

The Salt That She Became: The Unnamed Wife in Genesis

“Lot’s wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt”

- Genesis 19:26

In the depths of our despair, we turn. Whether we turn away, or back, or simply in one small rotating circle displaying that specific brand of misery as we dust off the old, exhausted phrase: there is nowhere to turn, so we turn. We do not turn knowing that what we do is wrong, we turn because we are human and the past is known and the future not yet so, and further: we do not know how to face it. The past is a comfort; the past is gone. And now, what could the future possibly offer if all that we knew has been removed? What is happening? Are there any survivors? Are we alone? Is this real? And so we turn. We are, after all, only human.

So it is with the unnamed wife of Lot in the Biblical exodus scene out of Sodom and Gomorrah, as she turns to witness the destruction of her home, her people, and her land by way of YHWH’s raining “sulfurous fire” as he “annihilated those cities and the entire plain” (*Jewish Study Bible*, Gen. 19:24). There is a single paragraph break after the proclamation of Lot’s wife’s transformation, as if to give the reader a moment for shock and even mourning, as neither Lot nor his daughters are depicted as doing so, the fear of YHWH being apparently too great to even give pause. A trick of translation? Perhaps, as what is left out of the Bible is often just as important as what is left in. Or, perhaps we can be satisfied with the explanation given by Everett Fox’s footnote: “She became a pillar of salt: An old folklore motif of what happens when humans see God (or his actions), made popular by the many mineral pillars in the region around the dead sea.” Perhaps Robert Alter’s, a bit more in depth, will suffice:

As has often been observed, this tale looks doubly archaic, incorporating both an etiological story about a gynomorphic rock formation in the Dead Sea region and an old
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mythic motif (as in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice) of a taboo against looking back in fleeing from a place of doom (95).

The above may be so; perhaps, but likely not so. I have no intention of interpretation solely through the safer vehicle of physical explanation, though it bears speaking of for the purposes of this paper.

David Tresemer, who has travelled extensively in the area, states:

There are places that the salt, which is in supersaturated condition, crystallizes. Indeed, when you swim in the Dead Sea, you can feel the crunch of little crystals at your feet on the sand. Where the waters are still and undisturbed, the crystals can actually rise up out of the water, building smallish pillars. The larger pillars are the salt-rimed rock formations on the side of the Dead Sea, one of which I recall passing by called Lot's Wife.

This is, of course, the easy explanation: the physical form of a mythological concept which allows the Reductionist to do what they do best and explain myth through the vehicle of physical fact. Tresemer continues: "Anything vertical in a land so desolate gets attention. There is a salt haze that broods over this lowest place on earth, 1300 feet below sea level." One can imagine that it would not be too far a leap to apply a mythic theme to such an area sometime in the centuries before Christ was a concept, much like any of the myriad *this-is-why* mythic explanations that deal with awe-inspiring physical phenomena that are beyond human comprehension.

But, as a Biblical myth should only be taken as a literal explanatory device at the reader's own risk, the question then becomes: which came first, the phenomenon of salt pillars or the myth itself? This brings us back to the original inquiry as to what is really going on in the passage of Genesis 19:26. The motif suggestion in Alter's statement bears discussing, as the recognition of an older mythical theme gives the Biblical story an interesting context. To briefly recap the story of Orpheus and Eurydice: Orpheus, for whom the loss of Eurydice on the day of **Emma Tresemer. "The Salt That She Became: The Unnamed Wife in Genesis."** *Mythological Studies Journal* 3 (2012).

their wedding is enough to prompt a solo journey down to the underworld, attempts to plead with the gods to win her back. He almost succeeds, but he too looks back: he looks back into the dark hallway leading down to the world of the dead. He looks back towards Hades to make sure that he has not been tricked. He looks back because he loves Eurydice and wants to make sure of her presence. In the words of Ovid, “when he, afraid that she might disappear again and longing so to see her, turned to gaze back at his wife” (327). Thus he fails: he has gone against the one instruction and, as the gods had commanded, “all he had received would be lost— irretrievably” (327). Lot’s wife also turns back despite the warning command of the angels, and perhaps she, like Orpheus, looks back with a similar hope that she is followed by the sons she left behind. But the scene is utterly different, and though the motion is the same, the end result makes the analogy ultimately fail. Orpheus goes on, Lot’s wife does not. Orpheus will die; Lot’s wife will not.

Though there is more than one reason for Orpheus’ turning, we are at least familiar with his intent. Lot’s wife is without name and without a voice, so we must create a story around her. To do so is risky as it is with any story where the character is such an exemplary *tabula rasa*; she has but one line in the entirety of the tale, no personality or even physical characteristics besides being the wife of one who speaks to the angels. What one comes up with is often more about the one interpreting; projection is very easy here. Still, to not attempt an interpretation would be, in a sense, neglectful; akin to skimming over the ending of Job in which he receives new children and calling it justifiable, or even right. One cannot assume that the Bible simply yields an explanation on the first reading, or that there is an easy answer lying somewhere in the pages.

Often the Biblical passage is credited with a simple explanation of cause and effect: that because God says not to turn around, then it is due to Lot’s wife’s disobedience that she is so

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changed. In the words of Martin Buber, “civilized man’s understanding of the world is based on his comprehension of the functioning of causality” (103). But this is nowhere in the wording: the angels advise the family to “Flee [...]! Do not look behind you, or stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away” (*Jewish Study Bible*, Gen. 19:17). This sounds more like a warning than a rule, and to be sure, the unnamed wife is not swept away nor is she ‘turned into’ salt, as if by result of God’s direct action or wrath. In fact, in all eight versions that I consulted (*Jewish Study Bible*, NRSV, New Living Version, King James, New King James, New International Version as well as both Alter and Fox’s translations) the word is “became,” thus the intonation is such that unless we misread, God has not acted at all in this particular moment. This is not a situation of cause and effect, the ‘if you do this, then I will do that’ as with so many of the conversations between God and Israel, but a completely isolated incident, suggesting an odd balancing act in which the act of seeing God causes a physical result in the human chemical makeup.

This brings up the issue of what was seen. YHWH is a God who does not spend much time speaking of his darker, or shadowed, aspects (though his allusions are frequent in the *Tanakh*, the issue of the heart-hardened Pharaoh being a rather poignant example). Neither he nor his followers speak of his destructive aspect except in reference to (what he perceives as) the wrongdoings of others. As God states directly in the Book of Job: “God is mighty, He is not contemptuous; He is mighty in strength and mind. He does not let the wicked live; He grants justice to the lowly” (*Jewish Study Bible*, 35:5-7). But wickedness is subjective. In Leviticus 10:1-2, for example, the Lord consumes Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu for “they offered before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them.” Death by fire does seem a little

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extreme considering the circumstance, especially when the God in question spends so much time speaking of his own kindness and sense of justice.

One is reminded of the old African folk tale in which the Lion, king of the forest, spends his time wandering about the jungle bellowing “Me and MYSELF, Me and MYSELF!!!” completely unaware of any danger, completely sure of his own superiority, completely heedless of any downside to being so cocksure and loud in a land where men with guns do not have similar views of the lion’s dominance (5). Dr. Downing tells of Nietzsche’s version of YHWH: the old gods were sitting together, perhaps enjoying a cup of coffee in the late morning of eternity. A young male god comes in, still young enough to barely reach knee-height, and he is singing loudly to himself: “I’m the only one, I’m the only one,” like a child with a nursery rhyme, looking for all the world like Tom Thumb with his fingers ringed in uncovered plumbs. All of the gods watch. They laugh so hard that they eventually laugh themselves to death.

Perhaps YHWH, or the God of the monotheism, does not know himself very well. Perhaps he simply does not know his own shadow. In the words of Jung (speaking of Job’s God): “the character thus revealed fits a personality who can only convince himself that he exists through his relation to an object. [...] he is too unconscious to be moral. Morality presupposes consciousness” (10). Thus it is that (at least in Jung’s world), we are left with a deity who does not know his own parameters, boundaries, or even his own nature, as the two sides cannot exist in the same awareness at the same time. Thus a shadow falls, and what a shadow it is... for it is utterly unknown to the one who bears it, who is also, coincidentally and rather unfortunately, the one in control. A human’s personal shadow may sometimes interact with the world, moving as it does through the vehicle of unconscious action, hence the term “shadowed.” But accidentally

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leaving the wedding ring at the side of the public swimming pool, though effective in its mission to bring up marital discourse, is not exactly on par with the destruction of two whole towns. Thus God's shadow presents a far larger problem. Perhaps it is when God destroys something so blithely; it is his engagement of his shadow, an excitement for which he might even feel shame, an action over which even he may not have control. Jack Miles builds on Jung's theory of an unconscious (but moving towards consciousness) God. In reference to the murder of Abel and God's subsequent conversation with Cain: "After the murder, when he says to Cain, "Hark, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!" it is as if he has at that moment discovered that murder merits condemnation" (41). God, according to Miles, does not know what is wrong until it is wrong; murder becomes known to God as something bad only after the fact, the annihilation of entire towns being an unfortunate side effect of this learning curve. Or, perhaps he, like Freud, understands that "the aim of all life is death" (46), thus it is humanity's fault for getting too caught up in living. Then again, as Dr. Downing says in reference to Freud's death instinct: "the natural wish is that one wants to die, the natural way to deal with that is to deny that, thus the inverse [is that] of one who wants another to die." Perhaps in witnessing God's aggression, we have simply stumbled on his fear of death.

Miles also references, albeit briefly, the passage concerning Lot's wife: "God turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt, an event that obviously has no status as history but one that for the purposes of this work must be counted as a moment in the life of God and as evidence, however minor, about his developing character" (13). Though it is slightly disappointing that he too falls into the easy and widely accepted belief that the word 'became' in this passage is really 'turned,' his purpose is to regard God as a literary device that, like Hamlet, is on a certain path of

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burgeoning self awareness. Thus the growing up of the deity, with all the accompanying pains and temper tantrums would indeed be indicated by his action *against* the unnamed wife.

Either way, we are left with a morally ambiguous God who “rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD from the heavens. And He overthrew all those cities and all the plain and all the inhabitants of the cities and what grew in the soil” (Alter, *Gen.* 19:24-25). This is a God so fierce and devastating that when Lot’s two daughters looked down at the destruction of their homeland, they were convinced that they were the last people on earth. One wonders what Lot’s wife saw, indeed: was it that YHWH could not bear to be witnessed in his destructive aspect? Or was it that Lot’s wife could not bear to witness the act, as the shame of seeing God himself do something so awful was simply too much for her?

When the pain and suffering of a particular character become too great, they may simply transform into something else. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* gives example after example of this exact scenario. The story of Hecuba in Book XIII illustrates just such a tale: she was Priam’s wife and the mother of Hector and Polyxena, both of whom were killed by Achilles-- in the case of Polyxena; it is at the behest of Achilles’ ghost. Her third child, Polydorous, was killed by king Polymestor in an act of bad faith. Now a captive, she calls to the other Trojan women prisoners and together they kill the king for what he has done. The men call to arms and as the women are attacked, Hecuba, having simply endured too much for this lifetime, “with a hoarse howl, she snapped her teeth. Her jaws could only bark, though set for speech. [...] And then, for long, through all the fields of Thrace, remembering her many griefs, she howled” (453). In her immense pain, Hecuba turns into a “She-hound,” for her grief is beyond human containment. She can no longer witness the world and the gods with human eyes; they are too terrible to behold. Is

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this what happens to Lot's wife? That instead of the barking of a hound to express the vast and wild despair, she instead issues forth an immortalized and endless scream in the form of a pillar of salt?

And why salt? Why not a wolf, a bird, or a monster, perhaps a serpent that crawls away to hidden caves to mourn in peace? Though perhaps the answer to this lies in the fact that the gods of the Greek world never claimed to be more powerful than the fates, nor did they claim power over life and death. YHWH, for his part, does: removing the last vestige of solace found in the knowledge that the universe is incomprehensible. The gods may act against us, but in truth, these are powers beyond anyone's control or understanding. But here-- here is a God who has not only created the universe and everything in it, but then willfully destroys parts he sees to be unfit. What inconceivable pain from knowing that it is your home that God has deemed wanting! Further, when God kills, there is no freedom to find justice in a different deity. God is the only God. There is no relief here for it is utterly personal, he has given his reasons and there is no alternative but to move forward. The only way to deal with this is to become anti-life, as another animal would still be subject to the destructive aspect of the deity. Thus: salt.

To say that salt has had a part in our collective history is to say that breathing and childbirth have had a part in our collective history. As a substance, it has a rather lengthy and bloody past, being prized for its preservative capabilities and the fact that a human being cannot live without it, thus it was that for a very long time, he who had the salt had the power (Cowen).

Salt regulates the exchange of water between our cells and their surrounding fluids. One component of salt, sodium (Na), is involved in muscle contraction including heartbeat, nerve impulses, and the digestion of body-building protein. Humans contain about eight ounces of salt. The amount of salt is regulated in our bodies by our kidneys and by perspiration. (Stout)

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Salt is also associated with purity, healing, and cleansing, and comes up often in religious texts (though there is some debate, the King James Version of the Old Testament uses the word about forty-five times, and the Qu'ran is said to have a few mentions as well (Kahlil). Alchemically, according to Paracelsus, salt is one of “the three *principia* -- mercury, sulphur and salt, out of which all seven metals originate. Mercury is the spirit, sulphur is the soul, salt the body” (qtd. in *Transformations*, 18), and further: “Salt (body) was associated with earth and was characterized by its not being vaporized by fire and so being found in the ashes” (Henderson and Sherwood 18). Salt, clearly, has a mythical status in the collective psyche. It represents the common thread that flows through most living things, blood and sea water being two easy examples, and, of course, it is found in our tears. Thus one wonders: what would happen if the water in the human body was cried out all at once, simply evaporate? What would be left?

Or instead of a reaction, the unnamed wife's new form could be considered an act of preservation: the preservation of a person who once saw the very darkest face of God, the preservation of a love for a flawed land and people, the preservation of the memories of an entire culture that has been covered in the shadow of an angry deity who so decreed that no one would survive. Or, from an alchemical standpoint, we could consider her to be utterly reduced to the form from which the human came in the first place: from salt and earth to human to salt and earth again. The mercury, or spirit, having left; the sulfur, or soul, having been “changed by fire”, and the salt, or body, being inflammable remains. It has been purified.

Although perhaps for the purposes of argument, we should leave God briefly out of the conversation and continue on without him, for perhaps the unnamed wife did not notice God at all. Perhaps what she saw was no more and no less than the physical phenomenon of a natural

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disaster occurring, thus when she turns back she is simply afraid: she is unable to return and unwilling to go forward and is further subject to mythical time when the laws of life, death and matter were still being worked out, and so the result is... somewhat unexpected. Freud's work on the death instinct and Eros drive seems poignant here, for it would seem that the unnamed wife is caught between the two drives. On the one hand, going forward represents the Eros drive or, in the words of Dr. Downing, "Eros is a forward moving energy connecting us towards others, the new, the future." In other words: Eros is life, messy and chaotic, and the longing for these things. On the other hand, turning back represents the Death instinct or longing, which "is evident in all our longings for all resolution and completion. [It is] the longing for things to be made whole, resolved, and completed." Somewhere between Eros (moving forward) and Death (looking back), the unnamed wife gets stuck. Somewhere between Eros and Death we all get stuck at some point, having nowhere to turn and not necessarily any interest in moving forward. One wonders what Lot was really like.

One wonders, also, what a life he could have promised her, if he liked her, or even if he respected her as a woman if he was so willing to throw their two virginal daughters out to the mob the night before. As with so many families that exist in such a firm patriarchy, the only respect given to the mother is through the sons and they have been left behind sleeping. Why would anyone follow? Who would not look back?

One wonders at the husband, certainly, and one wonders at this God who is so bent on destruction. Perhaps the unnamed wife did so as well, figuring that to follow was to actively submit to this new, untried, and extremely temperamental deity who had already required so very much from her. Perhaps rejection was the one thing that Lot's unnamed wife could offer in

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response; rather than voicing her doubts, she acts. Rather than 'being turned into,' she turns. In turning, she becomes the silent witness to Lot's blind submission and the terrible face of YHWH's shadow. Perhaps it could be considered a cruel fate, but perhaps instead one could consider it to be a choice of preference: better to be salt than to remain human and alive in such a terrible world as was the one in which the unnamed wife lived.

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