that perhaps works best. She urges: "It is time that we [Westerners] explicitly acknowledge that our claims about women are not based on some given reality but emerge out of our own places within history and culture; they are political acts that reflect the contexts we emerge out of and the futures we would like to see."³⁴ Feminist discourse has to locate itself within the particularities of history and culture and to acknowledge its political nature. It needs to recognize, as feminist theorists assert, that rape is "culturally produced at *every level*."³⁵

The issue of particularity and universality is not easily resolved. Many feminists, especially when they daily face the consequences of rape, view sexual violence as a universal phenomenon. The Women's Human Rights movement insists that human rights are women's rights, and so Julie Peters and Andrea Wolper, editors of *Women Rights—Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives*, ask, "Does the right to preserve cultural and religious practices take precedence over human rights norms? If so, is the very concept of international (universal) rights inappropriate in a multicultural world in which values and practices differ from place to place?"³⁶ They maintain the need for universal norms when they suggest that "women worldwide can formulate norms" and simultaneously "allow for cultural multiplicity."³⁷ For Peters and Wolper, conversations among women organizers

of different nationalities prove the urgency for international laws that prohibit violence against women everywhere.

Other feminist scholars propose that the problem be addressed on the level of international law. Rhonda Copelon, a professor at the City University of New York School of Law, supports international norms because of the persistence of rape in Western and non-Western wars during the twentieth century—wars that continue into the twenty-first century. In all of these wars, male soldiers raped women.³⁸ Even today, the practice of rape is pervasive in many places—in times of war and peace—and feminist work has shown that quick solutions are unavailable and international norms are much needed. In short, biological and societal explanations have proven to be unjustifiably general, and universalizing tendencies in Western feminist discourse often ignore particularities of time and place in women's experiences of rape. Perhaps one of the results of the discussion is that rape has to be theorized in the tension between particularity and universality and must be recognized as a considerable problem. That the Hebrew Bible includes numerous references to rape turns this body of literature into a promising resource for society and religion today.

Several Influential Feminist Studies on Rape in the Hebrew Bible

Feminist scholars discovered the prevalence of biblical rape texts and began publishing scholarly treatises on this topic from the 1970s onward. Some publications have enjoyed lasting impact, while others are significant mainly for their methodological sophistication or their success in communicating with audiences beyond academia. The following four pioneering publications illustrate the emerging discourse on rape in biblical studies; others will appear throughout the ensuing chapters of this book.

Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*

The first scholarly publication that included several biblical rape texts from a feminist perspective is Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror: Literary-*

Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives.³⁹ It includes the rape stories of Hagar (Genesis 16; 21), Tamar (2 Samuel 13), and the unnamed woman (Judges 19). Tribble also discusses the tale about the murder of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11), a horrific story but not about rape and thus not included here.

Other scholars appreciate that she broke the silence about these narratives. Jon D. Levenson, for instance, notes: "Phyllis Tribble's . . . keen ear and her fine sense of narrative technique help her to shed a revealing light on . . . stories that . . . deserve more attention than they have received."⁴⁰ Tribble uses rhetorical criticism to highlight the terror present in the narratives. About the rape of Hagar, an Egyptian slave woman, she writes: "All we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar's story. To neglect the theological challenge she presents is to falsify faith." About Tamar, who is raped by her half-brother, Tribble observes: "A woman of sorrows and acquainted with grief." About the gang-raped and unnamed woman, she laments: "The betrayal, rape, torture, murder, and dismemberment of an unnamed woman is a story we want to forget but are commanded to speak. . . . To take to heart this ancient story, then, is to confess its present reality. The story is alive, and all is not well."⁴¹ The book reveals the extent of androcentric bias throughout the centuries that has marginalized these stories so completely in the Christian and Jewish imagination.

Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love*

Another important contribution to the burgeoning field of rape in sacred texts is Renita J. Weems's *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, published in 1995.⁴² In four chapters, Weems examines prophetic texts that contain the so-called marriage metaphor. One chapter focuses on the marriage metaphors as speech about violence against women in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and it also explores the literary context of such metaphoric speech in biblical prophecy. In another chapter, Weems hypothesizes about the social and historical context of marriage metaphors within ancient Israelite society, and in the third chapter she inquires what the metaphors

reveal about God. A fourth and final chapter correlates prophetic rape texts with contemporary sensibilities and discusses how prophetic literature can be read as a spiritual and religious resource when the topic focuses on sexual violence against women.

Weems uses a pastoral tone as she guides readers through the plethora of terrifying biblical poetry. She shows that the prophets Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel employ the marriage metaphor to criticize ancient Israelite political, economic, and societal practices. Portraying Israel as a wife and God as a husband, the metaphor presents God as a punisher of the adulterous wife. The metaphors are composed from the husband's perspective and present him as justifiably threatening his wife with rape. Notions of hierarchy, power, and retribution characterize the metaphor, which, according to Weems, goes "terribly awry."⁴³ Weems also insists that readers need to distinguish between metaphor and God, and she warns not to adhere too quickly to the metaphor. Weems does not want readers to merge this image of God with the deity because the theo-political consequences would be horrendous. The metaphor depicts God only *like* a husband and not *as* a husband. If readers were to follow the metaphor that presents God *as* a husband and in this case as a *violent* and *raping* husband, they would accept, perhaps even promote, the justification of sexual violence. Yet Weems does not want readers to fall prey to these metaphors. She wants them to include women's experiences as alternative expressions for meaningful God-talk.

J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women*

Another important book that covers three biblical rape narratives appeared in 1993, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*, by feminist literary critic J. Cheryl Exum.⁴⁴ One of the chapters is entitled "Samson's Women." Among them is Delilah, who, according to Exum, "violated" Samson (Judges 16). Another chapter interprets the stories of "the endangered ancestress," also called "the wife-sister stories" (Genesis 12; 20; 26), and still another chapter reads the stories of Bathsheba and David (2 Samuel 11) and

the nameless woman (Judges 19) as rape narratives. Other chapters elaborate on matriarchal figures in Genesis such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, but rape is not central in Exum's analysis. Exum also briefly mentions Dinah's story:

Genesis 34. Dinah, “*the daughter of Leah,*” is raped by Shechem when she goes out to visit the women of the land. The Shechemites make a treaty with Jacob, but two of Jacob's sons avenge the rape by killing the men of Shechem and plundering the city. (p. 102)

This short comment on Dinah is the sole mention of this narrative in Exum's study. Still, it is a telling and important mention, as Exum does not shy away from discussing rape as an issue in biblical literature and interpretation, especially when she writes:

I am not dealing with real violence against women, but rather with violence against women as it takes place in biblical narrative. I take this violence seriously, though I do not take it literally, for like pornography—though not so blatantly—these literary rapes perpetuate ways of looking at women that encourage objectification and violence. . . . But like actual cases of rape, literary rape is difficult to prove. . . . Proving it depends upon taking the woman's word for it. And taking the woman's word for it is crucial for recovering women's experience in patriarchal literature.⁴⁵

Jonathan Kirsch, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road*

Finally, the journalist and fiction writer Jonathan Kirsch published a book in 1997 that emphasizes the significance of rape in the Hebrew Bible. In *The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible*,⁴⁶ Kirsch focuses on three rape stories: the story of Lot's daughters (Genesis 19), Dinah (Genesis 34), and Tamar (2 Samuel 13). His goal is to familiarize readers with lesser-known Bible stories that are filled with violence, sex, and murder, and consequently are not often

mentioned in synagogues and churches. In Kirsch's view, this situation should change, because "the Bible describes and even seems to encourage a range of human conduct that goes far beyond what is permitted in the Ten Commandments."⁴⁷ He opposes Jewish and Christian efforts of "cleaning up the Bible,"⁴⁸ and presents the "forbidden texts," including rape stories, to excavate "the traces of much older spiritual traditions that have been ignored or suppressed by all three faiths."⁴⁹ In these traces, Kirsch explains, appear daring, powerful, and resourceful women who "outshine even the venerable patriarchs and prophets."⁵⁰ These women are "intriguing remnants of forbidden spirituality" that included goddess worship and fertility rituals. Kirsch finds a "humane and compassionate message at the heart of the Bible,"⁵¹ which he conveys to his readers in a journalistic tone.

Sometimes biblical scholars dispute whether the above-mentioned stories should be classified as rape texts.⁵² Still, many agree that rape has become a prominent topic in biblical studies, since monographs and journal articles give ample witness to the undeniable presence of rape in biblical prose and poetry. This book brings the various scholarly discussions and biblical texts together and examines them as part of the long and diverse history of interpretation.

Toward a "Hermeneutics of Meaning"

Once readers recognize the difficulties involved in historiographical readings of the Hebrew Bible, they wonder how else to read this ancient body of literature. To such readers, the historiographical difficulties raise important hermeneutical questions about the purpose of the Hebrew Bible. How and why should it still be read and what are the benefits of reading it? Since not all interpretations are equally valid, the question is how to assess the merits of different interpretations. When interpreters come to see that they too are part of the meaning-making process, not distant and value-neutral observers, they learn to appreciate that authorial meaning is ultimately unknowable. Instead, text and readers are intrinsically linked.⁵³

The hermeneutical insight that text and readers are intimately connected is significant, because Western society functions largely

without the Hebrew Bible, attributing at best symbolic meaning to this body of literature. Moreover, many people do not even care for it. The late theologian and writer Dorothee Soelle was aware of this situation when she made an intriguing suggestion. She called for a “hermeneutics of hunger” and questioned the need for a “hermeneutics of suspicion.”⁵⁴ She recognized that a hermeneutics of suspicion has enabled feminist theologians to criticize churches and synagogues for omitting, excluding, and marginalizing women from religious thought and practice. The hermeneutics of suspicion equipped feminist scholars to investigate biblical literature and the history of interpretation and to seek alternative biblical meanings.

Yet this deconstructive approach should not be the last step, Soelle asserted, and hence she wanted the hermeneutical project to move to the next level. She recognized that the hermeneutics of suspicion does not take into account the needs of the next generation, which lives outside institutionalized religion. People of this generation do not struggle with religious traditions, do not know its oppressive history anymore, and mostly live disconnected from religious institutions. To this generation, the purpose of and need for a hermeneutics of suspicion are unclear because religious doctrines have not thoroughly shaped their religious imagination and experience since childhood. Religion has played only a limited role in this generation’s individual and collective lives. According to Soelle, then, this generation does not feel the urge to criticize Christian or Jewish traditions. The need to be liberated from religion is minimal, and instead people struggle to identify a spiritual home. Hence, Soelle suggested developing a “hermeneutics of hunger” that nurtures the spiritual hunger of this secularized Western generation.

Interestingly, religious activists of other religious traditions have proposed similar hermeneutical strategies for reading sacred texts. Already decades ago, Mohandas K. Gandhi wrote about his first encounter with the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Even in 1888–1889, when I first became acquainted with the Gita, I felt that it was not a historical work, but that under the guise of physical warfare it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind [*sic*], and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal

duel more alluring.”⁵⁵ Gandhi recognized that the sacred text of his religion refers to spiritual struggles apart from historical meaning. Perhaps the interpretation of biblical literature in Western societies of today would benefit from a hermeneutics that both deconstructs and constructs biblical meaning beyond the literalist-historical sense. If so, it might be worthwhile to supplement a hermeneutics of suspicion with Soelle’s “hermeneutics of hunger” and what I want to call here a “hermeneutics of meaning.” It might indeed help a secularized generation of Western people to gain a deepened understanding of the sociopolitical, religious, and cultural meanings of biblical rape texts in today’s world, where rape occurs daily.

But I want to avoid misunderstandings. This hermeneutics of meaning is based on a feminist-critical hermeneutics that is grounded in a postmodern epistemology. It assumes that all interpretation is perspectival, particular, and sociopolitically located, never objective, universal, and value-neutral. My hermeneutical operations posit a strategic positivism, perhaps even a strategic essentialism, to combat scientific-empiricist epistemology, but the seemingly positivistic elements are strategic. My hermeneutical operations must be understood within a dominantly positivistic and modern paradigm. It is a problem of language that requires alternative interpretations to be articulated within the dominant language game currently available. If I want my work on biblical rape to be understood, I have no alternative but to present it within the rules of that game. Otherwise, few if any would accept the alternatives, which would be ignored or, worse, not even published. This is an old hermeneutical dilemma that the ancient Greeks already recognized.⁵⁶ In this sense, Todd Penner and Lilian Cates got it right when they explained, “Modern historical-critical scholarship, whether it seeks sources, literary and rhetorical structures, or the recovery of the repressed voice of the Other overrun by patriarchal ideology, frequently succumbs to a fundamental assertion of so many forms of analysis: the text’s meaning is determinate and its ethic manifest.”⁵⁷ This problem pertains also to postmodern scholarship.

The dilemma, then, is how to articulate alternatives. An “operative poetic-ethical framework that strains against the structure of

textual determinacy”⁵⁸ seems a viable option because Penner and Cates’s proposal to find pleasure in the textual indeterminacy does not go anywhere in our global rape culture. Their wish of “allowing the text of pleasure to operate on its own terms”⁵⁹ comes perhaps from an ultimate location of colonizing superiority and disembodiment. Thus, my hermeneutical stance assumes that as long as the materialistic conditions grounded in sociopolitical and theo-cultural structures of oppression and discrimination facilitate and tolerate rape on a global scale, androcentric patterns of sexual violence need to be deconstructed within the intersections of racism, classism, and other social categories. Under such materialistic conditions any classification of biblical rape texts as “blissful” is dangerous, leaving unchallenged rape-prone attitudes and allowing a pervasive silence about the pain of rape victim-survivors both inside and outside religious institutions and ideologies. Therefore, any seemingly essentialist positivistic rhetoric of this book is only a rhetorical strategy that counteracts, deconstructs, and reevaluates modern empiricist methodologies, hermeneutical assumptions, and the practice of objectifying and universalizing ethics of rape-prone stances. My goal is to provide readings of biblical rape texts that endorse a hermeneutics of meaning and present the Hebrew Bible as a “sacred witness” to rape in the lives of women, children, and men.

The Content of This Book

The chapters of this book examine rape stories and poems thematically. Each chapter deals with several rape texts and aligns them with a particular form of rape. So, for instance, one chapter deals with narratives on acquaintance rape, another with marital rape, and yet another with rape in war. The thematic rather than text-based organization of the book focuses the attention on the various kinds of rape and relates biblical literature to terminology familiar to contemporary readers. Since many readers know little about the Hebrew Bible, the thematic arrangement should help them to relate specific forms of rape with particular biblical texts and to remember the content of the stories and poems. For instance, few know the details of Genesis 34, but many

know of acquaintance rape. Similarly, not everybody knows the stories in Judges 19–21, but most have heard of instances of rape in times of war and of peace. People have heard about marital and gang rape, and perhaps even about male-on-male rape, but they probably do not know biblical texts that relate to these topics. In short, the thematic approach assumes modest knowledge about the Hebrew Bible and begins with contemporary categories of rape.

It is important to acknowledge that the thematic approach is not based on a literalist correlation between biblical narratives and contemporary rape categories. The process of classifying a biblical text as “acquaintance rape” or “marital rape” requires imaginative work, as well as a solid knowledge of both the categories of rape and biblical literature. Sometimes the correlation seems immediately acceptable. For instance, the story of the concubine in Judges 19 is obviously about gang rape. In other cases, the categories are more difficult to establish because a text under consideration is not widely viewed as a rape story, as in the case of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Other readers with other hermeneutical interests have argued for different interpretations, and this study alludes to many of them, but the focus will always be on rape.

The ambiguities of correlating contemporary categories of rape with biblical texts lead to another important point. Biblical Hebrew does not have a technical term for “rape,” a linguistic situation that Hebrew shares with other languages. In Biblical Hebrew, the verb most frequently translated as “to rape” is the verb ענה, *ʿinnā*, but this verb may also refer to other forms of violence and oppression. For instance, in Exod 3:7, the word describes the oppression endured by the enslaved Israelites under Egyptian rulership (“I have observed the misery [ענה, *ʿnh*] of my people”).⁶⁰ Erhard S. Gerstenberger explains that the verb describes “unjust situations,” “the creation of a miserable situation,” and “physical or psychological violence.”⁶¹ Others insist that the verb refers to consensual sexual intercourse. Consequently, scholars debate whether the verb should be translated as a reference to rape.⁶² Sometimes the discussion about this term is heated and participants forget that, as inherently ambiguous literature, the Hebrew Bible demands an evaluative stance from readers. Interpreters

generation after generation have faced the arduous task of deciding among apparently irresolvable multiple meanings of a biblical text. The very fact that Biblical Hebrew does not offer a specific term for rape makes the interpretive task a continuous challenge. This book aims to help this generation of readers in developing relevant biblical meaning for our time.

Yet all interpretations stand in a long tradition with, it is hoped, a long future ahead of them. Many hermeneutical goals have led, lead, and will lead to an even wider range of biblical meanings. This book aims to enhance contemporary understanding of rape, and so it reads the ancient texts alongside feminist perspectives on rape. It advances a literary-cultural approach and searches for meanings in biblical rape stories and poems as they seem appropriate in today's rape culture. The nature of Sacred Scripture allows—and in fact calls for—open-ended discourse. Textual multiplicity should therefore be understood as enrichment and not as distraction or contradiction to the interpretive endeavor. After all, the ongoing hermeneutical process ensures that biblical rape texts remain an indispensable resource, a sacred witness, in the enduring task of reflecting, seeking, and understanding the sociopolitical, religious, and cultural meanings of biblical literature.