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CHAPTER I

Signs of the flesh

To arrest the meanings of words once and for all, that is what Terror wants.

Jean-François Lyotard, *Rudiments Paiens*

The use of the biblical icon is widespread in our culture. We are named Sarah, Leah, Jacob, Joseph. We live in towns called Canaan, Bethlehem, Jericho. We refer to a deceiving cheating woman as a Jezebel; a man is strong as Samson. On a recent best-selling CD-ROM Charlton Heston gives a sonorous reading of the book of Exodus from a craggy vista somewhere on Mt. Sinai. We are so accustomed to being addressed by these images that we scarcely notice their total impact. Indeed the tropes and figures of the Bible reside in the collective unconscious of Western culture as well as in the conscious streams of moralizing that drench our popular media.

Mostly we interpret biblical narratives in terms of binary oppositions: divine and human, male and female, Israelite and gentile. It is the intention of this study to use a variety of reading strategies to shake loose the habit of binary interpretations that have been bound by a central interpretive unity or logic. This logic springs from two mouths: either condemning or protecting women from the seemingly "clear" interpretations of biblical narratives. A central cause of women bearing the weight of patriarchy is to be found in the biblical portraits of women. If women want to extricate themselves from the androcentric logic of the roots of Western culture, they need to analyze the strategies, conscious and latent, that have been used to make all areas of life conform to the

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old androcentric biblical logic – or what we take it to be – that woman thwarted the divine plan. A majority of feminist intellectuals have freed themselves from the religious biases first planted in the Garden that continue to teach androcentrism as God's law. But this is not enough to change a culture.

As historians, anthropologists, and literary critics have all recently argued, the social construction of reality does not produce a clear and coherent world view. As any reader of a novel knows, to find one's way through a book is not the same as to make one's way through life. Yet the parallel can be instructive. A persuasive version of the process of reading has been developed by French philosopher Michel de Certeau, who understands reading as the appropriation of texts, or as he termed it, "poaching" texts. He argued that ordinary people are not helpless passive victims of texts, but rather they take what they want from mass media, regardless of the intention of the author. De Certeau was primarily concerned with the readerly connection between the characters of soap operas and life depicted within tabloids, the texts of those at the bottom of the social order, but he could have included the Bible as a text that everyone freely poaches.

Most important for de Certeau's argument is that readers use the same tactics in their everyday lives as they do in their reading process, snatching whatever advantage they can to survive within a hostile environment (de Certeau 1984: 168–70). De Certeau and others acknowledge that ordinary readers award life to the characters who dwell in their minds. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984) analyzes the way working-class women in contemporary America read Harlequin Romances, identifying with some female characters, judging others. Too often scholarly analyses of literary figures deprive the characters of the juiciness of life. While I agree with scholarly conclusions that the gap between the lives of real and imagined women can be large, the process through which ordinary readers identify with literary characters has largely been ignored. Similarly the route that a reader takes through texts is largely unknown.

The question of what are the significant categories in the study of a literary character is twofold. First, the study of character in the Bible has too often attempted to produce a theory that is unitary,

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homogenized. I suggest that readings need to incorporate the arena of contradictions: to acknowledge the endless conflict and negotiation that goes on within the mind of the reader, a matter of drawing lines, contesting boundaries, reinterpreting symbols, and rearranging experience into constantly shifting categories – an effort which corresponds to the efforts of readers to make sense of narratives and the characters who live within them. Second, it is important to realize and to take into account that characters exist in our consciousness independently of the stories in which the characters were originally encountered. This is how it is relevant to speak of a biblical culture today. But such a culture, then or now, can not be conceived of as pure and homogeneous. Assuming the ongoing "life" of characters, one can identify counter voices and forge links with other noncanonical literary figures. Again, emphasizing contradictions allows the reader to perceive the differences between culturally valued elements, such as rationality, language, masculinity, whiteness, over against that which is outside the white, male order. In biblical narratives, a major otherness is created between the chosen of YHWH and followers of other gods. In reading the dominant elements against the other, the effect of the literary text can be both to release and repress the other. Since repression never succeeds completely, the reader functions like a psychiatrist who asks questions of the resisting text, which nevertheless gives its unconscious away in slips of the tongue.

When female literary figures within biblical narratives are analyzed solely against each other, too much cultural otherness is dropped out and a self-referential loop is created. In order to break free of that loop, I present readings of biblical literary figures, in particular the so-called wicked women, against various extrabiblical narratives. In focusing upon the life of characters within biblical narratives I remain an oppositional critic: that is, I do not attempt to harmonize, to set a fixed horizon line for a particular group of readers. Instead, I have tried to design an approach that is kaleidoscopic – its function is to find new arrangements, ones that emphasize cultural connections that move between scholarly disciplines. One advantage to this method is that it decreases the reader's fascination with a hypostasized notion of literary theory. Too often such toying with metatheory leads one to believe she has

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carved out the road to some grand universal truth. Thus, the reader can explore how conflicts within the biblical text become transferred in varied narrative expansions into critical conflicts about the biblical text and doxic traditions. By doxa I mean one's idea of a narrative plot point or character or place from some remembered version of it, such as thinking that Delilah cut off Samson's hair, or that Herod's luscious step-daughter Salomé is named in the Bible. Often the doxic version becomes cultural baggage for the reader, setting up assumptions that blind one to what appears in the actual text.

Reading Second Temple narratives and rabbinic midrashim lets the reader in on the ancient doxa as well as the process of canonization. The biblical expansions provide the interpreter with prime examples of the efficacy of using extracanonical narratives to highlight and resolve textual irritants in the canonical version. One thus rattles the keystone of the edifice of canon in which the texts are viewed as blocks of a unified object. This is a first interdisciplinary move: from biblical to literary studies. By ignoring the artificial barriers of canon, I can enable previously unthinkable readings.

While scholars of biblical studies have traditionally been resistant to subjecting biblical texts to the same critical border-crossings as those who study secular texts, the paradigm of privileging the Bible, isolating it from ideological scrutiny, is shifting. Concomitant with this move is the acknowledgment that the weight of the doxa must be figured into the readerly equation. Following the move toward cultural readings of literary texts, I have applied cultural perspectives to a group of biblical narrative units centered upon female figures: Judith, Esther, and Jael, each celebrated as a heroine of Israel for seducing men with wine and food and then cutting off their heads (or in the book of Esther, causing Haman to be impaled) and two other biblical vixens, Delilah and Salomé, who used the same weapons – wine and food and sexuality – to bring down their enemies.

Reading through the binary code of good and evil results in the first group of female literary figures being judged as good and the second group as evil. Such dichotomous reading reproduces essentialism by assuming that texts have a fixed identity and that literary value can inhere only in the unchanging properties of the

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text, such as imaginative and linguistic. An analysis of the plot structure in each narrative indicates that each of these women has performed similarly in plotting the demise of an enemy and caused the same dis-ease among the members of the male audience. The basic move, however, is to attach more labels to plot structures.

Part of the ideological effect of the text is to splinter the power of women, and the most efficient way of accomplishing this effect literarily is to isolate women from each other within textual units and commentaries. Moving outside the boundaries of individual texts allows me to break through the isolation of character portraits of individual female characters. One way to negotiate this comparison is through intrabiblical interpretations: to bring biblical characters together who have been isolated by the storyteller. A second strategy is to compare the portrait of a biblical character with the expansion of her role in postbiblical literature and other uses of a figurative motif in a variety of modern literatures. By extending my palette, I present a chiaroscuro of character. Vibrant portraits can be painted when the reader views a character from more than one angle. The wider the reader's gaze, the more vivid the portrait. A deeper point here is that criticism of the Bible is oddly capable of keeping everybody engaged. Moralists and Marxists, Freudians and Feminists, semioticians and deconstructionists – all find a literary banquet in biblical narratives. And for every generation of critics, and readers, the Bible is effortlessly renewed.

As has proved evident even in feminist readings conscious of gender biases, remaining within the biblical canon as a closed universe presents problems. To seek a coherent pattern in biblical portraits of women is bound to marginalize women unless one lays bare the social and cultural codes as well as the gender codes that are reflected in the texts of the society that produced them. The first character to be analyzed in this study is the wife of Potiphar (Genesis 39), whom I call Mut-em-enet, following Thomas Mann in his novel *Joseph and his Brothers* (1934). In chapter 3, I read the biblical narrator's story. In order to see how his bias has been incorporated into the text, I perform a rhetorical analysis of both his interpretive frame and the narrative unit it encloses. This strategic move allows me to peel a particular ideology away from the story. I then juxtapose the traditional portrait of Mut-em-enet

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with that of Susanna, often considered to be the female counterpart of Joseph, a pious Jew falsely accused of sexual activity. An alternative reading that brings Susanna together with Mut-em-enet allows both female characters a measure of subjectivity in contrast to the doxic versions in which they are objects of male stories. A reading of the gender code links Mut-em-enet and Susanna, as female objects dependent on male characters to resolve each story.

Once I have established a subjective position for Mut-em-enet through a suspicious analysis of the male story, I can turn a deaf ear to the narrator's voice. Then I can substitute my own voice as I read *her* story against the first-century Greek expansion, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (T12P), in which a dying Joseph tells his sons his version of his life's struggles, especially his sexual encounters with that predatory Egyptian virago. The *Testament of Joseph* (*TJos*), usually read as a moral and ethical portrait of Joseph, has considerable literary interest for this study, since it is a detailed first-person account of "what happened" between him and his master's wife. The Joseph of the biblical account is curiously silent after her accusations; this later story is focalized through the hero Joseph. Thus, I shall set up within the reader's mind two stories: the narrator's version in the biblical account and Joseph's version (a second narration) in *TJos*. In neither version does Joseph's character move beyond the opaque consciousness of a man wronged, pursued. In order to subjectivize the story, I have read these male versions against a third, imagined narration, recounted in the voice of Mut-em-enet. Thus, reading a biblical text against its later Jewish expansions awards the female character a measure of subjectivity.

One can identify throughout T12P the beginnings of the conflict that became apparent in literary as well as religious works of late antiquity, when people embraced asceticism and penitence as protection against the seductions of physical pleasure. An important interpretive shift has occurred from the confidence of the biblical writers, who assumed divine protection against erotic evil to the fears of the writers in the Second Temple period of the serious threat of Eros. In Proverbs the believer is certain of his own immunity, while in T12P the evil spirit Beliar threatens the

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believer, both as protagonist and as reader, who "feels his soul torn asunder." In the *Testament of Levi*, the patriarch warns his sons, "Choose for yourselves light or darkness, the Law of the Lord, or the works of Beliar" (19:1). In the expansion of the biblical tale, the transformation of the character of Joseph as well as the fuller portrait of his female seducer can be seen in terms of this shift. Joseph takes refuge in penitent behavior, as protection against the sensuality of his master's wife.

In chapter 4 I explore the wickedness traditionally allocated to Mut-em-enet with the virtue of another Egyptian female figure, the wife of Joseph. Because Aseneth is mentioned only one time in the Bible (Gen. 41:45), I have imported the fuller portrait of Aseneth from the novella *Joseph and Aseneth* (*JosAsen*) a first century CE Greek romance composed during the same period as the Testaments. In sharp contrast with the sinful Mut-em-enet is the portrait of the ascetic Aseneth, who controls her desire for Joseph and transforms wantonness into wifeliness. In neither version do the sensual woman and virginal wife interact. That meeting takes place in the mind of the reader.

Like Aseneth, Bathsheba might also be considered as a biblical character committed to protecting Jewish tradition by plotting to have her son Solomon anointed king. Instead Bathsheba is traditionally considered a temptress who has seduced David, by intentionally bathing in the chill evening air in Jerusalem to catch the monarch's eye. In chapter 5 I examine the objectified Bathsheba in the same order as the biblical narrator presents her, originally as an object of male sexual fantasy, seen and not heard, and in I Kings 1–2, finally, as a good mother, heard and not seen. My reading results in a portrait of a female biblical figure who is not as wicked as traditional interpretations have drawn her.

Jezebel is another biblical figure who has become a stock character representing seduction and betrayal. Unlike the case of Bathsheba there is no mention of sexual attraction in the narratives of Jezebel. She is a political queen, attempting to gain the extra land that her husband Ahab desires. Her narrative is the reverse of Bathsheba's. Jezebel moves from being heard to being seen; painted, her body adorned as though for a celebration, she is thrown from a window, the usual site for a woman to observe male

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activity. Thrown to the ground, in death, Jezebel becomes the object of a contemptuous male gaze.

Objectified female characters, especially when used to promote masculine sexual fantasies, are not confined to the domain of the canonical texts. By interpreting popular fictive portraits of Bathsheba, I begin a second disciplinary move from literary to cultural studies. Leaving the limited literary canon for a wider cultural one permits the reader/spectator to explore first-hand the construction of female sexuality not only in the ancient culture that produced the foundational biblical text, but also today, in the widely diffused media, including advertising, music-videos, journalism, and television, that continue to produce a heavily gendered rhetoric of sexuality and provide the ineluctable cultural context in which the biblical story is and will be read.

One example of cultural poaching or appropriation can be found amid the fragments of popularized Freudian analysis that decorate and direct contemporary literary readings. Most literary critics accept that the study of biblical literature, or any canon for that matter, is not a matter of imposing order on a corpus of texts, but rather is a function of readers making sense of symbols. Such a process can not operate independently of the influence of the reader's unconscious. In a post-Freudian culture such as ours, it is impossible to escape saturation with Freudianism, which operates in our culture in unconscious as much as conscious modalities, so that even so-called "neutral" or "apolitical" or "mainstream" readings work from unspoken assumptions colored by post-Freudian cultures, which speak through us, whether we acknowledge such activity or not. Thus, it is necessary to foreground such cultural mediation, rather than to pretend that there is a possible pre-Freudian access to the Bible. Ironically, since the days of the Viennese master, the specifics of sexuality may have changed, but the essential use to which the images of the evil woman are put has not changed. Women are depicted in a significantly different way from men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine – but because the "ideal" spectator has always been assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.

The woman consciously displaying herself for male pleasure is a

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motif that has only recently begun to be explored. The trope of the woman on display returns us in chapter 6 to the biblical figures whose sensuous beauty trapped the men who could not turn away from them. Traditionally the difference has been one of ethnic or theological triumph. Jael, Judith, and Esther killed the right men, while Delilah and Salomé are represented as viraginous vixens for destroying men whom the ideal community had identified as heroes. Underneath the songs of praise are warnings about women connected to the sublime delights of wine, food, and sex. Expecting platters of pleasure and celebration, the male reader sees his own death as the main course. Through analyzing the cultural connections between food and sexuality, and comparing the function of banquets and sexuality in other peri-Mediterranean texts, I argue that all women are potentially deadly seducers to the extent that they reflect male fears of castration. Reading through a psychoanalytic lens, then, allows one to enumerate the nuanced differences between a seemingly unified group of female biblical literary figures: those who occupy a traditional position of valorized heroine, like Esther and Judith, and those who have been devalorized. My mode of reading demonstrates that these narratives signify the success or failure of the cultural effort to repress the knowledge of sexual danger in the first instance and to close it down in the second.

Thus, interweaving cultural and literary questions suggests additional possibilities in understanding the motivation of character. Cultural studies offers the reader a blueprint for negotiating the challenge of evoking the past while being rooted in a world that is totally different. By imagining oneself as an ethnographer of the biblical corpus, one is able to read across the barriers of time and space without being trapped in universalistic thought. When I refer to a peri-Mediterranean world, I am not required to halt before ethnic or nationalistic borders. I can simultaneously slip the bonds of area or discipline (religious studies) and moralistic interpretation (theology).

While the great proportion of scholarly investigation of the term *banquet* in biblical texts has been philological, the same concentration on philology has kept cultural analysis of the occasion to a minimum. If the Bible can be considered a compressed record of some two thousand years of struggles, then the ethnographer's

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interpretive project is one of decompression. Such a cultural study is actually a representation not of the ancient culture itself, but of the dynamics among a culture, an interpreter, and the institutions of study and discourse. It is within the space of a decoding process that expands meaning that the subjectivities and the discursive practices of the interpretive community assert themselves. Through looking at the cultural context of food, sexuality, and death, one can connect figures who have been separated by theological readings, Old and New Testament locations, and even wider disciplinary distances of the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world.

The reader becomes the site at which the texts and the cultures that produced them come together. Thus, comparative analysis of the symbolic connections that various Mediterranean cultures made among ritual and social celebrations, sexuality, and death decompresses or fills the gap of understanding between the function of banquets in one narrative and the function of banquet in the other. Considering the signs connected to the narrative detailing of aromatic fragrances and food adds depth to the reader's appreciation of the story. While banquets have not everywhere signified the same thing, there are relationships between eating and nurturing identified with women as locus of food, sexuality, and death that form a basis of comparison. The food becomes a crucial trope in this complex: it poisons, intoxicates, or causes delusions of grandeur or pleasure. The food either represents sexual pleasure or accompanies it. The Persian banquets of Ahasuerus and Herod's birthday banquet were products of the same cultural understandings as the Greek symposia attended by Socrates and his students. Each was understood as a major event of homosocial solidarity among men, attended or served by women. One reading examines how that affinity is reversed when the woman severs the man's head from his body rather than serving his bodily desire. Another reading connects the temporal nature of perfume and tastes with the moment of action in which a female literary figure uses her fragrant sensuality to entrap a man.

The seventh chapter deals with the figure of Salomé, one of the characters who shares a variety of tropes with the female literary figures examined in the preceding chapters. To make the case for a

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