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# Women's Silenced Anger: A Feminist Reading of Susanna

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## Abstract

*The story of Susanna tells of a woman sexually assaulted, accused of adultery, sentenced to death, and then saved by the prophet Daniel. Throughout the narrative, Susanna seems passive while she endures this dire experience. Underneath her outwardly submissive behavior and silence characteristic of biblical women, she is, I suggest, fuming with anger. This exegesis challenges Susanna's historically docile interpretation by reading the story through a feminist lens of women's anger. After problematizing common interpretations of Susanna's character, I offer an empowered reading of Susanna that imbues her with agency by shifting attention to her anger. Within this interpretation, Susanna's narrative has the potential to speak to the experience of millions of women who have endured sexual violence.*

## Introduction

The story of Susanna accompanies the Book of Daniel, appearing as an appendix in Chapter 13 of the book. Although the narrative is titled after Susanna, Daniel remains the protagonist,<sup>1</sup> while Susanna is framed passively. In this paper, I offer a reading of Susanna that questions the reliability of the narrator, embracing a hermeneutic of feminist suspicion that places Susanna at the center of her own experience. Underneath her outwardly submissive behavior and silence, she is, I suggest, fuming with anger. Indeed, her narrative speaks to the experience of millions of women who have endured sexual violence. I challenge Susanna's docile appearance by reading the story against the grain, through the lens of women's anger.

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 426.

### **Context**

Susanna's story begins by naming her husband and identifying Susanna as a beautiful, pious woman. On her husband's grand estate, she walks frequently in the garden. Two men, who are judges within the Jewish community, see her every day in the garden and lust after her (vv. 2-14). One day, Susanna decides to bathe in the garden and the judges hide to watch her. When she is alone, they reveal themselves and harass her to have sex with them. They give her an ultimatum: give in to their desires or be falsely accused of adultery and executed (vv. 15-21). She refuses, for she would rather die than have sex with them. Shouting ensues from both Susanna and the men. Her servants rush into the garden and the judges begin their accusations (vv. 22-27). They gather the community at her husband's house to begin her trial of execution. Susanna is stripped naked in front of her family and community. The judges' false testimony is believed because of their rank and authority (vv. 28-41). Susanna does not testify but prays to God. Hearing her prayer, God inspires the young prophet, Daniel, to intercede and investigate (vv. 42-46). Through a cross-examination of the judges, Daniel reveals the truth, and they are executed instead of Susanna (vv. 51-62).

### **Interpretations of Susanna**

*"A very beautiful woman"*

Susanna is not given many characteristics or much character development in the biblical text. In fact, her physical appearance possesses more narrative power than Susanna herself. Her beauty is the focal point and the reason behind the conflict: it compels men to objectify her and leads to her attempted rape. From a feminist perspective, this interpretation is problematic for several reasons. The irresistible beauty motif invites and enables the male gaze, which can

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present itself in three ways: “the gaze *in* the text (of male characters at female characters), the gaze *of* the text (of presumably male authors, through their narrators, at their literary creations and the rest of the world), or the gaze *at* the text (of readers at a text and its characters).”<sup>2</sup> It is possible to see all three of these components in the story of Susanna. In the text, the gazes of the two male judges are indicative of their desires to own and dominate Susanna. The narrative gaze of the text becomes clear in the description of the judges’ lust for Susanna and her bathing routine. She requests that her maids bring her “olive oil and ointments” so she can bathe (v. 17), a request that in an Ancient Near-Eastern narrative context would have had overtly sexual undertones. And thirdly, Susanna’s beauty is presented as entertainment for the reader. Susanna as the narrative object rather than subject allows readers to place themselves in the shoes of the judges.<sup>3</sup> In these ways, a private bathing scene becomes a voyeuristic, misogynistic narration through the gazes of the judges, author, and reader.

*“Feared the Lord and trained in the Law of Moses”*

Because Susanna is possibly the daughter of a priest, the author may have been compelled to describe her as a pious woman (v.2) so that his later sexualization of her did not appear too corrupt.<sup>4</sup> Susanna’s faith and education in the law serve as an advantage: they are what save her from rape and death. Her fear in God compels her to deny the judges’ forceful advances, as before the judges could overpower her, she “cried out with a loud voice” (v.24). The narrator would have been familiar with Deuteronomic law, which states that a woman being molested must cry out or else she carries blame (Deut 22:24).<sup>5</sup> After Susanna cries out, her

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<sup>2</sup> Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, “Biblical Bathing Beauties and the Manipulation of the Male Gaze: What Judith Can Tell Us about Bathsheba and Susanna,” *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 33.2, 2017, 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>4</sup> Collins, 429.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

servants hear her and rush into the garden. Her faith has saved her from rape, but the outcome of her court trial is still uncertain.

Within the patriarchal society, Susanna did not have legal power to speak or defend herself. She remains quiet while the judges accuse her, but she creatively breaks silence by utilizing her spiritual power in a seemingly powerless situation.<sup>6</sup> When Susanna speaks, it is in the form of a prayer that is powerful enough to change the plot.<sup>7</sup> After God hears her prayer, God “stirred up the holy spirit” within Daniel (v. 45), who saves her. Daniel receives a significant amount of praise for saving Susanna. However, upon closer inspection, it is clear that Daniel would not have saved Susanna if it were not for her prayer. She prays in front of the entire court for all to hear (v. 42). Daniel must have heard this prayer, yet he does not act until God intervenes. If Susanna did not pray, would God have saved her? Elma Cornelius suggests that Susanna gained spiritual power by giving up her own power.<sup>8</sup> While this expression of Susanna’s faith may appear encouraging to those seeking feminist interpretations, I believe that we should be cautious with how this interpretation could cause further damage to survivors of sexual violence. Daniel, in a way, was *given* power and motivation by God to become the story’s savior. Susanna was left to maintain her submissive position, waiting for God to intervene. This conveys a troubling message that identifying as a spiritually powerful woman requires remaining passive in distressing or violent situations. What changes when women claim a God-given power to act on their own behalf in the world in addition to claiming their own spiritual power?

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<sup>6</sup> Elma Cornelius, “What kind of power can build society? A remarkable power play in Susanna,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(3), 2019, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Marx, 227.

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius, 4

*“Woman of great refinement”*

Susanna's husband is a wealthy man. This is evident in the garden attached to his estate. We know that Susanna profits from this wealth because she has servants who help with tasks such as preparing her bath. However, this wealth is not her own. In her position, she did not personally own any material possessions. Her value and refinement are defined by her success as a wife and mother.<sup>9</sup> In early artistic depictions of Susanna, she was painted as a woman of marital chastity, a representation that places the responsibility of chastity and spousal commitment on the shoulders of women.<sup>10</sup> The devotion of a wife to her husband is then held to the standard of martyrs' faithfulness to God. She chooses death over adultery. Susanna is used as a model to train women to be “sexual gatekeepers, responsible for the proper regulation of men's sexuality.”<sup>11</sup> Susanna truly gatekeeps by ordering servants to “shut the garden doors” for privacy (v.17). After she screams to alert her servants of the judges' presence, one judge runs to open the gate, signifying an inability to keep their own chastity in check (v. 25).

Susanna's refinement is further expressed through the veil that she dons as she enters her trial (v. 31-32). The veil is ultimately stripped from her body, denoting her alleged failure in marital chastity. I assert that this act of forced nakedness is a form of sexual violence. The judges failed in raping her; therefore, in a desperate, final attempt to see her naked form, they unveil her and “feast on her beauty” (v. 32). Here, the male gaze derives great pleasure by defiling a chaste, refined woman. Susanna was legally and socially unattainable, but by unveiling her, they continued to satisfy their voyeuristic pleasure.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>10</sup> Babette Bohn, “Rape and the Gendered Gaze: ‘Susanna and the Elders’ in Early Modern Bologna,” in *Biblical Interpretations*, 9(3), 2001, 261.

<sup>11</sup> Karen Ross, Megan K. McCabe, and Sara Wilhelm Barbers, “Christian Sexual Ethics and the #MeToo Movement: Three Moments of Reflection on Sexual Violence and Women's Bodies,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 39(2), (2019), doi: 10.5840/jsce201939238, 344.

*Susanna as Temptress*

As scholars began to study Susanna, her model of female virtue morphed into seduction and temptation.<sup>12</sup> This evolution of the story's analysis was influenced by the development of artistic expression and cultural attitudes toward sex. In the early Renaissance period, paintings that depicted female nudity captivated male art enthusiasts. Concurrently, rape was not a serious crime.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, male patrons and artists "identified more with the villainous elders than with the heroine."<sup>14</sup> Susanna became an alluring temptress, beguiling those who gazed at her beauty. Tertullian, a church father, believed Susanna was to blame for what transpired because her bathing and nakedness welcomed the attention.<sup>15</sup> Other paintings combined her enticing sensuality with her piety. As she is gazing upwards with a heavenly light, her clothing barely covers her naked body. Her piety and chastity are distorted by subtle, provocative imagery.<sup>16</sup> Interpreting Susanna as a temptress is being complicit in her sexual assault and unjustly holds her accountable for the sins of others. Her attempts for privacy and her passivity in the conflict clearly indicate that the depraved attention was not welcomed, as some suggest. Susanna's silent and passive beauty, piety, and refinement in the text become distorted as temptation: she was asking for it.<sup>17</sup>

*Susanna as Silent*

Finally, the most striking characteristic about Susanna is her silence. She is harassed, assaulted, exposed, defiled, humiliated, and disbelieved. We come to know about her in the most

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<sup>12</sup> Bohn, 261.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>15</sup> Tamber-Rosenau, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Bohn, 279.

<sup>17</sup> Jennie Grillo, "Seeing Silence: Susanna's Christological Quiet," in *Anglican Theological Review*, 99(4), 2016, 744.

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intimate ways and yet she “repeatedly goes unheard.”<sup>18</sup> We must first understand the harsh truths of living in her world before we begin to interpret the use of her silence. In Susanna’s historical, cultural, and religious setting, her silence is compliant with gender norms and fulfills what is expected of her as a woman in antiquity.<sup>19</sup> Her withdrawal is pragmatic within the environment she lived in.<sup>20</sup> Women in this social context were constricted to their role as objects and property to men. She is not intended to be a strong presence but rather a “passive helper” to put the “male representative of a male God” at the center.<sup>21</sup> Susanna’s silence is a narrative tool that paves the way for Daniel to rise as hero and prophet.

Susanna’s passivity can also be interpreted as a trauma response.<sup>22</sup> The ordeal that she was forced through may have been too overwhelming for words to express. The fight or flight responses are commonly understood ways in which the body reacts to danger. However, the freeze response is another reaction that activates when neither fight nor flight will save one from threat.<sup>23</sup> Susanna may have assessed that any response, other than passivity and silence, would not have helped.

Silence can also be a response to shame,<sup>24</sup> something displayed throughout Susanna’s story. Her servants are ashamed when they find their mistress accused of fornication and adultery (v. 27). The community at the trial weeps when it sees her unveiled (v. 33). Once Susanna is found innocent, her family is relieved that shame did not fall upon her or the family (v. 63). The one person who is put under shame, however, does not appear to show shame at all. After the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 742.

<sup>19</sup> S. Philip Nolte, “A Politics of the Female Body. Reading Susanna (LXX Additions to Daniel) in a Brutalized South African Society,” in *BN NF 168*, (2016), 150.

<sup>20</sup> Grillo, 744.

<sup>21</sup> Nolte, 149.

<sup>22</sup> Grillo, 742

<sup>23</sup> Leon F. Seltzer, “Trauma and the Freeze Response: Good, Bad, or Both,” *Psychology Today*, (July 8, 2015), [psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/201507/trauma-and-the-freeze-response-good-bad-or-both](http://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/201507/trauma-and-the-freeze-response-good-bad-or-both).

<sup>24</sup> Grillo, 745.



judges unveil Susanna, they place their hands on her head. Susanna looks upward, not downward in submission (v. 34). By looking upward after this action, Susanna refuses shame.<sup>25</sup> She then breaks her silence and cries out her prayer.

Her motivation for rejecting shame, looking up, and praying may be a desire to embrace shamelessness.<sup>26</sup> However, I no longer want to ask why she is silent or to question the power of her silence. Instead, I want to ask *what is happening in her silence*. What is brewing in her soul while she is unveiled and accused? Her silence and prayer arise, I suggest, from an emotion that is negatively stigmatized for women. I believe that in Susanna's silence, there is a smoldering anger that serves as the deepest incentive guiding her prayer to God.

### **Anger in the Hebrew Bible**

Concepts of anger have evolved throughout generations. It has been understood as a “natural response to painful situations,” “a disease of the mind,” a response to personal or social attack, and a physiological response to an emotional stimulus.<sup>27</sup> Each language and culture has its own unique ideas about and expressions of anger.<sup>28</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, anger frequently arises “as a response to disregarded authority” which informs us that anger “is reserved only for the few who hold positions of power.”<sup>29</sup> Considering women's inferior status to men and the cultural expectations of the time, it is no surprise that angry expression is only witnessed in biblical men. Anger in scripture presents itself in many forms, ranging from heat and facial

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<sup>25</sup> Grillo, 746.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 747.

<sup>27</sup> Deena Grant, “Divine anger in Biblical Literature” (PhD diss., New York University, 2009), 3-7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

expressions to wind and water.<sup>30</sup> A feminist interpretation of these abstract descriptions can invite a broader and more creative understanding of anger as applied to Susanna.

In my reading of Susanna, I examine her emotional and physiological responses through the lens of anger framed by Beverly Wildung Harrison and Soraya Chemaly. Harrison's feminist moral theology defines anger as "a sign of some resistance in ourselves to the moral quality of the social relations in which we are immersed."<sup>31</sup> Chemaly similarly assigns moral qualities to the emotion by distinguishing women's anger as a challenge to the status quo, something different from men's anger.<sup>32</sup> Susanna was denied the opportunity to express anger as biblical men do. But if we believe that women in antiquity did not feel anger at all, I believe that we would lose enlightening and profound biblical interpretations.

### **Susanna's Anger**

*"Then Susanna groaned"*

We encounter Susanna's first emotion when the judges approach her and give her the choice of sex or death. The text reads:

When the maids had gone out, the two elders got up and ran to her. They said, "Look, the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us. We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away." Susanna groaned and said, "I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord" (v. 19-23).

In Susanna's groan, I hear the groans of millions of women. I envision this as a groan of fear, annoyance, disgust, irritation, and anger. Harassment is so deeply engrained in the experience of

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<sup>30</sup> Zacharias Kotzé, "Metaphors and Metonymies for Anger in the Old Testament: A Cognitive Linguistic Approach," in *Scriptura*, (2005), 119-123.

<sup>31</sup> Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers," in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 36, (1981), 49.

<sup>32</sup> Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger*, (New York, NY: Atria), 2018, xvii.

women that we expect it as part of our lives. Women leave their homes everyday prepared to encounter harassment. In 2019, eighty-one percent of women in the United States reported having experienced some form of sexual harassment.<sup>33</sup> Susanna's historical context did not enforce laws that defended women's safety, even as modern protections can still leave much to be desired. In this way, we can hear Susanna's groan as an angered lament for all women who have been sexually harassed, assaulted, and violated.

*"Through her tears she looked up toward Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord"*

While many understand Susanna to be sad in this verse (v. 35), I suggest that Susanna's tears are ones of both sadness and anger. Angry tears are a psychological and physiological reaction to injustice. Psychologically, anger and sadness emerge in response to unjust treatment, hurt, or humiliation.<sup>34</sup> Physiologically, body heat rises when angry. As body temperature increases, there is an increased blood flow to the face and nose.<sup>35</sup> This change and irritation to the facial area can lead to eye and nasal fluids leaking. Sadness and anger can be physically emoted in similar ways, yet when we see this physiological response in women, we often assume sadness.

Women's anger challenges and dismantles gender norms,<sup>36</sup> and we have a responsibility to Susanna's dignity to imbue her with this gender-transgressing emotion. If Susanna had expressed anger as men express anger, there may have been serious consequences for her. As a result, we can imagine that Susanna made her rage insignificant and unnoticeable. Chemaly writes that "when we feel fear, or anger, or a combination of both, we often freeze, act confused,

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<sup>33</sup> UC San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health, "Measuring #MeToo: A National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault," *Stop Street Harassment*, (April 2019), 10.

<sup>34</sup> Rebecca Joy Stanborough, MFA, "Why Do We Cry When We're Angry?" Healthline, (Sept. 29, 2020), [healthline.com/health/crying-when-angry](https://www.healthline.com/health/crying-when-angry).

<sup>35</sup> Grant, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Chemaly, xvii.

and stop talking in order to think. We become still and quiet.”<sup>37</sup> I believe Susanna’s tears are a quiet rage. At her trial, she was exposed for all to see. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually naked, what was she to do? Her circumstances would make anyone angry.

*“Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice”*

As Susanna listens to the false charges against her, her anger grows inside her. Eventually, her anger boils over, unable to be contained, and she exclaims for all to hear, “O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; you know that these men have given false evidence against me. And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!” (v. 42-43). This prayer is not only for God but also for her community.<sup>38</sup> A person who expresses anger and confronts others with the emotion is “demanding acknowledgment” and “asking for the recognition of their presence, their value.”<sup>39</sup> Susanna’s anger is a signal to God and her community that something is wrong, as anger is an active emotion that motivates us toward justice and change.<sup>40</sup> Susanna’s anger is present in her groans and her tears. And ultimately, her anger is what inspires her prayer and words. It is the underlying motivation that leads her to act via calling out to her God.

### **Susanna’s Anger Today**

The hope that I have for my reading of Susanna is for women to be able to look to biblical women and to find strength and solidarity. Women of faith have limited examples of biblical female empowerment. If we do, they are stories orbiting around the male narrative or displaying themes of femininity, chastity, sensuality, motherhood, and piety. Because there are

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>38</sup> Marx, 230.

<sup>39</sup> Harrison, 50.

<sup>40</sup> Chemaly, 5.

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no overt, powerful examples of women expressing anger, we must exegete scripture through feminist and suspicious hermeneutics to find relatability. At the same time, it is important to be realistic about Susanna's historical context. Ultimately, this story is not hers. Rather, it is a story that uplifts chastity, faith in God, and Daniel's wisdom.<sup>41</sup> We cannot completely save the story of Susanna, but we can become empowered by her justified and righteous anger. A feminist biblical framework that imagines women's anger is imperative for inspiring women to disrupt and resist cycles of repression, shame, and silence that still exist in society today, especially surrounding sexual violence.

Today, we see women leading social movements fighting to break such cycles. Tarana Burke, founder of #MeToo, and Patricia Cullors, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, are courageous women who have utilized their anger to protect women and people of color. In their conversation about anger and activism, Cullors said:

Most of us start this work because we're angry. We're angry about what's been done to us, we're angry about what we witnessed, we're angry about what we continue to witness, what hasn't been intervened on. And that anger becomes part of the emotional toolbox that lifts the work and drives the work. But I would also argue that you can't stay with just anger.<sup>42</sup>

As a survivor of sexual abuse, Burke responded that anger is not the center of these movements: love is. Anger is merely a tool. She describes anger as “a jump-off or a place when you can get a spark, but the rest of it is driven by love and compassion and humanity and humility.”<sup>43</sup> In this way, anger does not oppose love. Rather, when our anger is rooted in love, it is a “mode of

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<sup>41</sup> Nolte, 156.

<sup>42</sup> Tarana Burke and Patricia Cullors, “Anger, Activism, and Action,” *Elle*, (March 13, 2018), [elle.com/culture/career-politics/a19180106/patrisse-cullors-tarana-burke-black-lives-matter-metoo-activism/](https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a19180106/patrisse-cullors-tarana-burke-black-lives-matter-metoo-activism/).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

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connectedness to others” and “a vivid form of caring.”<sup>44</sup> It is an act of solidarity because it protects and cares for the vulnerable.<sup>45</sup>

The anger of sexual assault survivors protects them and shapes the relationships and communities around them. Susanna’s anger not only protected her but also challenged her community, as those in power who abused her were brought to justice. Shaming, erasing, or silencing women’s anger only reveals the patriarchal social structures desperately clinging to power. Women’s anger, in the work of love, guides us on the arduous journey toward justice.

### Conclusion

Susanna’s story depicts her as a beautiful, pious, refined woman, but her silence leaves her vulnerable to a history of sexualized interpretation. She is but a tool within a patriarchal context. But I believe we can learn from Susanna and become emboldened by her. By exploring a new question and delving into what is happening in Susanna’s silence, I have concluded that Susanna is angry. She has frozen in fear and, like many survivors of sexual violence, is denied the right to speak her truth. Therefore, she is left to simmer in rage, watching her accusers gaze at her body while her entire community condemns her to death. She finally breaks the silence, embraces her anger, and shouts in prayer to God, loud enough for all to hear.

Susanna’s silenced anger is emblematic of the experiences of many women today. Fear of rejection, marginalization, and negative consequences forces women to deny their anger in order to appease others. Susanna’s story and the abuse she endures can be a lesson for women: if we strive toward a just and feminist society, then the anger of the oppressed cannot be silenced. It is

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Vatican.va, 115.

an instrument for claiming agency and power. Susanna shows us that women's anger is not destructive but rather fights "for the full gift of life"<sup>46</sup> amidst suffering.

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<sup>46</sup> Harrison, 44.

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