HOLINESS AND HARLOTRY IN JUDEO-CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES: WOMEN CHALLENGING THE CONVENTIONS[1]

"Woman... Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you" (Jn 8:10)

In the Bible, one of the Hebrew words for harlot, *kedeshah,* has "precisely the same root" as the word for holy, *kadosh* (Kaufmann 124) an etymological link which raises intriguing implications and questions. Do the two meanings converge, or do they remain in opposition, one term excluding the other? Although Kaufmann takes a categorical view that the harlot is "one who has perverted her holiness," given the linguistic connection, one may also suggest an alternative perspective. Is the harlot the one who holds a potential for holiness, her "low social status" as "marginal" and "despised" (Bird 108) allowing her the freedom and flexibility of moving beyond the boundaries that patriarchy has defined for her? Which view does the Bible support? Can we arrive at a new understanding of harlotry through insights embedded within the Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition?

This paper will attempt to address some of the above issues within the limits of its scope, by discussing some scriptural texts related to harlotry ("harlotry" in a wide sense of the term, as will be clarified) and focusing on the narratives of four biblical women who figure significantly in Judeo-Christian scriptures -- Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba[2]. This study aims to highlight the moral and hermeneutical complexities posed by biblical women who violate social/sexual conventions.[3] Their stories present a dilemma since the protagonists violate biblical law and norms of morality, and yet, the four women retain a special status within the -Bible, being co-opted into the genealogy of the Davidic/Messiah lineage. Given this apparent contradiction, how do we interpret these female narratives, and what implications do they raise? In probing the circumstances, actions and strategies of these women, what can we infer about the connection between holiness and harlotry?

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[1] This paper is dedicated to the women in slum dwellings whom I met through the Shanti Community, whose experiences of oppression and attitudes of courage helped forge my feminist consciousness.

[2] These women are portrayed respectively in Genesis 38 (1-30): Joshua 2:1-24; Book of Ruth; and 2 Samuel 11:1-25.

[3] This study will attempt to take into consideration both Jewish and Christian perspectives on the topic, including rabbinic writings.

This study examines the tension between the selected narratives and pertinent laws (as presented in the Pentateuch) while maintaining that both categories need to be read in conjunction to reach a better understanding of biblical morality towards women associated with harlotry. In ancient Israel, as in most societies, a norm of conduct for women existed where females were expected to conform to certain acceptable standards of social/sexual behaviour. Prostitutes were viewed as deviants from the norm. According to Bird, harlots were "a kind of legal outlaw, standing outside the normal social order with its approved roles for women, ostracised and marginalised" (103). Bird further observes that a harlot is the "other woman" who is "typically contrasted to the "normal woman" ie, the married woman, from whom she is separated spatially and symbolically . . . she is a woman of the night who appears on the streets when honourable women are secluded at home" (100). Prostitutes were viewed as unholy and perverse, "lacking in wisdom, morals, and religious knowledge" (ibid 108).

While it is beyond the range of this study to analyse the construct of biblical laws governing female (sexual) behaviour, they were influenced in part by social mores and traditions prevailing in the region, including patriarchal views on what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable female behaviour.[4] Biblical legislation, if interpreted in a strict, literal sense, can result in a rigorous standard of conduct and harsh treatment of women. However, by reading the narratives and laws in conjunction, this paper will attempt to prove that there is a hermeneutical basis within the Bible for a nuanced interpretation of laws, which takes into account individual contexts and mitigating circumstances, as well as displaying a more sensitive attitude to harlots, incorporating the notion of *kadosh*. For the purpose of this paper, *kadosh* or holiness will be defined as a quality associated with one who manifests spiritual values and/or cooperates with the divine will and salvation plan.

Prior to commencing any biblical study on female characters, one has to take into account feminist claims on the patriarchal bias within Judeo-Christian scriptures. Feminist biblical scholarship has amply drawn attention to this issue, which makes it unnecessary to duplicate their arguments here. Schussler Fiorenza observes, feminists acknowledge that "the Bible is written in androcentric language, has its origins in the patriarchal cultures of antiquity, and throughout its history has

[4] For more background refer Tikva Frymer-Kensky "Law and Philosophy: The Case of Sex in the Bible," and also Phyllis Bird's "The Place of Women in Israelite Cultus" and "The Harlot as Heroine." Frymer-Kensky points out the "indubitable double standard in which adultery means sex with a married woman while for a married man to sleep with an unattached woman is not an item of concern . . .This treatment of adultery is part of Israel's inheritance from the ancient Near East" (295).

inculcated androcentric and patriarchal values" (21). The male position is privileged in some Pentateuch laws and teachings, including cultic rites, marital and divorce laws, rape and seduction laws, priesthood, jurisdiction, property inheritance, parental authority, civic rights. The New Testament displays a similar patriarchal bias in some texts. For instance, 1Cor 14 states, "women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." (34-35). 1 Tim 2 also forbids female leadership: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (1Tim 2:11-12).

In confronting biblical androcentric notions, feminist critics tend "either to condemn the text or redeem it from its male-bent environment" (Aschkenasy 10). Some feminists who are located within the biblical tradition tend to downplay patriarchal aspects or follow an apologetic approach. Alternatively, others may acknowledge and confront the androcentrism in Biblical texts, while attempting to "depatriarchalise" the scriptures from its dominant cultural perspective. For feminist believers, both Jewish and Christian, the Bible remains a divinely inspired text which continues to hold sacred relevance for women's lives. Schlusser Fiorenza comments that "the Bible has . . . served to inspire and authorise women and other non-persons in their struggles against patriarchal oppressions" (21). Such scholars recognise that despite some patriarchal bias, the scriptures provide a strong basis for a critique of patriarchy and unjust power structures (for instance, in Genesis where patriarchy is not validated, but rather represented to Eve as a curse/punishment following the Fall where "[man] shall rule over you" (3:16); or Galatians 3:28 which states "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In order then to "liberate" sacred scripture from its androcentric concepts/interpretations, Schlusser Fiorenza suggests that feminist biblical studies "must deconstruct the dominant paradigms of biblical interpretation and reconstruct them in terms of a critical rhetoric which understands biblical texts and traditions as a living and changing heritage" (5). Given this background, this study examines the topic of harlotry in the selected biblical narratives.

By definition, a harlot or prostitute is "a woman who offers sexual favours for pay" (Bird 100). The Bible uses two words for prostitute: *kedeshah* and *zona*. The former was involved in forms of (ritual) worship, probably Canaanite in origin, and tends to be associated with sacred prostitution, though some critics disagree on this point (Frymer-Kensky 201, Van Der Toorn). On the other hand, the *zona* refers to an ordinary harlot without any religious/ritual role, whose services could be hired

in public places such as brothels, inns, taverns, or street corners. Among the biblical women featured in this paper, only Rahab is a *zona* in the commonly understood sense of the term, although Tamar poses as a prostitute, receiving a pledge of payment from her father-in-law for an incestuous sexual encounter, and is referred to as both *zona* and *kedesha* in the text (Frymer-Kensky 201). The inclusion of Ruth and Bathsheba in this research paper may seem incongruous, since neither of them engages in prostitution. However, their addition may be justified if we recognise the more generalised notion of "playing the harlot." Crude epithets like "whore" "loose/cheap woman," or "acting like a tart" have often been applied to females whose sexual/social behaviour did not conform to the norm, implying their affinity to prostitutes. As the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* states, "the term [prostitute] came to include any women who abandoned herself to any man even if not for pay." Haberman also observes, "in rabbinic materials, the *zona* becomes a general term for a woman whose sexual behaviour is transgressive."[5] This claim has precedence when we consider that in Genesis, the act of "Dinah's 'going out' (34:1) cast her as a 'prostitute' (34:3; Zlotnik 51). Similarly, Bathsheba's adulterous liaison with David, and Ruth's nightly encounter with Boaz may be considered from this perspective to be comparable to the behaviour of a harlot. For the purposes of this paper then, the term harlot will be employed to cover a range of immoral (ie. violating the normative code) behaviours by biblical women, including incest, sexual advances, adultery and prostitution.

The ambiguous social position of a harlot is well-stated by Phyllis Bird: "her social status is that of an outcast, though not of an outlaw, a tolerated but dishonoured member of society . . . the harlot is that "other" woman, tolerated but stigmatized, desired but ostracized" (100). Similarly, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* states that "the prostitute was an accepted though deprecated member of Israelite society" (1243). She enjoyed the rights of a free citizen and could seek the legal protection of the state, but was generally treated with disdain, "both desired and despised, sought after and shunned" (100). These ambivalent attitudes towards prostitution bear important implications for the female body, which becomes the object of male power and desire, the site of struggle between the "conflicting demands of men for the exclusive control of their wives' sexuality, and for sexual access to other women" (Bird 100). Judith Butler accepts as "given" that "that there is no sexuality outside of power," (95) a notion that is particularly applicable to the vulnerability and exploitation of prostitutes.

Despite a lacuna in our understanding of harlotry in the ancient world, one may nevertheless, raise fundamental questions about their experience: What did it mean to belong to a "female body structured according to male needs?" (Evans

[5] Comments on draft paper.

105). What led these women to exploit their own bodies—was it by choice, or the lack of options/opportunities for females? What attitudes of shame, guilt, low self-esteem and sinfulness might they have faced? Did they internalise the social stigma attached to their roles? How did the prostitute relate to her own body and its objectification? What might she have felt towards her male clientele who exploited her, and yet remained a part of the "respectable" establishment, facing no public humiliation? How did these women see themselves located in relation to (Israel) religion and society, with its well-defined moral boundaries? One can raise questions, but the answers remain elusive since the authentic voices of such women have not been preserved for posterity. The extant male-mediated perspectives on prostitutes (ie. stanzas from *The Gilgamesh Epic*)[6] waver between disapproval and desire. In contrast, the selected biblical narratives reveal an unexpected shift from conventional attitudes, as will be discussed.

The biblical commandments on harlotry are few. Deuteronomy 23:18-19 forbids Israelite men and women alike from becoming sacred prostitutes, and states that their wages must not be used for vows. Israelites were warned against prostituting their daughters (Lev:19:29). A more severe warning is issued against a priest's daughter that if she "profanes herself by prostitution, she profanes her father and will be burnt alive" (Lev 21:9). In ancient Judaism, the Talmudic sages mitigate this law to apply only to the priest's daughter who is married or betrothed (and not to an unmarried/unbetrothed daughter). In this rabbinic debate (BT Sanhedrin 51a) Rabbi Ishmael argues that the married woman too should be excluded from burning (which is the more severe punishment, and instead be subject to stoning) while Rabbi Akiva argues for her inclusion, making his case on the basis that the biblical phrase has an extra *vav* ("and"). Rabbi Ishmael replies to this argument: "Do you really think that because you ascribe meaning to "daughter" vs "*and* a daughter" that we should take this woman out to be burned?" While Rabbi Akiva's view is upheld in the Babylonian Talmud, both this debate and the biblical text are strikingly silent on the transgression of the man with whom the priest's daughter "plays the harlot." Also absent is any comment on the role of the father who, as a priest, and a parent with near-absolute authority and jurisdiction over his female offspring, could be held partially accountable for his daughter's position.

Further highlighting gender discrimination, Frymer-Kensky observes that "the very existence of prostitutes indicates that there were women with whom a man (married or unmarried) could have sexual experiences. However, a married woman

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[6] The *Gilgamesh Epic* which is composed in Akkadian, features the adventures of Gilgamesh, a king said to have ruled the S Mesopotamian city of Uruk around 2600 B.C.E. (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*). Bird discusses the ambivalence towards the harlot in this text (*The Harlot as Heroine* 101).

could not be approached by anyone but her husband: sexual intercourse with a married woman constituted adultery, and both the male and female partner were killed [by stoning]" (191). The definition of adultery is the wife's violation of the husband's exclusive right of possession over her, while "the extramarital intercourse of a married man is not *per se* a crime in biblical or later Jewish law" (*Encyclopedia Judaica* 314). In cases where a husband suspected his wife of adultery, though lacking sufficient evidence or witnesses, he could subject his wife to a humiliating ordeal of bitter waters (Num 5:11-31). Here again "notable is the absence of a third party from the biblical ritual – there is no lover, actual or putative" (Zlotnik 106).

One other area of biblical commandments of relevance to this study is incest, where "complex incest laws declare off-limits all women who are part of the extended family structure" (Frymer-Kensky 191). Specifically, in the case of incest between father-in-law and daughters in law, which is explicitly called *tebel* or mixing, scripture says "both of them will be put to death; they have violated nature, their blood will be on their heads" ((Lev 20:12).

While the above biblical laws relating to female immorality are found in the Pentateuchal texts of Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers, the notion of harlotry appears in other biblical texts as well, including prophetic writings (such as Jeremiah and Ezekial) as well as in the book of Proverbs. Space limitations prevent a prolonged discussion, but as Frymer-Kensky observes, the prophetic texts often refer to the "wanton wife" as a metaphor for Jerusalem whose sinfulness causes her own downfall, as opposed to restored Jerusalem, which is portrayed by the beloved figure of *"bat-siyyon"* or "daughter who is Zion" (169). Harlotry also figures prominently in the prophet Hosea who was married to a prostitute, and his writings draw parallels between Israel's infidelity to God (ie. by worshipping foreign gods) and the behaviour of an unfaithful wife. This connection between idolatry/adultery has relevance for this paper, given that all four female characters under study have foreign associations, either by birth or through marriage. Further, the theme of adultery emerges in the Book of Proverbs where Frymer-Kensky comments on the dualism between the figure of Woman-Wisdom as opposed to the "other woman" the married adulteress in the morality tale of Proverbs 7 who represents "unlicensed, unauthorized and basically anti-social adulterous love" (182).

To sum up this discussion on scriptural texts pertaining to harlotry, clearly, the Bible has well-defined and strict commandments governing female behaviour, which can be rigid in application. The Pentateuchal legal system does not condone the blurring of moral boundaries, and with specific kinds of violations (adultery, "playing the harlot" by a priest's daughter, and incest) it upholds the ultimate penalty of death. While some of these laws (as in capital punishment for adultery) apply equally to men, they do so usually when the honour and prerogative of another man is at stake (either the father or a husband). Frequently, one can observe the

patriarchal bias of these commandments which offer a man privileges and protection that are denied to a woman (as in the case of the bitter ordeal, or in the case of rape, where a woman has to marry her rapist while her father receives fifty silver shekels -- Deut 22:29). While the rapist does concede his right to divorce, it can hardly be a comforting option for a woman to be bound for life to a man who sexually abused her and violated her body in the first place.[7]

The rabbinic laws, in some instances (like the *Sanhedrin* discussion cited above) mitigate the harshness of certain biblical commandments. While they may help to ameliorate the female position, nonetheless, by continuing to legally privilege the male perspective, the rabbinic laws (at least in the area under study) do not seem to make any substantial improvements on women's rights.[8] Admittedly, "the topic is hotly disputed," as Haberman comments, and the discursive nature of rabbinic texts makes diverse arguments possible. However, it is reasonable to mention that in a variety of areas such as divorce laws, parental rights, property rights, education (Torah study) and rape law, the rabbinic laws clearly lean in favour of male advantage, as one might expect in any patriarchal culture of the period. On the issue of prostitution per se, one comes across very few rabbinic materials. The following quote of Rava, "whoever has intercourse with a harlot will in the end be reduced to begging for bread," (Bokser 157) and some *aggadah* stories (such as the one on Beruria's sister who was abducted and taken to a house of prostitution, though her chastity was unbreached) reveal that harlotry was viewed with disapprobation (Boyarin 190,207). In Talmudic times, the *halakhah* imposed a general prohibition on the professional prostitute (*Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1246).

In evaluating biblical and rabbinic laws, one needs to contextualise them with other legal systems prevalent during antiquity to appreciate their relative merits and moral advancements. While it was not possible for this writer to locate research comparing biblical and ancient Near Eastern attitudes to harlotry, Zlotnik offers an excellent analysis of laws on adultery by drawing on Greco-Roman sources, as well as rabbinic and biblical texts (105-131). Her findings are useful, but too detailed to discuss here, except to note that Zlotnik gives specific examples where Jewish law

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[7] Haberman validly points out that according to the Talmud (Kiddushin 41a) both the victim and the father have the right of refusal to marry which is indeed a remarkable advance on biblical law.

[8] As a newcomer to the study of rabbinic texts, I am cautious of making generalized statements, given the complexity and multiplicity of discourses and perspectives found in these materials. My claims are based on the primary and secondary resources I have been able to access, as listed in the bibliography, and through some discussions with peers and specialists, while keeping in view that there are probably many resources which this study unintentionally excludes.

represents an advance over Roman law ("the absence of all other males, besides the husband, as parties to potential prosecution" 122) and other instances where the converse is true ("Roman law also weighed the role of an alleged lover, a factor on which the rabbis hardly ever commented," 125). Overall, one may maintain that the above discussed biblical and rabbinic laws were reasonable and sophisticated in the context of their time, presumably according women more dignity and better treatment than in most societies in antiquity, though from a modern feminist perspective, the male bias of some of these laws is blatant.

Keeping this legal framework in view, this paper will now shift attention to the selected narratives, focussing on each protagonist's circumstances, actions and strategies, and how their behaviours relate to biblical law. In Genesis 38 (1-30) Tamar who has been widowed twice and is childless, faces a precarious future. Judah, her father-in-law, has sent her back to her father's household (probably of Canaanite origins, according to Frymer-Kensky 124) commanding her to wait there till his youngest son, Shelah, is old enough to fulfil the requirement of a levirate marriage for her (Deut 25:5-10)[9]. In a society where a childless widow was at risk of destitution (if she had no male sons, her late husband's property went to his brother) a levirate marriage offered some measure of security (Aschkenasky 81). While the levirate institution has been critiqued for serving to ensure the patrilineage of a deceased husband (Fuchs 135) Tamar seems to readily accept the practise, having previously been through a levirate marriage (to Judah's middle son, Onan) and she probably anticipates the elevated social status of being a wife again. However, the text implies that Judah has no intention of keeping his promise (Gen 38:11) a fact which Tamar comes to realise after waiting "a long time" (38:12,14). Judah's cruelty lies in that he has "practically condemned Tamar to [permanent] loneliness and childlessness." Tamar cannot re-marry someone else, bound as she is to her dead husband's family by the levirate custom, and even in her paternal home, "she is no longer her father's responsibility and would have no claim to an affiliation with her father's clan." (Aschkenasky 81,83; Frymer-Kensky 123).

Desperate to escape this hopeless predicament, Tamar devises an elaborate strategy to secure her future. It involves posing as a harlot, having intercourse with her father-in-law and becoming pregnant by him, while holding onto a pledge of Judah's identity. Aschkenasky discusses the clever and well-timed nature of

[9] Levirate marriage required that "if two brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son," the brother of the dead man has to marry his widow, and the first born son she bears will succeed to the name of the dead man. In Tamar's case she was first married to Judah's eldest son, Er, and on his death, she was taken in Levirate marriage by his brother Onan who subsequently dies, leaving her childless again. The next step would be for the youngest brother Shelah to marry the widow, a move that Judah forestalls.

Tamar's plans, exploiting information she'd gathered about Judah's movements, and "sensing correctly when he will be ready to resume his sex life [after the loss of his wife]" (85). Successful though her strategy is, Tamar still remains vulnerable to the penalties of the Law. Though the legal system has failed to protect Tamar's right to a levirate marriage, ironically, it allows Judah to defend his family honour by having Tamar condemned to death and burnt for 'playing the harlot" (38:24). It is only when Judah realises that Tamar is carrying his own child (and perhaps hoping for a replacement for the sons he has lost) that he releases her from the charge, and admits to his own wrongdoing (38:26).

From a legal point of view, this narrative illustrates three violations of the biblical legal system—Judah's reneging on the levirate marriage law, Tamar's "playing the harlot" and the committing of an act of incest. Significantly, the text remains silent on the incest issue, offering no moral judgment on the gravity of their offence, despite the clear condemnation of incest between father-in-law and daughter-in-law in Leviticus. No explanation is given as to why Judah and Tamar are not subject to the death penalty for flouting this biblical precept. Instead, by having Judah conclusively admit that "She was right and I was wrong, since I did not give her to my son Shehlah" (38:26) the narrative conveys the impression that his is by far the more serious violation, and Tamar's actions are justifiable under the circumstances. As Frymer-Kensky states, "Judah realises that Tamar is 'more righteous' than he, that she has bested him in their battles of rights and obligations, deception and counter-deception." (124).

Unlike Tamar who only poses temporarily as a prostitute, Rahab in Joshua 2 (1-28) is portrayed as a professional (Canaanite) prostitute living in Jericho. While Tamar had already been integrated into the Israelite community through marriage, Rahab is located completely outside their boundaries physically, as well as morally and spiritually.

The narrative makes no secret of Rahab's harlotry. Her reputation is such that even the king of Jericho is aware of her profession (2:3). Bird argues that it is the very fact of Rahab's being a *zona,* an outsider in her own community, which makes her place (possibly a public house or brothel) a logical point of entry for the Israelite spies, providing them both access and cover (106). Haberman comments on Rahab's role as "a penetrable boundary-keeper, both inside and outside." The wisdom of the spies' choice is justified when Rahab saves their lives, being inventive in her strategies: hiding them on the roof "under some stalks of flax," (6) convincingly lying to the king's messengers on the spies' behalf, and later, helping the men escape by lowering them with a rope from a window in the city wall.

Rahab's benevolent actions towards the spies who are plotting against her own people, and at great risk to her life, is puzzling. Rahab herself offers an

explanation by declaring her faith in the God of Israel: "your God is God both in heaven above and on earth beneath" (2:11) and "I know that God has given you this country" (2:9). Accordingly, one might conclude that Rahab's actions are motivated by her belief that the Israelites are the chosen people of God, destined to conquer Canaan, and her wish to seek protection for herself and her family, knowing that defeat is inevitable (12-13). Bird also wonders whether "to understand her act as that of a social outcast among her own people, protecting the representatives of an outcast people, an outcast people on the move, that may offer her a new future" (107).

Both reasons may be valid, but undoubtedly, the narrative casts Rahab as a heroine who is partly responsible for Israel's victory in Jericho. In addition, the text highlights her familial loyalties and generosity as she requests guarantees of safety not just for herself but also for her relatives: "you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters and all who belong to them, and preserve them from death" (2:13). She is rewarded by having her request granted, thus saving herself and her entire clan, and the text hints that Rahab and her people settled down peacefully among their new neighbours (6:22-25). While no further description is given of Rahab's subsequent life in this text, the gospel of St. Matthew specifies that Rahab married Salmon, and had a son called Boaz, whose lineage included royal (Davidic) descendants. It serves as further proof of the successful entry into Israelite society by a Canaanite harlot, "by virtue of her righteousness" (Haberman).

An obvious question that remains is "why the Israelites [would] consort with a prostitute who is portrayed as a heroine, without apparent censure of her profession or role?" (Bird 105).[10] It is a valid query, considering the biblical disapprobation of harlotry. Would it not have made more sense for the narrative to have downplayed Rahab's harlotry, or at least to have registered her regret for her former promiscuous lifestyle? Another moral dilemma is that, as a foreigner, Rahab probably worshipped foreign gods and violated the biblical injunction against idolatry. While the text mentions her belief in the Israelite God, still, she refers to the divine as "your God" (2:11) and makes no explicit declaration rejecting the Canaanite gods, though presumably, she later adopted Israelite religious practises. Strikingly, the same book of Joshua contains emphatic instructions against mixing with foreigners: "if you make friends with the remnant of these nations still living beside you, if you inter-marry with then, if you mix with them and they with you, then know for certain your God will stop dispossessing these nations before you . . ." (Joshua 24:12-13). Regardless of these cautions, and the stigma of prostitution,

[10] Haberman suggests that "Joshua 2:1 seems to indicate the possibility that they even availed themselves of her 'services,' " which would further complicate the narrative intrigue (paper remarks).

the narrative shifts emphasis away from these transgressions to focus on Rahab's courage, her loving concern for the safety of her family and her kindness to the spies, presenting her as "a heroine and a harlot" (Haberman).

In one of those surprising links that is not uncommon in the Bible, Ruth is positioned as Rahab's daughter-in-law (through her second marriage) in the genealogy given in the Gospel of St. Matthew. Like Rahab, Ruth is a foreigner who is validated and inserted into Israelite society (in the Book of Ruth). A Moabite by birth, Ruth first marries into a Jewish family who had moved into Moab during a famine. Even after the death of her husband, the young widow seems to share a close bond with her mother-in-law, Naomi (1:6). When Naomi, having lost her husband and both sons, decides to return to Bethlehem, she urges her daughters-in-law to go back to their parental homes (1:11-12). But through her eloquent declaration that "where you go, I shall go/wherever you live, I shall live/Your people will be my people/and your God will be my God"(1:16) Ruth expresses her willingness to leave behind her family connections and native land "out of her loyalty for Naomi" (Fuchs 78). Perhaps Ruth felt concern for the survival of the older widow, who, lacking male protection in a patriarchal society, would have had no means of financial support.

Ruth's initial entry into Israel was probably a struggle, coming from a different culture which Aschkenasy describes as a "morally loose, corrupt society," (151) The two widows clearly hover on the border of destitution, since Ruth has to resort to a charitable provision available to the poorest, gleaning the fields of a wealthy man (Deut 24: 19-21). The man turns out to be Boaz who, Naomi is quick to realise, "is one of those who have the right of redemption over us" (2:20) and has the power to exercise the custom of a levirate marriage on Ruth. Though Boaz himself may be aware of this implication, he remains silent on this point. As Aschkenasy observes, "If Boaz has indeed heard about the women's tragedies and their present destitution [as he claims in 2:11] then why hasn't he approached them and offered them help before?" (152). It exposes a gap in the legal system, but neither Naomi nor Ruth is willing to leave their future to the mercy of an unsympathetic patriarchy.

Chapter 3 reveals the resourcefulness of the two women as they strategise to spur Boaz into taking the requisite action and offering them due protection. The initiative comes from Naomi whose "crafty planning and cunning manipulation" engineers an encounter between Ruth and Boaż "in the middle of the night to show [the younger woman's] availability and persuade him to marry her" ((Frymer-Kensky 137). Ruth faces up to the challenge with equal quick-wittedness. When the startled Boaz wakes up and demands who she is, Ruth has a ready answer: "I am your servant Ruth. Spread therefore the skirt of your cloak . . . for you have the right

of redemption over me" (3:10). Aschkenasy discusses the potency of her words, "in effect commanding the man to redeem her...and [giving] him a clear reason why the responsibility falls on him" (153).

The situation is happily resolved in marriage, but the narrative does raise a moral complexity. Ruth's midnight encounter with Boaz flouts accepted social/sexual conventions. Ascheknasy notes that "the narrator uses the euphemistic, suggestive phrase, the uncovering of the man's "feet" ...which is laden with sexual connotations, but does not explicitly indicate that Boaz was seduced by Ruth" (154). This moral ambivalence accounts for the secrecy surrounding the episode, with Ruth slipping in at night "quietly," taking care not to be noticed, and she gets up "before the hour when one man can recognise another," (3:14). Boaz too acknowledges "it must not be known that this woman came to the threshing-floor" (3:14). Both Ruth and Boaz seem aware of the implications of a widow approaching a man at night, that it could taint her reputation as "playing a harlot." Nonetheless, the narrative tends to valorise rather than condemn Ruth and Naomi (3:12-16). The plotting of the two widows, even thought it dares disturb the social mores, is portrayed as acceptable, since they stir Boaz's "sense of responsibility" (Aschkenasy 152) and prod him to take the right course of action.

If Ruth's actions are morally justifiable, the last female character in this study, Bathsheba, poses a greater quandary. The narrative of David's adulterous liaison with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-27) is too intricate and well known to merit analysis in detail, but interpretations of this text often focus on the king's "thoughts and speculations" (Aschkenasy 107). Bathsheba's own culpability in this episode is left open in the narrative, which certainly raises troubling questions. As Aschkenasy wonders, "did she fall in love with David or was she reluctant about the whole affair but powerless to resist?" Did Bathsheba willingly betray her husband (Uriah, a Hittite by origins) and expose his life to danger? Was she a naïve pawn caught up in a complex world of power, politics and military might? Or was she an adroit manipulator, perhaps even to the extent of initially timing her bath to expose her body to the male gaze of the king?

Critics tend to take various stands on Bathsheba, depending on their own critical perspective. Some read Bathsheba as an "unfaithful woman," while feminists regard her as "a victim of man's lust" or others see her as a passive female (Aschkenasy 108-109). This range of opinions is facilitated by the text itself where "the narrative gaps have been identified as the dominant technique in the tale" (107). It seems the narrative gaps are in relation to Bathsheba rather than David, for the text displays no ambivalence in judging the king's motives through the figure of Nathan in Chapter 12.

We know little of Bathsheba's personal life or her thoughts, except that she is linked to four powerful men: Eliam her father, Uriah her husband, King David,

and King Solomon her son. Both Eliam and Uriah are listed as elite warrior figures (2 Samuel 23:34, 39) while David's own heroic exploits needs no introduction. In such an aggressively male dominant world, one doubts whether Bathsheba had much freedom to make her own choices. Perhaps she learned early on that the path of least resistance is the easiest for a woman, to unquestioningly follow the bidding of the key male authority in her life. When David calls her to him, while Uriah is away, the possibility of resisting a great king may not have even been an option in Bathsheba's mind-set, even though she most likely knew that adultery was considered a capital crime. As Frymer-Kensky observes, "sometimes a woman's beauty can set her up to be a victim, in that men of power might desire and take her ....[just as] Bathesheba was taken by David. In these cases, the woman is an object and a victim" (140).

It is possible, however, to construct another line of interpretation, to read Bathsheba as a shrewd strategist (Aschkenasy 115-117) skilfully manipulating the men in her life to achieve her regal ambitions. The text allows for both readings by its marked silence on her motives, a silence which extends to Bathsheba herself. Her only words in this passage are the terse message she sends to the king: "I am pregnant" (11:5). By giving voice to just this phrase, the text epitomises her vulnerable position, and it could also be read as a strategy by Bathsheba to put "pressure on David." (Aschkenasy 117). After all, she is the one in danger of being stoned to death as an adulteress, obviously pregnant by a man other than her husband, while the king could easily deny his involvement. In this respect, her predicament resembles Tamar's situation.

The narrative clearly places the onus of guilt on David, both for violating the law of adultery as well as for the murder of Uriah. The prophet Nathan makes no mention of Bathsheba's culpability in delivering God's judgment on this incident (2 Samuel 2:7-12). In the allegory he employs, Nathan even compares Bathsheba to a 'lamb," which gives credence to the view that she had little choice in the outcome of events. Admittedly, in comparison to the other female protagonists, Bathsheba's moral position is ambivalent, and she does not demonstrate spiritual values/virtues in the selected passage, as was clear in the case of Ruth and Rahab. However, the very vulnerability of Bathsheba to the charge of "playing the harlot" justifies her inclusion in this study, epitomising as she does the plight of women who often have to bear the brunt of public scandal and overt moral disapprobation, when little is known of their complicity, innocence, or inner struggles.[11]

[11] For example, one may cite the public scandal of Susanna (Daniel 13) who is unjustly accused of adultery and saved from the death penalty by Daniel's intervention. His words: "Are you so foolish . . .to condemn a daughter of Israel unheard, and without troubling to find out the truth?" (13:49) could well have been echoed in Tamar's and Bathsheba's cases.

Having analysed four biblical narratives, one notices certain parallels among them. In all the cases, the women are placed in challenging circumstances, either outside society, or marginalised within the patriarchal social structure, lacking male protection or legal recourse to alleviate their conditions. Instead of passively accepting their fate, the women strategise to save themselves. Frymer-Kensky observes how "women who did not have the power, economic means, or authority to achieve their goals" resorted to various strategies such as manoeuvring, nagging, manipulating, deceiving or persuading men in power to help them achieve their objectives (130-137). She argues that "these women had no other way to do what they had to do, what was necessary for them to do in order to achieve. . . God's aims" (137).

Another common feature among the stories is that the women are associated with harlotry or "playing the harlot" and violating behavioural norms, risking their reputation and their lives. However, rather than advocating that the women be penalised according to biblical law as one would expect, the narratives tend to portray the women sensitively, taking care to draw attention to their positive qualities (fidelity, kindness, family values) as well as their vulnerability and desperation, giving reason for the reader to empathize with them, instead of judging them according to the legal standard. While the narratives do not condone or deny that moral transgressions took place (although in the cases of Tamar and Bathsheba, the text places culpability mainly on their male counterparts) nevertheless, the four women receive blessings instead of punishment.

The ultimate means of success and security for a woman in ancient society was to have a son, a goal which all the protagonists achieve. Fuchs observes, "all the narrative details are designed and orchestrated in accordance with this ideological perspective [to promote the institution of motherhood]" (135). Admittedly, modern feminists critique this paradigm of motherhood as the highest and only form of female accomplishment. Nonetheless, one must not overlook the significance of the four protagonists' achievements, within the limited roles and social space available to them. Not only do they defy patriarchal obstacles and create meaningful new lives for themselves, but their names are also inscribed into the Davidic/Messianic lineage, an unusual honour for traditionally "male-marked genealogies" (Furman 123).

An obvious challenge rising from the above analysis is the apparent contradiction within the Bible between the legal and narrative texts. As previously discussed, the scriptures present a set of well-defined laws, which maintain rigid standards of female conduct, with specific and severe penalties attached to violations of these commandments. Given this context, one would expect the narratives to uphold the validity of the biblical law, and to deter transgressions by illustrating that violators are subject to punishment/condemnation by God and the

human court. However, as the four narratives reveal, the transgressions of the female protagonists are portrayed with sympathy and even justification, and instead of receiving the prescribed penalty, the women receive blessings and rewards.

How does one explain this discrepancy between the laws and narratives? Is there a fundamental contradiction within the scriptures? Schwartz maintains that "in biblical narratives ... the truths are multiple and conflicting, and they resist the consistency, continuity and comprehensiveness that characterise metanarrative" (335). Her view, however, is hardly supported by this study where one observes a consistently empathic portrayal of the female protagonists in the narratives, with several parallel (rather than conflicting) elements in their stories. Alternatively, one could assert that the biblical narratives undermine the law, exposing the harshness of a patriarchal legal system. Or would it more reasonable to claim that the narratives and laws have different functions in the Bible, that one is not meant to comment on the other, and they ought to be treated as distinct and unrelated sections?

This paper posits a hermeneutics where the relationship between the legal and narrative sections in the Bible is understood as complementary rather than contradictory.[12] Such a reading insists that a more comprehensive and nuanced biblical morality can be arrived at when the narratives and laws are examined in conjunction with each other. This hermeneutics recognises the significance and sacredness of the law (in terms of upholding values like justice and righteousness, providing moral guidelines, promoting ethics, establishing social and familial order, deterring crime, to name but a few) while at the same time acknowledging the gaps and biases within the biblical legal system. These lacunae in biblical commandments can be attributed to concepts /codes originating from patriarchal cultures of antiquity, and the very nature of legal systems, which treats people as categories within a legislative framework, with the laws applying more or less uniformly to everyone, with little or no sensitivity to the finer details of individual circumstances.

Biblical narratives serve to fill the gaps in the laws, acting as a corrective for both the patriarchal bias and the impersonality of the legal system. As was evident above in discussing the cases of the four women, the narratives centre on the female protagonists as individuals, taking their personal circumstances into account, considering the mitigating factors in each instance, adopting a compassionate rather than condemnatory view of their actions and behaviour. The narratives do not disregard biblical law or deny its importance, but rather they extend the limits of these laws to embrace the requirements of a compassionate and just judgement, ensuring that the voice of the "other" is heard. The narratives demonstrate that case-

[12] My hermeneutical approach has been influenced by Ellen Davis in "The Poetics of Generosity" *The Word Leaps the Gap*, Eerdmans 2008, ed. J. Ross Wagner et al. (pp. 626-45).

sensitive interpretations of biblical laws are possible and necessary to arrive at an authentic morality.

However, it is important to emphasize that narratives by themselves would not be instructive, without having the laws as a referent. The circumstances, behaviour and motives of individual men and women in these narratives can be evaluated only within a legal framework, which enables a discourse on issues of justice and ethics to take place, giving definitions to such acts as murder, violence, sexual transgressions, and incest, etc.

As previously stated, a hermeneutics that takes into account the relationship between the legal texts and the scriptural narratives would allow for a more nuanced and meaningful interpretation of the laws, thus deriving a biblical morality which balances the demands of justice, with a compassionate understanding of individual circumstances. For instance, in the cases of Tamar and Bathsheba, the biblical laws highlight that a moral transgression has occurred, but by focussing on the personal circumstances of each woman, and portraying their desperation and helplessness, the narratives reveal that the women are more likely victims rather than perpetrators of injustice, not deserving punishment but reward. Similarly, with reference to the notion of harlotry, while there is a general disapprobation towards harlots as violating norms of acceptable female behaviour, the narrative on Rahab reveals a professional prostitute who is generous and kind in helping the Israelites in their time of need, and caring for the safety of her own family, rather than just seeking self-protection.

By interpreting the law in conjunction with the narratives, one arrives at a new understanding of harlotry in the biblical context. The women who "play harlots' in these texts do not lack morals, wisdom or goodness. They display some virtuous qualities which reveal their godliness. Furthermore, these women have their place in promoting the continuity of the Davidic/messianic lineage, and bringing about the universal salvation plan. The "harlots" in the selected texts do not merit condemnation on the basis of their external behaviour and action, but instead they demonstrate their growth towards holiness, and they cooperate with the divine will.

Evidence for an intra-textual reading along these lines can also be found in the Gospel of St. John where a woman caught committing adultery is brought to Jesus (John 8:1-11). The question posed to him demands an interpretation of the law: "This woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and in the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind. What do you say?" Jesus' response is best understood in view of the insights we have gathered from reading the narratives, in conjunction with law. Clearly, in this case the biblical law has been violated, but the other details are disturbing. Where is the man who committed adultery with her? What personal circumstances or desperate motives might have led the woman into this dangerous situation? Who is qualified to judge her? Does she

deserve death? When Jesus tells her accusers "Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her" and says to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you," he is in effect following the paradigm we have already observed in the narratives, that the woman who "plays the harlot" does not deserved to be condemned on the basis of her external behaviour, but to be treated with compassion and sensitivity.

It is not implausible to suggest that Jesus' perspectives as presented in the gospel account may have been shaped by his familiarity with the biblical narratives. It cannot be coincidental that the genealogy of Jesus (in Matthew's gospel) makes specific reference to the four women, Rahab, Tamar, Bathsheba and Ruth. These women represent a point of unity, of intersection within the Judeo-Christian scriptures (between the Old and New Testaments[13]) where the insights of one text illuminates the other.

In conclusion, this study has considered the notion of harlotry by discussing legal passages as well as focussing on four narratives of biblical women. It argues for a hermeneutics which takes into consideration the complementary relationship between the laws and the narratives, enabling the derivation of a more nuanced biblical morality towards women who have transgressed sexual boundaries. In applying such a hermeneutics to the selected texts, a deeper understanding was reached regarding the connection between holiness and harlotry in the Bible. While this paper has briefly addressed such complexities, there are related issues which merit further attention. The ongoing feminist investigation of biblical laws and some of their patriarchal underpinnings, deserves expanded study, including menstruation laws, divorce laws, child birth laws, inheritance laws, ritual laws, to name a few, together with any pertinent narratives which may serve to provide deeper insights into specific female situations. The hermeneutics proposed in this paper-- reading the narratives and laws in conjunction –can also be directed to examine areas where biblical women's roles have traditionally been limited (such as religious and military leadership, and decision-making) by focusing on women (ie. Deborah and Judith) whose stories have challenged social norms and legal boundaries. Finally, the pioneering roles of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba need to be acknowledged as biblical women who dared to defy the conventions of their time, even "playing the harlot" at risk to their lives, to journey towards achieving their potential for holiness / wholeness within a patriarchal world.

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[13] Current scholarship tends to use the term Hebrew Bible instead of "Old Testament" to break away from the derogatory notions of replacement theology in the past. However, this paper employs the former term with positive connotations of "Old" as in chronologically prior, rooted and established.

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