

The Concubine as Mytheme of Convergence and Differentiation in Hebrew Mythology

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Imagination plays [a central role] in that empathic turning to the other which lies at the heart of any genuine communion between one human being and another

Downing, *Luxury of Afterwards* 79.

Reading the Tanakh, the texts forming of the Jewish scriptures, through a feminist lens without being outraged, is a fine art and at first glance seems to confirm my pre-existing beliefs that the texts are ancient misogynistic stories. Yet the role of the most poorly treated characters, the concubines, play a surprising prominent role in a sacred text. As Christine Downing writes, understanding the Hebrew Scriptures “means noticing the gaps and contradictions and the repetitions and variations. It is in large measure through these formal aspects that the meaning is communicated” (Downing, “Biblical Monotheism” 2.) As defined by Claude Levi-Strauss, mythemes are the irreducible elements of a myth. Mythemes can be bundled in different combinations or linked in different ways to create different myths. By using an imaginal approach in examining the concubine, her appearance as a critical mytheme in the developing Hebrew mythology is revealed as the incorporation of or rejection of “foreign” mythologies. The concubine is not a historical constructed character in a sacred text, but rather functions as a mythic theme in the development of the Hebrew culture and religion. The concubine functions as a repetitive mytheme that provides evidence for an analysis of the Tanakh as a record of mythic thought.

All myths change over time in ways both deliberate and accidental as the people who keep the myths alive also change and relocate. According to Downing the Hebrew mythology changes over time and incorporates into this new God or YHVH the positive aspects of other

divinities. Mark Smith identifies this pattern of convergence and differentiation as key to the formation of the new mythos. The differentiation aspects are identified as negative characteristics where are then excluded from the new myths. The process of convergence and differentiation appears not only in YHVH but is also embodied in the Biblical concubines. It is on their bodies or more specifically in their wombs that we see convergence and differentiation at work.

If as Jack Miles claims in *God: A Biography*, “centuries of rigorous, godly character-building have created an ideal of human character that stands fast” (3), then of equal interest is the ideal of human character created by the concubine. According to Downing the myth of monotheism is a different kind of myth, not an evolution from polytheisms but a counter myth.

Identities are constructed through the recognition of analogies and similarities, through identifications... To be chosen meant ... helping to bring all humankind together in a world ordered on the basis of justice and peace. (Downing, “Biblical Monotheism” 17-18)

In other words, Downing is making the point that to be part of the convergence meant you were included in the new myth just as some of the concubines we will examine are included while others are excluded and their off-spring are not part of the world of peace and justice. The problem of translating Gods and myths to fit into a monotheistic paradigm in a polytheistic world can be accomplished in many ways, but interbreeding is one of the strongest ways to bring out the recognition of analogies and similarities. Breeding with the “other” highlights the pull of convergence and differentiation in multiple ways. As Mara E. Donaldson’s points out in “Kinship Theory in the Patriarchal Narratives: The Case of the Barren Wife”, the challenge of finding a mate with enough cultural and mythic similarity to be incorporated into the family unit and enough difference to insure no incest rules are violated is the primary goal of kinship theories of exchange and alliance. Therefore, finding a mate with an appropriate distance is the balance that

can create a new mythology. Therefore, if the role of the wife is to uphold similarity and existing social order, than the role of the concubine is to interject difference. In the text of the Tanakh, this interjection is treated differently in different stories.

In some narratives, the concubine is mythically integrated into the larger Hebrew myth, while in others the concubine is alienated or destroyed. Reading the concubine mytheme as symbolic of foreign ideas in the overall mythology, a push and pull in acceptance and rejection of the concubine and her offspring emerges as the changing mythic system tries on various ideas. If the idea is accepted, it manifests as a named concubine and her children become part of the mythic system. These children and their descendants are incorporated into later sections of the text and used for the development of mythic elements contained therein. If the idea is rejected, the concubine generally goes unnamed and in extreme cases, the community kills or destroys the concubine.

Commentary by multiple Hebrew Scholars on the origins of the Tanakh in *The Jewish Study Bible (JSB)* reveals that the stories comprising the text were not written in the order presented. Furthermore, the JSB states that the redactor(s) ordered the text in such a way as to delineate concepts that work towards chronicling the move from a familial tribal system to the non-landed monotheistic nation of Israel. The presented order develops a number of critical concepts; therefore, I will take up the concubines in the order in which they appear.

A commonly used narrative convention is to disclose more details about characters that are central to the story than those that play supporting roles. In Genesis, the stories of concubines named and unnamed provide clues to elements of the mythemes incorporated into and excluded from the mythology. Furthermore, Midrash, the body of critical interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures, suggests naming represents both individual embodied human and nation (*JSB* 26);

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therefore, any act of naming becomes critical to the establishment of a community against which the “other” is identified.

The prevalence of named and unnamed concubines in the Hebrew Scriptures constellates a mytheme. Concubines were a sign of wealth in that the more women and children a man could support, the more wealth he controlled. Concubines provided children in a culture with a high mortality rate for infants and children. Furthermore, men with concubines gained access to multiple sex partners within the family unit. In the *Jewish Study Bible*, Exodus 21:7-11 explicates the rules for female slaves, including the selling of a daughter as a concubine. Interestingly enough, a non-concubine slave was freed after six years, while concubinage was for life. The negative aspects attributed to the concubine are visible in Daniel 5:1-2, when King Belshazzar has a banquet and engages in sacrilege when the nobility and the concubines drink from the “gold and silver vessels...taken out of the temple at Jerusalem.” As Midrash points out the sacrilege of drinking from Temple vessels by the concubines is the most emphasized transgression (*JSB* 1651). Therefore, the concubine mytheme presents the concubine as a symbol of wealth, male sexual prowess, female oppression, and sacrilege

In the “Problem of Childlessness,” John Van Seters analyzes the types of marital relationships that existed at the time of the above-mentioned stories with a focus on the concubines of Abraham and Jacob. He points out that the manner in which inheritance took place in these stories does not match with the historical practices. According to Van Seters, Ishmael, as a recognized son of Abraham by his concubine Hagar, should have inherited half of his father’s estate. “It is in order to forestall the split in the inheritance that Sarah forces Abraham to expel Hagar and her son. And it takes a special divine dispensation to circumvent the accepted custom or law” (405). He goes on to state that “the children of the slave are immediately considered as

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the children of the principal wife, although their adoption is conditional upon the fulfilling of certain requirements” under Mesopotamian law (406). His close look at Biblical history versus secular history points out that Biblical narratives surrounding concubines do not represent socio-historic conditions. In other words, Hagar’s son is disinherited, but Jacob’s children by his concubines are not. No mention is made of Zilpah’s and Bilhah’s children receiving lesser inheritances. Van Peter theorizes that the marriage customs presented in Genesis seem to reflect later historical periods.

In taking a modern approach to concubines in the Tanakh, one should consider Van Seter’s point that Biblical accounts often violate the cultural norms of the historical era. In Genesis 16:1-3, Sarah had no children despite the promises of God, so she offers her Egyptian maidservant to her husband Abraham as a concubine. While Hagar as Abraham’s concubine explicitly fulfills the role of providing a son, she also provides an important clue to the recurring mytheme. If as I proposed, the concubine reflects “foreign” mythologies, a significant intrusion of the “other” is represented in Hagar. In this case, the concubine is of the lineage of the Egyptian (Arab) and represents a melding of the “other” with the Hebrew in the body of the offspring. The tension between the two cultural systems becomes explicit in Genesis 16:6, when Sarah treats the now-pregnant Hagar harshly and Hagar runs away.

Judith Baskin points out that ethnic differences prejudiced Sarah against Hagar. “Israel, at the very moment of its birth as a nation, appeared to be threatened with a mixture from an outside source” (Baskin 150). I agree but would also argue that from a mythic perspective, the struggle is placed on the concubine’s body (in this case Hagar). Hagar represents the struggle to incorporate or reject various mythic elements from the Egyptian culture. Baskin accords Hagar wife not concubine status because “according to *Genesis Rabbah* 45:3, Sarah gave Hagar to

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Abraham as an ‘other’ wife, not as a concubine” (151). This mythological syncretism is in its infancy and just as Sarah is unable to handle the new ideas in her world, she is unable to handle the coming child, which makes tangible the melding of cultures and myths. In fact, Hagar's existence is not mentioned until Tanka incorporates the ideas of Egyptian ideas of mythic journeys and symbolic life into the developing Hebrew mythology. At this point in the narrative, neither Sarah nor Abraham has a strong understanding of what the God character wants. God had promised them many children and yet, Sarah remains barren. In Genesis 16, Abraham invests Sarah with the power to decide the pregnant Hagar’s fate. Despite Sarah’s apparent fear of integrating the “other” into the mythic family, God intervenes and sends Hagar back to Sarah and Abraham (Gen. 16:12). Therefore, the God, while privileging a certain set of people, wants to incorporate ideas from the “other” into this mythology. “And the angel of the LORD said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude... and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren (Gen. 16:10-12). The language of abundance and living with his brethren by the heirs of the legitimate wife indicates that despite the difference between Arab and Hebrew, this pregnancy will create a common myth incorporating aspects of both. God forces multiculturalism on the people he has chosen by sending Hagar back to Sarah, ensuring the incorporation of the foreign element into the line of Abraham. Sarah found it hard to accept her husband’s son. Even God did not quite recognize “other” cultures prior to this point. I argue that the resistance to change and the begrudging acceptance of change is indicative of a cultural mongrelization that is at the core of the Tanakh and is revealed in the mytheme of the chosen people breeding with the “other.”

Resistance to God’s wishes continues in Genesis 21:9-13 -- Sarah wants Hagar thrown out because she does not want to her son to share his inheritance with his half-brother. God

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reveals how the concubine Hagar helps to further God's plan for Abraham's descendants to father a "multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5). God promises to make Ishmael, the concubine's son, fertile and the father of a great nation as well. However, the son of the wife, Isaac, inherits the Covenant or agreement between the descendants of Abraham to follow God's rules (*JSB* 38) in exchange for wealth and power. This covenant must be continually renewed by circumcising all male children when they are eight days old (Gen 17:12-15). Most mythical traditions have the idea of the "people" and the "other." Because the children born to the concubines are full-fledged members of this new religious tradition, the concubines slowly erase the gap between the "Hebrew" and the "Other."

Another twist on the concubine mytheme occurs when Sarah switches from the role of wife to King Abimelech's concubine, creating connections between the family of Abraham and the people of Negeb (Gen. 20:1-3). The Hebrew God reveals to the King that Sarah is already married. Therefore, he returns her and provides Abraham with gifts of sheep, oxen, slaves of both genders, and silver. King Abimelech receives the words of God in a dream and his wives and concubines bear him many children. Even though Sarah and the King do not consummate the relationship, the mere positioning of her as his concubine creates an intermingling of Hebrew and Egyptian cultures and recognition that these two mythologies have something to share with each other. If concubines exist as a means to integrate disparate myths, then both Hagar and Sarah have created alliances with the "other" and participated in acts of cross-cultural relationship building.

The overreliance on internalized mythologies transpires in the narrative of Lot's daughters and reveals the failure of incorporating the other into the next generation. Lot's daughters were concerned about continuing the human race. The two daughters are referred to as

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the older one and the younger one. They mate with their father to create descendants in order to consolidate the central Hebraic myth and save it from extinction. Lot's daughters create offspring that eventually become the "other." In other words, the lack of outside elements forces the familial relationship outside the line of the "chosen people." Midrash indicates that the children go on to form the enemies of the Hebrews: The Moabites and the Ammonites provide "an unflattering account of the origins of two of Israel's traditional enemies" (*JSB* 42). The descendants of these children come back in the myths of the "Moabite Ruth ancestor of King David and the Ammonite Naamach, wife of King Solomon" (*JSB* 42).

Returning to Abraham's women, Keturah may have been the third of Abraham's women. According to some Midrashim commentators, Keturah was Hagar's personal name, and "Hagar" was a descriptive label meaning "stranger." Other sources of Midrash dispute this point. However, Keturah is named and her children acknowledged as lesser sons of Abraham. "To Abraham's sons by concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land to the East" (Genesis 25: 1-7). This last statement seems to indicate that the only son of a wife was Isaac. Yet Keturah's naming is considered important in the genealogy in that her six children and subsequent grandchildren are named and come back into the mythology as the Assyrians in Isaiah 19:24-25 when Egypt, Assyria, and Israel shall be united and in Isaiah 60:6 when two of Keturah's son's (Midian and Ephah) return to the house of Jacob with offerings. In contrast to the prior scenarios, the positioning of Jacob's concubines, Zilpah and Bilhah, is more sophisticated.

Zilpah and Bilhah are wedding gifts from Laban to his daughters, Leah and Rachael. According to some sources of Midrash, they are Laban's daughters by his concubine (*Eliezar* xxxvi). Therefore, the concubines would be full sisters to each other and half-sisters to the wives

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Rachael and Leah. Alternate sources place them as the daughters of Laban's slave won in war. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Testament of Naftali, Rotheus is listed as the father of both Bilhah and Zilpah (9-12). He was a prisoner freed by Laban.

These concubines are named because their sons, Gad, Asher, Dan and Naphtali, number among the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. In terms of how these two women function with the myth, similarities and differences exist between the two. Bilhah, as Rachel's maid, is a mimicking of Hagar as Sarah's. Both Rachel and Sarah had trouble conceiving. Sarah gave her maid to Abraham for a son. Rachel did the same (Gen. 30:1-7). Yet the same was not true for Leah. She had given birth to Jacob's sons before giving Zilpah to him. In this variation, the relationship of the concubine to a barren wife is contorted and more aligned with the variation evident in the Keturah narrative. In the Sarah/Hagar story, Sarah tried to isolate the concubine and her child from the family. In the textual relationships between Leah/Bilhah and Rachael/Zilpah, there is no narrative indication of this type of tension. While the motif of barren mother is discussed in a variety of texts (Thompson, Fuchs, Van Seters), I found no analysis of the concubine as embodied intersection between cultures. Because Zilpah's and Bilhah's sons are considered part of the "chosen," the mythology itself seems to be growing more comfortable with or perhaps more reliant on the incorporation of the "other's" ideas as central to the family of beliefs. Using Jack Miles's method of showing the development of God as a character, I would propose that the naming of the concubines and their incorporation into the sacred text illustrates a growing understanding of the value of integrating the "other" into this new mythology.

In parallel to Jacob's concubines, his brother Esau's son has a concubine named Timna. "Timna was a concubine of Esau's son Eliphaz; she bore Amalek to Eliphaz. Those were the descendants of Esau's wife Adah" (Gen. 36:12). There are numerous Biblical narratives

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involving fighting, war and murder between the Amaleks and the Hebrews. The Amalekites could be considered a historical enemy of the Jews. Amalek's descendants hold the "identity as the ruthless enemy of the people Israel and their God" (*JSB* 73). 1 Chronicles 1:39 identifies Timna as Lotan's sister and simultaneously the daughter of Eliphaz in the Genealogy from Abraham -- a very difficult combination from a genealogy perspective. Depending on the Midrashim source, Timna is the daughter of royalty who chooses to be a concubine in order to convert to the new mythology (Deut., 32:47). She willingly comes into the mythology.

The Rabbis reconcile this discrepancy by explaining that Timna was indeed Eliphaz's daughter, as a result of his adulterous relations with Seir's wife; to compound his sin, Eliphaz took his own daughter as his concubine. The Torah charts the lineage of Esau's descendants at length, in order to show that this lineage was founded in adultery. (Kadari)

There is no clear-cut incorporation or splitting off from the Hebrew mythology in Timna, just a festering question that perhaps has yet to be resolved in the quest for both the incorporation of "other" mythos and the segregation from "other" mythos. Timna's existence is complicated by adultery and, as a minor concubine, she does not completely fit the pattern. However, her line goes on to form the Amalekites. As Miles notes, Saul "takes the best of the sheep and cattle as battle spoils rather than destroy" (164) the Amalekites, saves the king, fails to exterminate the people and in fact incorporates their wealth, if not their cultures. Therefore, one could propose that the survival of the Amalekites is due to the concubine Timna.

However, sometimes a concubine is just a concubine. King Solomon "had seven hundred royal wives and three hundred concubines" (1 Kings 11:3). The excessiveness of not only the number of concubines but the wives as well tends towards gluttony. These concubines are not

individual people, but mythic indicators of excess. They are his possessions, indicate his wealth, and as such remain nameless.

However, a concubine can be unnamed and still function as a mytheme of convergence or differentiation. In contrast to the three hundred unnamed concubines of King Solomon, the Levite's unnamed concubine in Judges 19–20 has agency but remains nameless. In *Writing the Wrongs*, John Thompson points out feminist interpretations that indicate the Levite's unnamed concubine challenged the rules of marriage by returning to her father's house and re-enacting a similar motif that can be seen in the narrative of Lot's daughters. Perhaps then, this concubine is unnamed because she is rejecting the mythology of the Tanakh. Her punishment for not being willing to inhabit the new mythos is extreme. She is brutally gang raped and cut up into twelve parts. The concubine's sins are "constituted by her initial desertion not of her husband but of her father. The subsequent plot serves largely to re-inscribe on her body the conflict between her father's marriage code and that of her husband" (Thompson 181). Thompson notes Mieke Bal's theories that this narrative depicts the transition from "patrilocal" familial structures where the wife resides with the father to "virilocal" models where the wife lives with the husband. The Levite is not satisfied with rejecting her and is unable to accept her existence at all. Therefore, she must be totally destroyed and used as justification to wage war against those whose mythologies are differentiated from that of the Hebrews. The unnamed concubine's presence in the Tanakh represents an instance of a concubine's mythology being rejected by the Hebrew mythology and the subsequent war against "patrilocal" social units.

While my look at the individual concubines was brief, I believe the pivotal role played by each of these women proves the importance of a close reading of the concubine mytheme. In the establishment of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the male children of named wives and named

concubines become the founding patriarchs. In Arabic tribal culture, which emphasizes relatedness as key to legitimacy, the concubines play important roles. Mara Donaldson looks through the lens of Claude Levi-Strauss's *Kinship Theory* to analyze the degree of relatedness that is appropriate and concludes that the matrilateral cross-cousin marriage is an optimum degree of separation in achieving the proper balance between exchange and alliance. She states that "women, then, are not only central in exchange and alliance, but they also determine the kinds of exchange that can be made and therefore what alliances can be formed" (79). I would argue that the concubines provide an opportunity for exogamy or marriage outside the social group. While Levi-Strauss believes that marriage with foreigners is considered a negative, I counter that exogamy in Hebrew mythology represents a unique perspective in that it interacts with the world at large, and further, I believe this interaction to be positive.

Therefore, we have a mythic system that evolved a concept of a "chosen people" who have a covenant with God promising that they and their descendants will reap the favor of this one God, this YHVH. This tension between the mytheme of the concubine's son who goes on to found a great people and that of the chosen people seems to echo the transition from polytheism to monotheism. The naming of the concubine serves as a signifier that new ideas are incorporated into the mythology while the absence of a name seems to indicate a rejection of the ideas brought in via the concubine. In some cases, naming the concubines manifests as a poverty of commitment to the mythology, disinterest in continuing to develop the mythology and an indicator to readers that the male protagonist has lost his mythic way. The mytheme then becomes something akin to a concubine of questionable lineage bearing the heirs to the line that has a solemn agreement with God to reap his favors in exchange for their obedience. The myth of "the chosen people," which plays out in the Torah, consists of a mongrelized group of people.

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Martin Buber writes, “the history of the development of Jewish religion is really the history of the struggles between the natural structure of a mythical-monotheistic folk-religion and the intellectual structure of a rational-monotheistic rabbinic religion” (99). By examining the ways in which foreign mythic or cultural constructs are incorporated into Jewish mythology or rejected, one can see sexuality as a metaphor for the coming together of disparate themes. Mythic sexuality involves two people coming together to create a third—an apt overarching metaphor for the manner in which the Tanakh chronicles the creation of a mythology. If a marriage signifies a solidifying of familiar myths via the marital/ familial mytheme, then the introduction of a concubine signifies an outside element introduced into the closed system. The harmony or disharmony of this situation drives the treatment of the concubine. The narrated struggle between monotheism and polytheism seems to parallel a similar trajectory between monogamy and polygamy. As the chosen people slowly shed their other gods, the need for the concubine in sacred texts fades away. Her presence indicates an evolving mythology while her absence indicates an established mythology. Therefore, the concubine functions as the embedded intersection between the desire to incorporate foreign elements into a belief system and simultaneous aversion to the unfamiliar in the development of the Hebrew mythology.

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