

“*Claiming Her Dignity* introduces us to fourteen biblical women who bravely responded to the violent evils of war, rape, systemic injustice, and poverty in seemingly small but effective and creative acts of nonviolent resistance and in the process retained their dignity and agency as full human beings. Claassens brilliantly demonstrates how the complex, realistic, and hopeful accounts of these ancient biblical women continue to reverberate in the stories of women and other marginalized people in our world today. Highly recommended!”

—Dennis Olson

Charles T. Haley Professor of Old Testament Theology
Princeton Theological Seminary

“This is a superb resource for those seeking to engage oppression, precarity, and trauma in biblical texts and in contemporary communities. Using the stories of Jephthah’s daughter, Abigail, Ruth, Susannah, and more, Claassens highlights women’s creativity and resilience in situations of systemic inequity and interpersonal brutality. Sophisticated gender analysis is combined here with unflinching attention to violence in its many forms. Claassens’s exploration of strategies of resistance makes this book essential reading for those interested in biblical ethics and feminist approaches to Scripture.”

—The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

Professor of Hebrew Scriptures
Yale Divinity School

“In this volume Juliana Claassens has once again applied her careful exegetical eye and her deep theological insight to texts that illumine the experience and witness of women in the Old Testament. The result in every chapter in this collection brings voices and stories of women, usually confined to the margins of biblical interpretation, into our consciousness with fresh perspectives that enrich the humanity of us all.”

—Bruce C. Birch

Dean Emeritus and Professor Emeritus
Wesley Theological Seminary

Claiming Her Dignity

Female Resistance
in the Old Testament

L. Juliana M. Claassens



A Michael Glazier Book

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To Denise Ackermann and Elna Mouton,
the first women to teach at the Faculty of Theology,
Stellenbosch University
and who know something about resistance

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Introduction

To be human means to resist dehumanization. Even in the darkest periods of human history: in the ghettos and the extermination camps in Nazi Germany, on the plantations of the American South, during the violent civil rights era (as vividly brought to our attention in the recent film *Selma*), and during the struggle to end Apartheid in my home country of South Africa, men and women rise up and in many different voices say this one thing: “Do not treat me like this. Treat me like the human being that I am.”

Of course, victims of injustice do not always have the liberty to say these words out loud. Many individuals, however, have found nonverbal ways of expressing their resistance to their oppressors’ actions that have sought to deny their humanity and assault their dignity. These acts of protest serve as a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit that desperately seeks to survive even amid the most terrible of circumstances. Moreover, the very act of resisting dehumanization underscores the incontrovertible and indestructible nature of human dignity. As Beverly Mitchell argues, “The dignity of being a human made in the image of God was manifested precisely in the bearing witness to the violation and in the protest against those violations, whether the assaults were physical, emotional or spiritual.”¹

We see this notion powerfully illustrated in the work of African American novelist Toni Morrison. In her much-acclaimed novel *Beloved*, we are shown a variety of ways in which characters such as Baby Suggs, Sixo, and Paul D resist the oppressive system in which they find themselves—a system that at any moment could erupt in devastating violence. In her wonderful book *Laughter of the Oppressed*, Jacqueline Bussie outlines

¹ Beverly Eileen Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 4.

these instances of resistance in *Beloved* that quite often are associated with the characters laughing amid the most tragic of circumstances,² something Bussie calls “tragic laughter.”³

Baby Suggs, the mother-in-law of Sethe, in particular is a great example of female resistance that offers us a helpful point of entry for this current project. Some years earlier, Sethe, rather than having her children be returned to the horrors of slavery, ended up killing her daughter, Beloved. The novel hauntingly shows how the various characters, including Baby Suggs, are seeking to come to terms with the devastating psychological and emotional effects of slavery, with the figure of Beloved emerging not only as a ghost representing Sethe’s dead child but also of the other children who died during slavery.⁴

Baby Suggs herself carries deep wounds caused by her experience of slavery. Morrison compellingly describes the objectification and dehumanization experienced by Baby Suggs and others who find themselves in captivity: “In all of Baby’s life, as well as Sethe’s own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized.”⁵

In the midst of this dehumanization, however, Baby Suggs finds ways to resist the indignity she is experiencing by claiming her autonomy as an independent subject, as a person who emerges as an “uncalled, unrobed, unanointed” lay preacher.⁶ In one of Baby Suggs’s sermons out in the Clearing, far away from the oppressors’ eyes, she herself not only is claiming her dignity but also calling on others to do the same:

² Jacqueline A. Bussie, “Flowers in the Dark: African American Consciousness, Laughter, and Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” chap. 5 in *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 125–81. It is important to note that whereas Sethe is a fictional character, Margaret Garner, on whom Sethe is based, is not. Bussie notes how Morrison came over a little-known article from 1856 in the American Baptist called, “A Visit to a Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child,” which offered for Morrison the impetus for imagining Sethe’s psychological struggle in coming to terms with her act of killing her own child. Bussie, “Flowers in the Dark,” 126.

³ Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 3.

⁴ Bussie, “Flowers in the Dark,” 127.

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 5, quoted in Bussie, “Flowers in the Dark,” 127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. . . . Then she shouted, “Let the children come!” and they ran from the trees toward her.

“Let your mothers hear you laugh,” she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling. Then “Let the grown men come,” she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees. “Let your wives and your children see you dance,” she told them and groundlife shuddered under their feet. Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.” And without covering their eyes, the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.⁷

In Baby Suggs’s speech, we see how basic human elements such as laughter, weeping, and dancing are invoked as means of resistance. By calling on the people to laugh, to cry, and to dance, Baby Suggs reminds her people that they are bodies: “flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass.”⁸ And she calls on the people to love their bodies, for elsewhere their flesh is the object of scorn, subjected to violence and humiliation. Hence, she encourages her people to love one another, to take the hands that the slave owners “use, tie, bind, chop off, and leave empty” and “love them,” using them to “touch others with them.”⁹

We see how Baby Suggs’s acts of resistance play an important role in establishing an alternative consciousness that stands over against the oppressive regime. Jacqueline Bussie argues that “through laughter and dance, [Baby Suggs] encourages the people to rediscover themselves as lovable, beautiful, and chosen.”¹⁰ In the process, Baby Suggs is embracing her own autonomy, emerging as a subject in her own right who in turn also urges the people around her to reclaim their subjectivity.¹¹ By her

⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

acts that become a way of resisting dehumanization, she contributes to the creation of an alternative identity of her people as subjects who have agency: who dance, who weep, who laugh.

These acts of resistance are a sign of what has been called power *in spite of* oppression.¹² Drawing on the work of Judith Butler that considers the way in which people who are constrained by social forces may at the same time react against these norms, Amy Allen formulates a definition of resistance that encompasses “the capacity of an agent to act in spite of or in response to the power wielded over her by others.” As she argues: “Resistance seems fundamentally to involve asserting one’s capacity to act in the face of the domination of another agent.”¹³

This relates to the important work done by James Scott, in which he identifies strategies of nonviolent resistance by means of which oppressed individuals and groups are able to resist unjust power structures. Also termed “passive resistance,” these acts of defiance by the oppressed, which in contrast to aggressive or violent resistance, are rooted in everyday actions that at first glance may seem to be trivial and insignificant but are actually quite creative and potentially liberating. So these seemingly ordinary nonviolent acts of resistance rightly can be described as “weapons of the weak,” to echo the title of one of Scott’s books.¹⁴ Scott identifies the notion of “hidden transcripts” that stand over against the official or public transcripts and that include a whole range of practices such as rumors, gossip, stories, songs, rituals, euphemisms, and jokes that serve as a powerful avenue to voice dissent among people in subordinate positions.¹⁵

It is also important to note that the focus of this book is not so much on the organized forms of protest, the marches and the demonstrations that were compellingly illustrated in the movie *Selma*, which documents the dramatic events associated with the historic march from Selma to

¹² In this regard, Amy Allen’s notion of power *in spite of* oppression is helpful. With regard to the oppression that women in particular experience with reference to the power that men exercise over women, Allen contemplates “the power that women exercise specifically *as a response* to such domination.” Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 122.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹⁵ Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, 14.

Montgomery in 1965. Rather, *Claiming Her Dignity* focuses on the unofficial, often unnoted acts of resistance that found expression in ordinary places and were conducted by ordinary people, underscoring Foucault's assertion that in the face of power there always will be resistance. It is important to acknowledge, however, that such acts of resistance are as multiple and diverse in nature as the people from which they come. In this regard, Foucault maintains that there is "no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances."¹⁶ Foucault, however, knew well that the cumulative effect of these acts of resistance is what in the end makes a revolution possible.

Baby Suggs's inspiring example of resisting dehumanization helps us to identify a framework for female resistance that will be useful for considering the phenomenon of female resistance in the Old Testament. As a biblical scholar, I have been particularly drawn to those Old Testament narratives that show women using a variety of creative means in order to resist the circumstances and persons who are responsible for causing them great harm.

The narrative world created in the narratives of the Old Testament can be described as a world submerged in violence, in which the lives and well-being of particularly the most vulnerable members, women and children, were regularly threatened. And it is not just physical violence that was the result of war and sexual assault that caused women in particular great harm. One also can identify numerous instances of structural violence in the world reflected in the Old Testament, a world made up of multiple interconnected forms of oppression and domination. Moreover, it will be shown how poverty and the lack of resources in the Old Testament world, as also today, can be described as a kind of violence that puts especially women at risk.

As we have seen in the case of Baby Suggs, however, to be human inherently means to resist violence and the unjust power structures that most often are responsible for this violence. In *Claiming Her Dignity*, I will explore the theme of female resistance in the Old Testament by focusing on a selection of Old Testament narratives (including one narrative from the Apocrypha). What these narratives have in common is that they show a number of diverse, multifaceted ways in which the female

¹⁶Quoted in Bussie, "Flowers in the Dark," 160.

characters respond to the dignity-defying circumstances in which they find themselves—circumstances that violate their self-worth and impede their ability to flourish.

The acts of resistance of these women are often quite subtle in nature—reminiscent of the ordinary acts evident in the example of Baby Suggs, who employs acts of laughter, tears, and dancing in order to reclaim a sense of self. These acts of resistance are, however, by no means insignificant or trivial. As we will see in this book, the women's resistance is actually a source of great power, albeit a different kind of power. So we will see how the female resistance narrated in the biblical texts featured in this book plays an important role in helping the female characters to assert their autonomy in the face of circumstances that deny their personhood and threaten their well-being. Indeed, this ability to act *in spite* of the best attempts of individuals and/or circumstances that seek to crush human beings attests to the fact that even in the most precarious situations, people will fight back and claim their dignity in the face of dehumanization.

It is important to note that the acts of resistance by these female characters are all nonviolent in nature. In the Hebrew Bible, one does find examples of female resistance that are violent in nature, e.g., the story of Jael killing Sisera with a tent peg (Jdg 4) and Judith severing Holofernes's head after seducing him. I would argue, however, that violent resistance is not an option in the violent world in which we live, as violence quite regularly begets more violence. Moreover, violent resistance can be quite dangerous for those who find themselves in situations of oppression, as the violent retaliations after the slave insurrections in the American South or in response to the Warsaw uprising in Nazi Germany clearly attest.

Finally, one should acknowledge that the female resistance narrated in these biblical stories is complex. Recent conversations in gender theory and postcolonial interpretation will be helpful in providing a thicker description of the nature of female resistance that is, as so often is the case in life, not uncomplicated. Indeed, literature mirrors life where women's ways in the world are seldom straightforward or simple.

Claiming Her Dignity will follow the following structure. There will be four chapters in the book. Each chapter explores different aspects of the dehumanization that particularly women experienced in the Old Testament—each of these four topics being associated with violence in some way: (1) The Violence of War; (2) The Violence of Rape; (3) The

Violence of Patriarchy Heterarchy¹⁷ and (4) The Violence of Precarity. It is widely accepted that violence not only pertains to physical or direct violence but also includes structural violence. Structural violence has been responsible for intense psychological and emotional suffering and can be as damaging as direct violence.¹⁸ Hence, Wolfgang Huber helpfully observes that it is important to view violence from the perspective of the victim, contemplating the effects of violence on the individual as well as the community as a whole.¹⁹ Moreover, to be in a constant state of depravity can also be viewed as some form of violence. As Steven Lee argues in an essay called “Is Poverty Violence?”: “If anything, an enforced state of poverty is a worse violation of a person’s humanity than most physical assaults, given the seriousness and long-term nature of poverty’s consequences.”²⁰

In the midst of this all-encompassing experience of violence that is reflected in the narratives that are included in *Claiming Her Dignity*, however, one finds notable signs of resistance, attesting to the fact that the female characters do not just accept the way things are as the way things ought to be. In chapter 1, titled “Resisting the Violence of War,” we will read two stories of women resisting collective violence in quite different ways, i.e., the story of Rizpah mourning the senseless murder of her sons (2 Sam 21) as well as the story of Abigail, whose hospitality prevents a similar tragedy from happening (1 Sam 25). In chapter 2,

¹⁷ In response to Carol Meyers’s suggestion that one use the term “heterarchy” instead of the often-used term “patriarchy” in order to reflect the existence of multiple hierarchies rooted in different intersecting levels of oppression and domination based on factors such as race, class, gender, and social orientation. See Meyers, “Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 1 (2014): 27.

¹⁸ Kathleen Ho, “Structural Violence as a Human Rights Violation,” *Essex Human Rights Review* 4, no. 2 (2007): 1–17, <http://projects.essex.ac.uk/ehrr/V4N2/ho.pdf>.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Huber writes: “Recent research looks at violence not primarily from the perspective of the act and its perpetrator, but from the perspective of the victim. Empathy for the victim becomes the key to understanding violence. Therefore, not so much the means but the effects of violence and not so much the intentions of the actors but the consequences for the victim form our image of violence”; see Huber, “Religion and Violence in a Globalized World,” Eleventh Gerd Bucerius Lecture, Washington, DC, June 24, 2010, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 47 (2010): 52, http://www.ghi-dc.org/files/publications/bulletin/bu047/bu47_051.pdf.

²⁰ Steven Lee, “Is Poverty Violence?,” in *Institutional Violence*, ed. Deane Curtin and Robert Litke (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 5–12, http://genevapeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Is_Poverty_Violence.pdf.

“Resisting the Violence of Rape,” the stories of Tamar (2 Sam 13) and Susanna (the apocryphal addition to Daniel) will be used to illustrate the notion of female resistance in the context of rape and sexual assault. In chapter 3, “Resisting the Violence of **Patriarchy** Heterarchy,” two stories of daughters resisting the injustice of patriarchal power (or rather “heterarchal power,” as will be shown in chapter 3 to be a more suitable term in order to capture the multiple intersecting levels of oppression reflected in the narrative world of the Old Testament) will be introduced. So the story of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11 and the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27 will be explored for what they tell us about the various ways in which women go about resisting injustice. In chapter 4, “Resisting the Violence of Precarity,” we will read stories that narrate women’s vulnerability due to a lack of resources and systemic injustice. So we will see in the stories of Hagar and Sarah (Gen 16, 21) and Ruth and Tamar (Gen 38) some of the creative ways in which women resist the dehumanization associated with a lack of resources that affects a person’s material and psychological well-being.

Each of the four chapters will highlight the importance of lament. The first narrative in each chapter will have a focus on lament as resistance. It has been shown that throughout history, and particularly in some cultures, weeping often is associated with women.²¹ Gail Holst-Warhaft writes about this connection between women and weeping, stating that laments “seem to have been women’s way of bearing the unbearable,” as they “confront death with open eyes.”²² Throughout these narratives, it will be evident that tears are not a sign of weakness but of strength, i.e., indicative of what we have earlier described as power in spite of oppression.

The focus on female resistance in these narratives, however, will also show that there are other modes of resistance. The second story in each

²¹ Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley, introduction to *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, ed. Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12.

²² Gail Holst-Warhaft argues that “men and women may both weep for their dead, but it is women who tend to weep longer, [and] louder.” See *Dangerous Voices: Women’s Laments and Greek Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 1. See also my work on the mourning or wailing women in Jeremiah 9, in L. Juliana Claassens, “Calling the Keeners: The Image of the Wailing Woman as Symbol of Survival in a Traumatized World,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (2010): 63–78; and *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God’s Liberating Presence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 18–30.

chapter will depict alternative expressions of resistance performed by the female characters. In these narratives, we will see examples of women standing up for what is right, of women using hospitality and prayer, of women appealing to the legal system, and also of women who at times revert to trickery, which quite often has been the way in which women and others who find themselves in oppressive situations have survived. What these strategies have in common is that they attest to women's resilience; they resolve to rise above their situation, in addition to their creativity in finding nonviolent ways to fight back.

The two stories in each chapter are perhaps also representative of the complex interrelationship of being a victim and of being an agent—something that captures the reality faced by women in many different parts of the world. These two sides are not easily separated. So the act of lament in the first story of each chapter is an important expression of agency that could conceivably be quite powerful as well. Denise Ackermann reminds us that in ancient Greece, lament was outlawed because it was considered “a threat to the state's ability and power to preserve order.”²³ And one could well imagine that the resourceful actions of the women reflected in the second story in each chapter may well have been accompanied by tears as they sought to make the best of a situation that indeed could be described as tragic.

Why read biblical texts through the lens of female resistance? First, it may help us to come to a richer understanding regarding the richly diverse ways in which women's lives are narrated in the Old Testament. As suggested above, it is all too easy just to view women as victims who are unable to do something about their plight. Therefore, a focus on female resistance in the Old Testament that takes into consideration the small and large ways in which women in the Old Testament resisted their dehumanization helps us to look at women's lives then (and I would argue also now) in a more nuanced way. Quite often in history, women were both victims and held some sort of agency at the same time. In this regard, Martha Nussbaum rightly argues that people are “constrained by social norms, but norms are plural and people are devious. Even in societies that nourish problematic roles for men and women, real men

²³ Denise Ackermann, “Lamenting Tragedy from ‘The Other Side,’” in *Sameness and Difference: Problems and Potentials in South African Civil Society*, ed. James R. Cochrane and Bastienne Klein, Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change, Series 2, Africa, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2000), 224.

and women can also find spaces in which to subvert these conventions, resourcefully creating possibilities of love and joy.”²⁴

Second, by reading a number of different narratives from different parts of the canon (and one from the Apocrypha), we will see that female resistance in the Old Testament constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon with many different expressions and different levels of intensity associated with women’s ability to assert themselves in the face of dehumanization. So each situation reflected in the various narratives demonstrates how a different mode of action may be necessary, thus adding to our understanding of the diverse nature of female resistance then and now.

Third, I have found that biblical narratives offer us the space to contemplate the complex situations in which women around the world find themselves.²⁵ Biblical texts that narrate the diverse, subtle, but nevertheless powerful means in which women in the biblical narratives have resisted the violation of their human dignity may help create a conversation that can help us think through the complex issues facing women today. Women in different parts of the world; women from all walks of life; women of different colors, cultures, and creeds share the common challenge of finding ways to claim their dignity in contexts of power that at times may include the abuse of power and even at times subtle, and not so subtle, attacks on body and soul.

In this regard, Martha Nussbaum’s argument that narratives show us the truth of our situation is quite compelling. Nussbaum argues that literary creations and their “representations of common human events may sometimes enable them to elicit emotion across wide divides of space and time.”²⁶ Accordingly, narratives constitute a “space in which we investigate and try out some of life’s possibilities.” When entering a

²⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Introduction: Feminism, Internationalism, Liberalism,” in *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14.

²⁵ John Barton argues that in ancient Israel, “narrative was conceived as a vehicle for presenting insights into the moral life of human subjects in such a way that the reader would be challenged and stimulated by thought and action.” Barton writes that the authors of ancient Israel’s narratives “realized that human ethical enquiry needs to be anchored in specific cases, and that it is only through the richness of storytelling that we come to understand what it is to be human and to make informed choices in a world that is only partly predictable.” See Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 10–11.

²⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 247.

narrative world, “the reader or spectator of a literary work is reading or watching the work but at the same time reading the world, and reading the own self.” Drawing on Marcel Proust’s notion of literature as an “optical instrument,” Nussbaum argues that narrative may help the reader to contemplate personal realities, which, as will be evident in the narratives selected for this book, may contain some complex ethical issues.²⁷

There are a number of reasons why I personally have been drawn to this topic. For one, I am currently working in a country where I am confronted on a daily basis with the vulnerability of women. HIV-AIDS has been called a gendered pandemic, with women being particularly susceptible to contracting this debilitating condition (due to both biological and sociocultural factors). Women also, to a large extent, carry the burden of care for the sick and the dying.²⁸ Moreover, the “feminization of poverty” has become a popular term to describe the fact that a greater number of women live in extreme poverty and are touched in gender-specific ways by the reality of poverty.²⁹ And sexual violence in particular causes women to be vulnerable, with about 90 percent of all victims of rape being female and 99 percent of all perpetrators being men, making rape a distinctly gendered crime. Incidentally, South Africa boasts one of highest instances of rape of a country not at war, making this topic a deeply personal one.³⁰

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 243–44. See also Jacqueline Lapsley, who understands ethics “as a form of encounter between text and reader” in which the reader enters the story and experiences a sense of empathy for its characters.” Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women’s Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 10–12.

²⁸ Beverley Haddad outlines the reasons why HIV-AIDS could be described as a gendered pandemic, including, e.g., “women’s biological susceptibility to the virus, their subordinate position in sexual relationships prescribed by culture, and the high incidence of gender violence.” “Surviving the HIV and AIDS Epidemic in South Africa: Women Living and Dying, Theologising and Being Theologised,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 131 (2008): 49.

²⁹ Valentine M. Moghadam, “The ‘Feminization of Poverty’ and Women’s Human Rights,” *Social and Human Sciences Sector Papers in Women’s Studies/Gender Research* (Paris: UNESCO, 2005), http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/cpadocs/Feminization_of_Poverty.pdf. See also Marcelo Medeiros and Joana Costa, “What Do We Mean by ‘Feminization of Poverty’?,” *International Poverty Centre (IPC)* 58 (2008), <http://www.ipc-undp.org/pub/IPCOnePager58.pdf>.

³⁰ See Louise du Toit, “Rumours of Rape: A Critical Consideration of Interpretations of Sexual Violence in South Africa,” Stellenbosch Forum Lecture, February 25, 2013. She argues that South African rape statistics are equal to and even exceed those of countries that are at war.

In my current position at Stellenbosch University, I have the privilege of teaching a class each year to our MDiv students on Gender, Culture, and Religion, with the unique feature that this is a class that all of our students who are preparing for ministry have to take. The objective of this class is to help our future pastors understand something of the nature and the extent of the challenges that cause women in particular to be vulnerable. Moreover, this class also challenges the students to try and find ways of changing this reality.

Another reason that resistance has probably become part of my DNA is my own life's journey. My decision to embark on a career path that up until this day is still mostly dominated by men is responsible for the fact that the notion of female resistance is, for me, not just a matter of theory. During those years, as one of the first women to study theology in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (the only woman in a class of twenty-eight men to graduate in 1997), teaching at various universities and colleges in both the United States and South Africa, and in 2014 becoming only the second full female professor in the faculty of theology at my alma mater, there were times that I, together with other women, had to struggle to have my voice heard or to maintain a sense of self amid dignity-defying circumstances.

Inspired though by the work of feminist scholars like Judith Butler, I have also become deeply committed to extending my own and other feminists' struggle for liberation to other individuals and groups who are suffering victimization. So Judith Butler proposes that individuals and groups who find themselves in situations of precarity due to unjust power structures should act in solidarity with one another, forming alliances across barriers of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in order to resist injustice together.³¹

Finally, the topic of female resistance is important to me as I am genuinely concerned about how one goes about claiming one's dignity in such a way that does not undo the dignity of others? Is the slur "Femi-Nazi" just a figment of the male imagination that fears women who are becoming too powerful in their minds? And what about other organized and informal acts of resistance that have come to our attention in recent months and years, in which individuals and groups resist unjust struc-

³¹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 43–49.

tures? How should one think, for example, about students in South Africa who recently (and forcefully) demanded that the Cecil John Rhodes's statue in front of the University of Cape Town be removed—Rhodes being, of course, the prime symbol of the British Empire (which included a grand plan of a railway extending across the African continent from Cape to Cairo).³² Or consider my own institution, Stellenbosch University, where increasingly, the #OpenStellenbosch movement is strongly critiquing a university where the power still firmly lies in the hands of a group of white (Afrikaner) heteronormative males? Particularly given the fact that this postcolonial act of resistance is sometimes coupled with some extreme demands, e.g., that curriculums should be revised in order to remove all signs of Western/Eurocentric knowledge?

Ultimately, the question at the heart of this study is, how does a more nuanced understanding of female resistance in the Old Testament help us, on the one hand, to give space for women and other groups who are living in unjust systems to (re)claim their identity but, on the other hand, do it in such a way that does not reinstate power over another?

Perhaps the history of my people, the Afrikaners in South Africa, offers an important lesson for future generations. After experiencing tremendous human rights violations at the hand of the British Empire, with a great number of women and children dying after being thrown into concentration camps (some forty years *before* the Nazi death camps), the newly elected Afrikaner National Party, in an attempt to strengthen their own people, were reincarnated as the architects and enforcers of Apartheid.

These lessons from history affirm the importance of resisting in such a way that one's resistance is never separated from values such as empathy and compassion for others near and far. My hope is to show that the female resistance in the Old Testament is very much rooted in an understanding of power as solidarity, i.e., how a group of diverse individuals may work together to challenge, subvert, and, ultimately, overturn a system of domination. Employing Hannah Arendt's definition of "power as 'the human ability not just to act but to act in concert,'" Amy Allen considers this notion of *power-with* in terms of the "collective ability that

³² Ra'eesa Pather, "Rhodes Must Fall: The Movement after the Statue," *Daily Vox*, April 21, 2015, <http://www.thedailyvox.co.za/rhodes-must-fall-the-movement-after-the-statue>. Cf. the popularized #RhodesMustFall designation that is used to describe this movement.

results from the receptivity and reciprocity that characterize the relations among individual members of the collectivity.”³³

Claiming Her Dignity took a long time to grow and mature into its current manifestation—from the very first time I worked on this topic in a 2005 article called “Laughter and Tears: Carnivalistic Overtones in the Stories of Sarah and Hagar,”³⁴ to my 2015 sabbatical in Germany, courtesy of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation that gave me the space to finally complete this project. Much has happened in the decade since I first started thinking about this topic—my book, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God’s Liberating Presence* appeared in 2012 (Westminster John Knox); teaching in the United States; moving back to South Africa; teaching at Stellenbosch University; having a baby girl; hosting many conferences; and editing a number of collected volumes. But the topic of female resistance in the Old Testament remained in the back of my mind and featured in a number of articles I wrote, particularly since taking up my position at Stellenbosch University, which has a research focus on the promotion of human dignity made possible by a generous grant from Stellenbosch University’s Hope Project. In the past few months, I could immerse myself in this theme, write new material for the book, and bring together many of the ideas I have been working on for many years. It is actually fitting that my chapter on Hagar and Sarah was one of the last ones I wrote for this current project, as doing so was a way of returning to the place where the project initially started. But it was also good to see how far one has come over these past ten years, the impact of the many books one has read, the many conversations one has had, and the many life experiences generated by living in two countries, which inevitably leads to seeing old texts in new ways. With this in mind, let us turn to some of the very interesting narratives from the Old Testament that tell us the stories of a number of courageous women who refused to let violence have the final word.

October 3, 2015
Stellenbosch, South Africa

³³ Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory*, 126–27.

³⁴L. Juliana Claassens, “Laughter and Tears: Carnivalistic Overtones in the Stories of Sarah and Hagar,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 32, no. 3 (2005): 295–308.

Resisting the Violence of War

1. Understanding Collective Violence

Probably one of the most extreme forms of dehumanization comes in the form of the collective violence that we find in contexts of war and terror. Throughout the history of the world, individuals and groups, and in the case of the great wars of the world, even whole towns, have been utterly destroyed by acts of devastating violence. To read of such brutal attacks in newspapers or in the histories and narratives that seek to document these events, or to see images of the carnage of armed conflict, terrorist attacks, and genocide on media outlets such as CNN and YouTube and in films seeking to capture the magnitude of these events, we are reminded of the ugly truth that we know all too well but perhaps would like to forget: Human beings are prone to injury, violence and death. As Judith Butler writes: “Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the wilful action of another.”¹

The World Health Organization’s Global Consultation on Violence and Health defines violence as follows:

Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, or against a group or community that

¹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 27–28.

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either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.²

Each year, more than 1.3 million people worldwide die due to violence in all of its manifestations (self-directed, interpersonal, and collective). Collective violence in particular “refers to instrumental violence inflicted by larger groups such as nation states, militia groups and terrorist organizations in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives.”³

The past century has seen more than its share of collective violence that took the form of war or armed conflict, terrorism, genocide, and gang warfare—it is estimated that since the Second World War, there has been a total of 190 armed conflicts, with only a quarter occurring between states. According to one estimate in the WHO’s report on violence and health, a total of 190 million people have lost their lives in the twenty-five largest instances of collective violence in the twentieth century—60 per cent of these deaths being civilians who died directly or indirectly due to these acts of war, terror, or genocide.⁴ The recent examples of school shootings, movie theatre shootings, and church shootings in the United States, as well as the pervasiveness of violence in many other parts of the world, including my native South Africa, clearly demonstrate that for many, violence is no longer something that happens in worlds far away.

Moreover, the effects of communal violence are far reaching. Acts of war and terror not only leave countless dead bodies in their wake but also cause severe trauma and deep psychological and emotional scars on survivors. In this regard, Marcelo Suárez-Orozco and Antonius Robben show, for instance, the consequences of trauma on the very fabric of society; how whole communities may be traumatized, including members of the community who were not originally involved in the original violent attack. Suárez-Orozco and Robben further identify “the intergenerational transmission of trauma” as another phenomenon that points to the social

² “WHO Global Consultation on Violence and Health” (1996): 4, quoted in World Health Organization, “Global Status Report on Violence Prevention, 2014,” <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/Reports/UNDP-GVA-violence-2014.pdf>, p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ World Health Organization, “Collective Violence,” chap. 8 in “World Report on Violence and Health, p. 218, http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap8.pdf?ua=1.

effects of communal violence when the children of trauma victims experience the effects of trauma themselves.⁵

So how do people respond in the face of violence that not only has the potential of annihilating the lives of human beings but also can crush the spirits of the survivors? News agencies such as *Time* and Reuters regularly put together a series of their best news photographs of a given year.⁶ It is striking that in a great majority of these photos, men, women, and children are shown to be weeping uncontrollably. Crying in despair. Lamenting the dead and dying. One way that individuals thus react in the face of violence is the very human reaction of lamenting: showing one's distress regarding the cruelty of violence and the vulnerability of the human condition. As Butler writes: "Lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed."⁷ By lifting up their voices in lament, these men, women, and children demonstrate their indignation at being violated and their dissent regarding the violence that has destroyed all that they love. But are there also other avenues for resisting violence? And perhaps even for bringing an end to violence, or as the title of Judith Butler's book will have it, breaking the "Frames of War"?

In the Old Testament, there are many stories that narrate both the reality as well as the effect of violence on individuals and the communities from which they come. In the stories of Rizpah (2 Sam 21) and Abigail (1 Sam 25), one finds at least some attempts on the part of individuals to step out of the violent script that has dominated the world in which they live. In this chapter, I will focus on two stories from the book of Samuel that reflect something of Israel's violent past. These stories both have female characters who inadvertently find themselves in a context of violence and who seek to deal with the effects, or the potential effects, of violence on their communities. These two stories vividly capture

⁵ Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Antonius C. G. M. Robben, "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Violence and Trauma," in *Cultures under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma*, ed. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Antonius C. G. M. Robben (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 24–25.

⁶ "Time Picks the Top 100 Photos of 2014," *Time* magazine, December 17, 2014, <http://time.com/3599787/top-100-photos-of-2014/>; "Best Photos of the Year 2014," Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/news/picture/2014/12/03/best-photos-of-the-year?articleId=USRTR4GLBU>.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009), 25.

some of the very different ways in which women in the Old Testament are resisting the violence of war that has the potential to utterly destroy their families and the communities in which they live.

2. Rizpah's Lament (2 Samuel 21)⁸

In a most brutal display of narrative violence, the bodies of Saul's seven sons and grandsons, who have been murdered and dismembered, are seen strewn all over the field in 2 Samuel 21:1-14. These members of Saul's household have been the victims of a vicious cycle of violence caused by petty politics as exemplified in the Gibeonites' demand to David to have seven of Saul's sons executed because Saul did not honor an old treaty that existed between them and Israel. Indeed, violence begets violence and old feuds can return with a vengeance.

Amid this carnage, though, human rights violations of the worst kind—the dead are not even given the decency of a burial—one finds a heart-wrenching image of a mother weeping for her sons—an image that reminds us of the hundreds and thousands of mothers who on a daily basis are faced with the calamity of losing a child. In 2 Samuel 21:10, one encounters Rizpah, the widow of King Saul, lamenting the heartless killing of her two sons as well as the sons of her stepdaughter Merab.⁹ She is said to keep a six-month vigil “from the beginning of the harvest until the rains poured down on them from the heavens” (v. 10) for these victims of violence. Rizpah does not have much of a part in this narrative, at least not a speaking part, and her presence in the text constitutes little more than one sentence. Yet Rizpah emerges as one of the prime examples of female resistance in the face of violence in the biblical text.

⁸ An earlier version of this section has appeared in a collection of essays that grew out of conference on the Old Testament, Ethics, and Human Dignity that was held at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa: L. Juliana Claassens, “Violence, Mourning, Politics: Rizpah's Lament in Conversation with Judith Butler,” in *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Human Dignity*, ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Bruce Birch (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 19–36.

⁹ J. Cheryl Exum notes that the ancient witnesses are divided on whether Rizpah is lamenting in 2 Samuel 21:8 for Merab or Michal's sons. Whereas the Masoretic text reads “Michal,” other ancient texts have “Merab,” which is the preferred reading since Merab was the wife of Adriel. Moreover, according to 2 Samuel 6:23, Michal did not have any children. See J. Cheryl Exum, “Rizpah,” *Word & World* 17, no. 3 (1997): 263.

a) *Failing to Mourn*

The narrative in 2 Samuel 21:1-14 starts with the disturbing account of David trying to find a reason for the famine that for three years has ravaged the land. Introducing God's voice in first person speech, the narrator divulges that the cause of the drought is divine displeasure regarding the bloodguilt resting on Saul's house because of his zealous attempts to wipe out the Gibeonites (vv. 1-2) despite the treaty, which according to Joshua 9, existed between the Gibeonites and Israel.¹⁰ In order to restore the cosmic order so that it may rain again, David calls in the aggrieved Gibeonites, who demand that the descendants of Saul be executed. Without as much as a hint of mental anguish, David complies with this request (v. 6), and Saul's two sons and five grandsons are brutally executed—the NRSV translating the Hebrew verb *yq'* ("to tear apart") as "to be impaled" (v. 9). According to the LXX, an alternative translation would be "to scatter their bodies," which suggests they were dismembered and their bodies left in the field in the wake of this violent massacre.¹¹

The absence of a proper burial for Saul's sons points to the community's failure to duly mourn victims of violence. In her book *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler contemplates this inability of a community to mourn loss with reference to the United States' response after 9/11 and the ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹² Butler argues that the community's failure to mourn is profoundly connected to a hierarchy of grief in that

¹⁰ Marie-Theres Wacker argues that according to the ancient Israelite worldview, the shedding of blood is intrinsically connected to famine. She refers to the Cain and Abel narrative in Genesis 4:11-12, in which the ground is said to have opened its mouth to receive the blood of Abel with the result that, when Cain tills the ground, it will no longer yield to him its strength. See Wacker, "Rizpah oder: Durch Trauer-Arbeit zur Versöhnung: Anmerkungen zu 2 Sam 21, 1-14," in *Textarbeit: Studien zu Texten und ihrer Rezeption aus dem Alten Testament und der Umwelt Israels. Festschrift für Peter Weimar zur Vollendung seines 60. Lebensjahres mit Beiträgen von Freunden, Schülern und Kollegen*, ed. Klaus Kiesow and Thomas Meurer (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2003), 551.

¹¹ Paula Gooder, "Remembering Rizpah," *Sojourners* (January 2004): 26. In verse 14 it is said that the bodies of Saul's sons had to be gathered for burial, which perhaps supports the LXX translation.

¹² Butler, *Precarious Life*, 28–29. Butler draws on Sigmund Freud's notion of "Mourning and Melancholia," according to which melancholia results from unresolved grief and an inability to mourn the loss of an object, person, or ideal. See also David L. Eng, "The Value of Silence," *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 1 (2002): 87. I propose that the failure to bury the bones of Saul and his sons is symbolic of this inability to let go of the past.

not all victims of violence are mourned equally. According to Butler, certain lives are not considered real, so that “those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealisation.”¹³ Referring to the United States’ presence in Iraq and Afghan, Butler contemplates this act of derealisation in terms of the thousands of nameless Iraqis and Afghans who have died and who have gone unmourned:

It is one thing to argue that first, on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture. If 200,000 Iraqi children were killed during the Gulf War, and its aftermath, do we have an image, a frame for any one of those lives, singly or collectively?¹⁴

The narrative in 2 Samuel 21 reflects something of this process of derealisation when the sons of Saul go, for the most part, unnamed.¹⁵ We know nothing of them, little more than that they were unfortunate enough to be the sons of Saul. Echoing Butler’s probing questions with regard to the thousands of Iraqis and Afghans who have died, one could well ask of Saul’s sons: “Do they have names and faces, personal histories, family, favourite hobbies, slogans by which they live?”¹⁶ One wonders whether this absence of a narrative frame that would humanize these individuals is not responsible for the fact that David so easily could give the sons of Saul over to be killed.¹⁷ Their dehumanization, furthermore,

¹³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33. Butler continues: “What, then, is the relation between violence and those lives considered as ‘unreal’? Does violence effect that unreality? Does violence take place on the condition of that unreality?”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵ Rizpah’s two sons are named Armoni and Mephibosheth (v. 8). The five sons of Merab are not named. The names of Rizpah’s sons may be remembered due to Rizpah’s selfless act of mourning, which as I will argue later in this essay, serves the function of memorializing them.

¹⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 32.

¹⁷ David does spare the life of Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, because of an oath he made to Jonathan. It may be that the text contrasts in this instance David and Saul—David who does not break an oath he has made, unlike Saul, who in this text is said to have violated an oath with the Gibeonites. See Wacker, “Rizpah,” 552. On the other hand, it may be as Exum has argued that David spares Mephibosheth’s life seeing that, due to

is graphically realized by their bodies violently being torn apart and then left in the field without being properly buried.

Butler shows a link between the failure to mourn and the derealisation of its victims. As Judith Butler writes with regard to King Creon's decree that outlawed any public act of grieving in the story of Antigone: "There will be no public act of grieving (said in Antigone). If there is a 'discourse,' it is a silent and melancholic one in which there have been no lives, and no losses; there has been no common bodily condition, no vulnerability that serves as the basis for an apprehension of our commonality; and there has been no sundering of that commonality."¹⁸

Moreover, Butler is right that this failure to mourn, or, in certain situations, a prohibition against mourning, can come back to haunt a community, leading to further violence. Without a public act of grieving, there may be the temptation to engage in further violence to right past wrongs.¹⁹ Butler contends that "when grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly."²⁰

In 2 Samuel 21, we see how this cycle of violence is associated with the famine-causing drought that in the narrator's mind serves as a symbol of the order in the world that had been upset by the injustice committed by Saul. Violence is thus committed in the name of restoring the disorder that has infected the land. It is, moreover, telling that if one goes back in narrative time, one finds that Saul himself and his son Jonathan have not received proper burial, either (1 Sam 31). It seems that this failure of

his physical disability, he does not pose a threat to the throne. *Ibid.*, 266. See also Athalya Brenner, "I Am the Glow: Rizpah Daughter of Ayah," in *I Am: Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 120–32, esp. 127. I further would argue that in light of Judith Butler's point of the importance of a narrative frame to foster a common connection, it may be that David's act of compassion is rooted in this personal connection to Mephibosheth's father Jonathan that serves to humanize him.

¹⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33–34. See also Eng, "The Value of Silence," 88. Eng discusses this failure to mourn in terms of the United States' response after 9/11.

²⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 29–30.

the community to adequately mourn Saul and Jonathan has come back to haunt the community in further expressions of violence.²¹

In addition, with the inhumane death of the sons of Saul, there is the added danger that violence will renew itself in the face of the derealisation of these victims in a war without end. In this regard it is significant, though the brutal deaths demanded by the Gibeonites as blood sacrifice do not have the desired effect of breaking the drought. It is at this point that Rizpah enters the story.

b) Resistance and Lament

The sum total of Rizpah's actions is to be found in 2 Samuel 21:10. As the secondary wife or concubine (*pilegeš* in 2 Sam 21:11) of Saul, member of the disposed house of Saul, and now also a childless widow, Rizpah has very little power. She and the other women of her community could do nothing to stop the violent massacre. In verse 10, however, we read the following account of Rizpah's actions in resisting the violence that had befallen her people:

Then Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it on a rock for herself, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens; she did not allow the birds of the air to come on the bodies by day, or the wild animals by night.

In this singular verse, we see how Rizpah steps forward to mourn publicly the death of Saul's sons, protecting the bodies of her own sons as well as another mother's sons from predator birds for a period of six months. Rizpah employs the traditional mourning garb which she spreads out on the rock, which she guards over the bodies of the deceased. For all the time that the parched earth is mourning due to the devastating drought, Rizpah mourns over her sons.²²

²¹J. Cheryl Exum writes that although dead, Saul continues to dominate the story in 2 Samuel 21, when the violence Saul had committed against the Gibeonites returns with a vengeance in the brutal execution of his sons and grandsons. See Exum, "Rizpah," 262. Even though David does call on the mourning women to lament the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, in addition to lamenting himself (2 Sam 1:11-27), the failure to bury these men is symbolic of the community's failure to adequately mourn their deaths.

²²Wacker, "Rizpah," 557-59. Wacker writes that the reference to the rains falling from the heavens indicates an end to both the earth's as well as Rizpah's mourning.

There is a lot that this text does not say. For instance, Rizpah's voice is never heard—her action of mourning the death of these victims of violence is accompanied by silence.²³ It does not take much to imagine this bereaved mother weeping silently as well as wailing at the top of her voice. So Rizpah's lament is to be understood in the context of women who, through the ages, have mourned the death of their loved ones. Luis Riviera-Pagan writes how "in the wake of war," women's lament has served as a means of "resistance against the perennial proclivity to make force the arbiter of human conflicts."²⁴ Citing instances of professional wailing women in ancient Japan, Greece, and Mexico, as well as in modern-day India, Greece, and Iran, Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley note the well-documented phenomenon in both ancient and contemporary societies of public and communal lamentation, especially weeping at funerals, being associated with women.²⁵ In the biblical traditions, we see a number of instances of female mourners, for instance, the daughters of Israel called to lament the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:24), as well as the wailing women in Jeremiah 9:17-20, whose tears and laments vocalize the pain and suffering the people experienced in the wake of the Babylonian invasion.²⁶

²³ It is a question as to how to interpret Rizpah's silence. On the one hand, as Nancy Lee points out, "[I]n regular Jewish mourning rituals, a period of silence is respected and observed." Nancy Lee, *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 12. On the other hand, her silence may be due to the failure of the biblical witness to recount Rizpah's action and speech. See also Brenner, "I Am the Glow," 202. Brenner argues that Rizpah may be a silent witness but hardly a passive one.

²⁴ Luis N. Riviera-Pagan, "Woes of Captive Women: From Lament to Defiance in Times of War," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 121-34, here 130. See also Gerald West, "Reading on the Boundaries: Reading 2 Samuel 21:1-14 with Rizpah," *Scriptura* 63 (1997): 530. West argues that Rizpah "was doing what women all over the world do, caring for the dead." See also Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 152. Lee notes that across cultures, "[T]he burden of this duty [is] on women."

²⁵ Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley, introduction to *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, ed. Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12.

²⁶ For an exposition of the role of the wailing woman see L. Juliana Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Liberating Presence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 18-30. See also Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 31-32, for the central role of the Daughter of Zion in voicing the people's suffering in the book of Lamentations; see also Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, "Traces of Women's Texts in the Hebrew Bible," in *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*,

An interesting example that helps one to visualize Rizpah mourning over her dead sons is found in Peter Paris's recollection of a funeral for a young man he once attended in Ghana. During this funeral, the casket was placed out in the open under the massive trees in the village. Paris describes how a grieving woman came forward and started to mourn the death of the young man:

Her entire body seemed to be nearly broken by the weight of her sorrow. Throughout the service, she quietly and gracefully danced around the casket while reaching out her arms and hands in gentle gestures as she tried to embrace the casket. I have never before or since witnessed such mournful beauty. The entire liturgy and all of the participants seemed to be drawn into the aura of that grieving woman's physical movements as her faith confronted the cold presence of death with sadness and love.²⁷

The content of Rizpah's lament is hidden from us. In her book *Lyrics of Lament*, Nancy Lee has collected laments from all over the world, both ancient as well as modern, which helps us to contemplate the sorrow this mother may have been voicing while guarding the bodies of her sons. For instance, in the book of Lamentations one reads how the Daughter of Zion voices the suffering of the people in the wake of the terrible violence they have experienced at the hand of the Babylonian Empire:

O LORD, look at my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed!
Look, O LORD, and see how worthless I have become.
Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is
any sorrow like my sorrow. (Lam 1:9c, 11c-12)

And in an early Islamic lament, Rahab mourns the death of her husband Husayn:

ed. Athalya Brenner and Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes, *Biblical Interpretation Series 1* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 83–86.

²⁷ Peter J. Paris, "When Feeling Like a Motherless Child," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 119. See also Brenner, "I Am the Glow," 122, 131. Brenner imagines vividly how Rizpah, who is called the daughter of Ayah, meaning "falcon," could speak to the birds during her lonely quest of protecting her sons' bodies from further desecration.

He who was light, shining, is murdered;
Murdered in Karbala, and unburied.
Descendant of the Prophet, may God reward you well
May you be spared judgment on the day when deeds are
weighed:
For you were to me as a mountain, solid in which I could take
refuge;
And you treated us always with kindness, and according to religion.
O who shall speak now for the orphans, for the petitioners;
By whom shall all these wretched be protected, in whom shall
they take refuge?²⁸

In these laments, we see some common features found in lament songs across cultures that offer an interpretative framework for Rizpah's lament. For instance, Lee describes shared motifs such as a complaint about the tragic death of a loved one, reference to the death and how the person died—especially if it was due to violence—expressions of sorrow, and weeping. In the second example cited above, one also sees the direct address of the dead, which includes praise for the deceased as well as a plea to the deity.²⁹

Rizpah's lament in the wake of the terrible violence that has destroyed the lives of her sons and the sons of Merab may on all accounts seem futile. Her lament most certainly cannot bring her sons back to life. And yet as Judith Butler points out, "To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which [an individual] develop[s] a point of identification with suffering itself."³⁰ Rizpah's lament thus offers us some important perspectives regarding the nature of resistance in the face of violence. First, by lamenting, Rizpah transcends the dignity-destroying effects of violence, so attesting to the universal truth that to be human means to resist those forces that seek to assault, violate, or obscure one's human dignity. The very act of resisting as exemplified in Rizpah's lament, even though it may not change the victim's situation

²⁸ Cited in Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 38. The translation of this lament is done by Lynda Clark and can be found in her essay "Elegy on Husayn: Arabic and Persian," *Alserat* 12 (Spring and Autumn 1986): 20–36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 52. Lee moreover shows how some laments may also include "a call for justice, revenge or a curse."

³⁰ Butler, *Prekarious Life*, 30.

in any decisive way, is hence a sign that this person is maintaining some basic sense of what it means to be human. As Nancy Lee writes: “Lament in essence, provides a cathartic vehicle for human beings to express all aspects of suffering and to help maintain the value and dignity of one’s humanity under hardship if possible.”³¹ In very difficult circumstances, as suggested by Rizpah’s wake in the wilderness, Rizpah shows tremendous courage in the face of violence.

Second, Rizpah’s lament serves as an act of silent public protest regarding the injustice committed and as a testimony to the futility of violence that affects the community as a whole.³² Gerald West, reading Rizpah’s lament in terms of James Scott’s work on passive resistance, furthermore argues that Rizpah’s lament constitutes a hidden transcript over against the dominant ideologies and theologies of those in power.³³ According to West, Rizpah’s lament constitutes a prime example of female resistance in that she was “caring for the dead while and because men in power did not care for the living.”³⁴ Moreover, Marie-Theres Wacker notes that Rizpah engages in an act of resistance, not only against the wild animals and birds but also against David.³⁵

Rizpah’s act of resistance, though, is not without risk. As Judith Butler writes regarding the classic story of Antigone, which is also cited by J. Cheryl Exum³⁶ in connection with Rizpah’s lament: “Antigone, risking death herself by burying her brother against the edict of Creon, exemplified the political risks in defying the ban against public grief during times of increased sovereign power and hegemonic national unity.”³⁷ Those in power know all too well that lament is dangerous indeed. These “weap-

³¹ Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 27.

³² Ibid. Lee argues: “Lament is . . . a call to bring attention to injustice, an anguished plea for respite and consolation, an appeal for intervention not only to one’s deity, but to one’s community and to the world community.”

³³ West, “Reading on the Boundaries,” 530.

³⁴ Ibid. See also Brenner, “I Am the Glow,” 127–27. Brenner views Rizpah’s lament in terms of a long tradition of nonverbal protest.

³⁵ Wacker, “Rizpah,” 557–58.

³⁶ See Exum, “Rizpah,” 261. Exum has read the story of Rizpah in terms of the story of Antigone mourning the death of her brothers.

³⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 46. See also Bonnie Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 1 (2010): 8–10, esp. 5. Honig critiques Butler’s application of Antigone’s narrative as a basis for a new (moralist) humanism. She argues: “Against those who seek in lamentation a universal humanism of sound and cry, I have argued that Antigone’s dirge is a partisan political

ons of the weak,” to quote Scott’s well-known description of hidden transcripts such as women’s lament, may unleash a tidal wave of voices demanding change and an end to the abuse of power.³⁸ We thus see how Rizpah continues day after day in her self-imposed duty of mourning the violent death of her sons, so becoming an enduring example of embodied lament that moves the community to face the tragic death of the sons of Saul and to adequately mourn their deaths.

Third, Rizpah’s lament constitutes a powerful means of resisting the derealisation experienced by Saul’s sons. Her lament serves as a type of obituary for these victims of violence—her six-month vigil preventing her sons as well as the sons of Merab from being completely erased.³⁹ Judith Butler writes about the nature of an obituary:

[Obituary] is a means by which life becomes, or fails to become, a publically grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which a life becomes noteworthy. . . . The matter is not a simple one, for, if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life and is not worth a note. It is already the unburied, if not the unburialable.⁴⁰

By means of Rizpah’s public grief over these seven victims of violence, the lives of her sons and her stepsons are recognized and prevented from falling into oblivion. As in the lament of Rahab mourning the death of her husband cited above, one could well imagine Rizpah supplying details in her lament regarding the lives these young men have lived, serving the function of reclaiming their humanity once more. The following contemporary lament by an anonymous Chinese mother after her son was shot at Tiananmen Square makes this point well. In the final stanza of, “Crying over Child: To the Child Killed by Nine Gun Shots,” one of the laments collected by Lee, the bereaved mother voices her shock and anguish at seeing her son shot:

intervention,” 18. She furthermore points out that “Antigone is not a mother: she refuses to be one and laments the fact that she will never be one.”

³⁸ Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 24.

³⁹ Brenner, “I Am the Glow,” 127. In first-person speech, Brenner supplies Rizpah’s voice: “I couldn’t save the boys from their fate, but I could save their memory, especially the memory of my own sons. Why even their names are recorded, unlike the names of Merab’s sons.”

⁴⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 34.

14 *Claiming Her Dignity*

They say you were a rioter,
They said
You'd sabotage the 20-million lives-
built great palace.
Nevertheless
Mum knows
You were just a naïve child
Pulling Mum's hand yesterday
Urged Mum to take you to the park.⁴¹

Imagining Rizpah's lament in terms of mothers like this Chinese mother remembering her dead son as a little boy serves as an alternative narrative frame through which the humanity of these victims of violence is reclaimed. Moreover, as we will see in the following chapter, this act of resisting dehumanization has an important transformative effect that bestows significance on Rizpah's lament beyond the singular verse narrative space afforded to her actions.⁴²

c) Mourning and Transformation

Rizpah's six-month vigil lamenting the brutal death of her children has a transformative effect on all who witnessed her resolve to effectively mourn the violence that had destroyed the lives of Saul's sons and grandsons. As Judith Butler describes this link between mourning and transformation: "In the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for the Other that takes place in language in the broadest sense, one without which we could not be. . . . It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other."⁴³

So we see how God hears her cries and sees her lament when it finally starts to rain.⁴⁴ As we have noted before, the rain is not connected with

⁴¹ "Crying over Child: To the Child Killed by Nine Gun Shots," cited in Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 36.

⁴² Exum notes that Rizpah's action is "absolutely pivotal, for it changes the entire course of events. See Exum, "Rizpah," 261. She further argues: "The causal nexus between divine displeasure, atonement, and divine appeasement set up by the story is abruptly broken by Rizpah's awesome display of the proper reverence due the dead." *Ibid.*, 267.

⁴³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 44.

⁴⁴ See West, "Reading on the Boundaries," 530. West argues that "the silent cries of Rizpah and the dead were heard by God," so we see how "God responds first, and the

the blood sacrifice demanded by the Gibeonites but closely linked with Rizpah's lament. According to verse 10, Rizpah conducted her solitary vigil until it started to rain again. The divine response of giving rain again as a symbol of the order that has been restored is thus associated with the community satisfactorily mourning the victims of violence—a process initiated by Rizpah's lament.⁴⁵

Moreover, Rizpah's lament also has a profoundly transformative effect on King David.⁴⁶ It is significant that in response to Rizpah's vigil for her sons as well as the sons of Merab, King David finally is obliged to respect the dignity of the dead by giving these victims of violence a decent burial. With this act, something of the humanity of Saul's sons is recovered. It is moreover significant that David also, after all this time, decides to bury the bones of King Saul and his son Jonathan when he heard what Rizpah had done (vv. 11-12). Rizpah's display of grief thus helps David to deal as well with the community's failure to adequately mourn the tragedies of the past.

Judith Butler writes that at the heart of mourning's ability to effect transformation on an individual, as well as on a political, level is the recognition of a common human vulnerability. It is, on the one hand, the realization that as humans we are all profoundly vulnerable to violence that may eradicate our being; on the other hand, as vulnerable human beings, we are also dependent on the other for the physical support of our lives.⁴⁷

Read in terms of Butler's thoughts on mourning and transformation, one could argue that this ability to forge a common vulnerability is already modeled by Rizpah. So it is significant that Rizpah's lament extends beyond her own sons to another woman's sons as well. By weeping also for Merab's children, Rizpah embodies an important principle voiced by

rain falls on Rizpah and the dead (v10a). David then also responds, recognizing, we hope, another more accountable, responsible, and compassionate theology." *Ibid.*, 531.

⁴⁵ Exum, "Rizpah," 267. God's act of giving rain again may also be a sign of transformation in God who, up until this point, has been consistently involved in punishing Saul—all of Saul's male relations met untimely deaths, and Michal suffered the terrible fate of dying childless. See *ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁶ Athalya Brenner describes Rizpah as a tool for educating David. See "Rizpah [Re] Membered: 2 Samuel 1–14 and Beyond," in *Performing Memory in Biblical Narrative and Beyond*, ed. Athalya Brenner and F. H. Polak (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 207–8. See also Gooder, "Remembering Rizpah," 28.

⁴⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 31.

Butler, i.e., being able to recognize the suffering of another.⁴⁸ As Lord Eames's (cochair of the Consultative Group on Irish Reconciliation) powerful statement that expresses this humanistic promise that is rooted in the universal expression of the fact of mortality and the cry of pain puts it: "There is no difference in a mother's tears."⁴⁹

Also, Gerald West imagines that Rizpah "could not have survived day and night, month after month without the support of her sisters from other sectors of the society." He ventures to say that perhaps even Merab (Michal) [the mother of the other sons mourned by Rizpah] was among those who acted in solidarity with Rizpah, sustaining her through her six-month vigil.⁵⁰

Finally, Rizpah's lament is significant in that it offers an important way out of violence. Her lament over the tragedy that had befallen her people breaks the cycle of violence that for a very long time existed between the Israelites and the Gibeonites.⁵¹ In the biblical traditions, there are many laments that call for revenge and further violence to settle past scores. For instance, in Psalm 137:8-9 we read the brutal wish that the heads of the babies of the Babylonians be dashed against the rocks.⁵² Even though we do not know the content of Rizpah's lament during her six-month vigil, the act of burying the sons of Saul's bodies together with their father and brother Jonathan does signal an end to violence and serves as a powerful symbol of the community dealing with its grief.⁵³ In this regard, Butler argues that what is at stake in reframing past events in order to change

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁹ Cited in Honig, "Antigone's Two Laws," 5.

⁵⁰ West, "Reading on the Boundaries," 531.

⁵¹ See also Emanuel Levinas, who ends his reading of 2 Samuel 21 not with the Gibeonites' cruel demand for justice but with Rizpah's sacrifice. Gary Mole, "Cruel Justice, Responsibility, and Forgiveness: On Levinas's Reading of the Gibeonites," *Modern Judaism* 31, no. 3 (2011): 266.

⁵² With regard to what she calls the "poetry of revenge" in Jeremiah, Kathleen O'Connor writes that these literary expressions for revenge in the face of trauma constitute a healthy part of the recovery process, as they create space for healing to take place. See *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 119. See also Nancy Lee's warning that such texts could be dangerous if they are used to sanction sociopolitical violence. Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 184.

⁵³ See also Wacker, who argues that this burial of Saul and Jonathan's bones suggests a reunification of the house of the first king of Israel, Saul [in German "eine postmortale Vereinigung des Hauses Sauls, des ersten Königs Israels"], Wacker, Rizpah," 563. Only with this act of restoration can there once again be peace in the land. See also the last

the world in the direction of nonviolence is the recognition of a common human vulnerability.⁵⁴ She writes:

But perhaps there is some other way to live such that one becomes neither affectively dead nor mimetically violent, a way out of the circle of violence altogether. This possibility has to do with demanding a world in which bodily vulnerability is protected without therefore being eradicated and with insisting on the line that must be walked between the two.⁵⁵

It is thus by reading one's own suffering through the lens of someone else that we may derive a principle by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, by, as Butler suggests, challenging the notion that "certain human lives are more vulnerable than others, and thus certain human lives are more grievable than others."⁵⁶

3. Abigail's Hospitality (1 Samuel 25)

Another narrative in which a female character finds creative avenues for resistance in the face of potentially devastating violence that threatened to destroy her community is the fascinating story of Abigail. In 1 Samuel 25, one is introduced to Abigail, the wife of the Nabal, the Fool (according to the literal meaning of his name in Hebrew), who resists the very real threat of violence that would see all the male members of her household wiped out by providing a lavish feast to David and his band of hungry men. What is particularly interesting about this narrative account of female agency is that Abigail's act of resisting violence comes through the ordinary acts of providing food.

a) A Culture of Violence

Abigail's world is marked, or one should rather say marred, by violence. The account of Abigail's gracious act of providing food to David

verse of this pericope, in which it is said, "After that, God heeded supplications for the land" (2 Sam 21:14).

⁵⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 17.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 30. See also the application of Butler's thought by Ilka Saal, "Regarding the Pain of Self and Other: Trauma Transfer and Narrative Framing in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 3 (2011): 451–76.

and his men that saves her household (1 Sam 25) is to be found in the context of King Saul doing his utmost best to kill his rival, the future King David (1 Sam 19–26).⁵⁷ Moreover, a couple of chapters earlier, an erratic Saul has commanded Doeg the Edomite to kill eighty-five priests of Nod just for helping David and his men (1 Sam 22:6–19). And as we have seen earlier in this chapter, in 2 Samuel 21, Saul’s descendants will be wiped out by the enemies that Saul has made in his lifetime when David allows the Gibeonites to brutally kill Saul’s seven sons and grandsons, leaving their bones in the open field without a proper burial (2 Sam 21). Indeed, were it not for Abigail’s swift actions in 1 Samuel 25, the whole household of Nabal (whom some argue stand for Saul⁵⁸) surely would not have lived to see the light of day.

The account of the near-massacre of Nabal’s household in 1 Samuel 25 starts innocently enough with a request for food by David and the group of men gathered around him that included “everyone who was in distress and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented” (1 Sam 22:2). A fugitive David, together with the other outcasts and disenfranchised cohorts surrounding him, is hungry. Living as foreigners on the outskirts of society, David and his men appeal to the rich landowner of the land in which they have dwelled for food and recognition for the work they have done for Nabal. In 1 Samuel 25:6, three times David uses the term “shalom,” saying that he has come in peace and has kept Nabal’s possessions safe. Nabal blatantly refuses, causing David to explode in a fit of anger. In verses 21–22, David vows to kill every single male member of Nabal’s household by morning—the

⁵⁷ More specifically, the story of Abigail’s hospitality (1 Samuel 25) is sandwiched between 1 Samuel 24 and 26, in which the fugitive David twice has the opportunity to kill Saul. Elsewhere I have argued that Abigail’s acts of compassion and care, which had a transformative effect on David, extend beyond the confines of 1 Samuel 25 to impact the actions of both David and Saul, whose hostile relationship is narrated in chapters 24 and 26. See L. Juliana Claassens, “Cultivating Compassion? Abigail’s Story (1 Samuel 25) as Space for Teaching Concern for Others,” in *Retrieving Compassion: Global Ethics, Human Dignity, and the Compassionate God*, ed. Frits de Lange and L. Juliana Claassens (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, forthcoming).

⁵⁸ Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 205–15; Barbara Green, “Enacting Imaginatively the Unthinkable: 1 Samuel 25 and the Story of Saul,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no. 1 (2003): 1–10; Mark E. Biddle, “Ancestral Motifs in 1 Samuel 25: Intertextuality and Characterization,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 4 (2002): 636–37.

repeated reference to the sword in verse 13 indicating that the threat of violence is exceedingly real.

Violence and folly, as suggested in Nabal's name, is linked in this narrative when Nabal's act of hoarding goods and having indulgent meals (see v. 36, "like the feast of a king") while others go hungry is construed as folly, leading to death—in the case of Nabal this is literally true—Nabal is struck down by God in verse 38. But folly is also responsible for the fact that a whole household is put in jeopardy when violence threatens to erupt at any moment. It is within this context of violence that we find the compelling example of Abigail, whose actions and words manage to successfully transcend the dominant culture of violence.

b) Hospitality and Resistance

Abigail's act of hospitality as exemplified in her very ordinary act of providing food to the hungry, the landless, and the marginalized is portrayed as a powerful means of providing a way out of violence. Reminiscent of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 9:1-6, who holds a banquet of meat and wine, inviting all to participate, the generosity of the wise Abigail is sharply contrasted with her foolish husband Nabal's miserliness.⁵⁹

In verse 14 we read how Nabal's servant, realizing the desperateness of their situation, turns to Abigail, who is characterized in verse 3 as clever (and beautiful). Her wisdom is demonstrated in her quick thinking and her equally quick acting,⁶⁰ as she immediately gathers a huge quantity of food—two hundred loaves, two wineskins, five prepared sheep, five measures of parched grain, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of dried figs in verse 18—enough food to feed a hungry army. Abigail sends this feast out before her, following shortly after in

⁵⁹ Judith McKinlay, "To Eat or Not to Eat: Where Is Wisdom in This Choice?," *Se-meia* 86 (1999): 73–84. See also Mary Shields, who identifies extensive further parallels between Abigail and Woman Wisdom in an intriguing article called "A Feast Fit for a King," in *The Fate of King David: The Past and Present of a Biblical Icon*, ed. Tod Linafelt et al. (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 38–54. For instance, she argues as follows: "Nabal, the fool, ate the feast that led to death while David accepted the feast leading to life." *Ibid.*, 51. This portrayal relates to the broader theme in the book of Proverbs, according to which the Way of Wisdom is sharply contrasted with the Way of Folly—the latter leading to certain death.

⁶⁰ Note the threefold repetition of the term "to hurry" (vv. 18, 23, and 34), which creates a sense of urgency with regard to Abigail's actions.

order to meet the fuming David herself, whose rage is making him very dangerous indeed. In verse 27, Abigail's gift of food is described with the term "blessing" (*bĕrakāh*) instead of the more usual word for gift (*minhā*). As Mary Shields points out, Abigail's gifts of "food and drink are truly a blessing which has the possibility of bringing peace and life in the face of imminent battle and death."⁶¹ The story has a happy ending, with the future King David admitting in verses 33-34 that were it not for Abigail's hospitality, Nabal's household would most definitely have all been dead by morning.

I find this story of a woman resisting violence by offering food quite intriguing. The story of Abigail's hospitality raises some interesting questions regarding what makes it possible for individuals to step out of the violent script that dominates their society. Butler argues that individuals are profoundly shaped by violence as behavioral and societal norms are inscribed and reinscribed upon people.⁶² Thus, for an individual to step out of the mold society provides for them and—as in the case of Abigail—to resist the reality of violence that permeates her world, the individual has to be compelled by some kind of understanding of human beings and the world at large that makes nonviolence possible.

In this regard, Beverly Mitchell argues that the root of violence is situated in the inability to see the face of the other, i.e., failing to see the other as human. She argues: "Once we no longer see ourselves as fellow human beings with a shared capacity for joy and profound sadness, for pleasure and immense pain, for exaltation and great suffering, then it is easy to take the subsequent steps that lead to mistreatment, brutality, degradation, and attempted destruction of one another."⁶³ Conversely, central to an individual's decision to resist violence is an alternative frame of reference rooted in the notion of compassion, i.e., the ability to recognize the potential victims of violence as human beings—as real

⁶¹ Shields, "A Feast Fit for a King," 47.

⁶² Butler writes: "Thus, the singular 'one' who struggles with non-violence is in the process of avowing its own social ontology. Though debates on this topic often presume we can separate with ease the matters of individual practice and of group behavior, perhaps the challenge of non-violence is precisely a challenge to the presumption of such dual ontologies. After all, if the 'I' is formed through the action of social norms, and invariably in relation to constitutive social bonds, then it follows that every form of individuality is a social determination." Butler, *Frames of War*, 166.

⁶³ Beverly Eileen Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 3.

people with, as Eric Seibert reminds us, “moms and dads, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, grandmas and grandpas . . . [with] hopes and dreams, strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices just like we do.”⁶⁴

Furthermore, in order for a person to resist violence, it is important to see oneself not as a singular “ego” but as a “being bound up with others in inextricable and irreversible ways, existing in a generalized condition of precariousness and interdependency.”⁶⁵ Butler argues that in the face of violence, “all the potential actors in the scene are equally vulnerable,” something she describes as “equality in the midst of precariousness.”⁶⁶ Butler notes, however, that for an individual to recognize this mutual vulnerability, there has to be “existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject.”⁶⁷ Thus, as Butler argues, in order for “a life . . . to be intelligible as a life, [it] has to conform to certain conceptions of what life is, in order to become recognizable.”⁶⁸

The act of providing food as means of resisting violence actually serves as a good example of such existing norms of recognition. To provide food is essentially to recognize the basic human need for food in the Other and to respond to this need by offering the Other something to eat and to drink. It is to understand that You are hungry, cold, scared, in need of sustenance, clothing, and comfort just like I, so recognizing the existence of a shared sense of vulnerability between the Giver and the Recipient.

One could thus argue that Abigail’s hospitality in 1 Samuel 25 is very much rooted in such existing norms of recognition; in Abigail’s

⁶⁴ Eric Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament’s Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 101. See also Butler’s definition of being human: “[L]ives that count as livable and grievable.” Butler, *Frames of War*, 180.

⁶⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, 181.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* In particular, this understanding of a shared vulnerability pertains to the insight that violence to the other will inadvertently make oneself even more vulnerable to future acts of violence.

⁶⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 43. Butler writes: “If vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject.”

⁶⁸ Butler, *Frames of War*, 7. Butler continues: “So just as norms of recognizability prepare the way for recognition, so schemas of intelligibility condition and produce norms of recognizability.”

ability to recognize that David and his men are hungry, and to respond by serving a generous meal, satisfying their most basic need for food. The quantity and the variety of the food may not only point to the fact that this is not just food to ward off hunger but also may suggest that for uprooted, homeless individuals, food serves as a source of comfort, evoking memories of festivity and home.

It is significant that Abigail's strategies for resistance in the face of violence include this very ordinary, everyday activity of providing food that is often associated with women's custom of caring for their loved ones by means of offering food. In this regard, there has been a long history that documents the relationship between women and food. As Laura Schenone argues in her book *A Thousand Years Over a Hot Stove: A History of American Women Told Through Food, Recipes, and Remembrances*, "Men may have cooked for aristocrats and kings, but it was women who devoted extraordinary energy to finding, growing, preparing, and serving food to the better part of the human race"—a reality that from time immemorial has had a profound effect on women's lives.⁶⁹ Considering this link between women and food, it thus makes sense that in contexts of dehumanization, women would use food as a means of resistance. For instance, during the siege of Leningrad (1941–1942), women went to great lengths not only to find food for themselves but also to save their children and the few remaining men in the city, as well. During this siege, which lasted nearly nine hundred days, with 1 million people dying of starvation, the survivors had to be creative beyond measure to find food: "tear[ing] books apart and giv[ing] their children the glue of their bindings"; using wood shavings, sawdust, pine needles, nettles and grass to make anything from soup to pancakes.⁷⁰ Darra Goldstein writes that the folk wisdom of old peasant women was vital in the survival of the people of Leningrad, as they imparted their knowledge to other (younger) women around them: "Women who had never given much thought to domestic exigencies learned how to dry tree bark and grind it into flour

⁶⁹Laura Schenone, *A Thousand Years over a Hot Stove: A History of American Women Told through Food, Recipes, and Remembrances* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003), xii–xiii.

⁷⁰Darra Goldstein, "Women under Siege: Leningrad 1941–1942," in *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*, ed. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 144, 150–54.

(the bark stripped from oak trees stopped the bleeding of gums), and how to extract vitamin C from pine needles for a scurvy preventative.”⁷¹

In these most desperate of circumstances, women employed food as a means of resistance in order to do two things: In the first instance, particularly in a context where their humanity was denied, food became a way for women to maintain a basic sense of self in their efforts to create an alternative consciousness over against the violent, oppressive, dehumanizing actions of their perpetrators.⁷² In Leningrad, women would do all sorts of creative things with the nearly nonexistent food that they had: turning breadcrumbs and water into soup that felt at least more nourishing than a mere slice of bread. As one of the survivors writes: “People made porridge out of bread and bread out of porridge.” Indeed, “siege cookery resembled art.”⁷³ Food thus served as a way of maintaining one’s identity and agency in the face of dignity-denying circumstances.

Second, even amid very difficult circumstances, the act of providing food continued the act of caring for others that, in reality, quite often has been assumed by women. Even in a situation of extreme depravity, these women at times would give gifts, including gifts of food to one another.⁷⁴ An exhibition of handmade gifts and art that were given to fellow prisoners in one of the concentration camps during the Holocaust, Ravensbrück, contained the following description of such acts of kindness:

This act of creativity and generosity “meant that one had to remember a different way of being that defied violence, terror and hate; and one had to acknowledge someone else when their own individual pain was so great. Gift giving, in these circumstances, took a kind of

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁷² Drawing on the work of Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Jacqueline Bussie describes such attempts of creating an alternative consciousness in terms of the notion of “cultures of resistance” in which individuals and groups maintain “an alternative, critical worldview” that stands over against the oppressive system created by those in power. See “Flowers in the Dark: African American Consciousness, Laughter, and Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” chap. 5 in *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 147.

⁷³ Lidiya Ginzburg, *Blockade Diary*, trans. Alan Myers (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), 65. Cited in Goldstein, “Women under Siege,” 157.

⁷⁴ See the example of Kira, a young hospital worker in Leningrad who would sprinkle tiny squares of bread with a bit of hoarded sugar as gifts to coworkers—something she called “blockade pastries.” Goldstein, “Women under Siege,” 155–56.

courage rooted deep in one's character that challenged annihilation. It was a courage that reclaimed one's humanness by connecting to past traditions of celebration and kindness."⁷⁵

It is significant to see in these examples that women's resistance in terms of food is closely associated with the act of caring for others. In a context in which acts of violence sought to destroy life, women used food in order to sustain life, not only for themselves but also for the others who depended on them.

In light of this connection between women using food as means of resistance, perhaps it is not surprising that Abigail uses food to stop a war. Alice Bach calls Abigail the "mother provider of transformation," noting that she turns "raw material" into "salvific nourishment" when she offers prepared food such as "dressed sheep" and loaves of bread to powerful effect.⁷⁶ Abigail is the "mother-magician," to cite Kim Chernin's poignant description of the link between women and food: "Adept at the mysteries of creating bread from a cup of water, a handful of flour, a pinch of salt, a woman serves up the loaf that is the bread of life—exhibiting in the bowls and retorts of her domestic alchemy the awesome power of transforming matter into nurturance."⁷⁷

But even more importantly, Abigail's abundant gifts of food bring life in a context where the denial of food is deadly.⁷⁸ So not only does the life-giving sustenance that Abigail offers save David and his men from hunger but also, by providing food, Abigail saves her household from certain death. Her act of providing food not only recognizes the needs of David and his men but also the boys and young men of Nabal's household in front of her; they compel her to use food as means

⁷⁵ Cited in Rochelle G. Saidel, "Resistance that Lifted the Spirit," chap. 4 in *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 60.

⁷⁶ Alice Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," in *The Pleasures of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts*, ed. Alice Bach (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 49.

⁷⁷ Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating, and Identity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 200. Chernin writes that "food, in fact, preserves the silenced history of women's power. From infancy and through all the stages of our later development, women have exhibited in their relation to food capacities and qualities they have surrendered in many other aspects of their lives."

⁷⁸ McKinlay, "To Eat or Not to Eat," 79–80; Shields, "A Feast Fit for a King," 54.

of bringing an end to violence.⁷⁹ Butler is right that “the recognition of shared precariousness introduces strong normative commitments of equality and invites a more robust universalizing of rights that seeks to address basic human needs for food, shelter, and other conditions for persisting and flourishing.”⁸⁰

In the case of Abigail, the provision of food that is rooted in the recognition of the needs of those both in and outside her circle of concern serves as a compelling expression of female agency in the face of the potentially devastating violence that threatens to destroy the well-being of the community. Reminiscent of Scott’s designation “weapons of the weak,” Abigail’s act of providing food serves as a way of maintaining a sense of self amid potentially dehumanizing circumstances as well as continuing to care for those in need.

The link between women and resistance also illustrates, however, something of the complexity with regard to female roles within a mostly heteronormative society. On the one hand, food preparation functions in many cultures as a distinctly female role, serving as means of “gender socialization” that is “used to subordinate women, devalue their work, and maintain the idea of separate private and public spheres for men and women.”⁸¹ On the other hand, Veronica Limeberry shows in her very interesting study on women, food, and resistance that food also serves as an important means for women to claim their identity and find avenues to exercise their autonomy over against the dominant culture. She argues:

⁷⁹ In this regard, one may well ask who the mothers of these presumably multiple sons of Nabal’s house are whom David vows to eradicate by morning? The text does not say. Despite calling Abigail the “mother provider,” Alice Bach presumes that Abigail has no children, that she is childless—like David’s other wife, Michal, of whom it is said explicitly that she had no child to the day of her death (2 Sam 6:23). Bach, “The Pleasure of Her Text,” 49. One later reads, however, about Abigail having a son, Chileab, with David (2 Sam 3:3; cf. 1 Chr 3:1), so she is obviously not barren, as are so many other significant female characters in the biblical text. So, is Abigail perhaps speaking up for the lives of her sons? Particularly in a cultural context in which children form a natural part of marriage, one might assume that this woman is acting on behalf of her children. Thus, whether biological or performing the role of a mother, Abigail is very much acting as a mother, her acts of resistance profoundly other-centered when she saves her household by her act of offering food and drink to David and his men.

⁸⁰ Butler, *Frames of War*, 28–29.

⁸¹ Sherrie Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2001).

Cooking, then, became more than a space to construct and enforce identities and communities—it became a space to negotiate power and resistance. As a source of women’s history and lives as well as the embodiments of cultural identity, cooking is exposed as a conflicting source of power and resistance. On one level it defines and enforces cultural expectations regarding women and food; however, it also creates space for women to contest and redefine those expectations.⁸²

Abigail’s resistance in terms of the provision of food may thus be understood as a good example of how Abigail’s situation is being shaped by the sociocultural norms of her day but, simultaneously, how she manages to transcend her culture’s heterarchal practices, which would have relegated her to a position of submissive domesticity.

In 1 Samuel 25, we see how Abigail’s provision of food, which typically would have been associated with the private sphere, breaks into the political realm when she employs hospitality quite effectively as a way to stop bloodshed.⁸³ Abigail’s peacemaking efforts, which center on her actions and words that are intent on resisting violence, may thus be understood as a natural extension of her commitment as mother to preserve life—whether her own or that of another mother—embodied in the act of providing food.⁸⁴

c) *The Power of the Word*

A second avenue for resisting violence that Abigail utilizes in conjunction with her act of providing food, which perhaps has the purpose

⁸² Veronica Limeberry, “Eating in Opposition: Strategies of Resistance through Good in the Lives of Rural Andean and Appalachian Mountain Women,” (master’s thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2014), 29. Limeberry draws on the work of Elisabeth Fleitz, who refers to the existence of cookbooks as a sign of women’s resistance, arguing that in cookbooks, “women have used language in creative ways in order to have control over their reality and free themselves from oppression.” Fleitz, “Cooking Codes: Cookbook Discourses as Women’s Rhetorical Practices,” *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society* 1, no. 1 (2010): 92.

⁸³ See the work of Sara Ruddick, who proposes that “the effort of world protection may come to seem a ‘natural’ extension of maternal work.” Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 57, 81.

⁸⁴ I have argued this more fully in my inaugural lecture on Abigail, “An Abigail Optic: Reading the Old Testament at the Intersections,” that will be published under the title: “An Abigail Optic: Agency, Resistance, and Discernment in 1 Samuel 25,” in *Feminist Frameworks: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Carolyn Sharp (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, forthcoming).

of demonstrating that Abigail is indeed transcending her traditional role in a heterarchal society, regards the power of speech as a way to end violence. In the longest single prose speech by a woman in all of the Old Testament,⁸⁵ Abigail through her words, which show great insight and the ability to persuade, causes an enraged David to reconsider his murderous intentions and stop the violence that surely would have led to even more violence.

Abigail's speech speaks of David as the future king and thus can rightly be described as prophetic. In this regard, Ellen von Wolde argues that, in the absence of the prophet Samuel, Abigail acts as the spokesperson of God who shows in her speech remarkable insight, emerging as a model of wisdom and discernment. At this point in the narrative, David is running for his life; a homeless, landless fugitive who is easily dismissed by Nabal. And yet Abigail recognizes him as the future king, thus showing keen insight and understanding.⁸⁶ Indeed, it is a sign of wisdom to recognize greatness in the most unlikely places or persons.⁸⁷ So Abigail is the first person to call David a *nāgîd*, a divinely appointed leader who is committed to the well-being of the people (1 Sam 25:30).⁸⁸ The term *nāgîd* has not yet been used for David, not even at the time when Samuel anointed David in 1 Samuel 16:11-13. Now, in the absence of the prophet Samuel, Abigail is showing David his true identity: a *nāgîd* of Israel who is called to be a shepherd to his people (see also Nathan's confirmation of Abigail's words in 2 Sam 7:8-9).⁸⁹ Abigail's words are, moreover, reminding David that to truly be the leader that he was meant to be, he not only has to refrain from having blood on his hands but also

⁸⁵ Shields notes that Abigail's speech is 131 words long; only Deborah's song in Judges 5 contains more words. Shields, "A Feast Fit for a King," 44.

⁸⁶ Ellen von Wolde, "A Leader Led by a Lady: David and Abigail in 1 Samuel 25," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114 (2002): 367. See also Sylvia Schroer, who argues that this portrayal of Abigail contributes to a more nuanced understanding of women's lives in Israel's history: "It shows that in early YHWH religion the idea that God would make spokespersons of women was not at all offensive and that women were in command of religious language." Schroer, "Abigail: A Wise Woman Works for Peace," chap. 5 in *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 82.

⁸⁷ McKinlay, "To Eat or Not to Eat," 80-81; Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," 45.

⁸⁸ Von Wolde, "A Leader Led by a Lady," 365-66.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 370-71.

needs to learn to act compassionately and to attend to the needs of his subjects.⁹⁰

Abigail's use of the spoken word in 1 Samuel 25 adds an important perspective to the nature and significance of female resistance in the Old Testament. Far from being a victim who is helpless to change her own situation as well as the situation of others around her, Abigail's words, much like the food she brings, are life-giving in nature. She emerges as the quintessential embodiment of Wisdom, a prime example of what it means to do justice, to show kindness—in the process serving like Woman Wisdom as counselor to kings (Prov 8:15).⁹¹ Building on the link between food and the word that exists in the Wisdom tradition (and became quite important in the intertestamental period), making words of wisdom your own is considered in terms of the metaphor of ingesting food, the proverbial bread of life.⁹²

This emphasis on the power of the word to end violence is crucial in a context of war. In this regard, Silvia Schroer highlights the importance of Abigail's speech as a model for making peace when she argues: "The story of Abigail presents an unmistakable plea for diplomacy, negotiation, and nonviolence in solving life-threatening conflicts. Making peace demands cleverness, insight, and readiness to risk something."⁹³ As she rightly notes, "[N]egotiations, compromises, and sometimes even giving in undoubtedly require more intelligence and courage than the mobilization of any kind of military force."⁹⁴

⁹⁰ In terms of the placement of this narrative in the context of 1 Samuel 24 and 26, in which David twice had the opportunity to kill Saul but refrained from doing so, Von Wolde proposes that it is "because of Abigail's persuasion not to murder Nabal and to relate this to David's decision not to kill Saul, that David becomes a *nāgīd*. Von Wolde, "A Leader Led by a Lady," 374. See also Claassens, "Cultivating Compassion?"

⁹¹ Shields, "A Feast Fit for a King," 54. In this regard, Mary Shields argues that two feasts are contrasted in 1 Samuel 25: the "feast like a king" in which the foolish Nabal self-indulgently partakes (v. 36) and the life-giving feast offered by Abigail to the future King David. As Shields argues: "While Nabal's feast 'like a king' ends in his death, the feast which Abigail offered, and which David accepted, was a feast fit for a king."

⁹² L. Juliana Claassens, "'Come, Eat of My Bread and Drink of the Wine I Have Mixed': The Relation of Woman Wisdom as Nourisher to the God Who Feeds," chap. 5 in *The God Who Provides: Images of Divine Nourishment* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004), 83–98.

⁹³ Schroer, "Abigail," 82.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

In Abigail's example, we thus see how nourishing food and wise words rooted in compassion, in addition to the acknowledgment of a shared vulnerability, thus become powerful tools with which the dominant culture of violence is interrupted (for a moment at least) by one woman who stepped out of the script prescribed for her by society and resisted violence.

d) Creative Possibilities amid Complexity

This compelling account of female resistance in the face of violence as evident in Abigail's hospitality in 1 Samuel 25 is, however, not insulated from the complexities that so often are associated with female agency in the Old Testament. Is Abigail not, as some have argued, a calculating opportunist who sees in David a much better marital prospect? As Shroer asks: "What woman, starving for life, would not prefer a young attractive guerrilla leader to a rich fool and a drunkard?"⁹⁵ Moreover, Shields speculates that in the context of Abigail's prophecy in verse 31 that David will become prince over Israel, "[S]he may be angling for a political place in the coming monarchy."⁹⁶ Indeed, after the death of Nabal, the story ends with David wooing Abigail and taking her to be his wife (vv. 39-40). This, however, is not some kind of Hollywood romance as the story ends with the reference in verse 43 that David took another wife, Ahinoam of Jezreel, at the same time as Abigail.

Also, even though Abigail's words, which Ellen von Wolde calls a "rhetorical tour de force," have a transformative effect on the future king, causing David's eyes to be opened,⁹⁷ her speech that speaks of great theological insight and political savvy is clothed in language that stresses her subservience and does little to resist the dominant power structures. So she repeatedly calls David "my lord" (eight times in vv. 25-31) and herself "your servant girl" (vv. 28 and 31), a designation suggesting a lower-class woman who holds no power.⁹⁸ Prostrating herself before the king (vv. 23-24), she uses flattery and takes the blame for

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹⁶ Shields, "A Feast Fit for a King," 48-49.

⁹⁷ Von Wolde, "A Leader Led by a Lady," 374. As David himself admits in verses 32-34, it is Abigail's swift actions, in addition to her persuasive words, that saved her household from bloodshed.

⁹⁸ Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," 42.

her husband's behavior on herself.⁹⁹ Moreover, even though Abigail is held up as a model of nonviolent resistance, elements in her speech in some sense undermine this portrayal. Her words in verse 29, in which she expresses the wish that David's enemies will be like a pebble in a slingshot, perhaps referring to his most immediate enemy, Nabal, who a couple of verses later indeed will be struck dead by God, offer some disconcerting associations with violence.

But probably most disturbingly from a feminist point of view is that, after this striking portrayal of female agency that represents Abigail's redemptive actions and poignant speech, she all but disappears from the story. Alice Bach rightly notes, "We do not hear her wise voice again."¹⁰⁰ After all her take-charge activity throughout the narrative that had such a profound effect on the lives of her family and community and the life of the future king, Abigail's story ends in silence.¹⁰¹

Indeed, in terms of the heterarchal nature of the biblical text, it is not surprising that one finds in the case of Abigail an example of a woman who on the surface is complying with the customs of the traditional power structures in her society, using their language and bowing down before the feet of the most powerful. Moreover, the association with violence raises questions about whether Abigail is fully able to transcend the violent script that dictates her context. And yet, as evident in Abigail's act of providing food, one sees an example of a woman who is carving out an alternative space in which she, by nontraditional means, can transcend what is considered to be customary, pointing also to contemporary examples of women who, despite the complexities associated with their resistance, may continue to bring life in contexts where life is denied.

⁹⁹ Schroer, "Abigail," 79.

¹⁰⁰ Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," 55. Bach links Abigail's voicelessness to her status as widow: "In spite of her marriage to David, Abigail remains a widow, that is, she survives without speech in the text." Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Abigail features only one more time—when she and her "sister-wife" Ahinoam are caught in a violent hostage drama with the Amalekites that most certainly left them threatened if not violated sexually (1 Sam 30). David Jobling points out that Abigail and Ahinoam were in enemy hands for quite a few days (1 Sam 30:13), which included a drunken orgy (v. 16). He suggests evocatively that presumably they were raped. Jobling, *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 184.

4. Rizpahs and Abigails of “These Modern Days”

The narratives of Rizpah and Abigail capture for us the resistance of two courageous women who both, in very different ways, refuse to accept the violence that threatens to extinguish their loved ones and—in the case of Rizpah—already has taken the lives of dear sons. The power of these two narratives is situated in the fact that they encourage the reader, many years later, to contemplate the pain felt by people around the world who have lost their sons and daughters to the infinite cycle of violence and contemplate creative ways of finding a way out of violence.

So the narrative of Rizpah’s lament opens up space for the reader to make sense of other traumatic experiences—a dialogical exchange with other situations of trauma, making it possible to recognize connections between other individuals and groups suffering violence.¹⁰² In this regard, it is interesting to take note of the reception history of Rizpah’s lament. For instance, Athalya Brenner cites a poem by Australian poet Henry Kendall who, in the nineteenth century, spoke about “our Rizpahs in these modern days, who’ve lost their households through no sins of theirs, on bloody fields and in the pits of war.” Making a connection with the Civil War that “shook America for five long years,” Kendall references Rizpah who, like Rachel in Rama, wept for her children and refused to be comforted.¹⁰³ And Nancy Lee draws our attention to a number of modern-day protest movements, for instance, the Women in Black movement that started in 1988 in Jerusalem with a group of Jewish and Palestinian women clothed in black who silently stood together in public protesting war, death, and violence.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² See Saal’s interesting example of Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* which, in an act of trauma transfer, seeks to read the trauma of 9/11 in terms of the bombing of Dresden during the Second World War. Engaging Judith Butler’s work on “Violence, Mourning, and Politics,” Saal contemplates how successful this narrative transfer is in Foer’s novel. Saal, “Regarding the Pain of Self and Other,” 464–65.

¹⁰³ Cited in Brenner, “Rizpah [Re]Membered,” 223. Saal raises an interesting point regarding questions of agency in terms of situations of trauma. She says that “while a wound is wound regardless of nationality, religion or ideological conviction. . . . It does matter who inflicts it and for what reasons. Saal, “Regarding the Pain of Self and Other,” 469.

¹⁰⁴ Lee describes silent laments of the Tiananmen Mother’s Campaign, which are a prime example of embodied lament. Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 34–35. See also the Black Sash movement’s silent protest against the Apartheid regime in South Africa, as described by Denise Ackermann in her essay, “On Hearing and Lamenting: Faith and Truth-Telling,” in *To Remember and to Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and*

Moreover, Abigail's industrious example of using food to end a war has inspired contemporary interpreters in the peace movement to proclaim Abigail, as Silvia Schroer has done, "a sister and a companion in the struggle." As Schroer argues: "When men go over our heads to prepare for war and drive the earth closer and closer to ecological bankruptcy we are summoned, like Abigail—without asking our husbands or any man—to take steps for peace; we are called to independent and courageous action."¹⁰⁵

In this regard, probably some of the most interesting initiatives in the never-ending process of peacemaking have to do with initiatives that use food in order to cultivate peace. The pop-up restaurant Conflict Kitchen London is grounded on the premise that food encapsulates shared human experiences and also forms part of our rituals (e.g., the custom of eating together as part of a reconciliation meal that exists in the Middle East).¹⁰⁶ The pop-up restaurant, which serves food from conflict-ridden areas such as Burma, Jordan, and Peru, facilitates encounters across hostile divisions, and in the spirit of Abigail's peace-making efforts, becomes a way of eating one's way to peace.¹⁰⁷

The courageous acts of resistance by both these women thus may serve as a model of resisting violence that continues to violate the dignity of men, women, and children in contested spaces all across the world. So Rizpah's lament is joined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who poignantly preaches, in a situation of dehumanization as we have seen in Apartheid South Africa, on the Daughter of Zion's lament cited earlier:

Reconciliation, ed. H. Russel Botman and Robin M. Petersen (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1996), 47–56.

¹⁰⁵ Schroer, "Abigail," 83.

¹⁰⁶ Phil Champain writes how "the ritual process of *sulh* (literally meaning "peace") in the Middle East usually ends in a public ceremony of *musalaha* ("reconciliation") performed in a public place. The families of both the victim and the guilty party line up along the road to exchange greetings and accept apologies. The ceremony includes a visit by the family of the perpetrator to the victim's home to drink a cup of bitter coffee, and it concludes with a meal hosted by the family of the offender." See Champain, "Conflict Kitchen Puts Peace on the Table," *Guardian*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/sep/10/conflict-kitchen-puts-peace-on-the-table>.

¹⁰⁷ See also the parallel Conflict Kitchen in the United States, which serves food from countries with which the United States is in conflict, which served as the inspiration for the London initiative, <http://conflict-kitchen.org/>.

Your dignity is not just rubbed in the dust. It is trodden underfoot and spat on. Our people are being killed as if they were but flies. Is that nothing to you who pass by? What must we say that we have not said? God give us eloquence such that the world will hear that all we want is to be recognized for what we are—human beings created in your image.¹⁰⁸

With these words in mind, Rizpah's silent lament so long ago over the bodies of her dead sons is echoed in every new plea for resisting violence and recovering the human dignity of those victims whose dignity has been "rubbed in the dust," "trodden underfoot," and "spat on." And Abigail's gracious act of hospitality points to the creative ways in which women continue to care for others, both family and foe, by means of acts of compassion and kindness. Ultimately, the power of Rizpah's and Abigail's resistance is situated in its ability to inspire readers centuries later to continue working for a less violent and more humane world.

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 167.