

The
Denison Journal
of
Religion

Published by the Denison University Department of Religion
Volume III: Number 1
© 2003

The content of the Journal shall be academic discourse which promotes and illuminates community dialogue. Appropriate topics of submission include but are not limited to the secular critique of religion, inter-religious dialogue, the interpretation of sacred texts, the interaction of religion and society, the validation of ethical discernment, and issues of race, gender, and class.

Student Editor

Daniel Rohrer

Faculty Editorial Board

John Cort

John Jackson

Joan Novak

Harold Van Broekhoven

David Woodyard

Contributors

Dan Rohrer graduated in 2003 with majors in Religion and English. He is currently attending Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

Sarah Pyle is a senior major in Religion and Creative Writing.

Meghan Henning is a senior with majors in Religion and Economics.

Erin Walker is a senior Religion major.

Lindsey Ross graduated in 2003 with a major in Religion.

Beyond Pacifism: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology During War

Dan Rohrer

Introduction: Theology of a Martyr

If there were such a thing as a “pop” theologian, capturing the imaginations of the public, Dietrich Bonhoeffer would be the one. He does so most noticeably in terms of his fascinating biography, the crowning achievement of which is martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis. Further investigation uncovers his involvement, despite his deep pacifist commitments, in a bombing plot that failed twice to take Hitler’s life. This is the same man who wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*, an outline of the requirements of Christianity, and *Life Together*, a blueprint for Christian fellowship. The ostensible discrepancy between his recourse to violence and the serene desires of *Life Together* is enigmatic enough; his later theological thoughts, however, as given in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, prove even less accessible and more puzzling – yet nonetheless find themselves in the mainstream.

In at least one way, this popularity is fitting: the relationship between Christianity and the secular order is often thought to be the center of these letters. Certainly this was the opinion of those heralding the Death of God movement, which drew quite heavily on Bonhoeffer’s later meditations. Regardless of the polemical moves that such movements have made in claiming Bonhoeffer’s voice, there is a genuine concern for the secular order in these letters. He speaks of his preference for talking with atheists about matters of faith, and wonders about his now famous notion of a “world come of age,” a human society that seems to be self-sufficient apart from belief in God. In these and many other ways, Bonhoeffer’s theology was charged with political concern. Yet he endures mainly as a devotional author. In a time of war in America, it is important to recover the political intent of Bonhoeffer’s theology.

The academic discourse about Bonhoeffer tends to center on *Discipleship* and the *Letters and Papers*, as well as his later appropriation by various secular philosophies, like the Death of God movement. The highly political theologian

Karl Barth provided what are perhaps the greatest praise and sharpest criticisms of Bonhoeffer using these categories. Barth, whose enormous bibliography attests to his penchant for writing, nonetheless expressed the desire simply to insert sections of *The Cost of Discipleship* into the *Church Dogmatics*, praising Bonhoeffer's discussion of cheap grace as the best work on the subject (Dorrien 2000: 153). Barth also praised Bonhoeffer's willingness to tackle "the Jewish question" so aggressively during World War II, while other prominent thinkers were silently complicit with the Nazi agenda (Dorrien 2000: 156). Despite this praise, he accused Bonhoeffer of being an incompetent theologian, especially in his latest writings. His appropriation by secular philosophies in the Sixties was his own fault. Also, (with reference to accusing Barth of "positivism of revelation") he argued that Bonhoeffer was guilty of latching onto catchy phrases, writing about them, and abandoning them (Dorrien 2000: 156-7). Barth provides a stance of praise and criticism that serves as an interesting entry-point for looking at Bonhoeffer, both in his merits and shortcomings.

The problem, most likely due to Bonhoeffer's early death, is the underdeveloped nature of his *Letters and Papers*. *Discipleship* and *Life Together* provide wonderful descriptions of the proper way to follow Jesus and coexist with other Christians in community, respectively. These works are fully articulated and accessible, at least to those familiar with theological language. The works from Tegel, however, prove arcane even to the initiated, hence Barth's doubt of their theological credibility. If one reads *Letters and Papers* with respect to the historical situation, however, and in the context of his earlier works, some fairly developed ideas emerge.

A theme that governs his final, inaccessible works, usually implicitly, is a response to the capitulation of German churches to the Nazi agenda – or, even worse, their enthusiastic endorsement of it. In many ways his theological writings are political tracts targeting what he perceived as un-Christian behavior. Indeed, Bonhoeffer explicitly resisted the Reich in several of his writings, including his work with Barth on the Barmen Confession and his involvement with his seminarians in writing a letter of protest to Hitler. This political involvement characterized the most enduring, useful theology of the time: it used Biblical images and language as weapons against dangerous political situations. In this same genre of writing, the Confessing Church's letter to Hitler asserts the proper use of biblical symbols against the Nazis rather than in support of them. Though Bethge, Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer, does not give the full text of the memorandum to Hitler, he includes an outline of its seven major points:

(1) Was the de-Christianization of the people official government policy? (2) What was the actual or ostensible meaning of the Party formula "positive Christianity"? (3) The recent "pacification work" muzzled the churches. (4) In breach of existing agreements, young people, schools, universities, and the press were forcibly being de-Christianized under the slogan "deconfessionalization." (5) The new ideology was imposing an anti-Semitism that necessarily committed people to a *hatred of the Jews*, which parents had to combat in the education of their children. (6) The church saw reason for anxiety in the popular materialistic morality, the exalting of the loyalty oath, manipulation of the Reichstag elections, concentration camps that mocked a constitutional state, and the activities, unhampered by legal scrutiny, of the Gestapo. (7) Spying and eavesdropping exert an unhealthy influence. (Bethge 2000: 532: emphasis Bethge's)

This shows a clear concern beyond the traditional boundaries of the Christian church, reaching into the realm of public advocacy. Most striking is the Christian concern for the Jewish population, above and beyond the tradition of anti-Semitism of the Church. Bonhoeffer and his seminarians were involved in lobbying the government on behalf of others, not just Christians. This is a matter that will warrant further discussion in a later section on Bonhoeffer and Judaism. The overall concern of this letter, evident from Bethge's outline, is the harmful way in which Germany's political climate influenced religion. This concern would drive Bonhoeffer from letter-writing to authoring books against the Nazis, the first of which was *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The Cost of Discipleship: Persecution for the Gospel's Sake

The first of Bonhoeffer's "mature" works is *The Cost of Discipleship*, a treatise on the nature of Christian life that is at once quite orthodox, appealing to the Lutheran roots of German Protestantism, and quite radical. In the context out of which Bonhoeffer writes, recovering an orthodox sense of Jesus' ministry was a radical venture; it involved extricating Christianity from the nationalist trappings with which the Nazi Party had outfitted it. Rather than Christian discipleship for the sake of Hitler, the Nazi Party, or Germany, he describes a discipleship for the sake of Christ and Christ's suffering. Bonhoeffer attempts to come to terms with the aspect of discipleship that involves suffering, which was omnipresent in World War II Europe. The suffering that he describes is not senseless and inexplicable, as much of the climate seemed to be at the time; it

is suffering for the sake of Christ, imitating Him even to martyrdom. Such a grim conception of Christianity finds firm biblical grounding as well as precedent within the tradition; Bonhoeffer quotes Luther's notion that Christians are those "who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel's sake" (Bonhoeffer 1937: 101). (It is important to remember that Bonhoeffer really meant what he said about martyrdom, as his final fate reminds us.)

The term "obedience" is essential to *The Cost of Discipleship*, and is linked to belief. As he explains, "...only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes" (Bonhoeffer 1937: 69, italics his). For Bonhoeffer, these propositions cannot be separated from each other or from Christ. He is fond of constructing his arguments in this fashion, using two interdependent propositions to explain his theology; this is the same tactic he uses to explain the individual in community in *Life Together* (to which I will turn in the section on that book). Christianity cannot be collapsed into one aspect or the other; it is both belief and obedience, one flowing from the other and grounded in Christ. The effect of this belief and obedience is death, either metaphorically or literally – which makes it distinctly Christian. Apropos to this, his scripture reference for this concept is Mark 8, the passage about taking up one's cross and following Jesus.

In relation to this concept, one of Bonhoeffer's greatest indictments of the church's role in the workings of the Reich is his concept of cheap grace, with which he begins *The Cost of Discipleship*. His own words on this idea are quite compelling and should speak for themselves, as Barth felt:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. (Bonhoeffer 1937: 47)

This is the essence of the entire book, especially the first half. Cheap grace is an expression of the belief-and-obedience relationship that is so essential to Bonhoeffer's thought, and the church is irresponsible when it offers the benefits of belief without the suffering of obedience. "Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks' wares," he writes (Bonhoeffer 1937: 45). While compelling in its own right, this simile perhaps conjures images of Jesus' cleansing of the temple, by which Bonhoeffer would be pointing his finger at a church that betrays its essence in favor of cultural success. Like a peddler of cheap goods, the church has begun to offer its "customers" all of the benefits of

Christianity without any of the difficult parts, the parts that require discipleship, taking up one's cross and following.

The kind of Christianity that he advocates in opposition to this is one of costly grace. As he stresses many times, grace cost God his son, so it must cost humans something as well (Bonhoeffer 1937:48, for example). Costly grace is the reality of the disciple, the person who follows Christ to death metaphorically or literally. If the church offers people anything but this harsh picture of the faith, it is guilty of peddling cheap grace and therefore is advocating discipleship without Jesus Christ (an oxymoron). *The Cost of Discipleship* is often cast in individual terms; *Life Together*, to complement this, concentrates on the individual's role within the church community.

Life Together

As discussed earlier, the most enduring critical label for Karl Barth's theology was that of "positivism of revelation," that Christians must swallow all aspects of the faith or none at all; Barth expressed bitterness at this inaccurate label many years after Bonhoeffer used it to describe him, though others found it quite fitting. If Barth is guilty of positivism of revelation, some critics say, then the early Bonhoeffer was guilty of positivism of the church (as in Pangritz 2000: 12-13). This over-confidence in ecclesiology was characteristic of Barth's work during the Thirties, up until his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. His doctoral thesis, later published as *The Communion of Saints*, was a sociological inquiry into the workings of the church, and displayed great faith in this ecclesial organ. This uncritical view of the church runs through *The Cost of Discipleship* as well. *Life Together*, a book wholly devoted to the role of the church, affords the opportunity to ask what Bonhoeffer thought of the church as the activities of the Nazi party escalated. In a country whose churches bowed to nationalism so readily, what would an ecclesial positivist think of the church?

Before engaging entirely with *Life Together*, some discussion of Bonhoeffer's relevant ecclesial and political background is necessary. The previous section on *The Cost of Discipleship* described the role Bonhoeffer prescribed for the individual Christian's commitment to Christ. *Life Together* complements this analysis by describing the group in which the disciple must operate. In point of fact, Bonhoeffer argues that the individual cannot exist without the group, and vice versa. This takes the same form as his thoughts on the inter-relationship of belief and obedience, as described in the previous section. The group must adhere to certain simple rules for fellowship, rules that do not allow

for the intrusion of nationalist agendas like that of the Nazis. This is the way in which Bonhoeffer's seemingly simple book of group devotion carries with it a political meaning, as does all church activity and theology.

In Bonhoeffer's time the church aligned with the government, as exemplified by the swastika hanging next to the cross in most churches. By abdicating its critical voice, the church bought into the German nationalism that the swastika symbolized. Regardless of the moral valuation that subsequent generations are able to make of Nazis, it is as inappropriate for the church to so enthusiastically endorse a nationalist program as it is for a government to officially sanction a religion. In Bonhoeffer's time, the churches had mortgaged their right to stand in opposition to any of the government's policies, favoring a stance that sacralized the new political order. Bonhoeffer's underground church at Finkenwalde stands as one example of a group that opposed Nazi rule, keeping alive the prophetic voice of the church.¹

Just as he sets up an inseparable dependence between obedience and belief, Bonhoeffer sees that the individual and community are interdependent. To separate the one from the other is to sacrifice both. While both *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Letters and Papers From Prison* testify to the strength of the individual, as described above, both of these works must be seen in light of *Life Together*. A temptation when reading Bonhoeffer is to stress too much the radical individualism that his later works describe, leaving out the necessity for community that grounds all of his work. Without *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer's work can be used to reinforce the very culture that he criticizes. The climax toward which his work moves is that of a specific kind of Christian community, one in which fervent believers share equally: daily prayer, collective singing, and so forth. Most importantly, the symbols and stories of that community are not accessible to disinterested parties from outside of the faith; leaving elements of Christianity open to people outside of the community opens them to the "profanation" that Bonhoeffer discusses in his letter from 30 April 1944. In many ways, even while he was writing from his solitary prison cell, Bonhoeffer always existed within this quasi-monastic community of faith, even if only through Bethge's visits to smuggle letters out of the prison.

In the environment from which Bonhoeffer writes, his theology can be seen as nothing less than political subversion. Making a statement regarding the common life of Christians was an affirmation of Christianity at its most basic level: it is the fellowship of Christians in and through Christ, nothing more. It is not the nationalist agenda of the Nazis. It is not the condoning of the fate of scapegoat

groups. By disassociating itself from political agendas such as these, Christianity cannot avoid a certain amount of political involvement, lest it be at the mercy of politics and culture. Yet this essence – the affirmation of transcendent goals, which make earthly goals relative – was the very thing that caused Bonhoeffer's political engagement and should cause similar behavior in Christian communities today.

Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* was his most widely read book during his lifetime (Bethge 469). Today this distinction is held by *Letters and Papers from Prison*, but both are susceptible to a common problem when placed into the hands of a wealthy, American audience. There is a danger of removing Bonhoeffer's struggle from its context and reading it solely from the perspective of a middle-class, North American citizen. *Letters and Papers from Prison* is the personal journey of one Christian against the Reich – which can have implications for the American citizen in this democratic republic, but is not easily analogous to it. *Life Together* is not meant to be read with purely American eyes; it is the struggle for a communal Protestant identity in the face of national socialism, not the rules for running a comfortable church in the suburbs. These works cannot be lifted wholesale from their context and be applied to American values and situations. There are ways of translating them, so to speak, but they do not preach directly to the realities of a democratic republic under post-industrial market capitalism.

Therefore readers need to be aware of the political realities that surrounded Bonhoeffer's writings, which condition the meanings of many of his statements. Take as an example one of the initial assertions on which *Life Together* builds: "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this... We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ" (Bonhoeffer 1954: 21). When approached with questions arising from North American spirituality, this appears to be a somewhat challenging but fairly ordinary statement of faith. It is a call to live in the Church, and perhaps a statement of that Church's position of dominance, as opposed to the marginal positions of other traditions. When viewed outside of this North American context, however, and in its original context, the text is much more dramatic and challenging, and certainly less ordinary. By the time Bonhoeffer wrote this book, many of the churches in Nazi Germany had capitulated – often willingly – to a new kind of Christendom, a marriage between the political agenda of a nation humiliated after World War One and the moral grounding of a church steeped in tradition.

The political realities of the time reveal the true importance of the text and simultaneously speak to why those realities are not addressed explicitly. There was need for tactful articulation of one's opinions in order to avoid a jail sentence. For Bonhoeffer this penal consequence became a reality anyway, not so much because of his writings (though they probably did not help) but because of his involvement in a plot to take Hitler's life.

Letters and Papers From Prison

Bonhoeffer provides possibilities and puzzles for Christianity after World War II. Starting his theological career very grounded in the traditions of German Lutheranism, his work reflects the concerns that arise out of that tradition: the faith/works debate, the significance of monasticism, the role of the church after the Reformation, and so on. Yet his writings from the last years of his life represent a different stance on his tradition; even more, they present a perceptive analysis of the relationship between Christianity and the secular order, a problem that has been increasingly important in the recent history of the faith. It is a matter of utmost importance in America today, especially in terms of defining something that looks like a Christian stance on America's aggression and militancy. In many ways America's churches are faced with the same challenge of the German churches during World War II: do they endorse the nationalist tendencies of the government or challenge them? The conclusions we arrive at today must be colored by Bonhoeffer's ruminations on the matter.

Letters and Papers from Prison represents a work that is in some ways fragmentary, in some ways cohesive. Interspersed between greetings to family and requests for clothes, books, and cigars are meditations on the state of Christianity in light of World War II. His thoughts are rooted in church tradition, biblical scholarship, and a deep faith commitment. These are things that should be kept in mind when reading Bonhoeffer's harsh critique of Christianity; he remained, until his last moments, a pastor and a believer in personal prayer. Also, he was writing to a fellow Christian and pastor, Eberhard Bethge, with most of his criticisms. These facts do not mitigate his critique but prevent the kinds of readings that insist that Bonhoeffer presages the Death of God movement. They are also useful in sorting out what exactly he means by some of his seemingly anti-Christian comments, as we shall see later.

The matter at hand is not the death of Christianity or God in the face of secularism; rather it is the stance of the Christian faith and the church, both very much alive, on secularism. Bonhoeffer is of the mind that secularism represents

a good thing for faith. It allows the faithful to think of God not as *deus ex machina*, that which takes over where human reason gives out, but as something more central – indeed, the most central thing. In this way, secularism is a corrective for the Christian faith – not a replacement for it, as interpreters like Harvey Cox might say. Bonhoeffer thought about Christianity and secularism in the same way that Paul thought about Christianity and the law, as the next section suggests.

Bonhoeffer and Paul

Rather than being a philosophical, existential argument, Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* is a Christian argument after the style of Paul. Bonhoeffer makes distinctions between the concepts of religion (Christianity is perhaps the truest form of religion, but even Christianity is shedding its religious aspects in a world coming of age), the church (the place where religion and faith meet, and the organization in which the individual must exist), and faith (a person's relationship with God above and beyond religious systems). He sees the need for the church and the person of faith to shed the parts of the faith that are "religious." This is a move that builds on Paul's meditations on the relationship between the gospel and the system of Jewish legalism.

In order to understand Bonhoeffer's argument we must place it within its biblical context. He uses Paul's discussion of gospel versus law as a springboard for his concept of "religionless Christianity." Krister Stendahl writes of Paul and the law-gospel debate:

But he himself thought, albeit with some arrogance, that for the sake of Lord and the church he had to deal straightforwardly with such issues as what had happened to the law, to that wall of partition, now that the Messiah had come. The relationship of primitive Christianity to the law could possibly have been avoided, glanced over, or even enthusiastically overcome in spirituality, but Paul settled down at that wall of partition and kept thinking about it. (Stendahl 1976: 71)

Stendahl sees Paul as the only intellectual in the early Christian church, giving a unique character to his ministry. Other apostles preached to the Gentiles, as Paul did, but Paul's uniqueness came in his continual meditation on the relevance of the law now that the Messiah had come. Even if one believes that all of the letters attributed to Paul are really his, they do not reveal a systematic theology of the kind found today; the bits of theology that show through are the thoughts that would be important to Paul's pastoral and missionary roles. He was one of a num-

ber of apostles who saw their mission as being directed toward the Gentiles. This meant that Christian theology must not rest on the same foundation as that of Judaism: the law. There is some disagreement in the Gospels as to Jesus' relationship to the law, but Paul's conception of Jesus and Christian apostleship is clear. He knows only Christ and him crucified (1 Cor), and describes the scene of the Eucharist. These things, not the law, are necessary for Christianity. Despite the desires of some "judaizers" within Christianity, Paul saw that the Christian religion must transcend Jewish legalism for the sake of Christ's crucifixion.

Bonhoeffer's argument regarding Christianity and the secular order is analogous to Paul's argument regarding Christianity and the law. He combines pastoral and theological concerns, though never in a systematic way. He fixes his intellect on one problem, the relationship of Christianity to the secular order. As with the law-gospel debate, the problem of secularism "could possibly have been avoided, glanced over, or even enthusiastically overcome in spirituality...," but Bonhoeffer settled on that problem and kept thinking about it. He sees the need for a kind of transcendence; where Paul saw a need to transcend the law through Christ, Bonhoeffer saw the need to transcend the "religious" parts of Christianity in favor of a more mature faith. The part of Christianity that is "religion" is that which caused the German churches to bow to the Nazis and combine the cross with the swastika. It is the religiosity that Bonhoeffer describes with such abhorrence in a letter to Eberhard Bethge, the kind of pietistic jargon that makes Bonhoeffer so uncomfortable. It is the cheap grace that he condemns in *The Cost of Discipleship*, the offering of the best parts of Christianity without the discipline and obedience that accompany them. This is the state of the Christian "religion," necessitating the shedding of religion in favor of something greater. For Bonhoeffer, this is an experience of God that, through an embrace of secularism, is more genuine than the experience that comes through "religion." True to form, he suggests ethical implications to his theology; for example, the church should give away its acquired wealth and have its members work in secular callings.

These thoughts are perhaps both radical and biblical. Paul argues that one need not be faithful to the law to be faithful to Christ; Bonhoeffer argues that one need not have religion to attain salvation. He writes, "The Pauline question whether [circumcision] is a condition of justification seems to me in the present-day terms to be whether religion is a condition of salvation. Freedom from [circumcision] is also freedom from religion" (30 April 1944: "circumcision" originally rendered in Greek). Jesus must not be associated with one stage in

human development, the law. In this way Bonhoeffer argues that the rise of secularism is a good thing, helping humanity to shed religious pretension in favor of a greater understanding of Christ.

Letters and Papers: Theology During Wartime

Obviously the work of a theologian like Dietrich Bonhoeffer cannot be reduced to engagement with one issue or even several. The topics he engages are numerous and diverse, rising to the intellectual demands of the chaotic time in which he lived. This is quite useful for gaining a sense of theology as issue-oriented rather than a timeless (and possibly irrelevant) discipline. Bonhoeffer's thought is submerged in the time and engaged with its intricacies and challenges.

Indeed, engagement with the public domain is the very stuff from which Bonhoeffer's Christianity is made. It is the heir to the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures in which God elected critical voices to make divine pronouncements on corrupt structures. The Christian Scriptures are the story of a political radical, a messiah who reigns not as a king but as a servant (the ultimate political expression), who dies at the hands of the political and religious elite: Pilate and the Pharisees, representatives of the systems of the Roman Empire and the Jewish religion of legalism, respectively. In this sense the Christian operates within a tradition founded on radical political engagement, not endorsement of corrupt governments.

The picture of Christianity that Bonhoeffer paints is between these two extremes. It disavows the purely spiritual forms of Christianity that are useless to everyone but the person holding the beliefs, but does not require such a high degree of public engagement as to endorse Nazism. Spirituality is to be something that drives one into public engagement due to the very nature of Christianity. As he says in a letter to Eberhard Bethge on 3 August 1944, "We must move out again into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world, and risk saying controversial things, if we are to get down to the serious problems of life" (Bonhoeffer 1970: 378). For his theology, this meant risking the rejection of such luminaries as Karl Barth; for his life, this meant the ultimate sacrifice.

Some of Bonhoeffer's comments from *Letters and Papers from Prison* further clarify his sense of politics in theology. He frames an argument about the nature of the Kingdom of God in terms of the events occurring around him (quite literally, in the case of this air raid):

If in the middle of an air raid God sends out the gospel call to his kingdom in baptism, it will be quite clear what that kingdom is and what

it means. It is a kingdom stronger than war and danger, a kingdom of power and authority, signifying eternal terror and judgment to some, and eternal joy and righteousness to others, not a kingdom of the heart, but one as wide as the earth, not transitory but eternal, a kingdom that makes a way for itself and summons men to itself to prepare its way, a kingdom for which it is worth while risking our lives. (Bonhoeffer 1970: 304)

This is “not a kingdom of the heart,” something to be understood in purely spiritual terms; it is a kingdom with eternal implications that subvert the idolatry of public life, something that makes the kinds of demands on a person that Bonhoeffer describes in *The Cost of Discipleship*, i.e., death. In this way he makes a case for public engagement being intrinsic to Christianity.

The spiritualized nature of Christianity is due in large part to the world’s coming of age, a concept that is critical to the understanding of Bonhoeffer. First I will explain the historical trend toward spiritualization, then tie that into a discussion of the world come of age. The original vision of Christianity is similar to the above quote about the Kingdom of God: “Christianity puts us into many different dimensions of life at the same time; we make room in ourselves, to some extent, for God and the whole world” (310). The beginning of this transformation of society is something he traces to the 1300s, roughly (Bonhoeffer 1970: 325). As he says, “The displacement of God from the world, and from the public part of human life, led to the attempt to keep his place secure at least in the sphere of the ‘personal’, the ‘inner’, and the ‘private’ (Bonhoeffer 1970: 344). This retreat, coupled with the churches’ sanction of Nazism, led to the terrible state of German Christianity during World War II. Hence Bonhoeffer’s desire to associate Christianity with the public sphere in a responsible way. Again, he asserts the total demand of Christianity upon one’s life, even to the point of death: “Jesus claims for himself and the Kingdom of God the whole of human life in all its manifestations” – not just healing sickness or treating sickness as the fruits of evil (341-42).

By the time he writes, the world’s coming of age is nearly complete. By this he means that the world has come to understand itself without using God as an *a priori* or *deus ex machina*: God is neither the precondition for all thought nor the recourse of thought once reason has run out. Humanity has developed to such a point that it does not need God for such answers.

Here there is great potential for misunderstanding Bonhoeffer’s meaning. Most important to understanding the world come of age, religionless

Christianity, and the church's role in all of it is a distinction between *religion* and *Christianity* (as manifested by the church). I've read too many sloppy commentaries that continue to conflate these two things when Bonhoeffer spells out the difference between them to a great extent, in terms of circumcision. The letters from 30 April and 5 May 1944 broach the topic, and Bonhoeffer returns to it on 8 June. Circumcision (in the Pauline sense) is important in establishing Bonhoeffer's argument that religion is not a precondition of faith. He argues against religion, the same kind of religion that yielded Jewish legalism and other forms of exclusion from God. He argues for the inclusive aspects of Christianity that flow from Christ.

Beyond this coming of age, by which the world understands itself, Bonhoeffer calls for understanding the world better than it understands itself. This can only be done with the gospels and Jesus Christ. Speaking about God in a non-religious way – that is, in the world come of age – is meant to expose the ways in which the world is without God:

When we speak of God in a 'non-religious' way, we must speak of him in such a way that the godlessness of the world is not in some way concealed, but rather revealed, and thus exposed to an unexpected light. The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age (Bonhoeffer 1970: 362)

This coming of age is good in its honesty about the world's relationship to God. Bonhoeffer acknowledges that humans almost always operate as though God did not exist; non-religious discussion, therefore, exposes that kind of living before God without God (a phrase of Bonhoeffer's).

Bonhoeffer describes a vision of Christianity that copes with the suffering of wartime, and in this sense his theology is politically charged. In the face of religion's failure to deal with the Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer described religion as a vestige that the world has almost entirely abandoned in favor of secularism. While religion is obsolete, given the ability of humans to think without recourse to God, there is still a place for the arcane discipline of Christianity. In *Dietrich Bonhoeffer – His Significance for North Americans*, Rasmussen rightly devotes much attention to the role of worship in the secular environment. This question is essential for Bonhoeffer, though perhaps his second most puzzling point (the first being his notion of the secular interpretation of religious symbols, about which he continually promises explanation but gives only a few sentences).

Offering an explanation requires recourse to biographical information. As I mentioned above, Bonhoeffer's final journey to Flossenbürg demonstrates his commitment to worship, even when faced with death at the hands of the secular order. He led a kind of church service among himself and the other prisoners who were to be killed. He would not have done so, since one of the prisoners was atheist, but that prisoner requested that he continue (this suggests that evangelism is best achieved through sensitivity and acceptance of difference, unlike the fundamentalist concept of evangelism). Before he climbed the gallows, Bonhoeffer prayed in solitude. Clearly his theology – which always translated into his ethics – redefined the relationship between Christianity and the secular order, not doing away with Christianity but describing its appropriate place in a changing world. This was a theology and ethics that was pacifist, but which made allowances for Bonhoeffer's involvement in a plot to kill Hitler, the crime for which he was imprisoned and executed. Just as one cannot differentiate between Bonhoeffer's Christology, ontology, and ethics, one cannot entirely separate Christianity and political involvement.

Conclusion

In some ways Bonhoeffer is radical through his orthodoxy – he is identified with the so-called “neo-orthodox” or “neo-Reformation” theologians of World War II, like Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth. The recovery of Martin Luther's sense of monasticism is integral to *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The interpretation of Christian tradition, including copious exegesis of biblical passages and commentaries on church history and the Lutheran tradition, is integral to Bonhoeffer and serves as the basis for many of his radical claims.

However, something in Bonhoeffer reaches beyond easy identification with the neo-orthodox camp and a recovery of orthodoxy. Some of his ideas are quite radical on their own. Germany's situation was so desperate in Bonhoeffer's eyes that he dismissed traditional conceptions of discipleship, community, and ethics; the ultimate result of this dismissal was involvement in a plot to kill Hitler, which failed twice. (In his notes from July/August 1944, he scrawls about the collapse of Christian ethics.)

In the world come of age, there must be no distinction between private and public. The Bible does not make such a distinction. Jesus is always concerned with the whole person, as in the Sermon on the Mount; and the symbol of the heart does not mean an “inner” life in the sense that we mean it today, but it

means the total person. For the Christian, this means giving oneself totally to Christ and following in his footsteps, which lead to death at the hands of the secular culture.

Notes

1. Calling the Confessing Church a church is somewhat problematic, depending on one's definition of the word. It was not a church in the way that modern Americans use the word, since it did not have a traditional hierarchy, membership, and so forth; it was a group of ministers who disagreed with the responses of their own churches to the Nazi regime.

Works Consulted:

- Bethge, Eberhard. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Ed. Victoria Barnett. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976.
- _____. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972.
- _____. *Life Together*. Trans. John W. Doberstein. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.
- Casalis, George. *Portrait of Karl Barth*. Trans. Robert McAfee Brown. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1964.
- Dorrien, Gary. *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.
- Jehle, Frank. *Ever Against the Stream: The Politics of Karl Barth, 1906-1968*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002.
- Rasmussen, Larry L. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972.
- Stendahl, Krister. *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976.

Sisters in Sorrow and Durga's Incarnations: the double-edged sword of *shakti*

Sarah Pyle

“avatum pennale, alivatum pennale”

—Tamil proverb

As an American woman, it seems that dealing with current controversial women's issues, for example abortion, women in the military or prostitution, is in itself a complex task. But what happens when I expand my lens to explore women's roles and rights within a different social context? How do Hindu women experience “womanhood”? Gender is socially constructed, meaning that the reality that an individual experiences is shaped by the definitions of her social context, and how that context designates roles and rights based on sex. If gender is socially constructed, then gender would likely not be experienced in the same ways universally. This essay seeks to take a closer look at the way Hindu women are shaped by their social context. Beyond that, I wish to delve into the social symbols and metaphors that are responsible for shaping Hindu womanhood.

Theologian Sallie McFague describes the way that language defines the material and ideological climate of reality in any culture. It is language that shapes our understanding of gender within a culture. Of course, language varies from culture to culture and this is why there is no universal understanding of what it means to be a woman. From a western perspective, there is a tendency to hold other societies accountable to our ethnocentric definitions of human rights and fair treatment. Looking specifically at the Hindu culture of India, there is ample evidence that women are unjustly, even inhumanely treated. One tends not to consider social constructions within the context of the society within which they are created. But it is vital to understand the foundations of social constructions, in this case the social construction of Hindu women in India. This is because only once one understands a society and its people can

one make judgments as to what is and is not just and humane without forcing intellectual imperialism upon a culture that is misunderstood.

It proves to be especially challenging, for me as a western woman, to delve into the social constructions of the Hindu woman. I am writing this paper from the point of view of a twenty-one-year-old American woman. My perspective on Hindu women is also undoubtedly affected by my studies of the Christian theologies of Sallie McFague, and the assumptions, which I will explain here, that I have gained from my studies. Her book *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God and Religious Language* is particularly relevant as she points to the ways in which language is foundational to religious worlds. Therefore we must examine and analyze a culture's understanding of "God," as that understanding reflects the culture itself. This theory is vital in looking beyond one's own culture while observing that it is shaped by religion. As this essay will reveal, McFague's message that the language we use when we talk and think about God is profoundly related to the way we perceive and treat each other. For example, talking about "God the Father" in the Christian religious world has profound ramifications on gender divisions because God is portrayed as a man. One goal of this paper is to continue to consider how the way Hindus think and talk and interact with God(s) shapes the way Hindu men and women think and talk and interact with one another.

In some respects Hinduism seems to be gender-equal; for example Hindus posit the viability for women to be perceived as divine. However, there also is a contradictory reality where women are expected to subordinate themselves as part of their religious obligation. There is a Tamil proverb which states: "avatam penale, alivatum pennale," meaning "through woman is being and through woman is downfall" (Madan 67). This proverb embodies the paradoxical nature of the Hindu woman who is simultaneously revered for her ability to create, but then scorned for her ability to destroy. She holds the power of responsibilities that make her revered but also disdained. We see further contradictions when we investigate of Hindu tenets, which dictate the social ideals pertaining to the feminine, which in effect construct what is "woman." These tenets offer contradictory metaphors manifested in Hindu imagery and literature, creating an ambiguous and confusing designation for Hindu women. Some metaphors for the Hindu woman depict the feminine as empowered, fulfilling crucial functions in the maintenance of cosmic order by driving out evil and ignorance. Some of these portrayals even reveal women to be of superior power and strength to men. However, there are also metaphors that point to an oppressive patriarchal hegemony that subordinates women.

This contradiction seems best manifested in the images of two deities: Sita and Durga. Sita represents a feminine ideal of *stridharma*, total devotion of a woman's life to the well-being and happiness of her husband and the submissive sacrifice of her own contentment. Durga, in seeming opposition, is independent and even superior to all men. She is a powerful goddess who maintains cosmic order by slaying evil and ignorance. Sita seems to be a victim of oppression while Durga is independent and empowered. Does each deity demonstrate only some aspects of the Hindu woman, making it possible for Sita and Durga to coexist together as an entire woman? Or are they mutually exclusive? In attempting to reconcile the seemingly contradictory metaphors of women, my goal in this essay is to reach an understanding about the way that symbols and metaphors, within a Hindu context, function once applied to social reality. In turn I would like to observe the way that social realities might inform the function of symbols and metaphors. Do "injustices" exist not as patriarchal oppression but as reflections of a higher cosmic order? In answering these questions, why is it also that some Hindu women remain silent victims of what is potentially social oppression? Perhaps they do not perceive themselves to be oppressed. Yet there are others who identify a need to break free from a subordinated social construction through social reformation. How can this polarity be reconciled?

***Stridharma*: the social location of women's value**

Dharma is a foundational aspect in defining the Hindu religious world. It is also vital to understanding the social construction of the person, for it dictates one's role within society. For the purpose of this paper an exploration of the social construction of *dharma* for women is particularly relevant for understanding their location within Hindu society. *Dharma* is hard to translate, but it is a sense of order, an assurance that things are not random. It is each person's specific obligations, roles and duties, both ethical and religious, hinged upon their identity, for example gender, age, *jati*, *varna* and caste. *Dharma* determines what is right or wrong, acceptable or not, obligatory or insignificant, in a way that is not universal, rather varying from person to person. One's ability to fulfill one's *dharma* is vital to the maintenance of cosmic order. Therefore one is valued not on one's ability to obey a monistic sense of morality, but on one's ability to conform to one's *dharma*. This allows for a pluralism of right and wrong, good and evil, but is specific in defining morality for an individual. The need to preserve *dharma* through alignment with one's religious and ethical

obligations creates interesting repercussions as far as its ability to reinforce a social norm and disallow much possibility to diverge from this cosmic order.

The social norms and constructs for women are the by-products of *stridharma*, a woman's *dharma*. This creates a powerful ideology about a feminine ideal, which is pervasive in Hindu society. Mary McGee touches on the persistent aspect of *stridharma* as manifested in women's votive rights in her article "Desired Fruits: Motives and Intention in the Votive Rights of Hindu Women." The *nitya* rituals are "duty-born" rituals, which implies that they are obligatory and also performed without desire. Women perform *nitya* duties as a vital part of their female roles of wife and mother. Women practice these rites because they are the essential means for the fulfillment of their *dharma*. Men practice votive rights to attain *moksha*: they are the means for personally acquiring liberation. Women are not granted such access to liberation. According to the religious law (*dharmasastra*), liberation for women is available only after she is reborn as a man. Thus, attainment of liberation is gradual, *kramamukti*, and the extent to which she can achieve a life of right conduct and moral perfection is bound to the fulfillment of her *dharma*. A woman's first and foremost *dharma* is to be a devoted wife. Her duties and devotion are only to perpetuate the well-being of her husband. When a woman performs these rites her intentions are primarily to promote marital happiness, the health and longevity of her husband, the health and longevity of her children, and hopes of her own male progeny. These intentions are her greatest concerns, taking priority above her own health, wealth, her relationship to God, and liberation or *moksha*. This is how a woman correctly performs her *dharma*. Mary McGee concludes, "this is [...] the *dharma* of a Hindu woman: to devote her life and actions to her husband; in other words, to live for him" (McGee 78). According to *stridharma*, a woman is defined not as an independent individual, but within the context of her essential role in the family.

This concept of *dharma* breeds an inherent sense of hierarchy and hegemony in Hindu society. Manifestations of such hierarchical systems are caste divisions as well as the obedience and submission of women to men. With regards to women's issues this also places a high value upon a woman's need to be a wife and mother to coincide with not only social norms, but also a higher moral order and religious obligation. Integrating *stridharma* into an understanding of Hindu women is crucial to untangling some of the complexity and ambivalence which surround issues of women's power or their subordination. Could it be that such complete devotion and sacrifice to one's husband is indicative of an oppressive

patriarchal system? Within a religious context it is harder to discern if women are socially devalued or if their obedience to a higher moral obligation at the sacrifice of self is something empowering and admirable.

Sita and the Feminine Ideal: a model of consent or coercion?

The story of Sita and Rama as told in the *Ramayana* is very revealing of traditional conceptions of the feminine ideal. Rama's wife Sita is one role model of Hindu women. It is further revealing to see the way in which women identify with Sita and criticize Rama as evidence of women's dissatisfaction, but compliance with *stridharma*. When women tell the story of Rama and Sita they focus almost entirely upon Sita as the universal woman whose life represents themes central to women, as well as a harsh social reality they must endure. Nabaneeta Dev Sen talks about the union of the sisters in sorrow, describing that in the Indian's women's folk tradition no matter a woman's age, location within the subcontinent, language, or political designation, they are instantly united when they sing the songs of Rama and Sita. "Sita is a figure closer to home, the girl next door, a person they know too well, a woman whose pain they can share. She is not part of the elite and she never rebels. She symbolizes sacrifice, a woman's greatest virtue according to patriarchal traditions" (Sen 220). These women, like Sita, suffer silently, knowing not to challenge men in their songs, just as Sita does not challenge Rama. Their relief comes from the union formed in singing of the experiences women share.

The *Ramayana* tells of the marriage between Sita and Rama. Rama is an *avatara* of Vishnu, "the preserver," and he is described as "the best of men" and the "ideal son." However, the songs of the sisters in sorrow focus on Sita and in Sita's defense expose the travesty of Rama's later misdeeds against Sita. Some songs even refer to Rama as "stone-hearted" or "the sinner." Their songs focus on the milestones of Sita's life, as they are universal to every woman, and interestingly these themes are fiercely tied to themes of abandonment, violence, victimization, and loneliness as well as romance, marriage, injustice and pregnancy. This indicates how these women feel that these are natural elements of a woman's life, as natural as puberty or childbearing. It also demonstrates that while these women are "sorrowful" for their condition, they recognize this is a reality they must endure, not overturn.

The songs concentrate on Sita the orphan, not Sita the princess. This is metaphorical for a woman's feelings of loneliness, abandonment, and being unloved. Interestingly enough, early on in Sita's life, as her adoptive parents

seek a worthy husband for their daughter, she exhibits extreme physical strength when one day she is cleaning and she lifts Shiva's bow with one hand to sweep underneath it. Her father, who has never seen anyone move the bow before, laments, for a husband must be stronger than his wife and Sita has shown more strength than any man he has ever seen. He worries that she will remain unmarried. This is interesting for two reasons. One, this scene proves how women can possess extraordinary strength yet they are forbidden by social restrictions to embrace their power. Two, her father's reaction is not one of awe and respect for her strength, rather one of fear that her power will force her to be outside social normalcy. It is not a woman's strength that is valued but her marital status. Sita does finally marry, though, when Rama successfully lifts the bow.

The songs then turn to the reality of being a child bride, which not only requires the social responsibility of being a wife when one is so young that they can barely care for herself, but also a bride's *sasurbas*. There are many songs that deal with Sita's *sasurbas*, stories of how her mother-in-law would torture and abuse physically and emotionally. Among other abuses, Sita is starved and restricted from being able to wash and care for herself. Of course, Sita continues to suffer in silence and she does not complain, modeling a feminine ideal to be imitated by Hindu women. After being abducted by Ravana but then rescued, Sita is forced to undergo trial by fire to test her chastity. This story has several significant parts.

First is the way in which Ravana deceived Sita. Sita had ventured into the forest seeking the golden deer (her reasons for doing so differ according to regional tellings) and encounters Ravana disguised as a *sadhu*, a holy renouncer. Sita is standing within a number of magical concentric circles which her brother-in-law has instructed will protect her. But if she steps outside the circles she will be abducted. Sita has sent both her brother-in-law and Rama to chase after the deer. She is all alone when the *sadhu* approaches and explains that if she leaves the center of the concentric circles that she will have a son for each circle she crosses. Without further consideration Sita crosses every circle, risking abduction. This reveals not only the dire importance and pressure a woman feels to give birth to sons, but also shows the hierarchical nature of the value of life. To please her husband and bear sons Sita was more than willing to risk possible abduction. Her life is of lesser value than that of her husband or the prospect of sons.

Second, after Sita is rescued from Ravana she is forced to prove her purity through a fire ordeal. This shows how women who are actually victims of vio-

lence, abduction, and/or rape are blamed rather than supported. Sita's chastity is proven by the fire ordeal and she and Rama spend a romantic evening together where she is impregnated. However, Rama's subjects continue to gossip and ridicule Rama for taking back his impure wife. Rama then abandons Sita by exiling her to the forest even though she is in the advanced stages of pregnancy.

This is a third and significant aspect to Sita's story. Not only is she abandoned in the forest, but also she is five months pregnant. She is lonely and humiliated but even as she prepares to go into exile her thoughts are only of Rama. She makes sure that his clothes will be laundered, that he will be well-fed, that his bath will be filled daily, and that his lamp will have oil. Even as he has abandoned her, she will not abandon her wifely duties to Rama.

While in exile she continues to think of Rama and soon she gives birth to their twin sons. Her exile is the final aspect to be discussed here because it bears important symbolism that is reflective of women's conditions according to the sisters of sorrow songs. Sita's exile is figurative for women's disempowerment, their denial of rights and their alienation from society.

These songs are significant to understanding Hindu women because they divulge a definite message that women consider themselves victims of abandonment, neglect, denial of rights and loneliness. Here the feminine ideal is displayed vividly. Women's lives and identities are defined by being married and bearing sons. This is clearly not a reality that empowers women; rather women are only empowered in their shared suffering. These songs also divulge the resignation towards this reality that women feel, suggesting that they are voiceless in trying to change reality. Or perhaps they show that women might recognize that to suffer this sorrow is to fulfill a woman's role. These songs do not call out for equality and justice, rather they disclose a woman's consent, rather than coercion, to a reality full of sorrow.

There are contradictory notions of Sita however, that reveal her to be emblematic of women's strength and empowerment. In the songs of the sisters of sorrow we see how Sita is the epitome of the feminine ideal through her incredible wifely devotion. She took on very different connotations when Mahatma Gandhi decided to use Sita's influence as the most popular icon and most influential role model for women, to promote women's strength. By focusing on very different aspects of Sita's story than those highlighted by the sisters of sorrow, Sita was virtually recreated into the picture of strength and self-sufficiency. Gandhi reminded women of how Ravana wouldn't touch Sita against her will, saying that Sita was "no slave to Rama" (Kishwar 31). Sita did not require the

assistance of Rama, in fact, she had the ability to protect herself, making her autonomous from men. Sita even would say “no” to Rama if she was not interested in his sexual propositions, meaning she did not have to sacrifice her own will for the will of her husband. Madhu Kishwar refers to Gandhi’s use of Sita to voice the following message: “women have the right to define and follow their own *dharma* (code of morality) rather than be constricted to wifedom.”

The consequence of Gandhi’s message was an upsurge of women leaving their confinement to their homes to step into the political arena. Gandhi’s objective was to incite a movement of women who would follow this “renewed” model of Sita, the independent woman free to leave the boundaries of a domestic life to participate in the resistance against the colonized economy of India. Gandhi also wanted to teach the message of peace, again using Sita as the manifestation of non-violence. Sita’s truth and purity gave her the ability to rise above Rama’s oppression. In fact, it was her purity that protected her against Ravana. By bringing Sita into the political foreground as an icon of strength, independence, and power in truth and purity, Gandhi achieved many important steps relevant to the location of women within Hindu society today. Suddenly women were encouraged to step outside social norms. They were empowered to take up a social and political cause. Women were encouraged to redefine *dharma*, not as contingent upon the well-being of their husbands, but as their own moral code. This represents not only a different Sita than the one of the songs of the sisters in sorrow, but it represents a change in women. Additionally it represents a rejection of the traditional understanding of *stridharma*, whether or not it was oppressive to women.

These two rather conflicting interpretations of Sita raise questions surrounding tradition and change as facilitated by the flexibility allotted, within the dynamism of Hinduism, to create and recreate gods and goddesses into entities that serves a specific social purpose: in this case to incite women’s independence. Once again this reminds us to consider the way in which gender is created: it is a social construction. The closer we come to understanding possible injustices embedded within socially created norms the closer we come to determining whether Hindu women feel victimized by oppression or empowered by religious duty.

Shakti, Durga and other Powerful Goddesses

Gandhi’s movement is one example of contemporary Hindu women achieving empowerment, gaining autonomy from men and willingness to define their *dharma* by their own sense of moral codes, allowing their arrival in the

social and political fora. However, women all over India still remain sisters in sorrow, singing of Sita's abandonment and suffering. In fact, the songs, recently collected between 1950 and 1997 in Nabaneeta Dev Sen's article entitled "Sisters in Sorrow," indicate that their "sorrow" is still very present. Additionally, many social norms still exist which, at least by western feminist standards, are verification that huge injustices against women are present even today. It seems possible that while there are contemporary forces that influence a need for equality and these forces provoke women to be dissatisfied with their stringent *stridharma* roles to be domestic and "live for their husbands," as McGee suggested. One such force might be Gandhi's movement to de-colonize India's economy which brought an influx of western standards. At the other end of the continuum, perhaps the women who suffer patriarchal injustices quietly without protest are examples of where tradition has remained intact, where *stridharma* thrives. The theory, that McGee presents, is that the invasion of contemporary forces was more effective in undermining traditional concepts of women in some places than others. The result is differing reactions to women's acceptance or rejection of *stridharma* and the self-sacrificing, silent-suffering model of Sita. The largest factor, which would seem to disprove the viability of this theory, is that even traditional Hinduism incorporates amazing, inspirational icons of extraordinary feminine strength, power and independence from men. So the question remains, why do Hindu women, who feel victimized, subordinated, and suppressed by traditional patriarchal social norms, not feel compelled towards their own independence when their religion offers awesome images of women's empowerment? It also demands a more complex question: how can the same religion that binds women's worth to their husbands also provide such role models for women's strength and power?

Shakti is a concept that is foundational to Hinduism, but also to a Hindu understanding of women. *Shakti* is feminine creative energy and it is believed to be the energizing power that infuses all that is divine, every human, and every thing. This energy is personified when it is incarnated in the forms of numerous goddess forms. The most encompassing of these goddesses is *Devi*. She may manifest herself in different forms, with various names in various places, but she always possesses *shakti*, the incredible power to give and to take life.

The result of such extraordinary capacity to create but also to destroy is a mystique that surrounds Hindu women. There is a sense that they must be revered, but also feared. This *shakti* is a power that all women possess. T.N. Madan speaks to the ways in which *shakti* defines a woman within the context

of the home: "woman is the nucleus of the family, the source of energy, well-being and bliss for all its members" (72). Of course, one can assume that while great respect of women can be generated from such power to provide her family with well-being, comfort, and health, there is also great potential for this power to be dangerous for a woman should her family encounter sickness, hunger, or misery. It rests the responsibility of downfall upon the shoulders of the woman alone. It is clear, then, that this vital tenet of Hinduism could help explain the complexity surrounding women as simultaneously empowered and powerless. It would be very hard for a woman to embrace such power knowing the impossible responsibility it assumes.

Parts of the *Devi Bhagavata* provide another piece that makes up the complex perspective of women in Hindu society. These segments also imply notions similar to the concept of *shakti* pointing to a certain dangerous power women have over men. These descriptions indicate that women are evil because "inherently carnal" and their sexuality is so potent that it renders men helpless. The *Devi Bhagavata* says: "Women constantly suck the blood of men like leeches rob him of his manhood through sexual indulgence and of his mind, his wealth and all his possessions. Hence is there any greater robber than a woman?" (Baig). This statement reveals the complexity surrounding the Hindu woman. She is so carnally persuasive and powerful that men cannot help themselves. Men are powerless. This relationship translates into a conclusion that women, then, in the words of Tara Ali Baig, are evil. Again, this "power" women hold is a danger to them. They are to blame for men's actions, even if those actions violate women.

To further complicate the perceptions of Hindu women, let us look at the manifestations of Devi. These goddesses, like Durga and Kali, offer complex and seemingly (at least to the western eye) contradictory characteristics. Durga, the patron goddess of kings and warriors, is a foreboding, frightening and fearsome goddess. She successfully slays a demon that none of the male deities could kill, suggesting that her power surpasses that of all the gods. She has sixteen arms and each one clutches a weapon: the weapons are used not only to destroy evil demons, but also to drive out ignorance. She is violent, but in depictions her face is always very calm and peaceful reminding us that she is not ferocious when we concur with her. Durga is stronger than all the gods and she is responsible for maintaining cosmic balance by destroying evil and ignorance. She is worshipped, as a patron goddess, by kings and warriors, which conveys the way that men show awe and reverence for women. This intricate web of violence,

justice, respect, and fear surrounding Durga is a manifestation of the Hindu woman, as she is defined by men, other women and herself (Kinsley).

When Durga is confronted with a demon she cannot slay, Kali is born out of her forehead, created by Durga's focused concentration. Kali is also dark and fierce. She feeds on blood and wears necklaces, bracelets, and anklets made from the skulls of the demons she has killed. Although she is violent, she is known as a tender, compassionate protector. She is even considered to be maternal in the way that a mother would do anything to protect her children (Kinsley). The deities and Devi, in her transcendent form, represent a strange collection of characteristics. The goddess is the preserver of ultimate cosmic balance. She is a violent, fearsome warrior, but a tender, compassionate mother. She is feared and she is venerated. What then can we conclude from these seemingly contradictory portrayals of Hindu women? It seems that such inconsistencies would explain how women simultaneously are empowered and powerless. Perhaps, additionally, this accounts for different conceptualizations of what constitutes injustice against women. This might be why some women feel victimized and remain silent sufferers, why some women feel they should abide by their *stridharma*, and why still others are outraged by their condition within Hindu society and are prepared to overturn it.

The Indian feminist Madhu Kishwar says, "any woman who manifests extraordinary strength and is believed to be her own mistress and totally unafraid of men begins to be treated with special awe and reverence, often commanding unconditional obedience in her own milieu and treated as a manifestation of the goddess Durga" (28). This statement makes clear reference to the social truths that dictate how characteristics of strength, independence from men, and courageousness can garner extreme respect and admiration. This means that these are, at least to some, aspirations in achieving ultimate femininity. India's first woman Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, for example, was considered by many to be an incarnation of Durga. Kishwar also speaks of Kiran Bedi, India's first woman police officer, who "projects the image of a woman who can outperform men in every way and is fearless even in dealing with criminals," and is therefore referred to as an incarnation of Durga. To be fearless, to outperform men, to be powerful: these attributes are regarded so highly that they indicate human beings are descendants of these amazing goddesses. It seems then, logically, that these goddesses, and these women who have attained aspects of these goddesses, would be inspirations in empowering women.

Perhaps these women, Indira Gandhi, Kiran Bedi, even Durga herself, are considered anomalies, thus unattainable: worthy of worship and praise, yet unattainable from within the social degradation of Indian women. They represent a possibility to deviate from social norms but their deviation seems to require a rejection of *stridharma*. For example, there are powerful religious cults that encourage women to desert the social norm of matrimony by either leaving their husbands or remaining unwed as a means of liberation. Kishwar remarks about these women who rose “above all social constraints imposed on women in the name of family honor. The nudity some of them practiced was an assertion of their refusal to abide by social norms and conventions with regard to a woman’s role in society” (29). This seems to create a stigma: a woman can only fully become empowered when she breaks free of constraints like marriage. The paradox then remains intact as there are still two conflicting portrayals of women: one embodied in Sita the devoted wife, enduring all that Rama inflicts upon her, but also Durga, whose strength and power is superior to that of men’s. Both images are held up and deified. Both are ideal women. The important question to answer then is, are these two ideals mutually exclusive or can they coexist?

Concluding Reflections

Asking the question, “How would a Hindu woman define the feminine ideal?” might be the best approach in resolving the paradoxes and complexities surrounding their identity as it is socially constructed. The feminine ideal could be *stridharma* and the life of Sita as interpreted in the songs of the sisters of sorrow. Or the feminine ideal could be that which is portrayed in Gandhi’s reinvented Sita, a political icon for feminine strength and independence outside domestic constraints. Or the ideal woman could be modeled after incarnations of Devi, like Durga and Kali, who are violent, powerful, fearsome, and tender, compassionate mothers. The reality is that all of these social constructions are simultaneously true within the context of the Hindu religious world. This is not an issue of which one is right, the sisters of sorrow or Gandhi or Kiran Bedi. They are all realities, merging, coexisting, synthesizing into one large dynamic ideological system, which creates the Hindu woman.

A key issue is, *how much of a say do Hindu women have in constructing their own identity?* This is where the real symptoms of oppression may lie. It is true, a woman’s definition of herself cannot be separated from the social and cultural reality within which she is immersed. However, a common theme run-

ning throughout this examination of Hindu women and society is that until recently their identities have been defined in relation to men. A *stridharma* ideal is fulfilled by a woman's absolute devotion to her husband, requiring her to sacrifice herself to him and remain a silent sufferer. The *Devi Bhagavata* is another example of men defining women: they are evil because men cannot help themselves. Durga incarnations are those who exceed men in capacity. Women are responsible for the success or failure of their families. It is as the Tamil proverb says. Women create being, but they can also instigate downfall.

But these are not notions that women have attributed to themselves. These notions are the product of a tradition that gives voice to the patriarchy and these notions are made feasible only by man's self-proclaimed superiority as reinforced by these social constructions he creates. As Sallie McFague addresses in her book *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, the way a culture conceives "God" is reflective of that culture's social constructions, which themselves reflect power relations. Conceptions of God are indeed dynamic, that is, they are subject to change, fluctuation, and manipulation. The perfect example of manipulation of social constructs is seen through Gandhi's recreation of Sita. Gandhi changed a traditional interpretation of Sita, a perfect *stridharma* wife, into an independent woman stepping out into the political forum. The great part of Gandhi's movement is that it gave voice and agency to women. However, it proves how effective manipulation of social and cultural tenets to reach a certain outcome can be in defining women's identities. In response to the question of whether social reform is necessary, I would argue that it is, if only to the extent that women need to have more of a say in determining their own identities. Hindu women are responsible for deciding when they are oppressed and if they reach that conclusion they must realize that the oppression starts in allowing their identities to be formulated by patriarchal manipulation of social constructions. The Tamil proverb should be modified: women are responsible for defining their being, but they are also responsible for allowing their downfall.

Works Cited

Baig, Tara Ali. *India's Woman Power*. New Delhi: S. Chand & Co. Ltd., 1976.

Kinsley, David. *Hindu Goddesses: visions of the divine feminine in the Hindu religious tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Kishwar, Madhu. "Traditional Female Moral Exemplars in India." *Education About Asia*. Vol. 6, No. 3. Winter 2001: 23-31.

Madan, T.N. "The Hindu Woman at Home." *Indian Women: from Purdah to Modernity*. Ed. B.R. Nanda. New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1990. 67-90.

McFague, Sallie. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.

McGee, Mary. "Desired Fruits: Motives and Intention in the Votive Rites of Hindu Women." *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Ed. Julia Leslie. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1991. 73-85.

Sen, Nabaneeta Dev. "Sisters in Sorrow: Contemporary Indian Women's Re-telling of the Rama Tale." *From Independence Towards Freedom*. Eds. Bharati Ray and Aparna Basu. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 201-239.

Bibliography

Dhruvarajan, Vanaja. *Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology*. Granby: Bergin and Garvey, 1989.

Eck, Diana L. *Banaras: City of Light*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Embree, Ainslie T., ed. *Sources of Indian Tradition*. vol. 1. 2nd edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

Flood, Gavin. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Forbes, Geraldine. *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Hawley, John Stratton and Donna Marie Wulff, eds. *Devi: Goddesses of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Hiltebeitel, Alf and Kathleen M. Erndl, eds. *Is the Goddess a Feminist?: the politics of South Asian goddesses*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Leslie, Julia, ed. *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University of California Press, 1991.

Patton, Laurie L. *Jewels of Authority: women and textual traditions in Hindu India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Ray, Bharati and Aparna Basu, eds. *From Independence Towards Freedom: Indian Women since 1947*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Who's that Lady?

Meghan Henning '04

<i>Aleph</i>	A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.
<i>Bet</i>	The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.
<i>Gimel</i>	She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.
<i>Dalet</i>	She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.
<i>He</i>	She is like the ships of the merchant, and brings her food from far away.
<i>Waw</i>	She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls.
<i>Zain</i>	She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
<i>Het</i>	She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.
<i>Tet</i>	She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. her lamp does not go out at night.
<i>Yod</i>	She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
<i>Kaph</i>	She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.
<i>Lamed</i>	She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson.
<i>Mem</i>	She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.

<i>Nun</i>	Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.
<i>Samek</i>	She makes fine linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.
<i>Ain</i>	Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.
<i>Pe</i>	She opens her mouth with wisdom; and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
<i>Zade</i>	She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.
<i>Qoph</i>	Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her;
<i>Resh</i>	“Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”
<i>Shin</i>	Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
<i>Taw</i>	Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.

Proverbs 31:10-31 (An Acrostic poem in Hebrew)

Women filed into the small room, at the Campus Crusade for Christ Spring retreat, anxious to learn more about how they as women could better serve God. Two of the younger women opened in prayer and directed everyone to Proverbs 31:10-31, the “Song of the Valiant Woman.” As the discussion of this passage progressed the women were overwhelmed by all that the woman in the text had accomplished, holding her up as the standard to which a “Godly woman” should conform. This “valiant woman” seemed to be the Barbie of the Bible, an impossible dream that one could never fully attain. And yet, the leaders of the group were suggesting that each woman could, in fact, emulate this woman, if only they tried harder and “trusted God more” with the responsibilities of college life. Then, women wrote down a few ways in which they could improve themselves, using the text as a guide for becoming “God fearing women.”

This illustration reveals the manner in which women of faith have looked to the woman of Proverbs 31 for guidance. As they do so they are often chagrined to find a veritable superwoman in both the private and public spheres.

Thus, the Proverbs 31 text becomes problematic for women of faith, seeming to suggest that they have to add more responsibilities, take on more roles, and “wear more hats,” just to bring honor to their husbands and families. Consequently, scholars who represent various schools of thought have sought to “reclaim” this text in a way that makes more sense for the contemporary woman, asking the question “Who’s that Lady?” Often these theological endeavors are conducted in ways that unwittingly impose foreign agendas on the text with questions that are totally removed from its original intentions. Granted, all scholars bring some agenda to the text, whether consciously or not, but those who are conscious of their perspective often do more justice to the text’s meaning. This paper will argue that, when not treated carefully, agendas foreign to the text’s world inhibit scholars from correctly identifying the Proverbs 31 woman because they force scholars to make false assumptions about the text. Fortunately other scholarship has tried to reclaim the text in less violent ways, aiming to identify first the Valiant Woman’s identity in her original context before thrusting her into Twenty First Century America. As these scholars take a closer glance, they find that a text, which was meant to encourage women in the ancient world, is being taken out of context and used to discourage women in contemporary society. Therefore this paper will ultimately make some conclusions about the original identity of the Proverbs 31 woman and then make some suggestions about who that woman might be today.

I. The violent voices of contemporary scholars: Who that Lady is *not*

First we must look to the scholars who have been paying the most attention to the Proverbs 31 woman and evaluate their interpretive methods. Liberation theologians (including feminist and womanist theology as well) are very concerned with the Biblical portrait of womanhood that this text paints, seeing a desperate need to “resignify,” or re-contextualize this text for a contemporary culture that is vastly different from the one in which the text is “embedded” (Bergant, 3-8). Unfortunately, many of the scholars that fall into this camp attempt to re-contextualize this text with very little concern for its original context at all. They also make no conscious notice of the fact that their interpretive methods are driven entirely by an agenda and questions that are foreign to the perspective from which the text was written and first read.

For example, Dianne Bergant admits that her “liberation-critical” reading of Wisdom literature “deliberately avoids questions of a historical nature and proceeds from a reader-centered approach” (Bergant, ix, 1-14). She believes that the

only way in which any theology can “reclaim” a Biblical text for a contemporary context is by accounting for issues of sustainability and enlisting the voices of the marginalized. Furthermore, Bergant makes very clear that she is writing from “feminist concerns,” starting with the assumption that Biblical texts were produced by men in a patriarchal culture. Consequently, her entire analysis of Proverbs 31 is conducted under the assumption that regardless of the historical context, the texts communicate to the reader that the domination of another is accepted and even admired (Bergant, vii-ix). This Liberation-Critical analysis of Proverbs 31 concludes that the Proverbs 31 woman might be ideal, but only according to the ideals of a patriarchal society in which a woman’s worth is judged in terms of her utility to man, and there seems to be a public versus private division of male and female labor (Bergant, 99). According to Bergant all of the Hebrew Bible is laden with these gender biases, and in the case of Proverbs only those Proverbs that supported the opinions of those in power were retained as an accurate expression of social norms (Bergant, 93-94).

Similarly, Jorge Maldonado has problems with the Proverbs 31 woman because she does not reflect the need for solidarity in the third world. On the surface it does not connect with poorer women who cannot live up to the roles that the valiant woman fills – i.e. a seeming economic independence (Maldonado, 36). Thus, like Bergant, Maldonado sees a need to reclaim this text by emphasizing the elements of the passage, which may indicate that this woman is in fact, “unusual, atypical and...revolutionary for her time” (Maldonado, 37; Bergant, 92-104). While both these theologians make interesting points about ways in which this woman is wielding power and doing things that were inconceivable for her time, they provide no evidence for this beyond the demands that their agendas place on the text. That is, they seek almost exclusively to read the text from a 21st Century lens. At one point Maldonado actually makes an argument for the two-income household from the place in the passage where the woman’s children bless her. Here Maldonado presumes that her children bless her because of her role as a revolutionary workingwoman, based upon the economic activities she carries out in the text, wrongfully presuming that these activities were “revolutionary” for an Ancient Israelite woman. Finally, Maldonado takes this conclusion a step farther, making this text the mouthpiece for a modern agenda (justifying a two-income household with pop-psychology from Oprah): “parents need to derive satisfaction from what they do in order to raise healthy, independent, and secure children” (Maldonado, 38-39).

Liberation theologians are not the only scholars who allow an agenda to interfere with the analysis of the Proverbs 31 passage. A literalist, Jill Briscoe, uses a method similar to that of Bergant and Maldonado, only from the perspective of conservative Christianity. Briscoe is a literalist, but in order to reclaim this text she proclaims that the Proverbs 31 woman is merely an ideal, who never lived at all. As support for this position she does not cite contextual evidence but simply states that “she (the Proverbs 31 woman) appears to be a very together person” (Briscoe, 9-15). Briscoe’s work begins here, suggesting that contemporary women tackle this overwhelming and unattainable ideal by “beginning with the self,” using Proverbs 31 as a self-help guide. Briscoe’s self-help approach reclaims the edgy and unattainable goals that this text has upheld and demythologizes them with conservative doctrines of redemption (Briscoe, 28-41).

Briscoe also “reclaims” the text via individualistic thought stating that the valiant woman of Proverbs 31 “wouldn’t have an equal because *every woman is unique*...some of us have some of her talents and some of us have other gifts that are not mentioned here” (Briscoe, 30). This misstep in interpretation further ignores the context of the passage, totally denying that the activities of the Proverbs 31 woman might have had a different significance in her world than whatever significance they hold in our contemporary world, missing a crucial piece of her identity. Likewise, individualism and autonomy are the guiding contemporary assumptions, which Nancy Rockwell brings to the Proverbs 31 text, using these verses to legitimate the pro-choice argument in the abortion debate (Rockwell, 24-27). Her conclusions may or may not represent what a God-fearing woman might do in these circumstances, but this cannot be discerned from her arguments because she fails to treat the text with responsibility. In her conclusions she uses passionate language to make her point, rather than calling upon the historical identity of the Proverbs 31 woman or the context of these verses in the larger Biblical tradition (Rockwell, 27). In the final analysis, for both Briscoe and Rockwell, the Proverbs 31 woman can be translated to today’s society with absolutely no regard for differences between the ancient culture and today’s world, leaving both authors free to make the text say what best suites their respective contemporary audiences.

On the contrary, not all writers who see the Proverbs 31 woman as an asset to their cause do such violence to the text. For example, Madipoane Masenya writes from a womanist perspective while paying close attention to the context of this passage. Masenya is honest about the fact that some of the questions we ask are foreign to the frame of reference supplied by the text. As she comes to

Proverbs 31, she too notices that this woman's identity is wrapped up in her husband and cannot be understood independently (Masenya, "Bosadi," 152-155). Rather than throwing out these pieces of the story and focusing on whatever speaks readily to the contemporary South African problems, Masenya takes the time to identify who the valiant woman was in her original context so that she can compare that context with South Africa and interpret accordingly. Thus, Masenya concludes (with the help of Camp's essay on household economy in Ancient Israel) that the Proverbs 31 woman of worth "is a family woman who has the concerns of her household at heart" (Masenya, "Bosadi," 152). This means that today the needs of the household should be at the heart of both African men and women, because men and women's roles are no longer so sharply divided. This places responsibility for economic subsistence on "God fearing" men and women (Masenya, "Bosadi," 152-154).

II. Biblical Background of Proverbs 31:10-31: Who was that Lady?

Masenya identifies the Proverbs 31 woman as an androgynous symbol for economic responsibility. Still one is left wondering, who is that lady? One also wonders if she is a contemporary workingwoman, legitimating the two-income household as Bergant and Maldonado suggested. Or is she the model of a unique individual, illustrating self-assurance for women in a contemporary world, as Briscoe and Rockwell suggest? Or perhaps she is an exemplar of one who cares for the subsistence needs of the family. The answers to these questions are not as easily uncovered as some of these scholars contend. As Masenya's work suggests, one can find a richer, truer picture of the Proverbs 31 woman simply by researching her context within the Biblical narrative. Patricia Gundry also points to a deeper interpretive method, calling readers to view this text as a call to personal wholeness that can only be found when one searches for the "complete woman," of Proverbs 31 (Gundry, 15). Thus, any reading of Proverbs 31 must examine all that this woman was to determine all that she would be today.

First, attention must be given to the text's position within Proverbs itself. The book of Proverbs is part of the wisdom tradition. Wisdom literature encompasses a variety of genres, but the common theme is a connection between godly prudence and every day life. Proverbs contains two of the four types¹ of wisdom literature as identified by R. E. Murphy; "practical wisdom" and "theologizing wisdom" ("Assumptions and Problems," 104). Practical wisdom outlines what is meant by "fear of the Lord," providing applications for religious

conduct and guidelines for everyday transactions (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems, 104). The other type of wisdom that is found in Proverbs is the theologizing of wisdom, simply representing the notion that all wisdom originates with God. The theologizing of wisdom provides a link to the creation narrative in that humans can understand the world only because the Divine creator imparts Divine wisdom, as found in Proverbs (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems," 104, Perdue, 37, 47). An example of theologizing wisdom is the Woman Wisdom who opens the book of Proverbs and is described in more detail in chapter 8, a personification of Divine Wisdom that gives life to this character who under rides the very creation of the earth and pursues men and women, convincing them to take the prudential "path less traveled."

While Murphy makes a distinction between these two types of wisdom, they are inextricably linked in Proverbs, which stands in sharp contrast to the contemporary dichotomy between the sacred and secular (Whybray, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 4). That is, the book of Proverbs describes the ways of the world and then provides practical instructions for living within this world order. The Proverbs themselves have a narrative character, particularly when describing the consequences of a given action. A prudent manner of behaving is described and then followed by a description of a predictable reward or result of that type of behavior (Bergant, 79, 93-94). According to R. N. Whybray, this trend is reflective of the Old Testament world-view in which it is not counter-intuitive (unlike our contemporary world-view) for otherworldly "moral" practices to lead to practical, this worldly rewards, because all of these things fall into the same category of things which are "intrinsically good and desirable" (*New Century Bible Commentary*, 4).

Thus, any view of the Proverbs 31 woman must take into account this unitary view of life, taking care not to presume that her activities and her "fear of the Lord" are one in the same in her world. Furthermore, this world-view might suggest that her work within the household and in the city are not expressions of a patriarchal double standard in which women must "earn their keep," as suggested by some liberation theologians. Rather her work represents a responsibility to "behave rightly" in God's kingdom and in the world simultaneously via practical activities. Unfortunately this sense of unity is lost and even mistaken for oppression when looking at the text through a modern lens in which the dichotomies of sacred vs. secular are assumed.

Next, the structure of this particular Proverb must be examined. Proverbs 31:10-31 is in acrostic with each verse beginning with a consecutive letter of the

Hebrew alphabet. Scholars disagree over the effects that this form might have on the meaning of the passage. On the one hand, some think that this formal structure prevents the description of the ideal woman from being complete, and in effect removes any possibility for progression of thought, thematic sequence, or true narrative style (Bergant, 92; Whybray, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 426). In fact some scholars even regard all Biblical acrostics as “detractions from the true outpouring of emotion” (Minkoff, 31). On the other hand, other scholars think that this acrostic form adds to the meaning conveyed by the author, emphasizing that it indicates the author’s control and provides direction for a more intentional display of emotion (Minkoff, 31). This latter position is represented with greater strength in the literature. In the case of Proverbs 31:10-31, the acrostic structure reflects the completeness of this woman, showing that she covers her responsibilities from *aleph* to *taw* (the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet) (Bergant, 78, Gundry, 15, Minkoff, 31).

Furthermore, this acrostic structure points to Proverbs 31:10-31 as more than a collection of practical tidbits of advice (McCreesh, 25). The editor of Proverbs seems to have closed with Proverbs 31:10-31 as a book-end poem which mirrors the image of the “Woman Wisdom” in chapters 1-9 of Proverbs in “both form and content” (Bergant, 78). Most scholars agree that these concluding verses are probably a separate conclusion to the entire book of Proverbs, suggesting that all of the information within the book of Proverbs is based on the ideal that “the Fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 31:30; Bergant, 78; Brown, 49; McCreesh, 25; Minkoff, 31-46; Murphy, “Form Criticism,” 482; Perdue, 277; Whybray, 426). Throughout Proverbs there is a contrast between Woman Folly, “whose ways lead to death,” and Woman Wisdom, “who promises life” (Crenshaw, 355-56, McCreesh, 40, Perdue, 50). Proverbs 31:10-31 concludes this theme in favor of Woman Wisdom, and “draws together major themes, motifs, and ideas of the book in a final, summarizing statement about wisdom under the image of an industrious, resourceful, and selfless wife” (McCreesh, 25, 40).

The actual parallels between Woman Wisdom (Proverbs 1-9) and the Proverbs 31 woman, beyond the central one already mentioned (“Fear of the Lord”) are astounding. Both Woman Wisdom and the Proverbs 31 woman are “more precious than jewels” (Proverbs 3:15, 31:10). Whoever finds them will not lack material gain (3:13-14; 31:11). Also, Woman Wisdom is found at the city gates (the busiest center of the city where people enter and exit) calling out, and the Proverbs 31 woman is praised at the city gates. Finally, the theme that

Woman Wisdom builds her own house “of peace, industry and successful living,” is recapitulated in Proverbs 31 where the woman of valor’s well-managed household brings rewards to herself and others (comp. Proverbs 9:1; 14:1; Crenshaw, 355-56; Whybray, 426). At the very least all of these parallels indicate that the Proverbs 31 woman is a great example of what is considered “wise” throughout Proverbs (Whybray, “The Intellectual Tradition,” 17). Yet the style, positioning and thematic nuances of Proverbs 31:10-31 which have all been cited above, seem to indicate something stronger. The view of the Proverbs 31 woman as an intentional conclusion to the book of Proverbs suggests that she is indeed, the portrait of not only a Godly woman, but also of a Godly person-man or woman. This conclusion rests on the fact that she reflects all of the characteristics of Woman Wisdom, the female personification of God’s divine Wisdom, intended as an inspiration to both men and women for right thought and action. Thus, Masenya’s interpretation of the text in a way that places economic responsibility on both men and women is an accurate reflection of the literary characteristics of this text. (The significance this connection might have in terms of interpreting Proverbs 31:10-31 as a metaphorical figure rather than an actuality will be discussed in greater detail later.) In fact, as one seeks to read this passage within the context of Proverbs and the larger Wisdom tradition, Masenya’s conclusions move to the forefront, echoed by other scholars’ identification of this woman as a metaphorical representation of Woman Wisdom. These ideas are important to consider in greater depth, because they would suggest that the Proverbs 31 woman makes demands on all people, not just women, as commonly presumed by most theologians (Bergant, Briscoe, Gundry, Maldonado, Rockwell).

However, this focus on the literary character of Proverbs 31:10-31, should not be confused with form criticism. Form criticism, or identifying the form of the Proverb in order to try and discern information about the context is an arbitrary task to some degree (Murphy, “Form Criticism,” 481-483; Whybray, 14-15). There are very few clues as to how these sayings were used or who used them. In fact, many passages could have been didactic in more than one situation. For instance the Proverbs that begin with “my son” could be used on a variety of occasions beyond the biological parent-child relationship, carrying a great “density of meaning” (Murphy, “Form Criticism,” 481-483, “Interpretation,” 295-297). Consequently, the focus of the interpretation of Wisdom literature should not be upon the form itself, but rather on how the saying was understood and applied in reality. After all, as Murphy argues, the Wisdom tradition itself is con-

cerned with the "right action at the right time in the right manner" ("Assumptions and Problems," 109). Al Wolters provides a great example for Murphy's argument, engaging in form critical analysis of Proverbs 31 almost exclusively, making very precise, but minute conclusions. In fact, Wolters represents the opposite extreme of the theologians first considered here who paid no attention to the nuances of the text or its context. Wolters' work is fascinating and pays great attention to detail, and yet seems to be a lost cause if the Wisdom tradition is as diverse and nebulous as most scholars admit. For instance, Wolters spends an entire article identifying the form of Proverbs 31 as a heroic hymn, of the same form of hymns in praise of Yahweh elsewhere in Scripture ("Heroic Hymn," 446-457; "The Song of the Valiant Woman," 30-41). While this analysis does lead to some compelling conclusions about the woman of worth as a practical hero created to contrast erotic images of women in eastern culture, it ultimately fails to do justice to the text, ignoring its problematic nature as a part of the Wisdom tradition. This oversimplification also falls short of an answer to our driving question, "Who's that Lady?" inadequately dealing with the complexities of the text as it is situated in the entire, diverse, Wisdom tradition (Crenshaw, 353-354).

In light of the inadequacies of form criticism, one must turn to the Wisdom tradition at large in order to truly contextualize the Proverbs 31 woman. As one looks to the wisdom literature for clues, the parallel between Proverbs 1-9 and Proverbs 31 again becomes significant. John J. Collins and G. E. W. Nickelsburg identify two kinds of ideal figures in Ancient Judaism, raising the question of whether this woman functioned as a paradigmatic figure or an eschatological one (7-8). If she was paradigmatic she was perceived as a model intended for direct imitation. On the other hand, if the woman of valor was an eschatological figure she may have simply "given expression to the ideas which influenced behavior" (Collins and Nickelsburg, 8). T. P. McCreesh and William Brown both argue that this ideal figure is wholly eschatological in nature, simply a symbol of Woman Wisdom, based upon the variety and number of tasks she engages in, word repetition and allusions to wisdom or to a "wisdom activity" (Brown, 49, McCreesh, 44). Yet Collins and Nickelsburg warn against using the categories they created in order to dichotomize the text, arguing that one cannot systematically identify one type of ideal figure or another in Scripture, but she must pay careful attention to the context of each text/figure and the "unique characteristics of the individual phenomena" (11). In this instance such attention to context requires one to examine the extent to which wisdom, and then in particular this passage, was connected to the royal tradition. If there is a strong rela-

tionship there, then the Proverbs 31 woman was likely to have been a paradigmatic figure, setting up an ideal which was to be imitated with precision.

As many liberation theologians have assumed, the wisdom tradition originated in the royal tradition, reflecting the “ethos of the official classes,” because the sages were associated directly with kings and leaders (Murphy, “Assumptions and Problems,” 103-104). Identifying the social background of Wisdom literature, Robert Gordis concludes that all Wisdom represents the pragmatism and conservatism of the upper-classes, serving and maintaining the interests of the status quo (79-82). However notions such as these have created a perceived dichotomy between Wisdom literature and the rest of Hebrew Scripture, presuming that Wisdom literature represented the demands of the status quo versus the prophetic voice present in the rest of Scripture (Murphy, “Assumptions and Problems,” 105). Again Murphy argues that this form of literary criticism isn’t conclusive, that sharp lines cannot be drawn between prophecy and Wisdom. Rather, the two are inextricably related, because the Old Testament writers wrote out of the same culture in which both kinds of ideas were central.

Furthermore, Wisdom must still be considered Yahwistic, because it “was formed within a people in covenant with Yahweh” (Murphy, “Interpretation” 298). More specifically, the last section of Proverbs is not even likely to be from a courtly perspective due to the date of its addition with respect to the date of the exile and fall of such structures (Whybray, *New Century Bible Commentary* 9). Therefore, the Proverbs 31 woman is not just a symbolic hero as Wolters and McCreech might like to conclude, but she belongs within the entire Old Testament tradition, informing and also being shaped by other pieces of the culture that “believed in the LORD as Savior and Creator” (Murphy, “Assumptions and Problems” 108). Again, this requires the interpreter of Proverbs 31:10-31 to break down the false dichotomies and categories which have typically framed this debate. As Ralph Marcus suggests, personified Woman Wisdom has “an obscure position between personal being and principle. She is both, she is neither, the one nor the other” (161). This same view holds true then for the Proverbs 31 woman, who must be situated somewhere between paradigm and eschatological ideal, as she probably functioned in both capacities originally.

Finally, an alternative view of this text and its original context further elucidates that this woman was both a practical model and an eschatological ideal. Ellen Louise Lyons, like others notices that the Proverbs 31 woman looks like a pre-monarchial woman (237). In particular she carries out all of the same functions and roles as a woman from the pre-monarchial period would have done

according to Camp's functionalist perspective, and Meyers' work (Camp in Masenya, "South African Context" 60; Meyers in Masenya, "Bosadi" 150-151). In pre-monarchial society women carried out all of the work that required technical skill and they produced all of the "finished products." Women's work was also much more varied than men's and men in turn were working in the agricultural realm, trying to make unfertile soil produce (Meyers, 1-47). In this context women were key to the household's effectiveness and economic sustainability (Lyons, 238-239). Pre-monarchial women also still benefited from the financial security of a dowry, able to "laugh at the days to come" (Proverbs, 31:25; Gundry, 169). Situating Proverbs 31:10-31 in this context means that the Proverbs 31 woman was initially a pre-monarchial woman, accounting for what seems today to be outlandish industriousness. In addition to fitting the pre-monarchial paradigm of a "Godly woman," this text also makes sense in the era of reconstruction during the exile. Repopulating and rebuilding called for women's work. Thus, as Lyons suggested, the text itself was reclaimed in the post-exilic period because women as "productive, respected, members of society must have again become a valid cultural model" (Lyons, 242). This reclaiming of a pre-monarchial text for a post-exilic audience not only foreshadows a modern need to reclaim the text in this way, but also reveals the manner in which the Proverbs 31 woman acted as both paradigm and eschatological ideal. That is, she was and is today both a realistic representative of what a Godly woman looked like in ancient Israel and is simultaneously a wholly otherworldly ideal to which no woman could ever attain. As Brown suggests, the Proverbs 31 woman represents the embodiment of Wisdom, not in a set of guidelines, but in a picture of a pragmatic woman of high character, intended to preserve her community (49).

To summarize, the Proverbs 31 woman cannot be identified until one considers her rich history within both Proverbs and the Wisdom tradition. In this context her complex identity is unveiled, revealing that both her position in the text (as the conclusion of Proverbs) and her characteristics suggest a strong relationship to Woman Wisdom of Proverbs 1-9. Furthermore, the fact that the Proverbs 31 woman is not likely to represent the royal tradition of wisdom writing but rather a post-exilic memory of the ancient, pre-monarchical way of life, suggests that this text functioned as an eschatological ideal based on the paradigm of the Ancient Israelite woman. This ideal embodies the "ideas which influenced behavior," encouraging readers to pursue Godly wisdom in their own context, no matter what the practical means might be (Collins and

Nickelsburg, 8). That is, just as Woman Wisdom is seen carrying out the tasks needed to run the Ancient Israelite household (then central to the Hebrew community of faith) or to restore the kingdom after the exile, so also Woman Wisdom today would be found carrying out the practical tasks needed to restore the contemporary community of faith.

III. So who *is* that Lady?

The Proverbs 31 woman is Woman Wisdom, the complete embodiment of Godliness in Ancient Israel, carrying out all of the practical responsibilities of the day. Since this eschatological ideal was originally based on the pragmatic concerns of post-exilic Israel, it should not be used to overwhelm or discourage people of faith today, but rather to spur individuals on to discovery of Divine Wisdom through practical activity. That is, this woman was not intended to be some unattainable standard or strict set of rules for conduct, but rather a representation of God's character that spurs the community on to restore God's kingdom on earth. The Proverbs 31 Woman is not an eschatological representation of a human woman, but of Godself. This eschatological ideal, then is not just for women, but for all people, men and women, painting a picture of part of God's character in which the tasks of daily life are completed, bringing honor and praise.

Precisely who is that Lady then, today? This consideration of her as Woman Wisdom does not remove any contemporary implications for daily life that she may have represented. In fact, it simply serves to remove the violence done to both the text and women when one interprets the Proverbs 31 Woman as a paradigm to be directly imitated today. Her function within the text was based loosely on a paradigm of the Ancient Israelite woman, but reclaimed in the post-exilic world as the personification of Woman Wisdom, used to challenge Israelites to restoration of Godly culture. Thus, she still challenges men and women today, not to the specific tasks of the Ancient Israelite household, or the male-female separation of roles (private vs. public), but to the spiritual connection between human and divine activity fueled by divine Wisdom. The Proverbs 31 Woman speaks boldly to the community of faith today, calling people of faith to join God in God's practical activities in the world.

While this interpretation may seem too broad or vague, it does have particular implications in different contexts. "God's practical activities" can be identified by calling upon God's activity as revealed thematically throughout Scripture (a task too large for this study to consider exhaustively). Here for brevity sake we will simply consider two aspects of God's activity: the restoration of

the community of faith and concern for the outsider. I have chosen these two aspects because they seem to connect most directly to the illustration that introduced a need to reclaim the Proverbs 31 woman at the outset of this work (i.e., a Denison women's retreat).

In the instance of the Campus Crusade for Christ movement, the Proverbs 31 woman is calling women and men of faith to join God in bringing healing and unity to a diverse group of believers on Denison's campus. The broken office of religious life, the exclusion of some religious groups, and the promise of a new program might be seen as a correlative to the broken temple in the post-exilic period. Thus, men and women of faith at Denison should look to the Proverbs 31 woman as a reminder that God is dynamically present in all aspects of the restoration process and participation in this process is actually joining God in God's activity. Second, the Proverbs 31 woman could be calling believers to take responsibility for the outsider, as illustrated throughout Scripture, joining God in this process of drawing the other in. On Denison's campus an example of this could be seen in the recent CommUNITY festival, a response to the hate expressed towards homosexuals by a group of religious fanatics. As women and men participated in this event they embraced diversity, and communicated love for those considered outcasts in society alongside God, joining Woman Wisdom in Her work.

So in conclusion, the answer to the question "Who's that Lady?" is found in context to be Woman Wisdom and can be recontextualized today to encourage the community of faith, as she once did, to join Her in God's practical activities in the world.

Notes

1. Murphy's discussion of "types" of wisdom is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to illustrate that the category of "wisdom literature" is very broad, encompassing a wide variety of texts. Furthermore, more than one type of wisdom can be embodied in one text. The first two types of wisdom, not represented in the text at hand, are "judicial wisdom" and "nature wisdom." Judicial wisdom is evidenced in 1Kings 3 where Solomon gives out the correct decision in the case of the harlots, preserving order with the wisdom received from the Lord. Nature wisdom is seen in the secrets of nature, unveiled through sayings ("Assumptions and Problems," 40).

Works Cited:

Bergant, Dianne. *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

- Briscoe, Jill. *Queen of hearts: the role of today's woman based on Proverbs 31*. Old Tappan, NJ: F.H. Revell, 1984.
- Brown, William P. *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Camp, Claudia. "Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration." *Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.* Hoglund, Kenneth G., et. al. eds. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 45-76.
- Collins, John J. and G.E.W. Nickelsburg. *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism*. Missoula: Scholars, 1980.
- Crenshaw, J.L. "In Search of Divine Presence: Some Remarks Preliminary to a Theology of Wisdom." *Review and Expositor*. 74 (1977): 353-69.
- Gordis, R. "The Social Background of the Wisdom Literature." *Hebrew Union College Annual*. 18(1943, 44): 77-118.
- Gundry, Patricia. *The Complete Woman*. New York: Doubleday, 1981.
- Lyons, Ellen Louise. "Note on Proverbs 31:10-31." *The Listening Heart*: 237-246.
- Maldonado, Jorge. "A fulfilled family: the family of a virtuous woman: Proverbs 31:11-31." *Even in the Best of Families: The Family of Jesus and Other Biblical Families Like Ours*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994.
- Marcus, Ralph. "On Biblical Hypostases of Wisdom." *Hebrew Union College Annual*. 23(1950-51): 157-171.
- Masenyana, Madipoane. "A Bosadi (Womanhood) Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31." *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Dube, Musa W. ed. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature; Geneva : WCC Publications, 2001, 145.
- _____. "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Reading for the Liberation of African (Northern Sotho) Women." *Semeia*. 78 (1997): 55-68.
- McCreesh, Thomas Paul. *Biblical Sound and Sense: Poetic Sound Patterns in Proverbs 10-29*. Sheffield, UK: J.S.O.T. Press, c. 1991.
- Meyers, Carol. "The Family in Early Israel." *Families in Ancient Israel*. Leo G. Perdue ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997: 1-48.
- Minkoff, Harvey. "As Simple as ABC: What Acrostics in the Bible Can Demonstrate." *Bible Review*. 13(2, 1997) 27-31, 46-47.

- Murphy, R.E. "Assumptions and Problems in Old Testament Wisdom Research." *Catholic Bible Quarterly*. 29 (1967): 101-112.
- _____. "Form Criticism and Wisdom Literature." *Catholic Bible Quarterly*. 31(1969): 475-483.
- _____. "The Interpretation of Old Testament Wisdom Literature." *Interpretation*. 23(1969): 289-301.
- Perdue, Leo G. *Proverbs in: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000.
- Rockwell, Nancy. "Scripture and Morality: How Good Women Make Wise Choices." *The Other Side*. 26 (March-April 1990): 24-27.
- Whybray, R.N. *New Century Bible Commentary: Proverbs*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.
- _____. *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament*. New York: De Gruyter, 1974.
- Wolters, Al. "Proverbs 31:10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form Critical Analysis." *Vetus Testamentum*. 38 (1988): 446-457.
- _____. "The Song of the Valiant Woman:" *Studies in the Interpretation of Proverbs 31:10-31*" Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001.

Good Sex and How to Get It

Erin Walker

What is good sex? The question has been asked for centuries – and different answers seem to surface for each person who asks it. Over the years sex has been regarded both as a prison and a means of freedom and liberation, a hindrance to spirituality and a guide to finding one’s inner self. So, then, the question remains: what is good sex? Christian ethicist Marvin Ellison and Christian theologians Kelly Brown Douglas, and Rita Brock and Susan Thistlewaite all address this question in their respective books *Erotic Justice*, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, and *Casting Stones*. According to all three authors, sexuality is an essential part of us as people, so that we are not “whole” without it. This wholeness that we seek has been elusive, as we have used our sexuality as a means of domination instead of a means of mutual enjoyment and grace. In its turn, domination has become oppressive and exploitative, marring the goodness of sex and dehumanizing all people. Further, this domination has become institutionalized, socially accepted, and even culturally legitimized, forcing the issue of sex and sexuality to be a public issue of social destruction. However, this negative view of sex and sexuality need not continue to cause us harm! Instead, through a variety of means, we can create a new society which will both affirm the goodness of all people as sexual beings and promote equal justice for all people as a sexual issue.

Each author addresses wholeness with respect to our sexuality. Our sexuality is an integral part of us – unable to be separated from any other part of our self. Both Ellison and Douglas use the term broadly, encompassing with this one word much more than genital sex. They explain that we are body-selves, unable to be defined or understood apart from our bodies. Douglas explains that sexuality is “basic to who we are” (6), both calling us into relationship with one another and helping to define what those relationships look like (115). In fact, the integration of sexuality with other aspects of the self is one definition for the word

erotic (Brock and Thistlewaite 107). In keeping with this, Ellison defines sexuality as “embodied capacity for intimate connection” (2). As an inherent part of our selves, sexuality is also necessarily good. God came to the world through the incarnation of Christ, proving that the body itself can be a “vehicle for divine presence” (Douglas 116). By embracing our bodies and our sexuality, we affirm that they are not dirty and bad, but rather “holy, sacred, and inviolate” (Ellison 120). When sexuality is used in relationships characterized by mutual respect and compassion, our bodies are redefined as sacred; we ourselves become sacred, and grace is communicated through our bodies (Ellison 120).

Of course, sexuality is not the only aspect of our wholeness. While it is integral to us – and therefore embracing it is a part of embracing our wholeness – there is much more. As a womanist, Douglas claims to be “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” (128). She points out that the Biblical call to love with our hearts, minds, and souls, and to love our neighbors is a “call to radical wholeness” (143). Likewise, Brock and Thistlewaite call for a radical wholeness – that wholeness which comes with healing the scars left by exploitation and oppression.

This exploitation and oppression are the greatest barriers to wholeness. All of these authors thus frame their arguments as a means of discourse against different kinds of exploitation and/or oppression. They focus specifically on societal power structures that condone and/or perpetuate oppression. Douglas explains that power only exists in relationship (19). It is therefore present on all levels of society, wherever people relate with one another (19), and it is inequality in these relationships that causes domination and oppression (20). All of the authors also discuss alienation as a result of unequal power structures. Alienation is evil, where evil is defined as the domination of others which aggravates helplessness or inflicts pain (Brock and Thistlewaite 243). It is necessarily the lack of mutual relationship, that relationship to which we are called by our very humanity. This alienation from intimacy, mutuality, and connection is particularly psychologically harmful (Brock and Thistlewaite 170). When people are alienated from their bodies and their sexuality, they are also necessarily alienated from God in two ways: they neither know the love that God has for them nor the love of God that is found in relationship (Douglas 123-4).

Alienation can also be understood through the concept of two kinds of dualism, or the separation of two parts that causes one part to dominate the other. These two dualisms are patriarchal dualism and spiritualistic dualism. Patriarchal dualism is misogynistic, separating male from female qualities

(Douglas 27). Spiritualistic dualism is a separation of mind and body, or body and spirit (Douglas 25). This dualism is inherently sexist as the traditionally male values of the mind are prized over the traditionally female values of beauty and passion. It also reveals the power social structures still maintain, particularly over heterosexual men, as they strive to master the body by controlling the mind (Brock & Thistlewaite 281).

All of the authors agree that the social structures which cause oppression must also be called to account. Ellison points out that because sexuality is shaped by ideology, the way we view our bodies is bound to the societal structures around us (30), and thus these structures which lay the foundation for what is viewed in society as moral behavior, therefore allowing them to sanction those behaviors that perpetuate and legitimate violence and domination within relationships. Thus, each author is concerned with the marginality and oppression of those about whom they speak. As each author believes that sexuality is the part of us that calls us into relationship with one another, and as power exists only in relationships, our sexuality must be addressed whenever we are addressing power issues. Because each author is concerned with power issues, they are necessarily drawn into a discourse about sexuality. In this discourse, Ellison calls for solidarity with the marginalized as a cornerstone to sexual ethics. The marginalized tend to be viewed as “the other” in society – those who are different and therefore alienated from us. People who do not have a genuine connection with “the other” tend to be out of touch not only with others’ pain, but also with their own. Only when a person can recognize the pain in his own and others’ experiences can he see how injustice affects a person’s humanity (11). Also, Ellison points out that those on the margins of society hold a unique position regarding the ability to critique any ethic, since the experience of marginality offers a new perspective from which we can see things differently and imagine alternatives (69).

Douglas frames her argument in terms of White versus Black culture and the oppression and marginalization of Blacks therein. She insists that White culture, and particularly White cultural stereotypes, perpetuate and legitimate the oppression of Blacks. White culture is the most dominant power structure that affects Black people and their culture, because White culture permeates our society. It has relegated Blacks to a position of inferiority and marginality. White culture always asserts its own supremacy, which is upheld by the social, political, and economic structures within the culture (17). In fact, its main purpose is to secure the supremacy of Whites (18), which it does by disparaging Blacks in every way possible. In particular, White culture has attacked Black sexuality and negatively affected it in

many ways. Its disparaging nature alienates Black people from their bodies, their selves, their community, and ultimately their God (123). Douglas sees that Black sexuality has been the target of attack because of two things: Blacks have been critical to maintaining the economic prosperity of whites (23), and Blacks simply look different and are therefore easily labeled “other” (24). Douglas understands this label in the same way Ellison does – as a label that enables people to both stay out of touch with pain, and as a means of maintaining the status quo (29).

An especially prominent misunderstanding of Blacks within White culture are the cultural stereotypes about Blacks that are so prevalent. There are three stereotypes that are particularly prevalent: that of the jezebel, the mammy, and the violent buck. These stereotypes have been passed down in White culture so that, though they were created during the slavery era, they persist, only slightly modified as the Black matriarch, the welfare queen, and the violent Black man. The mammy (now the Black matriarch) is viewed as an asexual person, domesticated and domineering. The jezebel image (now the welfare queen) is promiscuous, perfectly suited for breeding (though perhaps not rearing) children. Finally, the violent Black man was and is seen as just that – violent and dangerous, particularly to White women. These stereotypes uphold White culture by attacking the sexuality of Black people, portraying them as “the other” and thereby legitimizing the oppressive White culture (59). This stereotyping the other happens in other ways as well. Brock and Thistlewaite write about the same phenomenon with regard to prostitutes. Men who use prostitutes separate women into the same two classes: the virtuous woman back home, and the sexually promiscuous woman (77), allowing these men to maintain the pretense begun in the Victorian era that wives should be chaste, while at the same time satisfying their own sexual desires.

In an attempt to create a justice-centered and liberating sexual ethic, Ellison addresses the forms of oppression he sees in society. He believes that in creating a sexual ethic, one must begin with what defines the social world. Specifically, he explains that “we live in a world broken and alienated by multiple forms of oppression” (1-2). Ellison asserts that power relations affect every aspect of human life. Therefore, any helpful sexual ethic must begin with this “personal-structural connection” (1). Also, a sexual ethic must necessarily be justice-centered, as justice and love cannot be separated; if one seeks to love, justice must follow (2). Ellison asserts the logic of this statement through his definition of justice and justice-making: “attend[ing] to how people’s well-being is enhanced or diminished by prevailing social patterns of social power and powerlessness” (2). The necessity of a specifically sexual ethic comes from Ellison’s understanding of sexuality. A

sexual ethic must address both dualisms mentioned above. Ellison writes that respect for our bodies is imperative if we are to have respect for ourselves (41). Physical touch has the amazing power to communicate both care and compassion as well as disrespect, depending on how that touch is used (41). Thus, when touch is used to control and dominate, and especially when this kind of touching is culturally legitimized for some people, all humanity is diminished. On the other hand, by embracing our bodies and our sexuality, we communicate that we are not dirty and bad, but rather “holy, sacred, and inviolate” (120). When sexuality is used in relationships characterized by mutual respect and compassion, our bodies are redefined as sacred. By the same token, we ourselves become sacred, and grace is communicated through and in our bodies (120). Thus, Ellison calls for a redefinition within society; whereas domination is eroticized, he calls for a change to eroticization of mutuality. By this, he means that instead of power being “sexy,” this would be true of relationships of mutual respect and pleasure – and thus these would be the relationships which people would seek to form and maintain.

Brock and Thistlewaite explain that exploitation is wrong because it is a misuse of power (240). Specifically addressing prostitution, they used both power structures and hypermasculine tendencies in their definition of the term, writing that prostitution is “the institutionalized sexual use, by the more powerful members of male-dominant societies, of the less powerful, which involves financial transactions specifically focused on the sexual use itself” (331). They stress that this is facilitated by economic structures, legal codes, and geographic areas within which prostitution can flourish, regardless of its legal status (15). The authors are searching for appropriate discourse with respect to prostitution because of the widespread American belief, perpetuated by pop culture, that prostitution is a “victimless crime” (158). Akin to prostitution is sexual slavery, or the use of women and children for “sexual acts under duress or physical threat.”

Despite their careful definitions and explanations of prostitution and sexual slavery, Brock and Thistlewaite assert that we must focus on power differences, not sex, or we miss the point (156). They go on to assert that the fundamental question in all analyses must be whose power is being protected and why (180). Sex is used to reinforce structures of power (157). Some of these structures are patriarchy, religion, militarism, multinational capitalism, law, and criminal justice systems (243).

Because humans naturally behave in ways that are either sanctioned or ignored by society (Brock & Thistlewaite 25), it is imperative that the problem of oppression and exploitation be viewed and addressed as a social problem. Thus

it is that each Ellison, Douglas, and Brock and Thistlewaite form their various solutions to the specific types of oppression that they address. In *Erotic Justice*, Ellison creates a helpful framework under which to view the works of the other authors. His call is for a justice-centered liberating sexual ethic. It is his belief that with a re-formed, re-imagined sexual ethic, the societal power structures of oppression can be broken down, replaced by structures and beliefs which promote the eroticization of mutuality. This ethic must not privilege any one group. Specifically, it must not privilege a gender analysis, particularly to the exclusion of such things as race and class, also bases of injustice (31). The point of the ethic is not just to add those who are now marginalized to the current ethic. Instead, it is meant to transform the tradition and society, so that neither privilege traditional male, heterosexual values only, but also encompass the values of those groups now marginalized (66). This requires a restructuring and rethinking of the current societal power structures. Ellison believes that true pleasure can only come when people relate to one another out of a strong sense of their own individuality and personal integrity (84-85). This can only happen when both are fully respected as individuals. In this kind of relationship, a new ethical code which specifies good and bad sexual touching is not needed. Rather, we should define a more generalized "ethic of respectful touching" (92). This redefines traditional ethics, which has typically defined "good" and "bad" sex by the particular ways in which men use women, and redefines it as mutuality (56).

Douglas responds to the oppression of Blacks with a call for a sexual discourse of resistance. While understanding that the Black community has been discouraged from engaging in sexual discourse because of their history of having their sexuality exploited by Whites (68), she still calls for the Black community to engage in such a discourse, as silence can mean consent to power, while a certain kind of discourse can instead disarm it (68). This discourse must both penetrate the Black community's sexual politics and cultivate a new approach to Black sexuality that promotes wholeness (69). The value of a sexual discourse of resistance is twofold. It is concurrently deconstructive and constructive. The discourse would both help Black people to understand the forces that have shaped Black sexuality and positively alter attitudes toward Black sexuality (72). As a womanist, Douglas is concerned with the wholeness of all people – male and female, heterosexual and homosexual. She is concerned that without such a discourse, Black people are trapped by a history that has denigrated them, and they continue to feel ashamed of their bodies (74). Douglas is adamant about the reclamation of African heritage, which posited no difference between

the sacred and the secular (132), and viewed human sexuality as divine (122). Black people must be able to love themselves before they can have healthy attitudes toward their sexuality (138), and the reclamation of their African heritage promotes this self-love. A sexual discourse of resistance is crucial to allowing all Black people to embrace their bodies and their sexuality, freeing them to love and be loved – affirming their full humanity (138).

Brock and Thistlewaite advocate many changes; one important task pertains to the creation of a new theology – one that is liberating and healing for prostitutes. They insist that an analysis of religions is necessary because of the role of religion in reflecting and guiding societal values (18). This analysis is not meant to vilify religion, but rather show where different religions are helpful and hurtful in creating a liberating, healing ethic for prostitutes (70), expanding both what we view as religious and how different religions promote liberation together (212). In this analysis, Brock and Thistlewaite use a synergistic effort – addressing both Buddhism and Christianity and using what is helpful from each for a theology of liberation and healing. They also hope that they will contribute to a feminist discourse that will break through the stereotypes of those in the sex trade and begin to change the societal structures which oppress prostitutes (210). These structures include everything from social policies to education to religious ideologies (18), all of which need to be reimagined and deconstructed to promote freedom from oppression (99). For example, energy and resources should be reappropriated to help those who want to get out of the sex industry (205), and antiprostitution police should not antagonize the women trafficked here, but instead help them (306). Like Ellison, Brock and Thistlewaite emphasize solidarity with the oppressed, leading to a deeper understanding of their condition. However, in this solidarity, while we can offer solutions, we must never impose them (312), but respect the rights of individuals to make their own decisions. Also like Douglas and Ellison, Brock and Thistlewaite promote using discourse to begin the change, but they offer a strong word of caution. Discourse itself is not enough; one must be actively opposing oppression as well (228). However, it is also imperative that you never work alone, as social change requires a social movement to back it up (320).

As theologians, Brock and Thistlewaite specifically address the church, believing that the church's call is to heal (23). Specifically, the church needs to redefine specific tenets such as sin, grace, and compassion. Sin should be redefined to no longer blame the victim, but to focus responsibility where it really belongs (241) – with those who are exploiting the victims. The concept of grace must also be redefined. Specifically, grace should be a means by which we

come into solidarity with those who are oppressed and exploited. The expression of grace, then, would be the connection of remembrance, solidarity, and action (270). Grace cares for and heal brokenness (278). This brokenness is described by the Korean word *han*, which refers to the experience of suffering that has not been relieved (284). *Han* can begin to be released through breaking the silence behind the experience of oppression, and as *han* is released, healing and wholeness occur. Healing, then, is finding relationships that enable the release of *han* and enhance the process of coming to terms with one's experiences (294). The church's job, as it fulfills its call to heal, is to be an active agent in enabling this grace, both by creating a place for the release of *han* and by being active in the work against oppression and exploitation. Finally, compassion must be redefined. While the traditional concept of compassion as empathic consciousness of others should be retained, it must be augmented to include silence. Silence is central to compassion, as silence also promotes wholeness, healing, and community (292). Through silent compassion, the church becomes a means of grace, offering resources for healing that do not pretend to offer a return to an innocence of an erased past, but that embraces the pains of the past and still affirms each person's ability to "live a satisfying, creative life" (294).

Each of these books addresses its audience in a different way. Ellison provides a basic framework that addresses society as a whole, Douglas speaks specifically about the Black community, and Brock and Thistlewaite speak for (albeit not to) prostitutes. Despite these minor differences, though, all three of these books are strikingly similar as they helpfully trace the problems of exploitation and oppression through society to structures of domination. I cannot help but be convinced of the extremely negative results of structures of power and domination – structures which can be deconstructed by precisely the solutions put forth in these books. The usefulness of each must be measured by its results. It is not that we should consider whether these specific solutions are working now. It is not even that we should consider whether these solutions are plausible. Rather, we should consider the deeper desire of the authors: the desire to create a discourse that destroys the stereotypes of "the other" and promotes mutual understanding and concern. It is through this discourse that we begin grassroots movements that will ultimately have the power to overturn the structures of domination and oppression in our society. Thus, the question is not "What is good sex." The question is, "How do I get it?" More broadly, the authors would ask, "How do I enable all people to have good sex?" I think that all three authors would agree that the answer to this question is quite simple: start talking and reforming. And don't stop.

Genesis 9: 20-21: Noah's Legacy of the Vine

Lindsey Marie Ross

Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent.

—Genesis 9: 20-21

Although the Genesis story of the Flood in Genesis, chapters 6-9, features Noah as the hero of the flood, the story in Genesis 9:20-21 identifies him as the hero of the vine. This second story is not as dramatic as the story of the flood, but it is rich with implications and raises many questions. Is this story an inventor's saga or a cultural myth of the discovery of wine? Is Noah's drunkenness a psychological reaction to a demoralization triggered by the flood? Is the brief story to be a warning against drunkenness? Who was Noah and why should we remember him?

I. The Identity of Noah

A. Noah's Genealogy

Lineage is a prominent theme in the development of any influential character in the Bible. Noah's story really begins in Gen. 5:28 (where he is introduced as the son of Lamech and a tiller of the vine) and not in Genesis chapter 6 as is usually understood.

Tracing the lineage of Noah, son of Lamech, raises interesting questions. Immediately after the story of Cain and Abel (in which Cain murders his brother, Abel), Gen. 4:17-24 lists the descendants of Cain: Enoch, Irad, Mehujael, Methushael, and finally Lamech. A few verses later in 5:6-29, the lineage of Seth (Cain's brother who was born to take the place of Abel after he was killed) is listed: Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, and, again, Lamech,

who is the father of Noah. It is difficult to know what to make of this name repetition. Did the Biblical writers recognize that Noah was descended from Cain, the source of jealousy and hatred and thus an antihero, and decide to change his lineage to that of Seth or are the two genealogies merely similar? Perhaps. But if we see Genesis as a literary unit then the similarity of genealogies cannot be a mere coincidence. If Cain (to whose descendants are attributed the birth of the city and civilized endeavors) is a tiller of the soil, it is ironic that the last mentioned one in the line of Seth is Noah, also tiller of the soil. The genealogies of Cain and Seth (the latter born to take the place of the murdered Abel) point to a transition from nomadism (represented by Abel, the shepherd) to settled agriculture (originally in Genesis 4 represented by Cain but now represented by Seth's descendant, Noah) and perhaps a resolution of the tension between the two economies.

B. What's in a Name: The Identity of Noah

Scholars have often argued about the dual identities of Noah: Noah the hero of the flood in Gen. 6:1-9:19 and Noah the cultivator of the vine in Gen. 9:20-27. Although some are able to see unity in the stories, most scholars have a difficult time blending together seemingly irreconcilable stories. Could the same man who saved humanity from total annihilation because of its wickedness also have planted the vineyard, drunk to excess, and been disgraced in his drunkenness. J.H. Marks simply says that the stories bear no relation to one another.¹

Marks argues that in the flood story (Gen. 6-9:19) Noah's sons are represented as married men, while in Gen. 9:22-24 they are represented as minors. Confusion, says Marks, also is found with the names of Noah's sons. With such considerations, Marks argues that the two stories of flood and vine belong to different traditions. Furthermore, he believes the confusion of names, was simply a poor attempt by biblical writers to blend together these two stories and to mend the break between the two traditions about Noah.²

Nevertheless, while one must be aware of the inconsistencies, it is also important to examine the story as it appears in the text and not dismiss it because of superficial anomalies.

1. Noah the hero of the flood? Gen. 9:20-27 and Gen. 5:28-29 are the only places in the Bible where Noah was not defined by his role in the flood. Everywhere else in the Bible (e.g. Isa. 54:9, Matt. 24:37-38, and Luke 17:26-27) he is the hero of the flood. When first introduced in Gen. 6:9, Noah was said to be a "righteous man, blameless in his generation" (cf. Ezek. 14:14, 20; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5), chosen to survive the flood because of his obedience to

Yahweh (Heb. 11:7). Only 20 men in the entire Bible, among them Noah, were named for their personal righteousness. Furthermore, he – along with only Job and Daniel – was said to be saved through his own righteousness (Ezek. 14:14).

In light of this association, scholars have attempted to connect the meaning of Noah's name with his role in the flood. For example, one theory of the original biblical etymology connects Noah's name to the Hebrew root *nuah*. Initially the name Noah was thought to be derived from Assyrian *naxu, inux*, "to rest," but this supposition was given up when it was discovered that the Akkadian \underline{x} and Hebrew \underline{h} do not represent the same consonant. Another possible connection with the Old Babylonian *nuhiya* (an Akkadian "diminutive of a name" formed from *nuh*) does not correspond "vocalically" (with respect to the vowels) with "Noah." So Marks lays out more commonly accepted suggestions for this etymology of the name Noah in connection with the flood: "Two suggestions have received scholarly support: (a) Noah is the derivative from a Hebrew stem which in Arabic gives the word *nahahe*, "liberality" "generosity"; and (b) that it is connected with the Akkadian element *nah*." In short, the Akkadian *Nah*, it is argued, was changed to the Canaanite-Hebraic *Noah*. *Nah* is apparently a divine name. The name Noah therefore may be theophoric and the personage represented by the name pre-Israelite in origin.³

If this Akkadian derivation for Noah is correct, many questions arise: Was *Nah* in Mesopotamia originally a god or only a secondarily deified figure? Was he native to Mesopotamia or was he brought there by invaders of the nineteenth-eighteenth centuries B.C.E.? Was he already known in connection with the flood story in the Mari region?⁴ But all these associations seem tenuous and it seems better to associate the etymology of the name "Noah" with his role as tiller of the soil.

2. Noah the farmer? Even within the text it is evident that he is defined by his role as the gardener. One commentator refers to the version, which says, "Noah the husbandman was the first who planted the vineyard." John Skinner said this implies that he is "addicted to (or perhaps the inventor of) agriculture, which now in his hands advances to the more refined stage of vine-growing."⁵

Genesis 5:29 introduces Noah not in connection with the flood story of Genesis 6-9 but as a tiller. Here we read that Lamech fathered a son: "He gave him the name Noah because he said, 'Here is one who will give us, in the midst of our toil and the labouring of our hands, a consolation out of the very soil that Yahweh cursed.'" Many refer to the verse 5:29 as prophecy, which would later be fulfilled in 9:20. Robert Davidson remarks: "Noah provides a palliative for the burdensome life of toil to which he was condemned by God."⁶ Marks, on the other hand, believes that 5:29 was misplaced from 9:20. This is rationalized

by saying that Noah's name and etymology don't correspond at all and Rabbi Johanan and Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish both support this hypothesis.⁷ As noted above, Gen. 5:29 and 9:20-21 are said to belong to a second tradition, the Yahwist tradition, and attached rather clumsily to the dominant flood tradition.

But the idea that the name Noah is associated with agriculture is supported by Poulssen's recognition of the word *adamah*. This word in 5:29 represents the Hebrew word for "ground and man's relationship with it." Furthermore, the *pi'el* stem for the Hebrew verb is significant in 5:29 and 9:20. When combined with Noah's name, it means "to comfort", "to cheer", "to dispel sorrow."⁸

Wenham has a different take on the etymology of Noah's name. He focuses more on the phrase "tiller of the land" and he believes that it really means "master of the earth." This symbolized Noah being the head of the one family on earth. Regarding Noah's name, Wenham suspects that maybe describing Noah in 9:20 as "man of the land" is an ironic reference to 5:29.⁹

Some commentators still try to link the Noah of the flood and the Noah of the vineyard by reference to the stories from Syria-Palestine where such a figure entered the area initially as a gardener.¹⁰ While others believe that the linkage is a forced connection. ("...The passage has nothing to do with the Deluge-tradition; and it is more probable that it is an independent legend, originating amidst Palestinian surroundings"¹¹), most commentators will agree that the etymology of Noah's name refers directly to his farming as opposed to the flood story. In short, we are to recognize Noah "as *the* man of the ground – i.e., *the* farmer – as though he were well known, not as the builder of the ark, but rather as the gardener par excellence." The meaning of Noah's name reflects his cultivation of the vineyard, and Gen. 9:20 resonates as a culture myth describing the discovery of wine.¹²

The Noah story, as we have it in Gen. 5:29 and 9:20-21, reinforces the biblical etymology, for Noah's story begins and ends with his identification with viticulture and this identification brackets, as it were, his identification with the flood. His name itself is not associated with the flood tradition but with the gardener, the father of viticulture, and the discoverer of wine. "With this occupation the suggested biblical etymology of his name would agree; he is no longer a wanderer but is settled, at rest, an agriculturalist."¹³

II. Viticulture in the Ancient World

A. The Nature of Viticulture

The cultivation of vineyards and production of wine is a refined art requiring specific conditions and careful attention to the details of the intricate

process. To fully unpack this story, it is important to know the specifics of viticulture and of the conditions necessary for viticulture as well as the complexity and sophistication of the actual winemaking process.

Even today, to grow good Old World, or European, grapes it must be warm or hot and dry in the summers. The winter temperatures should not get any lower than 10°F or -12°C.¹⁴

The grape growing process required great care. The ground was carefully prepared before the vine was planted. Each vineyard had a stone wall or “hedge” to protect vines from foxes (Song of S. 2:15), boars (Ps. 80: 13), and thieves (Jer. 49:9). A stone watchtower was assembled at each vineyard (Isa. 5:2). During vintage season, vinedressers and guardians of the fruit lived in these towers and the first floor was used for a winepress or stables. The vinedresser had to be more delicate and attentive to his grapes than farmers of other types of crops. Pruning was an important part of vine maintenance. When blossoms became ripened grapes, the vinedresser cut off non-bearing branches (Isa. 18:5; John 15:2). This made the existing branches stronger and allowed them to bear more fruit.¹⁵

Grapes were harvested in August or September. Knowing when to harvest grapes was critical. Grapes that were harvested early, before they were ripe, were sour. When the grapes were harvested, ripe ones were eaten in their natural state, dried into raisins, boiled down to a thick syrup, or made into wine.¹⁶ After the grapes had been harvested they were set in the sun for a time before they were fermented. The vats in which the grapes were pressed were connected by a channel through which the juice flowed.¹⁷

The first stage in the fermentation process took place 6 hours later in one of the vats.¹⁸ For fermentation and storage, wine was transferred to jars (Jer. 13:12; 48:11) or to wineskins. The skins were made of goat hides with the neck and feet tied together. An opening was left for gases to release during fermentation. Freshly made wine was put into new wineskins because old wineskins would burst under pressure (Matt. 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-38).

In short, viticulture was labor intensive. It required a great deal of care and skill. It required a climate that was warm and dry. And it offered commercial potential. It was a product of and for a more civilized and organized society – one such as was attributed to the descendants of Cain in Gen. 4:17-24.

B. The Geographical origin of wine

Noah, the hero of the flood, is said to be the first to plant the vineyard after the flood waters recede. According to the text, the ark landed on Mount Ararat,

in Armenia. Many believe that Armenia is the place where wine originated, and from there viticulture spread throughout the rest of the Middle East.¹⁹ One commentator remarks: "Since the vine is said to be indigenous to Armenia and Pontus, it has naturally been proposed to connect the story with the landing of the ark in Ararat."²⁰ When one considers the weather in Armenia and Palestine, this makes a great deal of sense: warm and dry, but not too hot and with sufficient enough rainfall.²¹

Again, the weather necessary for growing good grapes indicates that viticulture was a sign of forgiveness and renewal: the flood was over. Cold, wet, rainy, soggy, muddy flood conditions would never serve as a good environment for growing grapes. The conditions necessary for good grapes are the exact opposite of flood conditions. Noah is able to grow grapes and produce wine. The earth was restored, and humanity forgiven and able to move forward, as people on earth and in covenant with God.

C. Non-Israelite vine myths

The Hebrew narrative – "*Noah, a man of the soil, began the planting of vineyards*" – suggests that this was the Hebrew peoples' version of the inventor saga.²² Given the intoxication attributed to wine, other common cultural myths attributed the discovery of wine with a god and intoxication as "divine inspiration." For the Greeks the god Dionysus invented wine, and for the Egyptians it was the god Osiris. The Bible presents the Canaanites as "orgiastic" and one could assume that for them wine was also discovered by a god; some scholars suggest that Noah himself was originally a Canaanite wine god.²³ The Utnapishtim, the Babylonian counterpart to the Deluge, claims that wine antedated the flood with the builders of the ark being supplied with wine.²⁴ References are made to viticulture from the reign of Gudea. The vine was cultivated in pre-dynastic Egypt although Egyptian military inscriptions from the Old Empire referred to the vine in Palestine. Sinuhe also told about the grapes of Syria-Palestine.²⁵

In the context of this literature the Noah myth regarding the discovery of wine is seen as especially important. If Noah's story is a warning against drunkenness, it is also a cultural myth or inventor's saga explaining the discovery of wine.²⁶ Most important, where in other cultures this invention is attributed to a god, in the Noah story it is attributed to a man.²⁷ The Hebrew perspective holds up humanity as created in the image of God and attributes to human agency what other cultures attribute to the gods.

III. The Symbolism of the Vine in Israel

A. The Significance of the VINE

The vine was an essential part of Israelite culture, which makes Gen. 9:20 an important moment in the Hebrew narrative. The vine, along with the fig tree and the olive tree, was one of the three main plants in Palestine (Jg. 9:8-13). It was called the "fruit of the land" in many Biblical passages (Josh. 24:13; 2 Sam. 8:14; 2 Kings 5:26; Jer. 5:17; 40:10; Hos. 2:12-H 2:14). The Torah addresses the uses and operation of vineyards and its central value in Israel. Vinedressers were to reap the vineyard only once so that the poor and oppressed could pick up what was left over or what had been dropped in the harvest (Lev. 19:10; Deut. 24:21). Like other crops, vineyards were to lie fallow during the Sabbath year to replenish and allow the land to rest (Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:3-5). In one text, those who had planted a vineyard were exempt from military service (Deut. 20:6). The vine became a national symbol of Israel because it was a source of wealth and for some their only source of income.²⁸

The Biblical text is rich in vine imagery in both the Hebrew Testament and Christian Testament. In the Hebrew Testament, the vine was a metaphor for Israel, said by the psalmist to have been "brought out of Egypt and planted by Yahweh" (Ps. 80:8-13 – H 80:9-14). Israel, once a "choice vine," had become a "wild vine" (Jer. 2:21; cf. Isa. 5:1-7; Hos. 10:1). Yahweh found Israel "like grapes in the wilderness" (Hos. 9:10). The remnant was also compared to a cluster of grapes (Isa. 65:8). A parable regarding the judgment of God upon a corrupted Jerusalem in Ezekiel points out that the wood of such an unproductive vine is only useful as fuel (Ezek. 15; cf. 19:10-14). The vine was also a metaphor for the individual. Ezekiel proposes an allegory in which the "seed of the land" (Zedekiah) is planted by a "great eagle" (Nebuchadnezzar) and grows up to be a "spreading vine" (Ezek. 17:1-8).²⁹ Furthermore, in Psalms, the wife who fears Yahweh will be like a fruitful vine (Ps. 128:3).

A deficiency in the vines or grapes was taken as a sign of Yahweh's disapproval. This is seen in the vines of Sodom where the grapes were said to be poisonous (Deut. 32:32). An abundance of vines and vineyards was seen as an expression of Yahweh's favor.³⁰ The spies sent by Moses from the wilderness into Palestine-Syria were shown the rich bounty of the Promise Land through the abundance of grapes. This fruitfulness was evident when "they were able to bring back a cluster of grapes so large that it had to be carried on a pole" (Num. 13:21-27). When Israel was forgiven and brought back from exile, they were given vineyards (Hos. 2:15).

In the Christian Testament, Jesus often uses the vine in his parables. He describes himself as the “true vine” in John 15 and his father as the “vinedresser.” Jesus uses this metaphor and expands on it to show the relationship between God, Jesus and humans as individuals.

It is clear, then, that the vine, whose discoverer was Noah, became much more to Israel than a plant which produced grapes. It became a cultural symbol holding significance at many levels in the culture of Israel.

B. Significance of WINE³¹

Wine produced in ancient Israel had many uses. It was more necessary and more common during biblical times than it is today because of the scarcity and pollution of water at that time. Wine accompanied everyday meals and also held a place in the sacrificial meal (Deut. 14:26; 1 Sam. 1:19:12-16; Amos 2:8). It gave pleasure and banished sorrow (Judg. 9:13; Ps. 104:15; Prov. 31:6-7). Older wine was preferred in ancient Israel because it was both sweeter and stronger than new wine (Ecclus. 9:10; Luke 5:39). Large amounts of wine were provided at banquets and the Hebrew word for banquet or feast also translates to “drinking.” Wine served as a gift to those who were superior (1 Sam. 25:18; 2 Sam 16:1) and as an article of trade (2 Chr. 2:8-10, 15). Wine was used as medicine to revive those who were fainting (2 Sam. 16:2), to settle the stomach and treat “frequent ailments” (1 Tim. 5:23), and for dressing wounds. When mixed with myrrh or gall it was used as a drug and was offered to Jesus by soldiers while he was on the cross (Matt. 27:34; Mark 15:23).

Wine became a very integral part of most ritual offerings. Libations were sometimes made to false gods (Deut. 32:37-38; Isa. 57:6; 65:11; Jer. 7:18; 19:13); however, wine was also used by the orthodox. Whenever worshipers made pilgrimages they would bring a skin of wine to the temple (1 Sam. 1:24; 10:3) and wine may have replaced the custom of offering blood. The wine served to supplement an offering of lamb, fine flour, oil or any combination of these things (Ex. 29:40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:7, 10; 28:14). More specifically it was used at the celebration of Passover although not until Hellenistic times (Jub. 49:6). Wine found its way into many uses in ancient Israel, and like the vine yielded rich imagery in the Hebrew and Christian Testaments.

C. Wine Imagery

Much of the wine imagery in the Bible consists of rather morbid, apocalyptic metaphors for Yahweh's judgment of humanity, often expressed in terms

of a cup of wine: Yahweh will force the wicked to drink the “wine of wrath” and they will then “reel and lose their wits” (Ps. 60:3; 60:5; 75:8; Jer. 25:15; 51:7). God commands nations to be agents of his wrath, saying, “Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow for their wickedness is great” (Joel 3:13-H 4:13). On the Day of Judgment Yahweh treads the wine press, his people on earth being the grapes (Isa. 53:2-6).

On a lighter note, an abundance of wine, like an abundance of vineyards, is an expression of Yahweh’s blessing. This is seen when Isaac asks Yahweh to give Jacob “plenty of grain and wine” (Gen. 27:28). This imagery is also used when Joel looks forward to the time when “the vats shall overflow with wine and oil” (Joel 2:24; cf. 3:18 - H 4:18; Amos 9:13; Zech. 10:7). The gift of wine served as good imagery to communicate the messages of God – both of judgment and of blessing.

D. Attitudes toward wine

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Bible conveys mixed attitudes towards wine, rendering it both praise and criticism in both the Hebrew and Christian Testaments.³²

The Hebrew Testament set an early precedent of negative attitudes towards wine, beginning with Noah’s story. Later, wine is described in Ecclesiasticus as “good things...created for good people” (Ecclus. 39:25-26) but the prophets are generally reproachful. Habakkuk says “wine is treacherous” (Hab. 2:5; cf. Hos. 4:11). Micah complains about the people who want a preacher who will speak of wine and strong drink (Mic. 2:11). The Nazirites (among whom was Samson) and Rechabites (ascetic brotherhoods in ancient Israel) all avoided fermented drinks completely,³³ apparently a protest against the debauched luxury of the Canaanite civilization (Num. 6:3).

It is well to differentiate attitudes toward wine from attitudes towards drunkenness. Frequently, of course, the Hebrew Testament viewed drinking and drunkenness as synonymous and both with abhorrence. Much of the Hebrew Testament viewed drinking as disgraceful (Jer. 13:13; Ezek. 23-33; Gen. 9:20-27; Gen. 19:31-38) and the stories of both Noah and Lot were good examples, showing the immorality to which a good man exposes himself when he becomes drunk.³⁴ Drunkenness was associated with licentiousness (Hos. 4:11, 18; 2 Sam. 11:13), wealth (1 Sam. 25:36; 1 Kings 16:9; 20:16; Esth. 1:10), insubordination and gluttony (Deut. 21:30). The prophets condemn it in leaders believing it causes moral blindness (Isa. 5:11-12; 28:7; 56:11-12; Amos 6:6;

Prov. 31:4-5). Trito-Isaiah mocks "shepherds" (kings) who were only interested in procuring wine and filling themselves with strong drink (Isa. 56:11-12 cf. Hos. 7:5).³⁵ Isaiah condemned priests and prophets who would "reel" and "stagger" (Isa. 28:7). Because of this, priests are later forbidden fermented drinks while in the Temple sanctuary (Lev. 10:9; 108-109; Ezek. 44:21).³⁶ People were warned about the illusions of inebriation, which said wine "takes away the understanding" (Hos. 4:11) and men who drank it were "confused with wine... they err in vision" (Isa. 28:7). Immoderation and insobriety were regarded as incompatible with holiness (Isa. 5:22; Prov. 21:17; 23:20-21, 29-35). As in the story of Noah, drunkenness is frowned upon especially when it leads to self-exposure (1 Sam. 1:14; Hab. 2:15; Lam. 4:21).

Wisdom writers, and in particular Proverbs,³⁷ are especially critical of drunkenness (Prov. 20:1; 21:17; 23:20-21, 29-35). Wine is a "mocker" and strong drink a "brawler" (Prov. 20:1). Wine is seductive: "Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly" (Prov. 23:21). Readers are warned that if they grew enamored with wine, they would never be wealthy (Prov. 23:20-21). Drunkenness is also satirized (Prov. 23:32-35).

But the later Hebrew Testament distinguishes drunkenness from enjoyment of wine. The Psalmist praised Yahweh for giving "wine to gladden the heart of man" (Ps. 104:15; cf. Judg. 9:13; Eccl. 10:19). A more complex and accurate understanding of wine is found. Its goodness is recognized as well as its dangerous potential. Ben Sirach says "Wine gives life if wine is drunk in moderation. What is life worth without wine? It came into being to make people happy. Drunk at the right time and in the right amount, wine makes for a glad heart and a cheerful mind. Bitterness of soul comes of wine drunk to excess out of temper or bravado" (Ecclus. 31:27-29).

The Christian Testament echoes many of the negative attitudes towards drunkenness found in the Hebrew Testament. In the Christian Testament the immoderate person is not prepared for the coming of the kingdom of God (Luke 21:34) and the "drunkard" would not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10; Gal. 5:21). As in the Hebrew Testament, the Christian Testament disapproves authority figures drinking in excess. John the Baptist, because he was a Nazirite probably took the oath to abstain from consuming fermented drinks (Luke 1:15). Late in the New Testament period, bishops and deacons were only to drink in moderation (1 Tim. 3:3, 8; Tit. 1:7).

Wine is never condemned outright in the New Testament³⁸ although drunkenness is associated with Gentile culture and its wickedness and depravi-

ty [Rom. 13:10; 1 Pet. 4:3]). But if one is a thoughtful Christian, one will not drink wine for fear that it may cause a weaker Christian to slip back into Gentile ways (Rom. 14:21). Sometimes, the Christian Testament is more clearly prescriptive, saying that a Christian should not get drunk on wine but be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18). Other instructions against drinking are still more negative, suggesting that drinking in excess should not be tolerated in the Christian community (1 Cor. 5:11-13).

All of these perspectives on drunkenness are important because they are all somehow connected to the story of the first drunkenness: Gen. 9:20-21. These views resonate with how people of this time period regarded drunkenness and therefore, help us to reevaluate how these people may have regarded the wine production and drunkenness of Noah.

IV. Noah and the Ambiguous Status of the Vine

A. Noah and the Ambiguity of the Vine

As important as is the Noah story as a cultural myth of invention, therefore, it is also a warning against immoderation. Some writers believe this is the main emphasis of the story. Davidson believes that this story tells of the consequence of overindulgence, a potential outcome which follows the new invention.³⁹ Wenham, on the other hand, has a very mixed response to the Noah story. He points out that when Scripture is brief and gives sparse detail (e.g., in 9:21: "He drank some of the wine, and while he was drunk, he lay uncovered in his tent") it often expresses disapproval.⁴⁰ But even Wenham balances this point, saying that because wine is seen as a gift from God to man (Ps. 104:15), Noah was not denounced for drinking *per se*.⁴¹ Neither drinking nor wine but drunkenness is condemned. In fact, Westermann, like many other commentators, argues that Noah's behavior was "regarded as quite acceptable in biblical times: only Ham's voyeurism and his subsequent recounting of what he had seen is censured."⁴²

Noah's drunkenness thus reveals the mixed sentiments regarding wine held at the time Genesis was written. Skinner comments pointedly on this confusion of meaning:

Noah's discovery is there represented as an advance or refinement on the tillage of the ground to which man was sentenced in consequence of his first transgression. And the oracle of Lamech appears to show that the invention of wine is conceived as a *relief from the curse*. How far it is looked on as a divinely approved mode of alleviating the monotony of toil is hard to decide. The moderate use of wine is not

condemned in the OT: on the other hand, it is impossible to doubt that the light in which Noah is exhibited, and the subsequent behaviour of his youngest son, are meant to convey an emphatic warning against the moral dangers attending this new step in human development and the degeneration to which it may lead."⁴³

B. Noah as transitional figure and Second Adam

There are many reasons why this story represents an advancement of agriculture. First, wine production is a complex process requiring more control of resources and technology than other forms of agriculture. Wenham says "This seems to make a step forward in agriculture. Whereas Noah's ancestors raised only the most basic foodstuffs (cf. 3:18-19; 4:2), Noah introduces the cultivation of luxury items so that he can produce 'wine that maketh glad the heart of man (Ps. 104:15)'. "⁴⁴ Second, wine is a source of consolidated, transportable wealth, and therefore advanced commercialization. Entire cities sometimes were formed around vineyards. Skinner calls the invention attributed to Noah "a fresh advance in human civilization," and a major turning point from the nomadic hunting and shepherding to settled agriculture.⁴⁵ But in Gen. 9:21 Noah is still a tent-dweller. Marks comments that "Noah and his two sons Shem and Japheth are tent dwellers (Gen. 9:21 and 27); but Noah, no longer a nomad, has advanced beyond the simplest forms of agriculture to the more specialized, complicated art of vine cultivation...with this occupation the suggested biblical etymology of his name would agree; he is no longer a wanderer but is settled, at rest, and agriculturalist."⁴⁶

The story in Genesis thus points to Noah as the second Adam. First, according to the genealogy, Noah's birth was the first birth since Adam's death, said to be 126 years earlier.⁴⁷ Noah then became the second father of humanity after all other humanity had been destroyed in the flood.⁴⁸ He fathers the remnant, which is supposed to continue life on Earth (Ecclus. 44:17-18). As noted above, Noah's title as "tiller of the soil" may mean "man of the land" or "master of the earth." This idea connects to him being the father and master of a new generation of humanity. Second, Drewermann notes that Noah's drunkenness seems to parallel Adam's indulgence of the forbidden fruit. Furthermore, the new generation born after the flood is just as bad as the generation that preceded the flood: "the humanity that begins with Noah fully parallels the humanity that preceded the flood." Wenham believes that this condemnation of Noah is a little harsh and unforgiving, but that it is still a fall from grace.⁴⁹

Steinmetz, however, argues that Noah's accomplishments and character are an amending of the previous order and a good description of the post-deluvian world. She, like Drewermann, draws parallels between Noah's fall from grace and those of Adam and Eve on the one hand and Cain and Abel on the other. She sees that common motifs among these three point to a myth of the increasing autonomy of humanity, more responsibility as moral agent and more independence from God. Like Drewermann, Steinmetz sees Noah as being the new representative of humanity and a new father of mankind but, unlike Drewermann, Steinmetz affirms the new relationship between society, nature, and God.⁵⁰

Conclusion:

Because alcohol is so often associated with irresponsible and destructive behavior, people forget that it is a gift from God. Our story in Genesis indicates that wine was a symbol of Yahweh's forgiveness and renewal of the earth after the flood. The Hebrew Bible presents it as given to Israel, a symbol of Yahweh's bounty and blessing upon His people, of God's delight in the comfort and well-being of humanity. Even moderate intoxication can give humanity a glimpse of the euphoric atmosphere of the Kingdom of God. As such, given its association with human civilization, it is an indication that human enterprise and achievement is not in and of itself evil. All this is evident in the language in the Bible: Noah's story suggests that wine is a good thing.

But alcohol has not gained its notoriety without reason. And Vogels says that this story shows the limits of humanity.⁵¹ Perhaps Noah was so demoralized by the flood that the wine gave him a sense of comfort and an escape from painful memories. Perhaps God gave the fruit of the vine, the wine, as a sign of blessing after the long nightmare of the flood. Wine brings an otherworldly bliss to earth. Wine offers a taste of "heaven." But alcohol cannot fully replace the Kingdom of God. One could argue that the Bible suggests that humanity is so tempted to make alcohol an idol that God had to create extreme consequences to overindulgences. Thus, wine is paradoxically a symbol of God's bounty and blessing and of humanity's tendency to debauchery and corruption.

This "inventor's saga" of Noah narrates a myth regarding the transition from nomadic to agricultural life. But if the Cain and Abel story (Gen. 4:1-16) depicts a struggle between Cain (agriculture) and Abel (nomadism) the story of Noah shows the dangers of the ascendant agriculture⁵² – drunkenness and human callousness. Greater advancement provides greater opportunity for corruption and, therefore, calls for greater responsibility.

Noah is often presented as a second Adam – the new father of a new humanity and also of a new “fall” from grace because of his drunkenness. Both positive and negative implications come along with this title. Noah is a righteous progenitor of a more righteous, purified humanity. But, like Adam, he provoked his own fall. Steinmetz remarks “Although you may be seduced to sin, you have the power to rule over that which lures you. This is God’s assertion that human beings are responsible for their own deeds.”⁵³

The Genesis stories are stories about humanity gaining more and more autonomy. Noah can be described as a “bringer of the new age, who rescued mankind from the return of chaos in the deluge, a messianic figure.”⁵⁴ God, it appears throughout the Bible, refines humanity, encouraging it to grow more responsible. Noah represents a significant step in that refinement. As the agent of the cataclysmic flood, he brings one epoch to a close. As cultivator of the vine, he opens a new epoch, a new way of life with greater autonomy and greater blessings, but with greater responsibility and greater consequences for carelessness. Noah is the second Adam, the NEW MAN.

Notes

1. J.H. Marks, “Noah,” *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (hereafter, I.D.B.), ed. by G. A. Buttrick et.al. (Nashville: Abingdom, 1962) Vol. III, 555.
2. Ibid. In Genesis 5:32-9:19 and from Genesis 10 thereafter the sons are Shem, Ham and Japheth. The son who disgraced his father Noah in 9:22 was Noah’s youngest son, Ham. In 9:25 Canaan is cursed for the disgrace (not Ham) and his brothers are named Shem and Japheth. (Genesis 9:18 seeks to explain that “...Ham (was) the father of Canaan” and vs. 9:22 assigns the shameful behavior to “Ham, the father of Canaan.”)
3. Ibid 555-56.
4. Ibid.
5. John Skinner, *Genesis*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) 183.
6. Robert Davidson, *Genesis 1-11* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1973) 95.
7. Marks, 555.
8. Ibid.
9. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987) 198.
10. Marks., 554.

11. Skinner, 183.
12. Ibid 555
13. Ibid.
14. World Book Encyclopedia, s.v. "grapes", 320.
15. J. F. Ross, "Vine," I.D.B., Vol. IV, 785.
16. Ibid.
17. J. F. Ross, "Wine", I.D.B., Vol. IV, 850.
18. Ibid, 851.
19. Ibid.
20. Skinner, 183.
21. Ross, 785.
22. Davidson, 94-95.
23. Skinner, 183.
24. Wenham, 198; GE 11:72-73.
25. Ross, 785.
26. Skinner, 185; Davidson, 94.
27. Davidson, 95.
28. Ross, 785.
29. Ibid., 786.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 851.
32. Ibid.
33. Skinner, 183.
34. M. Greenberg, "Drunkenness," I.D.B. Vol. I, 872.
35. Ross, 851.
36. Greenberg, 872.
37. Ross, 851.
38. Ibid.

39. Davidson, 95. Davidson believes it is not fair to judge Noah for his drunkenness because as the first one to ever drink wine, he was merely testing the wine and did not yet know the potency of his new invention.
40. Wenham, 198.
41. Ibid.; Wenham also cites other passages which show that wine was supported, not condemned, in Israel: having a place in peace and burnt offerings, purchase of wine at festivals, and the vine being one of Israel's national symbols.
42. Ibid.; Wenham goes on to describe Westermann's interpretation and condemnation of Ham's disrespect of his father as being sexual misconduct. Furthermore, Wenham makes a point to say that sexual misconduct and overindulgence of alcohol go hand in hand. This is important to mention but will not be elaborated on because it gets into the vast interpretations which can possibly be taken from the incident in 9:22. To expand on this subject would be to stray from the focal point of this paper.
43. Skinner, 186.
44. Wenham, 198.
45. Skinner, 182, 185.
46. Marks, 555, 556
47. Marks, 554.
48. Ibid.
49. Wenham, 199.
50. Devora Steinmetz, "Vineyard, Farm and Garden: The Drunkenness of Noah in the Context of Primeval History," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 113 (1994) 205
51. Walter Vogels, "Cham découvre les limites de son père Noé," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 104 (1987): 544-573.
52. Marks, 555.
53. Steinmetz, 204.
54. Marks 554.

