

Women in the Bible, Qumran and Early Rabbinic Literature by Paul Heger

Quotes

Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis present drastically different narratives of the creation of humans. As we may observe in the narrative of Gen 1:26–31, there is no difference in any respect between man and woman. The term Adam is genderless and refers to “human,” not to “man.” Both man and woman were created at the same time, both are in God’s image, and their joint purpose is to multiply and subdue all other inferior creatures of the universe (1:27–28). God has granted to man and woman equally the right to enjoy all the products of the earth, and both are superior to all other creatures, whose right to food is restricted to specified types (1:29–30). The narrative in Gen 2 is in stark contrast to this thoroughly egalitarian portrayal of man and woman with respect to their creation, purpose, function, and place in the universe. This second narrative became crucial to the conventional interpretation of the Creation story, together with its repercussions for women’s status in Jewish and Christian societies. Unlike the clear and unambiguous Creation narrative in Gen 1, this portrayal of the creation of humankind—particularly the creation of woman; God’s rationale for her purpose and function before her creation (Gen 2:18); the mode of her

creation (2:21–22); and the events immediately after her creation (2:23–24)—provokes many questions, divergent interpretations, and assumptions. Whereas Gen 1 describes the simultaneous creation of man and woman, Gen 2:7 records only the creation of man; the NIV, whose translation is quoted above, correctly translates the term אָדָם in Gen 1:27 as “mankind” (in the modern sense of humankind) and in 2:7 as “man”; the KJV has “man” in both cases, and the LXX has ἄνθρωπος [Anthropos], usually understood as the genderless “humankind.” Moreover, whereas Gen 1 emphasizes humankind’s creation in God’s image, Gen 2 does not mention this; though recording that God breathed into man’s nostrils the breath of life, it emphasizes his creation from the dust of the ground (2:7). Scholars have noticed these and other inconsistencies and concluded that the two narratives come from two different sources, amalgamated by the redactor...It has generally been assumed that Gen 1 is from source P and Gen 2–3 from source J. However, this presumption creates some problems: How can one explain that the later P authors contradicted the earlier J authors?¹

[Note from RU.org: While many scholars do not believe there is a contradiction between Genesis 1 and 2, and there are various interpretations within theological and academic circles, we recognize the value in presenting diverse perspectives. The

¹ 11-12.

viewpoint that Genesis 1 and 2 contain contradictions is one such perspective. We welcome contributions that offer different interpretations or arguments. If you believe these chapters can be reconciled and wish to share your perspective, we encourage you to write an article following the guidelines provided on our contact page. Should your submission align with our editorial standards and contribute constructively to the discussion, it will be considered for publication on our website. We believe in fostering an environment of respectful and scholarly dialogue, and we look forward to receiving your contributions.]

To conclude the discussion of woman's later creation: in my opinion, the simultaneous creation of woman does not indicate equality, nor does her later creation imply inferiority. Other circumstances may influence such conjectures. According to the biblical narrative, the creation of woman is prompted by God's own conclusion that she was indeed missing in his previous creation of man. Further, she is created personally by God—not by intermediate powers such as angels or other messengers, which might hint at an inferior rank of creation. Woman's later creation may instead denote her significance: without her, God's creation was not fully and perfectly accomplished. Further, there is no doubt that according to the Creation narrative the creation of humans constitutes the pinnacle of God's creation, to "fill the earth and subdue it"—to rule over all that was created before. This paradigm

and the sequence of the ascending order of creation demonstrate that the latest creation was the most important. Thus, it is illogical to argue that woman is inferior because of her later creation. It seems to me that scholarly efforts to minimize the significance of man's prior creation were intended to debunk Paul's justification of his decree that woman must be submissive because of her later creation: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve" (1 Tim 2:13).²

Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 141, writes: "Human aloneness leads God to say— for the first time—that something 'is not good' (Gen 2:18)." Brodie further notes that the woman is "the high point of creation." Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 177, calls our attention to the fact that, in contrast to the Israelite Creation narrative, "None of Israel's neighbours had a tradition involving a separate account of the creation of the female."³

Both ancient commentators and modern scholars have probed why Adam had to be sleeping during the creation of the woman. The JPS Commentary suggests that the sleep had the "dual function of rendering the man insensible to the pain of the surgery, and oblivious to God at work." I do not find this explanation

² 21-22.

³ *Ibid.*

satisfactory; if the reader believes that God can create the entire world and, specifically, a woman from one of man's ribs, then he could have done so without causing pain to Adam.⁴

Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 120, writes, "The social system reflected in the Bible did not originate in Israel, nor is it substantially different in the Bible than elsewhere in the Ancient Near East." This is true to a certain extent, but the Israelites also made crucial changes to many laws in general, and to laws relating to women in particular that demonstrate a fundamentally different ethical approach to human relations. For example, men and women were equal with respect to Scripture's prohibition on spilling blood, a principle of utmost significance that differed from parallel rules in the surrounding cultures.⁵

Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 128, writes that "Male dominance was assumed: it was part of the social order of the world that the Bible did not question." We agree that this was the real situation; however, I argue that the Bible's Creation narrative offers an explanation or justification for the existing male dominance, and confirms it as the God-given world order

⁴ 22.

⁵ 29.

communicated to the woman in Gen 3:16: “and he will rule over you.”⁶

Therefore, a boy’s work from the ages of five to twenty is worth more than that of a man over sixty, and that of an infant is the lowest. Thus, we observe that according to a broad range of commentators from a variety of periods and cultures, Lev 27’s establishment of lower payments for the commutation of women’s vows than for men’s does not indicate man’s superiority or woman’s inferiority but, rather, relates to the values of their respective capacities for work. The real value of a person, which has no association with money, is his or her life, and in this case Scripture equalizes man and woman, old and young: a murderer is executed regardless of whether the victim is man, woman, boy, or girl (Lev 24:17). This seems normal and logical to us, but it was not so in the surrounding cultures in ancient times. For example, the relevant rules from the Code of Hammurabi, from which Scripture has definitely appropriated to some extent, go in an opposite direction in this respect. According to the Code of Hammurabi §210, if a pregnant woman dies as a result of being struck by a man, the man’s daughter is killed. This rule and the antecedent §209, which imposes a fine if the woman miscarries, have their parallel in Exod 21:22–23; whereas v. 22 also imposes a fine for the death

⁶ 36.

of the fetus, v. 23 commands “a soul for a soul”: the death of the perpetrator, not of his wife or daughter. In the Code of Hammurabi, then, a woman is worth less than a man, but not so in Scripture. Similarly, according to §228–29, if a builder constructs a house in an unsatisfactory way, and in collapsing it kills the owner, the builder is executed; but if the owner’s son is killed, the builder’s son is executed, since he is worth less than the father. The Creation narrative makes no discrimination; all humanity was created in “the image of God” (Gen 1:27), and as their creation is equal, their inherent value is equal. Lev 24:17 explicitly states that anyone who takes a human life is to be put to death, with no exceptions; all are equal when it comes to the appreciation of life.⁷

On the other hand, many rabbinic texts express more positive views of women. For example, in b. Yeb. 62b we read that every man without a wife lives without joy, blessing, or goodness. The author of this maxim cites the biblical verses that are the source of his assertion.¹⁰⁸ Another rabbi says that in the west (that is, in Israel, which is west of Babylon) they say that a man who has no wife is “without Torah, without a wall (a barrier that defends him from fornicating)”; he too supports his assertion with biblical citations. The rabbis do not claim that their assertions, even with respect to physical facts and occurrences, have been reached by empirical

⁷ 38-39.

observation as in the modern physical sciences; rather, such assertions derive from study of the Bible, the fountain of all knowledge, in keeping with the rabbinic aphorism about diligently searching the Torah for guidance: “turn it and turn it, since everything is in it” (m. Abot 5:22).⁸

The story of the Fall begins: “Now the serpent was more crafty ערום than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made” (Gen 3:1). Scripture’s emphasis on the fact that the serpent is the shrewdest of all animals, an apparently superfluous detail, proves to be a decisive factor in determining which of the characters involved is mostly to blame for the sin and the consequent calamity. Indeed, beginning the narrative with this detail indicates the author’s sympathetic attitude towards the woman, displaying an understanding for her falling into the trap of this wily character, who skillfully frames the discussion to attain his goal... Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 73 writes: “We can readily understand that, confronted by such a formidable interlocutor, the woman had little chance of winning the verbal duel.”⁹

Note also the biblical author’s portrayal of the woman’s prudent thinking, even though she has not heard the divine prohibition. In contrast, Adam does not reflect on God’s explicit prohibition, but

⁸ 44.

⁹ 47.

makes a hasty decision to eat the fruit. In summary, the biblical text demonstrates a recurrent emphasis on the mitigating circumstances of the woman's actions, which continues a fortiori as the narrative progresses, shifting the blame on to Adam. We read in vv. 8–9 that both Adam and Eve heard וישמעו the Lord's coming into the Garden, and both hid (although the MT states that both ויתחבא ואשתו "Adam and his wife hid," it uses the masculine ויתחבא "he hid"); Adam too in his reply to God states in the singular ויאחבא "so I hid." But the Lord called only upon the man "Where are you," emphasizing again Adam's primary role, being the only one summoned by God. The language thus demonstrates Adam's primary responsibility in the sinful episode, as is also evident from the subsequent divine dialogue and accusation, explicitly directed to him alone (3:10–11). (In contrast, in God's blessing [Gen 1:28–30], the granting of authority to humans over all other creatures and the allotment of food is addressed equally, in the plural, to man and woman.) God addresses only Adam, and after listening to his explanation for his hiding (vv. 9–10), asks him alone, in a judicial manner, who told him to be naked and whether he transgressed the divine command given to him not to eat the fruit from the particular tree (v. 11). The woman is neither accused of disobedience, nor interrogated in the same manner as Adam. As an impartial judge, God would have asked her whether she indeed performed a criminal act by transgressing his command, but he

posed instead a somewhat odd question, “What is this you have done?” (v. 13), instead of the expected “Why have you done this?” Such a question would have followed logically from Adam’s reply in v. 12 that the woman gave him the fruit. Further, the question does not contain any description of her supposed deed, as one would expect in a judicial interrogation. Although God knows that the woman ate the fruit before Adam and then gave it to him, God interrogates Adam first because he is the one whom God prohibited from eating the fruit, indicating that God considers him the principal guilty party.¹⁰

Stephen Andrews interprets the term **עצב** not as “pain” but as a “psychological or emotional discomfort;” thus he translates the verse: “I will greatly increase your distress and [or ‘in’] your pregnancies.” By comparison, man’s punishment, consisting of a continuous and lifelong uphill battle for sustenance, entails more overall hardship. Scripture emphasizes explicitly the ceaseless calamity of the man’s punishment: “through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life” (Gen 3:17), and reiterates the point in Gen 3:19: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground.” It is remarkable that the rabbis, who, as we shall see, shift the blame of the Fall onto the woman, are nonetheless aware that Adam’s punishment is more severe than

¹⁰ 51-52.

hers. For instance, we read in Gen. Rab. 97:3 “Said Rabbi Jose son of Halafta, ‘Earning one’s sustenance is twice as burdensome than [the pain of] giving birth; at the birth is written **בעצב** and] at earning one’s sustenance is written **בעצבון** (the longer term is presumed to demonstrate its greater severity).’¹¹

Deut 21:14 protects even the rights of the Captive Woman; if her captor does not like her, he cannot sell her but must let her go free. Isaiah and Jeremiah call passionately for the rights of widows. Although Scripture indicates the motive of the levirate law “to carry on the name of the dead brother (Deut 25:6),” we cannot exclude the likelihood that the care for the widow’s subsistence, left without children to support her, was also a factor considered in the institution of this rule. We also encounter many positive pronouncements regarding women. Genesis records Isaac’s great love of Rebekah (Gen 24:67) and Jacob’s love of Rachel (Gen 29:18, 20). Gen 16:2 records that Abraham agreed to Sarai’s suggestion, and Gen 21:12 narrates God’s mandate to Abraham: “Listen to whatever Sarah tells you.” The Patriarchs and their lives are the model of Israelite virtuous conduct. We read a remarkable rule in Deut 24:5: “If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.”

¹¹ 57.

We observe the explicit justification that the bridegroom is absolved from the military duty to “bring happiness to the wife,” not to himself as in the cognate decree in Deut 20. The significance of this assertion is further enhanced by the comparison with the other motives for absolving men from the military service at war in Deut 20:5–7. There, the justification for the man who has become “pledged to a woman and not married her” is identical to the man who has built a new house or planted a new vineyard. They may die in battle, and someone else would enjoy the new house or vineyard or marry the girl. Since the man has not yet married the girl, she will not suffer if he dies; however, if he has already married her, Scripture relieves him from military duty for her exclusive benefit. There is no hint in Scripture of the danger of woman’s sexuality, as alleged by some scholars. The test of the Unfaithful Wife in Num 5 does not hint at woman’s seducing faculty or other immoral traits. This test, embarrassing though it may be in modern eyes, applies only when a feeling of jealousy overcomes the husband, probably because he has observed something that led him to such a supposition or because there is a conspicuous suspicion of her infidelity, as we read in Num 5:12–13. In either case a solution must be devised in order to safeguard the stability of the marriage and of the family, and Scripture establishes an innocuous albeit perhaps humiliating procedure. We have to compare the apparently disagreeable procedure of the biblical text with the Code of Hammurabi §132: “If a man’s wife should have a finger pointed

against her in accusation involving another male, although she has not been seized lying with another male,” a suspicion of lesser degree than that portrayed in Num 5, “she shall submit to the divine River Ordeal.” The suspected transgressor was thrown into the deep river with the belief that the innocent would float and the guilty would drown, constituting a real danger of death to the innocent and guilty alike, whereas the biblical rule uses solely a psychological device inducing the woman to confess, if she had indeed committed adultery. Further, if the woman was guilty of adultery, but without legally valid evidence, she could admit it and be divorced without the right of any financial compensation, but also without corporal punishment, since Scripture requires two witnesses for any conviction. We read in m. Sotah 1:5: “If she said that she is polluted [she slept with another man] she loses her ketubah [financial compensation at a divorce] and is divorced.” I doubt that the same approach would have been applied according to the Code of Hammurabi. I would also question whether in the ancient period the test of the suspected adulteress would have been perceived as humiliating, whereas, as Cecilia Wassen suggests, a modern reader would so perceive it.¹²

A sole exception to the benevolent attitude of Scripture towards women is constituted by two verses in the Wisdom literature, in

¹² 65-67.

Eccl 7:26 and 28b; these, however, appear in the course of the author's search for wisdom and are therefore out of place for rules of conduct. Therefore, allegorical meanings of these verses have been proffered in rabbinic literature, by both traditional commentators and modern interpreters. Further, these verses do not relate to all women, but to a wicked one, as per the use of the singular in v. 26. It has its counterpoint in another maxim in Prov 18:22: "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from God." The rabbis reconciled these contradicting declarations, explaining that the one relates to a good wife and the other to a bad one. Hence, the reference in Eccl 7 does not slander the female gender as a whole, and besides has no connection to the biblical narratives of the Creation and the Fall; the possibility of detecting a negative attitude towards women in general in these verses would rather be the result of Greek influence.¹³

At any rate, there is nowhere in Scripture the slightest hint of acquiescence to Lot's daughters' action. According to my opinion, Scripture perceives their act as extremely wicked.¹⁴

We read in Gen. Rab. parsha 8: "[A woman should not go out to public places because she will ultimately stumble into fornication, as happened to Dinah; she went out (וַתֵּצֵא) (and in the end she

¹³ 68.

¹⁴ 71.

failed.” Abot R. Nat. Recension b, Chapter 3 offers a different aspect of her guilt, suggesting that Eccl 10:8, “Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake,” refers to Dinah. Whilst her brothers were studying Scripture, she went out to meet the local girls (a frivolous act in comparison) and was bitten by Shechem, the snake.¹²⁸ Gen. Rab. 80 goes a step further, implying that Dinah showed a tempting posture, exhibiting her bare arm.¹²⁹ The rabbis allege Dinah’s improper behaviour as the cause of her calamity, rather than attributing it to Shechem’s sexual drive, incited by a girl from a different race and complexion and probably extremely beautiful, being a sister of Joseph, who was “well built and handsome” (Gen 39:6). Just as Joseph attracted Potiphar’s wife through his beauty, we may assume Shechem was attracted to Dinah, his sister. Hence Shechem’s attraction to Dinah, Joseph’s sister, would be a plausible explanation for the incident, “particularly in view of Gen 34:3, ‘His heart was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob,’ ” but the rabbis asserted that her immoral attire was the cause. Gen Rab. 80:1 even attributes Dinah’s rape in part to unchaste behaviour prompted by an evil genealogical trait inherited from her mother, Leah, who allegedly adorned herself like a prostitute to lure Jacob to sleep with her (Gen 30:16).¹⁵

¹⁵ 93-94.

It is remarkable that a nineteenth-century German scholar, Friedrich W. Schröder, in *Erste Buch Moses* at 530 makes a similar accusation against Dinah, referring to the text of Tit 2:5. Text copied from Suzanne Scholz, “Through Whose Eyes? A ‘Right’ Reading of Genesis 34,” in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible* (2nd ser.; ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 150–71 at 156. We read there: “Dinah is dishonoured violently because she roams about more freely than she should, leaving her father’s house. She should have stayed at home, as the apostle orders (Tit 2:5) and nature recommends, because virgins, like wives, should be keeper of the house.” Although I doubt that Schröder had any notion of these midrashim, he pronounces the same accusation as the rabbis, almost verbatim, based on Titus.¹⁶

The rabbinic instructions to men to avoid contact with women, cited above, indicate that their motive was the apprehension that men would not be able to control their libidos at encounters with women. B. Qidd. 29b states that an unmarried man over twenty lives all his days with sinful thoughts. Until a man reaches the age of twenty God waits patiently to see him married, but if he does not marry at that stage, God curses him. Therefore, b. Yeb. 61b asserts that a man should have a wife even if he has accomplished his duty of procreation, as God said: “ ‘It is not good for the man to be alone’ ”

¹⁶ 93.

(Gen 2:18). Their lack of confidence in man's ability to contain his libido also affects the priests, and even requires deviations from biblical regulations. M. Sotah 1:5 decrees that if the Unfaithful Wife is attractive or has nice hair, the priest does not tear her garments by grasping her forcefully and does not loosen her hair, actions stipulated in Scripture to disgrace her. The suspicion that the onlookers (the young priests) would be sexually aroused, and try all her life to find her and lie with her, is indicated as the motive of this rule. An alternative motive is the possibility that being sexually aroused, they might masturbate, a severe sin. M. Sotah 1:3b distrusts even the suspicious husband, conjecturing that he might lie with his wife on the way to the priest for the procedure of the ordeal; therefore, the Court nominates two scholars to accompany them to avoid such a possibility. The rabbis, aware of the strength of the male libido, attempted by all means to avoid its generating sinful deeds. They even suspected that men would attempt stratagems in order to look at women, such as giving coins to a woman in order to look at her or following a woman crossing a river in order to see her bare flesh (b. Erub. 18b). They were not afraid that the women would seduce the men, but that the men in their excitement would seduce the women, as we see from the following midrash in Gen. Rab. 17:8 (paraphrased): The man courts the woman [not the other way around] because he searches to recover the rib he lost, but the lost item [the woman] does not search for its owner. Some rabbis had an even worse opinion about

men's sexual "perverseness," and were aware of their inability to dissuade them from following their excessive and obscene lust except by frightening them with the severe punishment of their offspring, as cited below. B. Ned. 20a quotes Rabbi Johanan ben Dahbai (paraphrased): Angels told me four things: children are born lame because their fathers turned their table upwards (metaphoric) at intercourse; are born dumb because their fathers kissed the woman's sexual member; are born deaf because their fathers spoke erotically during intercourse; and born blind because their fathers gazed at their wife's sexual member. These presumed perverted manners do not constitute a theoretical pronouncement, but refer to real occurrences, as we learn from a narrative in b. Ned. 20b, recounting that when a woman complained to Rabbi that her husband overturned the regular method in their sexual intercourse, he said to her that he was sorry, but was unable to do anything, because Scripture allows the man to have intercourse as he wishes. Rav, responding to a similar complaint, compared the man's prerogative to have intercourse in the way he pleases to his right to eat his fish cooked in the manner he desires. We observe that the rabbis may not have been pleased with such behaviour, and showed compassion to the women, but as it seems to me did not venture to change the prevailing custom for the pragmatic reason that such a change would not be enforceable, particularly since such behaviour is not prohibited in Scripture. And indeed, b. Ned. 20b discards Rabbi Johanan ben Dahbai's dictum, and compares

the man's privilege to perform sexual intercourse to his right to eat his food as he wishes. On the other hand, the rabbis granted the women the unrestrained right of pleasure from permitted forms of sexual intercourse on the basis of their desire for men, implanted in them by God (Gen 3: 16) and reconfirmed in Exod 21:10 as a legal right that husbands must grant them. We read in b. Ket. 48a that the woman has the right to demand that both partners should be naked during sexual intercourse. However, the rabbis not only suspected the common people of possible sexual misbehaviour, but also believed learned sages were susceptible to immoral behaviour. B. Yeb. 63a tells a stimulating story: Although Rabbi Hiia's wife angered him, he bought her gifts when he found something suitable. To a rabbi, amazed by his conduct, he said: We should be satisfied with women's functions in raising our children and rescuing us from the sin of fornication. B. Yeb. 37b records that two rabbis (each separately in different locations) invited women to marry them for the period of their sojourn in town. In reply to the argument that such behaviour conflicts with some halakhah, it is explained that the rabbis did not actually have intercourse with these temporary wives; they just cohabitated with them. Having a woman at their disposition helped them to master their libido, as the renowned maxim declares: "There is no comparison between the emotion and behaviour of somebody who has a loaf of bread in his basket, and of the one who has not." This broad-minded metaphor supports the intensity of the rabbinic counsel to be

married; a man who has a wife at his disposition is not so easily excited at seeing a woman as a man without one.¹⁷

It is absolutely imperative not to deduce general opinions and ideologies from a single midrash or assertion. Ancient authors such as the rabbis were not overly concerned with ideas that might transpire from their dicta, and as we have seen, some rabbinic assertions seem utterly to contradict others, and at times to conflict with undisputed and deeply ingrained theological principles...See, for example, the midrash in Gen R. 18 parsha 2 about the creation of the woman (pp. 42–43), which overlooks the fact that its contents implicitly contradict divine omnipotence and omniscience, by alleging that God did not succeed in accomplishing his creation of the woman as intended—a statement bordering on heresy.¹⁸

Whereas the Bible does not condemn pleasure or enjoyment, we do find in it an array of passages promoting enjoyment of the bounty God has provided for humanity. Since the Bible's affirmation of joy and pleasure are generally acknowledged, I shall quote only one passage relating to each type of enjoyment and pleasure. Deut 14:26 commands enjoyment of food and drink; Deut 26:11 commands enjoyment of God-given bounty; Ps 100:2 commands

¹⁷ 97-100.

¹⁸ 100-101.

the Israelites to worship God with joy, and in Deut 28:15–68, we find a long list of curses as the punishment for not doing so, with the justification at v. 47: “Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity.” We also find favourable attitudes towards sexual activity. In Gen 1 we read God’s blessing and first command to humanity to procreate (Gen 1:28), as well as God’s evaluation of it: **וַיִּהְיֶה טוֹב מְאֹד** and it was very good” (Gen 1:31), whereas all other creations are evaluated as **טוֹב כִּי** “good.” Consequently, Deut 24:5 exempts the newly married man from military service, even during wartime, to ensure the fulfilment of woman’s God-given right to sexual pleasure; for one year he is to stay at home **וְשָׂמַח אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ** and bring happiness to the wife he has married. Finally, we find the conclusive axiom that obedience to divine commands is rewarded by a good life. The promise **יִיטֵב לְךָ** “so that it may [always] go well with you [in this world]” appears in various styles, referring to those who obey the divine commands. The significance of joy in Israelite theology is also manifest in the prophetic and hagiographic literature, demonstrating Scripture’s positive stance towards all aspects of life and thus negating any virtue in suffering. This attitude does not foster abstinence from pleasure or from performing permitted deeds; I would not hesitate to state, in fact, that it opposes such abstinence. The Israelites’ abstention from sexual relations before

participating in the Sinai revelation (Exod 19:15) does not suggest that there is anything evil about sexual activity, only that—like touching or carrying the carcass of an animal (Lev 11:26–28)—it ritually pollutes the participants, who must not approach a holy place before being cleansed. For this reason, Moses orders abstention from sexual relations before participating at the Sinai revelation, though this is not specified in God’s directives to Moses. Human beings, with their good and bad inclinations—their hearts of stone and of flesh (Ezek 36:26)—are God’s creation, and whatever God has created is good. Humanity’s strong desire, implanted by God in the process of creation, is not inherently wicked; it is good or evil depending on how humans use it. The term “תאבה” strong desire” is used both for good purposes, as in Prov 11:23, and for evil deeds, as in Ps 112:10. In fact, the Tenth Commandment in Exod 20:14: “לא תהמך” do not covet your neighbour’s house, wife, servants, household animals or anything else he owns” is understood both by the rabbis and by modern scholars as applying only to practical schemes and concrete actions aimed at acquiring the neighbour’s wife or property. Desire (coveting) alone is not forbidden, since תהמך denotes sensuality or lust leading to an action intended to achieve the object of the desire. Whereas Greek mythology records that Prometheus was cruelly punished for teaching humans how to make fire, against the will of Zeus, Judaism teaches that God, who created everything that exists,

gave humans the faculty to discover the world and its potential, leaving them free to choose how to use their inborn aptitudes and knowledge for good or evil purposes, and judges them according to their choices and their deeds; people are rewarded for good behaviour, and punished for doing evil. Thus, Scripture presents an optimistic view of the world: humans are masters of their destiny, and an almighty God, who cares for his creatures, is a righteous judge. I believe that Christianity succeeded in winning hearts in the Hellenistic world relatively quickly because it offered people hope, promising a loving God (a somewhat adjusted view of Judaism's caring God) in place of the frivolous desires and caprices of the Greek gods. This optimistic *Weltanschauung*, based on the biblical idea that God created everything, and what God has created is essentially good, sees no virtue in suffering or in the denial of joy. At the same time, it explains why Judaism has seen no religious movements such as Manichaeism and Gnosticism, or any tradition of a demiurge creator with a negative view of the material world.¹⁹

Although the command "afflict your souls" in Lev 16:29, interpreted as intending fasting, may seem to advocate suffering, this command and its grammatical derivative in the rules for the Day of Atonement in v. 31 are not evidence of the virtue of suffering or self-denial. It seems to me that fasting on the Day of Atonement,

¹⁹ 262-265.

as prescribed in Scripture, should be seen as a self-inflicted punishment to ensure the forgiveness of sins without enduring punishment inflicted by God. The symbolic self-administered punishment that induces divine forgiveness of sins is similar to the symbolic offering of animals, instead of one's own life, for the identical purpose, as we read in Lev 17:11 that the blood makes atonement for one's life. The parallel passage in Lev 16:29–30 describes atoning for sin by self-denial (fasting), a self-inflicted punishment. The two passages are intrinsically linked; just as the sprinkling of the blood on the altar, a symbolic sacrifice, induces atonement, the fast, a symbolic self-inflicted punishment, invokes the same result. There is no association with suffering as a virtue, and in fact fasting is not suggested in the Pentateuch except on the Day of Atonement, a celebration for the sake of the entire people of Israel.²⁰

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²⁰ 265-266.