

## *Future Dissertation Research & Outline*

### **Introduction:**

*Mastermind from Taylor Swift's album *Midnights* (2022)*

You see, all the wisest women  
Had to do it this way  
'Cause we were born to be the pawn  
In every lover's game

If you fail to plan, you plan to fail  
Strategy sets the scene for the tale  
I'm the wind in our free-flowing sails  
And the liquor in our cocktails

What if I told you none of it was accidental  
And the first night that you saw me, I knew I wanted your body?  
I laid the groundwork and then, just like clockwork  
The dominoes cascaded in a line

What if I told you I'm a mastermind?

### **Thesis:**

In this paper I will demonstrate, through the addition of the fawn response into Polyvagal Theory, how surviving the powerlessness of chronic sexual violence requires victim/survivors to progress from cooperation to participation and eventually to initiation. I will argue this survival does not qualify as consent because it is a response to danger rather than desire. Concretizing responses to threat, through Pete Walker's fawn response, invites victim/ survivors to see the structure of what was happening in the moment in which they misinterpret their own behavior as consent.

“Sometimes, we need help finding ways to fit unnamed and unnamable experiences into named categories.” (Graybill, 14)

### **Purpose:**

Through this work I want for myself as well as every survivor I have met, a lifting of shame and reclamation of power. As a therapist I clearly understand people cannot be talked out of their shame, but I do believe an understanding of how created humanity survives trauma can equip survivors to address their own shame when they are ready to transition into a deeper grief about what they endured than they have previously accessed. In Graybill's words this means “not letting the suffering or darkness...consume all the interpretive space around them.” (Graybill, 2)

### **Use of Biblical Texts:**

In this paper I will examine the stories of Abigail (1 Samuel 25), Ruth (Book of Ruth), Tamar (Genesis 38) and Lot's Daughters (Genesis 19).

### **Two Commitments in following Graybill's Leadership:**

1. Center my work around her framework of Fuzzy, Messy & Icky as well as the "complications" that arise when women survivors aren't "model survivors"
2. Explore four Biblical texts as "unhappy readings" that take seriously the unhappiness of sexual violence stories without seeking to fix or transfigure them.

### **Important Notes:**

I will adopt Graybill's messy hybrid of victim/survivor that utilizes a disruptive slash indicating the disruption to the stability of either category as well as the tension between the two words (Graybill, 15)

In sighting work around sexual violence and the Bible the word rape will come up often. I'm purposefully *not* examining stories of rape but rather stories of women surviving through utilizing their sexuality. I build on the truth that previous work around rape has established—that rape culture was foundational in patriarchal Biblical ancient cultures. This very truth is why I believe these women chose to take matters into their own hands—to *avoid* rape in some form.

### **Fuzzy, Messy, Icky:**

Graybill intentionally utilizes terms that are ambiguous and ambivalent.

"A framework for describing sexual violence as *fuzzy*, *messy*, and *icky*—fuzzy in that it's not always what clear what happened or how it was remembered, messy in its consequences, as well as in the ways that sex and bodies are often messy, and icky in the ways that sexual violence fails to fit into neat patterns of evil perpetrators and innocent victims." (Graybill, 2)

"Finding other ways of describing sexual violence that speak to what exceeds or is missed by the formal definitions: the things better captured by flexible and everyday words such as fuzzy, messy, and icky." (Graybill, 10)

These terms...

- Force us to remember the body
- Like the reality of sexual violence, the language we use about it suggests the risk of contamination
- Nontechnical, informal, familiar terms
- Not rigid or prescriptive categories

Fuzzy:

1. One form of fuzziness = What happened?
  - Not all sexual encounters are so easily judged as either “rape” or “non-rape”
  - “consenting to (avoid) rape.” Nicola Gavey in her book *Just Sex?: The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*
  - “unable to resist” “felt unable to stop it”
  - “going along with sex that was neither desired nor enjoyed because she did not feel it was her right to stop it or because she did not know how to refuse.” (Graybill, 13)
  - Adele’s “Easy on Me” song lyrics:
    - I had no time to choose
    - What I chose to do
    - So go easy on me
2. Fuzziness or the fuzzy absence of memory is frequently experienced by, and sued against, victims and survivors. (Graybill, 13)
3. Another form of fuzziness is caused by trauma and its impact on memory.

Messy:

A consequence of fuzzy

“The aftermath of sexual violence and the ways that it defies a tidy resolution.” (Graybill, 15)

“Complications when stories fail to fit into a tidy, preordained narrative of suffering and recovery.” (Graybill, 15)

Icky:

Synonyms: creepy, sketchy, weird; alludes to what we consider shameful, disgusting, “gross”

*Transition:*

The survival response of fawn is fuzzy, messy, icky and yet it can also help address the experience of survivors in all three of these words. Fawn helps frame dignity rather than shame in what victim/survivors brilliantly and cunningly choose to do in the place of no choice.

**Less Fuzzy through Fawn:**

The fuzziness of sexual violence lies in what relational experience is being centered. Often the context is between two partners. Scenes of sexual violence become less fuzzy when we start with the relational experience between a woman/person and her own nervous system. What should be centered is how her survival brain, for whatever reason(s), is responding to what is going on

outside of her skin. This is the power of allowing polyvagal theory to undergird the question of consent.

- Polyvagal Theory Summary (see slides also submitted)
  - Social Engagement: DESIRE & FREEDOM
    - Note: Desire must be discussed in a way that gives freedom to each person to define what this is for themselves.
- Peter Walker’s Fawn Response from his work with Complex PTSD
- Effects of Fawn: exhaustion, fragmentation and a role reversal perpetrator and victim/survivor—all of which create shame.
- Double Shame: (one of my key goals for survivors: equipped to address their own shame)
  - “Shame is the experience of one’s felt sense of self disintegrating in relation to a dysregulating other.” (DeYoung, 18)
  - “Shame emerges in response to an encounter we have with someone else.” (Thompson, 68-69)
  - “The event of implosion and collapse that corresponds to the event of dysregulating misattunement—is the core shame event.” (DeYoung, 41)
  - “Shame is primarily sensed and felt as a shift in emotional tone.” (Thompson, 71)
  - Shame was “once a useful response to interpersonal danger, but now a sense of being worthless or unlovable turns up in response even to minor interpersonal trouble” (DeYoung, 58).
  - Rewriting narratives that give shame survivors “a second chance at telling their story” (DeYoung, 107).
  - “Not all stillness is calm, not all compliance is consent.” (Sarah Scholte, equine therapist)
- Chronic Fawn:
  - Continual submission leaves one feeling at the mercy of a more powerful other; so much emotional collateral damage. How do survivors lodged in an oppressive/abusive dynamic find any grounding? Requires preemptively anticipating the emotional state of the other being experienced as dangerous and what he/she wants in order to calm him/her; over time this morphs into a “programmed’ initiation; this is mis-framed/mis-seen as desire when that is NOT the emotional state available to the victim
- Amber’s Story (“scheduling her terror”) as a synthesis of all this before turning to Biblical stories
  - Now we are getting icky back to messy back to fuzzy
  - Shame begets a role reversal between victim and perpetrator. Some commentators name Lots’ Daughters as the rapists rather than “masterminds” avoiding rape.
  - “Scheduling terror” seeks to find stability in the experience perpetual violence. Amber’s story helps us consider whether stability is what our female Biblical figures are also seeking.

*Excerpt from my Theological Anthropology Paper June 2022:*

In his book, *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, Bruce Perry, a psychiatrist, and senior fellow of the Child Trauma Academy, tells the story of an incest survivor named Amber. Beginning at age seven, her mother's cohabitating boyfriend, Duane, would rape and sodomize her when he drank. Since his drinking was unpredictable, about every ten days or so, Amber lived with the constant fear of when it would happen again. Her performance in school began to decline, and her demeanor shifted from "happy and outgoing to withdrawn and anxious" (Perry, 187). To keep her silent, Duane threatened even worse harm if she told her mother. Believing the abuse was inescapable, Amber did what she could to control it. She began provoking the violations by serving Duane drinks and behaving provocatively. Her efforts to get the abuse over with and know when it would happen allowed her to return to a basic level of functioning in studying and sleeping through the night. As Perry explains, essentially, she began "scheduling her terror" so that the abuse didn't interfere with her entire life (Perry, 187). Her school performance improved, and she seemed to be more like herself. "Although her behavior probably doubled the frequency of the molestation, the control she gained over the situation allowed her to manage her anxiety such that it minimized the effects that the abuse had on her daily life" (Perry, 187). In Amber's story we see the creative imprint through both her dissociation and shame. As Perry reports, whenever abuse would occur Amber erased the intolerable reality of rape by disappearing mentally into her imaginary world of animals. Amber also took on the shame of becoming the aggressor as she actively participated in the ritual setup of abuse to contain the collateral damage in other areas of her life. In her survival we see her God-given capacity to act, her playing with time as she schedules her terror to create a different outcome, the permission she gives herself to struggle with violation in an imperfect coping mechanism and her faithful call to her own humanity in cunningly surviving harm for years.

- Complication: when victims/survivors are not model survivor (Amber example)
  - Why we don't easily identify Lot's Daughters as victim/survivors because we are uncomfortable with what they do. What if their plot is scheduling their own terror?

*Transition:*

Now we will circle back to the concept of consent and the way the conversation around it is less fuzzy when the center becomes the felt presence of danger/threat for the nervous system of a victim/survivor. If these are present for a person, then we are in sympathetic nervous system arousal where desire is no longer driving action.

### **A New Center for Consent:**

Putting pressure on consent because the way it is currently talked about (without respect for various states of emotional regulation) overlooks discomfort and fawn as a survival response. The fawn response applies this pressure by centering the inner subjectivity of the person: "Put

pressure on consent and its dominance over imagining sexual subjectivity and practice.” (Graybill, 31)

### Confusion of Consent:

- Confusing terms that even Graybill alludes to: Limited consent, Choice under constraint, Constrained and coercive choice
- More than anything, the great appeal of consent lies in its simplicity and clarity: *Consent is always a necessary precursor to sex; sex without consent is rape.*” (Graybill, 30)
- Joseph J. Fischel : “affirmative consent” as the “least-bad” standard for sexual assault law and first responder engagement (Graybill, 30)
- “Rebecca Traister, “Seriously, God help us if the best we can say about the sex we have is that it was consensual.” (Graybill, 39)
- The subject who consents (or withholds consent) is further assumed to be self-contained, knowable, and self-aware. When I am asked to consent, there is the assumption that I understand what I am being asked, and believe myself capable of answering. This means knowing what I want, and knowing myself...The kind of self-contained subject that consent assumes is unable to accommodate the shattered subject of sublimity, trauma, or religious experience. (Graybill, 35)
- Consent is precarious: The concept has an edge; “suggest brinks, drop-offs, uncertainties, borderlines” (Graybill, 30)

\*Fawn’s complexity can hold the important missing elements of Discomfort, Domination, and the question of Desire

### Discomfort:

“The assumption that subjects can simply give or withhold consent also neglects the influence of more subtle forms of pressure, as well as **discomfort.**” (Graybill, 35)

“This is a point that Ahmed has analyzed incisively in *Willful Subjects*. As the title suggests, *Willful Subjects* explores the theme of willfulness, including **how the accusation of acting “willfully” is used to control resistant subjects**, especially women and children. Taking up the fuzzy/messy/icky problem of “how women willingly agree to situations in which their safety and well-being are compromised” and “the cases in which yes involves force but is not experienced as force,” Ahmed draws out the **power of discomfort: Discomfort constitutes** “a polite strategy or technique of power (the capacity to carry out will without resistance, or with the will of others).”<sup>19</sup> The significance of discomfort, and its role in leading victims/survivors to compromise their own wishes or will, is a point made again and again in contemporary accounts of rape culture.” (Graybill, 36)

### Domination:

Neglect of intersectionality (race, sexuality, gender, and disability): “The right to say “no” has been historically denied to many categories of people.” (Graybill, 36-37)

The framing of consent assumes that sex or rape is something done by one person to another; these positions, moreover, are typically gendered. In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown makes this point clearly. As Brown writes:

If, in rape law, men are seen to do sex while women consent to it, if the measure of rape is not whether a woman sought or desired sex but whether she acceded to it or refused it when it was pressed upon her, **then consent operates both as a site of subordination and a means of its legitimation. Consent is thus a response to power—it adds or withdraws legitimacy—but is not a mode of enacting or sharing in power.**<sup>26</sup>

“Consent does not share power so much as it reiterates relations of domination.” (Graybill, 37)

“Two modes of coercion: one explicit, one more subtle. To quote again from Ahmed and her critical assessment of consent in *Willful Subjects*:

We certainly need to hear the violence that converts no into yes. My additional suggestion is modest: we also need to hear the cases in which yes involves force but is not experienced as force, when for instance a woman says yes to something as the consequences of saying no would be too much . . . If being willing does not mean the absence of force, then we need to account for the social and political situations in which yes and no are given.

“Why women willingly agree to situations in which their safety and well-being are compromised.” (Graybill, 44)

#### Desire:

“When the framework of consent is the only framework we have to assess sexual culture, other questions and problems and possibilities become impossible to consider. In particular, consent discourses risk evacuating the question of sexual pleasure from sex. As Kelly Oliver writes, **“Affirmative consent should not be conflated with desire. Just because a woman submits to sex, does not mean that she wants it, especially in a culture where women feel pressured to please men.”** (Graybill, 38)

\*Fawn opens up a view of consent that incorporates internal desire not only outward acts of “submitting.”

#### *Transition:*

We now turn towards Biblical characters to think about these stories beyond “consent.” Without a clear sense of fawn as a survival strategy, consent is not enough but this wider frame allows us to reexamine the actions of Abigail, Ruth, Tamar, and Lot’s Daughters in light of discomfort, domination and desire.

- “The bad news is that the notion of consent is insufficient to address the complexities of biblical narratives of sexual violence...” (Graybill, 48)
- “Rape and rape culture remain challenging and sometimes shattering matters, in the biblical texts and even more so in the world. In pushing back against consent discourses, my aim has been not to reject consent itself, which plays an important role in contemporary understandings of sexual encounter and sexual violence, but **to summon us as feminists to think beyond the limitations of consent.**” (Graybill, 57)

## **Biblical Historical Sexual Context:**

It may seem strange to start an examination of stories *not* about rape with biblical rape culture as our compass but I’m choosing to focus on four stories of women plotting to survive not to broaden the definition of rape but expand how we see these women survive sexual violence. The rape culture of ancient Biblical times is crucial in understanding that life and death survival was at play in all these stories whether obvious to us as 21<sup>st</sup> century readers or not. These texts that include the fuzzy, messy, and icky of how women are surviving through their bodies has everything to do with soil in which these stories are planted.

### Three Aspects of Biblical Rape Culture:

- women as objects that need subjects
- unhappy readings
- focus on peremption (rather than predation) in naming sexual harm for these four women

“There is the possibility of a different story here, nestled uneasily in the larger frame of violence.” (Graybill, 26)

### Subjects and Objects:

Hebrew Bible.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the text presents a range of terms, including the verb *‘innâ* (to overpower or to rape) and the noun *nēbalâ* (outrage, often with a sexual sense). However, each term also has a range of meanings that extend beyond sexual violence, at least as it is narrowly understood. Thus, while sexual violence clearly occurs, the very terms that are used to describe it in the Hebrew Bible are themselves both fuzzy and messy.” (Graybill, 32)

Social, cultural, and ideological structures that sustain and nourish sexual violence

“A structure and ideology that pervades and organizes daily life.”

Rape is not an act of incomprehensible violence, it does not suddenly erupt but it is “an extreme expression of what is culturally acceptable, salient, even ordinary.” (Graybill, 18)



Harold Washington: ancient Israel was a rape culture; “rape cultures are distinguished by a failure of their legal institutions to recognize rape as a crime of violence against women.” (Graybill, 18)

“Biblical laws are concerned with the honor of male family members; rape of a woman represents harm to her father, brothers, or husband, not to the woman herself.” (Graybill, 19); injury to a masculine economy of power and honor

“Rape, like adultery, is an offense of taking; it prescribes a proper grammar of man = subject and woman = object. It likewise emphasizes relations between men, who interact with each other through and against the bodies of women.” (Graybill, 19)

“Much of this defining [of women’s lives] appears to be done from men’s perspectives. The tales of marriage, for example, really have to do with relationships between men.” (Women’s Commentary, 33)

Examples: face-saving, feuding and vengeance

#### Genesis 12-50 Patriarchal Tales

“Creation story repeatedly highlights the injunction to be fruitful and multiply, while the Patriarchal Tales, in the very process of frequently echoing this language of fertility from the opening chapters, make clear that procreation, far from being an automatic biological process, is fraught with dangers, is constantly under the threat of being deflected or cut off.” (Altar, 8)

#### *Transition:*

Men as subjects and women as objects means that survival happens through men, specifically for women, bearing sons. All these women’s lives are in danger because they have not borne sons and they are all “saved” or noted in the text through marriage and the bearing of sons.

#### Unhappy Readings:

Unhappy readings are tellings that hold space for ambiguity, ambivalence, and non-resolution. “a more flexible interpretive practice that takes seriously the unhappiness of rape stories—as plots, as narratives, as feminist problems—without seeking either to “fix” them or to transfigure them into tragic catharsis.” (Graybill, 7)

Contrast to “happy ending readings” where stories are told in a way that finds something redemptive even in the tragedy, seek to “save” the rape victim or describing her fight.

- Emphasize possibility and openness (Graybill, 145)
- Unhappy names a more expansive terrain than sadness.
- “Permit us to deviate from familiar paths of feminist criticism and give us the freedom to linger with unhappiness, without demanding resolution or injecting fixed meaning into ambiguity, ambivalence and discomfort.” (Graybill, 151)
- Unhappy ending: a failure to end opens new possibilities in reading old stories (Graybill, 151-152)

- “Unhappy reading allows us to linger with the unhappiness of stories, without, however, committing to a certain interpretive outcome...Importantly, unhappy reading also names and holds space for our own unhappiness as readers with these endings— we would like to know more, would like to linger with these stories, would like closure, even the sad closure of catharsis.” (Graybill, 168)
- “There is no one way of framing harm.” (Graybill, 174)

### Peremption not Predation:

“Joseph J. Fischel and his analysis of adolescent sexuality in *Sex and Harm in the Age of Consent*. For Fischel, “peremption” identifies the “*uncontrolled disqualification of possibility*”—in particular, the disqualification of certain forms of sex, sexuality, and sexual subjectivity. The root of the word, the Latin *perimere*, means to utterly kill or destroy; in the U.S. legal system, a “peremptory challenge” is a type of objection that requires no explanation. With respect to sexual harm, “peremption” describes the way that certain future possibilities, including possible forms of sexual subjectivity and being in the world, are peremptorily foreclosed.” (Graybill, 59)

“We know what the male protagonist wants, and what the men around her want. But we do not know what she wants, only what happens to her. This fuzziness around sexual violence is not a failure to understand the text clearly, but rather a key feature of the narrative.” (Graybill, 61)

“But this neglects other forms of harm, including limitations on sexual flourishing, the limiting of autonomy, and the foreclosing of possibility. While the model of predation seeks to protect victims, it ends up impoverishing them.” (Graybill, 70)

Peremption: Uncontrolled disqualification of possibility

Narrowing of sexual possibilities, limits our future rendering some possibilities impossible before they can even begin.

“Narrowing of the horizon of possibility” (Graybill, 75)

“Provides a fuller, richer picture of harm” (Graybill, 72)

“Harm is no longer limited to either predation or the violation of consent.” (Graybill, 72)

“The problem lies, instead, with a too narrow concept of victims/survivors that neglects *both* the lived experiences of sexual violence (what I have been calling throughout this book the fuzzy, messy, and icky) *and* the ways that sexual harm plays out, beyond binaries of predation/nonpredation.” (Graybill, 83)

“And peremption speaks, as well, to the question of futurity: Harm can also come through the precluding or preventing of possibility.” (Graybill, 84)

“*Conversations with Friends* insists that sexual predation or rape is only one way of understanding harm, and that to focus exclusively on it is to neglect a broad range of other forms of pain, suffering, and harm irreducible to either heterosexuality or predation.” (Graybill, 95)

*Transition:*

Though Graybill is referring to Biblical texts in conversation with works of nonbiblical literature her belief that “Texts crack open when they are made to talk to other texts.” (Graybill, 25) her thought apply to the power of putting Biblical stories in conversation with one another. My goal in is to expose the dignity of these characters (that which comes through Creation, but biblical rape culture does not grant these women) not give an explanation, acquittal, or “redeem” their actions. I only want to establish space through reparative readings to consider what they wanted and what the messy consequences are in their lives in how they survived.

“Reparative reading does not dismiss the pain of these stories but instead opens the possibility of imagining an *after* to such pain. Reparative reading... suggests that we can imagine an *after* to sexual trauma in the Bible without erasing that trauma itself. Instead, this is simply a practice of finding space—as Ahmed reminds us in *The Problem of Happiness*, an “aspiration” is, originally, a space to *breathe*. To be otherwise from paranoid is not to deny suffering, pain, or tragedy—it is simply finding space to breathe, for the texts, for their characters, and for ourselves.” (Graybill, 52)

#### 4 Stories of Survival:

3 Elements in engaging these stories: Scaffolding, staying with the trouble and the structure I’ll use in examining these texts

1. Scaffolding Intent: I’m addressing these texts with a focus on the increasing trajectory of fuzzy, messy and icky rather than in canonical order. We’ll start with a story we easily consider brave & noble and end with the one most often classified as abhorrent & revengeful and yet our examination will reveal they are not so wholly different. All these women must plot their survival.

2. “Staying with the trouble”:

Donna Haraway’s “Staying with the trouble” (Graybill, 21)

Reading practice that pursues complexity—“reading these stories as stories of sexual violence, without erasing their ambiguities and complexities, without assuming that we know what [these women] wanted, or that the dynamics of victim and victimizer are both clearly marked and unchanging.” (Graybill, 21)

Sometimes “staying with the trouble” means staying in trouble, particularly when reading rape stories.” (Graybill, 168)

Trouble of Survival: When women begin to subversively act as subjects in the only ways available to them (fawn response)

“I single out in particular the repeated pressure the essays put on the category of the victim/survivor—who counts as a victim, what it means to be a “good” victim or survivor, **how certain forms of survival are criticized or punished.**” (Graybill, 133)

“Many victims and survivors find that the language and concept of “survivor” implies a specific *sort* of survivor.” (Graybill, 133)

“These terms come to contain within their meanings both a description of character (a victim or a survivor is supposed to be a certain sort of person) and a trajectory of action (the victim/survivor is supposed to act in a certain way following the sexual violence itself). Furthermore, the victim or survivor is supposed to be oriented in a certain way, both toward what has happened to her and especially toward the future.” (Graybill, 134)

Piepzna-Samarasinha in her work “Queering Sexual Violence” : “For so many QTBIPOC [Queer Trans Black Indigenous People of Color], surviving violence is just life. We survive so many forms of violence and are resilient, and not. We make it, and we don’t, and we **make it sideways** . . . Survivorhood is not just what would be in the police file. Far from it. It is all our stories of every moment we survive.” (Graybill, 136)

*\*Surviving Sideways captures the essence of Fawn.*

“Survival is contingent, partial, ongoing, complicated.” (Graybill, 136)

“Survival is not something to overcome but rather an ongoing process of learning, living, and remembering.” (Graybill, 137)

### 3. Structure:

In each story we’ll examine...

- Experiences of discomfort and domination
- The plot to find stability & Fawn
- Their Desires & Peremption
- Complications of seeing these women as survivors

*Transition:*

“Although their positions are circumscribed by the men around them...they exercise great power over husbands, father-in-law, and father in situations involving the family, children and sexuality. It is, moreover, the women who are the critical ancestors for the proper continuation of

the Israelites.” “A number of women are portrayed as active tricksters who, like Eve, alter the rules, men’s rules.” (Women’s Bible Commentary, 33)

## **Abigail: 1 Samuel 25**

*Scaffold 1:* I begin with a story of physical threat that seeks to destroy a household. Abigail utilizes her body in trying to stop David judgment on Nabal as opposed to a letter but her effort to preserve life is not centered on offering herself sexually to David. We assume from the text she is childless with no sons, so Nabal’s death leaves her without a male protector/provider.

### Discomfort:

- Married to a fool; story of her marriage may be even more abusive than the narrator indicates if he so brazenly demeans and disregards David, God’s anointed
- With David she interposes distance between herself and her husband; rapidly denounces her spouse and counterposes “and as for me” (Altar, 283)
- Such a wicked man even his male servants don’t feel they can talk to him (1 Samuel 25:17)

### Domination:

- David’s command to his men: “every man, gird his sword.” = “urgent command to take up weapons and move out for the kill” (Altar, 281)
- Abigail would have seen him and his 400 men with their swords drawn coming towards her (Altar, 282)
- Abigail would not have heard that the threat was limited to the slaughter of males: “Abigail has no way of knowing whether David will have an impulse to kill her on the spot” (Altar, 282)

### Plot & Fawn:

- Abigail demonstrates her “absolute submission to David through these extravagant gestures of obeisance.” (Altar, 282)
- Takes food for his men as an offering; bows down before David
- Abigail’s cunning language when she petitions David:
  - No bloodguilt : cave where David refuses to harm Saul even when he has him in his power
  - “Blessing” = “gift” —allusions to Genesis 33 when Jacob prostrates himself before Esau and his 400 men with gifts
  - Sling: Goliath and David’s use of sling to destroy an enemy
  - David’s political self-interest—when he is monarch he will not want a “stain” (literal and metaphorical)
- There seems to be a second phase of her plotting as she carefully decides when to tell Nabal about her encounter with David; Altar indicates that maybe she is hoping the news will kill Nabal, but I think it’s more likely that at night when he was drunk she would have been less safe physically and maybe sexually telling her

- David assumes in verse 39 that God’s intervention in Nabal’s death was to support his cause. What if it was to deliver Abigail from a tortuous and violent marriage that endangered her life?

#### Desires & Peremption:

- “Abigail is not only sensible but beautiful and now a wealthy widow, whose land and assets David and his people could surely use (in fact, have been using, hence the problem in the first place). (Women’s Bible Commentary, 157)
- The only clear desire Abigail seems to have, though not stated directly by her, is to live. Did she want to be out of her marriage? Was she hoping David would take her as a wife? Would she have preferred to have been widowed and wealthy with her own household?
- If peremption if the foreclosing of possibilities, then becoming one of David’s wives, though polygamy was common, would have been very limiting. To be one of many means she would likely not have had the same childbearing opportunities as being the sole wife of one man. It’s possible she is also left without her own resources as David’s power would have absorbed all of Nabal’s property as her new husband.
- Will bear David’s second son, Chileab, though she is taken as a wife before David takes Ahinoam (who bears him Amnon—his first born). It is interesting to consider what may have affected this order of bearing sons. Was this because Abigail was a property acquisition more than a wife?

#### Complications:

- Less complicated since talking Abigail as a wife seems to be David’s idea, almost as if it is a reward in her story for her courage and wisdom; Abigail is seen as noble though some may criticize her for speaking directly about her husband’s faults

## **Ruth: The Book of Ruth**

*Scaffold 2:* In the story of Ruth sex and marriage are introduced as strategies for survival. Their poverty, unlike Abigail’s economic state, means Naomi (and thus Ruth) need Ruth’s body to produce a son. The book of Ruth contains the theme of “seed” with its overlay of the barley season. This theme of seed is present in the stories of Tamar and Lot’s Daughter’s.

Writer: 5th century B.C. (Late Biblical Period); written in response to Ezra & Nehemiah when intermarriage with foreign wives was an urgent issue (Altar, 622)

- “Harvesting and agriculture are a palpable presence in the story.” (Altar, 621)
- Idyllic/Charming = “no (morally) bad people” (Altar, 622)
- Seriously entertained by some commentators as having been written by a female. (Women’s Bible Commentary, 142)

#### Discomfort:

- “Wherever you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.” Altar seems to see Ruth’s talk of death as a moving speech of loyalty rather than a true fear of death (Altar, 627).

- “A settled place” = literal meaning in Hebrew is rest and in combination with inheritance implies “settling down somewhere in comfort and security.” (Altar, 626) This security is potentially more about survival than being comfortable.
- “Left your mother and your father and the land of your birth”—explicitly echoes what Abraham was commanded by God to do in Genesis 12:1 (Alter, 630)

#### Domination:

- “There was a famine in the land” :same exact phrase as Genesis 12:10 & 26:1 which endangers the safety of women, like Naomi, who sojourn into foreign lands (Women’s Bible Commentary, 143)
- Altar (pg. 630) refers to Boaz’s warnings in Ruth 2:9 “sexual advances” but no doubt Ruth would have been in danger of being raped had she gleaned in a field where an owner was less concerned about shalom for his workers.
- “The special protection afforded to widows in biblical law attests to Naomi’s extreme vulnerability.” (Women’s Bible Commentary, 144)
- “For Naomi, a woman’s hope lies only in the security provide by a patriarchal household that includes husbands and sons. (Women’s Bible Commentary, 145)
- “Finding security means finding a husband, since the women have no protection or standing on their own.” (Women’s Bible Commentary. 147)

#### Plot & Fawn:

- “With the end of the harvest season, the women can no longer count on Ruth’s daily gleanings, and they remain alone.” (Women’s Bible Commentary, 147) This initiates the plotting that Naomi will now do.
- Ruth 3: Erotic nature of bathe, anoint, put on your garments (and uncover) (Altar, 632)
- Naomi tells Ruth to wait until everyone is finished eating and drinking so Boaz will be of good cheer; the story is starting to feel icky
- Naomi instructs Ruth to do as Boaz tells her: “he shall tell you what you should do.” (Altar, 632)
- The sexual overtones that permeate the chapter further underscore Ruth’s sexual vulnerability. (“To lie down”, “to enter”, “to know”) (Women’s Bible Commentary, 147)
- Ruth tells Boaz what to do: “Spread your wing” (corner of your garment) echoes Boaz’s words in 2:12 “the Lord God of Israel under whose wings you have come to shelter”; this can be a symbol of marriage but Ruth does not explicitly say that (Altar, 633); “She thus suggests that he can make good on his prayer and provide the protective cover that he invoked in Yahweh’s name.” (Women’s Bible Commentary, 147)
  - Boaz says to Ruth what Naomi told her; undoes the subservient position (“whatever you say I will do for you”) (Altar, 633) This shifts the domination Ruth and Naomi are suffering under.
  - “Spend the night here.”; Ruth’s safety and reputation (whether it’s his own or Ruth’s) are concerns of Boaz; The verb used is the same one Ruth used “where you lodge, I will lodge” Ruth is receiving the same loyalty she expressed.
- “The Scenario is reminiscent of Hebrew Bible narratives in which women use trickery and sexuality to force a man’s hand, to manipulate those in power to do right by them. Rather than condemning such tactics, these narratives memorialize the desperate

struggles of women who have few or no other options, who risk everything just to survive.” (Women’s Bible Commentary. 147)

### Desires & Peremption:

- It is hard to tell what Ruth wants in the story. She certainly chooses to return to Bethlehem with Naomi and yet it’s important to consider what other choice she had. Did Orpah’s family have a more enlightened perspective of her role in the death of her husband. Did Ruth’s family blame her? Were there any future marriage opportunities for her if she had stayed? The reader is not told what becomes of Orpah.
- Ruth’s idyllic tone (Altar, 622) as well as Boaz’s honorable treatment of Ruth contributes to a sense that Boaz is a “good catch” (at least Naomi thinks so) and yet we aren’t told what Ruth wants. She makes several requests of Boaz, beyond what Naomi instructs her to do, and yet it is hard to know to what degree desire and survival come together to fuel Ruth’s actions.
- Of all our four passages, Ruth’s seems to have the least peremption. Marriage to Boaz seems to solve every problem for the two women. One possible source in the levirate requirement to raise up a child for Naomi is the lack of prominence as a mother to her first born.

### Complications:

- Ruth’s main complication as a “less than model” character is that she is, unlike Abigail, Tamar and Lot’s Daughters, a Moabite. This is mentioned often through the narrative and may be why a female author wrote this in response to the negative view of Moabite women that comes from Genesis 19.
  - “The most memorable narratives concerning Moab are marked by scandal and animosity. Genesis 19:30-38 traces the nation’s origins to incest and duplicity, making Moabite women particularly dangerous, possessing the power to seduce Israelite men away from Yahweh.” (Women’s Bible Commentary, 144)

### *Transition:*

From the story of Ruth and the book’s efforts to address the scandal and seduction of a Moabite woman being made family, we turn to Tamar whose story holds same potential accusations of scandal and seduction.

## **Tamar: Genesis 38**

*Scaffold 3:* The hint of a trickster narrative in the book of Ruth moves us from Ruth’s proposition of Boaz to Tamar’s deception of Judah, her father-in-law. Sex happens in the story though Judah is far from “forced” into it. The theme of seed (begun in the book of Ruth) is still prominent in this passage. Like Abigail and Ruth, there is great verbal honor given to Tamar by Judah at the end of the story. And what Tamar does in order to survive is more fuzzy, messy and icky.

### Discomfort:

- This story hinges on the Levirate marriage practice of Yibum (Altar, 626)



- note: In Ruth this law was extended beyond brothers-in-law to Kinsman
- “The law of the levirate suits a *male-centered* symbol system in that it neatens up that which has become anomalous according to the categories of that system.” (Women’s Bible Commentary, 42)
- Onan, her second husband, withholds his seed from her leaving her powerless.
- The carries the possibility that Judah is afraid to give Tamar to his last remaining son rather than it truly being about his age.
- Social disgrace in having to return to her father’s house after being twice married (Altar, 146)

#### Domination:

- Irony that Naomi does not want Ruth & Oprah to be “deprived of husbands” but Judah deprived Tamar of his third son, Shelah. Tamar is at the mercy of Judah’s lack of integrity.
- Tamar is legally under Judah’s jurisdiction as evidenced by his issuing a death sentence against her (Altar, 146)
- “In a symbol system like that of ancient Israel, without belief in bodily resurrection, offspring are one’s afterlife.” (Women’s Bible Commentary, 42)
- “Tamar returns to her father’s house, neither a virgin nor a wife nor a mother. She is on the fringes of the Israelite social structure, for nowhere does she properly belong.” (Women’s Bible Commentary, 42). Though Tamar may not be destitute as Ruth & Naomi were, she is still in physical and economic instability as not belonging fully to any household.

#### Plot & Fawn:

- In verse 17 we are told Tamar wants a slaughtered kid from Judah’s flock as payment. A slaughtered kid is what Judah and his brothers used to deceive Jacob about Joseph’s death. Tamar also uses a garment to deceive like Judah just as he and his brother’s used a garment to deceive Jacob (Altar, 147)

#### Desire & Peremption

- In Genesis 38:15-16 we are told only that Tamar wore a veil and Judah *thought* she was a prostitute. It has been assumed by commentators that Tamar was dressed as a prostitute. But what if she was wearing a wedding veil? What if Tamar, knowing Judah was now widowed, was asking to be taken as a wife? It appears clear by the speed at which he acts that Judah wanted to sleep with a woman. This potentially influences *how* he sees Tamar. The text does not identify that any other of Judah’s servant saw her. They are looking for a “whore” because that’s what Judah identified Tamar as.
- Burning was reserved in Biblical law for only the most atrocious crimes. The speed of Judah’s judgment with no reflection or call for evidence in verse 24 displays the heart of Biblical rape culture where the man is the object. In this case Judah has been “wronged” (Altar, 148)
- In verse 26 we find out that Judah “knew her again no more.” We aren’t told why though perhaps Judah’s sticky affect means he is unwilling. It’s tempting to think that is

honoring for Tamar but it also ignores the honor and joy she would have potentially had as a mother of many children. This is a foreclosure of possibilities for Tamar.

### Complications:

- In verses 21, Hiram (Judah's servant) changes the word the narrator uses (*zonah* meaning whore in a frank manner) to *qedeshah* meaning a woman who practices ritual prostitution in a fertility cult. (Altar, 148) The appearance of being a whore clearly distances Tamar from being a "model survivor" if she's considered a survivor at all. The irony is that Hiram's new way of classifying her is true in both regards. She has been ritually prostituted to evil men AND she is seeking fertility.

### *Transition:*

In verse 21 Hiram returns to the place where Judah met Tamar to deliver the promised goat in exchange for the return of his seal, chord, and staff. He's told by the men in the area, "There has been no harlot here." What a poignant statement of how Tamar will be seen by the end of the story—not as a harlot but as more righteous than Judah himself. Tamar's story brings us to our final passage where we will examine how Lot's Daughters' survival in its essence is more alike our other passages than thematically disconnected.

## **Lot's Daughters: Genesis 19**

### *Excerpt from my Biblical Survey Paper June 2022:*

Jackson looks at the story of Tamar from Genesis 38 along with Lot's Daughters from Genesis 19 and points out several powerful connections and commonalities in what she considers these trickster narratives. First, the women show a deep concern for the perpetuation of their family's line. Second, their barriers to perpetuation are not bareness but widowhood. Finally, both stories contain the birth of two sons. In examining these similarities between the two stories, Jackson further explains three unique traits specific to female tricksters. These women use their intelligence and often exhibit a greater understanding of the needs of their family and nation than their male counterparts. They exhibit faith as they more closely understand God's purposes than do their male counterparts. Lastly, through deception they acquire sexual agency as they determine when and with whom they'll have sex and bear children.

This final story, seemingly less fuzzy but exponentially messier and ickier than the others, requires we look not only at Genesis 19 but at the traumatic events that come before.

- "Just as there are no good or "pure" options available to Lot's daughters, who believe themselves and their father the sole human survivors, so too should we refuse easy judgment." (Graybill, 50)

### Discomfort:

- In verse 3 we are told their father “presses them [the visitors he meets at the city gate who plan to spend the night in the square] hard” for their safety but will not do the same later for his daughters.
- The daughters watch their father without resistance go out into the city to warn his sons-in-law of the coming judgment but must be urged by the messengers to leave the city.
- In verse 16 we are told he “lingers” in taking his wife and two virgin daughters who are the only ones with him and it is the messengers who must “seize” the hands of Lot, his wife and daughters to bring them out of the city.
- Their age (see excerpt below)

*Excerpt from my Biblical Survey Paper June 2022:*

It is important to keep in mind, as we turn towards the list of their traumas, Matthew Korpman’s view concerning their age. In his article “Can Anything Good Come from Sodom? A Feminist and Narrative Critique of Lot’s Daughters in Genesis 19:30-38,” he surmises these girls are likely 12-14 years old as unmarried virgins and potentially close in age to betrothal at the same time. In addition to their youth, as females in ancient near east culture the daughters quite literally “have no rights, no voice, no self-determination in this misogynist order.” Their powerlessness is irrefutable when examining all they have endured since their father took in the guests at sunset as well as imagining other past experiences of harm this night could have potentially triggered.

Domination:

- The daughters listen as their father offers them in exchange for their guest to be gang raped. The “sacredness of the host-guest bond of an ancient Near East code took precedent over other obligations.” (Altar, 61)
- The destruction of Sodom connects to the flood story through the use of “rain down” and “from the Lord/from the heavens.” The sense of isolation is echoed by the words of the daughters, “there is no man on earth (in the land) to come to bed with us” (Altar, 63).
- With their mother gone, they are at the mercy of their father’s sinister judgment about what is best for them.

*Excerpt from my Biblical Survey Paper June 2022:*

First, their father takes in strange guests in a city known for its sexual violation. Though they are virgins, it is possible their father has hosted unrighteous men who leered at or molested them, something it is easy to believe their father would have tolerated. Second, a mob comes to their door demanding a sacrifice. Has this happened before to a neighbor who entertained out of town guests? Have they listened from their own abode as a mob threatened to break down a nearby door or laughed as the men gang raped a victim within earshot? Cobb even goes so far as to wonder if their future husbands were a part of this mob in verse 4. Third, they hear their father offer them instead of the honored visitors. It becomes clear to them their father will not only fail to protect their sexuality, honor, or future but he will not even protect their life. Lot’s actions “clearly communicating that

hospitality towards men is more important than the welfare and safety of women.”<sup>1</sup> Fourth, the text is silent about their mother’s response, but we can infer she is present and there is no mention of her intervention. A variety of responses are imaginable on behalf of their mother. She could have cowered in a corner, begged Lot not to offer them or stood in the scene’s background silently consenting they be sacrificed instead of herself. It’s possible her death, as the consequence for a seemingly small act of glancing over her shoulder, judges her inaction on their behalf. Fifth, after their father lingers in the city, the daughters are led out of their home and through the streets at night by strangers they do not know. In addition to these, their home is destroyed, their future husbands decide not to follow their father and everyone they know dies as the city is punished. Their mother dies potentially an arm’s length away from them with a tortured scream as her body disintegrates into salt. They watch their father alter several times the plan of the visitors to lead them to safety. We do not know what they experience in Zoar, but we know it deserved similar punishment as Sodom but is spared for their sake. It’s possible they observe something in their father’s actions or demeanor in the hours or days in this new city that echo his debased actions from the fateful night of their fleeing. Their journey ends in a cave potentially inhabited with wild animals or desperate residents from other cities who are seeking shelter as well.

#### Plot & Fawn:

*Excerpt from my Biblical Survey Paper June 2022:*

The truth of the trauma they have survived leads to a deep understanding of the incestuous plot they devise. Together with Korpman’s article, Julianna Claassens’s writing “Excavating Trauma Narratives: Haunting Memories in the Story of Lot’s Daughters” frames their desperation and lack of safety. Claassens believes these two young girls have fully internalized the fear of apocalyptic annihilation and perceive the destruction as far more extensive than just the city. Korpman points out the daughters have no guarantee their father would protect them in the future after the night in Sodom. “They have no reason to trust that their father will not seek *to harm* them again. They have no reason to trust or be assured that he will protect their lives *from harm*. Instead of trusting their father’s patriarchal rule, they subverted it after coming to believe that it was untrustworthy. By bearing his children, they assure themselves that he will be forced to protect them--and his desired male heirs.” Though Cobb, Korpman and Claassens create the foundation for reading Genesis 19 as a trauma narrative that frames the daughters’ objectionable methods as survival, it is Jonathan Grossman’s application of associative meanings to verses 31 through 35 that offers a way to counter their marginalization.

#### Desires & Peremption:

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- What the daughters want, like every woman whose story we've considered, is shrouded by the narrator. Does Abigail want to marry David? Does Ruth go with Naomi because she wants to or because from her vantage point it is her only option? Does Tamar want to bear a seed for Judah's family, or does she simply need to continue existing?
- Once the daughters have borne sons from their father's seed, their future possibilities of marriage (since other people are still alive) and thus more children are extinct.

Complications:

- The use of alcohol to intoxicate their father becomes the focal point for flipping the roles of perpetrator and victim/survivors. It's as if the narrator assumes that Lot would not have gone along with the idea had he been sober, which is incongruent with the lack of character he displays in offering his daughters to a violent mob. What if offering their father alcohol made having sex with him less violent than it would have been had he been sober? What if they believed he was going to rape them anyway? What if he already had before leaving Sodom?
- Lot's Daughters' marginalization: undistinguished, unnamed, untracked
  - "That the daughters are nameless and semi-interchangeable is a final icky touch." (Graybill, 46)

*Excerpt from my Biblical Survey Paper June 2022:*

The Biblical author leaves them unnamed, undistinguished, and untracked. Melissa Jackson in her article "Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology" equates them not being named as evidence of their low status. Jackson turns to the work of Alice Ogden Bellis who describes the daughters as "unnamed and therefore considered unimportant by the Biblical editors." Except for Jonathan Grossman's article "Associative Meanings in the Character Evaluation of Lot's Daughters", which analyzes the difference between the role of the elder and younger in the execution of their plot, scholarship largely examines them not as individuals but as one entity whose main identified by their relationship to an unrighteous father. Finally, it is Kirsi Cobb, in her work for *Open Theology* journal, that notes the two women are untracked by the Biblical author after the execution of their plan. "After the birth of their sons, they simply disappear from the story."

- The most complicated of the two sisters is clearly the elder how seems to lead the younger at crucial parts in the plot.

*Excerpt from my Biblical Survey Paper June 2022:*

Grossman's work examines the two sister's differing roles in their impregnation and distinguishes them as characters while still allowing a unification of their behaviors as the trauma responses of fight and flight. In his article, "Associative Meanings in the

Character Evaluation of Lot's Daughters" he brings to the conversation of Genesis 19 the role of associative meanings. Grossman asserts that "differences are expressed in the fabric of the words describing the actions of each daughter" with the narrator evaluating the elder daughter differently from the younger one. Building on the work of Geoffrey Leech, Grossman explains associative meanings are most easily "found in places where a narrative occurs twice but is narrated the second time with a different choice of words."

At four different points in Genesis 19:31-35, a change in the repetition of the story or a difference in word choice scrutinizes the two incestuous nights, distinguishing these two sisters' roles from one another. First, the events of both nights are initiated by the elder daughter. Had the Biblical author written the second night as having the younger daughter in turn initiate and speak, the stories would be a complete and balance parallel. This indicates that the younger sister was "hesitant, perhaps even reluctant, to take action." Second, the unfolding of the first night also reveals an incomplete execution of their plan. The forecast of their plan in verse 32 seems to only necessitate one night of incest. "Let us make our father drink wine and we shall lie and preserve through our father. But this is not how the plan is enacted. "So, they made their father drink wine and the older one came and lay with her father." Grossman's view is this portrays the older daughter's actions as brave while the younger daughter seems "to have lost her nerve to act out the plan that the sisters had agreed upon." Third, the elder sister's language changes from "our father" in verse 32 to "my father" in verse 34. Korpman assets this change of the possessive pronouns "enables the elder sister to repeat her suggestion while sublimating the demand of her younger sister." Midrash history proves this elder sister successful in its more favorable attitude towards the people of Ammon who can't be subjugated to forced labor. Finally, the differing language in their sexual encounter with their father change the intensity of the view of the daughters' behavior. The change from *came* (verse 33) to *rose* (verse 35) makes the younger daughter seem "more delicate, devoid of excessive sexual references." The younger daughter's ambivalence is tangible as she rises to lie with her father. "She seems to be acting against her better judgment and against her instincts, in contrast to the elder daughter, who comes and lies." The Biblical author seems to be joining the elder sister in sublimating the actions of the younger. In summary Korpman writes, "In this context, the associative meanings, the specific word choices, and the delicate contrast between the sisters paint two different pictures of the two nights." By the end of his article, Korpman's tone joins the pull of sublimation of the younger sister in seeing the elder as revengeful, more violating, conniving and aggressively persuasive. Yet I view his perspective to be short sighted. Though I agree the sisters do care for their family's lineage, one heir for one sister is not enough. Had the elder sister alone conceived, the younger sister remaining childless would not address the lack of protection and care she experiences as the daughter of a sexually unrighteous man. Both girls must bear a son and so I believe it is out of care, not shame, that a courageous older sister willing to scheme on behalf of both still persuades her sister to join the plot.

## Conclusion:

Sara Maitland's short story "Siren Song," in which the Sirens recall the rape of Persephone and their own anger and sadness. At first, they are shocked to learn that Persephone, forcibly abducted by Hades, has willingly eaten the pomegranate seeds he offers: (Graybill, 80)

In our naïveté, we thought that to consent, to eat, to live rather than to die, meant that she had chosen. Now we know that sometimes, **when there is no choice**, when there is nothing that will change how the humiliation is then it is **sometimes necessary to consent because that is the one, the only, thing that you can do**; that you must do to be other than victim, to be yourself. **That is a real thing and the worst thing.**

Creative Ending?: What the sisters would say to the women coming behind them? What if it were done with the tenderness, understanding and acceptance from Siren Song?

\*Graybill Chapter 6: be careful what I imagine Lot's Daughters might say to these other women

"What if some things aren't fixable? What if some things really never will be the same—and that might not be great, but it might be okay? . . . What if some trauma wounds really never will go away—and we still might have great lives?" (Graybill, 137)

Flourishing without repair; Thriving but not cured (Graybill, 138)

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### *Potential Future Sources*

*Know My Name* by Chanel Miller

*Sex and Harm in the Age of Consent* by Joseph J. Fischel

*Willful Subjects* by Sara Ahmed

*What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape* by Sohaila Abdulali

*Unclean: Mediations on Purity, Hospitality and Mortality* by Richard Beck