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RAPE CULTURE AND
THE BIBLE

Scholars Reflect

Edited by
Barbara Thiede



Rape Culture and the Bible

Rape Culture and the Bible: Scholars Reflect offers readers the opportunity to hear from prominent and influential biblical scholars and scholar activists as they reflect on their work on sexual violence vis-a-vis the Bible. This book covers major points of inquiry in the field, focusing primarily on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. It explores debates on appropriate terminology; intersectionality of sexual violence, gender, and race; how survivor perspectives inform the reading of violent texts; male-on-male sexualized violence in biblical literature; and the connections of Judeophobia with sexual violence in early Christian literature. The introductory chapter establishes methodology, purpose, and aims of this volume. The final chapter reflects on the ethical concerns governing the field, challenges scholars have faced in their discipline, and the tasks ahead. Along the way, *Rape Culture and the Bible* demonstrates how rape and rape culture in the Bible impact real lives across time and the globe.

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Rape Culture, Religion and the Bible

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Barbara Thiede

First published 2026
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781032683676 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781032683706 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781032683713 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781032683713

Typeset in Times New Roman
by codeMantra

**This book is dedicated to Harold Washington, kindest
and gentlest of pioneers.**



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Acknowledgments

This book took shape in conversations with one of my favorite biblical scholars, Johanna Stiebert. Johanna was the one to propose that I interview scholars, rather than solicit written reflections. She also suggested many scholars for the interviews. She scanned my suggested questions and added trenchant ones of her own. She attended every interview and often offered comments and questions that enriched the experience for everyone. And, of course, she edited the final product and did so carefully and brilliantly (as she always does). My first and deepest thanks go to her.

Ralf Thiede was my sounding board and my in-house editor. He not only caught the random typos which somehow (?) mysteriously elude me but was expert at spotting infelicitous grammar or wording in passages I composed. His support was, as it always is, gracious, generous, and invaluable.

My thanks also go to UNC Charlotte's Faculty Development Awards Committee for selecting me as the 2025 Frances Lumsden Gwynn Award winner. That award was crucial in supporting Open Access publication for this volume.

Harold Washington was the first scholar I interviewed for this book. It was an unforgettable experience. Harold demonstrated all the things I respect and honor most about the academic project at its best: intellectual acumen combined with empathy and honesty. Harold convinced me that Johanna had given me the right advice: the interview format was going to offer readers unusual insight into scholars' thinking and intentions as well as the challenges they face. Every scholar I interviewed thereafter confirmed that fact; I owe them all my thanks. I got to speak to very brainy people who were sensitive, perceptive, and emotionally intelligent. It was a fantastic combination—every time.

This book is dedicated to Harold, and not solely for his pioneering and incisive work but for his wise and gentle heart. May the scholars of the future be so clear and so kind.



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A video with extracts from these interviews is available at <https://youtu.be/YaGIT7xoDDI>



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1 Genesis (Or: How This Book Came to Be)

Premises, Terminology, and Methods of Inquiry¹

Barbara Thiede

Scholarship in Sexual Violence: Essential Questions

This book is published in a series entitled *Rape Culture, Religion, and the Bible*. Perhaps the series title leads readers to conclude that using the terms *rape* or *rape culture* alongside the word *Bible* has become regular and accepted scholarly practice.² As it turns out, despite decades of scholarship on sexual violence in biblical and associated literature, the debate over whether these words can be put in the same sentence is not over. Resistance in biblical and ancient studies to applying the terms *rape* or *rape culture* to ancient textual traditions persists. Hence this volume. In it, scholars of sexual violence from biblical and associated studies explain in their own words the vocabulary they use and the premises that guide their choices.

Why is there such resistance, given the many examples of sexual and sexualized violence in the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Bible, and non-canonical sacred writings of early Judaism and Christianity? Some scholars argue that because there is no “lexical equivalent” for the word *rape* in biblical Hebrew, applying *rape* and *rape culture* to biblical texts is anachronistic. It is, the argument goes, neither appropriate nor academically defensible to use “modern terms” for an ancient literary culture. Those who do so are frequently charged with grafting contemporary ideas onto ancient texts—“retrojecting,” in short.³ Yet ironically, scholars who protest the use of *rape* and *rape culture* often have no difficulty with using such terms as “marriage” or “religion” in their work.⁴ Those terms and many others without clear “lexical equivalents” regularly appear in scholarly literature. As my students say: wait, what?⁵

Another (and related) reason for resisting the use of the terms *rape* and *rape culture* is based on premises that have governed biblical scholarship for much of its history. Those who founded the discipline in the 19th century—almost exclusively cis-gender- and heterosexual-passing, white, European, Christian men—assumed that their primary task was to reconstruct how things were “back then” for their contemporaries. Historical criticism, as it was termed, remains premised on the assumption that certain scholars can determine the provenance, the process, and even, in some cases, the authorship of ancient

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texts. Recovering biblical thinking with studied detachment, for those espousing these views, conveys authority and ensures neutrality. To produce biblical scholarship is to engage in an “objective” and “scientific” task. Making any value judgment, on the other hand, is a product of modern (and personal) prejudice, a lapse of professional principles. It should be eschewed.⁶

I was trained as a historian. Yes, understanding the past in its context is a legitimate academic aspiration. But I have also learned to respect the inevitable and natural limitations every historian ought to admit. Efforts to “reconstruct” are never “objective.” Scholars make choices, and these are influenced by their own history and positionality. David J. A. Clines notes, for example, that the men who still dominate the field of biblical studies have regularly engaged in “gender-based hero worship” of violent male characters while simultaneously bypassing and normalizing sexual violence against women (1995, 235). David, a monarch who takes and rapes women, who dismembers and sexually humiliates his enemies, and who slaughters civilians, is uncritically celebrated and extolled, as Clines points out, by uncounted numbers of mostly male scholars (234–43).⁷ Esther Fuchs quips, with reason, “Though most literary critics agree that the biblical narrative is androcentric, they rarely allow this fact to interfere with their analytical procedures” (2000, 34).

The so-called “neutrality” frequently results in reinscribing the dangerous ideologies one is “reconstructing,” even in supporting contemporary ideas grounded in hegemonic masculine ideas that are not too different from those found in the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Bible, and associated literature. Hegemonic masculinity, both ancient and contemporary, works to establish male domination; its structures are based on zero-sum struggles among men for status, power, and control. “Those who have the power,” as Susan Had-dox writes, “dictate the norms of masculinity” (2010, 3). Men who lose battles over position, authority, and honor do not reject hegemony’s demand that they compete but rather hope that they will claim victory in future contests. As such, they are complicit in supporting the hegemony that marginalizes them.

In such systems, masculinity must be continually performed and repeatedly proven (Connell 2005, 77–81). Ken Stone observes that sexual activity in the Hebrew Bible as such is important entirely because of the consequences for male relationships (1996, 136). Both biblical and contemporary hegemonic masculine systems feature hierarchies of dominance that are often worked out through sexual violence. In my own work, I have suggested that “[w]hen sexual violence is the means by which power is negotiated in the narrative, rape becomes the inevitable language of the text” (Thiede 2022, 23).

Nevertheless, some biblical scholars take the texts entirely on their own terms, without interrogation or critique. Textual scenes of sexual assault thereby become neutralized, accepted: read as insults or crimes against other men, not against female victims. In his 2011 article “Could a Woman Say

‘No’ in Biblical Israel? On the Genealogy of Legal Status in Biblical Law and Literature,” Robert S. Kawashima observes that only men (fathers, particularly) may lawfully dispense with the sexual use of female bodies (2011, 9, 12). He concludes that the absence of consent means that “there was no such thing as forcible rape in biblical Israel’s legal system” (2011, 2). Any such encounters are crimes of illicit sex, and the victim is either the woman’s father or her husband, not the woman herself (2011, 2). Thus, even the story of Amnon’s entrapment and attack on his sister Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, a brutal sexual assault she attempts to resist, is not rape for Kawashima (2011, 21). Biblical law and literature, he concludes, “failed to perceive” what he refers to as “forcible” rape (2011, 4).⁸

To be clear: biblical law and literature of the Hebrew Bible *sanction* rape because sexual violence is a vehicle for negotiating male power. Biblical and related ancient literature depicts sexual and sexualized violence as a legitimate tool for establishing rank, status, and power (including that of the deity).⁹ Because Kawashima is simply restating the biblical authors’ view without interrogation (or, perhaps, awareness) of biblical hegemonic masculinity, he makes an unsupportable and unprovable judgment of his own: somehow, the authors could not understand that there was such a thing as “forcible” rape. It seems, however, obvious that they indeed understood that such a thing existed: they described it in horrific detail in, for example, the depiction of the gang rape of the Levite’s wife in Judges 19. Kawashima’s judgment permits readers to excuse these authors for, in his view, a simple lack of comprehension. He protects the texts and their authors from the obvious conclusion: namely, that sexual assault and sexualized violence are tools in these texts for male characters in their contests and conflicts over honor and power. What matters is not the victim of sexual violence but rather the consequences for the relationships between those characters, Israel, and Israel’s god Yhwh.¹⁰

However, to reinscribe the premises of ancient authors leads to a failure of conscience. As I write elsewhere, “To call what happened to Tamar anything less than a rape redeems the biblical author and enables the power structures he represents. The outcome is not ‘scholarly.’ It is a suspension of ethics” (Thiede 2024, 199). Ancient authors use language that obscures sexual violence precisely *because* a toxic hegemonic masculine ideology generates their literary products. A culture which denies any form of consent betrays itself *as a rape culture*. Biblical authors do not give a name to the sexual violence they describe because they are engaged in normalizing it. The very *absence* of language and terminology for brutal and dehumanizing acts of sexual violence reveals the *presence* of rape culture.¹¹

This book engages scholars who have worked to expose the sexual and sexualized violence in biblical and associated literature. The scholars whose interviews follow assume that it is not their job to rest with unquestioningly reproducing the beliefs and values of biblical authors or texts, because doing

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so only justifies and reinscribes them. Given the ideologies of sexual violence in biblical and associated literature, “neutrality” engenders complicity. As Deryn Guest writes, “We have an ethical responsibility to challenge collusion with texts that diminish the lives of people” (2016, 43). All the scholars featured in this book take this ethical responsibility to heart.

On Terminology: *Rape* and *Rape Culture* in Biblical Scholarship

In the 1970s, feminists like Susan Brownmiller, author of *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, identified rape as a crime of violence and abuse. They dispelled the myths that rape is rare, that rape is “just sex” and not, therefore, particularly harmful, and that rapists are overwhelmingly deviant individuals. Feminists refuted the claim that victims wanted it “rough.” They pointed out that women are routinely blamed for the violence they endure and publicly humiliated when seeking redress. They noted that justice systems routinely dismiss or ignore victims and that in the minority of cases when rapists are brought to trial, they are exonerated. Early feminist writers described features of *rape culture* without naming it as such. Susan Griffin’s 1971 article “Rape: the All-American Crime,” for example, describes in some detail the wide-ranging mythology that supports rape culture, including the idea that women want to be raped, that only “bad girls” get raped, that when women are raped it is their fault, and that men cannot help themselves. Griffin argues that rape is not an isolated act that can be rooted out from patriarchy but that patriarchy would have to be done away with to do away with rape. In fact, she argues that “[a]s the symbolic expression of the white male hierarchy, rape is the quintessential act of our civilization” (1971, 35). Effectively, Griffin described *rape culture* without using the term.

Feminists themselves are unsure when the term *rape culture* first appeared, though the 1975 film *Rape Culture* provides an early and pivotal use.¹² In *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media*, Nickie D. Phillips notes that it took scholars years to incorporate the term in their work. The mid-1990s, however, saw an increased appearance of the expression *rape culture* in academic work published in English (2017, 23). Still, Phillips discovered that between 1995 and 1999, only two books, 47 articles, and 137 dissertations included the expression.

For the term *rape culture* to find its way into biblical studies took more than two decades after its appearance in popular culture. Harold Washington, whom readers will meet in this book, was the first to use *rape culture* to describe biblical literature. Washington had already explored biblical sexual violence together with his partner and spouse, classicist Pamela Gordon, in their 1995 article “Rape as a Military Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible” (Gordon and Washington 1995). Two years later, Washington published “Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible: A New Historicist

Approach.” He pulls no punches. Biblical law, he writes, is “productive of violence” (1997, 334). It renders “intelligible and acceptable both warfare and an institutionalized form of rape” (1997, 334). Indeed, biblical law positions the feminine as an object of violence (346). Washington concludes that biblical law illustrates “the character of ancient Israelite society as a rape culture” (352). While he agrees that it is necessary to historicize rape when reading ancient literature, Washington argues that scholars must also avoid complicity with rape cultures: “We need to examine our readings of biblical rape for collusion with ancient texts that construe rape as both nonexistent and inevitable, both trivial and necessary” (359).

Despite Washington’s compelling work, which includes a critique of those scholars who minimize rape in the Hebrew Bible or deny its existence outright, debate continues.¹³ The use of the word *rape* has remained fraught with accusations of retrojection. Sandie Gravett, whose interview also appears in this book, provides a detailed analysis of the terminology deployed by biblical authors in a wide-ranging set of biblical rape texts. In her 2004 article “Reading ‘Rape’ in the Hebrew Bible: A Consideration of Language,” Gravett argues that although biblical Hebrew lacks a lexical equivalent for the word *rape*, the use of that term is justified for texts that depict violent, nonconsensual sex (280). Enshrining the biblical authors’ “turns of phrase,” she writes, “fails to serve both languages” (297). Readers, Gravett concludes, must interrogate and resist the norms of the biblical world *and* of the scholarly community (298).

Washington and Gravett were part of a phalanx of authors who worked on defining, describing, and interrogating sexual violence in biblical texts. Both helped lay the groundwork for using the terms *rape* and *rape culture*. And yet, as the scholars in this volume lament, resistance and opposition remain. Scholars who have published since Washington’s article of 1997 and Gravett’s of 2004 still continue to claim that there is no such thing as *rape* in biblical literature, much less a *rape culture*.

Indeed, scholarship on this topic has never been monovocal, even among feminist scholars.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, then, not every scholar interviewed for this book takes the same approach to defining *rape culture*. Caroline Blyth understands *rape culture* as a “web of ideas, beliefs, and behaviors” that downplay the prevalence of sexual violence. “The distinction between consent and coercion gets blurred to the point that they almost become indistinguishable from each other,” she says, adding that “*rape culture* is also sustained by myths and misperceptions about rape that blame and shame victims for their own victimization.” David Tombs also defines *rape culture* as a world in which the prevalence of sexual violence takes different and insidious forms. Violence is minimized, Tombs states, and normalized, and rape myths pervade. “The rape myths which I think are particularly significant,” Tombs specifies, “include the myth that it’s not too common, the myth that it is not too bad, and the myth that victims are to blame.”

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The normalization of sexual violence is a repeated theme. Eric Vanden Eykel defines rape culture as “an environment in which sexual violence is normalized and perpetuated.” Yehudis Fletcher states: “rape culture for me is when attitudes and practices that include violent sexual assault are present in the threads of what is normal and expected.” Lisa Oakley notes that “[t]here are so many layers of what’s happening in communities and cultures that allow something that is horrific to become normalized.” Oakley also details the consequences of such normalization: “Our research,” she states, “shows that people who experience abuse can be made to feel that they are responsible for what has happened to them and therefore may engage in self-blame.”

Most scholars in this volume respond similarly. They define *rape culture* as the systemic subjugation of women and of vulnerable populations to male control. Such cultures, they argue, normalize sexual violence by downplaying rape, blaming victims, and ensuring that lower arrest and conviction rates for sexual predators reinforce the political, economic, and social messages that men can claim male power, status, and rank through acts of sexual violence and exploitation.¹⁵ Rape cultures rely on a wide range of myths that rationalize violence against vulnerable segments of the population—such as women, non-hegemonic men, members of the LGBTQ+, minority-ethnic and -religious communities, children, the disabled, the impoverished, and the elderly. Popular culture reinforces such myths, in part by valorizing and romanticizing sexual violence.

For Gerald West and Sithembiso Zwane, however, their own definitions of *rape* and *rape culture* were less important than those of survivors of sexual violence. “We don’t speak *for* people,” Zwane said. “We speak *with* the people. This is a very important distinction to make: that we recognize the voices of those who have been marginalized and excluded by systems of oppression in our communities.” On that very principle, it is worth noting that Sarojini Nadar, herself a survivor of sexual violence, expresses concerns about scholars, activists, and civilians of the Global North using the term *rape culture* largely for describing the Global South. Noting that Black men are disproportionately accused of rape, Nadar expresses deep discomfort around the way *rape culture* could become “the preserve of people in Africa, maybe the preserve of people of color.” At the same time, Nadar acknowledges that it is critical to “acknowledge the ways in which systems coalesce to sustain *rape culture*.”

In the past four decades or so, feminist studies, Queer studies, and masculinity studies have produced an incredible corpus of scholarly inquiry into sexual violence in biblical and associated texts.¹⁶ Feminists have certainly disagreed about the terms they use and how they read texts of violence. Scholars of masculinity studies are likewise varied in their understanding of biblical ideals regarding masculine performance. Queer studies have expanded the field of inquiry to critique binary assumptions on the part of biblical authors and of the scholars who reinscribe such assumptions. The field is rich, it is wide-ranging, and it is complex.

The Scholars, Activists, and Scholar-Activists: Who Appears Here, and Why?

Choosing whom to interview for this book was a challenging task, and some of those I first approached were unable to take part.¹⁷ In the interest of transparency, I would like to point out that scholars of the Global South especially are frequently contending with extraordinary demands on their time and do not enjoy the levels of privilege of scholars of the Global North. Such facts of life influenced who had the time and the energy to participate in this project. Certainly, I hoped, from the outset, to include members of the LGBTQ+ community, voices from the Global South, and scholars and activists of color. While I succeeded in these aims, I did not achieve an optimum balance of voices.

Four of the scholars I interviewed, Caroline Blyth, Miryam Clough, Sarojini Nadar, and David Tombs, are contributors to the Routledge Focus series *Rape Culture, Religion and the Bible* in which this book also appears. Blyth was also one of the founding editors of the series. Several other of the participants have also been engaged in various activities of The Shiloh Project, writing blog posts or participating in interviews. It is fair to say that all of the scholars interviewed also work in public settings to educate and inform, whether through public speaking, public teaching, or conducting workshops. For some, this work forms a critical portion of their efforts.

It was also critical for me that each participating scholar has a demonstrable record in terms of practicing critical empathy. “Critical empathy,” as Andrea Lobb points out, “is not just a process of feeling one’s way into suffering or identifying with suffering in general but of identifying with a morally specific variety of suffering that arises from social pathology and injustice” (2017, 597). An ethical issue is at stake when it comes to studying ancient Jewish and Christian texts of sexual violence; they reveal, after all, ideologies which continue to sanction and permit abuse and harm. As some scholars and activists in this book note, abuse and harm are ongoing—even pervasive—in some contemporary communities, cultures, and religious institutions.¹⁸

Scholars who engage ancient texts of violence with critical empathy understand their role not merely as one of analyzing and illuminating such texts. They also recognize the suffering that the texts reflect and sometimes normalize, and they probe the ongoing impact and resonance of this suffering. They resist reinscribing harmful ideologies. Instead, they strive to identify harm precisely where that harm has been actively hidden by discourses of power (Lobb, 2017, 602). Scholars who engage in critical empathy—whether as sociologists, anthropologists, literary critics, biblical scholars, or in any other field—identify injustice and abuse that cause suffering. Critical empathy names the harm that is silenced by discourses of power.

This mindset has motivated much of feminist scholarship on sexual violence in ancient texts. Scholars like Phyllis Trible, Cheryl Exum, Renita

Weems, Esther Fuchs, and so very many more laid the groundwork. In recent years, more scholars have become increasingly attuned to how ancient texts deal not only with depictions of female characters' gendered performance, they have also interrogated, sometimes intersectionally, how class, race, and ethnicity inform understanding of the hegemonic masculinity that undergirds biblical literature. Some have begun to address the male-on-male sexualized violence that is also normalized in ancient texts. The application of critical empathy, which seeks to uncover what has gone unnamed, is essential to these efforts.

The importance of critical empathy cannot be overstated, because sexual violence remains a blight the world over and because early Jewish and Christian texts are still being used to justify male domination and the subservience of women and children. Members of the LGBTQ+ community are also harmed by the vicious use of biblical texts to demonize, torment, and assault them. Religious institutions of all kinds remain settings for sexual abuse (cf. Stiebert 2022, 2025). Alone in the United States, a person is raped every 68 seconds according to RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), the country's largest anti-sexual violence organization. Nine of ten victims are female; one of every six women in the United States has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime; tens of thousands of children are the victims of sexual violence.¹⁹

Exploring rape culture continues to be challenged and contested in a host of scholarly settings. The academic world is, however, only one example of the problem we face. What was accomplished in this volume is limited in scope. It is, after all, important to acknowledge that the scholars interviewed and represented in the references here are Anglophone. Much of the focus on rape culture found in these pages centers on what is sometimes called "the West."

In fact, rape cultures are a global phenomenon, and some of their worst manifestations are also among the least represented and least visible. Rape cultures are ignored, even erased, in a wide range of industries. These include, to name but three, pornography, agriculture, and hospitality (the latter two regularly rely on vulnerable migrant labor). Rape cultures flourish in war, and they undergird trafficking all over the world. This book addresses a small part of a global nightmare: sexual violence is systemic across the planet, and the rape cultures which enable such violence remain protected and even privileged.

Perhaps for this reason, every participant in this project shares in the conviction that academic work on sexual violence in biblical and related texts cannot be confined to scholarly settings. They understand that they are working with a phenomenon that extends beyond the page. Scholars spoke repeatedly to the interrelationship between academic study, public education, and honoring survivor voices. Some describe their public work as a form of activism. Harold Washington, though, demurred: "It's not activism," he said, "it's clarity."

Methods of Inquiry

No book is born in a vacuum. Neither is any book written in isolation. This book took shape through emails and conversations with my colleagues. A good many played important roles in shaping my thinking, but I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge, at the outset, that Johanna Stiebert played an outsized role, even generating the very *form* this book has taken. I had planned to solicit scholars to write book chapters on rape culture in biblical and associated literature. Johanna suggested interviewing them instead.

I have worked for well over a decade as a columnist and freelance journalist. I have spent much time in my past interviewing subjects for my work, and I am aware of the advantages of spontaneous conversation with experts. Conversations create avenues for unexpected outcomes. They generate surprises. They permit all parties to learn in the process. Asking scholars and experts in the field to speak to their lived experience, work, activism, and motivation would generate different content than a regular book chapter, including stories that might inspire early career scholars and general readers. To research and write about sexual violence with understanding and empathy, to work with survivors—these labors require extraordinary strength and engagement. I wanted to capture what generated this work, what costs are paid to do it, and what keeps such individuals energized and committed.

There are key pieces to the interview process that must be acknowledged. First, each interviewee was given a list of questions around two weeks in advance of the actual interview. Second, interviews took place online and all interviews were recorded, with the transcription function enabled. Third, Johanna attended each interview and I welcomed her participation. As a long-time scholar of sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible, Johanna could offer an erudite presence (and follow-up questions). She also functioned as a witness to the truth of the outcome of my work when it came to capturing voice and content during the editing process. A few of the scholars and activists took some notes before we met online to help guide their responses; others did not. Of course, additional questions naturally presented themselves during the course of each conversation, and these sometimes precipitated surprising revelations.

As anyone who has ever been interviewed by a journalist knows, one inevitably says far more than the final product reveals. Each interview generated between 10,000 and 15,000 words. Final versions, given space constraints, generally needed to fall between 2,500 and 3,000 words. As editor, I needed to make decisions about what to keep and how to keep it. The former was dictated, in part, by my attempt to be consistent across interviews; readers needed to see themes emerging across scholarly fields and forms of public engagement. The latter was influenced, of course, by issues of readability. Everyone pauses, stops a sentence to begin another, or interjects and restates. As editor, I worked towards clarity and flow without fundamentally altering

the “voice” of each scholar. Interviewees functioned as secondary editors. Each was afforded the opportunity to make editorial changes where they felt these were necessary. They are, therefore, listed as co-authors of the chapters in which they appear.

What’s Ahead: Chapter Descriptions and Overviews

Biblical literature has had profound effect on the real lives of human beings for many centuries and across the globe. Ancient Jewish and Christian narratives of sexual violence have served, at times, to enable spiritual abuse. They can, paradoxically, also enable healing. In recent decades, scholars have understood the value of survivor perspectives in understanding the impact of biblical rape texts. Chapter 2, “Centering Survivors: “The Work is Not Finished”” is meant to focus our attention on those who are “knowledge producers.” Lisa Oakley and Yehudis Fletcher explain what centering survivors looks like, what “rape culture” means for them, and which biblical texts have helped or harmed them and other survivors. Gerald West and Sithembiso Zwane describe their work with survivors through Contextual Bible Study (CBS). CBS permits survivors to acknowledge the presence of violence and sexual assault in biblical texts and to discover how texts of trauma can be used to liberate and transform themselves and the communities they belong to.

In Chapter 3, “Origin Stories: Scholars Introduce Rape Culture, Survivor Voices, and Intersectionality,” three scholars who helped lay foundations for the study of sexual violence explain how they came to their work and what kept them at it. In 1997, Harold Washington became the first biblical scholar to apply the term *rape culture* to biblical texts. In 1998, he wrote that violence in the Hebrew Bible is “central to the consolidation of masculine identity” (1998, 186). Washington’s work, which exposes how integral violence is to the Hebrew Bible, defines terms of inquiry that scholars continue to rely on today. Caroline Blyth’s work on the Hebrew Bible pioneered the interfacing of academic textual analysis with survivor voices. Blyth helped develop an emerging sub-genre of trauma-informed scholarship, which has powerfully influenced academic moves towards centering survivors. Mitzi Smith has written both on being a survivor and on intersectional perspectives on violent biblical texts in the Christian corpus. Her womanist work on postcolonial feminist perspectives powerfully confronts and calls out injustice.

Chapter 4, “Sexual Abuse and Violence in the Hebrew Bible: Terminology, Masculinity, and Intersectionality,” brings together scholars who explore both the language of violence in the Hebrew Bible and its ideological foundations. Sandie Gravett is one of several scholars to write on the Hebrew terminology for sexual violence and on the translation of such terminology. She addresses why it is appropriate and important to use the word *rape* and to avoid circumlocution or euphemism. Ken Stone is a pioneer in establishing the relationship between masculinity and its violent performance in the Hebrew Bible. His

work speaks to the significance of gender construction with reference to perpetrator and victim roles, both in the Bible and in the present. Sarojini Nadar interrogates and elucidates the intersection of race, colonialism, and sexual violence revealed both in the Hebrew Bible and in the work of its interpreters.

In Chapter 5, “Sexual Abuse, Sexual Violence, and Judeophobia in Christian Texts and Settings,” scholars of the Greek Bible and related texts reflect on sexual abuse in contemporary church settings as well as the sexual violence to be found in early Christian literature. Miryam Clough’s autoethnographic work deals directly with sexual harassment and abuse in religious settings and with the ways in which biblical texts may serve to heal as well as harm survivors. David Tombs addresses the sexual violence implicit in Jesus’ crucifixion and the implications of this for today’s church settings. Meredith Warren and Eric Vanden Eykel interrogate the language and narratives of rape and rape culture, noting the overlapping concern of Judeophobia in early Christian literature and the dangers of supersessionism that afflict both the texts themselves and their interpreters.

Chapter 6, “Final Reflections,” returns to the central questions and concerns of scholars working on sexual violence in biblical literature, summarizing the central (and ethical) concerns they raise for the field.

Each scholar in this book speaks to their own history in the field: how they find themselves working with such troubling material, what they learned while doing so, and where the field is headed. Their honesty, generosity, and transparency were refreshing, moving, and spirited. May their words, courage, and dedication inspire, strengthen, and amplify generations of scholars to come.

Notes

- 1 A video with extracts from these interviews is available at <https://youtu.be/YaGIT7xoDDI>.
- 2 Using (scare?) quotes around the words *rape* or *rape culture* can signal doubt about their meaning, applicability, or legitimacy – and I have none; hence, I italicize these terms instead. For use of such scare quotes see, for example, Abasili (2011, 3); van Wolde (2002, 528); and Southwood (2017, 114).
- 3 E.g., Kawashima (2011, 2); Southwood (2017, 5–6).
- 4 Kawashima uses the term “marriage” twenty-nine times in his twenty-two-page article. Southwood’s book is entitled *Marriage By Capture*. As Valerie Rohy writes, “[T]he practice of historical criticism is impossible on its own terms. . . . historicism is always to some degree ahistorical—or rather, anachronistic. A screen memory of the public sphere, historiography cannot cease to transfer ideas of the present ‘into the past’ The charge of anachronism recurs endlessly because no one is ever innocent of it” (2009, 129–30).
- 5 In my (American) generation, we would have said “go figure.” Terminology changes, though the ideas remain the same. This footnote is making a point.
- 6 The valorization of “objectivity” has consequences; what is deemed “objective” and “rational” has been weaponized by power brokers for centuries to silence any voices of resistance. Scholars who rely on such models of “rational” inquiry frequently

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- ignore their origin in colonial systems that subordinate women, LGBTQ+ persons, and people of color, stigmatizing them as emotional, simplistic, and incompetent. By protecting the Hebrew Bible from critique or judgment, such biblical scholars apply rules of academic discourse that can allow sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible—and in the present—to go unchallenged.
- 7 When David commits wholesale slaughter of men, women, and children in 1 Samuel 27:8–9, Jan Fokkelman warns readers to assess David's actions on the biblical author's terms, not on their own. 1 Samuel 27, he states, "shows how God's blessing is miraculously at work on David's behalf" (1986, 569). Similarly, when Walter Brueggeman discusses 1 Samuel 8, in which conquered enemies are made to lie on the ground so David and his troops may decide who will live and who will die, he bypasses the horror of the text and asserts instead that "[t]his is a summary of David's conquests and subjugation of all neighboring territories. What may most interest us is how uninteresting it all is" (2002, 79).
 - 8 I address the ethical implications of Kawashima's argument, as well as other paradigmatic claims scholars have made about whether *rape* exists and can be named as such in the Hebrew Bible, elsewhere (Thiede 2024).
 - 9 This is a theme in my monograph *Divine Masculinity in the Book of Samuel: How YHWH Models the Man* (Thiede, forthcoming).
 - 10 It should be noted that Israel, as such, is a male collective. 'Am Yisrael should not be translated as "the people of Israel" or "the Israelite people," as Clines makes clear. The term 'am is not a collective and inclusive one for "people" when it is joined with the proper name *Yisrael*. It refers to *male* Israelites (Clines 2019, 80–81).
 - 11 For an extensive discussion of the implications of so-called "scholarly objectivity" where sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible is concerned, see Thiede (2024).
 - 12 According to Nickie Phillips, coproducer Margaret Lazarus recalled that the term evolved out of discussions she had with others when planning the documentary, and she believed that the film marked the first time the term was used (2017, 16). Others differed, and one feminist traced the term's first use to *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* published in 1974 (Phillips 2017, 15).
 - 13 Washington surveys some scholars' resistance or downplaying in his 1997 article. See especially, 357–59.
 - 14 A point Johanna Stiebert and I make repeatedly (Thiede and Stiebert 2025). We also acknowledge in that article that feminist scholarship is dominated by white, privileged, cisgender, and heterosexual voices.
 - 15 Men remain primary predators. See the web page of the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN): <https://rainn.org/about-sexual-assault>.
 - 16 For an annotated bibliography on the subject, which lists many decades of scholarly work on sexual violence against female characters in biblical literature, see the continually updated web page of The Shiloh Project: <https://www.shilohproject.blog/resources>.
 - 17 I would like to acknowledge Johanna Stiebert's help in suggesting and contacting scholars; as someone who has published in this field for decades and as co-founder of The Shiloh Project, her help was invaluable.
 - 18 Theologians, practitioners, and scholars are only beginning to confront how systemic sexual violence affects all major religious traditions (Stiebert 2022).
 - 19 <https://rainn.org/about-sexual-assault>.

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2 Centering Survivors

“The Work Is Not Finished”¹

*Lisa Oakley, Yehudis Fletcher, Gerald West,
Sithembiso Zwane/Barbara Thiede with
Johanna Stiebert*

Introduction

By the 1990s, survivor voices had joined the academic conversation about sexual violence in biblical literature and religious settings. *Centering* survivors and survivor experience was a later development, pioneered in the first decade of the 21st century. Since then, a growing number of academics, activists, and theologians have recognized their stake in the study of sexual violence, rape culture, religion, and the Bible. Centering survivors helps remind each constituency how these issues intersect.

This first chapter features interviews with scholars and activists whose hands-on work with survivors of sexual violence is foundational to their academic work. Contextual Bible Study (CBS) at the Ujamaa Centre in Pietermaritzburg, as Gerald West and Sithembiso Zwane explain, creates a way to re-read the Bible so ancient, marginalized voices are brought into dialogue with the lives of contemporary marginalized communities in South Africa. Lived experience is central to CBS; apprehending embodied realities and establishing what communities need come first. Only then do scholar-activists choose biblical texts for shared study and exploration. CBS permits trauma-informed reading and helps communities to establish pathways to justice and safety. CBS facilitates confrontation both with the harm biblical literature and religious authorities who weaponize it have caused and also with empowered discovery of how study of the Bible can liberate and aid in individual and communal recovery.

In their work, based in the North of England, Lisa Oakley and Yehudis Fletcher likewise seek to center and empower survivors and their communities to name what has happened and to identify the injury that has been done to them. Biblical texts of trauma serve, in their setting, to uncover, reveal, name, empower, and generate needed change in religious cultures and their institutions.

Lisa Oakley is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Chester. Her research focuses on faith, safeguarding, and abuse. Her published work includes *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* (2013), co-authored

with Kathryn Kinmond, and *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Culture* (2019), co-authored with Justin Humphreys. Oakley is also the Chair of the British Psychological Society Safeguarding Advisory Group and the former Chair of the Church of England Task and Finish Group on Spiritual Abuse. She was a core contributor to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). She has worked with survivors of trauma for decades.

Yehudis Fletcher is the author of *Chutzpah! A Memoir of Faith, Sexuality and Daring to Stay* (2025). In 2015, her testimony helped convict Jewish scholar Todros Grynhaus of pedophilia. Fletcher is an independent sexual violence adviser and the co-founder of the think-tank Nahamu. Nahamu's primary aim is to advocate with victims of harm in high-control Jewish communities. She has particular interests in agency, personal autonomy, and gender-based violence. Her research focuses primarily on Charedi communities in the UK, with a special interest in forced marriage, so-called honor-based abuse, and human rights. Fletcher is currently completing her Master's degree in Religion and Theology at the University of Manchester.

Barbara Thiede: Thank you both for being here and for speaking about the kind of work you do—work that changes lives. We're going to get started with one question: What does the term *rape culture* mean to you?

Yehudis Fletcher: Rape culture for me is when attitudes and practices that include violent sexual assault are present in the threads of what is normal and expected. The rape culture I encounter in my community is possibly more material than what is usually imagined when hearing that term. I see it, for example, in the public defense of why we shouldn't have sex education in schools and [why] we should have universal early marriage so that when girls get engaged they don't know that getting married involves consummation and that consummation has to take place on the night of the wedding, and there will be a phone call the next morning to check that it's happened. That's rape culture baked into religious practice. For me, in the Charedi² community, that's rape culture. It is observable in the material cultural artefacts of our community.

Lisa Oakley: There are so many layers of what's happening in communities and cultures that allow something that is horrific to become normalized. Our research shows that people who experience abuse can be

Yehudis Fletcher:

made to feel that they are responsible for what has happened to them and therefore may engage in self-blame. These things can become normalized. Lisa, when you mentioned self-blame, I immediately thought of the way it's not even self-blame, but external blame. This is demonstrated in the way in which Hasidic³ girls are expected to be covered from the age of three, to "protect men" from looking at their bodies. The blame is codified and taught explicitly.⁴ So Charedi girls are more likely than boys to receive secular education because Charedi girls are expected to navigate the world on behalf of the men. But if men can't go out into the world and little girls from the age of three need to wear tights and be covered from collarbone to their toes, that casts men as some kind of uncontrollable animal. I don't think it's any truer picture of how men actually are than how little girls are.

Lisa Oakley:

In the disclosure research that we did, one of the things that came out was about what's talked about and what isn't. If you are in a community or a culture where you don't teach people about parts of the body, you don't talk about sex, then when people experience these things, there's no language to talk about it. There's no way to understand what has happened to you, and there's no format in which you can disclose the abuse that you've experienced. There are so many layers that work against identifying experiences as abusive. Disclosing or speaking out is seen as something that you're just not allowed to do. So, there's so much that contributes to creating and maintaining a rape culture.

Barbara Thiede:

Can you speak to the intersection between biblical literature and rape culture?

Lisa Oakley:

I started my work looking at highly systematic patterns of coercive control in religious contexts and with a religious rationale, listening to the voices of victim survivors. For many people the use of scripture was part of that coercion and control. Take a biblical message of unity. Most people going to churches would have heard messages about unity, and in and of itself, that's not a negative thing. That's about looking after each other, being part

of a community, etc. But one of the first people who ever spoke to me said: “I was told to keep my mouth shut and my head down, to look on it as a case of keeping unity.” That teaching about unity was then misused and abused to silence people. You will have heard those messages repeatedly and seen them—as they often are—as positive messages. When they are used to control and coerce, it is really, really difficult to identify this is a misuse or abuse of that teaching.

I spent an afternoon at a theological college with a really helpful theologian, and he said to me that if you believe the Bible is the word of God, then everything in it has massive power.

Yehudis Fletcher:

We have the Torah, which is considered the absolute word of God. You also have the Mishnah and the Talmud, which you’re meant to believe are divinely inspired. Then we also have a third set of texts, which codify *halacha*.⁵ All these texts are used as proof texts to build what I like to call the halachic matrix, where people decide which pieces of information to include and which pieces not to include to come up with a practice that is then expected of people.

An example of this is Maimonides’ law on Mesira (מסירה). You’re not allowed to report somebody from Jewish communities to non-Jewish authorities. That has real-life implications. For me, the interaction between texts is not just what people might preach, or what people might draw on, and what expectations might be set, but the rigid, literal rules that dictate to people what they will and will not do in their own homes [because] there’s a teaching that God is always watching. The texts interact with people’s lives in my community on a minute-by-minute basis.

Lisa Oakley:

I was just reminded about one of the images from the disclosure project,⁶ a picture that a participant chose that represented why it was difficult for them to disclose their experience of abuse. It was a Bible open on a dinner plate. They called it “Eat the words.” When they talked about it, they said that they felt they were force-fed scripture.

A Bible passage is circled [that reads] "love keeps no record of wrongs."

It's not just about what's preached on. It's not just about what's taught. It's what's embedded within from an early age.

Our research study into domestic abuse asked people what passages or teachings were used to support—even if unintentionally—domestic abuse. What did perpetrators use? Passages on submission of women and headship of men. Interestingly, those who'd experienced domestic abuse as men were saying those passages were equally unhelpful to them because they were invisible in that experience.

Barbara Thiede:
Yehudis Fletcher:

Can you tell us how you came to this work?

I was living in Stamford Hill, pushing a double buggy, not able to drive. And a friend really, really pushed me to do a course at the London School of Jewish Studies. It was outside the Haredi community, in a modern Orthodox Jewish environment, that I first encountered women studying Torah. In that context, I first encountered Maureen Kendler. One of the first things we did with her was the *pilegesh*⁷ [of] Judges 19. I realized that this wasn't even Talmud; this is Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), and it had been censored deliberately. The will to confront violent texts was life-changing for me. Being Charedi, I encountered a lot of really-not-nice behavior to me on the back of my community's values. I suffered a lot. The normal response to that is to say either "suck it up" or "leave." Maureen Kendler said, "I'm not threatening to leave. I'm threatening to stay." I've taken that as my own motto.

Lisa Oakley:

Church for me was a very safe place when I was growing up. I found a real source of solace, and so I felt valued. When I was about 16, like many people, I decided that I didn't want to go anymore. When I was 18, I decided to go again, to somewhere that I wanted to go to. If I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it for myself.

I went to this tiny little church. They preached on a Sunday morning and then on Sunday evening;

you could come with any questions. I was probably the most annoying teenager they'd ever had; I used to write down all the things I wanted to ask, the things I didn't agree with, the things I wanted to know more about, the things I wasn't sure were substantiated. This amazing minister would answer whatever questions I had and sometimes say, "I don't know; I'm going to go and find out more."

Then I went to a church where I had an experience of spiritual abuse. When I came out of that experience, I started to read. Everything I could find was from America, talking about this thing called spiritual abuse.

That's where I began thinking: I've had this really positive early experience and now have had a really negative experience. It led me to want to understand better that whole experience [and] how scripture was used.

Barbara Thiede:

I'm wondering how you respond to people who are in the academy who resist personal experience. "It doesn't qualify. It actually disqualifies."

Lisa Oakley:

Everybody's voice matters. The person that I am, that experienced that abuse, has a right to talk about that and it doesn't disqualify me. In many ways it *qualifies* me. When I'm talking to people about their experiences, I want to understand their experience. It's not my story. But there is something that's shared about that.

Conducting and designing research where we put people at the center isn't neat, and it shouldn't be. It certainly isn't neat if people have experienced harm. Yehudis has been a huge influence on me. I saw that it was okay to say difficult and uncomfortable and challenging things.

Yehudis Fletcher:

Thank you, Lisa. And can I say that I was only able to show that level of vulnerability and create that kind of discomfort because you and others around you made it okay for me to do that? Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic justice or injustice has given me language to build on those ideas. The reason I'm interested in that is exactly because of this question that you pose. When you speak as a survivor of violence, and I call myself a "thrivor," I face a kind of double silencing of my knowledge

or what I know to be true about myself, my experiences, and the patterns that I've seen between my experiences and other people's experiences. It's either dismissed as "not true" because I am not believed, or I *am* believed, and then it's dismissed as trauma rather than knowledge.

Insisting that people don't silence me is something I'm very used to. I learned to talk back and question doctrine. That's what I did when I uncovered my hair. That's what I did when I came out as a lesbian. That's what I did when I learned Talmud for the first time. It doesn't take very much to get from that to challenging doctrine within the academy!

Lisa Oakley:

When I've been talking about spiritual abuse, the question has been put to me, "you're not a theologian, are you?" It's really about saying, "you can't speak about this." Somebody [even] once said to me, "can you be a Christian *and* a psychologist?" Yes!

I remember being in a meeting and challenging people about this notion of an angry survivor. I said, when people are quiet and they're trying to tell their story, nobody listens to them. Then they get cross, and then you say they're an angry survivor. So, it doesn't actually matter how you present. You're silenced.

Yehudis Fletcher:

Nothing is done without survivors speaking up either. Even if you need anything, from a research study to a newspaper article, you always need survivor accounts. [We] rely on survivors producing knowledge for us. And then at the same time, when that survivor speaks, we're going to say that's not real knowledge because they're too traumatized to have any kind of insight.

Certainly, we rely on survivor testimony to underpin any kind of knowledge production. We have to recognize the value of survivor knowledge. There is a huge emotional cost telling your story.

Lisa Oakley:

Barbara Thiede:

When you go into religious settings, how do you actually translate your work in those contexts and what kinds of challenges do you face?

Yehudis Fletcher:

If I'm even allowed or invited, people expect me to celebrate that as the win. The bar is, like, on the floor.

I tried to tell a bit of my own story and to situate that theory and current events. That didn't go down very well. Bringing sacred texts that include violence offered an opportunity to use a lot more of a theoretical lens to have exactly the same conversation.

Lisa Oakley:

If people invite you, then they're kind of on board, aren't they? There are places that want to explore and work out where things have gone wrong and even where nothing has gone wrong in their context. They want to look at how to make it safer, and I have seen some great examples of commitment to this.

There are other spaces I've been in that have been incredibly hostile. People have told me that I'm doing the devil's work for him... we shouldn't speak about this.

I've been on a learning journey with this about what's my responsibility and what isn't. It's *absolutely* my responsibility to represent well what people have shared with me. It's *absolutely* my responsibility to make sure that there's an opportunity for questions and reflection.

Yehudis Fletcher:

It isn't my responsibility to defend the church. Conversations that I have one-on-one with individual rabbis are miles apart from anything that anybody will invite me to say in public. That's really where the magic happens. Having enough knowledge of the halachic constructs to be able to ask the right questions is immensely valuable.

Barbara Thiede:

Some scholars, particularly female scholars, have expressed a kind of exhaustion with dealing with sexual trauma and sexual violence in the literature, suggesting that everything has already been said. We're curious how the two of you respond to that kind of academic claim—that the work seems to be done and there's nothing more to say.

Yehudis Fletcher:

The work is not finished, because women are still being abused and that abuse is being justified by religious texts and doctrine. Some people have access to a certain level of privilege, of freedom. [That] doesn't mean that we're all there. Clearly the problems have not been solved.

- That doesn't mean that exhaustion isn't completely justified for individual people.
- Barbara Thiede:* Yehudis said that beautifully. You might be done with it, and that's okay. But look at the world that we are living in, which is far from done with it. Not even close.
- Another question: When the two of you look back at what you've written, what you've said, is there anything you would change?
- Lisa Oakley:* If I went right back to the beginning, I'd like to co-design everything that I did. I'd like to be able to pay every survivor victim, survivor thriver, properly for taking part in everything. I also think I would like to have worked with people from other faith traditions earlier. The richness that has come from working with Yehudis has been important.
- Yehudis Fletcher:* There's loads of cringeworthy stuff out there that has my name on it. But I think it's lovely to see the path that I took to where I am now and wondering where I'm going to go next. One of the participants in our last study said: "when we know better, we do better."
- I think it's been a journey of learning. We learn as we go, don't we?
- Barbara Thiede:* You've both spoken on so many levels and with such incredible clarity. I want to thank you both for spending this time with us and sharing your experience, your wisdom, and your knowledge. I'm really thrilled that you made the time for us. Thank you both!
- Lisa Oakley:* This is so important to do, even though it's a really difficult topic.
- Yehudis Fletcher:* Yeah, thank you so much. Thank you.

Gerald West is Senior Professor in the School of Religion, Philosophy & Classics at the University of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa (UKZN). West was a pivotal figure in the development of Contextual Bible Study (CBS) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As West himself has pointed out, CBS asks what it means to interpret the Bible *with* the poor and marginalized. West's many journal articles and book chapters have frequently focused on this question, establishing both the presence of violence, including sexual assault, in biblical texts and how those same "texts of trauma" can be used by communities in ways that liberate and transform. West has helped guide the work of the

Ujamaa Centre for over three decades. Among his major publications are *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (1999) and *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (2016).

Sithembiso Zwane is an ordained minister who also serves as Lecturer at UKZN in South Africa. Zwane is Director of the Ujamaa Centre, which was initiated in 1989 as part of the School of Theology at UKZN. The Ujamaa Centre focuses on building safety in both religious and civil society through theological education and the active participation of South Africans in social transformation. Zwane's activism and his scholarly work emphasize issues of gender and sexual violence in biblical texts; he is a seasoned practitioner of CBS in the service of community transformation.

Barbara Thiede: I am honored to be here with both of you. Our first question: Rape culture is a global phenomenon that looks quite different depending on where you are. What does rape culture look like in your setting?

Gerald West: Barbara, may I begin [first] just by thanking you and Johanna. As you'll hear us say over and over again, we are committed to a process of action, reflection; action, reflection. Talking to people who are outside of our context is important. We probably will end up articulating things we haven't yet articulated to each other and to our own colleagues and community. Thank you for the opportunity. It's part of the action-reflection cycle.

So let me [answer] the question in a slightly roundabout way, but an important way for us. Since the very beginning of our work thirty-five years ago, what is now the Ujamaa Centre has been committed wherever possible to working with organized groups of the poor and marginalized. An organized group has its own identity, its own voice. That's key: we get summoned rather than try to set something up. For example, a group of women survivors would invite us to come and work with the Bible because the Bible was used over and against them.

What we understand by *rape* and *rape culture* is less important than what that organized group understands by *rape* and *rape culture*. As an organized group of survivors of gender-based violence, they are already deeply informed by notions of rape and rape culture, South African legislation, and African legislation in different countries. It's

not what we bring, or our understanding of rape and *rape culture* that's important. It's what *the communities we work with* bring.

Sithembiso Zwane:

And if we didn't behave as socially engaged scholars, they'd say, "this is not working. You're dominating us" or "you're not listening to us."

We don't speak *for* people. We speak *with* the people. This is a very important distinction to make that we recognize the voices of those who have been marginalized and excluded by systems of oppression in our communities. When we're talking about the culture of rape, we are talking about what communities refer to as an unholy alliance, a system of patriarchal oppressive cultural practices as well as religious systems of oppression.

For instance, in a traditional Zulu context, once women are married, their bodies are owned by their husbands. I raise the issue that if your wife says to you, "I'm not willing to have sexual intercourse with you today" and you continue, despite the fact that she says no, you will be raping your wife. Most of these men frown upon that statement and say, "how dare you? How can I rape my wife?" Patriarchy teaches them that they own bodies of women once they have married them. You see here a system of patriarchy that is embedded in cultural systems of oppression. Also, they use the religious narrative and say, "I'm the head of the family and therefore the head of my wife. My wife is accountable to me and reports to me. I have a right to do as I please with the body of my wife."

We work with organized group formations of survivors of rape. They constantly live in fear of being violated sexually by the people they trust, in their own communities. The rape culture is a system that needs to be challenged by communities themselves. What Ujamaa does is to journey alongside communities challenging these systems of oppression.

There's another challenge of secondary victimization when they go to court [and] are requested to relive memories of rape. Our legal system makes them feel guilty as survivors of rape. These are things that we try and challenge, try to build

capacity [to] not be afraid to speak against systems of oppression.

Barbara Thiede:

Can you explain how Contextual Bible Study (CBS) has succeeded in confronting rape culture?

Sithembiso Zwane:

We don't begin with a Contextual Bible Study. We begin analyzing the lived and embodied reality of rape culture where survivors of rape are narrating their own stories.

CBS becomes a tool of critical reflection on lived and embodied reality of the survivors of rape. Then we move into disrupting the dominant narrative of rape culture in our communities. Using biblical and theological resources, we create redemptive spaces of liberation for survivors of rape, which lead into pragmatic action that challenges the status quo.

We have seen an increase in reported cases of rape to the police. The survivors are breaking the silence because they have developed resilience that facilitates resistance.

Gerald West:

We did this work for the first time in 1996. The Ujamaa Centre was formed in the struggle against apartheid; the early work we did was all in the area of race and class. But gradually women started saying, "what about us? How are you going to work with us around women's issues?" They decided what women's issues were.

We did the first workshop in 1996. It was a three- or four-day workshop, and on the second or third day, the focus was on violence against women. We'd never done a CBS on violence against women before, so we were challenged to ask what we could offer these women as a resource. We turned to Phyllis Trible's work on 2 Samuel 13, and the first response by the women was [that] this text is not in our Bibles.

We had to say, let's find it. That itself was a breakthrough. And the women said, if this is in the Bible we will not be silent. We discovered something from the women who invited us. They wanted to do Bible study around issues of violence against women *as well as* on leadership and cultural issues. Secondly, here was a text that resonated with them.

That's the amazing thing about the work we do. We get summoned and guided by the communities we work with. They see certain realities that they live with, and they summon us then to address those realities.

We then got asked to deal with masculinities. In the literature in South Africa on rape culture, the terrain has shifted towards issues of masculinity in the context of race and class and, of course, colonialism.

Women now said to us, "thank you. This is a really important Bible study for us, and we will continue using it and we will continue speaking. But what about our men?"

The community says, "this is what we want you to deal with." Then we engage with them through the CBS process.

Barbara Thiede:

Could you give me other biblical texts that you feel have been fundamentally important to your work? 2 Samuel 11. It's a text that we've also used about abuse of power in terms of gender relations. David is someone in a position of authority, using his power to take someone's wife. It has resonated with some of the communities that we work with who say abuse of power has become institutionalized, both in the cultural and in the religious sector. We have also referred to Genesis 34, for instance, the story of Dinah.

Gerald West:

We've used a number of texts to deal with the issue of male rape. I can remember a workshop we did in Kenya in 2005, and there was someone from the Methodist hospital who came to [speak] on issues of violence. She told the story of a young man who'd been raped. And this caused consternation in the room, because the focus was on violence against women. But she pleaded with us and pleaded with folks in the room to hear this because it was so hard for men to admit to and acknowledge and deal with their own violations. We [were] drawn, again, summoned, to do work around this. The advantage of doing the Sodom [narrative] is you turn what is seen as a story about homosexuality into a story of male rape. We addressed this text

as rape by heterosexuals (not homosexuals). It is a heterosexual story.

We've also done work with David Tombs on the sexual assault of Jesus. There's no doubt that in Matthew's version of the story of the crucifixion, Jesus is sexually assaulted. People find it hard to hear that the Jesus they love, [that] their lord, was sexually assaulted. But when they do, it's a very powerful moment, powerful for men who can see Jesus now standing with them in a different kind of way.

But perhaps the most significant story has been Joseph. There are very clear indications that Joseph was a queer young man who was possibly sexually assaulted by his brothers and almost certainly sold into sexual slavery. Which is why Potiphar's wife feels she can do what she wants and is offended when he doesn't serve her "needs"—because he is a sexual slave.

Barbara Thiede:
Gerald West:

What is the most singular challenge you face? It depends on which community you are working with. When we work with conservatives, they feel obligated to defend the Bible, because for them, the Bible represents God. They don't want to let the text be shaped by people in the room, be it the unemployed, the survivor of gender-based violence... They want to take control of the process.

One of the major contextual challenges for us has been what is referred to here as "corrective rape"—Lesbians, gay men, trans folk who get targeted and raped to "correct" them.

We have a workshop based on what happened to Eudy Simelane. She was a Lesbian woman, a well-known member of our national soccer team who was raped and killed [in 2008]. We had a colleague who knew the family and invited the family to come and sit with us and to teach us. We created a kind of campaign around Eudy, and that's given us a real opportunity each year to work within the queer community and more widely around issues of "corrective" rape.

Each year, the Eudy workshop takes a slightly different form, and we learn different things from that. Within the last week, one of our leading queer

activists who's Muslim, Muhsin Hendricks, was about to officiate at a lesbian wedding. He was assassinated (Ngcobo 2025).

Barbara Thiede:

Oh no...

Gerald West:

It was a devastating moment to realize that he'd been targeted.

Johanna Stiebert:

Terrible.

Barbara Thiede:

Yes [pause]. Gerald, you and Sithembiso have spoken about the continual transformation of your work, starting with gender-based violence against women to issues of male-on-male violence, to the kinds of violence the LGBTQ+ communities experience. But your method is still based on the community. What is the community asking us? Where is the community leading us?

Gerald West:

We try to work with organized groups in an ongoing way, not in-and-out. The problem with in-and-out is that you do your thing and then you do your thing again and then you do your thing again. You don't change. But working with the same community, you grow. We are then forced to change because the communities we work with are changing.

We are working with issues of economics. We're working with gender-based violence. We're working with issues of ecology. We're working with issues of disability. We speak of intersecting or interlocking systems of oppression.

It's really important to work with a community intersectionally and systemically.

Sithembiso Zwane:

Our intervention in the community is not an *event* but a *process*. We journey with the community reflecting and acting and reflecting, being intentional about praxis. We have seen gradual shifts and changes in the communities. They become intentional in how they interrogate the text. Now they understand the process of being patient and engaging with the details of the text.

They no longer see an economy as something that is an individual problem, but they understand it's a structural problem. They know that patriarchy is a system that manipulates and controls other people. They begin to understand the dynamics in systems of oppression because they are immersed in a process and not in an event.

The Tamar campaign on issues of rape has been taken over by different Christian councils around the continent and even the World Council of Churches. So that's a major achievement in terms of creating awareness about sexual violence in the Bible. We have offered the world a resource that they can use to talk about issues of rape culture at the global level.

Barbara Thiede: How does scholarship come up in the work that you do?

Gerald West: Scholarship has to be useful. Now, that doesn't mean we don't recognize the integrity of what scholarship is. We do. But for us, it has to be useful. I've talked to Phyllis Tribble about this. She's delighted, absolutely delighted that we were able to use her work in this kind of way.

There's nothing we do that we don't reflect on. That often takes the disciplined form of writing. What happened in that workshop? What have we learned? We've been very fortunate to have found spaces that are willing to take up our reflective writings and to publish them. We can generate [what] is now a global network of resources.

Sithembiso Zwane: There is no doubt that there's been an impact from the academic work that [we have] published in creating awareness and providing a critical reflection on issues of rape culture. It is always important to ensure that the academic work that is published also reflects the voices of the people that we work with.

It is our responsibility: whatever has been published academically is translated, for instance, into local languages and is shared with people that we work with, the organized group formations. I really value that when we do academic work, it must reflect the reality of the people.

Barbara Thiede: Is there a particular challenge in addressing trauma in faith settings?

Sithembiso Zwane: Because of the system of oppression that silences women who have been oppressed or who have been raped, the only time they get to speak about their own experiences [may be when] they come into a CBS workshop. It allows them to have a voice that

is often silenced by those who are in power. You have to try and journey with the individual that is now reliving these traumatic experiences.

I was facilitating a workshop, and an individual cried in the workshop and started talking about the cleric who had raped her and saying that since then she hated the Bible because of the gendered nature of the Bible.

When we're talking about the father, the son—the gendered nature of the Bible has created a lot of problems for women who have been raped in the church. They see God as a rapist if God is the father. We have trained counselors available, [and] we've also learned to trust the communities. They will have their own resources amongst themselves, their own ways of dealing with trauma.

Gerald West:

I've always been amazed at workshops where we're dealing with sensitive issues—it might be unemployment, or disability, or HIV. Someone starts to cry or look crestfallen or depressed. Someone will lean over and take their hand and maybe start to pray with them.

Barbara Thiede:

What happens for you two?

Gerald West:

It's really a depressing experience on one side but also an exposure to reality that other people are living with on a daily basis. Either way, it takes you out of your own comfort zone as a facilitator who might be privileged in coming into that space.

Sithembiso Zwane:

It's also therapeutic in a way because you then begin to confront your own fears and get support from the rest of the group. There is solidarity in these groups. It's a lifelong process of learning from each other in that space.

Gerald West:

You begin and end with community. And the community you begin with is not the community you end with. Community is critical and we trust that. I would not be an academic if it wasn't for this work, and I would not be a Christian. My own faith is sustained by the communities in which we work.

Much of the work we've been doing over the past thirty-five years has been shaped by people who are socially engaged biblical scholars. That is important. But for us, it's not the whole story.

Sithembiso Zwane: The people that we serve and the people that we work with in the community are the most important people in our work as an organization. The community itself shapes the work of Ujamaa and the academic work that has been produced by the Centre. Organic intellectuals in our communities have contributed immensely.

Even though we don't talk about individuals in the organization, the work that Gerald has done has opened doors for all of us. Almost each and every staff member has been given an opportunity to have a voice and to contribute to the academic work of the Centre.

Gerald West: It's not about individuals, it's about the collective work that has been produced over the past thirty-five years. That really is the story of the Ujamaa Centre. If you read Sithembiso's Ph.D., you will see that his focus is not so much on the work of Ujamaa as a Bible-connected project, but how the Bible project relates to participatory community-based development. What he has done in his work, both in Ujamaa and in his academic work, is to journey with communities after the Bible study.

Most of our communities live in space controlled by others. What CBS does is invigorate that space, challenge that space, and disrupt—leading to the potential for communities to construct their own development, change their own contexts.

What Sithembiso has done is to say, let's foreground *that*. Let's foreground the participatory community-based development dimension of our work.

Barbara Thiede: This is such desperately needed work. I'm so glad that we will have your voices in this book. Thank you for giving us this time.

Sithembiso Zwane: Thank you so much.

Gerald West: Barbara, thank you.

Notes

1 A video with extracts from these interviews is available at <https://youtu.be/YaGIT7xoDDI>.

2 Yehudis Fletcher writes: "I transliterate the Hebrew name for my community as it is spoken by those who identify within it."

- 3 Hasidism is a Jewish religious movement that arose in the 18th century. Hasidism emphasizes God's immanence in the universe, devotional religious practices, and the spiritual nature of corporeal and everyday acts. The adherents of Hasidism are organized in independent sects. These are led by the "rebbe," whose role is hereditary. Followers of Hasidic Judaism worldwide constitute about 2% of the global Jewish population.
- 4 For a standard text, Fletcher suggests Pesach Eliyahu Falk's *Modesty, An Adornment for Life* (1998).
- 5 *Halacha* (literally, "the way to walk") is often translated "Jewish law, but is better understood as the correct way to behave. It is derived from rabbinic texts, notably the Talmud.
- 6 Oakley is referring to her part in a large grant funded by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council. The grant has the title "Abuse in Religious Settings: Organisational Cultures, Public Policy and Survivors' Experiences." The disclosure project explored creative visual ways of disclosing abuse. Fletcher acted as specialist consultant to the same grant.
- 7 Hebrew for "secondary wife."

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3 Origin Stories

Scholars Introduce Rape Culture, Survivor Voices, and Intersectionality¹

*Harold C. Washington,
Pamela Gordon, Caroline Blyth,
Mitzi J. Smith/Barbara Thiede*

Introduction

Since Phyllis Trible published her groundbreaking work *Texts of Terror* in 1984, a vast number of articles and books have been written on sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible.² Nevertheless, it was not until 1997 that the term *rape culture* was applied to biblical literature—more than two decades after it had first appeared in public discourse. A few years later, the inclusion of survivor voices was made part of academic explorations of sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible. In the early 2000s, feminist and womanist scholars of the Hebrew Bible set out powerful arguments for an intersectional approach to biblical literature.

Three scholars pivotal to each of those efforts are interviewed here: Harold Washington, who resolutely asserts that the Hebrew Bible depicts a rape culture; Caroline Blyth, who foregrounds survivor voices in her treatment of Genesis 34, the story of Dinah; and Mitzi Smith, who is part of a pioneering movement that expounds the many intersections between race, gender, class, and biblical texts.

Harold C. Washington, now retired, served as Professor of Hebrew Bible at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri. He holds both M.Div. and PhD degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary. He is a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Washington's partner, classicist **Pamela Gordon**, chairs the University of Kansas' Department of Classics. Washington and Gordon have frequently demonstrated their combined interest in sexual violence and misogyny in ancient literature, notably in a pivotal co-authored article, "Rape as a Military Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible" (1995). Both joined this interview.

Washington was the first scholar to apply the term *rape culture* to the Bible, in his article "Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible: A New Historicist Approach" published in 1997. The designation would only

become more accepted in academic publications after 2010 (Phillips 2017, 23). Washington continued to publish groundbreaking work that reveals how biblical law establishes the foundation for male violence and domination.

In his work with seminary students, Washington emphasized the inescapable need to address the sexual violence in biblical texts. He terms this work not as “activism” but rather “clarity.”

Barbara Thiede: Our students come in with a sense of the sacredness, the holiness, the untouchableness of biblical texts. How did your students react in the 1990s when you pointed out that there are problems that need to be addressed about the texts?

Harold Washington: When I started working on this area, some one or two times, I started crying, because the sexual violence is so graphic in the Hebrew text, if you can bring yourself to realize what is there.

Pamela Gordon: If you recognize it. People were glossing over and not acknowledging [it]. I think we were not able to do that in either of our classes so people would see what we saw, and so we felt we had to address it.

Johanna Stiebert: Why do you think that was? Do you think it was because they didn’t expect it—so they were able to unsee it?

Pamela Gordon: When I first read Ovid—it was in a Latin class when I was in college, and we read a little tiny passage that was titled “The Rape of the Sabine Women.” They cry and they call for their mothers... I was horrified, but everybody was laughing—it was supposed to be charming.

I didn’t go back to class for two weeks. And I never told the teacher why I couldn’t go. I think that people don’t notice; they try not to notice, but when the instructor can see it—we just felt that we needed to address it and read as much as we could and talk with as many people as we could.

Barbara Thiede: So not much different from all the struggles we have today and challenges that we have today—trying to help our students, to deal with what they can see and to unpack what they find difficult to see. We are still struggling with this process, how to do this in ways that are gentle, compassionate, and truthful.

Harold Washington: And that work won’t be finished. Not for a long time.

- Barbara Thiede:* This was, and remains, a collaborative agenda for the two of you. I'd like to acknowledge that. We wanted to ask you, Harold, first, what you can identify that drew you to the topic of sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible in the first place. Do you know what it was that that created that interest?
- Harold Washington:* As I was growing into adulthood—and this was part of my religious experience—I became a pretty stalwart pacifist. So, with these texts before me, I had to say something.
- Barbara Thiede:* In your upbringing, were you presented with these texts in a way that seemed to gloss over the violence in them? Did you rediscover them after becoming a pacifist and being conscious of pacifism as life-calling for you?
- Harold Washington:* Yes, from a very much different angle that was in the culture that I grew up in.
- Barbara Thiede:* So, the culture you grew up in, I assume, did not address the violence of these texts.
- Harold Washington:* Completely blanked, I would say. And in the South, you know, we don't talk about those things, right? But we *do*—in horrific ways.
- Johanna Stiebert:* So, it was the glorification of military violence or language that sensitized you to the violence in the biblical text...
- Harold Washington:* Yes, I encountered something in most of the literature and especially in religious communities, those horrific images. I just thought, you know, we can't abide this, we can't teach this... there's got to be another way to teach these texts than validating them. We need to work against those texts.
- Barbara Thiede:* I noticed you both used the words "resist" and "resistance" a great deal in the article. So, this was a project of resistance for both of you. Is that fair to say?
- Harold Washington:* Yes. Yes, it is.
- Barbara Thiede:* Both of us have noticed that you are the first scholar, so far as we know, to use the term *rape culture* for ancient Israelite culture. Did you know you were the first scholar to do that? We can't find anyone else who did it before you.
- Harold Washington:* Pardon me, but I thought it was obvious. There it is. And I felt that I had to try to push back.
- Johanna Stiebert:* The term was certainly there since the seventies. But it's really only in 2012 that it really made a

big splash, the category of *rape culture* in biblical studies. And before then it was very, very isolated. And yes, yours was the first, the first time we saw that term. There were other pieces—including the one you two wrote together—that talk very much about the horrors of rape but *rape culture*, and your use of the term was the first occurrence we found.

Barbara Thiede: So that does make you a kind of a founding figure for our series.

Harold Washington: I am too small to be a founding figure...

Barbara Thiede: Well for us, we're standing on your shoulders. You said, "I thought it was obvious," but still we'd like to know what the term *rape culture* means to you.

Harold Washington: I don't remember now where I first encountered it, but it spoke something to me that hadn't been spoken of and that is in ancient texts and is in the fabric of our present cultures. And not to speak to that is a failure if we are going to be honest. It's hard to say those things, especially to some students. All of my students were training to be some kind of minister or pastor. It was hard work for the students. But I think we really understood some things in a better way.

Barbara Thiede: Can you speak to what you believe those students came away with after studying biblical literature as a rape culture? What did those students come away with in their ministry?

Harold Washington: People would cry in class because my students were going to be pastors of churches, and they were gripped. They exuded grief when we waded into these motifs. I mean the ancient Eastern world is a very harsh world, and that has filtered all the way through into our current time. It's just still there. It hasn't gone away. There's a lot more work to do on these issues.

Barbara Thiede: So, we'd love to know how people initially responded to your scholarship and your use of the term *rape culture* and you're addressing—you and Pamela together—the pornographic nature of these texts and the violence of these texts. This might be a question for both of you: How did other scholars and colleagues, people in the guild, respond to the way you were reading these ancient texts?

- Pamela Gordon:* We got a lot of support. I don't remember any hostility. We gave that [paper] as a talk. It was a huge auditorium at an SBL [Society of Biblical Literature] meeting... and lots of people were so eager to ask questions and they wanted to ask them all of me. And I, I was able to answer some of them, but since I wasn't working with the biblical text, I felt I needed to defer to the person who worked on the Hebrew. I think people assumed because it was about sexual violence, I must have been the motivator of the article. I think a lot of people at that first audience were surprised that a man was so much a part of writing that.
- Johanna Stiebert:* Did you get none of the resistance that sometimes comes along? "That's all very well but it's activism"—as if "activism" and "scholarship" are somehow not in tune, or shouldn't be in tune, or that you're being "too emotional," or that that's not what the text says...? You didn't get that response?
- Harold Washington:* It's not activism. It's clarity. I mean, that's the way I described what we were doing.
- Johanna Stiebert:* That's so interesting, that distinction.
- Barbara Thiede:* I want to put that as a quote underneath the title of this book. "Not activism—clarity"... So you had already come to conclusions around the violence and the horror of these texts and found this to be true of these texts when you and Pamela started working together. And Pamela, you said that people were surprised that a *man* would be conscious and aware of the sexualized violence and that this is why, even at SBL, they turned to you rather than to Harold. Can you say more about that surprise that Harold was there already? He did not need the feminist classicist to make him see the sexual violence, because he had seen it already for himself? Can you say something more about that surprise that a white man had recognized the dangers of these texts?
- Harold Washington:* I don't know... I just saw it in those texts and I just felt this cannot be. It can't go on uncountered. There's no hope if we don't break through the misogynist world. This is not just a good topic. It's centuries and centuries of mourning. That was

my motivation. Some things were not being said and not being recognized. And it's *right there* in the text. So, I stand by my words.

Pamela Gordon:

And a lot of people supported him. Athalya Brenner, Carol Newsom—all kinds of people. They heard him out even though he's a guy. And they weren't afraid to listen to what [we] had to say about sexual violence. There was some courage there too.

Barbara Thiede:

One of the things I'm noting, Harold, is that you have used words like "grief" and "mourning" and "tears" several times, that your response to the violence in these texts is a lamentation of sorts.

Harold Washington:

That's a good word—a biblical word.

Barbara Thiede:

Can you speak a little bit about that? This is how you responded emotionally—with grief, with lament.

Harold Washington:

When someone is grieving... It can be hard to embrace what we are confronting. But trying to do this kind of work, as painful as it is, there was a real electricity that went through me with my students. And through a semester, when I taught those classes, we went a long way from one world to another. You can very gently, *gently*, try to bring out what's really happened to this female figure in this story that has been ignored for hundreds of years. And I'm sure there's plenty more work to do.

Barbara Thiede:

Would you say that your students grieved with you during that process?

Harold Washington:

[It's] impossible for there not to be resistance. But I think maybe I allowed my own grief. I just asked my students to say what was really happening in this text. What is it portraying? What kind of suffering is behind so many motifs and stories? They need to be framed in a different way.

Barbara Thiede:

This is an aside, but you're totally giving me a teachable moment here. I think my own response mixes grief and rage. But grief is a response for you, as well as mourning and lament. We had this question about where your critical empathy came from in reading these texts. We know a lot of scholars who manage to read them *without*, apparently, feeling that kind of distress. And you

- clearly read them with your emotional awareness and self-awareness intact. Where did that critical empathy come from, empathy that allowed you to see the suffering? Do you know?
- Harold Washington:* I don't know if I've ever tried to articulate much of that. I've seen a lot of sorrow in women that I've known. And to see these motifs in sacred texts—it's something to mourn. It's something to mourn like a death. Those figures in these texts represent worlds of women. And it was painful to do the work at times. We haven't come as far as we need to.
- Barbara Thiede:* How did you take care of yourself?
- Harold Washington:* Oh, not very well. But when I did that kind of work, I felt better. But those rape scenes in sacred texts—you can't just stand by. Because people will pray through those texts, and that's a catastrophe.
- Barbara Thiede:* Do you think you were consciously attempting in your own work to instill critical empathy in your readers? Was your work meant to say: look, pay attention and *feel* what you need to feel, and mourn what you need to mourn? Did you hope for that?
- Harold Washington:* Yes, I think so. It was a matter of shining a bright, harsh light on something that is not recognized in women's lives around the world. I see this in the news. Women suffer in ways that men don't.
- Johanna Stiebert:* You did say that there's so much more work that needs to be done in the field. You don't feel it's kind of "job done!" do you?
- Harold Washington:* You know, I can understand the theological language of a fallen world. And I do think we're living there with regard to the things that we're talking about. And so, it should be taught. It should be taught, taught against what the culture gives to us. Does that make sense?
- Johanna Stiebert:* Yes, it does make sense. Yes, so that because it's still so relevant in the world we live in. There are points of connection with the ancient text and so it deserves to be taught as we go forward.
- Barbara Thiede:* Which leads us directly to this next question. Johanna and I have met up with scholars who are saying, "oh, we've done the work, we're

exhausted, we've said everything there is to say about sexual violence in biblical texts." If you were sitting across from one of these scholars who says, "we've said everything we need to say, we're exhausted and tired," what would you want to say to them?

Harold Washington: Will they listen to me? To a receptive audience I would say that the scriptures are glorious texts. And also, there is so much to mourn that is depicted in the Bible. And there's surely more to do.

Johanna Stiebert: Harold, thank you so much. Your work remains so poignant and important and it's been very, very meaningful and significant for both Barbara and me. We cite you all the time. We get our students reading your work all the time. Like I said, it's sad on the one hand that it's still so relevant, but you've given a real gift to the scholarly community, and we do want to thank you for that.

Harold Washington: Well, thank you. I really appreciate your saying that.

Barbara Thiede: Nobody has said what you have said better than you've said it. I'd like you to have a last word. Is there a question we should have asked you, or something you feel you need to say to the guild?

Harold Washington: Some of the most vicious biblical texts are in the New Testament—especially in Revelation. We've carried those images along into the churches and even into the prayers and hymns. If you're willing to look at it, you can see, you know, beautiful little children are singing some of these hymns that are very sorrowful. They're not things to be praised.

Johanna Stiebert: You'll be happy to hear we have got some scholars writing on the New Testament, which is, I agree, very neglected when it comes to violence, including sexual violence. Some of them are writing with particular focus on Revelation.

Harold Washington: Yes, you've got real material there.

Johanna Stiebert: Yes, and so much of that violence is, as you say, blithely sung and sermonized about by sometimes very powerful and influential people without paying attention to the words. You've really been somebody who has been very good at making us read with honesty and clarity.

Barbara Thiede: I will not be able ever to find my own words of gratitude for your work because you have sustained me, you have inspired me, and you have made sure that I do not despair.

Harold Washington: You're going to make me cry if you keep going... I really appreciate that. Thank you very much.

Caroline Blyth served as Senior Lecturer of Religious Studies at the University of Auckland (Aotearoa New Zealand), where her research and teaching was informed by feminist and queer theories. She now works as a proofreader and editor. She co-founded The Shiloh Project and was one of the original editors of the Routledge Focus series to which the present book belongs. Her own book in the series, *Rape Culture, Purity Culture, and Coercive Control in Teen Girl Bibles* (2021), analyzes how Bibles marketed to teen girls perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes that support rape culture.

In her first monograph, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah's Silence* (2010), Blyth pioneered the inclusion of survivor voices for exploring biblical rape texts; her work has also been formative in biblical trauma studies. She believes that the Bible and its interpreters can challenge gendered violence—such as rape, sexual and domestic abuse, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia—but that they can also perpetuate it. For this reason, Blyth argues that academic work must speak to the world “in front of the text,” including by helping to raise awareness about contemporary rape cultures.

Barbara Thiede: Let's start with an important question: What drew you to the topic of sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible?

Caroline Blyth: I've always been more interested in the world *in front of* the text than in the world *in* the text or the world *behind* the text. I've been very interested not just in biblical scholarship but in literary criticism more widely as well as in feminist approaches.

When I was thinking about a topic for my PhD, I wanted to do something that focused on feminist readings of the Bible. I had been a mental health nurse, so I wanted the work to be practical. When you're a nurse, everything has to have a purpose or a reason. I was drawn to this idea of looking at the Bible and the world in front of the text, and how this culturally and religiously influential book impacts readers today. I went on this journey, trying to think about how texts might

impact people. The issue of sexual violence came up because I'm interested in violence and crime and how that's depicted in the Bible.

I landed upon Genesis 34. It fascinated me because it's quite an ambiguous story. It's a story about rape, but in other ways it's not about rape at all, because the rape that happens is silenced in the narrative. I focused on that for my Master's and then my PhD, and that introduced me to the whole world of studying sexual violence in the Bible. It was quite a circuitous route that took me there.

Barbara Thiede: Being interested in the world *in front of* the text and how that led to thinking about violence *in the* text seems like very direct movement to me.

Caroline Blyth: Maybe it was really naïve of me, but when I initially sat down with Genesis 34, I thought I should look at how rape is understood in this text and in the Bible and compare it to contemporary attitudes towards rape, because I thought there's bound to be a huge difference. I started researching contemporary issues around sexual violence, and I realized there's *no difference at all*. Nothing's changed. The same myths and misperceptions that we read in Genesis 34 and that we read in other rape narratives in the Bible are still prevalent today.

People are reading in the Bible that a victim gets "defiled" because she's been sexually assaulted, or that a rapist is classed as a good bloke and, therefore, we can forgive him. Sexual violence just gets treated as a normalized part of sexual relationships between a man and a woman. That's essentially perpetuating myths that are still prevalent today.

Barbara Thiede: Your first book, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah's Silence*, included a detailed examination of the source-text combined with close discussion of terms and language. It also pioneered the interfacing of academic textual analysis with survivor voices. Can you explain what brought you to risk this approach? Is the word *risk* the right word for the time and context in which you were writing?

Caroline Blyth:

I didn't think at the time I was doing anything particularly unusual. My education in biblical studies was at Edinburgh University, and it was very traditional, with a strong historical-critical focus. Later, when I was doing my postgraduate studies, I came across scholars like Mieke Bal and Cheryl Exum, who drew me into that idea of being able to look beyond the text. They were looking at literature and myths and art and music. That opened my eyes to the possibility of looking beyond the text, to use other texts to reflect back on the biblical story.

I came across a life-changing chapter by womanist scholar Koala Jones-Warsaw (1993). She read Judges 19–21 through the lens of Black women's everyday experiences of violence and the way that class, race, and gender shape women's experiences. That was the first time I saw someone taking something that's happening in the Bible and reading it alongside things that are happening in the lives of women. That chapter is what drew me to do something similar with Genesis 34.

I was very conscious of the fact that this text was about a rape, and yet the victim of that rape, the woman, the person at the center of the whole story, doesn't get a word to say. The event gets understood and interpreted through the eyes of all the men in the story. When I was researching contemporary understandings of sexual violence, I came across an article by American writer Deena Metzger (1976). She was reflecting on her own experience of being sexually assaulted, and there was this line in the article that really caught my eye. She said, "After rape, there is a terrible silence" (405).

It made me think of Dinah's own terrible silence. I read other articles and Susan Brison's and Nancy Venable Raine's memoirs of their own experiences of sexual violence (Brison 2002, Raine 1998). That theme kept coming up. Women kept saying, "I needed to tell my story. I needed to talk about this in order to help me along the path to healing or getting somewhere beyond where

I am now. But nobody would listen. Nobody wanted to hear my story. I wasn't given a chance. I wasn't believed." That just kept coming up time and time and time again.

I thought that I could use the voices of women who've survived sexual violence themselves to start thinking about how it might have impacted Dinah. I didn't want to do a definitive "this is how she must have felt," but to start a process. We can think about silenced biblical women. We can start thinking about how they might have voiced their experiences had they had the chance.

Johanna Stiebert:

Do you see it as a kind of giving-a-voice-to Dinah? And if so, how do you feel about your work as a feminist endeavor that creates alternatives, like Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*?

Caroline Blyth:

I was reflecting on the voices of other women and taking their testimony seriously. So many of the women's voices I drew on said they weren't believed, or their words were downplayed, or no one wanted to hear them. I didn't want to give Dinah a singular voice or try to speak *for* her—it wasn't my goal to put words into her mouth. I wanted to think about the voices that could inform our study of her silence—to begin noticing the silence of victims and survivors and making room for them to speak.

Barbara Thiede:

Your work was groundbreaking in making Genesis 34 real. You cannot ignore that silence after you see it in light of real victims of sexual violence.

Johanna Stiebert:

What kinds of responses did you get?

Caroline Blyth:

Most of the professors and my fellow doctoral students were very polite, but some couldn't get their head around that I was looking at a gap—a silence—in the text. For them, if there's a gap in the text, then you leave it alone. They thought what I was doing was eisegesis, putting something into the text rather than interpreting something that's there.

In my PhD, I used the phrase "using the power of our own imaginings" to think about how Dinah's silence might be filled. When I spoke about this at a research seminar, a few people

asked, “What has that got to do with biblical studies? Imagination doesn’t come into it.”

I recall Paul Noble referred to feminist readings of Dinah’s silence as “feminist fictions” (Noble 1996, 199). He said that the silence was there, and there was nothing we can do about it. Just move on. But I didn’t want to accept that.

Barbara Thiede:

You’ve been pivotal in inaugurating the sub-genre we now know as trauma-informed scholarship, which has also powerfully influenced centering survivors. Can you tell us what’s made it possible for the academy to accept and address trauma studies in recent years?

Caroline Blyth:

I think it maybe came out of wider feminist biblical scholarship. Feminist scholarship has always been about centering the women in the text and reclaiming their voices, or focusing on their experiences. Very often women in biblical texts are silenced, or marginalized, or victimized. Many female biblical characters are impacted by trauma, often in a narrative that depicts their trauma but doesn’t always acknowledge it. Feminist biblical scholars opened the door to making it more feasible in biblical studies to look at centering the victim, even though they may not be the main character in a story.

Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom, who were pioneers in rape counselling, were among the first to look at the trauma of sexual violence survivors and to focus on the fact that they were victimized through the rapist’s use of power and control over them. Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) was also pivotal. The link between their work and feminist scholarship feels quite natural to me.

What I think is positive is the fact that research on sexual violence is becoming far more intersectional. Now, there’s greater diversity in readings of biblical texts through the lens of ethnicity and race and sexuality and gender identity, disability, and class. Robyn Whitaker and Monica Melancthon’s book *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, Gender,*

and Violence (2021) captures some of the brilliant work that's being done.

The opposite side of the coin is the focus on scholars from the Global North using very much white Western approaches to read the texts. There's far less attention paid to scholars from the Global South—scholars of color and scholars living in the shadow of empire and from minoritized communities in terms of their social status and class. That definitely needs to change because their work doesn't get nearly as much attention as it deserves. The state of the field remains highly focused on the production of white Northern scholars and remains in a space where it under-recognizes the contributions of the Global South. Is there anything else you find concerning?

Barbara Thiede:

Caroline Blyth:

I'm always wary of what I'd call "post-feminist takes" on violent biblical texts, which are grounded in a desire to see something less traumatizing in them, to make women look stronger than perhaps they are in these texts. It's almost as though there's a sense of embarrassment or disappointment that women can be victimized, and sometimes there's a desire to un-victimize them or to downplay the seriousness of their trauma.

I've seen this tendency in some feminist scholarship on Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11), for example. There's sometimes a desire to claim that she could exercise choice in the story—"she chose to permit her father to sacrifice her, so she's empowered and she's not a victim."

It reminds me of the post-feminist notion that women today always have choice and agency. It's a very white notion of feminism as well. Women have choice and they have agency, and there's almost something shameful about being victimized because [then] you're failing to exert your power as a woman. You're a post-feminist failure.

It always just makes me grit my teeth.

Barbara Thiede:

Thank you for mentioning this. We've noticed scholars expressing a kind of exhaustion around sexual violence in the Bible, that feminist scholarship just keeps repeating "the same old, same-old" and there's nothing left to say.

Caroline Blyth:

First of all, I'd ask them if they're all right. That response can sometimes be a defense to one's own sense of burnout or anxiety, or the topic hits too close to home. I sometimes feel that I'm doing this work and I'm getting nowhere and I'm exhausted with it. It's almost like compassion fatigue. So perhaps I'd say to them, "Are you okay?"

If they said, "I'm absolutely fine. Why are you asking? I'm just telling you, I'm bored with this topic," I would probably then say to them, "Well. You need to check your privilege." To say that there's nothing left to say is categorically incorrect. It speaks to that white Western Northern hemisphere lens that often gets applied to biblical scholarship. If it's not important in the United States or in Europe, then it's not important anywhere. "There's plenty to say, and maybe you're not the person to say it. Maybe you're not in a position to talk about it, because you don't belong to a particular community or ethnic group, or your sexuality or gender identity doesn't give you the insights that you need to look at this. You need to open your eyes and invite more people to the table."

If you're having a *monologue*, you need to start creating a *dialogue* with people who have different insights than you and who might be able to look at the topic from different perspectives than you can. Not everyone has the luxury of being bored. They may live in a culture or a society where the chances of being impacted by sexual violence are very high and the chances of getting justice for what happens to them are so low that it's risible.

Boredom is a luxury we can't afford.

Barbara Thiede:

Caroline, is there anything you would change about what you've written over these many years?

Caroline Blyth:

I think I would, particularly on my book about Dinah. If I could rewrite it today, I would have a far greater focus on intersectionality. I did make a conscious effort to bring in voices of women from different parts of the world, not just the Global North. But I didn't think about the way

that ethnicity, class, faith, and sexuality shape a person's experience of sexual violence. That's a huge gap I wish I'd filled.

I think I'd be more strident. That's something you develop with age and experience, or you give yourself permission to be strident because you don't feel that you have to be pleasing everyone, ticking the boxes, that maybe you were when you were a doctoral student.

I'll just pass on a piece of advice. Sometimes, it can be quite exhausting when you think, "am I doing any good?" It can be emotionally tiring to work in this field. I think it's important that scholars who are studying sexual violence in the Bible and in other contexts are aware of the impact it has on them. When I started my PhD, I got to spend a semester at Yale Divinity School. I met Professor Kristen Leslie, a pastoral theologian. She was working at the time as a rape victim advocate. I talked to her about my research, and near the end of our meeting, she asked me out of the blue, "How are you?" And I said, "Oh yeah, I'm fine, thanks," just thinking she was being polite. And she said, "No, I mean, how are *you*? Because this work changes you. It will change who you are because you're staring into the abyss, looking at the awful things that people do to each other and things that no one should ever experience."

I always remember that. My research into sexual violence *has* changed me, and not all for the better. I get frustrated at times, and angry, and despondent with the everyday reminders in the news and on social media that rape culture is everywhere, and it's not going away anytime soon. And I think it's maybe worth reminding all scholars who work in this field that the work *can* change you, and you need to not only look after yourselves but also turn that frustration into something positive. Allow it to make you more strident, more outspoken. We need to remind ourselves that there's no room for complacency.

If we look after ourselves, maybe we can chip away at rape culture and make a little bit of a difference. And that's all we can really hope to do.

Barbara Thiede: This was inspiring, reassuring, and comforting all at the same time. Thank you.

Caroline Blyth: Thank you for inviting me. It's a real privilege.

Mitzi J. Smith is the first African-American woman to earn a PhD in New Testament from Harvard University. She serves as the J. Davison Philips Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. Her work on womanist biblical hermeneutics explores the intersections between race, gender, class, and biblical texts. In addition to her scholarly work, Smith is an ordained itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Smith's body of scholarship is expansive and wide-ranging. Her work on sexualized violence has powerfully illustrated biblical rape culture, including daring and sometimes deeply personal explorations which contextualize both the crucifixion of Jesus and the enslavement of Mary in light of Black suffering.

Smith's biblical scholarship highlights the unequal treatment of marginalized groups and advocates for attentiveness to social injustice that leads on to activism. This approach is powerfully intoned in her monograph *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation*. She fronts the podcast *Beyond the Womanist Classroom*.

Barbara Thiede: Mitzi, I want to say what an honor it is to meet you. Re-reading your work has been shattering and eye-opening all over again.

Mitzi Smith: Thank you.

Barbara Thiede: We wanted to start by asking what the term *rape culture* means for you.

Mitzi Smith: When I think about rape culture, I think about the ways in which our society supports or encourages sexual abuse—sometimes not just supports but actively *calls for* sexual abuse of women. After the 2024 election, men on social media were writing, “Your body, my choice!” In the U.S., a majority of Americans are okay with ignoring the sexual abuse of women [by] the most powerful man in this country and his own acknowledged sexual abuse—on record—of women.

It says how much we have normalized sexual abuse and rape and how much we have normalized blaming women and not men for sexual abuse. Men are not saying it's *not* okay to abuse women.

We see more and more movies on TV of stories of women being abused, sexually abused. I was looking at a movie with my sister last night.

And [there's a] woman, somebody's chasing her, and she runs into a dark alley. I've seen so many movies like this. The depictions are, on the one hand, calling attention to [sexual assault], but at the same time, depicting women as in some way at fault.

Johanna Stiebert: There's also a kind of voyeuristic delight in this woman's fear and her trapped-ness.

Mitzi Smith: Voyeuristic. That's the word for it. We're going to take some kind of gratification, some kind of pleasure, out of seeing these depictions.

Barbara Thiede: Mitzi, what drew you to the topic of sexual violence in biblical literature?

Mitzi Smith: I first thought it was a class I was teaching. I wanted to talk about Judges 19, the gang rape of this woman. I remember having students read the story out loud, and I was shocked that there was this collective gasp when the men asked for the *man*. But when the woman was raped, it was like, "oh, well..." Nothing. I had to stop and ask: what is going on here?

Really, as I think back on *this* moment, I think it was the beginning. I was going to pursue a book on the binary of virgin-and-whore in biblical texts. I was seeing how much we have, as women, embraced that binary and the violence that it supports against women. I can remember talking about that with a Black woman scholar in theology [who] said to me, we need those categories.

Why do we need these categories? What are they doing for us? Men (and women) leverage them when it suits them. Just because, for example, [a woman] chooses to be independent, just because she chooses to ignore men's catcalls going down the street, just because she chooses not to smile, [she] is labeled as a whore and thus as violatable.

When I was in Detroit, there was a scandal in the police department, and I went to look at some of the online comments on the story. And the woman [in the story], people kept labeling her as a whore, *not the man* who had taken advantage of his power, right? The chief of police had taken

advantage of women [and] did it with a number of women.

You know, if you're a single woman, or if you're a mother trying to raise kids—we already know that women make less money and are promoted less often. And then you're holding over these women, you know, promotion and wages and so forth, unless they have sexual intercourse with you. But *she's* the whore, right? *She's* the whore, not the man who abused his power.

I started saying we need to really disrupt that. I started looking at the New Testament. It begins with the notion of virginity. It ends with the notion of whore.

Barbara Thiede:

You reference Alice Walker's definition of the term *womanist* in one of your texts (Smith 2014, 129–30), and you say that it's not just a matter of wanting to do the work, it is a necessity. How does this need take shape in your analysis of biblical literature—not just wanting but *needing* to do the work that you're doing?

Mitzi Smith:

There's [also] this other statement from Toni Morrison, who states that what we do is not a gift to the world—that it is a necessity.

It is a necessity that we write our stories because many of our stories don't get told or they're told by men. We know the stories in the Bible are written by men. It is a necessity that we do the work, particularly if it disrupts injustice, whether it's in the Bible or in society. It's a necessity that we talk about it, even as Bible scholars. Too often Bible scholars are accused of being out of touch with the world, and then when we *do* focus on violence, then [we are] attacked for feminist work or womanist work. We're accused of doing something that is not “scholarly.”

We just can't keep going on acting like what's happening in these texts is not happening in the world. If you grew up in [a] conservative religion, as I have, you've been indoctrinated. Many of us have been indoctrinated. We are still unraveling those threads, and I imagine I'll continue to do it as long as I'm alive.

I think we have to come to terms with [the Bible] as an ancient and human text. It's not God. What is more sacred is our lives, the lives we have now, right here in front of the text. That is the most sacred thing. It is more sacred than any ancient text. We are *living texts*, and we are more sacred. We need to come to terms with the very human nature of the Bible and its fallibility.

Barbara Thiede:

This leads to the next question. We know that you helped pioneer the study of biblical literature through a womanist lens. I'm curious about what you think the guild has learned from that perspective and what they have yet to learn.

Johanna Stiebert:

Especially your *Womanist Sass* book.

Mitzi Smith:

I thank you for your compliment, but I do have to say that I haven't pioneered it. It's true that my approach is different from other womanist approaches. But I'd have to say that Raquel St. Clair was probably the first to write a womanist book on a book of the Bible, Mark. In her book she disrupts this notion of glorifying suffering through the cross, taking up the cross. You're called to suffer? No, but it can be a consequence of doing the right/just thing. [That] is her point.

The *Womanist Sass* book was probably a turning point for me, finding the voice that I now have. In that book, there truly comes through the privileging of the world in which we live, our sacredness as readers and as Black women in our communities, our concerns [with] injustice issues. I try to do it as a sustained dialogue—looking not to apply/impose an ancient text but to create a critical dialogue [with it] and allow the questions that the contemporary context brings to the ancient biblical text to guide me as interpreter.

Johanna Stiebert:

Do you start with a sacred text or your own encounter with a situation, with activism?

Mitzi Smith:

Some people could call it activism, but yes [*Womanist Sass*] started with the reading of Mark, through looking at Sandra Bland's and Black women's experience and the way people tried to blame her for knowing her rights and talking back. The sass came from that experience ("Death of Sandra Bland" n.d.). So, yes, I start

Johanna Stiebert:

with activism; justice or injustice motivates or animates me. Some people may call it activism. Yes, my writing is an act of activism.

You know that Mark and other texts have been read from womanist perspectives, but the kind of challenge you bring to the New Testament, especially in *Womanist Sass*, is pretty gutsy and singular, I think. There is something you do that is quite distinctive and punchy.

I just wondered whether you're reading the text and things come into your mind, or you're outraged by something you see on the news and that carries into the text, or if such a separation is even possible? Is there a kind of movement, any discernible direction to that movement?

Mitzi Smith:

One of my goals—and this is a part of activism, right?—is to raise people's consciousness about justice issues and raise people's consciousness about the problems with the biblical text—particularly people who revere the biblical text and even use the biblical text as an impetus for *not* getting engaged in social justice.

I see a text that is being used in a way that's very harmful when it bleeds into society and how we treat each other. That calls for talkback and activism, right?

As a biblical scholar, I didn't start out this way. I was ordained in the AME [African Methodist Episcopal] Church. I haven't been to roll call since 2019. I'm fine with that. I consider myself non-denominational now. I don't feel beholden to any church. That releases you to say what you want to say; it gives you a boldness.

I remember talking at an SSBR [Society for the Study of Black Religion] meeting two years ago about the strong possibility that Jesus could very well have been born a slave. I got immediate pushback particularly from men, Black men, and older folks. The younger folks were really willing to consider it. Someone said to me, "you're messing with their Christology." I'm like, "yes, I am!"

Part of [what] holds us back is our need to fit into the organizations that we rely on, that call some of us to preach. I only preach every now and

then. I don't want to be controlled by an organization telling me how far I can go in terms of my critique and my pushback in terms of the biblical text.

Barbara Thiede: Mitzi, you have written with incredible power on the intersection of race and rape.

Mitzi Smith: We still have a long way to go, particularly when it comes to race and sexual abuse or sexuality. I don't think there's that much [comparatively speaking] being written among Black womanist scholars, [though] Ericka Dunbar's work on sex trafficking in Esther is a recent work.³

But we are so few in number. We're losing people; some scholars are dealing with serious illness. Two died, prematurely, in recent years.

Johanna Stiebert: You're absolutely right. And we are so programmed to think voyeuristically of rape victims as beautiful, young, and white. Then we look at the statistics and the tremendous vulnerability of queer folk, of Black folk, of migrants. We see traces of that in biblical texts too. In paintings, Susanna is always white. Jezebel is regularly Black. There are these kinds of intersections that desperately need womanist scholars. They are first to pick up on these things, to talk back. How do you see the field? Do you see it as just kind of desperately behind and stuck in silos, finally acknowledging women are raped and it's a dreadful thing but still not pushing it where it needs to go in terms of acknowledging *who* the victims are?

Mitzi Smith: We still have a long way to go. It's hard because people will say, "what are we going to do about getting more women and Black women into biblical studies?" We're losing numbers, and so many institutions do not want to change.

Our numbers have not changed in terms of Black biblical scholars; they have not changed over the last twenty years. We lose people in death and sickness, and [for] other reasons [some are] pushed out of the academy. We're overworked. And Black people can't be the only ones to solve the problem either.

Barbara Thiede: You can't ask the marginalized to fix a system invested in their marginalization.

Over the years, we're pretty sure you must have faced some significant resistance to your work. What has that resistance looked like? Has it changed over time?

Mitzi Smith:

I'm sure that some of it I'm not aware of. I'm happy for that.

I had a student, a white woman, who took my class. She wrote that critical race theory—and I'm sure that message was to me—that it teaches Black people to hate white people. I just wrote: "I'm Black and I use it, but I don't hate you."

I remember being invited to an Acts of the Apostles SBL unit panel. I wrote on the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) and Apollos (Acts 18:24–19:1) and the negative portrayals and commonality between the two. There were two white men in the audience, quite conservative. They weren't there for the beginning of my talk. They decided I should give them a summary of what I had said.

It bothered me. I wasn't going to do it. It happened to be a white woman presiding, and she went ahead and gave them a summary. I don't think she should have done that.

Those same two men were waiting in my hotel lobby for me, and they asked me if my institution allowed me to write like that. It was a good thing that it was crowded in the lobby. I just stepped away. But let me talk about the positive too. At the last SBL conference, four or five people who were not Black people, who were not minorities, walked up to me and thanked me for my scholarship. White men, white women. Black people are not the only people reading and using my work. That was hopeful. I write about and for our communities but also for all readers committed to justice.

So, I'm grateful for that. There are people who are reading and who are appreciative of my work. None of us want to think that we do this work in vain.

Barbara Thiede:

You have written with incredible eloquence about the way Jesus experienced sexual assault and how that suffering needed to be seen in the lens of Black suffering. Can you speak to the importance

of connecting the suffering that we see with Jesus and the suffering we see in the Black world, putting it back in front of people, even though it's constantly being erased, quietly ignored by the guild?

Mitzi Smith:

Racism is always involved, and hatred of women. With racism comes sexual assault, particularly on Black women. It can come from within and without. When you had Michelle Obama as first lady and Kamala Harris running for VP [Vice President], one of the first things [was] to try to assault them sexually through vile name-calling or even threatening sexual violence.

Most churches don't talk about race and/or sexual violence or sexuality.

And war between countries or war within a country comes with sexual violence. A lot of it continues to be directed at Black women. The number of women who are sexually assaulted is higher for Black women and girls. More of us are kidnapped off the streets. Sex trafficking is an epidemic in the US and globally. You even have kids who are trafficked through the foster care system. Human trafficking and sex trafficking couldn't exist without oligarchies, without that money behind it.

So, yes, it's something we must continually address and fight against.

Barbara Thiede:

Mitzi, is there anything you would change about how you wrote, what you've said?

Mitzi Smith:

Well, I do wish I was the person I am today ten years ago...

Barbara Thiede:

Is there a question you've been waiting to answer about your work, about the field, about what needs to happen, particularly in the time that we're living in [and] in the country that you and I are living in?

Mitzi Smith:

One thing I'm struggling with is the impact on us of the church councils.

Students, when they're seeing Jesus, they're always saying "God." That's because of the 4th-century church councils. It's not because of the way the gospels are presented per se. Maybe John will take you down that lane a little, but he

doesn't leave you there. The Gospel of John says that you will do greater things than I did (14:12). In other words, you don't have to be God to do what I've done.

I wonder: how would we ask that question? In what ways [do] church councils/traditions tie our ethical hands? In what ways do they keep us from reading justice?

Barbara Thiede: You could say exactly what you just said and substitute for church councils the guild and its traditions. How is it that the guild and its traditions and expectations tie our hands and tie our ethical hands and keep us from doing justice?

Mitzi Smith: On both sides there are constraints around how we speak, how we write, where we write (the so-called elite journals, *JBL [Journal of Biblical Literature]*), and even what we do with our observations in a world that prevents us from doing justice. How do we dissent, disrupt, and do our justice work, regardless, on every level?

Barbara Thiede: Mitzi, this was just amazing. I am so grateful to you for taking this time with us and being here and giving us the benefit of your wisdom and experience.

Mitzi Smith: Thank you both for the conversation and for your work. I so appreciate you.

Notes

1 A video with extracts from these interviews is available at <https://youtu.be/YaGIT7xoDDI>.

2 For an annotated bibliography on the subject, which lists many decades of scholarly work on sexual violence in biblical literature, see <https://www.shilohproject.blog/resources>.

3 Dunbar's work appeared in this series. See Bibliography section.

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4 Sexual Abuse and Violence in the Hebrew Bible

Terminology, Masculinity, and Intersectionality, Reprised¹

*Sandie Gravett, Ken Stone,
Sarojini Nadar/Barbara Thiede with
Johanna Stiebert*

Introduction

Scholarship on sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible was already well established by the 1990s. And yet, some critical issues remained controversial. Translation and terminology continued to be a source of debate; because biblical Hebrew does not have an exact lexical equivalent for the term *rape*, multiple scholars argue that those who use the word to describe the Bible's scenes of sexual assault or sexual violence are imposing modern ideas onto ancient texts. Clarifying the terms of engagement was, therefore, a critical piece of the scholarly project, particularly for feminist scholars.

Today's scholars can draw on a rich trifecta of associated fields for their academic inquiry into sexual violence in the Bible: feminist, masculinity, and queer studies. Moreover, intersectional sensibilities have become increasingly prominent, further nuancing investigations.

Sandie Gravett's work on terminology forms a key piece in helping to establish parameters in discussions over terminology. Ken Stone's observation that sexual activity is important to biblical narrators "almost entirely because of *its possible consequences for relationships between men*" (1996: 136) lays the foundations for students of masculinity studies to examine how male characters manipulate female bodies in their contests for power, authority, and control. Sarojini Nadar's work has expanded and developed the intersectional approach that reveals how racism, colonialism, economic violence, and sexual violence intertwine both in biblical texts and in their use by scholars, religious leaders, and politicians.

Sandie Gravett is Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Appalachian State University. Gravett works on issues of biblical interpretation and the teaching and practice of religious

studies. Throughout her career, Gravett has focused on creating spaces for students as well as general readers to investigate and interrogate biblical texts and the violence they depict. Her foundational article, “Reading Rape in the Hebrew Bible: A Consideration of Language” (2004), provides a powerful and detailed analysis of Hebrew terminology of sexual violence and sexual assault.

Gravett’s commitment to making the text accessible to a variety of audiences extends beyond the classroom and her publications; she also accepts over fifty public speaking engagements a year.

Barbara Thiede: Sandie, I was reading your article again. This is work that takes time to unpack concerns in an extremely detailed and careful way. What was it that drew you to this topic to begin with?

Sandie Gravett: [As a graduate student] I recall wanting to explore something that felt relevant and pulled on what I consider to be my strengths—doing a close reading of the text. But I didn’t expect to do anything that was explicitly feminist in my dissertation. In fact, at Duke [University] I had resisted earning a women’s studies certificate in the graduate program because it felt very much like [to do so] might be limiting my professional options. It would pigeonhole me in a way that already being really young and female was going to pigeonhole me. And I will add this piece: I ended up in my appointment at Appalachian State University in my second, third, and fourth years directing the Women’s Studies Program and it *did* pigeonhole me on that campus. My fear ended up being true.

But when I step back from it and think about it, I am certain that my choice of topic had to do with being young and female and navigating through an incredibly traditional field and some pretty conservative institutions. I am a graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. That was where I got an M.Div. I was in the last class to graduate before fundamentalists took over and forced a lot of the faculty to resign. At Duke there were only a handful of women in my PhD program, and it was a deeply conservative institution. SBL [Society of Biblical Literature] was even more overwhelmingly male than it is now. I remember going to conferences and being one of the few—if not the only woman—at a lot of sessions.

I had amazing support from mentors [and] colleagues for my dissertation. But I know now that I was finding

my own academic voice in a way that felt relevant to the issues that concerned me and resonated with who I was.

Barbara Thiede: Can you remember back to what it was like to be part of foundational early efforts on sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible?

Sandie Gravett: My work came into a conversation that was already lively and ongoing. The bibliography of my dissertation [included] Phyllis Trible, Phyllis Bird, Mary Daly, Nehama Aschkenasy, Renita Weems, Mieke Bal, Cheryl Exum, Carol Newsom, Susan Niditch... I could go on and on and on. While I was working, Julie Galambush published her work on Jerusalem as a wife in Ezekiel. It was amazing what was coming out in the late 80s and early 90s. What I was doing was just a small part of a really strong wave of women writing at that time.

My dissertation was defended in December 1994. The *JSOT* [*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*] piece didn't come until ten years later. A lot of my foot-dragging had to do with the fact that I just didn't want to pick up that writing. It carried such an emotional freight for me. I often tell the story about the morning I sat down after my defense to do the corrections. I understood for the first time what the phrase meant, "to have a weight lifted off your shoulders."

I didn't realize what living with sexual violence and gang rape had done to my psyche. It took ten years in the classroom, working with students, thinking about it, directing the Women's Studies Program, to, first of all, get frustrated that nobody had written all the translational stuff in one place. It was very hard to find something to assign, so I just wanted to write that. But also, my students were reminding me all the time that [my work] was still relevant and important and that I needed to be a part of the conversation.

Barbara Thiede: We've talked before about feeling like you had to modify your language or change your approach in order to be publishing at all or even getting your dissertation through the system. Was that part of the weight that came off your shoulders?

Sandie Gravett: My advisor, Jim Crenshaw, was completely supportive every step of the way. He didn't always agree with me—he still doesn't always agree with me. But he kept pushing me to be better. It was, "it's your work, you go for it and let's push it to the limits." Some of the tension

was around my willingness to veer from a way of doing biblical scholarship that privileged the writers of the biblical text and to conjecture about their world above everything else.

That tension was consistent throughout my graduate school experience, on my committee, and in sessions where I was presenting my work formally. I think what it was really cloaking was arguments about biblical scholarship itself and the relationship between biblical scholarship and religious institutions and theology, at least in my setting. But it was also about any approaches to the text that hinted at the political. It was before academic biblical scholars had their own conversation about just how political scholarship is and what voices it privileges and what this idea that we were being “neutral” was *really* all about.

We knew we were not being neutral when we read the text, but the field hadn’t grappled with the issues in its own history, its own construction of whose voices were privileged and why. My dissertation was fighting that battle, even though I really didn’t understand [what] battle it was fighting.

Barbara Thiede: You looked at “normal words,” words that we didn’t see as being charged with potential in texts of violence. All these “little” words—“take” and “lie”—words like *lakah* (לקח) and *shachav* (שכב) might be read differently now. Have biblical scholars internalized the need to be attentive to the way those “normal” words work in texts of sexual violence?

Sandie Gravett: I was writing in an interesting time. Precision of terminology was really important—and I still think it is. I’m a traditionally trained biblical scholar, and so that meticulous kind of effort is still crucial [to me]. But what helped open it up was the time period. We had this changing understanding of sexual violence coming to the fore.

In the mid-1980s and forward we started talking about things like date rape—maybe these encounters that lots of women were having in their social lives weren’t okay. It was, “I’m not sure that sex was what I wanted... we had gone three steps further than I wanted to go, but I couldn’t say no at that point.”

In North Carolina when I was writing, they were in the process of outlawing marital rape. It happened in 1993—we were the last state to do it. All these people

that were going, “but wait a minute... you could rape your *wife*? You could be charged with that?” It was this big revelatory moment. A lot of assumptions about what constituted rape legally [were] entering into national consciousness.

This is, of course, the issue where a lot of the biblical material is stuck: what do the “laws” say? We are also dealing with how a term like *rape* might function *outside* of a legal context, how it would encapsulate a person’s experience of sexual violence. Can I use the word *rape* even when it doesn’t rise to the legal definition of the word *rape*?

When we think about common words and how we use them, I think scholars are far more attentive to that now. Are they on top of it all the time? No. I still see too many introductory textbooks that don’t even think about this issue. I see students who’ve gone through foundational courses and have never been introduced to these kinds of thoughts. I think there’s still an awful long way to go even though the conversation in scholarship may have gotten better.

Scholars spend a lot of time talking to each other but don’t do a very good job of putting out material that’s publicly accessible. That market has been sucked up by a lot of happy religious stuff. What you get on a Google hit is very much controlled by evangelical religious folks.

I go to theological communities all the time. I gave fifty external talks last year. I do a lot of work with adults and especially older adults. They receive this work really well. They are very excited about it, and they almost have the same reaction our introductory students have. “Why have I never been told this? Why has this never been accessible to me? What can I read that I will understand?”

Johanna Stiebert: When you talk to people, do you do take them on a journey of the vocabulary?

Sandie Gravett: Yes! I just finished up a biblical study with an Episcopalian group on the Bible and slavery. We did feminist work; we did womanist work; we did this really amazing unit on queer theology. They were so excited, and they asked, “why can’t we find this?”

Johanna Stiebert: There is real underestimating of people in [the] public. Some academics want to be territorial about the text and about the space. It’s a real shame.

Sandie Gravett: It helps to think about what it is to read in translation and how interpreters often shape their view of what the text actually says.

Johanna Stiebert: Absolutely! When I have brought Hebrew into discussion of the text, most of the people I talk to feel empowered by it; similarly, when I say that we don't really know exactly what a word or text means. We often underestimate non-academics.

Barbara Thiede: I also have the experience that Sandie is describing—people saying, “How is it that I was basically given an [interpretation] that cleaned up the text so I don't have to be troubled? You are giving me a text that looks radically different than the one I thought I knew!”

You've written about the need for resistance. Has the need to adopt this role changed in the last twenty years or since you wrote your dissertation?

Sandie Gravett: No. That passage in my work is followed by a quote from Esther Fuchs. What she says is [also] my contention. The Bible does not merely project a male consciousness; it promotes a male supremacist social and cognitive system. I reflect on how most biblical critics know this situation to be true but often don't let it interfere with how they do their work. There is still a real need for voices that do that political resistance.

Right after I was finished with [my dissertation] was the Bosnian war and the use of rape as a weapon of war. Rwandan genocide and rape were happening. We moved from Bill Clinton to MeToo. Those are all questions that are in the public consciousness and with readers. One of the things that you are seeing after MeToo in religious communities [are] frustrated people saying, “we need to be interrogating this text too.”

The very structures of the systems have been problematic. How do we find a way to resist that that feels okay and yet still have some place in institutional structures? I don't think we've figured that out yet.

Barbara Thiede: Is the need to read these texts with resistance and to think about male structures as important as it was when you wrote your dissertation?

Sandie Gravett: It is *more* important. Laws have changed. Conversations are different. But these battles are still relevant. We are not addressing the structures very well. I have male colleagues with whom I share teaching biblical studies as well as other religious studies classes. The

level of privilege that they enjoy—even at earlier points in their career, in comparison to me in a very senior moment in my career—is still breathtaking. I am almost retired, and I still don't have the level of privilege that some of them do.

Johanna Stiebert: When we started our conversation and you spoke about not wanting to be pigeonholed as a feminist, that resonated with me. You somehow internalize and receive the message that that made you one particular kind of scholar to the exclusion of other kinds of scholarship. That's still there and that's there for queer scholars now.

Sandie Gravett: I don't think that we've started to deal with the ripple effects you are talking about. I'm someone who never married, never had children, someone who now cares full-time for two ninety-plus year-old parents who are still living at home. I don't get to rely on a partner who picks up the slack when I can't do it.

It's going to be even more of a problem because the field of biblical studies is contracting. It's almost inevitable that religious studies programs are going to start shutting down more and more at regional universities like ours or at smaller places. The field is going to exist in America at very elite institutions or in religious institutions, which is going to complicate this conversation yet again.

Johanna Stiebert: That is exactly what's happening here, sadly, and at a time when there is more acknowledgment than ever that there are many conversations that cannot be held without some knowledge of religious dynamics. Biblical studies is moving into a few locations—Oxbridge, Edinburgh...—and being wiped out everywhere else with the exception of a few theological colleges, which are almost all Christian.

Sandie Gravett: So, to me the issue is: where does the public work happen? Is there a place for public scholarship that's not attached to a university? I've often wondered if I would make it to my retirement before my program shuttered. It's going to be close.

I was really taken about your question about scholars suffering from exhaustion on issues of sexual violence in the texts and the feeling that there's nothing left to say. I wondered: "where the hell are you? Look at October 7. How is this still not relevant? Look at what's happening with women's bodies in this country and the way that

women's bodies are being talked about. How is this work not relevant?"

If this stays in the scholarly community alone and is not made part of the public discourse, you can't make change. For goodness' sake, we are getting ready to outlaw IVF [in-vitro fertilization] in places because we are so anxious to control what women do with their reproductive capacity.

These kinds of thinking are also a form of sexual violence and a form of control... One of the things that is also under attack is scholarship from a vantage point. You can't teach race anymore because that's not "objective."

We're increasingly finding ourselves in the position where the kind of work that we do is under attack. And because of the field contracting, it is going to be harder to hire us and harder for people to publish the kinds of things we would want to publish. The publication barriers in my time were different, more about delicacy. In my *JSOT* article I fought for the f-word. I also fought for the c-word in my dissertation and lost.

My committee asked me, "why are you so committed to this offensive word?" And I said, "I think the text is offensive and there is nothing that conveys that level of offense other than this word." If you've got to be shocked by it, be shocked by it. Let's be uncomfortable with it. Those were the battles I fought.

Now, you can say anything, but we're fighting the battle that you will never get a job if you say that. You'll never get promoted if you say that.

Barbara Thiede:

Sandie, is there anything you would have done differently looking back?

Sandie Gravett:

Young scholars now are so pushed to publish. I wrote this dissertation in a time only certain humanities scholars could enjoy [nowadays]. I had years to study and think about it. Then I took years before I picked it up again and wrote about it. How many of us can say we spend that kind of time thinking about an issue, pondering it, working with the language, and honing in on it? That's why I think I like it. It was well thought out.

We don't have that kind of space now. You've got to get two peer-reviewed projects every three years, while you're teaching, while you're speaking, while you are living your life, and while you're doing all these other things. You don't get that sort of time to write thoughtful pieces.

I would much rather be focused with a group of people thinking about the same issues pushing each other more slowly. If I were writing on this topic again and with, for example, the two of you to push and think and ponder—that might produce something interesting.

And now we're in a time when you have to have so many publications to clear the tenure hurdle and that, to me, is antithetical to what *really good* scholarly reflection should be about.

The one great experience of my time in this field has been just terrific colleagues all along the way who are going through many of these things at different places and in different ways. I just want to say I appreciate you asking these questions and writing this book and thinking of me when you did it. That means the world to me.

Barbara Thiede: The honor is ours, and we want to thank you for taking the time to speak with us. We are incredibly grateful.

Sandie Gravett: Thank you again for this time. It's been terrific.

Ken Stone is Professor of Bible, Culture, and Hermeneutics at Chicago Theological Seminary and winner of a Lambda Literary Award. His first book, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* (1996), explores the way male sexual practice undergirds struggles for honor and power. Stone has gone on to produce a rich corpus of work that contends with the relationships between biblical hermeneutics and matters of gender and sexuality. His books and articles often directly address sexualized violence in biblical texts.

Stone's work has been foundational in three fields of biblical study: masculinity studies, Queer studies, and animal studies; and formative for the academic study of gendered violence in the Hebrew Bible and the rape cultures it supports. Stone himself argues that students of the Bible must both acknowledge the diversity of its writings and their historical contexts, while ensuring that they reflect critically on the process of interpreting and teaching them. The latter, he believes, is essential for transforming our contemporary world toward greater justice and mercy.

Barbara Thiede: Let's get started! What drew you to all topics around honor and the performance of masculinity in the 1990s, and how compelling do these topics remain for you?

Ken Stone: I was a PhD student at Vanderbilt in the early 1990s. At the time there was a big emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches to biblical interpretation. My advisor, Douglas Knight, was especially interested in the use of the social sciences in Hebrew Bible scholarship. That intrigued me as well, because I had come to my

PhD program with some prior education in cultural anthropology.

Carol Meyers' book *Discovering Eve* had just come out. It made some use of the social sciences, including anthropology, and applied them to matters of sex and gender so that these were seen not just as natural matters but products of culture. Of course, she was focused on reconstructing the lives of women. But I wondered what it would mean to turn the anthropological lens back onto men and to denaturalize male sexuality and masculinity.

I was also already openly gay. I didn't enter PhD studies with the intention of studying that in any way in relation to the Bible, but in retrospect I do think that it drove my interest in denaturalizing male sexuality and masculinity.

I found the work of Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead very important. Their idea of sex as a prestige structure preceded my interest in honor and shame. In fact, I think that it was their reference to honor and shame as a prestige structure that got me interested in honor questions. They were already talking about sex and gender as something one had to display. Men in particular had to display it to other men. So, that notion of sex as a prestige structure and its implications for the study of male characters and female characters, male voices, female voices, and so forth captured me first.

It so happened that honor-and-shame was one of the anthropological models that was getting more attention among some biblical scholars, especially New Testament scholars. But it was often being applied, at least I thought so, in a kind of wooden way, and not so much to matters of gender and sexuality. There was a big focus on things like hospitality as a question of honor. Scholars who were using the honor-and-shame paradigm to read the New Testament didn't really want to deal with the sex stuff even though it was part of their anthropological paradigm. They were interested in whether Jesus was acting like an honorable man [i.e. not a masculine, or sexual, man].

I was really interested in the ancient protocols of sex and gender, masculinity. The honor/shame literature gave me a handle on that while allowing me to pursue the question of using the social sciences to read the Bible. A key text for me here though—that isn't very well

known in biblical studies but allowed me to see the honor and shame literature in a new light as something that could be applied to an ancient text—was a book by the late Classics scholar John Winkler, entitled *The Constraints of Desire*. It wasn't focused on the Hebrew Bible, but it was focused on ancient literature. Winkler wrote an explicit dialogue with the schools of thought around honor and shame that involved people like Michael Herzfeld and David Gilmore, [producing] this whole body of literature by people who were working on manhood and what it meant to be "good at being a man," not just "a good man." Also, working with them at the time was Carol Delaney, a feminist anthropologist, who was already doing some work on the Hebrew Bible. All that came together for me as a way to construct my own interpretive lens.

There wasn't really a very large literature at the time on cultural constructions of manhood and masculinity in the Hebrew Bible. There was a growing and already vibrant feminist literature looking at women in the Hebrew Bible that was very important.

I still find the study of honor and the performance of masculinity important—especially in the sexual realm. It shapes how I read much of the Hebrew Bible, and it definitely shapes how I teach it.

Biblical scholars have put the performance of masculinity on the table, but I don't think very much has been done to communicate it beyond biblical scholars. I think there's a lot more work to be done in the realm of public communication.

Barbara Thiede: Are there key trends or developments that have been fundamental to your understanding of sexuality, gender, or other kinds of gender performance and expression since the publication of *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*?

Ken Stone: There's a lot more work out there that has been done related to sexuality—not only the work both of you have done on rape culture but also the kind that Cynthia Chapman has done on Assyrian masculinity and warfare. I think that the kinds of questions I was asking could be answered in a more well-rounded way now because of the work that people like Cynthia have done.

A shift in my thinking had to do with my taking more intentionally into account what is now this huge

literature in LGBT studies and Queer theory. That was already in the background of my work when I wrote *Sex, Honor, and Power*. But I did go [into that] more explicitly in my subsequent work.

One of many things I appreciate about LGBT studies and Queer theory is that it gives me an explicitly critical perspective on the Bible's approaches to sexuality and gender. In that respect, I would not compare it to the work using anthropology. I would compare it to feminist approaches and your own rape culture framework. Barbara, you talk about rape culture and using that terminology as a judgment call, as a term of resistance. Resistance is also emphasized in Queer studies, and it seems to me that we need those critical points of resistance, given the ongoing influence of Bible and the way parts of it are appealed to by those who want to defend conservative positions.

Also, under the influence of LGBTQ studies, I would want to emphasize—more than I did at the time—the kind of heterogeneity and instability that are inherent in phenomena associated with sex and gender.

I would have to say that my own work on sexuality has been more shaped by Queer studies than by the work that I was influenced by when I wrote *Sex, Honor, and Power*.

Barbara Thiede: I sent you some quotes from *Sex, Honor, and Power*. Is there anything you would change about these three quotes?²

Ken Stone: I would still make those statements. I might be more cautious about how I put them. Thanks to Queer studies, I'm a little more attentive to the instability of these structures and power relations than I was when I wrote *Sex, Honor, and Power*. Reading the first two quotes out of context, they sound kind of rigid.

I was curious enough to go back to see the context. I was trying to make a point about the way sexual activity is represented in the narrative text. I think they're still accurate representations of what I see. I would just want to be clearer about the fact that I'm aware that there are other texts and perspectives in the Bible. The statements I made aren't necessarily equally applicable to all other texts and perspectives in the Bible.

I wouldn't say they're entirely irrelevant even to a text like Song of Songs. The woman speaker's brothers

were concerned about her sexuality, and she apparently gets beaten for being out and about in the city. Both of those moments could easily be read as a reflection of the views on sex and power that I talk about in *Sex, Honor, and Power*. But at least the Song of Songs offers us a more critical perspective on those views, right? So, I would tread a little more lightly in terms of how I put it.

On the flip side, there are other biblical texts that I didn't talk about that could be described in ways similar to descriptions I gave for those narrative texts. This is not a novel thing to say, but a lot of prophetic texts involve sexual violence. When I was writing the dissertation that became *Sex, Honor, and Power*, Renita Weems was at Vanderbilt, working on her book about the prophets,³ and we had some cross-fertilization of ideas about how power and honor and manhood influence the shape of those biblical texts. The third quote you mentioned—I don't think I would change a thing in that statement. I still think it's true, and true today also. I don't think it's just a statement about the ancient world but still true for contemporary dynamics.

Speaking of sexual violence, I always think about a scene in [the film] *Thelma and Louise*. There's a scene where neither are actually in the frame, but Brad Pitt is being brought in for questioning. He sees Gina Davis's lousy husband there and he finds out who he is, and when he comes out of the interrogation, Brad Pitt does this whole little thing where [he says], "I like your wife," and he starts doing these body movements that are basically kind of simulated intercourse without Gina Davis being in the frame. It's obvious that he's using his relationship to get at the husband of Gina Davis.

And you know, that's a contemporary piece and everybody immediately knew what was going on there, whether they would admit it or not. Guys knew as much as women watching that, and at that moment, Brad Pitt simulating sexual intercourse with this woman was not about her but about his relationship with this guy, his way of taunting this guy. Those are still very contemporary dynamics.

I see what looks like examples of that sort of thing in popular culture and daily living, hearing what men say to other men when women aren't around, sometimes when women *are* around. They still manipulate

their relationships with women as a way to achieve some kind of goal in their relationships with men—sometimes *violent* relationships with men—but using the bodies of women to do that.

Barbara Thiede: That leads us into this next question. What is your position on the use of terms such as *rape* or *rape culture* in regard to the Hebrew Bible?

Ken Stone: I know that the use of the word *rape* has been controversial among some scholars. I find it hard to find a difficulty with the use of the word *rape* to describe the sexual violence we see in certain biblical texts. I understand the arguments that are being made, but it seems entirely appropriate to me not only with texts that are often referred to as rape stories in popular culture—the story of the Levite’s concubine, Tamar, the daughter of David—but also, for example, the so-called concubines of David, whose story I find to be an even more horrifying story for the reason that there’s a role implicitly played there by God, the character. So, it’s hard for me to know why one would resist using the word *rape* to talk about those types of texts. The argument that there’s no word for *rape* in the Bible doesn’t seem very persuasive to me.

There is certainly a semantic field in the Hebrew Bible that describes what we would call rape—a whole language of humiliation and violence. So, I don’t find that argument compelling. As for the phrase *rape culture*, I feel like I’m still learning from scholars like both of you about its utility in biblical interpretation.

I assume that *rape culture* indicates that you can’t really understand rape as a phenomenon if you only study it as an isolated act. You’ve got to look at larger social, cultural, and religious assumptions that undergird it. Rape is still obviously a big problem, and you’ve also got now the resurgence of men on the right. You see them on Twitter all the time—men who are claiming to promote biblical manhood, biblical womanhood. Attention to which biblical texts are being used, and how rape or its representation functions in those texts, is still critical.

Johanna Stiebert: I think what Ken was saying really captured it well, the kind of bigger setting that enables not just rape to take place but the things that normalize it.

Ken Stone: I’m happy that biblical scholarship on sexual violence has grown the way it has. I wish there was more attention

now that there is this rich body of literature out there—it should still grow, but it also needs to be communicated more.

I don't have a view on the most effective ways to communicate biblical scholarship at more popular levels. But I do wish for that.

There could be more attention given by biblical scholars to the history of reception around these topics. Now that we have a somewhat more robust body of literature dealing with the biblical text, it would be useful not just to jump to contemporary culture in terms of communication but to be able to do that as part of a process of looking at the longer history of interpretation around these types of issues.

I would like to see an attempt to communicate both the ancient stuff and that history and the contemporary impact—maybe working with other scholars.

Johanna Stiebert: Is that interest partly driven by the kind of importance you see in this kind of work? By a kind of activism?

Ken Stone: The importance of work on sexual violence in the Bible? Absolutely! In terms of its relevance, it seems as relevant as it's ever been. We could point to some of the images we've seen coming out of Israel and Gaza to know just how relevant it still is.

I brought up the Israel/Gaza situation. One dynamic [is] mentioned in passing in news stories, where they talk about men raping women in the presence of other men. What is the function of sexual violence in that kind of moment? Sexual violence comes to play a role that involves not only the two individuals involved in it, but the audience who's seeing it. That seems a through-line to what we already see in the Bible. It's troubling that that's still the case and that we have that kind of shock of recognition. We've done this kind of work already with the ancient world and ancient texts, and [we see] it happening now.

Johanna Stiebert: I think biblical scholarship is sometimes going off into a direction where the level of critical empathy and feeling for the terror of it is disappearing in the conversation around rape. I find that really distressing. You just articulated really well why it's still important to speak about it, including in relation to the biblical text.

Barbara Thiede: It is reassuring to feel that this work is legitimate. Would you do anything differently?

Ken Stone: I have already mentioned that under the influence of Queer studies I would try to pay more attention to heterogeneity and instability in the text, though not to change the major points that I made.

I might rely a little bit less on the language of honor and shame—not because I think it’s irrelevant or unimportant, but because it seems to be more tame than it needs to be. I might want to go back and place more emphasis on prestige.

I don’t think I paid enough attention to the violent aspects of the texts I was talking about because I was so focused on making the point that sexuality and gender were understood differently than we often assume when we think of the Bible and sex. I don’t think I stressed enough the kind of horror of some of the violence.

Johanna Stiebert: Do you do that in your teaching now?

Ken Stone: I have to think a lot more carefully. Every single time I talk about the story of the Levite’s concubine, I wrestle with how I’m even going to talk about it in class. It’s such a horrifying story that most students still don’t realize is in their Bible, some of whom are probably victims of sexual violence.

It’s all very well to say we’re going to look at this awful text, but you still can’t predict how that’s going to land and affect them after they walk out of the classroom.

Johanna Stiebert: Can you identify when that became much more in the forefront of your awareness?

Ken Stone: It happened over time. Just the actual experience with students made me realize that [even though] I had spent all this time working on this text, I was not in a position to gauge the impact that reading it was going to have. I’ve not myself been a victim of sexual violence in any way and to watch students—especially women, though not only women... Over the years it’s become more of a challenge. I don’t have a neat formula even all these years later.

Barbara Thiede: We rarely get the time to say personally, face-to-face, to a scholar: “I owe you.” I’m very grateful for how careful you have always been in your research and how illuminating and clear it is not only for my own work but also for my students.

Johanna Stiebert: I agree. I love your wit. I really appreciate good writing.

Ken Stone: Thank you for that.

Barbara Thiede: And thank you, Ken, for your time today.

Sarajini Nadar is the Desmond Tutu Research Chair in Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. She is the editor of the *African Journal of Gender and Religion* and serves as a section editor for *Oxford Intersections: Gender, Religion and Culture*, a digital publication of Oxford University Press.

Her scholarship engages the intersections of gender, race, and class, and she explores how sexual, structural, and epistemic forms of violence are legitimized through cultural texts and traditions. Drawing on intersectional feminist theory, critical discourse analysis, and decolonial thought, she investigates how sacred narratives and systems of belief reinforce injustice while also creating space for alternative, liberatory ways of knowing rooted in resistance and ethical accountability.

Her most recent publication is *Gender, Genocide, Gaza, and the Book of Esther: Engaging Texts of Terror(ism)* (Routledge, 2025), a decolonial feminist analysis of biblical violence and its contemporary political ramifications.

Barbara Thiede: I'm truly honored that you took the time to be part of this project. I'm going to start by asking: can you give us an idea what the terms *rape* and *rape culture* actually mean to you; what associations do you have?

Sarajini Nadar: I've been distinctly uncomfortable with this term. I had to think carefully and intentionally for the first time about where that discomfort comes from.

For me, it stems from the recognition that culture is often assumed to belong exclusively to people who are regarded as "exotic," mostly those from the majority world, or Global South, rather than the West, the Global North, or to white people—a notion I resist.

For example, about a decade ago now, I was invited to facilitate Contextual Bible Study for a European faith-based organization. It was on the book of Esther. I had brought up themes of rape. One of the features of Contextual Bible Study is that, at the end, you ask people to reflect on what this text means for their lives in their current moment. It was fascinating to hear from people—and I've heard this before, having done it in other contexts in the Global North—"I can understand that there's a lot of that rape stuff in your context. But in our context, we don't have this. So, this kind of methodology can work for your context, but not our context."

I think my discomfort from the phrase comes from the understanding that *rape culture* may be the preserve of people in Africa, maybe the preserve of people of

color. That's "you people down there." Black men are disproportionately accused of rape, as we know.

Let me just say this clearly. I think it's really important that we acknowledge the ways in which systems coalesce to sustain rape culture, right? Tinyiko Sam Maluleke and I wrote a piece called "Breaking the Covenant of Violence Against Women," where we spoke about religion, culture, and the subsequent power of gender socialization as the unholy trinity underwriting violence against women.

So, I understand the system. It's the *term* that makes me a little bit uncomfortable.

Johanna Stiebert: I find it interesting because I see *rape culture* discussed so much more in Western and Global North settings. But I was in Ghana doing some work on Contextual Bible Study and *rape culture*. When I was talking about the prevalence of rape and *rape culture* in the UK, people were stunned. They themselves had believed that it was a problem that *they* had, but *we* did not have. This kind of internalizing of just the kinds of things you were talking about was really very shocking.

Barbara Thiede: What drew you to the topic of sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible?

Sarajini Nadar: It was never a career aspiration to become a Hebrew Bible scholar. I was studying English literature and African literature. I wanted to be a high school teacher, but when I got to my final year, I was told that African literature, go figure, in South Africa in 1995, was not regarded as a teaching subject in high schools. This was because of the apartheid-era Christian National Education system, which mandated a particular theological framing within public education.

I was on scholarships and I needed to finish my degree, and it was my final year and *now* they tell me this! I needed to scramble and find a subject very quickly. In my prior years, I had, just for the heck of it, chosen Hebrew as an elective. I met a wonderful mentor who introduced me to feminist biblical studies, actually. She asked me, "aren't you interested in pursuing this further?" And I didn't think I was, until I got to my third year and discovered that I couldn't do African literature as a teaching subject.

Biblical studies was a teaching subject in high school. They saw that I had Hebrew on my transcript, and they

said I could get biblical studies as a major or religion, but I'd have to do a little bit of religious studies as well. That's how I got into the study of Hebrew Bible. Then, I loved it so much and went on to do postgraduate studies and didn't end up being a high school teacher.

My engagement with this topic is deeply personal. I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. The man who harmed me was not a stranger—he sat comfortably in the pews of our church. He drove the church bus. He was seen as a spiritual leader, someone who quoted scripture with ease. But he was not the only one. There were many men who passed through our home—men who were considered godly, trusted, respected. I speak of him because the abuse he inflicted was the most severe, but the culture that enabled him was much broader.

My father died when I was eight. I am the youngest of seven children, and the first in my family to complete high school—never mind go to university. My mother had been married off in an arranged marriage at fourteen, had her first child at seventeen, and went on to have six more children. When my father—a builder and bricklayer—fell from a scaffold and died, my mother was left with no income, no support, and no way forward. She had a breakdown. In the wake of his death, men from the church came forward—supposedly to care for the widow and her children. But their care came with conditions. They helped themselves to the vulnerable bodies in our home, cloaking their abuse in the language of faith. A touch here, a squeeze there, all justified through scripture and spirituality.

This is what led me to study the intersection of religion and sexual violence; my scholarly interests are shaped by lived experiences and my earliest experiences of power and survival. It is in this terrain that I do my work: from within the wound, so to speak.

Barbara Thiede: Can you speak, even a little more, to how critical that acknowledgment of being a survivor is for your own work and for biblical scholarship as a whole?

Sarojini Nadar: Writing about oneself is never easy, right? In biblical studies, the accusation against those of us who write and speak from an *intentionally* located place—because everyone's writing from a located place—is that it's so self-indulgent or it's navel gazing.

What is so damn self-indulgent about going into the very recesses of your being and unearthing things that

have caused so much trauma in your life? There's nothing self-indulgent about that. It's actually incredibly difficult and challenging and courageous and heart-wrenching and gut-wrenching at the same time. It does all sorts of things to your body.

Acknowledging survivorship, if you want to call it that, is not just an act of personal truth but a scholarly declaration. I don't know if that makes sense. It's a way of saying, "this is my way of doing scholarship with my body, that's broken for scholarship, that's revealing truth. It creates space for embodied forms of scholarship where narrative memory and trauma are not *distractions* from the work, or an *aside* to the work, but it *is* the work."

In a field that's valued disembodied exegesis so much, where disembodied exegesis is held up as the norm, the universal gold standard, lived experience is a form of theory. It is a form of meaning-making. It opens up the space for us to theorize lived experience in a field that's so textual, that's so written, and that's so canonized.

That story then becomes the method.

Barbara Thiede: The lived experience is absolutely directly connected to those textual sources. They're not disconnected. You can't disconnect those things without doing an additional violence, not only to your own body but to the actual texts.

Sarajini Nadar: Absolutely. Epistemic violence is exactly one of the things that I'm more and more focusing on in my own work, the kinds of epistemic violence that happens through the silencing of those lived experiences.

Barbara Thiede: Your work brings together multiple theoretical concerns: the intersection of race, rape, womanist perspectives, critical discourse analysis, and theological assessments—both of the biblical text and how it's received. Can you unpack this approach and explain the questions which drive the inquiry in your work?

Sarajini Nadar: It was the work of Black feminist scholars that made me feel at home. I'm paraphrasing here, but bell hooks says, "I came to theory because I was hurting. I wanted to understand my pain." That's the best explanation of theory I can find, because theory can help you stitch together fragments and turn them into maps for how to chart the various dimensions of your work. My work sits at the intersections of race, rape, womanist, and African feminisms, between discourse and doctrine. I'm driven

by the question of how religion functions not just in text but in life.

It's important that I take popular culture seriously, because it shows us not just how biblical texts are received but how they are recycled and weaponized in real time. I resist narrowing text to canon alone. A sermon, a meme, a protest sign, and a Facebook post—I consider it all as legitimate texts.

Barbara Thiede: This leads me to ask about the kind of reaction that you've had to your work. How do people respond?

Sarojini Nadar: There are wonderful spaces of joy and solidarity and sisterhood. But I do think it is impossible to do the kinds of research that we do and not experience resistance. I don't think there's anyone who does feminist work who says, "oh, the academy has been so welcoming of my work." We know it's questioned. Gender studies is now pejoratively termed "grievance studies."

Let me name one form of resistance: the defensiveness and the policing around intellectual borders of disciplines. I constantly get asked, "are you a biblical scholar? Are you a theologian? Are you a social scientist? Your work is never squarely in biblical studies."

It's not. The world doesn't work like that. And if I want to address myself as a scholar to the issues of the world, there isn't one particular angle that I can come at it from.

Disciplines are crafted to classify, to control, and to contain, which is really the ultimate colonial mindset to have, right? And I see much of my work as a refusal of that containment. I refuse to be contained in those boxes.

I get that content knowledge matters. But we need courageous thinking that isn't afraid to cross the lines and to do the work and to do it well. Why do people have PhDs if they haven't acquired the analytical skills to think across disciplines?

My work insists that the academy must make space for messier truths, for truths that don't color within the lines, and for truths that are not confined by disciplinary boxes.

Barbara Thiede: If you were to assess the question of how people are acknowledging, exploring, or dealing with the connections between race and sexual assault, could you give us a grade or an assessment or say how you think the field is doing on this?

Sarajini Nadar: I despair. The field is waking up, but slowly and painfully. There's a willingness to engage race. But it's in very polite and surface-level ways, because the minute race and sexual violence collide, things get uncomfortable.

Rape is weaponized. The West has been complicit in trying to save the brown women from the brown man. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks specifically of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1988, 297).

My work insists that we can't speak about rape without also speaking about racism, without speaking about colonialism, and without speaking about economic violence. And I think in the field, if I had to do an assessment of the field, intersectionality is a buzzword. But intersectionality can't just be a buzzword. It's a demand. Feminist scholars are willing to say that intersectionality provides us with opportunities to recognize that there's complexity. But scholars are still picking and choosing which intersections matter. There are a whole lot of scholars who can be very progressive, except when it comes to Palestine. The silence has been deafening. People are starting to wake up to the idea of intersectionality and decoloniality, but not in ways that are more politically committed. I think it's still stuck at a very scholarly level.

I have to be equally committed to racial justice, to disability justice, and to all of those intersections. All of them rest on axes of power. Intersectionality is about power, and we have to address that head-on. Intersectionality has to be the starting point.

Barbara Thiede: Some scholars have expressed exhaustion around the topic of sexual violence. They ask, "have we really got anything more to say? Have we done all the work?"

Sarajini Nadar: People have been saying this for a long time, not just about whether the topic of sexual violence is done but whether feminism is done. I saw an interesting meme once. "I'll be post-feminist when the world is post-patriarchal." I'll stop working on sexual violence when it stops structuring our world.

I'm not just talking about those of us who are survivors and who feel the pain in our bodies and speak from that pain. I'm also talking about those of us who are so committed, who are so empathetic, that we literally feel sick to our stomachs—that we could literally go vomit in a bucket—every time we hear about another case.

Exhaustion is a luxury that many of us can't afford in this moment. I'm still exhausted, but I'm showing up because this conversation is so important. People who say, "oh, there's nothing more to say," are people who themselves might have been doing very disembodied work. If you are embodied in your scholarship, it would be very difficult to say we've said enough.

Barbara Thiede: Sarojini, thank you for so many important and insightful moments. Thank you for participating in this project.

Sarojini Nadar: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

Notes

- 1 A video with extracts from these interviews is available at <https://youtu.be/YaGIT7xoDDI>.
- 2 "Other male characters are, so to speak, the initial audience of the sexual events that take place.... If we wish to understand the possible meanings of the text, we must first understand the possible meanings of the sexual acts for the characters who interact with one another in the story." Sexual activity of any kind is important "almost entirely because of its possible consequences *for the relationships for men*" (136; italics Stone's). Sexuality is "a primarily homosocial affair" (136; italics Stone's). "[M]en often manipulate their relations with females to achieve particular goals in the realm of their relations with other men.... All sorts of male-female relations can be interrogated for what they tell us about all sorts of male-male relations" (48).
- 3 Weems (1995).

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5 Sexual Abuse, Sexual Violence, and Judeophobia in Text and Church¹

*Miryam Clough, David Tombs,
Meredith J. C. Warren, Eric Vanden Eykel/
Barbara Thiede with Johanna Stiebert*

Introduction

The 1980s saw the emergence of a powerful set of scholarly works on sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible. Renita Weems, Mieke Bal, and Cheryl Exum were among early feminists to explore sexual abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault. While some scholars focused on such issues in (then) contemporary church settings, biblical scholars continued for some time to focus largely on the Hebrew Bible.

Scholars arrived at the study of sexual violence in the Greek Bible and associated early Christian literature in the early 2000s; that field is still emerging. Masculinity studies and Queer studies have enriched the field. An interesting development in recent years has been the scholarly recognition of the intersections of sexual violence in early Christian literature and Judeophobia.

Miryam Clough, herself a survivor of clerical abuse, has focused her efforts on exploring abuse within the church and the ways in which such abuse has powerfully affected women's vocation. The academic work of David Tombs, like that of Clough, incorporates training and workshops that help church communities address sexual harm in their midst. Tombs has pioneered work on the scenes of Jesus' sexual abuse in the Gospels, applying modern understanding of the powerful intersections between torture and sexual abuse.

Meredith Warren, too, has long focused her attention on sexual abuse and sexual violence in Christian texts and is one of the scholars to note the connections between oppression of women in biblical literature and the demonizing of Jews. Eric Vanden Eykel also explores sexual assault in early Christian literature; he joins Warren in pointing out the intersectionality of Judeophobia and sexual violence in the Greek Bible and associated texts.

For centuries, theologians and scholars alike have privileged the Greek Bible and associated texts, neglecting the wealth of violent depictions they include. Supersessionist claims, moreover, that assert that the Hebrew Bible's

violence is succeeded by the Greek Bible's emphasis on love and peace have prevented biblical scholars from frank assessments of the abuse and violence in Christian literature. Both Warren and Vanden Eykel have led efforts to recognize the effects of supersessionism; the intersection of sexual abuse and Judeophobia is a topic nowadays because of their work.

Miryam Clough is Research Fellow at the College of St. John the Evangelist in Auckland, New Zealand. She is a contributor to the Routledge focus series to which this volume belongs. Her volume is entitled *Vocation and Violence: The Church and #MeToo* (2022). It explores the impact of clergy sexual misconduct on women's vocational aspirations and career choices in the church. Clough's book includes data from interviews with both survivors and church leaders, as well as accounts of her own experiences and sets out how misogyny and toxic masculinity justify purity culture, complementarianism, and clericalism. These, she argues, help cultivate the conditions for rape culture to flourish.

Clough has also contributed to *Accompanying Survivors of Sexual Harm: A Toolkit for Churches*, edited by Emily Colgan and Caroline Blyth. This toolkit was developed as a practical resource for church leaders to reflect on ways that churches can become spaces where sexual harm survivors feel safe and supported.

Barbara Thiede: I'm going to say how grateful we are for your time, Miryam. Can you start by telling us what drew you to the topic of sexual violence in the first place?

Miryam Clough: When I was an undergraduate, sexual violence wasn't widely discussed. To read about a rape case in the newspaper or see a dramatized rape on TV was quite shocking. As a young theology student studying the Hebrew Bible and translating Hosea, I found that I was unable to work with those [texts of] sexual violence in class, and my lecturer agreed that I could hand in written translations instead. There wasn't much literature around at the time that critiqued the sexual violence in that text, and I found it quite hard to deal with. So, I would have said this is a topic I've shied away from until recently. And yet when I think about it, my first theology dissertation—I was writing in the late 1980s—was concerned with sexual violence.

I'd become aware of what we called "sexist language" in those days—language that privileges the masculine and is still quite common in churches now. It was actually a male friend who'd said, "Don't you realize this language is disadvantaging women?" So, part of that dissertation, which was on the Psalms, was around language, but I was also advocating for the Psalms as a pastoral and liturgical

resource for women who'd experienced sexual violence, because they cover the whole gamut of human emotion. New Zealand's Anglican Prayer Book² was just being finalized at the time, and the Prayer Book Commission had decided to omit many of the violent passages from the Psalms. I was saying, these psalms are potentially really useful for women who've been abused, because they allow us to express all those difficult emotions in a safe way. I was advocating for retaining those verses. So that was, I guess, the first step.

When I started my PhD, it was partly around processing my own experience in the church, particularly at that time around a relationship that I was in with an Anglican priest. It was a very emotionally abusive relationship, and at times he was physically violent. It had become public to some extent, but he'd moved to another diocese, so there were no consequences for him in terms of his position in the church. I was pondering the structural stuff that was going on there—I felt that I was being called to account but he, as a priest, wasn't—when I saw Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), and I made the connection that I was experiencing a lot of shame, and shame seemed to be really dominant in the situation of women in Magdalene laundries. I wanted to know, where was their agency in that situation and how did the church retain *any* credibility, given its appalling treatment of these women, many of whom had been abused? I was also curious about the different ways shame was manifesting in the relationship I was in and about the way responsibility and blame were being allocated by others. So, I decided to do a PhD on shame and sexuality, focusing on the Magdalene laundries.

Researching shame took me into the area of violence. Authors like Thomas Scheff, Allan Schore, and James Gilligan were all linking shame to violence. Gilligan, for instance, says that underneath every act of violence there's an individual trying to regain their self-esteem, and Schore looks at the neurobiological link between shame and rage. I looked at the way shame is weaponized against women who have been abused and against women who don't conform to the church's standards of purity. As well as the physical constraints of incarceration, women in Magdalene laundries were subjected to repeated shaming. It effectively paralyzed them.

If you'd said to me a few years ago that my PhD had been on sexual violence, I probably wouldn't have recognized it as such, explicitly, although there are lots of examples of rape culture and sexual violence in it. I now see that kind of "architecture of containment," as James Smith describes the Magdalene laundries and those associated institutions that locked up women and children around matters of sexuality, as, itself, a form of sexualized violence.

Barbara Thiede: Even the initial steps that you describe that have to do with misogynistic language or toxic language: these are already a starting point around sexualized violence. I mean, that's a part of what undergirds rape culture. Even if you didn't see it that way, it still seems like you were already addressing issues of sexualized violence really from the get-go.

Miryam Clough: Yes, that's right. Eventually, I began engaging with it more consciously. I published *Shame, the Church and the Regulation of Female Sexuality*, which was the monograph based on my PhD, in 2017. Not long after that, I was reflecting on the factors that led to my not getting ordained in the 1980s, talking to a male friend I'd trained with. His path was very much just straight into ministry. What were the differences in our situations? That led me to study the experiences of women in the Anglican Church in New Zealand. I wanted to understand more about the context of my own experiences in the church. Again, it still didn't occur to me at that point that I would be studying sexual violence—even though it was part of my own story.

Someone suggested that I read Louise Deans' 2001 book, *Whistleblower: Abuse of Power in the Church: A New Zealand Story*, which was about her [own] and other women's experience of reporting being abused in the 1980s by Rob McCullough, who was a senior priest in the Anglican Church. Eventually around thirty-five women disclosed being abused by him. So, from there, the literature trail I was following was taking me again to the issue of abuse, and I wrote *Vocation and Violence: The Church and #MeToo* (2022), which was about clergy misconduct and its effects on women with vocations to ministry.

Barbara Thiede: It's hard to tell the story on multiple levels. It's hard to tell the story on a personal level. It's hard to tell the story because nobody gives you room or space to tell the story. And then there's actual pushback against

telling the story. I'm just thinking about the question of the effects of the suppression of sexual violence in Christian contexts and how this facilitates and even undergirds rape culture. Can you speak to that?

Miryam Clough:

Yes, many people have suffered terrible pushback. Louise Deans documents this in her book, but she persisted and 30 years after she first disclosed the abuse, she gave evidence at the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care. The stories don't go away just because they've been shut down. The church is realizing this now, I think.

With the situation I mentioned, when that relationship became public and someone went to the bishop, the bishop said, "There can't be a scandal. You can't talk about this." It was never identified as abuse; it was treated as an affair. None of the power dynamics were discussed. It was only when I started reading the literature on clergy abuse that I started to understand those power dynamics and the lack of meaningful consent within any pastor-congregant relationship.

One consequence of the suppression of any abuse in the church is that the abuse of power is not exposed or critiqued. Instead, victims are shamed. It has to be kept a secret. Rape myths come into play, and women are blamed for men's poor behavior. Women—and others—who do speak out are shut down by church leaders and lawyers in really horrible, damaging ways. And because it's not talked about, it keeps happening. Several of the women I interviewed for *Vocation and Violence* commented that they appreciated being able to tell their stories, because, in many respects, they had not felt heard—or they had been actively shut down in the past. Hearing the stories is also helpful for other survivors. That was a big thing for me: to realize I wasn't alone and that there was a context that supported sexual violence.

A big part of that context for me was the use of New Testament texts to serve that misogynist agenda—that whole culture of "women shouldn't be ordained, women should be silent, Jesus only chose male disciples"—it was very prevalent when I was an ordinand in the 1980s. Every day was a battle in that respect. The attempts to silence women in that way or to make life difficult for women or to deny their vocations—which is a form of violence in itself. That contributes to a context where more egregious acts of sexual violence can happen under the radar.

And then there's the use of biblical texts to actually justify male violence. The Anglican Church in Australia commissioned a study in 2021 that found equivalent and higher rates of intimate partner violence in Anglican communities than in the general population, and that violence was justified by patriarchal interpretations of New Testament texts around male headship and female submission.³

Barbara Thiede: Where do we stand with the work that's been done on sexual violence in Christian settings?

Miryam Clough: I think there's some exciting work being done, but there's still a long way to go, and I'm not sure how many people in the church really engage with this work. Jenny Richards, in Australia, has done some really interesting doctoral research on developing faith-law approaches to domestic violence based around the theology of T.F. and J.B. Torrance. She highlights that women are still often encouraged by pastors to forgive their partners and remain in abusive relationships.⁴

Barbara Thiede: Why is it that we keep having to say the same things over and over again? We're saying the same things we were saying decades ago. Clearly there has been some work done on sexual violence in Christianity. Are we seeing any real impact of that work?

Miryam Clough: The reception to my material around sexual violence has been positive, but you know, conferences are attracting the people who are already interested, often attracting survivors—people who “get it” because they've been there. Out in the congregations generally, there's not a lot of engagement. I think often it's down to the people who are leading those communities whether it's discussed or not. Some people feel a responsibility to have these conversations, but there's still a lack of understanding, even among the leadership. The Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia released a statement after the Royal Commission's final report came out in 2024, and at the end of the statement, there was an invitation to anyone who'd experienced abuse in the Anglican Church to come forward. There was an email address you could write to, but no information about who would receive or respond to the email or what would happen next. Reading it, I thought, there's no way I would feel safe as a survivor to respond to that. They don't really get it, even at a pastoral level.

I would say, working in the Māori Anglican Church, where more people have experienced abuse of various

kinds (statistically, Māori are disproportionately affected by sexual violence), there's more of an openness to discussing sexual violence. I remember a student giving a homily during a ministry training weekend and talking quite openly about her childhood memories of her father regularly beating up her mother. I was quite shocked at her unfiltered telling of the story, but people responded really positively. It resonated with them. I've found there's more of a willingness in that context to acknowledge sexual violence, but it can also be challenging to try and critique rape-supporting biblical texts. People get really offended because you're criticizing the Bible—or you're seen as having a go at men.

There's also a concern in the church with sexual morality, with purity, with no sex outside marriage, and with restricting ministry opportunities for people in committed same-sex partnerships—with policing sexuality. Policing sexuality is part of rape culture as well, and I see that kind of moral policing still happening at the expense of understanding sexual violence—just like it did in the twentieth century with the Magdalene laundries. We'd rather tell people in loving, consenting, respectful relationships that they can't have sex than make the changes needed to prevent sexual violence in our churches. I attended a hearing where a female priest was harangued in a really intrusive way about her personal life by the male lawyer representing the church. The women who were there supporting her were in tears. I was sitting there thinking, "this is medieval." She hadn't breached a fiduciary boundary. She hadn't abused anyone. I can't imagine that many male clergy have been spoken to in the way that she was, even when they've *committed* abuse.

It shocked me to come back into the church after nearly twenty years away—I came back in 2019 expecting things to be different. Expecting women to be really established as leaders in the church. But it's just not like that. Women aren't flourishing. The language is often male-centric. There's little awareness that language produces culture and that, even more broadly, women are being written out of it.

Barbara Thiede: Looking back, would you do anything differently?

Miryam Clough: With the knowledge I now have, I think I would have more confidence to challenge things. I've certainly broadened my understanding of what sexual violence is and of

how power can be exploited by clergy. I wouldn't refer now to a relationship between a priest and a parishioner as a consensual affair, for instance.

Johanna Stiebert: I'd love to have male ordinands read your book, actually. It would be really great if they could get insight into what the world looks like.

Miryam Clough: I'd be surprised if very many are interested.

Barbara Thiede: That should not be up to them.

It makes me grateful for everyone like you who is trying to open the door that keeps getting shut by institutions. We keep forcing it open and we turn around and it's shut again, and we feel like we have to start all over again with just turning the knob.

I want to thank you so very much for spending the time on thinking about these things with us.

Miryam Clough: Thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this—it's a really exciting project.

David Tombs is Howard Paterson Chair Professor of Theology and Public Issues and Director of the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at the University of Otago, New Zealand. He is also an Anglican lay theologian.

Tombs specializes in contextual approaches to public theology, including liberation theologies and theologies of reconciliation. Together with Jayme Reaves, Tombs co-edited the courageous collection of essays *When Did We See You Naked?: Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse* (2021).

Tombs authored *The Crucifixion of Jesus: Torture, Sexual Abuse, and the Scandal of the Cross* (2022), a monograph in the Routledge focus series *Rape Culture, Religion, and the Bible*, where he integrates modern accounts of torture into reading the depictions of crucifixion in the Passion narratives and other Greek and Roman sources. He attends closely to the sexual violence gospel accounts describe.

Tombs regularly engages in community outreach, both writing and consulting with churches who hope to improve their response to sexual and spiritual abuse.

Barbara Thiede: David, it is an honor to have you here. We are grateful for the courage and the bravery of your work and the persistence with which you quietly and kindly keep doing it. What brought you to this topic of sexual violence in the Greek Bible?

David Tombs: In 1997, I was in the University of London library reading an account of a graphically misogynistic, sexualized execution of a health worker in El Salvador in the early

1980s. At that time, there were very high levels of political violence and counterinsurgency in Central America, struggles over democracy and military regimes. Reading that story took me into learning about torture as an instrument of state terror in Latin American regimes. Two things came out of that.

Firstly, how much we need to understand torture as a form of state terror that's directed against a much wider audience than the immediate victim who experiences torture. Secondly, how shockingly prevalent sexualized violence and violations are in torture practices. It's almost universal but it may not be obvious on first reading. As soon as you start digging into torture practices, you discover you're engaging and learning about sexual violence.

My work at the time was in theology, in Christology. I was looking at two Salvadoran theologians or, actually, two Basque theologians working in El Salvador, Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino. They were working on the crucified Christ as understood through the crucified experiences of the Salvadoran people—metaphorically, they called the crucified people “the preeminent reality” in Central America in their day. They asked: how are we to understand the crucified people?

I was thinking about the execution of the health worker. Here was a really graphic example of El Salvadoran crucifixion which they might have used to address sexual violence, but which they left on an abstract level. They would have seen her death as an important part of the experience of the crucified people, but they would not have spoken of the sexual violence involved in her death. It's not that they were, I suspect, unaware of the frequency of sexual violence, but they didn't wish to focus in detail on the particulars of this woman's death. I wanted to understand *why* was the health worker executed in that way and why was the sexual violence not featured in the work of such insightful theologians like Ellacuría and Sobrino?

For all their brilliant work, Ellacuría and Sobrino hadn't really identified the sexualized element of political violence in their understanding of the crucified people, and they hadn't used that experience for their thinking about the crucifixion of Jesus.

I thought, “I'll try to bring this health worker's experience into that conversation on crucifixion.” The state

terror aspects of crucifixion were fairly straightforward and obvious and not completely original.

But thinking about crucifixion in terms of sexual violence was completely new at least in terms of the language used. The stripping and naked exposure of Jesus was something which was reasonably widely known, but it wasn't seen as sexual violence or abuse in any way. Naming the stripping and nakedness as intentional and a form of sexual humiliation, and therefore a form of sexual abuse, was a new way of thinking about the text.

I wanted to investigate the gospel texts that directly disclose that aspect of Jesus' experience and then ask, "might the stripping have then led to other forms of sexual violence which are not immediately disclosed?"

But you don't quite know who your audience will be, and it's always varied. I'm surprised by the public criticism that speaking of Jesus' experience trivializes sexual violence against women. I think it comes from people thinking that forced stripping is "not that bad" and their belief that women particularly have experienced much worse sexual violence than stripping. Acknowledging the stripping of Jesus as sexual, and a possible step to other sexual violence, should not be seen as trivializing anyone else's experience of sexual violence.

Johanna Stiebert: What led you to seeing what is so rarely seen—sexual violence against a man?

David Tombs: I was reading the Latin American torture reports. There were, of course, plenty of stories of torture and sexual violence against women. It was almost universal in one form or another. But there were also plenty of stories where men were stripped and kept naked, where there was genital beating, where there were different forms of sexual violence. I noticed that there was at least as much silence—perhaps even more silence—about the sexual violence against men, as there was against women. There weren't many directly attested accounts of, for example, rape of male victims, but there were sometimes references to the possibility that other men might have been subjected to sexual violence.

The issue of male-against-male sexual violence in detention and torture wasn't always foregrounded. You had to notice it. For example, accounts of torture by electrical shocks would usually mention shocks to the genitals, but this would not be labeled as sexual violence. Likewise,

genital beating would be described but not recorded as sexual violence. Often sexual violence is just subsumed as torture.

The reticence and reluctance to use the language of sexual violence for torture practices that involve sexual violence seemed really important for thinking of Jesus' experience. If we're willing to use the language of sexual violence, it becomes obvious there's something hidden in plain sight.

Barbara Thiede: Why is it so difficult for readers to see what's before their eyes, what's hidden in plain sight when it comes to the sexual assault that Jesus endures in these texts? Why is it so important that they do?

David Tombs: There's a really interesting combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity that is at play here. In many ways Jesus' crucifixion is very familiar to people. It's a story that is very well known—or people think it's very well known. But describing the mistreatment to Jesus as a form of sexual violence or sexual violation, sexualized violence, or sexual abuse: that's very *unfamiliar*. You've got this tension between what's familiar and what's unfamiliar. If you were starting with a torture victim that nobody knew anything about, people might be much more ready to believe that if they were stripped and exposed naked, this constitutes sexual violence. However, because the stories of stripping and the crucifixion are so well known, I think people feel confident that they can dismiss this suggestion that sexual abuse is at work.

There are a number of factors that feed into this and complicate it. There's a strong suspicion of academic work, a suspicion that academics are trying to promote themselves, jumping on a "MeToo bandwagon." Others are cautious about thinking about things in new ways. Some have argued that it's making crucifixion about sexual abuse, which is [neither] necessary [nor] appropriate. And sometimes, or very often, no specific reason is given; it's just dismissed as absurd or offensive without needing to give a specific reason.

For some people, there's a very narrow understanding of sexual abuse. Some only see it as relevant to children. Or it only qualifies as sexual abuse if Jesus is raped.

Johanna Stiebert: There doesn't seem to be much of a problem to acknowledge that Jesus was tortured and suffered terribly... think of the Mel Gibson film, for example. This seems

the *one type of torture* that cannot be named. Why do you think that is?

David Tombs: I think religious purity values and purity culture have an influence. For some people it's that they just don't know how to respond to a male figure, to a sacred figure, to a figure who is seen as pure but who has been subjected to sexual violence.

I've tried to change the way I've presented the work since 1999. In 1999, I referred to the stripping and the nudity as a form of sexual humiliation, which is a form of sexual abuse. I drew a distinction between sexual humiliation and the further possibility of sexual assault. But actually, drawing the distinction in this way can encourage people not to take the stripping and nudity seriously. The stripping and the nudity *are themselves* a form of sexual assault. Students are sometimes anxious and tentative at this suggestion that there's evidence that Jesus was subjected to sexual abuse. But when they make the connection that the evidence of the stripping and nudity is very clear and the stripping and the nudity should be named as a form of sexual abuse, things fall into place.

Barbara Thiede: Would students presented with Mary stripped of her clothing in front of 500 Roman men understand that as sexual assault, as sexual abuse?

David Tombs: I suspect they would. I think most people are not aware that "a whole cohort"—about 500 soldiers—were involved. One aspect of thinking of Mary in that way is her strong association with purity. Jesus' experience is potentially a helpful way of examining the problematic aspects around purity. When Jesus is named as a victim of sexual violence, churches can't take the default response of blaming and rejecting the victim of sexual violence. The issue of sexual violence has to be addressed at a deeper level and not as easy victim-blaming.

When you can actually have a conversation with people, they come to see what's being said as absolutely right and often are amazed that they didn't see it before.

I now put a bit more emphasis on the crucifixion experience of forced nudity. We have much more compelling evidence that on the cross, Jesus was fully naked. However, there aren't many works where this evidence gets drawn together in a helpful way. I wrote a piece for *The Conversation* that gathered the different types of evidence together.⁵

Barbara Thiede: You've opened a door, but what is it that scholars need in order to walk through it?

David Tombs: I suspect the biggest thing would be a clearer sense of how both male and female political prisoners in the world today are often subjected to sexual violence. That would really help. I'm doing more work to explore how sexual violence of political prisoners is reported in contemporary accounts. It is legitimate and appropriate to use these contemporary accounts to ask about Jesus' experience, because Jesus was a political prisoner.

Turning to the Roman world, there has been a lot done in Classics by scholars offering insights into attitudes, into conquest and violence and the role of penetration and hierarchy in sexual acts. This helps move [us] away from a really unfortunate assumption that sexual abuse is only about sexual gratification and driven by erotic desire. Sexual violence during torture is much more about power, control, and humiliation.

There may also be a guild issue. I don't claim to be a biblical scholar. It's not how I came into this. And I suspect that whether you are seen as a biblical scholar or not makes a difference to some biblical scholars. Because I'm fairly explicit that I'm coming to this as a contextual theologian, and from a liberation theology perspective, there are assumptions that liberation theology projects its own interpretations *into* the text rather than draws the historical reading *out of* the text. Drawing on contemporary torture reports can be seen as a subjective activist eisegesis rather than respectable scholarly exegesis.⁶ I think that's wrong.

My research would probably have had more impact in biblical studies if it had been in a biblical studies journal. I'm really pleased I did what I did and published in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, which was known for its support for liberationist perspectives, but it probably reinforced some of the reservations some scholars might have about historical anachronism. I didn't expect to keep working on it, but things just kept coming up. The Abu Ghraib scandal coincided with [the Mel Gibson film] *The Passion of the Christ*. But everyone was talking about *The Passion of the Christ* and yet couldn't put together the mistreatment of naked prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the mistreatment of the naked Jesus ... it took me back into it. The death of Muammar Gaddafi did the same in 2011, as

did #MeToo in 2017 and, more recently, the Abuse in Care Inquiry in New Zealand (2018–2024).

Coming here to New Zealand, I've been working with a Peruvian colleague, Rocío Figueroa, and it's taken us into the issue of the abuse of religious women, consecrated women or nuns, and how this experience of Jesus might be a helpful resource for nuns who have been subjected to sexual abuse.

Johanna Stiebert: You work on Jesus as the victim of sexual abuse. How did you feel about Stephen Young's chapter [in *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts*], the one which suggests that Jesus is a rapist in the Revelation text?

David Tombs: *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts*, edited by Christy Cobb and Eric Vanden Eykel, is a fabulous book, and Stephen Young's chapter raises really challenging issues. Young picks up a very different perspective from the one that I address in my work. The Christ figure in Revelation is not the earthly Jesus, but Christ as triumphant heavenly Lord. It's confronting but understandable that Jesus as a triumphant Christ figure should be represented in terms of toxic masculinity, in terms of using sexual violence in punitive ways, in terms of all the things which would have been common in that culture and remain common in ours.

Barbara Thiede: In your work, you describe the sexual assault on Jesus. Young describes Jesus as a rapist.

Johanna Stiebert: As a liberation theologian how do you deal with that?

David Tombs: I would be concerned at any faith community that in any way said that because this is how Christ is represented in Revelation, or God in Hosea, that that justifies and makes somehow righteous violent masculinity and punitive sexual violence. That seems to me completely wrong.

The truth is liberating. Whatever the truth is, [don't] be afraid of it. If the heavenly Christ is represented as sexually violent in Revelation, nothing is served by denying it or pretending otherwise. It needs to be faced up to. It needs to be confronted. The harmful assumptions behind seeing the Son of God in this way need to be identified and clearly understood and rejected. One way to do this is to note that this representation of the heavenly Christ is diametrically opposed to the experiences of the earthly Jesus.

Young's point that the sexual violence of Christ against Jezebel is normalized and erased by readers is well put. It is likely to be a painful truth for the church, but it offers the church an opportunity for liberation from a destructive

and distorted Christology. At the same time, a similar argument can be made for how readers normalize and erase the sexual violence against the earthly Jesus. Acknowledging this normalization and erasure of Jesus' own experience is a painful truth that can offer liberation.

Barbara Thiede: Can you assess the way that suppression or erasure around sexual violence has facilitated or affected rape culture in institutional contexts and religious institutions?

David Tombs: One of the other texts I work on is 2 Samuel 20:3, which is a terrible demonstration of the stigma that victims of sexual violence [endure]. Ten women, David's secondary wives, are raped by Absalom and then shut away by David. Everyone can see that the rape by Absalom is wrong and horrific and terrible. However, people often have trouble seeing that what David does is deeply harmful. David's actions reinforce the message that those who have been subjected to sexual violence are irretrievably damaged and should be rejected from respectable society. Jesus' experience of sexual abuse has huge potential within churches to surface and challenge this sort of stigma.

The Church of England is going through an absolute crisis around sexual abuse issues and how they failed to respond. I would like my work to be shared by those engaged in safeguarding in the Church of England. This work on Jesus is highly relevant to safeguarding work precisely *because* it points to dismissal and minimization. When churches refuse to acknowledge Jesus' experience for what it is, they deprive themselves of a really important resource for challenging stigma.

Johanna Stiebert: David, thank you so much. I think it's so important that you say all this in the way that you do. You do it with great sensitivity, without hiding anything.

Barbara Thiede: I want to express my gratitude, too.

David Tombs: It's been great to talk to you both.

Meredith J. C. Warren is Senior Lecturer in biblical and religious studies at the University of Sheffield and Director of the Sheffield Centre for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies. She describes herself as a feminist from childhood.

Warren's scholarship centers her feminism and spans a wide range of topics in early Christianity and its intersections with Judaism. She is the co-author of *Jewish and Christian Women in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Parks et al. 2022); with Shayna Sheinfeld and Sara Parks) and the author of numerous articles on gender, sexual violence, and the Bible, notably "Five Husbands: Slut Shaming the Samaritan Woman" (2022a), "Mary Magdalene and the

Dangers of White Feminism” (2022b), and “Rape Jokes, Sexual Violence, and Empire in Revelation and This Is the End” (2023).

Warren pays tribute to decades of scholarship on sexual violence, rape culture, and Judeophobia. Still, today’s researchers must continue to raise concerns, she argues, to dispel harmful stereotypes about the nature of Jewish and Christian literature.

Barbara Thiede: First, we want to say how honored we are to have you here. We want to jump in by asking: when you look at the terms *rape* and *rape culture*, what do these terms actually mean for you?

Meredith Warren: For me, rape culture is the way that society is so not bothered about sexual violence or gender violence and is very permissive about the kinds of behaviors that prop up a system that is quite happy with having any number of its members abused or sexually abused.

Barbara Thiede: Is it possible for you to pinpoint what drew you to think about sexual violence in biblical literature?

Meredith Warren: I’d always been a feminist, even when I was a child. And then, early in my career, I came across this article by John Marshall on Revelation and the rape threats uttered to Jezebel by Jesus (Marshall 2010). It was the first time that I had noticed or been called to notice that verse. I was flabbergasted that all these commentaries on Revelation, all this mainstream scholarship, were totally oblivious. Now I know that it’s not obliviousness. It’s not ignorance. It’s bending over backwards to get rid of a problem that exists in a text.

Stumbling across that article really opened my eyes and made me hungry for more of that kind of approach to the New Testament. I was raised in an Anglican church. I went to youth group; I was confirmed. I always was uncomfortable with the underlying misogyny of what I was experiencing.

Mike Pope wrote an article in 2018, “Gabriel’s Entrance and Biblical Violence in Luke’s Annunciation Narrative” (Pope 2018). It’s about the lack of consent that Mary has when God is suddenly, “by the way, you’re going to have a baby...” For me, that was one of these light bulb moments. This is the thing that I knew was creepy. And finally, someone has put footnotes on that.

The work of other scholars that I was reading at the time, like Adele Reinhartz and Tina Pippin, and the women that I went to and did my PhD with, Sara Parks

and Shayna Sheinfeld, and then coming to Sheffield and working with Katie Edwards and meeting Johanna [Stiebert]—all of those things kind of galvanized me. This isn't just something that you keep for your group chat. This isn't something that just gets brought out when you're at the pub with your mates. This is something you can write and publish on.

When I did my PhD, the university and the department that I was in was quite old-school. You did traditional biblical studies, historical-critical method. So, the idea that you could do feminist biblical scholarship and be taken seriously... obviously, I knew that because I was reading all of these scholars. But the idea that *I* could do that came to light, is what I'm trying to say.

I was always drawn to these texts where there's so much going on with gender, but I came so late to the idea that I could actually comment on what those texts were doing.

Barbara Thiede: You are describing a personal awareness that can be confirmed by academics who are articulating what you are feeling, rather than erasing what you were sensing.

Meredith, generally, when people think of sexual violence, we tend to find that they automatically gravitate towards the Hebrew Bible. The topic [of sexual violence] regarding *Christian* biblical literature has remained fairly invisible until pretty recently. What do you think that scholars needed in order to be able to acknowledge, understand, and start investigating sexual violence in the Greek Bible?

Meredith Warren: I'm not really sure what people needed. I know that there's a pervasive idea that there's *no possible way* that Jesus could be mean or violent. Every year when I get a fresh crop of students, one of the first things that I know I have to do is [look with them] at a list of verses. Some are from the Hebrew Bible and some are from the New Testament. There's a nice variety of a loving God in both and a pretty angry God in both (Mroczek 2021). I'm trying to break down that idea that there's like a clear division between a mean Old Testament god and a nice New Testament god. There needs to be that recognition that texts about love occur in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and that Jesus has a temper, and he acts on that temper all the time.

Trying to acknowledge or resist Jesus' PR team—that would be what people would need.

Barbara Thiede: Would you say that erasure has had a particular effect on rape culture in our own time?

Meredith Warren: I've written on a film, "This Is the End," and its use of rape culture, and Revelation fits really well with what the New Testament is doing with rape culture and sexual violence. The use of rape jokes in that film [is] a way of asserting control by a group of actors who are considered sort of underdogs in the comedy industry but are reinforcing very mainstream misogyny in how they're engaging with each other and with the few female characters in the film. This goes hand-in-hand with what Revelation is doing. On paper, it looks like it's resisting empire. But when you look right down at it, it wants to *replace* the empire with its own *divine* empire that the author is going to control. He really hates women, to be honest with you.

There's [also] the 2018 film on Mary Magdalene, a film that is ostensibly about a woman and this relationship that she has with Jesus. But it plays on this sort of long-standing practice that comes up again and again in Christian feminism: Jesus is great and you can tell that Jesus is great because look how good he is compared to the Jews, who are horrible. There's this idea that Judaism is bad for women and Jesus came in and saved women. There's antisemitism in the film (Warren 2022b).

This happens all the time. The gospels use "Jews" as sort of a negative prop against which Jesus can be measured. The film also amplifies this. However, we're reading the New Testament; however, we're reading this text, that is how it plays out in culture.

But there are implications for people who are churchgoers, right? This is creating an environment where you can't really complain about misogyny or sexual violence or sexual abuse in the church. You must know that Jesus was a feminist and therefore the church is good for women. They all work together in a really pernicious way, I guess.

Johanna Stiebert: Is Jesus regarded as a feminist because so much of that Christian literature is, by contrast, so overtly anti-feminist?

Meredith Warren: In conservative Christian circles, certainly, Jesus is not a feminist, and he upholds "traditional" gender roles. But among Christian feminists and especially [in] Christian feminist scholarship, you do get this idea that Jesus paved the way for women.

It's much like early feminist literature tried with such devotion to find those strong female leaders in the Hebrew

Bible who demonstrate that it isn't as bad as we always thought it was.

Barbara Thiede: It seems to be yet another way of undergirding a supersessionist argument, really.

Meredith Warren: Absolutely. We have evidence that Mary Magdalene must have been [most] probably independently wealthy (e.g., Luke 8:1–3). We have archaeological finds like Babatha's archives where she owns land and is able to hire legal representation and act on her own behalf in the courts (Parks, Sheinfeld, and Warren 2023, 145–47). We know [about] women patrons in antiquity and that in later antiquity they bankrolled church fathers (e.g., Matthews 2001; Chin and Schroeder 2017).

But a lot of Christian feminism can't possibly imagine that anything good that they like about Jesus could possibly have originated outside of Jesus' own brain. The idea of giving credit for the things that they like to Judaism is somehow too difficult to acknowledge.

Barbara Thiede: You've already begun to address the way Christian scripture has been used in the service of antisemitism. You clearly feel there's a lot of work to be done on this topic.

Meredith Warren: There has been quite a lot of work done on combating Christian feminist supersessionism and antisemitism, but it tends not to get, like, picked up or read very often. Judith Plaskow has been working on this since the 70s.⁷ She's got some fabulous articles about this and laments in at least one of them that it continues to be necessary to critique this ongoing trend in feminist scholarship (Plaskow 1993, 117). My friend Sara Parks has written on this [issue], and she's also got a chapter on feminist New Testament scholarship and Judeophobia in the book that I co-edited with Sarah Rollens and Eric Vanden Eykel: *Judeophobia and the New Testament: Texts and Contexts* (Parks 2025). Those are going to be really great resources, especially for teaching, as well. The problem is: why does it seem like every generation has to do this all over again?

It goes back to the false idea that feminist scholarship isn't real scholarship, it's not serious. Sara Parks (2019) has written on what she termed the Brooten phenomenon, named after Bernadette Brooten, who uncovered the Junia mistranslation in the 1970s (Brooten 1977). And yet, go and look into who's written on the mistranslation: it's a bunch of men who hardly cite her. They get all the credit while the person who actually wrote the pioneering article

on this topic is ignored. This happens again and again with critiques of supersessionism and antisemitism and feminist scholarship as well. So, the work has to be done again every single time.

Barbara Thiede: Why does the guild seem to be incapable of valorizing this work so that it *doesn't* have to be redone?

Meredith Warren: I have been going to the SBL [Society of Biblical Literature] conference for a number of years. And it seems like every couple of years we have a debate about who are we inviting to be part of this organization and whose money is here.

Why are these book publishers that have anti-trans stuff and supersessionist stuff as part of their publication offerings next to our books about liberation and feminist scholarship? Why does this keep happening, and why does no one seem to care about it?

But to a certain extent, there's a financial implication. And, especially in the States, the places that still offer biblical studies as a degree are Christian colleges. And in the UK, a lot of the departments are still theology departments where what is taught is *Christian* theology, but it's called "theology." You might have a Jewish Studies program somewhere, but it might not even *be* in the theology program. It might be somewhere else, in History. And related to that: if [organizations] are worried about keeping [their] Christian evangelical base, then the Christian evangelical base is invested in supersessionism. If you're going to try and root out supersessionism from the guild, there's a risk that you're going to piss off a whole bunch of your base. You also have to keep Christian Zionism alive.

Barbara Thiede: Is there a relationship between Judeophobia and antisemitism and sexual violence in Christian texts? Do these things connect?

Meredith Warren: There definitely is. Both link back to this idea of Christian hegemony and Christian supremacy, because both anti-semitism and misogyny are tools of oppression, propping up this hegemonic order where Christianity is normative and powerful. You have to stay with Christianity because "look at what it used to be like in the Hebrew Bible—it could be like that, right?"

My colleague at Sheffield, Valerie Hobbs, has written about abuse in Christian contexts, about rape culture and sermons on divorce (Hobbs 2019). [She shows] how the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees on divorce is one

that gets misread so frequently in Christian contexts. It doesn't fit with this idea of Jesus as more liberal towards women. The Pharisees [present] the rules for divorce, and Jesus is the one saying, "absolutely not, *no* divorce." This makes it difficult to talk about Jesus the feminist, or Jesus is good for women.⁸ Jesus is actually *more conservative* than your supposed Pharisees.

Barbara Thiede: If you were assessing where are we as a whole on sexual violence, on rape, on rape culture in these texts, where are we? What's really getting into the classroom? What's infusing our seminars, our education, our SBL sessions? What's the state of the field and to what extent does anybody notice?

Meredith Warren: We've done a lot of like chipping away of things, and we've created a big enough hole that now we can see how bad things are. Before it looked like, okay, if we just write, like, a couple of articles and this book, we will have done it. Now we can see exactly how big this excavation project is. Things are so much better than when I was a grad student. There is so much more out there now. I'm really excited because I get emails from people who want to do PhDs on this stuff.

Barbara Thiede: Is there anything you would do differently, would say differently?

Meredith Warren: I wish I had been more explicit in my earlier work about how my approach to certain texts, or my choice of certain texts, has implications for the wider world.

Barbara Thiede: Is there a question we should have asked that we didn't?

Meredith Warren: I don't know if this is a question, but I feel there isn't as much conversation as I would like there to be among New Testament *and* Hebrew Bible scholars about this material. There's still sort of a weird great divide going on.

Barbara Thiede: Meredith, it seems that the very need for that kind of conversation, collaboration, and communication would do a lot to deal with the rewriting problem that you described earlier. If we talk to each other more, would we have the need to keep rewriting and re-investigating?

Meredith Warren: My guess is maybe not. We could also talk about material outside of the canon. We need to, like, break out of our canonical silos.

Barbara Thiede: This was delightful. Hearing your perspective on so many aspects of what's happening regarding sexual violence, rape, rape culture, antisemitism, and Judeophobia has been so informative. Thank you for giving us your time.

We so appreciate that you are willing to participate in this project.

Meredith Warren: Absolutely.

Eric Vanden Eykel is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Ferrum College, where he teaches courses on early Christian literature and the cultural afterlives of biblical texts. His research explores the interpretive dynamics of minor and marginalized figures in early Christian literature, with particular attention to how gender, power, and violence are constructed and contested in the textual tradition.

Vanden Eykel is the co-editor of *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts* (Cobb and Vanden Eykel 2022), a volume that brings together interdisciplinary approaches to the intersections of bodily harm, sexualized violence, and sacred scripture in antiquity. His scholarship examines how early Christian texts reflect and participate in rape culture—through silences, euphemisms, narrative gaps, and theological justifications. His current work explores how narratives of suffering in both canonical and apocryphal texts are shaped by gendered assumptions and how these stories have been appropriated, reimagined, or challenged across the centuries.

Through both his writing and teaching, Vanden Eykel advocates for ethically responsible interpretation that takes seriously the historical embeddedness of ancient texts and the ongoing consequences of their use in contemporary religious and political discourse.

Barbara Thiede: Eric, thank you so much for being here. Can you explain what drew you to the topic of sexual violence in the Greek Bible?

Eric Vanden Eykel: My big “aha” moment was when I was working on the Salome episode in the Proto-Gospel of James. [Here] Mary gives birth in a cave. She’s all by herself. The midwife and Joseph are outside the cave. There’s this flash of light. The light recedes and then the midwife looks in and Jesus is nursing. She goes to Salome and says, “a virgin has given birth, and her body shows no signs of it.” Salome rushes into the cave and says, “I’m not going to believe it unless I put my fingers in.” And she does. Her hand catches on fire; it’s a very dramatic scene where she’s screaming about her hand withering. An angel comes and says, “pick up Jesus and you’ll be healed.”

I’d presented on it a couple of times. My focus had always been on the literary echoes between this story and Doubting Thomas, [who says] “I won’t believe he’s risen from the dead unless I put in my fingers.” It’s identical.

I was teaching this story in my class on early Christian literature. A student approached me after class, a female student. She was extremely upset. She said, “You know, you need to put a trigger warning, a content warning, on this story before you discuss it in class, because this is a story of sexual assault.” I looked at her and I said, “You’re right.”

It was an extremely emotional moment for both of us. I had betrayed my students in that moment—or maybe my positionality had betrayed them, I’m not sure. My student had seen something that I was unable to see, because I had never been in a situation like that where somebody was investigating me without my permission. I apologized to her and went back and reread [my work]. I’m looking at this stuff thinking, “I totally missed the point, *totally* missed the point.”

That was my entryway. Once you see it, you can’t really unsee it. I talked with Christy Cobb, and she and I then co-edited [and published] *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts* (2022).

Barbara Thiede: What is it that scholars have needed in order to acknowledge, understand, and address the sexual violence in these texts?

Eric Vanden Eykel: Pessimistically, I would say, many scholars still don’t have what they need to start thinking about this because of supersessionism. I once heard a pastor say from the pulpit something along the lines of, “if you have a question of why we needed a savior, just look at the Old Testament.” That’s a really, really weird claim.

I think what I needed, and what I think what others have needed as well, was to broaden the understanding of what we’re talking about when we’re talking about sexual violence. I pivot back to Rhiannon Graybill’s phenomenal work, *Texts After Terror* (2021). What scholars of the Greek Bible have needed to see is that it’s not the case that you have to have a “traditional” rape story in order for there to be sexualized violence. These dynamics, this rhetoric, takes a lot of different forms and sometimes it’s subtle. [Take] the case of a story like Salome, where this is so obvious to so many women, but it wasn’t obvious to me.

Scholars have needed to listen to other voices. There are some things we can’t see because of our

positionality. There are also some things we can't see because we aren't looking for them.

Our field of early Christian and ancient Jewish literature is so Christian-dominated. Scholars of the Greek Bible needed to realize that their own part of the canon is doing that same sort of work.

Barbara Thiede: How would you assess the state of scholarship on sexual violence in Christian literature?

Eric Vanden Eykel: I think that the conversation isn't loud enough yet, but I think that we are moving in the right direction. There are more and more people who are starting to see the more subtle examples, the ones that you don't really quite notice until they're pointed out to you.

We're clearly thinking more about positionality. More broadly, that conversation is becoming more acceptable at all levels of the guild. People are starting to listen a little bit more and to be more aware of and think critically and creatively about power dynamics.

To throw Rhiannon Graybill's work in there again, I think we've also really started to move away from this idea that sexual violence is black and white. You've got her terminology that sex is not a traffic light and neither is rape. I think she's spot on there.

My colleague Stephen Young, for example, has a chapter in *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts* about Revelation (Young 2022). [Commentaries] say it's a sickbed. No, it's not. [Jesus] is talking about killing her children [who] are the product of her adultery. She's not sick. She's being assaulted! And who's the one doing the assaulting? It's Jesus. It's been explained away so that we can't see it, but I think that we're starting to get more and more people who are digging into this and saying, "let's look at this again with fresh eyes—away from what all of these other people, either theologians or scholars, or whatever, have told us what this text is about. Let's go ahead and interrogate those positions and ask, what is this text really about?" That's good movement in the right direction.

Barbara Thiede: The kinds of things you have described have operated for so long—denial or erasure of the sexual violence that inhabits Christian texts: what's the effect of that in the real world?

Eric Vanden Eykel: Normalizing, right? That story of the Annunciation is a great place to start. If I look up, I've got two paintings

on my office wall of the Annunciation, and they're beautiful, right? Everyone's comfortable and Mary's all dressed up and everything's exciting. It's a new baby...

But I've heard this story used for victims of sexual assault who have become pregnant. [That victim] is told, "you know, Mary was also an underage woman, or a girl, and she, too, was given this burden to bear. And she accepted it, right?" This serves to erase the horrible thing that's happened to her. To take an instance like this and to theologize it and to say, "you can be just like Mary here and you can also carry your child..." The sentiments behind that may be pastoral, but they're also tapping into the kind of ickiness of the Lukan Annunciation story, pulling back the curtain to almost tacitly acknowledge that the Annunciation story is a story of a forced and not otherwise wanted pregnancy. This is a conversation that is happening daily with victims of assault that is directly related to how we have understood the story and how we have refused to see what this story really is about. We normalize sexual assault as something that "just happens" sometimes.

This is a story where Gabriel says [everything] in future tense. "*This* will happen. *This* will happen. *This* will happen. And you're going to do this and this and this and *this*." It's not until after he already says all the stuff that's going to happen that Mary says, "may it be to me as you've said."

You can already see this in the Proto-Gospel. Very importantly, no blood and no pain. [The author] sanitizes it by saying, "well, this wasn't a pregnancy like any other." This baby just appeared. Mary's body was unaffected by it. There are other examples too, one of them being the Immaculate Conception—this whole idea that Mary is prepared from the moment that she's conceived, that her whole nature is transformed by grace. The whole point of this, theologically, is so that she can't say no to Gabriel.

None of the theologians who are talking about this are subtle about any of it. They're all saying [that] the grace that God gives her at the moment of her conception enables her to say yes. That sounds a lot like a date rape drug.

By the time we get to today, it's just a beautiful painting where everyone's happy, everyone's comfortable. It's all good.

Johanna Stiebert: Just out of interest, off topic, but is there anything about Mary menstruating?

Eric Vanden Eykel: I'm going to give you a speculative answer first. If this occurs in the tradition, it's probably something that's going to pop up in the medieval period when people are starting to toy with the notion of Mary as the co-redeemer. I could imagine a scenario where somebody draws some comparison between the blood of menstruation and the blood of the cross or something like that. That's a wild guess. But now I'm also going to spend the weekend looking for it. So, thank you.

In the Proto-Gospel [of James], Mary grows up from the age of three to twelve in the temple—and in the Holy of Holies, no less. The thing that gets her expelled from the temple is [that] the priests say Mary is about to defile the temple of the Lord. The subtext there is that she's about to start her period.

The way that I read that is that this is the author being antisemitic. Mary is utterly pure in this text. There is nothing impure about her at all. Jewish leaders are caricatured in this text; they don't know what's right in front of them. They can't see it and they don't understand. I think it's Judeophobic. I don't think that that author imagines Mary as ever having menstruated because I think that that author considers that to be a consequence of impurity.

Barbara Thiede: What needs to be done in biblical scholarship around the intersection between Christian writings and antisemitism?

Erik Vanden Eykel: The subject matter is brutal and, yes, there's still plenty of work to be done. Many of the texts of the Greek Bible are supersessionist in nature, flat-out Judeophobic. And in some cases, Jews are never mentioned. Philemon never mentions Jews. That is also a form of Judeophobia, right? Erasure.

There's been some good work on highlighting those dynamics in these texts. Why is John referring to "the Jews" as a bad group when *everyone* in the story is Jewish? [There's work on] helping theologians with pulpit usage, [like the] common usage of the term "Pharisee," for example. More people are saying, "hey, you shouldn't be using this term as an insult, because that's anti-Jewish." At least in some circles that has helped us to make some progress.

The major work that needs to be done is scholars becoming more aware of the types of tropes that they are reproducing in their own work.

Barbara Thiede: Are Judeophobia and sexual violence connected in Christian texts?

Eric Vanden Eykel: They both rely on the same sorts of rhetorical and theological strategies to make the arguments that they're making. Sexual violence and Judeophobia are built within frameworks of domination and control, othering, the sense that this person is not a human with dignity, but something else entirely, [it's] dehumanizing. You can look at depictions of Jews in art as these kinds of monstrous others, right? Jews are othered by a lot of early Christian literature. They're blamed for Jesus' death. They're blamed for all sorts of things all the way through the medieval period, right? It's like, "hey, oh, there's an outbreak of plague... whose fault is it?" And when we talk about sexual violence and victim-blaming and these sorts of things, [we hear], "men are easily tempted and it's not their fault." Both of these things employ violence as a theological metaphor.

Stephen [Young]'s chapter on the Jezebel? Her consequence is martial rape. Punishment involves violence. That's not necessarily an early Christian innovation either. Read Ezekiel, Hosea. This rhetoric doesn't just come from nowhere. I think they're both peddling in the same type of rhetorical strategies.

I don't think you can really emphasize these things enough.

Barbara Thiede: I first encountered your work through a piece that you had written about abuse in the academy. Is there a link between abuse in the academy and rape culture in the academy?

Eric Vanden Eykel: They're absolutely related. At the very least, they're related because of the attitudes that fuel both of them. Sexual violence is fueled by the idea that this other person exists for my purposes.

The main point of that piece is whether we can still cite perpetrators of sexualized violence and whether we *should* still cite them. It's the question that agitates the heck out of me because you don't have to cite *anyone* you don't want to cite.

The other side of that coin are the random emails from people who say, "why didn't you cite me in this

work?” That sense of entitlement to a presence in a person’s work is very much fueled by that same kind of dynamic of a person who believes that they are entitled to whatever bodies they encounter. It’s the same attitude that goes into both.

In some cases, with well-known abusers in our field, tenure is used as a smokescreen to say, “Well, this person has tenure, so what can you do?” That’s not actually the case. “What can you do? Well, we’ve removed them from teaching, and they now live somewhere else, but they’re still on our payroll.”

That sort of harboring is what’s fueling this, right? People can get away with this stuff, and the institutions that they work for are going to try to sweep it under the rug as much as possible, not necessarily to defend them but to defend the institution. Institutions don’t care about us. They care about themselves.

Barbara Thiede: Is there anything when you look back, Eric, that you would have done or written differently?

Erik Vanden Eykel: Everything, I think. I was trained to see scholarly interpretation of texts, translation, those sorts of things as kind of exercises in objectivity. Obviously, I’m well versed enough in postmodernism to know that we all are participants in the creation of meaning. I wrote at length about this in my book on the Proto-Gospel of James... in the methodological chapter on matching together the author’s intended meaning and what the readers have heard. Meaning happens with those things together. But I only knew that intellectually.

What I would do differently is to realize that that’s not just an intellectual exercise. Interpretations have real consequences. That student’s conversation with me was part of that awakening in me to say, “you know, *no*, this is *not* just an article or a chapter or a lecture.” Acknowledging the real consequences of how these texts have been interpreted is something I can’t unsee now, [so] I’m making sure that I’m listening to people outside of my own positionality. Not diversifying your bibliography to meet a quota of scholars, but to say, “I have *chosen* these as conversation partners because they can see things that I’m not able to.” And to allow that to change my lens as well.

Barbara Thiede: Thank you. That brings us to the most important question, maybe... Is there a question that we *should* have asked.

Erik Vanden Eykel: People are reading these texts that we're talking about as sacred texts. I don't have any faith commitments, but it is a question for millions and millions of people, right? What does that mean for my faith or my tradition—should we just throw these things out? Should we all be agnostics, or whatever?

I think that that's an important question for us to wrestle with.

Barbara Thiede: What do you say to those many students and those many individuals?

Erik Vanden Eykel: Religions are artifacts of lived human experience. Lived human experience is messy. We learn from the past and we use what we learned from the past to make our presence and our futures better. If being part of a religious tradition is an important part of your identity, then you have to see your religious tradition as one that has been shaped and formed and built by lived human experience. These texts are still problematic. It doesn't mean that we have to keep perpetuating them. We can learn from them, and we can use that knowledge to say, "this is harmful rhetoric and now we're going to do better."

One of my major goals in class is to get them to see *all* texts are the products of human creativity. So, humans are putting in all of their messiness. Does Luke know that he's telling a rape story? No. He probably thinks that he's telling a beautiful story, but his presuppositions about the nature of this particular body [Mary] and how it's related to what God wants from it are different from how we should be thinking about this stuff today. So, I tell people, "no, you don't have to [throw out the text], unless your religion simply *is* this text. The texts are a big part of it, but they're bigger than just the text." Then people can sort of start to see that life is messy. So is religion.

Barbara Thiede: Indeed. Thank you, Eric, we are so grateful you could be here to speak with us. We deeply appreciate your time.

Erik Vanden Eykel: I enjoyed it! Thank you both.

Notes

1 A video with extracts from these interviews is available at <https://youtu.be/YaGIT7xoDDI>.

2 Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia (1989).

3 NCLS Research (2021).

4 Jenny Richards (2025).

5 See David Tombs (2024).

6 *Eisegesis* refers to “personal” interpretation of a text, which may involve reading “into” a text, as opposed to *exegesis*, which presumably rests on “objective” explanation or analysis that is generated “out” of the text.

7 Plaskow (1978, 1980); see also Heschel (1990).

8 See also Hicks-Keeton (2023).

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6 Final Reflections¹

Barbara Thiede

The Bible is both a relic and a curio of the past. It is also a live and living text. Its translations, its interpretations, and its offspring in media and art of all kinds make the Bible familiar—even in secular worlds. Its premises and its narratives have been foundational for religious institutions, for ideologies, indeed, and for global cultures. The Bible’s own hegemonic masculine foundations have helped assure the dominion of cisgender and heterosexual men. That dominion has been biblically defended, extended, and reinforced over all varieties of plant and animal life on the planet. The Bible has been a reliable tool for justifying war, enslavement, and environmental destruction. Its gifts have been touted, too, of course. But the harm it continues to enable—including for women and members of marginalized communities—has only relatively recently become a topic in biblical studies. For most of its history, the Bible has not been subject to meaningful interrogation for its normalization of masculine hegemony and sexual violence.

For these reasons (and others), several of the scholars interviewed for this book emphasize the importance of paying attention to the world in *front* of the text. Given that decades of exegesis and scholarship have focused on reconstructing the world *in* and *behind* the text, such an approach remains contested. Speaking of biblical literature as just literature—and thereby as subject to the same critique as other literary work—can be a fraught enterprise. In her interview, Mitzi Smith makes just that point: “[We] have to come to terms with [Bible] as an ancient and human text. It’s not God... We need to come to terms with the very human nature of the Bible and its fallibility.”

Commitment to the world in front of the text leads scholars of sexual violence to advocate direct engagement with the public. Ken Stone notes that while the performance of masculinity has certainly been put on the table for biblical scholars, not enough has been done to communicate the outcome of that inquiry outside the guild. He does, he adds, “wish for that.” Indeed, scholars of sexual violence in biblical and associated literature are well aware that conversations with readers of all kinds can impact their own understanding of violence in these texts. Eric Vanden Eykel’s story about a student who helped him see that the Proto-Gospel of James includes a scene of sexual assault is

not so uncommon. Scholars who teach texts of terror often (re)discover that, as Vanden Eykel puts it, our work is “not just an intellectual exercise. Interpretations have real consequences.”

Some academics and activists are unafraid to bring their own experience with sexual violence to the table—they even insist on it. Nevertheless, acknowledging such experience involves professional and personal risk in fields dominated by the demand that their inquiry should remain governed by “objectivity.” Those who speak from personal experience with sexual abuse or assault (some of which has occurred in their own religious communities) are frequently told that such an experience debars them from engaging “objectively” with biblical texts of terror. Yehudis Fletcher describes the kind of silencing survivors endure: “It’s either dismissed as not true because I am not believed, or I am believed, and then it’s dismissed as trauma rather than knowledge.” It takes courage to proclaim the truth: that such experience is a *qualification*, not a disqualification, for interrogating violent texts. As Sarojini Nadar says:

My scholarly interests are shaped by lived experiences and my earliest experiences of power and survival. It is in this terrain that I do my work: from within the wound, so to speak. In a field that’s valued disembodied exegesis so much, where disembodied exegesis is held up as the norm, lived experience is a form of theory. It is a form of meaning-making. It opens up the space for us to theorize lived experience in a field that’s so textual, that’s so written, that’s so canonized. That story then becomes the method.

The relationship between experience and textual tradition creates a valuable *and* professional approach for contending with an undeniable fact: biblical literature has had outsized importance when it comes to enabling, excusing, codifying, and normalizing sexual violence and sexual assault.

To that end, including multiple angles of inquiry has clearly become an important priority for scholars of sexual violence. As Caroline Blyth points out, the field is now characterized by greater diversity because ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender identity, disability, and class are included in the academic conversation. Nadar speaks to this development as well, maintaining that scholars cannot speak about rape and simultaneously exclude racism, colonialism, and economic violence. Nadar warns her colleagues: “intersectionality can’t just be a buzzword. It’s a demand.” That demand undergirds, in fact, how many scholars operate in the world in front of the text. Hence, Gerald West and Sithembiso Zwane make clear in their interview that any Contextual Bible Study (CBS) they plan and facilitate must respond to a variety of intersecting issues, including economics, gender-based violence, and issues of ecology and disability. “We speak of intersecting or interlocking systems of oppression,” West explains.

The guild has clearly been influenced by the recognition that intersectionality is important for the study of violence in biblical and associated literature. Increasingly, members of the academy have also understood that claims for “scholarly objectivity” in academic research are problematic. As Vanden Eykel states, “We’re clearly thinking more about positionality. More broadly, that conversation is becoming more acceptable at all levels of the guild. People are starting to listen a little bit more and to be more aware of and think critically and creatively about power dynamics.”

Paying attention to intersectionality and positionality has expanded the range of questions scholars and scholar-activists ask. Queer studies has joined feminist studies, womanist studies, and masculinity studies in enlarging the field of inquiry. Stone explains that LGBTQ+ studies and Queer theory offered him “an explicitly critical perspective on the Bible’s approaches to sexuality and gender.” That critical perspective includes a conscious and necessary deployment of resistance, Stone maintains, given the influence of Bible and the way it is used by those who wish to defend conservative positions. Queer studies has also opened doors for scholars to explore heterogeneity and instability that are, so Stone, “inherent in phenomena associated with sex and gender.” Are there ways out of a relentlessly binary vision of biblical literature, even as it pertains to sexual violence? Queer studies is helping to answer that question in the affirmative.

By the time Stone wrote his 1996 monograph, feminist scholarship had produced an extraordinary corpus of literature on the portrayal of female characters. They identified and dissected biblical misogyny and patriarchy. They described “texts of terror” (Trible 1984) and detailed the sexual violence inflicted on women of the Bible. Stone and other scholars of masculinity focused attention on constructions of manhood and masculinity. Scholars began to ask how biblical authors reveal what it means to be “good at being a man” (Herzfeld 1985, 16).

Understanding honor codes that undergird biblical literature was an important first step, but by no means the last. Thought-provoking work on the way in which the performance of masculinity not only normalizes the use of sexual violence against female characters but also on male ones has led David Tombs to reveal the ways in which Jesus was made subject to sexual assault. This field of inquiry, male-on-male violence in biblical literature, is a developing one (see Thiede 2022, Thiede forthcoming).

Similarly, the exploration of the overlapping features of sexual violence and Judeophobia has become a powerful topic for scholars of Christian literature. Vanden Eykel contends that

[s]exual violence and Judeophobia are built within frameworks of domination and control, othering, the sense that this person is not a human with dignity, but something else entirely, [it’s] dehumanizing... Both of these things employ violence as a theological metaphor.

In her interview, Meredith Warren highlights the way supersessionism affects scholars as well as Christian textual traditions. A number of Christian feminist scholars, she suggests, claim that Jesus paved the way for some form of women's liberation. Warren notes that this particular rhetorical move recalls the ways in which early feminist biblical scholars tried to find "strong female leaders" in the Hebrew Bible. The debatable outcome of such attempts is to assert that biblical literature is not as misogynistic as some feminists had first believed. Warren points out that such "strong female figures" of the Greek Bible should be seen in context: after all, the Hebrew Bible features a number of stories of women supporting, feeding, and housing prophets, generals, and other Israelite leaders (e.g., Exodus 1–2, Judges 4–5, 2 Kings 4, 1 Kings 17, and 2 Kings 22:14–20). What Warren describes in her interview reveals not only the supersessionist nature of Christian literature itself but the way in which scholars collude in reinscribing such views in their own works. Such scholars, she says, "can't possibly imagine that anything good that they like about Jesus could possibly have originated outside of Jesus's own brain. The idea of giving credit for the things that they like to Judaism is somehow too difficult to acknowledge."

Today's scholars have a variety of concerns about biblical scholarship. They are well aware of the continued pressure for an illusory "objectivity," and they fear the use of the term "intersectionality" may be something of a fad, rather than a commitment. They acknowledge supersessionist ideas that continue to blight the field, and they recognize that academic conferences make a home for toxic ideologies. Warren offers a trenchant observation in her interview:

I have been going to the SBL (Society of Biblical Literature) conference for a number of years. And it seems like every couple of years we have a debate about who are we inviting to be part of this organization and whose money is here. Why are these book publishers that have anti-trans stuff and supersessionist stuff as part of their publication offerings next to our books about liberation and feminist scholarship? Why does this keep happening, and why does no one seem to care about it?

Relatedly, Blyth points to the continuing dominance of scholars from the Global North: "There's far less attention paid to scholars from the Global South—scholars of color, scholars living in the shadow of empire and from minoritized communities in terms of their social status and class." Blyth also worries about what she sees as a reliance on white Western approaches to reading texts of sexual violence. She observes a trend in feminist scholarship to ascribe agency to victims of sexual assault. She offers the example of those who read the narrative of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11) and who claim that she exercises choice by permitting her father to sacrifice her. Such readings

run counter to the view that Jephthah's daughter is a victim of biblical hegemonic masculinity:

It reminds me of the post-feminist notion that women today always have choice and agency. It's a very white notion of feminism as well. Women have choice and they have agency, and there's almost something shameful about being victimized because [then] you're failing to exert your power as a woman. You're a post-feminist failure.

The desire to "empower" victims has led, Blyth suggests, to a false conclusion: women always have choice and can always exercise agency. This is an illusion, as she points out, for many women as well as for members of other subordinated populations across the globe. The World Health Organization (WHO) declares that violence against women, and particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence, is a major public health problem. WHO estimates that one in three women worldwide have been subjected to physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.²

Recently, some feminist scholars have openly expressed exhaustion when it comes to exploring texts of sexual violence.³ Fatigue is a professional hazard of working with violent literature. Harold Washington acknowledges this problem: "[i]t can be hard to embrace what we are confronting." Some scholars interviewed for this work admit that at times, they need to remember to pay attention to their own well-being to be able to continue their labors. Nevertheless, they also maintain that the work is far from complete. As Nadar puts it, "I'll stop working on sexual violence when it stops structuring our world." Exhaustion is an unaffordable luxury, she observes, when sexual violence remains systemic and pervasive. "Look at what's happening with women's bodies in this country and the way that women's bodies are being talked about," Sandie Gravett says; "How is this work not relevant?" And Washington concludes: "It can't go on uncountered. There's no hope if we don't break through the misogynist world."

A number of those interviewed worry that scholars of sexual violence are "speaking to the converted." Conferences, Miryam Clough points out, attract individuals who are already interested or survivors themselves—people who "get it" because of their experience. Clough, who works on sexual harassment and abuse in church settings, responded quietly, but revealingly, to Johanna Stiebert's comment that male ordinands should read her book to learn how religious institutions excuse or ignore institutionalized sexual abuse. "I'd be surprised," Clough said, "if very many are interested."⁴

Questions about the impact of their work emerged in several interviews: Why was it necessary, for example, to prove not only the misogyny of both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Bible but the Judeophobia apparent in the Christian corpus? After all, both have already been amply documented by scholars in earlier decades. While it is critical to expand our understanding around how widespread or

pervasive sexual violence *and* Judeophobia are in ancient texts, scholars feel at times that they have to start at ground zero, relitigating the existence of what has long since been laid bare. Were scholars inevitably confined to speaking to educated audiences who are already aware of the systemic nature of sexualized violence in biblical and associated literature? Has the guild, while accepting critical interrogation by scholars of masculinity as well as feminist and Queer scholars, nonetheless remained untouched by their work? Such questions remain.

Despite decades of work on sexual violence in biblical and associated literature, the question that opens this book, whether the terms *rape* and *rape culture* can be applied to biblical and associated literature at all, has not gone away. Stone notes that there can be no question that sexual assault is depicted in the Hebrew Bible. He adds that readers should not only acknowledge the story of the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 and the gang rape of the Levite's *pilegesh* (secondary wife) in Judges 19, but also Absalom's public rape of David's secondary wives in 2 Samuel 16:20–22. It is, he says, an even more horrifying story because of the role Yhwh plays in the assault:

It's hard for me to know why one would resist using the word *rape* to talk about those types of texts. There is certainly a semantic field in the Hebrew Bible that describes what we would call rape—a whole language of humiliation and violence. So, I don't find that argument compelling.

Where the term *rape culture* is concerned, we should note: If rape culture is a systemic condition that normalizes the use of sexual violence to secure power, status, and rank and to dehumanize and blame victims, then biblical literature illustrates rape culture. If rape culture excuses or even valorizes those who commit sexual assault, biblical literature depicts rape culture. If rape culture is characterized by an absence of any conception of consent, biblical literature features rape culture. Biblical rape cultures remain obscured for a reason: they are hidden because the biblical authors subscribe to premises that undergird them. After all, “the power of ideology,” as Roland Boer writes, “increases in a direct ratio to its ability to remain hidden, to seem natural and part of the way things are” (2011, 43).

Rape cultures *depend* on normalizing the sexual violence they enable and permit. Those whose power depends on fostering rape cultures are not likely to advertise that fact, whether we are speaking of ancient biblical authors or authorities and leaders of our own time. Biblical scholars must, at last, understand that the *lack* of legal language for sexual assault or consent in biblical literature and the lack of “lexical equivalents” for the term *rape* are *evidence of* rape culture, not proof of its absence. Those scholars who only wish to reconstruct biblical authors' language, semantics, and ideologies, whose work admits a desire to understand the mindset of biblical authors but eschews interrogating the historical and contemporary harm those premises cause, are colluding in hiding and in occluding sexual violence. The consequences for real human beings around the globe are real.

Almost a decade ago, David J.A. Clines issued a caution to biblical scholars. He wrote:

When the function of commentary on biblical texts [is]... to familiarize the Bible, to normalize it..., to render it as undisturbing as possible, to press it into the service of a different worldview; [then] eventually, the effect will be to write the Bible out of existence.

(1995, 243)

Scholars, in short, ought not to participate in normalizing sexual violence in the Bible.

In his work, David Tombs pioneered the study of the Greek Bible's depiction of the sexual assault of Jesus. He has written and spoken on the subject in many settings. Like other scholars interviewed here, he has met with considerable resistance. Tellingly, his focus on Jesus as a sexual abuse victim does not prevent him from acknowledging that Christian literature *also* features Jesus as a perpetrator, even a rapist in Revelation. When we asked about this particular depiction, he responded by insisting that "[t]he truth is liberating." Readers need not be afraid to face it:

If the heavenly Christ is represented as sexually violent in Revelation, nothing is served by denying it or pretending otherwise. It needs to be faced up to. It needs to be confronted. The harmful assumptions behind seeing the Son of God in this way need to be identified and clearly understood and rejected.

The scholars and scholar-activists interviewed here are engaged in an ethical project. They explore texts of trauma with critical empathy. They are not afraid to name the sexual violence they study or to acknowledge the harm that biblical literature has wrought on the lives of real people. They know that merely observing or summarizing the Bible's many texts of trauma without moral judgment is a mistake. Scholarly "neutrality" is no neutrality at all; instead, it disenfranchises, preventing readers from exercising their right to resist toxic representations of sexual violence. Given the power of biblical literature to impact the safety of women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and people of color, among other marginalized groups, this right to resist cannot be denied. For, as Mitzi Smith points out, "[w]hat is more sacred is our lives, the lives we have now right here in front of the text. That is the most sacred thing. It is more sacred than any ancient text. We are living texts, and we are more sacred."

Notes

1 A video with extracts from these interviews is available at <https://youtu.be/YaGIT7xoDDI>.

2 <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.

3 And, sometimes, even boredom. See Thiede and Stiebert (2025, 2).

4 As I myself said in that interview, “[t]hat should not be up to them.”

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