

Divinely Sanctioned Violence Against Women

Biblical Marriage and the Example of the *Sotah* of Numbers 5

Johanna Stiebert, University of Leeds

Abstract

Responding to an important volume by William Cavanaugh (2009), this article argues that biblical violence executed or sanctioned by God or one of his mediators is appropriately designated religious violence. The author looks particularly at gender-based and sexual violence in marriage, challenging some prominent contemporary notions of “biblical marriage.” Focused attention is brought to Num. 5:11-31, detailing the ritual prescribed for the *sotah*, a woman suspected of adultery. The text is applied both to illuminate religious violence in marriage and to explore and highlight why the ritual, sometimes referred to by biblical interpreters as “strange” or “perplexing,” remains an important topic in our present-day contexts.

Key Words

Sotah; marriage; adultery; gender-based violence (GBV); intimate partner violence (IPV); religious violence.

Introduction

In this article I argue that, contrary to the proposal put forth by William Cavanaugh (2009), violence in the Bible can appropriately be designated religious violence. More specifically, I suggest that biblical violence can be classified as religious violence when it is perpetrated by God, or by human mediators who claim to be carrying out God’s instructions, or when it is given divine mandate, or framed by religious justification or religious significance. In the human realm, biblical violence takes numerous forms and is perpetrated by and against men *and* women. My discussion in this article, however, focuses on divinely sanctioned violence perpetrated *by* men *against* women, especially in the context of marriage. I draw on Numbers 5, detailing the case of the *sotah*—the woman suspected of adultery—as an illustrative example. I focus my analysis of this text within wider discussion of gendered violence in the Bible, as well as within contemporary conversations about gender-based violence (GBV) and intimate partner violence (IPV).¹ While the spectrum of GBV—ranging from microaggressions, to harassment, to sexual assault—has received a flourish of attention, notably through the #MeToo movement, domestic violence and IPV have remained not only persistently commonplace but also consistently more neglected. This, I argue, needs to be called out and challenged, not least by scholars engaging with biblical and religious violence. Texts depicting biblical gender violence are situated in a canon that is

¹ For a full definition of IPV, a description of its range and impact, and statistical information for the US context, see Rowan (2016).

regarded as authoritative by faith communities. They therefore have significant potential to shape attitudes towards GBV within these communities. The biblical scholar's role in highlighting and challenging the Bible's problematic depictions of GBV and the ideologies that underpin them is therefore timely and urgent.

Religious Violence and the Bible

In his tome, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (2009), William Cavanaugh argues that the categories of "religious" and "secular" are inventions developed in modern Western settings. Their purpose, he suggests, is to promote the myth that "religious violence" (especially when associated with Islam and terrorism, as in the wake of 9/11) is typically fanatical and irrational, while "secular violence" is at worst a necessary evil, a rational force to restore stability and democracy. Cavanaugh characterizes this understanding of religious violence as myth, not only because it is false but also because like myths of times past, it makes powerful claims to authority.² He argues that this myth has become "unquestioned the more social reality is made to conform to it" (2009, 6). Nevertheless, he concludes that there is *no* "transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion" (3, 59, 225); any "distinction between secular and religious violence is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying" (9). What is so widely and so authoritatively claimed is, he maintains, unfounded, merely an invention.

Cavanaugh is correct that many scholars "give no definition of religion" or go no further than to "acknowledge the now notorious difficulty of providing a definition" (2009, 16). He describes "religious" and "secular" as co-created signifiers, explaining that "what counts as religion and what does not in any given context is contestable and depends on who has the power and authority to define religion at any given time and place" (59). The separation of religious and secular violence is, he contends, "part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West" (59).

Cavanaugh does not dispute that violence was and is committed in the name of gods and beliefs associated with them, or that sacred texts contain passages that are used to justify violence. He does not, however, distinguish such as examples of *religious* violence per se but as essentially indistinguishable from what might also be called political, or nationalistic violence. He is correct that ancient languages have no word approximating what modern users of English mean by "religion" (2009, 62). As he explains, the Latin *religio*, for instance, pertains primarily to social obligation, to "a powerful requirement to perform some action ... customs and traditions" and is "largely indifferent to theological doctrine" (62). In Rome, and similarly in ancient Israel, there was "no neat division between religion and politics" (61). Cavanaugh's argument therefore focuses on modern usage of the terms "religious" and "secular" and on what he considers an artificial and ideologically charged separation between these two terms. Such bipartite separation, as he explains, is not at issue in ancient texts, such as the Bible. Here there are neither distinct "religious" nor distinct "secular" dimensions.

² Cavanaugh is capitalizing here on the double meaning of "myth," which, on the one hand, refers to "a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon" and, on the other, to "a widely held but false belief or idea" (Oxford English Dictionary).

Cavanaugh states that his meticulous demonstration of the tenuousness of “religious violence” as a distinct category qua “secular,” “political,” or “nationalist” violence “may seem like an academic exercise in quibbling over definitions” (2009, 16). And I would agree that if you’ve been sexually assaulted by your priest, or if your pastor is pressuring you to return to your abusive spouse, or if members of your church tell you that your transgender identity is an “abhorrence” to God, then any quibbling about whether the violence you are enduring is really “religious” or “political” or “institutional” seems like hair-splitting and detraction.

In each of these scenarios—none of them particularly rare³—there is an association between “religion” and “violence.” Religious authority figures and institutions have participated and continue to participate in violence—by allowing violence, covering up violence, turning a blind eye to violence, and sometimes by legitimating and inciting violence.⁴ In the Christian contexts envisaged in all three scenarios, the Bible is sometimes cited as authoritative: most clearly in the second example, where the sanctity of marriage is regularly invoked alongside divine ordinance even when it condemns one partner to domestic violence (Hobbs 2018).

I am not suggesting that Cavanaugh has no emotional response to violence but such a response is not emphasized in his book. There may be good reasons for striking a dispassionate tone, and detachment and objectivity are widely regarded, by either explicit or unspoken rules and standards, as requisites and hallmarks of “proper” scholarship. But with regard to violence, including GBV (my focus here), I find such detachment increasingly unacceptable. On the one hand, the sheer extent of gendered violence is finally finding a voice, with more and more survivors and victims speaking out, seeking and sometimes finding a sympathetic hearing, as well as help, support, solidarity, and justice.⁵ Yet on the other hand, the gravity of such violence continues to be publicly downplayed and undermined by political and religious figures in the highest office.⁶ For this reason, I choose to call out violence,

³ Sexual abuse by religious authority figures and the role of religion and spirituality in survivors’ healing are the focus of ongoing research by Cunnington (2018). On sexual violence in marriage in the rhetoric of Protestant Christian pastors, see Hobbs (2018) and for a deluge of references to transphobic violence in conservative Christian discourse, see Blyth and McRae (2018).

⁴ In some contemporary examples of mass violence—such as the violence committed by Boko Haram in Nigeria, or by ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) against the Yazidi, or by the Myanmar regime against the Rohingya—to claim that religion plays no part in the violence is as inaccurate as saying religion accounts for all the violence. For incisive analysis on how “a theology of rape” (a phrase attributed to journalist Rukmini Callimachi) factors into GBV, both in the biblical text and up to the present, see Blyth and Davidson-Ladd (2018).

⁵ The #MeToo movement exemplifies this particularly forcefully. Within twenty-four hours of actor Alyssa Milano’s rallying cry for solidarity of 15 October 2017, 4.7 million people in 12 million posts on Facebook alone responded with messages declaring sexual harassment and abuse. The movement has not abated to date (Stiebert 2019).

⁶ I am referring, for instance, to political heavy-weights Donald Trump (when he was still presidential nominee), dismissing admissions of sexual harassment and groping as “locker-room banter” (Jacobs, Siddiqui and Bixby 2016), and Jair Bolsonaro (again, when he was presidential nominee) telling congresswoman Maria do Rosario, “I wouldn’t rape you because you don’t deserve it” (Kaiser 2018). In terms of religious authority, Pope Francis’ Vatican summit on child abuse was widely regarded a wasted opportunity that raised and then dashed hopes for commitment to change (Rahim 2019). The Vatican document on gender and sexuality, entitled “Male and Female He Created Them: Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education,” meanwhile, evidences both misinformation and a lack of dialogue with members of queer and transgender communities. The

including religious complicity in violence. In this endeavour, I have plenty of predecessors, such as womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems, whose important monograph on biblical metaphor and domestic violence opens with the powerful question: “What in the image of a naked, mangled female body grips the religious imagination?” (1995,1). Weems’s question is important, first, because, it pulls us up short to the shocking-ness of biblical texts, which is all too often suppressed, or represented in sanitized form. And second, it explains my shifting between ancient text and events of the present.⁷ Violence in the elevated collection of texts that make up the Bible has affinities with violence in our own time. Moreover, the Bible is constantly brought into and reconfigured in the present and the present *is* where I interpret the biblical text.

For this article I have chosen Num. 5:11-31, a text that is not likely to be the first to spring to mind when it comes to identifying violent texts of the Bible. It is not, for instance, one of the “texts of terror” in Phyllis Trible’s seminal book of the same name. It is less overt in its horror than, for example, the gang rape and dismemberment of the Levite’s wife in Judges 19. Yet, I argue, Numbers 5 *is* marked by ideologies that promote and condone divinely sanctioned GBV, because it both displays and excuses violence in marriage. This, in turn, has impact on contemporary understandings of gender relationships, including the tendency to downplay abuse and inequity when they take place within marriage.⁸ My primary intention, therefore, is to call out as violent what is often shrouded in assumptions and stereotypes about “biblical marriage” and to highlight that Numbers 5 has uncomfortable resonances with what can aptly be characterized as rape culture.⁹ The Bible has a pervasive presence and authority in my own social context and even more so in many other settings, notably large swathes of the global South where the Bible’s presence and status are markedly prominent. Furthermore, because I am reading and interpreting ancient texts in the here and now and cannot do otherwise, I will be alluding to connections between ancient texts and present contexts.¹⁰

document, given the authority conferred on it, holds significant potential for discriminating further against and harming transgender children in particular (Long-García 2019).

⁷ Such is evident also in other interpretations of Numbers 5. Britt, discussing male jealousy in the Bible, draws parallels with the contemporary prominence of “a jealous male husband or acquaintance” (2007, 05.6; cf. Briggs 2009, 289-91).

⁸ #MeToo has turned mass attention towards sexual harassment, abuse, and rape. Most of the #MeToo revelations are by women concerning perpetrating men (Peters and Besley 2018). While statistically most rapes are committed by persons known to the victim and while a significant number of these are perpetrated by intimate partners or former intimate partners, #MeToo has not focused in any way proportionally on IPV (see Wallace 2018 and Mervosh 2018).

⁹ The term “rape culture” originated in feminist contexts of the 1970s. It has become especially prominent since 2013. In brief, rape culture refers to communities and societies where rape not only occurs with some frequency but where sexual violence is perpetuated, trivialized, and normalized through unobtrusive ways, or microaggressions, including via sexist advertising and language, rape “jokes,” and body shaming (Phillips 2017, 1-34). The term has also come to be more and more prominent in analyses of the Bible (e.g. Kalmanofsky 2017; Blyth, Colgan, and Edwards 2018; Stiebert 2019).

¹⁰ The Church of England is the state religion of England, where I reside. Christianity, founded on the Bible, is also the dominant religion of the United States, which remains economically and culturally dominant, certainly in the Anglophone West. The United States has the largest Christian population of any single country in the world, although other countries have higher percentages of Christians among their populations. This applies particularly to populations of South America and

I am aware of the anachronism argument: namely, that “biblical times” were very different to our own and that rape, too, was “different,” or construed “differently,” in ancient biblical cultures. Hence, some scholars have contested the translation of “rape” for depictions of sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible. Some resist it on the grounds that there is no Hebrew word that captures notions of consent, which are central to the usage of the word in modern English (e.g. Kawashima 2011); or, that there is no English word that aptly captures the causative movement downward, particularly in terms of a woman’s social status, as is inherent in the word *‘innâ* (often translated “rape” in modern English translations of Gen. 34:2 and elsewhere) (e.g. van Wolde 2002). Leah Rediger Schulte, for example, goes to great lengths to argue that “biblical rape” is entirely distinct from “modern understanding of rape” (2017, 1-31). She suggests that four elements must come together for something to qualify as rape in the Hebrew Bible: God’s absence; the presence of either a foreigner or an outsider; the presence of a persistent problem; and an incorrect resolution (69-101). Schulte concludes in accordance with these defining criteria that the Levite’s wife (Judges 19), Tamar (2 Samuel 13), and Dinah (Genesis 34) qualify as victims of rape, whereas Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11) does not. Instead, because “the deity is present in divine name in the last word of the last verse of 2 Samuel 11” (137) and “since Bathsheba becomes a queen mother in Israel and is the one who reminds David of his promise to enthrone her son Solomon, she *cannot* be a rape victim” (134; original italics). For Schulte, Bathsheba’s bathing, is, instead, a “self-sanctification” and David’s “lying with her ... signifies her transition from foreigner to insider” (138). I find this bizarrely apologetic and a sanitization of what appears much more straightforwardly like David’s abuse of power and his rape of Bathsheba.

Neither Schulte nor I have access to the narrator of 2 Samuel 11, or of any other biblical text. Therefore, how rape was experienced, defined, or evaluated in the narrator’s milieu and whether or not this was different from ancient or modern women’s experiences of rape, is impossible to establish. I acknowledge that interpretation is necessarily subjective and shaped by the context in which it is conducted. I also align myself with Sandie Gravett in recognizing the need for “balancing of the social and cultural world of the text with the need to communicate content effectively in English” (2004, 279). This, I argue permits the translation of rape in a number of Hebrew Bible texts. Alternative translations of words such as *‘innâ* (e.g. “humbled,” “shamed,” or even “seduced” instead of “raped”) can mitigate the violence that is often very explicit in the Hebrew text.

Most importantly, as Caroline Blyth writes, “The sexist and at times misogynistic myths and attitudes given voice within the biblical scriptures still resonate today within a diversity of contemporary cultures, bearing witness to the pervasive and insidious influence that these ancient cultural ideologies have had *and continue to have* on values and belief systems” (2010, 16; original italics). By calling this out I am seeking, like Blyth, to disrupt the perpetuation, validation, and legitimation of gender inequality and of violence against women, including and especially within marriage.

sub-Saharan Africa. Even in contexts outside of congregations, such as popular culture contexts, the presence and influence of the Bible is pronounced. Edwards (2012; 2015) demonstrates this amply.

Biblical violence

That there is violence in the Bible is no great revelation. There is violence in the Hebrew Bible and violence in the New Testament. While my focus here will be a text from the Hebrew Bible, the supersessionist notion that the New Testament is somehow about “things being all better now” has been roundly challenged (see, for example, Schüssler Fiorenza 2011; Matthews 2017; Warren 2017). There is a wide vocabulary of violence in the Bible and there are copious occasions of war, killings, genocide, and rape.

In his paper “The Ubiquitous Language of Violence in the Hebrew Bible” (2018), David Clines collects Hebrew words for violence, before analysing them semantically, and recording the number of times each word is used. His aim is to assess how much violence there actually is. Focusing on “a largely physical definition of violence ... typically injury done especially to the body,”¹¹ Clines establishes that there are around 500 Hebrew terms for violence “and [that] the occurrences of violence total some 10,033.” Of those, he explains, “1,865 are ascribed to the deity, i.e. 18.6%.” He also notes, “on average, there are more than six instances of violence on every page of the Hebrew Bible, including more than one of divine violence.”¹²

Most human-generated violence in the Hebrew Bible is perpetrated by men against men. Much of it is deadly and on a grand scale. As Clines has noted elsewhere, being a fighter is the most defining of masculine characteristics: “It is essential for a man ... that he be strong—which means ... capable of violence against other men and active in killing other men” (2009, 217). Men, however, do not only kill other men, but also women and girls, particularly during warfare (e.g. Josh. 6:21).

When it comes to sexualized violence, there is considerably more male-on-female than male-on-male violence. Concerning the latter, there are threats of male-male gang rape (Gen. 19:5; Judg. 19:22) and Gen. 9:18-29 might hint at an incestuous incident between a drunken Noah and his son Ham. There are possible overtones of sexualized humiliation in Ishmael’s mocking of Isaac, which so inflames Sarah when she observes it, that she insists on evicting Ishmael together with his mother Hagar (Gen. 21:9), as well as in the Philistines’ humiliation of Samson (Judg. 16:25).¹³ Both passages use the verb at the root of Isaac’s name (*ts-ch-q*), which denotes forced sex and/or sexual humiliation in the story of Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39:14, 17). There is also reference to abused young men in Lamentations, men who have to grind (*t-ch-n*)—a verb with sexual overtones elsewhere (Lam. 5:13;

¹¹ The definition offered by the World Health Organization (WHO), on the other hand, extends also to threat, including against groups and communities, as well as encompassing “psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (see “World Report on Violence and Health: Summary” n.d., 4). My application of “violence” to Numbers 5 is wider than Clines’ and more in line with that of the WHO.

¹² Clines (2018) also asks, “is it a big number?” Putting the vocabulary of violence into context, he points out, “Let us recall that the Hebrew Bible contains some 303,500 words. The 10,033 occurrences are therefore 3.3% of the whole Hebrew Bible. Is that a big number?” I, for one, would say yes, it certainly is.

¹³ The Judges story also contains other, possibly sexualized, references to the Philistines’ denigration of Samson, using verbs from the root *-n-h* (Judg. 16:5, 6, 19).

cf. Isa. 47:2-3)—and both Job (30:11) and Jeremiah (20:7-8) use images suggestive of being raped by a masculinized God, who overpowers and prevails against them.

Nevertheless, references to sexual violence perpetrated by men against women are far more numerous. This has generated an extensive interpretive literature, especially in feminist criticism and especially since the turn of the millennium.¹⁴ There is repeated mention of sexual violence against women in war (Deut. 21:11-14; Lam. 5:11; Zech. 14:2)—such is even mentioned lightly, in song, alongside a wish for pretty presents gathered among the spoils (Judg. 5:30). Women and girls who have “not known a man” are sometimes specified as reserved for rape following conquests (Num. 31:17-18;¹⁵ Judg. 21:11-12). The rape of female servants for procreation—such as the sexual enslavement of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah (Gen. 16:2-4; 30:3-7, 9-12; 35:22) is mentioned matter-of-factly, with no dwelling on the details of violence. Only in the case of Hagar are these explicit, though none the less divinely sanctioned (Gen. 16:6-9).

Not uncommon in depictions of male-on-female violence is men’s physical strength—men are described as seizing women (e.g. Deut. 22:25, 28), carrying women off (Judg. 21:21), and overpowering women (2 Sam. 13:14). Even the book of Ruth, which is so often praised in terms of being a pastoral idyll or “women’s book,” has repeated mention of the dangers that lie in wait for women. Boaz tells Ruth to stay close to “his” young women and orders the male workers not to molest her (Ruth 2:8-9, 16). Naomi later reiterates this instruction to her daughter-in-law (Ruth 2:22).

Women’s vulnerability to harm from men is evident in other ways too. Men clearly have more status, which confers power, including power and impunity to rape: the sons of God see human women and take them (Gen. 6:2); the Hivite prince Shechem sees and takes Dinah (Gen. 34:2); King David sees and takes Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:2-4);¹⁶ the royal firstborn Amnon gets rid of any witnesses and overpowers Tamar, an act that is met with anger (but no action) from his father (2

¹⁴ See the summary by Scholz (2018, 185-90). Scholz refers to Phyllis Trible’s *Texts of Terror* (1984) as “pioneering” (185). Scholz describes the years since 2000 as a breaking of the flood waters, seeing the publication of numerous book-length studies on sexual violence (187).

¹⁵ This passage is particularly disturbing. As Andreas Michel points out, “in a horrifying way there is no limitation of age in the direction of small children. The lack of such a limitation, the clear sexual connotation (‘who have not known a man’) together with the ‘for you’, and additionally the fact that this is a positive instruction or permission given by Moses characterize the verse in the context of sexual violence against children as markedly harsh” (2004, 57). This is a clear instance of religious GBV.

¹⁶ Whether or not David rapes Bathsheba is contested by commentators (see above). Notable about 2 Samuel 11-12, however, is that there is no suggestion of Bathsheba’s guilt. The crime is emphatically “the thing that David had done” (11:27). It is David who committed an evil by taking Bathsheba (12:9); Bathsheba, by contrast, is the lamb of Nathan’s parable. In the text, she is not accused of either collusion or seduction and blame is focused entirely on David. While his crime is specified as adultery and murder in nefarious circumstances, rather than as rape, Bathsheba is not co-responsible, indicating, very possibly, that she was indeed raped.

Sam. 13:21);¹⁷ the royal upstart Absalom follows the advice of Achitophel, a respected adviser, and publicly rapes David's wives (2 Sam. 16:22).¹⁸

Sometimes the rape of women *is* depicted in sympathetic terms, such as the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13), where Tamar is presented as an innocent and tragic victim (Stiebert 2013, 59-64). Sometimes rape is depicted in graphic terms that accentuate brutality and incite outrage and pity—notably, in the casting of ransacked Jerusalem as a raped woman in Lamentations 1 (Stiebert 2013, 190-95). But more often, sexual violence inflicted on women by men is depicted in passing, matter-of-factly—as something that just “is,” something normalized. Harold Washington was one of the first to note that ancient Israel as reflected in the Hebrew Bible is a rape culture, where “sexual assault is viewed as a manly act and women are regarded as intrinsically rapable” (1997, 352).¹⁹

Marriage and Violence

In the Bible, marriage is no barrier to violence, including sexual violence. Indeed, marriage and violence are very much enmeshed. Nevertheless, even today, the Bible continues to be used—albeit highly selectively—to defend, or proof-text, particular conceptions of marriage that regularly erase the persistent presence of violence occurring in marriage.

In Jewish and Christian traditions, the Bible is widely drawn upon for an aetiology of marriage, as well as for defending and praising marriage. It is oft-quoted in wedding ceremonies and cited to reject the word “marriage” as a suitable term for same-sex unions, typically by referring to Gen. 2:18-24. One Christian website, which is representative of this usage, claims, with reference to this passage: “Marriage was instituted by God in the Garden of Eden at the time of man’s creation as a union between a man and a woman” (Crosswalk 2016; cf. Gospel Coalition 2015). Similarly, Andreas Kostenberger,²⁰ an influential figure in Southern Baptism and author of *God, Marriage, and the Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (2004), laments that marriage is under siege today and urges “a return to [its] biblical

¹⁷ The Hebrew text states only that David was very angry. The Greek version adds that David would not punish his son, because he loved him, on account of being his firstborn. This reading is reflected also in a Hebrew manuscript from Qumran.

¹⁸ Divine sanction to rape is not always clear but, in my view, sometimes implied (*pace* Schulte 2017). David is remembered as a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; cf. 1 Sam.16:7; Acts 13:22). YHWH is displeased with David and David is punished for adultery and his role in the killing of Uriah (2 Sam. 12:9) but not (in any way made explicit) for the *rape* of Bathsheba. Astonishingly, right up to the present, David is held up for such qualities as being “respectful” and “loving” (see Edmondson n.d.), which erases any allusion to or acknowledgement of his rape of Bathsheba or his failure to avenge his raped daughter, Tamar. On another note, the religious authority of Achitophel’s counsel when he instructs Absalom to rape his father’s wives is transparent, being likened to “the word of God” (2 Sam. 16:21-23).

¹⁹ Occasionally, women are depicted as inflicting sexualized violence on men. Potiphar’s wife harasses, physically seizes, and later falsely accuses Joseph of attempted rape (Gen. 39:10-18). There is also the story of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38), which, read at face value, is a story of two women raping their incapacitated father (cf. Scholz 2010, 169). Other readings of this strange story, praising or condemning either the daughters, Lot, or both, are possible (see Stiebert 2016, 156-65).

²⁰ Kostenberger is Professor of New Testament at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, editor of an evangelical journal and founding president of Biblical Foundations, an organization aimed at “restoring the biblical foundations of the home, the church, and society” (Kostenberger, n.d.).

foundation” (Kostenberger n.d).²¹ He, too, highlights Genesis 2 as stressing “the complementarity of male and female” and asserts that “the fullest understanding of God’s will for marriage can be derived from a careful examination of scriptural teachings.” For Kostenberger, biblical marriage is “a covenant, a sacred bond” and “rightly understood ... involves a husband, a wife, and God.” He also points to many passages in the New Testament but states that “marriage was the overwhelming norm in Old Testament times, in keeping with the foundational creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2.” To substantiate this claim, he references Prov. 31:10-31, which extols an excellent wife, and Song of Songs, which, he alleges, praises sex within marriage.²²

Kostenberger succinctly summarizes what he deems the “biblical” brand of Christian marriage and family. He identifies also six sins (or sinful compromises) that have corrupted ideal biblical marriage. These are polygamy, divorce, adultery, homosexuality, sterility, and gender role confusion. Whereas sterility is not always the result of personal sin but sometimes “a simple fact of (fallen) nature” (though “God is often shown to answer prayers for fertility offered by his people in faith”), the other five are designated sinful and aberrant choices, defying divine design. According to Kostenberger, God’s design for marriage is for a monogamous union for life between a cisgender masculine man and a cisgender feminine woman who have sex only with each other and bring forth children. He approves of the New Testament household codes, which include the injunction for wives to submit to their husbands. Any possibilities for such unions and hierarchies generating domestic violence or marital rape²³ receive no mention or consideration and neither is listed among the sins of marriage or as indicative of “fallen nature.”

It is indeed possible to argue for a representation of “biblical marriage” that is somewhat positive but also more critical and nuanced than Kostenberger’s own understanding (see, for example, Hunter 2019). My aim here, however, is to challenge head-on persons such as Kostenberger who distort what the Bible says about marriage because they fail to consider the presence of GBV and IPV in biblical depictions of marriage. Moreover, the Bible is largely silent on the necessary details of marriage; what Kostenberger refers to as “biblical marriage” is in many ways his own ideological construction, based on a selective scrabble (or proof-texting) of various Old and New Testament passages.

²¹ All quotes in this and the following paragraph are from Kostenberger (n.d.).

²² Both the passage from Proverbs (Tan 2018, 66-71) and Song of Songs (Clines 2009, 94-121) can be read as male fantasies that are damaging for women. The notion that the male and female in Song of Songs are married is questionable in a number of ways. Why, for instance, the unrequited yearning (e.g. Song 8:1-3) if the couple is married? Why the brothers’ concern for their sister’s actions (1:6) and for keeping her confined (8:8-9) if she has a husband, given that husbands elsewhere in the biblical traditions seem to be responsible for, even regarded as in possession of, their wives (cf. Hunter 2019)?

²³ Marital rape became criminalized in the United Kingdom in a landmark court case in 1991. Its illegality was formalized in the Sexual Offences Act of 2003. For a full discussion, including persistent and worrisome confusion among many responders to a recent survey as to whether or not rape in marriage is a crime, or even exists, see “When did marital become a crime?” (2018).

So what does the Bible say about marriage? Certainly, there is little or no mention of marriage ceremonies.²⁴ There is also no information about the age at which marriage might take place—though some commentators state with confidence that sexually mature girls were quickly married off (e.g. Blenkinsopp 1997, 77). There is also little about women’s right to assent to marriage, with one possible exception being Rebekah’s expression of willingness to marry Isaac without setting eyes on him first (Gen. 24:57-58). There is some indication that it is desirable for marriages to be arranged by parents, and polygamy is not uncommon. As Annalisa Azzoni points out, “Marriage in the Hebrew Bible cannot be described as being between one man and one woman, but instead between a man and all the women sexually available to him in his household” (2014, 484). Consanguineous marriage receives repeated mention (e.g. Gen. 29; Num. 36:11-12; Josh. 15:17; 2 Chron. 11:18-20). Marriage to someone of another ethnicity is sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly abhorred. Esau’s Hittite wives disgust his mother and Jacob is prevented from taking a Canaanite wife (Gen. 27:46–28:6). Solomon is faulted for what is depicted as the sin of taking foreign wives (1 Kgs 11:1-8; Neh. 13:26). Ezra laments the marriages of the people of Israel to foreign women, which has led to mixing and thereby, presumably, diluting or polluting “the holy seed” (Ezra 9:1-2). Only expulsion can restore the covenant with God (Ezra 10:1-3) and only separation can avert guilt (Ezra 10:10-11; cf. Neh. 10:28-30).

Meanwhile, Ruth may be a good woman but her Moabite ethnicity is clearly perceived as an “issue,” because it is mentioned over and over again (1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). Indeed, as has been widely suggested, the *raison d’être* of the book may be to account for the pesky Moabite in David’s lineage by making Ruth, while undeniably a Moabite, a *model* Moabite whose exceptional virtue (sticking by her mother-in-law, adopting Israel and its God, working hard, marrying whom she is told, and handing over her baby) counteracts the perceived blemish of her deficiency on ethnic grounds.²⁵ Biblical marriage thus seems to be quite widely associated with notions of religio-ethnic purity, not to mention all the violence required to enforce this (Num. 25:6-18; Neh. 13:25).

Above all, though, Hebrew Bible betrothal and marriage are agreements to move women from the sphere of authority of the natal home, in particular the father, to that of the spousal home. On marriage and during marriage, a man has the power to nullify or validate a woman’s vows (Num. 30:6-15) and this decision, moreover, facilitates divine forgiveness (Num. 30:12). A husband’s power is linked to God’s. Biblical marriage is thus associated with gender hierarchy and the ownership of women. It is telling that wives are listed among one’s neighbours’ possessions (alongside slaves and animals) that should not be coveted (Exod. 20:17).

²⁴ Azzoni states of the Hebrew Bible that in terms of the “specifics of the ceremony, the evidence is scant” (2014, 486), while D’Angelo writes of the New Testament that attention to marriage is “scattershot and limited” (2014, 501).

²⁵ Both Gafney (2009) and Yee (2009) draw out the significance of Ruth’s Moabite ethnicity to the narrative as a whole. Through drawing poignant affinities with contemporary Chinese American women in the United States, Yee points out how even when an ethnic minority is stereotyped in positive terms the effect can be deleterious and objectifying.

Marriage is also often associated with sexual violence. Rape is a catalyst for marriage;²⁶ marriage can be a “solution” to rape²⁷ and rape can occur in marriage.²⁸ Neither a rapist’s desire to subsequently marry his rape victim (Gen. 34:3-4), nor generous payments or marriage without prospect of divorce in the aftermath of rape (Gen. 34:12; Deut. 22:29); neither delaying rape marriage by a month (Deut. 21:13), nor formalizing a union to facilitate rape (Gen. 16:3) should hide or neutralize the presence of rape in a number of marriage contexts of the Hebrew Bible.

Violence in Numbers 5

With all this in mind, let me now turn to Numbers 5. The passage describes in detail an elaborate ritual for a particular scenario in the course of a marriage: what to do if a husband suspects his wife has committed adultery. The ritual in Numbers 5 is gender-specific, applying only to a *woman* suspected of adultery with a man (Towers 2014). Elsewhere in the Torah, adultery is depicted as a grievous crime. The death penalty is stipulated as punishment for *both* parties involved in adultery—the man *and* the woman (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-29). Nevertheless, adultery is a one-sided matter and, by definition, is only committed in cases where the woman is either married or betrothed and has sexual relations with a man other than her husband.²⁹

Notable about the Numbers passage from the outset is the insistent reference to religious authority: the ritual is ascribed to the word of YHWH, is transmitted to Moses (Num. 5:11) and is to be administered by “the priest.” YHWH is mentioned repeatedly after this, too: the ritual is performed before him (vv.16, 18, 25, 30) and his name is invoked in the curse (v.21). Very active in the execution of the ritual is the priest. The woman is brought to the priest who positions her (vv. 16, 18). He takes sacred water and prepares a potion by adding dust from the Tabernacle floor to the water (v.17). He dishevels the woman’s hair (literally, “head”) (v.18), and places the offerings and potion (v.18, 25). He adjures (vv.19-20), administers a curse (vv.21-22), writes the curses on a scroll then washes the words off the scroll into the water, and makes the woman drink this potion (vv.23-24, 26). Lastly, he burns the offering (v.26). The woman is active only insofar as saying “amen, amen” to the curse pronounced on her (v.22). Otherwise things are done *to* her. For Susanna

²⁶ In Gen. 16:1-4 the distinction between “marriage” and Abram’s sex with Hagar, which leads to conception, is unclear. Rape as a segue to marriage is also evident in the “marriage” by abduction and rape of the young women of Shiloh (Judg. 21:20-23). The law in Deut. 22:28-29 stipulates that a man who seizes and has sex with an unbetrothed virgin must pay her father a fine and marry her without recourse to divorce; this is also a veritable invitation to “marriage” by rape.

²⁷ As mentioned in the footnote above, Deut. 22:28-29 stipulates marriage as a solution to the rape of an unbetrothed woman. Tamar also appears to propose marriage both before (2 Sam. 13:13) and after (2 Sam. 13:16) she is raped by her half-brother Amnon.

²⁸ This might be suggested in Gen. 31:50, where Laban, before parting from Jacob and his daughters, enjoins his son-in-law not to “ill-treat” (NRSV) his wives. The verb is from the Hebrew root *‘n-h* and in thirteen places designates sexual violence against women (see van Wolde 2002, 530). Scholz (2010, 91) also argues that the verb from the root *ts-ch-q*, describing what Isaac enacts on his wife Rebekah (Gen. 26:8), has “rape-prone” connotations, as it certainly does in the accusation of Potiphar’s wife against Joseph (Gen. 39:14, 17). The captive war bride is also an example of a woman raped in marriage (Deut. 21:10-14).

²⁹ If, however, a man has sex with an enslaved woman who is promised to another man, this does not constitute adultery and does not incur the death penalty. Such a wrongdoing is rectified by bringing a guilt offering (Lev. 19:20-22). Once again, this indicates the impunity with which enslaved women, like Hagar, too, could be used for sex, or even raped.

Towers, “The embedding of her consent to the curse reinforce[s] the passive role she plays in the ritual” (2014, 6). Similarly, Brian Britt writes that “there is no explicit opportunity for the accused woman to move or speak, except to respond ‘Amen’ to the priest’s oath”; he concludes that “she is treated like a living mannequin by the men” (2007, 05.3).

The prominence of YHWH (and of religious authority legitimated by him) is also pronounced in other texts depicting crimes of a sexual nature. Hence, the incest laws of Leviticus 18 also begin (like Num. 5:11) with YHWH telling Moses to pass on his words (Lev. 18:1). The invocation of the deity, like the punishment determined before YHWH through a quasi-magical divination ritual,³⁰ is perhaps especially appropriate for offences such as incest or adultery, which tend to be clandestine (v.13), and therefore especially difficult to prove and likely to arouse profound anxiety.³¹ Alice Bach may well be right that with Numbers 5, this anxiety concerns, above all, female erotic desire. As she suggests, this text is about asserting “dominance over women’s bodies” and assuring a husband “that his honor could be restored if he had so much as a suspicion that his wife had been fooling around” (1999, 506). Ishay Rosen-Zvi argues similarly (though referring to the ritual as depicted in *Tosefta Sotah*)³² that the ritual constitutes “the ultimate cure for male fears, presenting the rebellious woman as passive, controlled, publicly exposed and ultimately stripped of all her seductive powers” (2006, 276).

Richard Friedman discusses several commentators who argue that, because a potion “of ‘holy’ water, dust from the Tabernacle floor, and ink from words on a parchment ... cannot be guaranteed to produce prolapsed uteri or any other particular condition in all guilty adulteresses ... the law’s effect was precisely to find all women not guilty and thus to prevent ‘lynchings’” (2012, 372).³³ In other words, the law is considered as having the ultimately benign purpose of both assuaging a jealous husband’s anxieties and, simultaneously, protecting, or at least not harming, the woman. For a number of reasons, this is implausible.

³⁰ Commentators point out that the law code of Hammurabi contains a similar trial by ordeal for both accusations of sorcery (law 2) and suspected adultery (law 132) (see Friedman 2012, 372 and n. 7).

³¹ Towers links Num. 5:11-31 and Deut. 21:1-9 (describing a ritual to absolve from blood guilt in the event of the discovery of a slain corpse where the murderer is not known) with “the connection between these two divinatory rituals ... [being] uncertainty regarding the crime committed” (2014, 5).

³² Later retellings or interpretations of the ritual are even more appalling. Rosen-Zvi (n.d.) describes how Mishnaic ritual “contains stages of abasing and humiliating the woman in public and ends with her death in the Temple” and Towers notes how in *Mishnah Sotah* and *Tosefta Sotah*, “representations ... of this ritual and its consequences become increasingly sexual, humiliating and brutal, yet the conditions for its enactment become stricter” (2014, 6). Graphic and violent language is again in evidence: “her face turns yellow, her eyes bulge out and her veins swell” (*Mishnah Sotah* 3:4). Josephus, meanwhile, describes the death of a woman guilty of adultery in gruesome terms: “Her thigh fell off from her, and her belly swelled with dropsy” (*Antiquities of the Jews* III, cited in Towers 2014, 9). Philo, much like Numbers 5, assumes the woman’s guilt and likens her to a wild beast. He also, with characteristic allegory, makes her punishment fit her crime, by attributing the swelling belly to insatiability of appetites and the falling thigh to desertion of reason (cited in Towers 2014, 10).

³³ Several contributions to Bach’s handbook (1999), notably the one by Jacob Milgrom, who uses the word “lynch,” represent this kind of interpretation.

First of all, I draw on Mary Douglas's challenge to the suggestion of arbitrariness in the Levitical dietary laws, as her argument has validity for our discussion here. Douglas asks, "Is it plausible to argue that [lawmakers] tend to codify nonsense—arbitrary enactments?" (1984, 47). I agree with her that it is not. For someone to record and transmit a text as detailed and precise as Num. 5:11-31 in the full knowledge that the ritual described is a smokescreen to protect women from their husbands' jealousy is highly improbable. It is also unlikely that if such a ritual was practised, it did no harm to the woman, even if the potion was no more than a placebo. The *violence* of this text must be emphasized. There is violence of the kind specified by Clines and Cavanaugh, of injury to the body—hence, if the woman is guilty, the potion will ensure "that her belly will distend and her thigh ... sag" (5:27). This is expressed as the consequence of the woman being a curse and an imprecation among her people, and seems to happen directly upon ingesting a potion prepared by the priest (vv.21-22).³⁴

Alongside this is also the possibility of psychological and emotional violence in terms of suspecting the woman of guilt, even presupposing guilt, subjecting her to an ordeal in which she is exposed and put on trial in a sacred and possibly public setting, which carries with it the risk of social exclusion and ostracism (v.27). First, her husband suspects her of adultery and this suspicion is brought to the priest and possibly made known to other members in the community—this alone is likely to cause distress. If the societies in the background of the texts are indeed shame cultures—as proposed by numerous commentators³⁵—the woman's distress would have been acute. Additionally, there is the elaborate and formal ritual and the fear of punishment. As Towers notes, whether the ritual was practised regularly or not, it "acts as a strong social message to other females in the community of the dangers of adultery" (2014, 6). If the ritual is able to assuage the husband, its curse and punishments are likely to have been believed in—or, at the very least, sufficient *gravitas* and *dignity*³⁶ would need to have been conferred on the ritual for it to have any efficacy in restoring either the woman's public standing or the husband's emotional equilibrium. I find it disturbing that some interpreters consider the ritual to be *protective* of the woman. If that is the case, not only does protection come with

³⁴ A number of suggestions have been made as to what this might mean in medical terms. These include oedema (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* II.vi.6), "harm to the sexual organs" causing infertility (Rosen-Zvi), a spontaneous abortion, and a prolapsed uterus (Frymer-Kensky 1999). Friedman (2012) interprets the distended belly and sagging thigh as referring straightforwardly to visible signs of pregnancy. He is correct that the word translated "belly" (*beten*) very often means "womb." He argues against the idea that "the swelling and sagging take place immediately, right there at the ceremony" (380). Friedman argues further that the curse inflicted by the holy water applies to punishment from God, not humans: "The law prescribes a ritual that, in the case of guilt, brings about a curse. If she is pregnant, then the bitter cursing waters do what a court cannot do. That is, her punishment is out of human hands. It is turned over to God. Thus the entire matter is a ritual procedure rather than a judicial one" (377). The woman is cursed if she committed adultery, but not if she is innocent. Both Tosefta Sotah and Josephus, however, interpret the physical response as an immediate punishment. Moreover, the sagging thigh seems an odd feature of pregnancy. I am not, therefore, persuaded by all of Friedman's argument.

³⁵ For honour and shame in the biblical world, see Matthews and Benjamin (1996).

³⁶ I am thinking here of the *dignity* and *gravitas* conferred, for instance, on church ritual. Hence, even for those taking communion who do not see the ritual as partaking in the body and blood of Christ, this ritual can be awe-inspiring, or instil a feeling of reverence.

elaborate accommodation to husbands' jealousies but it also comes at considerable cost to the woman. The question arises if such "protection" is really worth having.³⁷

In a number of ways, the ritual is very much stacked against the woman. While it is supposed to determine her guilt and while the potion may cause her harm (in the form of bodily pain, possibly also a spontaneous abortion), or exonerate her should she be innocent, leaving her "unharméd"³⁸ and able to remain pregnant or become pregnant (lit. "retain seed," vv.27-28), the opening statement still presumes her guilt. The reference is to a woman who *has* gone astray (from *ś-t-h*)³⁹ and who *has* broken faith (*m-'l*)⁴⁰ with her husband (v.12). This is then elaborated upon: the straying refers to another man who has had sex with the woman (male initiative is presumed—*ś-k-b* is a verb that only men perform). The sexual activity has involved *šikbat-zera'* ("lying of seed"), presumably penetrative sex and ejaculation (v.13),⁴¹ and this has been hidden from the eyes of the husband. Moreover, the woman has kept secret that she was defiled or that she has defiled herself (the verb is from *t-m-'* and in the nifal form and can indicate a passive or reflexive voice) but there was no witness to this event and neither was she forced (v.13).⁴² So on the one hand, a man other than her husband had sex with her but she defiled herself. She is accused of secrecy and somehow (though it is not clear how), it is confirmed that she was not forced. On the one hand, her agency is undermined by her passive role: the man took initiative—the colloquial translation "he laid her" captures the Hebrew well; also, she has become defiled or has defiled herself. But her passivity does not remove her responsibility. She alone is responsible for what has been *done to her*.⁴³

Let me stay with the suggestion that the woman was not forced: the verb negated here is from the root *t-p-ś*, meaning "to lay hold of, capture, or seize." In Deut. 22:28, it refers to a man who, having "found" a virgin who is not betrothed, *seizes* her and has sex with her (presumably by force),⁴⁴ and who is subsequently discovered. He then must pay a fine to the woman's father and marry the woman without possibility of divorce. In Numbers 5, the use of this same verb in its negative

³⁷ Moreover, if the woman was unjustly accused, pregnant, and subsequent to the ritual suffered a miscarriage, or if she was unable to conceive following the ritual, this could likely transpire in imputations of adultery. Protection of the woman seems doubtful.

³⁸ The verb translated "unharméd" (e.g. in the JPS translation) is a nifal from the root *n-q-h*, meaning "be purged, cleaned." It suggests that the water ritual can effect some sort of affirmation of the woman being "clean," as in "not defiled (by adultery)," hence, the adjective from *t-h-r*. But over and above that, the ritual also effects something purifying—as if such was necessary even in the absence of guilt. This might imply that the suggestion of adultery is defiling and requires purification. The woman is not given agency and she cannot entirely escape being tainted.

³⁹ The verb pertains to a general turning away in Prov. 4:15 but also to straying on the path of an adulteress in Prov. 7:25.

⁴⁰ The verb refers to acting wrongfully or unfaithfully, including against YHWH (Lev. 5:15, 21).

⁴¹ As Friedman points out, intercourse involving seed in the context of adultery is mentioned also at Lev. 18:20 but not in other laws dealing with this crime (e.g. Deut. 22:23, 25).

⁴² I agree with Friedman that the text "does not reveal whether a woman's intercourse of seed was rape or consensual" (2012, 377).

⁴³ This is not a singular example. As Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes has pointed out, the metaphorical sisters condemned for their sexual depravity in Ezek. 23:3 are also recipients of having their breasts and nipples groped—and then blamed for it. She rightly points out that this is suggestive of both child abuse and victim blaming (1995, 250-51).

⁴⁴ The verb refers to unwanted grabbing elsewhere (Gen. 39:12).

form would seem to suggest, without any evidence to the contrary, that her adulterous encounter was consensual.

In Numbers 5 the woman's collusion is, to begin with, assumed. If she had sex with another man, the only possibility under consideration is that there was no physical force. No physical force is equated with compliance, possibly complicity. There is no other witness. Strikingly, establishing the identity of the other man, an adulterer, is not a preoccupation of the lawmaker.⁴⁵ Unlike in Deuteronomy 22:23-29, his responsibility, his crime, and his punishment are of no interest. Attention is on the woman who becomes the focus of her husband's jealousy. A spirit of jealousy overcomes him on account of his wife who has become defiled (passive) or defiled herself (reflexive). And only now is the possibility acknowledged that the woman may or may indeed *not* be defiled (v.14). While this is not stated explicitly, some have inferred that the woman is pregnant and the husband is suspicious of the paternity of the unborn.⁴⁶

The Hebrew words for "jealous" and "jealousy" are from *q-n-*, which is also sometimes translated "ardent/ardour" or "zealous/zeal." There is reference elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to jealous husbands (Prov. 6:34)⁴⁷ and to the emotional intensity of jealousy (Prov. 27:4; Eccl. 4:4; 9:6). Brian Britt identifies it as "an exclusively male passion" (2007, 05.6).⁴⁸ Interestingly, the word is applied regularly to God, often with reference to divine violence and revenge (e.g. "zeal of YHWH of Hosts" in 2 Kgs 19:31; Isa. 9:6; 26:11; 37:32; 42:13; 59:17; 63:15; also cf. Exod. 20:5; Deut. 5:9; 29:19; 32:19-22; Josh. 24:19; Ezek. 5:13; 35:11; 36:5-6; 38:19; Zeph. 1:18; 3:8; Zech. 1:14; 8:2; Ps. 79:5).⁴⁹ It is also sometimes used to describe the righteous passion of other authority figures—approvingly, for instance, in a divine pronouncement about the (violent!) zeal of Phinehas the priest (Num. 25:11).⁵⁰ Sometimes, jealousy is, admittedly, self-destructive (Gen. 30:1; Prov. 3:31; 23:17; 24:1, 19), or plain destructive, and occasionally futile (Job 5:2; Eccl. 4:4; 9:6; Pss 37:1; 73:2-3; Prov. 14:30), not to mention decidedly negative (Gen. 37:11; Isa. 11:13). Nevertheless, it is also associated with or valorised as great love (Song 8:6; Isa. 63:15) or as ardour *for* the LORD (2 Kgs 10:16; cf. Pss 69:10; 119:139).

So, while there are some biblical passages that depict human jealousies in pejorative terms as futile, ill-advised, or destructive, a number of points serve to underpin and legitimate the husband's jealousy and the religious violence that

⁴⁵ For Friedberg the curse ritual is not about the other man but between the woman and God: "whether she is pregnant or not, the man (i.e. the suspected adulterer, not the husband) is cleared. Nothing has established his guilt or innocence, and nothing has caused a curse on him" (2012, 376).

⁴⁶ Frymer-Kensky argues there is no compelling reason to suppose the woman was pregnant at the time of the ritual (1999), while for Friedman, pregnancy is the crux of the matter (2012).

⁴⁷ Another example is the God-as-husband metaphor, where jealous fury is depicted as a legitimate response and lead-up to violent punishment for adultery (Ezek. 16:38, 42; 23:25).

⁴⁸ Britt points out that Song 8:6 may be the sole exception but the reference is ambiguous (2007, 05.6).

⁴⁹ Britt refers to *q-n-* as constituting an "appropriate divine attribute" (2007, 05.6). There are some words that are entirely appropriate when used of the deity but decidedly more ambiguous when applied to humans—such as words from the root *g'-h*, which refer to the majesty and splendour of God but can, when applied to humans, mean something far less positive, such as "proud" or "haughty." Words from *q-n-* may be functioning in a similar way.

⁵⁰ The violence of zeal or jealousy is also clearly expressed in Isa. 42:13 and 59:17 where the emotion attends YHWH in his metaphorical role as raging warrior.

results from it. First, jealousy is associated with love,⁵¹ and with men of God (such as with Phinehas the priest). Second, a husband's jealousy evokes and affirms the sense of righteous anger, anxiety, and outrage so often levelled at the sin of adultery. And third, there is the prominent depiction of God himself as either angry avenger or—more pointedly—as spurned husband of an unfaithful wife exacting effusive and violent punishment that is depicted as wholly justified.

In the God-as-husband metaphor evoked in the prophetic writings, God's jealous rage is depicted as a legitimate and proportionate response to the people's excessive sinning, which is cast in terms of a depraved woman's adultery. This leads up to violent punishment for the metaphorical woman, with Ezekiel (16:38, 42; 23:25) providing the most sustained examples. God and Phinehas can behave violently, and their violence is presented as justifiable and legitimate. Jealousy, moreover, is a mark of ardent love or devotion—even if it can turn nasty when that love is disappointed. In a troubling way, then, the ritualized jealousy of Numbers 5 can mask and downplay the violent damage it may cause.

What follows next in the text is a description of what the jealous man is to do. He must bring the woman to the priest, along with an offering. The woman is positioned “before YHWH” (vv.16, 18) and offerings are placed in her hands and a water potion is prepared. The priest also bares her head, or dishevels her hair.⁵² The priest's words give first the possibility that she is innocent (v.19) and then the possibility that she *has* become defiled. Again, while the “other man” is mentioned in v.20, the woman's defiling is, by implication, self-inflicted (given the nifal form and the absence of any mention of punishment concerning the adulterous man). Next, the priest describes the consequence of guilt and the punishment is ascribed to YHWH. The punishment is violent and graphically described—a sagging thigh and a distended belly. All the woman can say or do is acquiesce (5:22).

She is made to drink the potion by the priest (v.23) and the jealousy offering is taken from her hands (v.25). While she is there she is passive: a vessel for the bitter water potion and no more than a thermometer of guilt or innocence. For some commentators, this signifies the wisdom of placing the decision in God's hands, thereby “protecting women against capricious husbands” (as discussed in Britt 2007, 05.7).⁵³ Again, the perception that the ordeal described is somehow cleverly protective and ultimately good for women accused by jealous husbands seems bizarre. The punishment for guilt is graphic and physically disfiguring; the “reward”

⁵¹ For Josephus already, a husband's love (“the violence of his affection”) justifies even a false accusation of adultery (see Towers 2014, 9).

⁵² The precise significance of this action is not clear. The same expression, uncovering of the head or disheveling of the hair, occurs in a prohibition at Lev. 10:6. Here it would seem to refer (alongside the more familiar rending of clothes) to a mourning practice. Aaron's cousins are instructed to carry away the corpses of his sons, Nadab and Abihu, who have been struck dead by YHWH's fire on account of an incorrect burnt offering. Unlike their kinsmen, they may show no signs of mourning—hence, the prohibition. Is the woman's hair dishevelled because she needs to prepare for the worst, such as for mourning her outcast status, the loss of a pregnancy, or permanent infertility? Or, does the loosened hair signal adultery (just as loose, or flowing hair is synonymous in much of artistic iconography with seduction or “loose” morality)? Whatever the case, the woman is being exposed in some way, in a sacred place, by another man—a priest no less—and she must submit to this action. If this was carried out or even just threatened, the prospect is likely to have been daunting and unpleasant.

⁵³ See Frymer-Kensky (1999) and Milgrom (1999).

is an absence of harm and the ability to conceive or maintain pregnancy—in other words, a return to the woman’s “proper” function as receptacle for her husband’s seed. The closing words confirm that this is what is to be done when a man becomes jealous (v.29). The role of YHWH and priest are restated once more (v.30) and the closing verse pronounces that the husband is clear of guilt while the woman shall suffer for her guilt. Indeed, even if the outcome were to be that the woman was innocent all along (if the potion does not cause pain or an abortion), she has still been exposed in the Tabernacle and subjected to a terrifying ritual. What the woman is described as enduring is religious violence—violence framed, facilitated, and legitimated by religious authority.

Numbers 5 is not, it seems, terribly well-known or widely referred to in current Christian contexts.⁵⁴ In Judaism, being part of Torah, it is read annually in the Shabbat reading cycle.⁵⁵ There are no intra-biblical references to performance of the ritual (Rosen-Zvi).⁵⁶ With its emphasis on quasi-magical ritual performed in a Temple that no longer exists, it is a passage that could be said to be particularly obscure, even irrelevant. But it is also an unusually detailed passage; it is emphatically about violence in the context of marriage and it clearly describes religious violence—given that the procedure is performed in front of a priest, at the Tabernacle, and repeatedly alludes to holy water, offerings, and YHWH.⁵⁷ In Jewish tradition, the influence of the text does extend well beyond the time that the ritual was declared void, sometime during the late Second Temple period. Indeed, extensive discussions in the Talmud indicate something of a preoccupation with the text (see Haberman 2000). Moreover, while regularly described in terms of being a “strange case,” as in the title of Tikva Frymer-Kensky’s article (1999), or as

⁵⁴ Britt does note, “Christians practiced several kinds of water ordeals well into the early modern period, [so] there is no justification to claims that the text lacks influence” (2007, 05.8).

⁵⁵ The *Naso*’ section of Torah comprises Num. 4:21–7:89. The Nevi’im reading for this Sabbath is Judg. 13:2-25, the announcement and birth of Samson. In this passage, Manoah’s wife is first infertile and then goes on to bear a special, Nazirite son. This topos of female infertility followed by the conception of an extraordinary son is familiar particularly from Genesis: Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel are all unable to bear children until God intervenes and they each bear a son in the special lineage of blessing (Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, respectively). Hannah, too, is childless (“because YHWH had closed her womb,” 1 Sam. 1:5) before giving birth to Samuel, the prophet. Fertility and conception are associated with and attributed to YHWH and in both Numbers 5 and Judges 13 constitute divine reward. As can be inferred from Numbers 5, however, conception can also occur from adulterous sex. This is clear also in the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:5). While Numbers 5 specifies that the woman suspected of adultery was not physically forced when having sex with a man other than her husband, 2 Samuel 11 indicates that conception can also result from what is likely to have been rape. Rape overtones have also been explored with reference to the story of Manoah’s wife’s conception (Lewis-Smith 2018). YHWH’s role in conception is repeatedly confirmed. He is not, moreover, specifically exempted from granting conception in cases of adultery or rape. Kostenberger (n.d.) is similarly problematic when he deems infertility the result of sin. Likewise, the strict prohibition of abortion by some Christian groups, even in cases of rape, affirms certain ideas about the sanctity of conception and life—to the exclusion of the wishes and wellbeing of the woman.

⁵⁶ Rosen-Zvi (n.d.) refers to isolated references in the Mishnah (*Seder Moed*, *Yoma* 3:10; *Seder Nezikin*, *Eduyyot* 5:6), as well as to the Mishnaic tractate *Sotah*, which “differs significantly from the scriptural version.” He also refers to various descriptions of the ritual in pre-rabbinic sources (Philo *De Specialibus Legibus* 3:52–62; Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* III:270–73 and 4Q270.4 from Qumran). Rosen-Zvi is non-committal as to whether the ritual was ever practiced but believes it was “probably discontinued . . . during the Second Temple era.”

⁵⁷ In Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews*, too, the ritual of the *sotah* is located among “ceremonies about sacrifices, and about the purifications” given by Moses (cited in Towers 2014, 9).

“particularly perplexing” (Friedman 2012, 371), with Britt stating that “scholars remain understandably puzzled by this unique episode” (2007, 05.7), Numbers 5 is also in some ways uncomfortably familiar, even today.

Familiar is first, the association between jealousy and violence exerted against an intimate partner. Male jealousy is prevalent in reports of domestic violence and IPV. In a US report of 2000, over 22% of women surveyed reported physical assault perpetrated by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, boyfriend, or girlfriend in their lifetime. This compares with 7.4% of men. Most often, assault is attributed to jealousy on the part of male partners (cf. Britt 2007: 05.6).

A second affinity between the *sotah* ritual and contemporary instances of GBV pertains to the exposure of women in courts of law. I am thinking here of cases of sexual assault and rape—and it is not out of the question that the woman accused of adultery in Numbers 5 *was* raped. Like adultery, sexual assault most often occurs in private settings without witnesses. In Numbers 5, the woman is treated as guilty of adultery until proven innocent; similarly, complainants in sexual assault cases that go to court—and most cases do not—often report feeling as though they, not the defendant, are the ones being put on trial.⁵⁸ In Numbers 5 the woman is brought before YHWH and her head is bared, or her hair dishevelled—an act that would be embarrassing, exposing, and humiliating. In the court rooms of today, women bringing forward cases of rape are also exposed in comparably distressing ways. Recent cases have, for instance, included a woman having to hold up her underwear in the court room,⁵⁹ the disclosure of a rape victim’s sexual history and testimony from former lovers to undermine her capacity for consent,⁶⁰ and investigating complainants’ entire phone text history and social media presence, inclusive of private messaging, to cast aspersions on her character.⁶¹

⁵⁸ For example, women often have to demonstrate that they did not give consent, or act in ways still widely considered as “asking for it” or as making oneself vulnerable (such as through consuming alcohol, wearing a short skirt, or similar).

⁵⁹ The trial, which took place in Ireland, was reported on in November 2018 (“Irish Outcry Over Teenager’s Underwear Used in Rape Trial”). The trial transpired in the acquittal of a 27-year-old man accused of raping a seventeen-year-old woman. During the trial the defence argued, “You have to look at the way she was dressed. She was wearing a thong with a lace front.” In response to this, Irish MP Ruth Coppinger, holding up a thong in the Dáil, asked, “It might seem embarrassing to show a pair of thongs here ... how do you think a rape victim or a woman feels at the incongruous setting of her underwear being shown in a court?” The case gave rise to the online movement, #ThisIsNotConsent, with Irish women posting pictures of their underwear on social media. The Irish case also recalls the earlier case of Scottish teenager Lindsay Armstrong, a rape victim who three times during her rapist’s trial had to hold up the underwear she was wearing when he raped her in a park near her home. She committed suicide weeks after the trial in which her attacker was found guilty (Cramb 2018).

⁶⁰ Shockingly, the retrial of footballer Ched Evans, which saw his conviction for rape quashed, allowed evidence about the complainant’s sex life from two of her sexual partners. The two witnesses gave testimony about her sexual preferences and of her language during sex. As this was judged to match the accounts of Evans at his trial, she was deemed to have a particular sexual “pattern” and to have consented not only to sex with the witnesses but also to sex with Evans (Morris and Topping 2016).

⁶¹ As in the Wolf Pack case (Rosell 2018), text exchanges came to the fore in the recent Belfast rape trial. Here the exchanges between the four men acquitted of rape were presented by the prosecution as indicative of a complete lack of respect for women and by the defence team as mere banter of immature young men, egging each other on (“Text Exchanges” 2018). Those intending to report

For all the differences between the Numbers 5 *sotah* ritual and contemporary cases of IPV, there are a number of affinities. Biblical texts may not offer an undistorted window into the past, but they do reflect dominant societal patterns and values of the times in which they were transmitted.⁶² In both the biblical traditions and contemporary contexts, men are the primary perpetrators of sexual violence,⁶³ while women are overwhelmingly more likely to be victims of such violence.⁶⁴ Similarly, in both the biblical traditions and today's world, violence in marriage and IPV are all too common, and all too commonly overlooked, excused, or erased in both religious and secular settings.

How can we account for or make sense of such parallels? Are they coincidental? Has the violence described in the Bible (a text of such long-standing religious authority) contributed to patterns of violence in our present? Do both biblical and contemporary narratives of GBV signify the timeless presence of rape culture? Or is it simply the case that we see in the ancient biblical texts what we recognize in our current milieus?

Over the past few decades, feminist biblical critics have been exploring such questions. With regard to Numbers 5, Alice Bach's exploration of this text in her *Women in the Hebrew Bible* reader (1999) remains notable. She republishes scholarly examinations of the text by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Jacob Milgrom, Jack Sasson and Michael Fishbane, before adding her own. This exercise demonstrates how variously the passage has been interpreted and also how feminist interpretation brings nuanced attention to how women might have experienced or responded to the ritual.

Britt (2007) distils how the negative conclusions brought by feminist criticism to this passage suggest four possible modes in going forward: to ignore the text, reject it, neutralize it, or subvert it. He concludes that ignoring or rejecting the text "offer[s] nothing to those who cannot overlook the influence or authority of the Bible" (05.2). Neutralizing readings might be those that dismiss Numbers 5 as an archaic relic, or that excuse it by arguing that in placing punishment in the hands of the divine, women can be seen as protected from jealous men. Yet, as I stated above, this fails to acknowledge the violence of the text, including the collusion of religious violence (it is in some ways the equivalent of saying "it's not really so bad" when it actually is). As Britt also suggests, neutralizing a text only qualifies or brackets out its meaning. He therefore chooses to address the Numbers 5 tradition by means of subversion, offering two reading strategies influenced by Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler. The first strategy *reverses* the thrust of the text, throwing suspicion on the accusing husband and the second *parodies* the text by reading it alongside the exchange of sandals ceremony of Ruth 4. I like the cleverness of intertextual play in

rape and bring charges to court also have to submit to having their social media presence and text messages scrutinized. As in the presentation of the complainant's sexual history in the Evans retrial, or in the display of a complainant's underwear in the court-room, this can and has been used to suggest that complainants are promiscuous or sexually provocative.

⁶² I am adopting here the ideological-critical strategy described and applied by Pippin (1996) and Clines (2009).

⁶³ Boys and men are also victims of sexual violence. Harding (2018) identifies a similar impetus to underlie misogyny and homophobia, with both facilitating sexual and gender-based violence.

⁶⁴ By far most cases disclosed by #MeToo have concerned sexual assaults on women by heterosexual men.

Britt's argument, but I am not seeking, like him, to change the text into something that it is not. My purpose is, above all, to call out and rail at the violence of the text, because it is so clearly a text of religious violence and of violence in marriage, and yet is rarely called out for being such.

There is plenty wrong with the depiction of marriage in the Bible—and there is also a lot wrong with the sanctification of marriage, which is often part of a particular brand of Christian agenda that utilizes the Bible to promote a specific ideology of marriage: as heteropatriarchal, monogamous, opposed to sex before marriage or outside marriage, condemning divorce, remarriage and so-called “illegitimate” children, and aimed at reproduction and the preservation of “the family.” The “family,” in turn, is conceived as nuclear and hierarchical, led by the father, with the mother being primary caregiver to children and with gender lines for all members firmly drawn. As I mentioned above with reference to Kostenberger's work (n.d.), this particular Christian vision of marriage ignores even the possibility of marital violence, and, I would argue, may even serve to sustain it.

Whereas GBV is finally becoming more publicly present and increasingly challenged—not least due to the rapid, viral, sustained, and spreading impact of #MeToo—and while religious violence, too, is more in the news (such as the recent inquiries into widespread abuse in churches), IPV continues to be peripheral within public consciousness (Mervosh 2018; Wallace 2018). In biblical studies, this topic has been addressed (e.g. Weems 1995), including in the wider context of rape culture (e.g. Washington 1997). Such work does go some way towards drawing attention to the spread and spectrum of abusiveness in the Bible and up to the present day, in cultures and communities where the Bible is still read and preached. But one reason that this topic is not focused on with the energy it deserves is the powerful myth (in the sense Cavanaugh uses the word) constructing marriage. This construction, moreover, is much influenced by particular notions of Christian marriage, which in turn use the (selective deployment of the) Bible for validation to promote marriage as God-given, sacred, and never to be sundered.

But biblical marriage (like actual marriage) is often acutely violent and not infrequently associated with rape. Numbers 5 is not unequivocally about rape (although it does not rule out that the woman may have been forced or coerced) but it is suggestive of rape culture—of GBV that ranges from accusations and humiliations to physical harm. This spectral violence, moreover, is legitimated—on the grounds that the accuser (the husband), who is exonerated from all guilt, cannot help himself (given his intense jealousy). His wife's word is not heeded—her voice is barely heard. Her guilt is assumed, she is blamed for her own “defilement,” and is ultimately shamed and publicly humiliated. High religious authority—God and the priest—further legitimates the violence perpetrated against the woman. As in contemporary rape cultures, toxic discourses of victim blame, shame, and stigma echo throughout this ancient text with uncomfortable familiarity. This has to be called out, to be questioned and resisted. Numbers 5 may not be the best known or the most directly influential of biblical texts, but it exemplifies so well the strata and expressions of violence that still resonate today.

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