



Troy A. Wheelhouse*

WHAT IS *YĀDĀ* DOING HERE?
ANOTHER TEXT OF TERROR
IN THE CREATION STORY

Introduction

Sex and sexuality in the Bible is often either debated intensely or swept under the carpet in conservative scholarship and churches. When sex is debated, conservative scholarship has often tried to use the texts sexual in nature to demonstrate the positive nature of heterosexuality and the negative nature of same-sex relations, leading to homophobia. The writer argues that we need to look more closely at the texts that conservative scholarship identifies as acceptable sexual behavior. The most frequently cited argument for heterosexuality and positive sexual relations is the creation story in Genesis 2-4.¹ In this exegesis, the writer argues this text does not affirm correct sexual behavior but presents a story of oppression through sexual abuse.

Phyllis Tribble has done a great deal of work in the area of sexuality in the Bible, pointing out texts extremely oppressive to women. In her book, *Texts of Terror*, she identifies four passages that perpetuate oppressive sexism and violence against women. Her indictment to the reader is to understand the

*Troy A. Wheelhouse is a 2005 graduate of Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia, with a concentration in biblical studies. He plans to pursue a Ph.D. in the Hebrew Bible.

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¹In the creation story, there are only two persons involved: one male and one female. Human sexuality has only one outlet barring sex with animals; this does not speak to gay or lesbian love.

importance of these stories as sad stories with sad endings, but leaving room for new beginnings.² The four stories are not the only sad stories; there are other texts not identified that may have an underlying message to perpetuate the oppression and abuse of women.³ The creation story, through the vocabulary used, points to another such text.

Grammar and the Biblical Story

There are many different euphemisms in the Hebrew language to designate sexual activity: the two most popular in Genesis are *bā'* and *šākab*. The first, *bā'*, "to enter or come," is used most often for birth narratives. Of the 217 times that *bā'* appears in Genesis, twenty-one of these are sexual euphemisms. Typically, the birth formula is "he entered her, she conceived, and gave birth."

The other verb, *šākab*, "to lay" appears twenty-one times in Genesis with fourteen occurrences being sexually oriented. The formula for this euphemism can take a different direction: a woman takes the initiative in sexual activity. These situations, usually accompanied by *bā'*, leave little doubt as to the nature of the activity. An example of this is the text at Genesis 19 where Lot's daughters get him drunk and "lay" with him in an effort to procreate (Genesis 19:33, 35.) In these cases, the activity is considered abhorrent behavior. Sex is something done by men to women, not the other way around. As sexual euphemisms, these two verbs are used most often. So why does the narrator choose to use *yādá'*?

²See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

³Trible, *Texts of Terror*, chapter 2, 37-63 and chapter 3, 65-91, point out two different texts of sexual violence: one concerns the rape of Tamar in Samuel 13 and the other is the rape of an unknown woman from Judges 19. Both are explicit examples of sexual violence toward women.

Popular conservative scholarship insists that *yādá* is a cognition verb—perceiving, learning, or understanding⁴ and is used most often in this sense: designating knowledge or recognition of a subject or person. Its use as a euphemism for sexual activity occurs only two other places outside of Genesis.⁵

The term *yādá* is used least often as a sexual euphemism and is more often associated with violent and degrading behavior, or as a designation for female virginity. An example of both of these occurs in Genesis 19. The men of Sodom come out to “know” the guests in Lot’s house, and Lot offers his two daughters as women that have “not known” a man (Genesis 19:5-8.) In the case of Lot’s daughters, is it that they have not known sexual relations (genital penetration) or that they have not known the humiliation and abuse of a vulnerable and insecure male?⁶

Scholars disagree about the nature of the activity in Genesis 19. One problem is that the group coming to Lot’s house is an army or nation; as such, there is the possibility they are there to ensure the safety of the city. The group simply wants to know the danger that may have infiltrated the city and the intention of the visitors/spies. The way spies are treated elsewhere in the Bible gives an indication of how they will be known.

Lot assumes that the mob is there for a violent and violat-

⁴Gordon J. Wendam, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 1, Genesis chapters 1-15 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), 100-101, sees the use of *yādá* as without special meaning for the text. Note that Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis*, chapters 1-17 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 219-220, makes the argument that the couple becomes closer intimately; therefore, the use of *yādá*.

⁵I Samuel 1:19 (the story of Hannah) and I Kings 1:4 (the account of the virgin Abishag).

⁶A. Nicholas Groth and Jean Birnbaum, *Men Who Rape: The Psychology of the Offender* (New York: Perseus Publishing, 1979), 5-6. Groth has done extensive work into the mind of the sexual offender. Most often rape occurs out of a man’s insecurity and anger toward women—inside or outside of marriage.

ing activity. How well-founded this assumption is on Lot's part is debatable. People often revert to their experience in a particular situation. Here, Lot may have prior experience of this type of activity and may be trying to protect his guests. Violence of this nature is not unheard of in the Bible. In 2 Samuel 10, David's ambassadors are considered spies and dealt with violently by having their beards shaved and their clothing cut, baring their buttocks (2 Samuel 10:4).⁷

To protect his guests, Lot offers his daughters "who have not known a man" as a sacrifice to try and avert the angry mob (Genesis 19:8). This does not satisfy the mob which presses in on Lot to get to his guests. The possibility of sexual assault on the guests is not beyond reason.

A mirror text to Genesis 19 occurs in Judges 19. The story is almost identical except in this text the Levite's concubine is cast out to the crowd, and she is gang raped to the point of death. This may suggest the more deliberate intention of the mob toward the strangers who have entered their city. Both of these circumstances indicate that the men are acting out of their insecurities for the unknown visitors; the activity winds up being an act of degradation toward another human being, specifically a woman.

The term *yādā* is not only used for cognition and sexual euphemism but can also be defined as discipline, conquer, or humiliate.⁸ In Judges 8, Gideon used the thorns of the wilderness and briars to discipline the men of Succoth (Judges 8:16.) In this

⁷Whether rape is implied here is debatable but not unlikely. In Isaiah 7, "the victor shall shave the head, beard, and feet of the defeated." The activity is one of humiliation and sexual abuse as the defeated "shall be lead out shaven and naked" (Isaiah 7:10).

⁸Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 509. The use of *yādā* for the activity of humiliation occurs in Judges 8:16, 16:19; Isaiah 9:8, 53:3, 11; Jeremiah 31:19; Hosea 9:7; Psalm 138:6; Job 20:20, 21:19; Proverbs 10:9, 14:33; and Daniel 12:4.

instance, he uses a weapon to know the elders of the city. How Gideon uses the thorn and briars is left to the reader.

The narrator, by the use of *yādá*, brings a different idea to the text found in Genesis 4:1 and 4:17. Conservative scholarship has treated these situations as the simple consummation of the partnership between man and woman, but the term is not used this way in later texts.

The text prior to this (Genesis 3:1-24) plays a vital role in understanding Genesis 4:1 and the violence that the narrator is implying in this verse. It is the story of the fall of humankind and the expulsion of humanity from "paradise."⁹ Randall Bailey points out several problems with this text that is often used to degrade and oppress women. Woman is often portrayed as the "temptress" who seduces man to sin, which sets in motion what some scholars have deemed as the separation of humans from God.¹⁰ A closer examination of the text discloses that woman is the intellectual being, and acts as spokesperson for the couple in conversation with the snake. By interpreting the law, and bracketing one law inside another, she shows that she is theologically adept. She shows her intelligence in the way that she argues her case for not "eating" or "touching" the fruit (Genesis 3:3) that the man was instructed not to eat (Genesis 2:17). Before eating the fruit, she considers the benefits and makes a choice based on her conclusions.¹⁰ It must also be noted here that "man" was present during the conversa-

⁹David L. Lieber, *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 19-23. This resource still maintains the woman was gullible and vulnerable as she did not receive the prohibition directly from God. The disobedience causes the couple to be separated from God and expelled from the garden.

¹⁰Randall C. Bailey, "Doing the Wrong Thing: Male-Female Relationships in the Hebrew Canon," in *We Belong Together: Churches in Solidarity with Women*, ed. Sarah Cunningham (New York: Friendship Press, 1992), 18-29, points out that several of the relationships used in the Hebrew Bible as examples of position interactions are actually questionable at best. The stories typically point to oppression of women and should not be used as texts of correct relationship between men and women.

tion with the snake but does not participate; he simply eats what is handed to him, showing his impulsive nature.

When God appears, man tries to deny responsibility for his own actions and puts the blame on both God and the woman. Woman claims she was tricked by the snake. God then decides the punishment for the three characters, of which the woman's punishment is painful childbearing while still lusting for the man who will rule over her (Genesis 3:16.) In this way, God acts as the oppressor, and man becomes the instrument that will do the oppressing. Man takes the role seriously and begins by giving the woman a name. In doing so, he takes control and dominion over her. Woman is now subjugated to the impulsive and irresponsible man, and both are expelled from the garden lest they eat from the tree of life and be like God.

The less than equally yoked couple is now left alone outside the garden, and the narrator sets the stage for the procreation of humankind. The narrator is being deliberate in the vocabulary used for the sexual activity that happens, which causes this writer to rethink what is actually taking place between the "not-so-happy" couple. Woman has been put under the rule of man, but that is not the end of the abuse. The narrator chooses the verb *yādá*, "to know," to describe the sexual activity that is taking place, putting it into the birth formula: "he knew her, she conceived, and gave birth." In Genesis, this only occurs between Adam and Eve and between Cain and his wife (Genesis 4:1; 4:17.)

Evidence from Outside the Bible

In Genesis 4:1, the narrator uses *yādá* to describe the activity between the man and the woman. Is the narrator being more specific as to the activity occurring? Susan Brownmiller

makes a strong argument for rape as an act that has haunted women since the dawn of creation.¹¹ It seems her theory applies here, as this text demonstrates, that even in the creation narrative woman is being subjected to abusive sexual relations as the man knows her and she conceives. Brownmiller argues that men have used the genitals as a weapon in the effort to humiliate women and set a standard of control through violence by penetrating women. For a woman to have security she had to submit to the abuse of one man to protect her from the sexual abuse of another man. In the process women have been divided and not been able to work together, alienated from each other by the protection of a male.¹² By creating fear men have been able to exercise domination and control. Women have the ability to fight back but can never retaliate in kind.

It also needs to be pointed out that rape is not an activity based on sex; it is a degrading activity based on power. Of the men who rape, the action can happen for a variety of reasons:

Regardless of the pattern of the assault, rape is a complex act that serves a number of retaliatory and compensatory aims in the psychological functioning of the offender. It is an effort to discharge his anger, contempt and hostility toward women—to hurt, degrade, and humiliate. It is an effort to counteract feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy in himself

¹¹Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Women and Rape* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1975), 12-14, makes a candid argument on the history of rape identifying that women have had to fear violent men from the beginning of recorded history. She uses several biblical texts as points of reference for the violence shown to women and how this has isolated them from each other, having to seek the protection of one man against another.

¹²Groth, *Men Who Rape*, 118-120. Rape is not always perpetrated against women but also against men. In Groth's text, male rape, though not as prevalent, does occur.

and to assert his strength and power—to control and exploit.¹³

Returning to Genesis 4:1, we find the man removed from the “garden” for eating the forbidden fruit given him by the woman. He refuses to take responsibility for his part (or lack of) as he blames both the woman and God for his circumstances (Genesis 3:12). He now has to work the ground from which he came and to deal with the challenges of a less serene life. Directly after this, he “knows” the woman. He has already named her and taken power over her, but this next act could be his effort to solidify his position out of his own insecurity and feelings of inadequacy.

With the evidence of *yādá* found in other texts it seems that the narrator may be using the term in an effort to point out a violating act rather than one of consummation between the man and the woman. The impulsive man lashes out and humiliates (knows) the woman by using the weapon at his immediate disposal—his genitals. That he successfully assaults her is demonstrated by her conception and birth of a child. The couple’s removal from the garden gives rise to his feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. He blames the woman for the exclusion from the paradise they once inhabited, which causes anger and hostility in the man. He lashes out at the woman—the target of his aggressive behavior.

Conclusion

From the evidence presented, the text points to the stripping of power and the humiliation of the woman leaving her oppressed, demeaned, and then sexually assaulted. God has low-

¹³Ibid., 60.

ered her status and man, in his insecurity, has named her and assaulted her in the effort of dealing with his feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. We need to be more critical of the text and others that may seem to have an innocent appearance at first glance. This may have greater implications on other texts where *yādā* is found in that they may also be implying aggressive or violent activity. This includes the texts where God "knows" as we may find implications of oppression and abuse.

Though this text points out the aggressive oppression and domination of a woman through sexual assault, not all men are prone to these feelings or participate in this type of activity. The text may also be pointing us to a possible solution. By helping men sort out and deal with their feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, so that they are more whole with themselves, we may turn the tide and bring about the end of sexual assault and domination, liberating both men and women. Sad endings may in fact give way to new beginnings.

The first part of the history is a general account of the state of the world at the beginning of the world. It is a very interesting and useful work, and is highly recommended to all who are desirous of knowing the true origin of things, and the manner in which they have proceeded to the present time. The author has taken great pains to collect all the most authentic and ancient records, and to compare them with each other, in order to discover the truth of the matter. He has also consulted the most eminent philosophers and divines of all ages, and has taken the most exact notice of their opinions, and of the reasons on which they are founded. The result of his inquiries is, that the world was created by God, and that it has continued ever since in the same manner, and in the same order, as it is now. He has also shown, that the laws of nature are the same in all ages, and in all places, and that they are the same in all parts of the world. This is a very important discovery, and it is one which has been long since forgotten by the world. The author has also shown, that the laws of nature are the same in all ages, and in all places, and that they are the same in all parts of the world. This is a very important discovery, and it is one which has been long since forgotten by the world.

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