

Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel

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Volume 5
2016

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Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel

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Redaktion: Phillip Michael Lasater (Zürich)

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Verlag: Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, Postfach 2040, 72010 Tübingen
Vertrieb erfolgt über den Buchhandel.

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Satz: Martin Fischer, Tübingen.

Druck: Gulde-Druck, Tübingen.

ISSN 2192-2276 (Gedruckte Ausgabe)

ISSN 2192-2284 (Online-Ausgabe)

Christine Mitchell

Coming, Going, and Knowing

Reading Sex and Embodiment in Hebrew Narrative

This article both summarizes and analyzes recent feminist scholarship in literary studies and, in light of that analysis, examines a range of Hebrew terms for sexual intercourse. Particular attention is paid to Genesis and Judges.

My first real introduction to both feminist readings of the Bible and literary readings of the Bible came early on in graduate school in the early 1990s, when I was required to read the work of Mieke Bal: first *Lethal Love*, then *Death and Dissymmetry*, and finally *Murder and Difference*.¹ Bal's work had a profound impact on my development as a scholar, both as a feminist reader and as a literary critic. Her influence will be seen in this essay. Nevertheless, in the intervening two decades feminist readings of biblical texts have moved on. In some ways, the measure of Bal's success may be that few explicitly *literary* feminist readings of Hebrew narrative have been published, particularly of the book of Judges. Perhaps after these two decades, it is now time to return to a feminist-literary reading of Judges and other narrative texts, fortified by the work of gender theorists like Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, work that appeared after Bal's trilogy, and which has had limited impact on feminist biblical studies.²

1 M. Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); eadem, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); eadem, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

2 J. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988): 519–531; eadem, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); eadem, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); E. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); eadem, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Gender and the subject

In one way in particular, Bal's work was the end point of (literary) feminist readings of the Bible: grounded especially in the work of French feminist thinkers like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Bal's reading operated within a certain essentialism of gender and sexuality. Most feminist biblical scholarship – though not all – worked within Anglo-American feminist thought that privileged the concept of gender as socially and culturally constructed. The Freudian/Lacanian basis of some of Bal's readings, in particular, was generally not repeated in feminist biblical scholarship.³ Although profoundly influenced by Bal, this essentialist aspect of her readings has always been the most problematic for me. I was always more convinced by constructivist ideas, especially for the importance and possibilities they gave to agency and subjectivity.

Now, well into the new century, I find that some work of the very late 20th century that has come to permeate feminist thought outside the biblical guild does not seem to have had an impact within the guild. The dismantling of the theoretical basis for the concept of gender constructivism has been thoroughly discussed, both in the work of philosophers like Seyla Benhabib and in the work of theorists such as those cited above.⁴ Perhaps the writer whose work has had most impact in biblical studies is Butler. Her concept of the performativity of gender as put forward in *Gender Trouble* is cited and used productively, for example, by Cynthia Chapman, Elizabeth Stuart, and Teresa Hornsby, and recently in several of the essays in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*.⁵ In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that “the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.”⁶ That is, it is the way the body moves, dresses, is adorned, gestures, positions itself, etc. that conforms to a constructed gender norm. Gender is an effect, not an essence.

3 The exception is I. N. Rashkow, *The Phallacy of Genesis: A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

4 E. g., S. Benhabib, “The Debate over Women and Moral Theory Revisited,” in *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse* (ed. J. Meehan; New York: Routledge, 1995), 181–203, here 194.

5 Cynthia R. Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* (HSM 62; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004); E. Stuart, “Proverbs,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (ed. D. Guest et al.; London: SCM, 2006), 325–337; T. Hornsby, “Ezekiel,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (ed. D. Guest et al.; London: SCM, 2006), 412–426; J. M. O'Brien (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

6 Butler, *Gender Trouble* (see n. 2), 172.

In a later essay, Butler warns against confusing gender norms – as culturally constructed – with the concept of gender itself. “The conflation of gender with masculine/feminine, man/woman, male/female, thus performs the very naturalization that the notion of gender is meant to forestall.”⁷ A culturally-constructed gender is not the same thing as gender as an ontological category. The essay goes on to demonstrate the epistemological problem with reifying the sex-gender distinction as a set of two binaries: there is no space for metamorphosis of either a body or a gender without the correlative metamorphosis of the other, often through the alignment of an individual’s sex with gender.⁸

Already in the mid-1990s, before Butler’s best-known work, Grosz was able to say that for a number of writers, “There also is a wariness of the sex/gender distinction The body cannot be understood as a neutral screen, a biological *tabula rasa* onto which masculine or feminine could be indifferently projected. Instead of seeing sex as an essentialist and gender as a constructionist category, these thinkers are concerned to undermine the dichotomy.”⁹ She went on to problematize the whole philosophy of a fixed body, concluding in part that “the body is a pliable entity whose determinate form is provided not simply by biology but through the interaction of modes of psychical and physical inscription.”¹⁰ However, most theorizing about the body by men has taken the male body as the universal norm and sexual difference has been categorized as deviations from the male norm. The specifics of the male body, for example, are not taken as representative of masculinity, but as representative of humanity.¹¹ Grosz tried to read these “universal” discourses of the body as men’s discourses of the body; while men’s theorizing about the body might imply that a man does not have a body, Grosz demonstrated that bodily discourses describe men.

In a similar way, Sedgwick has argued that sexual difference, whether essential or constructed, is a tautology. Sexual difference is taken as a central fact, and other possibilities for analysis are not considered: “[A] certain, stylized violence of sexual differentiation must always be *prescribed* or *self-assumed* – even, where necessary, imposed – simply on the ground that it can never be finally *ruled out* The contingent possibilities of thinking

⁷ Butler, *Undoing Gender* (see n. 2), 42–43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 54–56.

⁹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (see n. 2), 17–18. Grosz is referring to Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, Jane Gallop, Moira Gatens, Vicki Kirby, Judith Butler, Naomi, Monique Wittig, “and many others.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

otherwise than through ‘sexual difference’ are subordinated to the paranoid imperative that, if the violence of such gender reification cannot be definitively halted in advance, it must at least never arrive on any conceptual scene *as a surprise*.¹² Because sexual difference is assumed, it can never be precluded.

The implication of Grosz’s presentation of discourses about the body, namely that a man does not have a body, should not come as a surprise. Especially since Descartes, and perhaps Plato too, the mind–body dichotomy has been linked with the male–female dichotomy, with the mind and the male in the privileged position. A whole series of other binaries may also be diagrammed and used in (post-)structuralist/semiotic analyses of texts. Bal made particular use of these binaries in her discussions of biblical texts, especially in *Lethal Love* and *Murder and Difference*. However, the Hebrew Bible is not a product of Western thought, even as it profoundly influenced that thought. It is one thing to read biblical texts *and their effects* using a Platonic and Cartesian model; it is entirely another thing to read the texts as objects themselves using that model. One thing that literary studies has emphasized since the 1980s is the cultural embeddedness of all texts, as summarized by Frederic Jameson’s aphorism “Always historicize!” Thus, to learn something about the text’s nature – if that is taken as a goal of interpretation *pace* Umberto Eco – is to learn something about the cultural and historical context of the text’s production.¹³ Since other essays in this collection address broader cultural aspects of the Hebrew Bible’s production, in this essay I remain within literary readings.

To say that reading using Western dichotomies may be methodologically erroneous is not to say that dichotomies or binaries did not exist in Hebrew literature. In fact, Hebrew- and cognate-language literatures exhibit a high degree of binaristic thinking: the word-pairs and parallelism exhibited in elevated prose display binaries embedded deeply in the literary style. However, those binaries are not necessarily evidence of dichotomous or dualistic thought. For example, in the common word-pairs *זהב-כסף* and *ארץ-שמים* there is no reason to think that silver was superior to gold (or vice versa), or that skies were valued more highly than earth. It is easy to multiply examples: *משפט-צדקה*, *מעים-בטן*, *לילה-יום* (justice-righteousness, guts-belly,

12 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (see n. 2), 133, emphases original.

13 U. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); cf. J. Culler, *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 166–182 for an analysis of interpretation vs. overinterpretation.

night-day), etc. Most word-pairs are synonymous or correlative.¹⁴ Thus the first principle in recognizing and interpreting binaries in biblical texts must be that one cannot necessarily plot them onto a simple list of opposites: good–bad, valued–denigrated. What follows is that there may not be an essentialist epistemology underlying these texts. Value may be contingent; that is, locally and situationally shaped.

If value is contingent in biblical texts, then we must restart feminist or gender-critical literary readings of those texts. It also means breaking down the essentialist–constructivist binary in discussions of gender. This returns us to the utility of work such as Butler’s, Grosz’s, and Sedgwick’s: work that transgresses boundaries between man and woman, body and mind, self and other. This work encompasses a de-privileging of the Cartesian subject in Western thought, which may have significant heuristic consequences for understanding non-Platonic epistemologies and especially their non-Cartesian cultural products.

Focalization/Point-of-view

Returning to the narratology of Bal, and a similar expression in the work of Adele Berlin, one of the most useful concepts in Bal’s system of semiology is *focalization* (point-of-view, perspective).¹⁵ At its most basic, analysis of focalization seeks to answer the question, “Who sees?” Even when the story is told by a third-person narrator as in most biblical narrative, we readers do not always hover over the scene with a panoramic view. The deictic particle הנה “behold” is perhaps the most obvious indicator that we are being brought to identify with one character rather than another. Alongside הנה, we may also consider the common idioms לפני/מפני, literally “in/from X’s face,” and לעיני/בעיני, literally “to/in X’s eyes.” Both *embody* the abstract: “before X/in X’s presence,” and “in X’s sight/X’s opinion.” In all cases, we are brought to identify with X’s position, whether it be spatial, temporal, cognitive, emotional, or moral. Furthermore, certain verbs of motion also presume a spatial position. The common military idiom יצא/בוא, “to go out and come in” suggests that the perspective is that of a fortified position (city, fortress, military camp) from which an armed party leaves for battle

14 W.G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (2nd ed. with corrections; JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 128–144.

15 Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry* (see n. 1), 35–36; eadem, *On Story-Telling: Essays in Narratology* (ed. D. Jobling; Sonoma: Polebridge, 1991), 75–108; A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (BLS 9; Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 43–82.

and to which it returns afterwards. Similar spatially-oriented word pairs are בוא-הלך (come-go) and הלך-שוב (go-return). However, verbs of knowledge and perception also allow us to identify a focalizer.

Studies focusing on perspective in biblical texts have usually dealt with the aspects of focalization that may be pictured using the heuristic device of filmmaking. Berlin's analysis of Genesis 22 was a masterpiece of this sort of interpretation.¹⁶ As such, it still emphasizes a certain disembodied form of perspective. Even the work of Bal and other feminist readers has been content to work with the disembodied transcendent spirit that comes to hover over the character, from whose perspective we view the story. What happens if we read from a profound corporeality, as Grosz did? Can we read from within the body? Specifically, how do the Hebrew words for sexual intercourse, the act of breaching corporeal boundaries, show us how to read from a corporeal perspective?

Reading sexual intercourse

There are several verbs, all often read as euphemisms, for sexual intercourse in Hebrew. The most common are בוא אל "to come into/enter," קרב אל "to approach to," ידע "to know/experience," and שכב עם/את "to lie with." There are a few other words that are used occasionally, but I will focus on these four. Notably, two are verbs of motion, while two are not. I will begin with the latter.

The verb ידע "to know" or "to experience" is a common verb in the biblical corpus, but has a specific sexual sense in several cases. It is used in three different kinds of subject-object configurations: man-woman; woman-man; man-man. The most common is a man as the subject and woman as the object (e. g., Gen 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16; 38:26; 1 Sam 1:19; 1 Kgs 1:4). The sexual nature of the word is clear in several of these cases: in Gen 4:1, 17, 25 and 1 Sam 1:19 the construction is "and X experienced his woman and she became pregnant/bore" In Gen 24:16, Rebekah is described as בתולה "virgin," qualified with "a man had not experienced her." In Gen 38:26 and 1 Kgs 1:4 the lack of sexual intercourse is noted: "And he did not continue to experience her," and "the king did not experience her." Within the context of all these occurrences, the focus is on the experience of the male characters: paternity/genealogy; suitable bride; male transgression; male impotence.

¹⁶ Berlin, *Poetics* (see n. 15), 44–58.

It is also possible for a woman to be the subject of ידע in its sexual sense. Most of these are part of a description of virginity: Num 31:17, 18, 35; Judg 21:11, 12; where ידע is part of a longer expression: אשה ידעת איש למשכב זכר “a woman experiencing a man in (the act of) lying-of-a-male.” In these cases it is plausible that the instances in Judges 21 were drawn directly from Numbers 31: The Judges 21 narrative has many similarities with Numbers 31 in the scenario of: battle, extermination, and taking of virgins as booty. The other two interesting occurrences of a woman as subject of ידע also pertain to a woman’s virginity, but have איש “a man” alone as the object (without the convoluted construction of Numbers 31 and Judges 21). In Gen 19:8, Lot describes his daughters to the Sodomians as “my two daughters who have not experienced a man”; and in Judg 11:39, Jephthah’s daughter is described as “she had not experienced a man.” The verb ידע as a verb of perception is also a verb of focalization, giving insight into the perspective of the subject. Both men and women focalize sexual intercourse.¹⁷

The third configuration, with a man as both subject and object of ידע, occurs twice: Gen 19:5 and Judg 19:22. The two episodes are closely linked in theme, style and vocabulary; this correspondence in the use of ידע is just one of many such similarities between the two passages.¹⁸ In Gen 19:5, the Sodomians demand that Lot bring out Yhwh’s messengers “so that we may experience them”; in Judg 19:22, the Gibeahites demand that the old host bring out the Levite “so that we may experience him.” In both episodes, the host’s response is to offer women instead of the male guests. When combined with the host’s words, the initial demand by the crowd is clearly sexual: “Do to them whatever seems right to you” (Gen 19:8); “Rape them [ענו אותם] and do to them what seems right to you” (Judg 19:24); the Judg 19:24 formulation is the most specific. In both episodes the term בתולה “virgin” is used to describe at least one of the two women offered: Lot’s two daughters and the host’s one daughter; Lot’s two daughters are specifically described as “they have not known a man” (above). While in Genesis 19, no-one ended up “knowing” anyone in Sodom, there was a good deal of sex afterwards, none of which is described as “knowing.”¹⁹ In fact, in a clever play on words, Lot is twice described as follows: “he did not know when she lay

¹⁷ Cf. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry* (see n. 1), 53.

¹⁸ S. Lasine, “Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot’s Hospitality in an Inverted World,” *JSOT* 29 (1984): 37–59. It is not necessary to agree with his argument that Judges 19 is dependent on Genesis 19, nor to agree with his analysis of the text as a tragi-comedy, in order to appreciate the detailed connections he drew between the two texts.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40, notes that both Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are followed by efforts to “repopulate.”

down and when she got up” (Gen 19:33, 35). In sum, men and women can both know or experience sexual intercourse in these texts, although the perspective is always that of a man.

There is one anomalous instance of ידע in the sexual sense, in which a man “knows” a woman, but his knowing is not a precursor to conception, nor is it used to denote the sexual innocence of a woman: the Gibeahites who ידעו אותה ויתעללו־בה “knew/experienced her and toyed with her” in Judg 19:25. In this case, ידע is used in the same way that the Sodomians and Gibeahites wanted to “know/experience” the male stranger(s). The Levite’s *pilegish* here is “known” as a man. She is “meta-gendered” or “meta-sexualized”: made into a man and then raped as a man.²⁰ She is “toyed with” (התעלל), just as Saul feared being toyed with in 1 Sam 31:4=1 Chr 10:4: והתעללו־בי פן ... “lest they toy with me”; Saul fears rape, not mockery.²¹ The feminist critic’s question of why the Gibeahites were satisfied with her, a woman, instead of the Levite, a man, has always required some analytical and critical contortion to be answered.²² Phyllis Tribble argued that conflict between men could be satisfied by sacrificing a woman.²³ Bal first read the story as a conflict between patrilocal and virilocal marriage and thus explained the use of the *pilegish*; later she read the use of *know* as ironic, since as readers we cannot know when the *pilegish* dies.²⁴ Ilse Müllner suggested that it was the foreignness of both Levite and *pilegish* that allowed them to be treated analogously.²⁵ Ken Stone suggested that as it was the Levite who was the target, raping the Levite’s *pilegish* achieved the same goal.²⁶

20 I use the terms meta-gendered and meta-sexualized in the sense of metamorphosis: the change of gender or sex in the epistemological realm of the text.

21 K. Stone, “How a Woman Unmans a King: Gender Reversal and the Woman of Thebez in Judges 9,” in *From the Margins, Vol. 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives* (ed. P. S. Hawkins and L. Cushing Stahlberg; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 71–85, here 77.

22 Or not. She can be reduced to a plot device: “[I]n order for the story to have its intended effect ... a rape-murder had to occur.” See B. Embry, “Narrative Loss, the (important) Role of Women, and Community in Judges 19,” in *Joshua and Judges* (ed. A. Brenner and G. A. Yee; Texts @ contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 257–273, here 265.

23 P. Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 73–76.

24 Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry* (see n. 1), 90–92; eadem, “A Body of Writing: Judges 19,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. A. Brenner; FCB 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 208–230, here 222–223.

25 I. Müllner, “Lethal Differences: Sexual Violence as Violence against Others in Judges 19,” in *Judges* (ed. A. Brenner; FCB 2/4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 126–142, here 132–141.

26 K. Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19: Subject-Honor, Object-Shame?” *JSOT* 67 (1995): 87–107, here 100. See the response by M. Carden, “Homophobia and

Reading with the concept of corporeality, I suggest that the Gibeahites make the woman into a man, into the body of the Levite man they wanted to rape: the body of the *pilegesh* is reconfigured; it is a pliable body, not a fixed one. In Judg 19:24 the host uses a masculine plural form to refer to the two women: this foreshadows what happens to the *pilegesh*.²⁷

The Levite's response to the rape of his *pilegesh* is not just about covering up his own dishonour, nor is it only about disguising his almost-rape. To be sure, in his speech to Israel he does change the Gibeahites wanting to "know" him to wanting to murder him (Judg 20:5). But he also changes the verb used to refer to their actions to his *pilegesh*: instead of the narrator's description of them knowing (ידע) and toying (התעלל) with her, in the Levite's speech they raped or abused her (ואת-פילגשי ענו), just as the old host had suggested in his speech cited above. That is, in his account they raped her as a woman is raped rather than as a man is raped. This matters to the Levite, because if she has been meta-gendered or meta-sexualized, then he has been lying with a man all this time. Bad enough that he should have been threatened with rape, with penetration of his own body, showing how unfixed was his corporeality and how his gender performance could be so easily undone.

The verb שכב, while commonly meaning "to lie down" or "to sleep," and particularly prevalent in the formula "to sleep with one's fathers," also has a sexual sense. The verb in its sexual sense is always used with a particle meaning "with," whether עם, את, אמש, אצל or אצל. It is thus a relational act that requires two participants. It is not something done to someone, but rather has a transactional or even transgressive aspect. Importantly, it can be used with either a man or a woman as the subject, although the two situations where it is used by a woman deserve some examination. Also of importance, it can be used in situations of rape, and these texts also merit examination. Finally, it is also used to describe sexual acts between two men. But most often it is used of a man having sexual intercourse with a woman, where the woman's consent is assumed or irrelevant. An example of (Leah's) assumed consent may be found in Gen 30:15–16: "And Rachel said, 'So

Rape in Sodom and Gibeah: A Response to Ken Stone," *JSOT* 82 (1999): 83–96, who suggested that the Gibeahites succeeded in "queering" the Levite (here p. 91).

²⁷ Perhaps this is preferable to the grammatical and syntactical contortions undertaken by some to understand אונתם as referring to the two women and the Levite. Cf. R. G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation and Commentary* (AB 6A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 276. Of course Boling was hardly aware that there were any women in the passage at all, cf. pp. 276–279. Compare "No reading, ancient or modern, should miss the simple fact that what happens to the concubine is an utter abomination," Embry, "Narrative Loss" (see n. 22), 262.

tonight he may lie with you [ישכב עמך] for the price of your son's man-drakes.⁷ And Jacob came in from the field And he lay with her [וישכב עמה] that night." An example of the irrelevance of consent for the unfolding of the plot can be found in a nearby text, Gen 35:22: "And Reuben went and lay with [וישכב את] Billah, his father's *pilegesh*." Yet שכב can also be used when the woman's consent is not assumed, is not irrelevant to the plot, and the action is rape: ויקח אתה וישכב אתה ויענה "And he took her and lay with her and raped her" (Gen 34:2); ויחזק ממנה ויענה וישכב אתה "And he grabbed her and raped her and lay with her" (2 Sam 13:14). However, in both these cases it is not the verb שכב that connotes rape, but the verb ענה "to rape/abuse" used alongside it.²⁸ In these instances, therefore, ענה must be used to make it clear that the woman's consent was not irrelevant, and was not given.

In light of the previous discussion, the instances of שכב being used by women become easier to understand. In Genesis 19, the two daughters of Lot use it in their speech and the narrator also uses it to describe their actions in having sexual intercourse with their father. While their actions are understandable given that they believe themselves to be the only three people left on earth, what the daughters actually want is not necessarily just children but sexual activity itself: "And the elder said to the younger: 'Our father is old and there is no man to come upon us [לבוא עלינו] in the usual way [כדרך כליה-ארץ]. Come, let us make our father drink wine, so that we may sleep with him [ונשכבה עמו] and we may have seed [זרע] from our father'" (Gen 19:31–32). While both daughters become pregnant and give birth, that is not the way in which they express their desires. Instead, they wish for "a man to come upon us in the usual way," and for "seed." While that "seed" (זרע) may be understood as metaphorical for offspring (its usual metaphorical meaning), it may also be understood as the more literal semen: the daughters want the sexual act itself.²⁹ Compare Sarah's laughter

28 Ellen van Wolde's contention – ענה should be translated as "debase" rather than "rape" – is a distinction without a difference (E. van Wolde, "Does 'innâ Denote Rape? A Semantic Analysis of a Controversial Word," *VT* 52 [2002]: 528–544.). What constitutes "rape" is a cultural construct. For example, up until 1983, legally there was no such thing as rape within marriage in Canada (see Department of Justice, *Sexual Assault Legislation in Canada: An Evaluation* [Ottawa: Department of Justice, Canada, 1992]). Illegal forced sexual activity, which is what she suggests is happening in many of the cases of ענה in the Hebrew Bible, may appropriately be translated as "rape." Other non-sexual activity may be translated as "abuse."

29 Cf. Lev 15:18: the recognition that the sexual act involves "seed from lying" (שכבת-זרע); perhaps only acts that involved the exchange of semen were understood as sexual. See D. Tabb Stewart, "Leviticus," in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (ed. Deryn Guest *et al.*; London: SCM, 2006), 77–104, here 89.

upon overhearing Yhwh promising a son to Abraham in Gen 18:12: “Shall I have pleasure, my husband being old?”

The other use of שׁכב by a woman is the case of Potiphar’s wife, who followed Joseph around, saying, “Lie with me!” (Gen 39:7, 12). Once he refuses her, her telling of the story to her slaves is interesting: she accuses Joseph of coming “to me to lie with me” (39:14). But to her husband she says, “The Hebrew slave whom you brought to us came to me to dally [לצחק] with me” (39:17). What she does *not* say is that he tried to rape her: there is no use of ענה; rather it is צחק “to laugh, mock, fondle.” She displaces her own sexual desire onto Joseph, *or* implies that she had opportunities for sexual pleasure that she could have pursued if not for her upright character.

The root שׁכב, used by women, places the agency for sexual activity with men. Used of men, it refers to sexual activity with a woman, most clearly shown by the expression למשׁכב זכר “the manner of lying of a male” in Numbers 31 and Judges 21. A woman may lie with a man, but his is still the active role. However, the verb שׁכב is also used of male sexual intercourse in Lev 18:22 (and 20:13): ואת־זכר לא תשׁכב משׁכב אשה “With a male never lie in the manner of lying of a woman.” Even though on the basis of the punishment in 20:13, interpreters often assume it means a man should not penetrate another man, given the above explanation of the root’s meaning of sexual activity with a woman, it more likely refers to a man performing a feminine-gendered act.³⁰ This text is not only about how masculinity as a gender is constructed or performed; it is also about the mutability of the body. The male body is not fixed: it easily becomes a female body. The meta-sexualizing of the body is the objectionable action. Compare the very next verse: ובכל־בהמה לא־תתן שׁכבתך (18:23; emphasis added). That is, do not have penetrative sexual activity with an animal. It is the man’s active role that must be proscribed in this case involving animals, but it is merely טמא “unclean.” A woman, on the other hand, who תעמד לפני בהמה לרבעה “stations herself in front of an animal for it to mate with her” (18:23; 20:16) is not performing a sexual act in the manner of human beings; it is תבל “perverse, transgressive,” and the verb used is the verb used of animals (רבע). It is not only that she takes an active role by

30 J. T. Walsh, “Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13: Who Is Doing What to Whom?” *JBL* 120 (2001): 201–209, here 206–208. The classic text is S. M. Olyan, “And with a Male You Shall Not Lie the Lying down of a Woman: On the Meaning and Significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1994): 179–206. Cf. also D. Boyarin, “Are There Any Jews in ‘The History of Sexuality?’” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1995): 333–355. Stewart’s argument (“Leviticus” [see n. 29], 97–99.) that this text forbids male-on-male incest is a bit strained, based on only one linguistic example.

stationing herself,³¹ but her body becomes the body of an animal: it is not a meta-sexualizing but a meta-species-ing act. She performs the feminine gender of an animal.

We have come far from the simple meaning of שכב “to lie,” but what we have learned is that a human man’s gender performance of relational sexual activity is at play when this verb or its derived nouns are used. Even when a woman uses the verb, she uses it to refer to relational sexual activity initiated by a man. These two “neutral” verbs ידע and שכב, therefore, show an embodied perspective or experience of sexual activity through their focalization. I turn now to verbs of motion, those that may presumably show the perspective of sexual activity in a more “cinematic” way.

First, in dealing with אל קרב “to approach,” paying attention to focalization is important. The root קרב in its nominal form קָרֵב, whether used prepositionally or not, has the connotation of inwardness or inside. We start from the inside and look outward to understand how this verb is a marker of focalization. Hypothetically, then, קרב may be better translated as “to come near,” which places the subject of focalization as the object of the verb (indicated prepositionally). A brief scan of the translations, however, reveals an interesting pattern: when used in non-sexual contexts, אל קרב is usually translated as “come near” or “bring near” (Hiphil), but when used in sexual contexts, קרב is usually translated as “go near,” or “go to.”³² The sexual act, therefore, is focalized by the man in the translations, while in Hebrew the verb implies a focalization by the woman (or in the case of Lev 20:16, the animal).

The case of אל קרב is merely a preview of the case of the more commonly used expression בוא אל “come to” in a sexual sense. The verbs בוא and הלך are usually seen as opposites: בוא meaning motion towards and הלך meaning motion away: “come” and “go.” It is intriguing, therefore, that הלך אל is used with a sexual sense only once in the Hebrew Bible corpus, in Amos 2:7, where a man and his father go into the same young woman. Usually the verb used is בוא. Yet again, the translators prefer to render בוא אל as “go to” rather than “come into” when a sexual sense is inferred.³³ A narratological

31 Stewart, “Leviticus” (see n. 29), 85–86.

32 A clear example is found in Isa 8:3: וַאֲקָרַב אֶל־הַנְּבִיאָה וְהָרָה “I came near to the prophetess and she conceived.” The NRSV reads “I went to”; the NJPS “I was intimate with”; the NIV “I made love to”; the KJV “I went unto”; the NASB “I approached.” Compare how the same versions translate Gen 37:18: וּבִטְרָם יִקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם “Before he came near to them”: NRSV “before he came near to them”; NJPS and NASB “before he came close to them”; NIV “before he reached them”; KJV “before he came near unto them.”

33 An example is Gen 16:2: בֹּא נָא אֶל שִׁפְהָתִי “Come into my serving-girl,” rendered in the NRSV as “Go into my slave girl; the NJPS as “Consort with my maid”; the NIV as “Go,

approach takes the focalization of these verbs seriously. When the mechanics of the sexual act are considered, the act is focalized by the one being penetrated. It is no doubt our own squeamishness about sex that leads translators to *not* translate ויבא אל־הגר ותהר (Gen 16:4) as “And he entered Hagar and she conceived,” with the construction’s directness intact. In this light, בוא אל is not a euphemism for sexual intercourse. It is a very direct, graphic, and corporeal expression. It is modern translators who treat it as a euphemism, and translate it with an English euphemism or idiomatic construction. Perhaps it is not an accident that the construction בוא אל is never used of male-to-male intercourse in the Hebrew Bible, at least not in a straightforward fashion.

One of the difficulties in Hebrew of using the construction בוא אל to represent sexual intercourse is that the same construction can be and was more often used non-sexually, as in Gen 19:5. While in most instances the intended sense is clear, there are a few instances where ambiguity can be read. In Josh 2:4, for example, Rahab tells the men of Jericho that: כן באו אלי “Yes, the men came (in)to me, but I don’t know where they were from.” Usually this verse is understood non-sexually, but why? Because virtuous Israelite spies would not have had sex with a prostitute?³⁴ But Rahab is speaking to the men of Jericho: whether the Israelite spies actually penetrated her or not, her neighbours would expect that they had.

Similarly, there are several instances where בוא אל is used in combination with שכב עם/את, which seems to indicate that בוא is being used in its more common sense, with שכב denoting the sexual act. Genesis 19:34; 39:14 and 2 Sam 11:4 all combine בוא with שכב. Importantly, these cases include the two instances where the woman is seen as the primary actor: ובאי שכבי עמו “You [f.] come in and lie with him!” (Gen 19:34); ותבוא אליו וישכב עמה “And she came to him and he lay with her” (2 Sam 11:4). In the case of Potiphar’s wife, by using בוא and שכב she makes it clear that Joseph did *not* penetrate

sleep with my slave”; the KJV as “Go in unto my maid”; and the NASB as “Go into my maid.” Again, we should compare a text like Gen 19:5, where the same construction is used in the non-sexual sense: אשר באו אליך הלילה “who came to you tonight,” rendered in the NRSV, NJPS, NIV and NASB as “who came to you tonight”; and in the KJV as “which came unto thee this night.”

34 R. D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 43–44, 47 for an exception, even though his translation of the passage on p. 36 is entirely non-sexual. His reading strategy ultimately downplays this construal by locating it within the surface level of meaning rather than the deeper theological meaning of the Deuteronomiic History as a whole.

her: *בא אלי לשכב עמי ואקרא בקול גדול* “He came to me to lie with me but I shouted loudly.”

With the foregoing in mind, we can turn to two ambiguous instances of *בוא אל*, Judg 4:21 and 3:20. The debate over the sexual nature of Jael’s actions in Judges 4 is extensive, and recently summarized by Pamela Tamar-kin Reis.³⁵ She proposes that there were two initial sexual acts between Jael and Sisera, which ended with Sisera telling her to guard the entrance of the tent in Judg 4:20. Then in Judg 4:21, Jael *בוא אליו בלאט* “came (in) to him quietly.” It might seem that the use of *בוא* is the more usual one (that Jael approached him), and that reading it sexually contradicts the pattern of women not being the subject of the verb, but Jael *does* enter Sisera’s body with the tent peg.³⁶ The phallic nature of her banging a tent-peg through Sisera’s temple, which seems obvious to me, is often not even commented on by recent commentators.³⁷ Her body, rather than being fixed as a female body, metamorphosizes into a male body, and Sisera’s from a male to a female body. It is not only that they are meta-gendered in a performative way, as per Butler, but also they are meta-sexualized. Both the gendered expression of the body as well as the body itself are changed. The meta-gendered aspect to the event is focalized by Sisera, the penetrated one, who takes on the usual female role of the one who is penetrated. Not only is he penetrated, he is raped – and we see the rape from his point of view: *ותבוא אליו בלאט ותתקע את-היתד ברקתו ותצנח בארץ* “And she came into him quietly and nailed the tent-peg into his temple and got off him.”³⁸ Then the focalization shifts to Jael: *והוא נרדם ויער וימת* “And he was deeply asleep and weary and died” (Judg 4:21). This reversal is especially pointed considering how Sisera and Jael met in Judg 4:18: *אל-תירא ויסר אליה*: “And she said, ‘Turn, my lord, turn into me, don’t be afraid.’ And he turned into her, in the tent.” While there is no other instance of *סור* being

35 P. Tamar-kin Reis, “Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading,” *SJOT* 19 (2005): 24–47; Cf. E. van Wolde, “Ya’el in Judges 4,” *ZAW* 107 (1995): 240–46, here 245. Reis’s essay provoked a response by R. B. Chisholm Jr., “What Went on in Jael’s Tent? The Collocation *בשמיכה* in Judges 4,18,” *SJOT* 24 (2010): 143–44, who categorically refuses to see anything sexual in this passage.

36 In Reis’s reading, which is imaginative and thorough, somehow she misses the use of *בוא* here: it would have strengthened her reading considerably; Reis, “Uncovering Jael” (see n. 35), 32. Considering that she construes *ויבוא אליה* “And [Barak] came to her” in v. 22 as sexual, it is surprising she missed *בוא* in v. 21 (Ibid., 34–35.).

37 T. J. Schneider, *Judges* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 79–80; Bal, *Murder and Difference* (see n. 1), 122–124.

38 The “difficulty” of construing *תצנח*, and whether its antecedent is Jael, the peg, or Sisera’s temple (Schneider, *Judges* [see n. 37], 80.) is only a difficulty when the action is not understood as sexual.

used sexually in the Hebrew Bible, it is a possibility here. Jael is the focalizer initially, playing the female role. Both Sisera and Jael act in ways that are typically gendered masculine and feminine; both have their bodies transformed into other bodies.

A similar ambiguity can be seen in the previous chapter in Ehud's killing Eglon. The number of scholars who have resisted reading this as male-on-male sex is really quite astonishing,³⁹ although it must be admitted that the text is very unspecific: "Ehud came to/entered him [בא אליו] – and [Eglon] was sitting alone in his cool upper room – and Ehud said, 'I have something divine [דבר־אלהים לי] for you.' And he got up from his throne, and Ehud used his left hand to take the dagger from his right thigh, and he nailed it [ויתקעה] into his belly/womb [בבטנו]. Also the shaft entered after the blade" (Judg 3:20–22). In this case, the first sexual act, in v. 20, is consensual, with the rape/murder happening as the second sexual act in vv. 21–22, introduced nebulously as "a divine word" or "something divine." Both Ehud and Jael nailed (תקע) their partner-victims, both entered them. It surely is not insignificant that Saul, after not wanting to be pierced or toyed with (התעלל) in 1 Samuel 31, ends up with his body nailed (תקע) to the wall of Beth-Shan. Eglon's body is permeable, unfixed; even down to his belly/womb; every other instance of בטן in Judges (13:5, 7; 16:17) refers to a womb, so it could be read here.

To come into or to enter someone: this is the action of a man entering a woman in the Hebrew texts. But the action is focalized by the woman. This kind of intimacy, this kind of experience of sexuality is shown to us from the woman's perspective. But this experience of sexuality described by בוא אל is never used of sexual intercourse legitimized by a (first) marriage. The construction is used in several passages (Gen 6:4; 16:2, 4; 19:31; 30:3, 4; 38:8, 9; Deut 22:13; 25:5; Judg 15:1; 16:1; 2 Sam 16:21, 22; 20:3; Ezek 23:44; Prov 2:19; 6:29). All but Deut 22:13 occur in one of several specific situations: 1. The woman is a secondary wife of some kind (Hagar, Bilhah, David's concubines); 2. The woman has already been married (Tamar, the case of Deu-

39 E. g., L. G. Stone, "Eglon's Belly and Ehud's Blade: A Reconsideration," *JBL* 128 (2009): 649–663, here 654 n. 19; J. M. Sasson, "Ethically Cultured Interpretations: The Case of Eglon's Murder (Judges 3)," in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay Oded* (ed. G. Galil, M. Geller, and A. R. Millard; VTSup 130; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 571–595. An excellent summary of the history of reading the passage as homoerotic may be found in D. Guest, "Judges" in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (ed. D. Guest et al.; London: SCM, 2006), 167–189, here 168–177. A briefer analysis which subsumes the features as "sexual," without explicitly discussing male-on-male intercourse or rape, is found in M. Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 82.

teronomy 25); 3. The woman is described or perceived as a *zonah* (prostitute) or an adulteress (Gazite woman, Oholah and Oholibah, cases in Proverbs); 4. The woman is not in a marriage and thus implied to be promiscuous (Genesis 6, Lot's daughters). Of the two remaining cases, Samson's Timnite wife in Judg 15:1 is perceived by Samson as having been adulterous: she was given to another man. The final remaining case, the only one where it appears to deal with marriage, is Deut 22:13–14: כִּי־יִקַּח אִישׁ אִשָּׁה וּבָא אֵלֶיהָ וּשְׂנָאָהּ ... וְאִקְרַב אֵלֶיהָ וְלֹא־מָצְאָתִי לָהּ בְּתוּלִים “If a man marries a woman and enters her, then hates her, [he must say] ‘I came into her but I did not find her a virgin.’” Since the woman is ultimately not found a virgin (on his say-so, admittedly), but is sexually experienced, she must be a prostitute or promiscuous: presumably an earlier marriage would have been disclosed in the marriage negotiations. If the two ambiguous cases in Judges 3 and 4 are included in the analysis, the implication is that both Sisera and Eglon were experienced as the female partners; they were not virgins. Thus in Hebrew only the sexually experienced – or those assumed to be so – focalize their penetration. Never in all the depictions of virgins is their experience of their first intercourse depicted. Neither do objects of rape have their experience depicted, whether the Levite's *pilegesh*, or Absalom's sister Tamar, or Dinah. Why might this be the case? A Freudian would no doubt find a fear of virginity,⁴⁰ but I am reading from a different standpoint. From a standpoint of corporeality, how are virgins and objects of rape similar?

Corporeality and sexuality

The privileging of man/mind over woman/body in Western thought is pervasive, and should be understood as a philosophical construction within Western thought. But the Hebrew Bible, a non-Platonic corpus (with the possible exception of Qohelet), is especially disserved when read through Western eyes. One index is the language used of sex. Translators have been particularly guilty of inscribing Western concepts of the body on the text: sexual intercourse is always focalized by the man; euphemisms in English hide the corporeality of the act in Hebrew. Yet there is a large lacuna in the corporeality of sex in Hebrew literature: the virgin woman and/or the object of rape. S/he never is the agent of focalization – even an animal is! S/he is the character that is not corporeal, not embodied. Dinah, Absalom's sister

⁴⁰ Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry* (see n. 1), 41–59.

Tamar, Lot's daughters, the Levite's *pilegesh*, the virgins of Shiloh, in none of their cases do we read with their experience.⁴¹ For men and sexually experienced women, the corporeal nature of sexuality is clear. Sexuality is performative and metamorphic: it has the power to turn a man's body into a woman's, to turn a woman's body into a man's, to turn a woman's body into an animal's.

In her essay on paranoid reading, Sedgwick asks feminist and queer readers what all our hermeneutics of suspicion has brought us. By labelling these hermeneutics a paranoid practice, she makes her point clear: not much! She also points out that uncovering and exposing oppression does not necessarily lead to the end of that oppression; she asks not what knowledge *is*, but what knowledge *does*.⁴² It is not enough to understand systemic oppressions, because that does not compel anyone to end oppressive structures. Quite the opposite, in fact: The hermeneutics of suspicion operates under the assumption that the means and methods of oppression are hidden and must be exposed – it is “trusting about the effects of exposure” – but when there are so many forms of violence that are flaunted rather than hidden, exposing violence and oppression as a means of eradicating it seems rather quaint.⁴³ On the other hand, as Grosz suggests, “Without concept, without theory, practice has no hope, its goal is only reversal and redistribution, not transformation.”⁴⁴ While I have not sought to expose oppressive structures in the text, I have tried to expose some oppressive reading practices. We already know that virginity and rape are problematic in biblical texts, and this is hardly hidden, so pointing it out does not advance the dismantling of oppressive systems.

However, Sedgwick's point earlier in the same essay is worth reiterating: sexual difference is assumed and then found by commentators. I have tried to avoid this tautology; perhaps I have even succeeded! The crucial difference in these texts about sex is not sexual difference: Several cases have shown that sexual difference can be metamorphosized. The crucial difference is in sexual experience. Men, women, and even animals know sexual experience in an embodied way, and all of their perspectives are available.⁴⁵ For men and women it is *knowing* (יָדַע), for men it is *sleeping with* (שָׁכַב עִם)

41 By reading this way, the rapes of Eglon and Sisera are occluded as consensual: they “wanted it.” In both stories, in the readings above it is implied that there was consensual intercourse prior to the rapes. Does this make a difference?

42 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (see n. 2), 124.

43 *Ibid.*, 138–140.

44 Grosz, *Becoming Undone* (see n. 2), 83, emphasis original.

45 Cf. *Ibid.*, 86 for a gesture towards theorizing human sexual difference within a broader animal world.

for women it is someone *coming into* (בוֹא אֵלַי) her. For virgins – and only female virgins are available as characters for our study – and objects of rape, it is different: They do not *know* and they are not *come into*. They are disembodied, incorporeal. Sexual difference is not the binary construct, sexual embodiment is. Gender roles are fluid, and not tied to sexual difference. The sex-gender dichotomy breaks down as a tool of analysis.

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Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel

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Publisher: Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, Postfach 2040, 72010 Tübingen
Can be purchased at bookstores.

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Printed in Germany.

Typeset by Martin Fischer, Tübingen.

Printed by Gulde-Druck, Tübingen.

ISSN 2192-2276 (Print Edition)

ISSN 2192-2284 (Online Edition)

Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel

volume 5 (2016), no. 2

Edited by

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2192-2276(201606)5:2;1-T