REFRAMING FEMALE AGENCY IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND SOCIAL DYSFUNCTION: A COMPARATIVE INQUIRY OF GENDER, POWER, AND RESISTANCE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

by

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DECLARATION PAGE

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS, ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

(Alphabetical; definitions are the working meanings used in this study, not generic dictionary entries.)

Agency. *Following Giddens, agency in this study refers to human action that is shaped by, enacted through, and continuously negotiated within social structures. It describes the socioculturally mediated capacity to act—sometimes reproducing existing arrangements and sometimes subtly or overtly resisting them. Agency is therefore not unrestricted freedom, but the situated ability to intervene in the flow of events through practices shaped by structural constraints and possibilities.*

BDB. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*

Biopolitics. *Foucault's concept describes how power governs life by targeting populations and regulating vital processes such as birth, death, health, and reproduction. In this thesis, biopolitics is understood through the lens of control over life and survival, which highlights how regimes such as Pharaoh's edict and Nazi medical policy determine who may live, be born, or die. These biopolitical controls form the backdrop against which women's life-preserving and resistant actions are analysed.*

Embodiment. *The understanding that subjectivity and agency are lived and enacted through the body. Embodiment is central to how the thesis reads childbirth, medical practice, and militant participation as not merely symbolic but materially impactful acts.*

Empowerment (Women's empowerment). *Hanmer and Klugman's definition of empowerment will be used for this study. Women's empowerment is a result of women's agency that 'questions, challenges, or changes regressive norms and institutions that perpetuate the subordination of women'.* [1] *In this thesis, empowerment is distinguished from agency: not all agency is empowering, but some agency produces empowering effects.*

Feminism. *A critical stance that critiques the gendered structures and paradigms that exist and which position men as dominant and superior to the women who, by comparison, and by effect, are defined as auxiliary and second to their male counterparts. It is a contextual and creative process in re-reading and re-examining all aspects of society, and all that pertains to a lived experience.* [2]

GBV. *Gender-based violence: Violence directed against individuals because of their gender or that disproportionately affects women and girls (e.g., rape, sexual torture, domestic abuse). GBV appears in the thesis as both context and mechanism through which crisis is gendered.*

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[1] Lucia Hanmer and Jeni Klugman, 'Exploring Women's Agency and Empowerment in Developing Countries: Where Do We Stand?', *Feminist Economics* 22, no. 1 (2016): 237–38.

[2] Rita Nakashima Brock, 'Feminist Theories**', in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 117; Ann Loades, 'Feminist Interpretation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 81–82; Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3; Natalie K. Watson, *Feminist Theology*, Guides to Theology (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 2; Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, Second (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 6.

Gender. *A socially constructed and performed set of expectations and roles associated with being "male" or "female". The thesis treats gender as historically contingent and performed, drawing on Butler's theory, while retaining grammatical gender as it appears in the Hebrew Bible and case-study literature.*

HB. *Hebrew Bible*

IPKF. *Indian Peace-Keeping Force*

JVP. *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Sinhalese Marxist–Leninist party/insurgent movement)*

Liminal. *Describes 'an ambiguous, transitional state and denotes a space of possibility'.*[3] *In this study, a liminal period is the transitional time and space proceeding from a disruption of social institutions or a breakdown of prevailing power structures due to a crisis.*

LTTE. *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam*

LXX. *Septuagint (ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible): Early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.*

MT. *Masoretic Text (medieval Hebrew textual tradition of the Old Testament): The medieval Hebrew textual tradition that serves as the base text for the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.*

NRSVUE. *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*

Patriarchy. *A system of social organisation in which men hold primary power and women are structurally subordinated, which has a direct impact on the oppression of women. The thesis treats patriarchy as a pervasive but historically variable structure that shapes how women's agency is constrained and perceived.*

Performativity. (Gender performativity). *Butler's concept that gender is not an innate essence but is constituted through repeated, socially regulated acts. In crisis, women's "performances" of gender can deviate from expectation, exposing the constructed nature of gender norms and opening possibilities for subversion.*

Power. *A relational and productive force embedded in structures, discourses, and bodily practices. Drawing on Foucault, this study understands power as diffuse, enacted through everyday mechanisms of regulation, surveillance, and control, yet always generating possibilities for resistance. Following Giddens, power is also viewed as inherent to agency: it both constrains and enables action through the duality of structure. Within this thesis, power is therefore not a fixed possession but a dynamic field that women navigate, contest, and reconfigure—even under severe domination.*

Resistance. *Forms of action that challenge, disrupt, or redirect existing structures of power. Resistance may be covert or overt, non-violent or violent, and is read in this thesis through both everyday acts (e.g. misreporting births) and spectacular acts (e.g. assassination, suicide missions).*

Shift Hypothesis. *A set of socio-historical hypotheses used in the thesis to explain how crises (war, genocide, systemic breakdown) prompt shifts in demographic patterns, gendered labour divisions, and political roles. These shifts often increase the visibility and scope of women's agency, even if only temporarily.*

Structuration. *Giddens' theory that social structures and human agency are mutually constitutive. Structures shape and constrain action through norms, rules, and resources, yet they also exist only as they are enacted and reproduced through human practice. In this thesis, structuration provides a framework for interpreting how women act within the*

[3] Sara McDowell and Elizabeth Crooke, 'Creating Liminal Spaces of Collective Possibility in Divided Societies: Building and Burning the Temple', *Cultural Geographies* (London, England) 26, no. 3 (2019): 324, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474018817791.

systems that restrict them—drawing on existing structures while simultaneously modifying or subverting them through their agentic choices.

SS (Schutzstaffel). *A major paramilitary organisation of Nazi Germany responsible for enforcing racial policy, administering concentration and extermination camps, and conducting surveillance, medical experimentation, and systematic violence. In this thesis, the SS represents the biopolitical and disciplinary apparatus within which Auschwitz's medical regime operated, forming the oppressive structure against which women such as Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska enacted life-preserving forms of agency.*

Trauma Theory. *A field of study that examines the psychological, communal, and narrative impacts of extreme violence, suffering, and disruption. While this thesis does not employ trauma theory as a primary analytical framework, it draws on its insights heuristically to acknowledge the profound wounds, fragmented subjectivities, and narrative ruptures present in the biblical and contemporary crisis contexts examined.*

UNP. *United National Party (Sri Lankan political party)*

ABSTRACT

Reframing Female Agency in Times of Crisis and Social Dysfunction: A Comparative Inquiry of Gender, Power, and Resistance in the Hebrew Bible and the Contemporary World.

by Tristin Hartley
Supervisor: Dr Brad Anderson

This thesis explores female agency in the Hebrew Bible and contemporary world during times of crisis and social dysfunction. The study engages four narrative contexts: Exodus 1—2:1-10, Judges 4—5, the testimonies of medical practitioners in Auschwitz, Dr Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska, and female militancy in Sri Lanka. Though contextually disparate, these narratives share a common terrain: crisis not only constrains but also generates openings for alternative forms of female agency, enabling women to negotiate and subvert dominant power structures.

The research presents a re-examination of these narratives based on key concepts of female agency, gender, and power, within a framework drawn from Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, Michel Foucault's biopolitics of power, and Judith Butler's notion of performativity. Furthermore, the shift hypotheses provide a macro-level scaffold for identifying the demographic, role-based, and political transformations precipitated by crisis.

By placing ancient biblical texts in conversation with contemporary historical case studies through an integrated theoretical framework, this project reveals the enduring patterns through which women forge agency at the thresholds of crisis.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In times of war, social dysfunction, and crisis, the visibility of female agency increases. Periods wrought with intense conflict – or the anticipation of such a period – are disruptive to societies, disturbing the social balance and forcing change or adjustment to the traditional roles of groups within these societies. This disruption to the normative standards of communities can unintentionally foster transformational changes, including the role of women.[4]

Examples in history abound. In the United States, World War I catalysed the women's suffrage movement, while World War II opened opportunities for increased female labour force participation. The turbulence of war forced open windows of opportunity for the greater inclusion of women in political, social, and economic spheres of life.[5] Along with new opportunities, we also see how 'women's domestic tasks were … infused with a broader nationalist purpose'.[6] This pattern was echoed following the First Chechen War, as seen in the example of the changing identities and roles of Chechen women. In the context of motherhood, the roles of Chechen mothers inadvertently became politicised — integrating traditional childcaring practices with political action to intensify child protection measures. The traditional role of the Chechen women shifted from one practised primarily in the domestic space to a position that included the responsibilities and duties of the breadwinner.[7]

Following the horrific beginnings in 1994 of the Rwandan genocide, women survivors and widows took up the mantle of head of the house in a culture steeped with cultural patriarchy and traditional roles. The disruptive shock of the genocide brought about the mobilisation of women in various social and political arenas. New activities were essentially politicised actions in that 'women's everyday efforts to establish normalcy in conditions of chaos ultimately manifested in political change'.[8] For

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[4] Kaitlyn Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', *International Organization* (New York, USA) 73, no. 2 (2019): 255–89, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818319000055; Ingrid Vik Bakken and Halvard Buhaug, 'Civil War and Female Empowerment', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* (Los Angeles, CA) 65, no. 5 (2021): 982, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002720983409.

[5] Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 256.

[6] Marie E. Berry, 'Women's Political Mobilization in Rwanda', in *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 8, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108236003.004.

[7] Alice Szczepanikova, 'Chechen Women in War and Exile: Changing Gender Roles in the Context of Violence', *Nationalities Papers* (New York, USA) 43, no. 5 (2015): 753–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.999315.

[8] Marie E. Berry, *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 83, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108236003.

example, the inclusion of women in new work and labour spaces led to changes in attitudes toward women — changes that arguably contributed to increased political empowerment for women in Rwandan society.[9]

Further examples can be found in Liberia, sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda, and Bosnia. In post-conflict Liberia, gender hierarchy and male leadership came under intense scrutiny. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Liberia's first female president and Africa's first head of state once said "the country had been led by men for 150 years—and look where that had gotten us".[10] On a global scale, African countries are credited with having the highest rates of women's legislative representation. As a reference point, between 1990 and 2010 alone, the number of women legislators active in African parliaments tripled. The end of civil war in African countries follows a similar trajectory, with post-conflict periods inducing institutional change.[11] During conflict in Uganda, women sought new means of income by running businesses. They occupied spaces previously dominated by men, learning how to drive and participating in politics.[12] The Bosnian war forced many to flee Bosnia to neighbouring countries — the majority claiming refugee status in Croatia. Women, children, and the elderly became the prominent demographic of the displaced. As patterned in other narratives of war, women became the new heads of household, assuming new roles and forming grassroots organisations.[13]

These are only a few examples from different geographical, cultural and ethnic demographic contexts. Interestingly, ancient texts reveal episodes that echo the trajectories of these more contemporary examples of female agency and crisis.[14] Narratives from the Hebrew Bible (HB) provide numerous examples where the agency of women is highlighted, not only in times of social disruption, crisis, or conflict, but also during the tumultuous periods *pre*-crisis and *post*-crisis. In these narratives, the boundaries prescribed by patriarchal, male-dominated contexts and cultures shift, if only for a time,

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[9] Marie E. Berry, 'When "Bright Futures" Fade: Paradoxes of Women's Empowerment in Rwanda', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 1 (2015): 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1086/681899; Berry, *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina*, 83–84; Bakken and Buhaug, 'Civil War and Female Empowerment', 1001.

[10] 'Historic Influences on Contemporary Women's Movements', in *African Women's Movements: Transforming Political Landscapes*, ed. Aili Mari Tripp et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 27, Cambridge Core, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511800351.003; Ellen-Johnson Sirleaf, *This Child Will Be Great* (Harper Collins, 2009), 261.

[11] Melanie M. Hughes and Aili Mari Tripp, 'Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010', *Social Forces* 93, no. 4 (2015): 1513–40, https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sov003.

[12] Aili Mari Tripp, *Women and Politics in Uganda* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=3445335; Hughes and Tripp, 'Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010', 1531.

[13] Berry, 'Women's Political Mobilization in Rwanda' (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 135–37.

[14] This study defines a crisis as an event that threatens the lives, safety, or welfare of an individual or group of people. Events such as war; violence, and conflict; the anticipation of war or anticipation of violence; the liminal spaces of unrest and disrupted social structures; and the tumultuous periods following a crisis are included in the definition of crisis for this study. Robert J. Ursano, *Textbook of Disaster Psychiatry* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), http://capitadiscovery.co.uk/dcu/items/dda-17/EBC328898; Sherry J. Holladay and W. Timothy. Coombs, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), http://capitadiscovery.co.uk/dcu/items/999606.

to allow female agency to come to the fore in new ways. While the themes of female agency, crisis, and power have been researched respectively, these themes have not been brought to bear collectively on the study of the HB, particularly in relation to issues arising at their points of intersection. This project brings these themes into conversation with one another and demonstrates their interconnectedness.

Furthermore, the study argues that extreme crisis contexts create liminal spaces where gendered norms, social structures, and power relations are disrupted. This enables women to enact complex forms of agency. By examining four diverse but thematically resonant narratives through an interpretive framework integrating theories from Judith Butler, Anthony Giddens, and Michel Foucault, the study seeks to demonstrate that women's agency under crisis reveals the performativity of gender, the negotiability of structure, and the instability of power in both biblical narratives and contemporary historical contexts. Considering these issues, the key questions that this thesis will explore are as follows:

1. How does women's agency emerge, adapt, and subvert power during moments of profound crisis, and what interpretative insight is gained by reading four diverse case studies – two ancient biblical narratives and two contemporary historical contexts – through an integrated theoretical framework of Butler, Giddens, Foucault, and the shift hypotheses?

2. To what extent do extreme crises disrupt gender norms, social structures, and regimes of power in ways that enable women to enact transformative forms of agency?

3. In what ways do women in both biblical narratives and contemporary historical contexts mobilise their bodies and social positions in times of liminality and crisis? How do theoretical lenses from Butler, Giddens, and Foucault – together with research on crisis-driven behavioural shifts (the shift hypotheses) – reveal the structural, performative, and biopolitical dimensions of that agency?

In addressing these questions, this study demonstrates that across all four narrative contexts – biblical and contemporary – women's agency arises not despite crisis but through it, precisely at the moment when structures of power destabilise. Through detailed textual, historical, and comparative analysis, I put forth four main arguments. First, I argue that crisis acts as a catalyst. Each narrative shows that crisis disrupts normative social, political, and gendered structures. This opens up opportunities for women to take actions not usually allowed by the normative social structure. Second, agency is a situated and embodied practice. Based on Judith Butler's work, the study will demonstrate that

women's actions reshape gendered scripts. This turns expected performances of femininity into forms of resistance.[15] Next, I argue that structure is both a constraint and a medium. Using Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, this project will explain how women's agency operates within existing structures (midwifery systems, kinship networks, medical expertise and knowledge, military operations) and by doing so, highlight the dual nature of structure.[16] Finally, I argue that power is productive and contestable. By referencing Michel Foucault's work, the analysis will illustrate how women challenge biopolitical and disciplinary regimes, not by escaping power, but by reappropriating its mechanisms and exposing its limitations.[17] Taken together, the thesis sets out to affirm that the four case studies, when read through the theoretical framework, reveal a coherent and comparative model of women's agency in times of crisis and liminality, despite the wide span of time separating them.

The application of contemporary theories to the study of ancient religious texts helps bridge the gap between the ancient and modern worlds, bringing texts such as the HB into dialogue with current developments in academia and beyond.[18] By drawing on contributions from feminist biblical studies and research on agency-power dynamics, this project seeks to offer new perspectives for critical reflection on these ancient religious texts. Feminist approaches to the study of the Bible challenge theological ideas and narratives that justify the patriarchal paradigm and inform biblical interpretation by highlighting how, beyond being a point of sexual differentiation, gender is fundamentally an assertion of power.[19]

In recent decades, there has been a shift of perspective from focusing on victimhood to emphasising agency. With an emphasis on female agency, there is a reshaping of previous representations of women in times of crisis and a deconstruction of ideas that portray women as passive recipients of societal and institutional power structures.[20] Moving from a focus on victimhood to female agency is significant when considering biblical women in times of crisis. Within traditional readings, women in

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[15] Judith Butler, 'Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics', *Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 4, no. 3 (2009): I–XIII, https://doi.org/10.11156/aibr.040303e; Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31, JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893; Judith. Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity / Judith Butler.* (Routledge, 1990).

[16] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Polity Press, 1984).

[17] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College De France, 1978-79*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Michel Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Power*, 1st edn, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 (The New Press, 2001); Michel Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume Three*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, Penguin Modern Classics (Penguin Random House, 2020).

[18] While this will be elaborated further in the following section, trauma theory in the study of exilic texts in the HB serves as an example in reminding us of this beneficial cross-disciplinary study.

[19] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone. The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (T&T Clark, 1984); Danna Nolan Fewell, 'Reading the Bible Ideologically: Feminist Criticism', in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

[20] Sumi Madhok et al., eds, *Gender, Agency and Coercion*, Thinking Gender in Transnational Times (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

biblical narratives – particularly those situated in contexts of crisis, war, and social dysfunction – have frequently been portrayed through the lens of passivity or victimhood.[21] While such interpretations may acknowledge their vulnerability, these readings risk reinscribing gender hierarchies by neglecting the strategic, subversive, or deliberate acts these women perform in shaping the narrative. The move from interpreting biblical women primarily as victims to recognising them as agents represents a crucial shift in both hermeneutical and theological implications.[22] Furthermore, comparative analysis can inform our understanding of gender and power in the HB by drawing on examples from different periods and contexts. A comparative study provides a stepping stone in examining how ancient biblical narratives can shed light on our knowledge of contemporary contexts and vice versa.

This thesis re-examines two biblical narratives in light of the issues noted above: Exodus 1—2:1-10 (a narrative focusing on the efforts of two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, a Hebrew mother and daughter, and an Egyptian princess), and Judges 4—5 (the prophetess Deborah and Jael). In these narratives, the characters demonstrate agency and experience shifts in power dynamics. These narratives are re-examined in light of contemporary theories concerning crisis and female agency. Along with these biblical texts, I explore two contemporary scenes where female agency and crisis converge, offering fruitful avenues for comparative reflection: female medical practitioners during the Holocaust and female militancy in Sri Lanka.

Women in Exodus 1—2:1-10 in conversation with women medical practitioners in Auschwitz

In Exodus 1—2:1-10, we see examples of the power and agency of five women: two midwives (Shiphrah and Puah), the mother and sister of the infant Moses (named elsewhere in the biblical text as Jochebed, Moses' mother, and Miriam, Moses' sister), and the unnamed Egyptian princess – the daughter of the Pharaoh.

Shiphrah and Puah are introduced in the narrative as the Pharaoh issues alarming measures to deal with an increasing population of the Hebrew people. He orders the midwives to kill all Israelite-born sons while the women are yet at the birthing stool (Exodus 1:16). Shiphrah and Puah defy Pharaoh's

[21] Traditional exegetical traditions have often silenced or marginalised biblical women's agency, reducing female characters to symbols of passivity or victimhood rather than acknowledging their strategic, narrative-shaping roles. See Juliana L. Claassens, 'Feminist Biblical Interpretation', in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan Wolfe, 18 January 2024, . https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/FeministBiblicalInterpretation.pdf.

[22] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror. Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Fortress Press, 1984), 28; Esther Fuchs, *Feminist Theory and the Bible : Interrogating the Sources / Esther Fuchs.*, Feminist Studies and Sacred Texts Series (Lexington Books, 2016).

orders because of their fear of the God of Israel and effectively become a powerful symbol of resistance, standing in for the collective people of Israel.[23]

Following Pharaoh's escalation of infanticide – commanding his people to throw all Israelite sons into the Nile – the narrative shifts to focus on one Hebrew family and the birth of their son. The mother manages to hide the child for three months before placing him in a basket among the reeds on the riverbank. The boy's sister is presented both as a guardian and a protector as she stands 'at a distance to know what would be done to him' (Exodus 2:4). The daughter of Pharaoh discovers the boy in the reeds and takes pity on him (Exodus 2:6); her compassion crosses the boundary of division between the Hebrews and the Egyptian people. In the narrative, we learn that the boy's sister approaches the princess after watching the Egyptian princess discover the baby. The sister then suggests fetching a nursemaid from the Hebrew women. The princess agrees and essentially adopts the boy as her own son.[24]

The role and portrayal of the women in these initial chapters of Exodus are rich and multi-layered. The work in feminist biblical scholarship – to be addressed in subsequent chapters – demonstrates the importance of the women characters in the opening chapters of Exodus within the context of the larger story of Israel, particularly at this moment of crisis. However, in this case, the intersection of gender, power, and agency is complex; the object of their activity and agency is primarily male and ultimately fulfilled in an infant boy.

In a compelling parallel to the courageous efforts of these biblical women, more recent scholarship has shed new light on the various measures of women medical practitioners in aiding in the survival of fellow prisoners during the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Europe. Operating individually, these women laboured under challenging conditions. They faced numerous obstacles, such as limited resources, exposure to infectious diseases, and the constant threat of death upon discovery for those who initiated perilous rescue missions.

Reflecting on the Holocaust through the lens of the Bible has become an important task over the past several decades.[25] Interviewed in the documentary "The Last Days", Hungarian Holocaust

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[23] Allan A. Boesak, 'The Riverbank, the Seashore and the Wilderness: Miriam, Liberation and Prophetic Witness against Empire' HTS Teologiese Studies 73, no. 4 (2017): 1, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4547.

[24] Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Harvard University Press, 1990), 59; David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (Yale University Press, 2014), 112–13.

[25] See Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2003); and Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004)

survivor Alice Lok Cahana likened her deportation from her hometown to Auschwitz to the exodus: 'It's like when you read that the Jews went out of Egypt. We are carrying all our baggage. The pillows and the covers are tied to them, bundled. And we children helped to carry.'[26] Such reflections illustrate the deep rupture the Holocaust inflicted upon Jewish historical consciousness, collapsing biblical memory and lived catastrophe into a single narrative.

Deborah and Jael in conversation with female militancy in Sri Lanka

This project considers biblical narratives that deliberately uphold ethical ambiguity. Moral ambiguity is viewed as a core aspect of crisis narratives, where agency as violence is exercised within conditions of social dysfunction and limited choices. As Hackett writes: 'Violence in the book of Judges is a function of the lawless era it describes, but it is also intertwined with the lives of women. The women in the book are both perpetrators and victims of violence; the relationship between violence and women's lives is a surprisingly intimate one.'[27] This complex reality is evident in Judges 4, where both the main female characters of the story are intimately involved in warfare and violence.[28]

The book of Judges has a cyclical pattern, shifting from Israel's disobedience to Israel's deliverance, only to repeat this cycle. Deborah and Jael are characters within this cycle, where 'judge after judge, each a quasi-nomadic warlord, demonstrates a general incompetence to lead'. The judges are the protagonists of the book of Judges, and the accounts illustrate their exploits and leadership of Israel during the unstable transitional period of biblical history, between Israel's inheritance of the promised land and the establishment of its monarchy. It is against a patriarchal context that Deborah serves as the judge of Israel, and the text categorically emphasises her distinctiveness from the beginning: she is (a) a woman — a named woman, (b) a strong leader and militant strategist, and (c) a revered judge and prophetess. While many women characters in the book of Judges remain unnamed, it is notable that both Deborah and Jael are among the few exceptions. Both women are depicted positively, each assuming the role of a national saviour.

In Judges 4, the story's events are primarily centred on the conflict between the troops of Deborah and Barak and the Canaanite army of Jabin. This battle frames the subplot of the assassination of

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[26] *The Last Days*, Documentary, directed by James Moll (October Films, 1998), 1h27m.

[27] Jo Ann Hackett, 'Violence and Women's Lives in the Book of Judges', *Interpretation (Richmond)* (Richmond) 58, no. 4 (2004): 356, https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430405800404.

[28] The thesis explores the figures of Deborah and Jael, and the women of the LTTE as agents operating within complex power structures while acknowledging the ethical ambiguity of the violence of their agency. The project therefore recognises that agency may be enacted through violence without romanticising violence itself. This allows the analysis to hold together two important claims: first, that womens' agency can be violent and should not be dismissed as merely accidental or derivative of male power; and second, that such acts must be examined carefully and critically, since agency exercised through violence remains ethically fraught and may be shaped by or in response to very structures of crisis it seeks to resist or subvert.

Jabin's commander, Sisera, by the woman, Jael.[29] The story is set against the backdrop of a crisis – Israel's oppression by Canaan. In her capacity as judge and prophetess, Deborah receives an oracle from God and calls upon her general Barak to mobilise the Israelite army accordingly. She instructs him to gather his men and wage war against the Canaanite commander Sisera and the forces of Canaan (Judges 4:6-7). Barak agrees to this charge provided that Deborah accompanies him on this mission. Niditch comments on the unique role of Deborah as a prophet: 'That she is female and therefore not expected to lead in a military context only enhances the impression of the judge as one raised by God, inspired and unusual, beyond the workaday roles of men and women'.[30] This comment underscores Barak's desire for Deborah to accompany him into battle. It is not her prowess as a warrior that he requires, but rather the symbolism that comes with her presence —the endorsement of the Lord.[31]

Following the discourse between Deborah and Barak, the reader is initially led to believe that the hands Sisera will be delivered into are Deborah's. However, it is later revealed that Jael, the Kenite, is the agent of Israel's victory. Jael enters her role as a national saviour by happenstance. However, this does not undermine her agency in seizing an opportunity through her quick and strategic thinking. After providing Sisera with a false sense of security, Jael murders Sisera in an assassination borne from opportunity. Jael's successful manipulation of Sisera earns her a legacy that inspires national-level respect and validation from the divine. In Judges 5, Jael is linked to a period that is clearly understood in the collective memory of Israel: 'in the days of Jael'.[32] She is called the 'most blessed of women' (Judges 5:24), and the chapter concludes with the implication that because of the events of Deborah and Jael, 'the land had rest for forty years' (Judges 5:31).

The biblical narrative of Deborah and Jael raises key issues concerning the relationship between war, violence, and gender. Speaking on 'the location of violence and female militancy within an ambivalent space of agency in narrative literature', Meegaswatta notes that there is often a disruption of conventional representations of war in gendered terms.[33] This is seen with the rise of women's visibility in conflicts around the world today, where traditional belief systems that reinforced ideas on the fragility and victimhood of women have been disarmed. This (new?) reality reverberates in literature, such as the corpus of fictional and non-fictional literary works borne in the aftermath of

[29] Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 64.
[30] *Ibid. 65*.
[31] Hackett, 'Violence and Women's Lives in the Book of Judges', 357.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] T N K Meegaswatta, 'Violence as a Site of Women's Agency in War: The Representation of Female Militants in Sri Lanka's Post-War Literature', *Journal of International Women's Studies* (Bridgewater) 20, no. 3 (2019): 28.

the 26-year-long Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009), where issues relating to women, violence and terror were brought to the fore: 'The armed woman rendered visible and vocal in literature constitutes a threat to patriarchy and war; 'violent' women in arms subverts figurations of women as 'delicate' symbols of hearth and home that frame decisions to go to war. This 'unframing' invites critical attention to the call to arms to men to 'defend' their women, children, and a fragile 'mother' land. At the same time, however, the violent potential of the armed woman can encourage oppressive practices that aim to contain women.'[34]

In the same way that the biblical women subverted the patriarchal structures of their world through militancy and violence, we see a similar trajectory in the agency of the women of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It has been reported that the LTTE was responsible for more than half the suicide bombings worldwide, with female LTTE suicide bombers accounting for 40 per cent of suicide ventures.[35] How should we as scholars confront the figure of the female militant—especially in cases where agency, in the form of political violence, situates the women militant at the uncomfortable intersection between empowerment and pawn in a patriarchal narrative? Through her violence, the female militant occupies a juxtaposed space of power and victimhood, an issue further explored in chapter 7.[36]

Project Outline

The present chapter introduces the study and concludes with my personal motivation for the thesis topic. Chapter 2 serves as a comprehensive literature review, situating the project within the broader context of feminist biblical scholarship and outlining the cross-disciplinary framework guiding the study. It establishes the theoretical groundwork governing the research question, defines the key concepts of crisis and liminality, and examines the role of contemporary theory in the study of the Hebrew Bible. A brief overview of feminist biblical scholarship situates the present study, focusing on the rise of academic biblical studies from its origins in the feminist movement in the 1960s to its integration into the academy, before surveying different approaches within the field. Finally, the chapter outlines the contemporary theories of power, gender, and agency that will be employed in

[34] T N K Meegaswatta, 'Violence as a Site of Women's Agency in War: The Representation of Female Militants in Sri Lanka's Post-War Literature', 40.
[35] *Ibid. 29*.
[36] Kirk-Duggan, 'Inside, Outside, or in Between: Feminist/Womanist Hermeneutical Challenges for Joshua and Judges', 78; T N K Meegaswatta, 'Violence as a Site of Women's Agency in War: The Representation of Female Militants in Sri Lanka's Post-War Literature', 28–29.

this research, highlighting how cross-disciplinary study and comparative methods can shed light on the aforementioned biblical narratives and the selected contemporary case studies.

The thesis is then divided into two further sections. Section One examines women's agency in conditions of extreme social crisis through the biblical narrative of Exodus 1–2:1–10 (chapter 3) and the testimonies of Auschwitz prisoners and medical practitioners Dr Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska (chapter 4), culminating in a comparative, theory-informed analysis (chapter 5). Section Two mirrors this structure, turning to issues of war and violence through an analysis of women's agency in Judges 4–5 (chapter 6) and the contemporary case study of female militants within Sri Lanka's LTTE (chapter 7), followed by a comparative analysis (chapter 8). Chapter 9 concludes by synthesising the central insights and reflecting on the broader implications of women's agency in contexts of crisis and liminality.

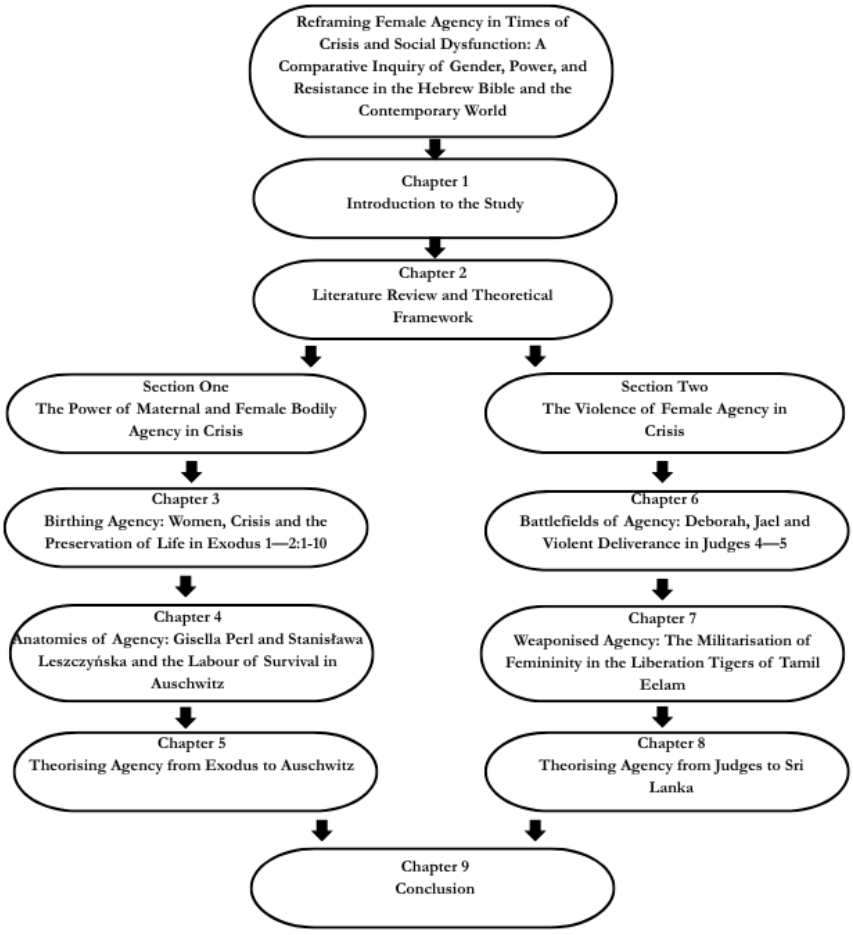


Figure 1: Project outline visual

Personal motivation: Themes and theories

As a white South African woman, my motivation to write a thesis on female agency during times of social dysfunction and crisis was deeply personal and reflective of my own lived experience. South Africa's complex history of apartheid[37], economic disparity[38], and ongoing social challenges[39] has shaped my understanding of how crisis and social dysfunction disproportionately affect women. South Africa is a country marked by profound historical and social upheaval, with Apartheid as an institution of crisis. Women, particularly women of colour, were disproportionately affected during Apartheid, facing layers of oppression not only due to race but also because of gender. While post-apartheid reforms focused on improving access for women in areas of education, healthcare, and employment, there are still noticeable disparities[40] stemming from socio-economic challenges.[41]

Women faced unique challenges during a regime centred on systemic exclusion. In particular, black women were often confined to domestic work or exploited in low-wage industries. These environments frequently entailed gender-based violence (GBV) and discrimination. The regime's migrant labour system further entrenched inequality as women were left to manage households under extreme poverty while men were forced to work far from home. This social and economic disenfranchisement was compounded by the pass laws, which controlled their movements, making it almost impossible for black women to work or reside in urban areas legally.

However, women played a crucial role in anti-apartheid movements, such as the historic 1956 Women's March against pass laws. This event signalled not only their resistance to racial oppression but also their fight for gender equality in a patriarchal system. This particular intersectional experience of South African women, and the firsthand witnessing of how women in South Africa navigate these crises with resilience, strength, and creativity, has become a foundational motivating factor in exploring female agency during times of crisis academically.

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[37] Apartheid in South Africa was a system of institutionalized racial segregation that existed from 1948 until its formal end in 1994. Apartheid enforced laws which saw the oppression of a non-white majority by a white minority government. This regime led to severe socio-economic inequalities and the restriction of rights of people of colour. The legacy of the Apartheid institution continues to influence the socio-economic landscape of South Africa.

[38] Eleanor Beth Whyle and Jill Olivier, 'A Socio-Political History of South Africa's National Health Insurance', *International Journal for Equity in Health* 22, no. 1 (2023): 247, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-023-02058-3.

[39] Oren Yiftachel, 'Deepening Apartheid: The Political Geography of Colonizing Israel/Palestine', *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2022.981867.

[40] Linda Nordling, 'The Long, Low Echo of Apartheid in South Africa', Harvard Public Health, 3 October 2022, https://harvardpublichealth.org/equity/apartheid-legacy-south-africa-health/.

[41] Edith Dinong Phaswana, 'Women, Gender, and Race in Post-Apartheid South Africa', in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, ed. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola (Springer International Publishing, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28099-4_141.

The four narratives selected for this thesis – Exodus 1—2:1-10, Judges 4—5, the testimonies of the medical practitioners Dr Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska, and the accounts of the Tamil Sri Lankan LTTE women—are intentionally diverse yet deeply complementary. Each narrative emerges from a context of acute crisis in which established social, political, and gendered structures are disrupted, creating conditions in which women's agency becomes both necessary and visible. Their juxtaposition allows for a comparative exploration of how female actors negotiate and reconfigure power when confronted with oppression, violence, or structural collapse.

In this avenue of research, I was particularly drawn to the social theories of Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler. Their respective approaches offer nuanced ways of analysing the intersection of gender, power, and times of crisis. Their theories enable me to critically examine how structures of power are reproduced or disrupted in moments of social dysfunction and in periods of liminality.

Moreover, these case studies offer a wide temporal, cultural, and socio-political spread, enabling Butler's theory of performativity, Giddens' structuration framework, and Foucault's analytics of power and biopolitics to be examined across vastly different environments. The shift hypotheses further bind these narratives together by revealing patterned transformations – demographic, role-based, and political – that emerge in crises and that shape the possibilities for women's agency. Together, the four narratives create a nuanced comparative field in which theories of gender performance, structural negotiation, and disciplinary power can be examined not as abstract constructs but as lived realities articulated through women's embodied, strategic, and often subversive actions.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter reviews the existing literature that situates this study and establishes the theoretical framework for analysing the biblical narratives and contemporary case studies. It begins by situating the study within Feminism and Biblical Studies, surveying key feminist approaches and interpretive methods and outlining the specific feminist hermeneutical strategies employed in this research.

The chapter then turns to the conceptual architecture of the study, clarifying the dynamics of crisis, liminality, and gender as they pertain to women's agency. These categories become particularly important given that this project moves between two worlds: the ancient world of the biblical narrative and the contemporary world of historical case studies. Addressing this methodological tension, the chapter outlines the principles and constraints that guide responsible comparison across temporal, cultural, and literary boundaries.

To frame how agency operates within these contexts, the discussion engages several theoretical interlocutors. Giddens's structuration theory illuminates the interplay between structure and human action; Butler's account of gender performativity reveals how gender norms are enacted, repeated, and disrupted; and Foucault's analyses of biopolitics and surveillance offer critical tools for examining how power regulates bodies, reproduction, and populations, particularly during crises. Together, these perspectives shape the analytical approach adopted in this thesis, providing a multidimensional framework for interpreting how women navigate, resist, and reconfigure systems of domination in both ancient and modern settings. Collectively, these sections locate the study within broader feminist and interdisciplinary scholarship and supply the conceptual scaffolding for the analyses that follow.

1. Situating the Study: Feminist lenses for reading ancient biblical texts

Historically, for most cultures (if not all), men have maintained power over women across significant domains of life — whether social, political, or economic. While advocacy for women's rights can be traced back to earlier points in history, feminism gained momentum as an activist movement from the women's political movement of the 1960s, with the desire to first and foremost achieve women's substantive equality in life domains typically dominated and controlled by men.[42]

[42] Fewell, 'Reading the Bible Ideologically: Feminist Criticism', 238; Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Sheila Briggs, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Shelly Matthews, 'Feminist Biblical Historiography', in *Feminist Biblical*

The term patriarchy has been employed since the 1960s to describe the gendered inequality and abuse (physical, mental, emotional or otherwise) that women have suffered. Patriarchy is deeply rooted in history and entrenched in societal structures. These structures are deconstructed by reimagined conceptualisations of gender as being distinct from the matter of biological sex.[43] In this understanding, gender is itself the expression and product of a division and hierarchy between human beings imposed initially by men on women, sex differences serving to naturalise a difference rendered prominent by the very foundation of oppression, such that it is gender that makes for patriarchal oppression and not sex that makes for gender.[44]

There is no single satisfactory definition of feminism, as it plays out differently across contexts and agendas.[45] Furthermore, feminism involves much more than mere agreement concerning equality and access to fundamental human rights. Feminism involves seeking transformation through *societal awareness*. Society has established masculine norms, leaving women marginalised and forced to identify within these male constructs. Therefore, it is imperative that society consciously and actively participates in deconstructing masculine norms.[46] Nevertheless, as a broad definition, and one that will inform this thesis, feminism can be understood as *a critical stance that critiques the gendered structures and paradigms that exist and which position men as dominant and superior to women, who, by comparison, and by effect, are defined as auxiliary and second to their male counterparts. It is a contextual and creative process in re-reading and re-examining all aspects of society, and all that pertains to a lived experience.*[47]

Feminist biblical studies is a fundamental component of the feminist movement in theology and the academic study of religion. The field of feminist biblical studies has had a significant influence and profound impact in academia, religious contexts, and society at large. Therefore, it is paramount that the contributions from feminist biblical studies be recognised and remembered.[48] There is value in recovering the past, particularly for feminist inquiry. As Daly argues, there is significance in looking back because, when patriarchal systems obscure women's histories, later generations are compelled

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Studies in the Twentieth Century : Scholarship and Movement, ed. Elisabeth Fiorenza Schüssler (Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dcu.idm.oclc.org/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=3118320; Alice Roberts Dunn, 'How Should an Understanding of Gender Shape Our Approach to the Production of Knowledge?', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 2 (2021): 92.

[43] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', 521.

[44] Christine Delphy, 'The Main Enemy', *Feminist Issues* 1, no. 1 (1980): 23–40; Christine Delphy, *Separate and Dominate: Feminism and Racism after the War on Terror* (Verso Books, 2015); Eric Macé, 'From Patriarchy to Composite Gender Arrangements? Theorizing the Historicity of Social Relations of Gender', *Social Politics* 25, no. 3 (2018): 320, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxy018.

[45] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 6.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Brock, 'Feminist Theories**', 117; Loades, 'Feminist Interpretation', 81–82; Ruether, 'The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology', 3; Watson, *Feminist Theology*, 2; Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 6.

[48] Renate Jost, 'The Institutionalization of Feminist Biblical Studies in Its International and Ecumenical Contexts (Dossier)*', in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship Movement*, ed. Elisabeth Fiorenza Schüssler (Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 365, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dcu.idm.oclc.org/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=3118320.

not only to rediscover what their predecessors once knew, but also to re-counter the very challenges they faced.[49] Jost extends this insight, emphasising that ' to learn from mistakes and avoid breaks with tradition, feminist theology also needs a culture of remembering that remains aware of its own past and deliberately makes it relevant in the present, so that it can become ever more part of the mainstream'.[50] Together, these perspectives underscore that revisiting tradition is not merely retrospective work but an active practice of continuity, discernment, and renewal.

While there have been contributions from women readers of the Bible throughout history, we focus here more particularly on the rise of feminist biblical studies in the contemporary period. Feminist biblical studies is rooted in the women's movements of the nineteenth century and can be traced back to scholars such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. While this period marks the early stages of a critical feminist biblical interpretation, it should be noted that women have been interpreters of the Bible long before the nineteenth century.

For example, women biblical interpreters can be traced back to St. Paula and St. Eustochium, who collaborated with St. Jerome in translating the scriptures into Latin.[51] Hildegard of Bingen is an example of a twelfth-century nun who later became abbess of a convent in the Rhineland. She was a scholar of significant and impressive breadth, with writings that ranged from accounts of her experiences with prophetic visions to reports on the natural world, science, and medicine. Hildegard of Bingen demonstrated proficiency not only as a theologian but also as a musical composer.[52] While the Reformation period nurtured a biblical interpretation that promoted and reinforced constructions of 'traditional' gender roles, Italian writer Christine de Pizan was among the very few who wrote in opposition to gendered structures. She did so by employing the Renaissance's new humanistic education to claim fuller humanity for women. In her 1399 work *The Book of the City of Ladies*, she defends women's capacity for virtue and moral standing against the misogynist invectives of clergymen and male writers.[53] Her theological defence included an interpretation of Genesis that held both woman and man to be created in the image of God. As an interpretation that would become

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[49] Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (The Women's Press Ltd, 1991), 23.

[50] Jost, 'The Institutionalization of Feminist Biblical Studies in Its International and Ecumenical Contexts (Dossier)*', 366. Jost provides a compilation of foundational components of the institutionalization of feminist biblical studies, focusing on institutions rather than individuals as they offer a broader context for further development Jost, 'The Institutionalization of Feminist Biblical Studies in Its International and Ecumenical Contexts (Dossier)*', 365.

[51] Watson, *Feminist Theology*, 5.

[52] Elisabeth Gössmann, 'History of Biblical Interpretation by European Women', in *Searching the Scriptures*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 1:29–32; Ruether, 'The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology', 4; Margaret Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 6. Gössmann calls Hildegard 'an ardent defender of God's image (*imago Dei*) in woman', a notion most evident in Hildegard's work *De operatione Dei* Gössmann, 'History of Biblical Interpretation by European Women', 29–32.. See: Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias*, translated by Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop Saint Hildegard et al., *Scivias* (Paulist Press, 1990), http://nuim.summon.serialssolutions.com.

[53] Ruether, 'The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology', 5.

more popular, the woman was seen as a creation from 'better' material, because it was the woman, not the man, who was created in Paradise.[54]

In the fifteenth century, Julian of Norwich emerged as yet another woman in history who participated in biblical interpretation and was known for her use of feminine imagery in relation to the Divine. She asked, 'Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God?'[55] In 1589, Jane Anger argued for the superiority of Eve over Adam, in what was considered the first English feminist polemic. Her publication, *Protection for Women*, is evidence of early feminist refutation of the misrepresentations and negative depictions of women, particularly regarding their moral character and intellectual abilities.[56] In the sixteenth century, the letters of Marguerite de Navarre, sister to King Francis I, provided a politically orientated interpretation of the Bible. Marguerite argued in defence of her sex using the rationale of Eve as a matriarchal figure and crown of creation, the last and most perfect of all that God created. Marguerite de Navarre's defence can be credited as employing the Scriptures politically in a period of Salic law that barred women's access to the French throne.[57] These are but a few examples of a rich history of women biblical interpreters.

The late nineteenth century saw the publication of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* in 1895 and 1898. In her work, Stanton engaged with the biblical text using the historical-critical methods of the day. In the commentary, Stanton endeavoured to seek the 'truth' regarding the biblical position on the status and role of women. Her commentary also critiqued the Bible and challenged the theological premise of women being subservient to men.[58] The book was highly controversial in light of the day's political and social backdrop, as it presented a theological *and* political statement.[59] For example, in Stanton's introduction to part 1 of *The Woman's Bible*, she writes, 'The canon and civil law; church and state; priests and legislators; all political parties and religious denominations have alike taught that woman was made after man, of man, and for man, an inferior being, subject to man. Creeds, codes, Scriptures and statutes are all based on this idea. The fashions, forms, ceremonies and customs of society, church ordinances and discipline all grow out of this idea.'[60] Her critique included

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[54] Gössmann, 'History of Biblical Interpretation by European Women', 34–35.
[55] Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, 7.
[56] *Ibid.9*.
[57] Gössmann, 'History of Biblical Interpretation by European Women', 35.
[58] Stanton critiqued the biblical position that woman brought sin and death into the world, and as a consequence 'marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty' Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible. Part 1*. (1895), para. 4.
[59] Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (SCM Press Ltd., 1983), 7.
[60] Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, para. 2.

the biblical position of her day that held women responsible for bringing sin and death into the world.[61] Some suffragists even distanced themselves from Stanton's project because of her criticism of the authority of the Bible. They feared her controversial and provocative statements might encumber the political aims of their cause.[62]

1.1. Feminist Biblical Studies in the Academy

Feminist studies moved into the academy in the twentieth century, and feminist biblical scholars have been active in universities since the 1970s. In 1971, the first thematic women's group was established in Atlanta, a momentous event made possible through the meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. Carol Christ (AAR) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (SBL) were the elected co-chairs of the Women's Caucus Religious Studies operation. During that time, notable women professors in the Society of Biblical Literature with varying feminist agendas included Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Phyllis Bird, Phyllis Trible, Antoinette Clark Wire, Winsome Monroe, and Mary Wakeman.[63] From the late 1970s into the early 1980s, an increasing number of women began to study biblical texts from a feminist perspective. This period included essential works such as Rosemary Radford Reuther's *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish Christian Traditions*;[64] Letty M. Russel's *The Liberating Word: A Guide to Nonsexist Interpretation of the Bible*; and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her,* along with her volume *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Interpretation*.[65]

The 1980s and 1990s saw the visible emergence of feminist biblical scholarship in more diversified, pluralist forms. This period has been aptly described as the foundation 'for the flowering of feminist biblical scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s that would see the entry of women of color, out lesbians,

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[61] *Ibid.* para. 4.

[62] Susan Brayford, 'Feminist Criticism: Sarah Laughs Last', in *Method Matters. Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards, Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study 56 (Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 314.

[63] Jost, 'The Institutionalization of Feminist Biblical Studies in Its International and Ecumenical Contexts (Dossier)*', 367; Judith Plaskow, 'Movement and Emerging Scholarship: Feminist Biblical Scholarship in the 1970s in the United States', in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century : Scholarship and Movement*, ed. Elisabeth Fiorenza Schüssler (Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 24, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dcu.idm.oclc.org/lib/dcu/reader.action?docID=3118320; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century : Scholarship and Movement* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 2, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=3118320.

[64] *Religion and Sexism* presented an examination into the role of religion in shaping the traditional cultural images that have been used to suppress women, and drew on the Bible in presenting this case: Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religion and Sexism; Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Simon and Schuster, 1974), http://capitadiscovery.co.uk/dcu/items/130701.

[65] Ruether, *Religion and Sexism; Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*; Ruether, *Religion and Sexism; Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*; Letty M. Russell, ed., *The Liberating Word: A Guide to Nonsexist Interpretation of the Bible* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1976); Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*; Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*; Jost, 'The Institutionalization of Feminist Biblical Studies in Its International and Ecumenical Contexts (Dossier)*', 368–69.

and Jewish women into an increasingly rich and multifaceted conversation'.[66] These new voices challenged the exclusivity of the white Western feminist scholar's voice. The need to differentiate from white Western feminist scholarship led to the recognition of other perspectives, such as *womanist* and *mujerista.*

In biblical studies, *womanist* is a designation for the scholar rather than an interpretive hermeneutic. Womanist scholars see womanist biblical interpretation as 'an approach to engaging biblical texts in a way that focuses on the perspectives and experiences of African American women'.[67] Key figures of womanist biblical scholarship include Renita Weems and Wilda C. Gafney.[68] The term *mujerista,* proposed by scholar Ada María Isasi-Diaz, is not used within the women's biblical movement in Latin America. It is a term used by Latinas living in the United States.[69] The emergence of feminist biblical theology in Latin America developed within a climate of political struggle, revolution, and grassroots resistance. From the late 1970s into the early 1980s, women increasingly began to understand themselves as subjects and not merely objects of theological reflection, articulating biblical interpretations grounded in their own lived realities. Although this work was well underway by the 1980s, the explicit adoption of the term "feminist theology" became more widespread only in the 1990s, as scholars such as María Pilar Aquino, Elsa Tamez, and Ivone Gebara consolidated the movement..[70] The differences in terminology illustrate the complexities of defining feminist interpretation and the careful consideration required to account for the diversity of scholarship.[71]

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[66] Plaskow, 'Movement and Emerging Scholarship: Feminist Biblical Scholarship in the 1970s in the United States', 34.

[67] Nyasha Junior, *Womanist Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/acref:obso/9780199832262.013.0089.

[68] Key figures of womanist biblical scholarship include Renita Weems, with her 1988 publication labelled the earliest of womanist work within biblical studies: Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible. Wilda C. Gafney, also known as Wil Gafney, is a specialist in womanist interpretation with a focus in the Hebrew Bible. Her work includes Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel Wilda Gafney , 'Daughters of Miriam : Women Prophets in Ancient Israel', 2008, /z-wcorg/, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctv1hqdhnd. and Womanist Midrash Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, 1st edn (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).. Clarice J. Martin is another notable name in early womanist biblical scholarship. See Martin's contribution "The Haustafeln (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: 'Free Slave' and 'Subordinate Women." in Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod* (1517 Media, 1991), JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15wxn53.

[69] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Orbis Books, 1996); Elsa Tamez, 'Feminist Biblical Studies in Latin America and the Caribbean', in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, ed. Elisabeth Fiorenza Schüssler (Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 37, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=3118320.

[70] For an overview of feminist biblical scholarship in Latin America, see Elsa Tamez, "Feminist Biblical Studies in Latin America and the Caribbean," in *Searching the Scriptures, Volume 1: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 33–46. Foundational works in Latin American feminist theology include María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), and Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). For broader contextual interpretation, see Néstor Oscar Míguez, "Central and South American Interpretation," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). For further reading on Mujerista theology, see Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

[71] Phyllis A. Bird, "Authority and Context in the Interpretation of Biblical Texts," Neotestamentica 28, no. 2 (1994): 325; Ann Loades, "Feminist Interpretation," in The Oxford Companion to the Bible, ed. Bruce Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford:

Thus, the contributions of African American womanist scholars, *mujerista* scholars, and East Asian women scholars emerged, bringing their unique experiences to the table. These different terms in theological and biblical studies make visible the diverse and pluralistic identities that contribute to the mosaic of feminist hermeneutics. For example, in terms of the Global South, feminist biblical studies emerged and developed in unique ways, guided first and foremost by context. In Africa, 'feminist biblical studies is one strand intricately woven into the fabric of African feminist theology'.[72] The establishment of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989 was a response necessitated by the gender gap in theological and biblical discourse in Africa. With the establishment of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians – spearheaded by Mercy Amba Oduyoye – a feminist biblical studies hermeneutic emerged, and gender came to be factored into African biblical studies.[73] The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was established to ensure that the distinctive voice of the African woman is heard in African theological discourse. The liberation theology that had strongly resonated in African theology was dominated by male and foreign scholars, with a focus on political and economic oppression. As such, the oppression of the African woman was ignored. African women's voices were absent in 'doing theology'.[74]

Within South African scholarship, Maysenya's *Bosadi* approach is particularly notable in developing a womanhood-focused hermeneutic that challenges the Western feminist framework in African biblical interpretation.[75] Sarojini Nadar has made significant contributions to feminist biblical studies, and issues related to gender and sexuality. Her work emphasises moving biblical interpretation from academic abstraction toward a socially engaged practice.[76] Charlene van der Walt's feminist and contextual methods are especially valuable for addressing gendered violence and her scholarship explores how biblical texts can highlight and challenge systems of power.[77] Furthermore, Juliana

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Oxford University Press, 1993), 81–82; and Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, "Toward Mapping Feminist Biblical Interpretations in Asia," in Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014)., http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=3118320.

[72] Dora Rudo Mbuwayesango, 'Feminist Biblical Studies in Africa', in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century : Scholarship and Movement*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 73, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=3118320.

[73] Mbuwayesango, 'Feminist Biblical Studies in Africa', 73.

[74] For further reading, see: Introducing African Women's Theology Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2001), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=743033. and chapter 3 of Circle thinking: African women theologians in dialogue with the West C.M. Pemberton and C M Pemberton, *Circle Thinking : African Women Theologians in Dialogue with the West* (BRILL, 2003), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=253606.

[75] Masenya, Madipoane. "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Reading for the Liberation of African (Northern Sotho) Women." *Semeia*, no. 78 (January 1, 1997): 55.

[76] Nadar, Sarojini. "Changing the World: The Task of Feminist Biblical Scholars." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25, no. 2 (September 22, 2009): 137–43. doi:10.2979/FSR.2009.25.2.137.

[77] Van der Walt, Charlene. Hearing Tamar's voice: Contextual readings of 2 Samuel 13:1-22. *Old testam Essays*, Pretoria , v. 25, n. 1, p. 182-206, 2012 .

Claassens has advanced feminist, trauma-informed interpretations of the Hebrew Bible that are useful tools for understanding biblical women in crisis and suffering.[78]

Taken together, the voices of feminist scholars, theologians, and biblical interpreters from across the globe are acknowledged as significant in both their shared feminist task of recognising structural inequality and injustice and their distinctive concerns and agendas. Bird writes: 'In this recognition and in their determination to fight against the various structures of oppression, feminists experience "sisterhood" which transcends but does not cancel the differences that separate them. Feminists' identity transcends religious as well as national, class, and ethnic identity'.[79]

1.2. Feminist Biblical Studies: Approaches and Methods

Feminist criticism, on which this project draws, is pluralistic and diverse, encompassing a broad range of approaches. It encourages multiple and often contradictory readings of the same text. It recognises the gains from a variety of approaches because it is suspicious of the notion that there is a 'proper way' to read a text, as such established readings are often expressions of male control of texts and reading. Reading is not disinterested. Interpretation of a text results from the kind of questions we ask, and our interests determine those questions, whether acknowledged or not.[80]

In engaging with selected passages in the Hebrew Bible, this project draws on three broad approaches of interpretation employed in feminist biblical scholarship. A brief overview of these approaches is necessary to demonstrate the pluralistic nature of feminist biblical interpretation, but more significantly, to illustrate how these respective perspectives can be used side by side in interpretation and analysis. While there are many diverse forms and approaches within feminism, in what follows, I offer three examples that show how feminists engage with the world of the text, the world behind the text, and the world in front of the text and further discuss these approaches in light of my research in the subsequent chapters.

1.2.1. The World of the Text: Narrative and Rhetorical Approaches

With a text-immanent approach, as seen in narrative criticism, there is a focus on the final form of the text as it has been passed down. In the HB, the authorship, dating and implied audience of a text

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[78] Claassens, Juliana L.. (2023). Theological Language in Crisis? The Importance of Trauma Hermeneutics for Exploring Gendered Metaphors for God in the Book of Jeremiah. *Old Testament Essays*, *36*(1), 202-219. https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2023/v36n1a12

[79] Bird, 'Authority and Context in the Interpretation of Biblical Texts*', 325.

[80] J. Cheryl Exum, 'Feminist Criticism. Whose Interests Are Being Served?', in *Judges & Methods. New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd edn, ed. Gale A. Yee (Fortress Press, 2007), 68.

tend to be unknown and generally a matter of speculation and controversy. The rationale for using a text-immanent approach in the Hebrew Bible is that the text can be viewed as an independent literary work and thus can be studied apart from *behind the text* approaches, regardless of its complex origins and development. This means that 'the exegete is really left with the text and only the text; therefore, the methodologies of literary criticism and the analysis of literary devices in a text provide handy instruments and are valuable keys for interpretation'.[81] This shift can be credited to an awareness that historical-critical methods tend to reflect the limited interests of Euro-American scholars. Minoritised feminist biblical scholars in the West and feminist biblical scholars from the global south and east often focus on questions that revolve around (but are not limited to) the texts and its readers. The emphasis is placed on how biblical texts resonate in the lives of women in contemporary contexts.[82]

A simple definition of a narrative is 'the telling, by a narrator to an audience, of a connected series or sequence of events'.[83] Narrative criticism 'seeks to take narrative meaning seriously by entering as attentively as possible into the story form'.[84] When looking at the narratives in the Hebrew Bible, there is an immediate distinction with the expansive and nuanced art of storytelling one finds in the modern novel. By comparison, the narratives in the Hebrew Bible are presented as succinct and selective constructions. When using narrative criticism, these constructions can be read in light of the implied meanings encapsulated by literary figures or by the individual terms of the phrases within the account. Narrative criticism engages with the text by reading biblical narratives as literature, identifying the text according to the conventional literary aspects and genres and taking notes of patterns in the composition regarding the narration, characterisation and sequencing. Analysing the text, a narrative critic would then determine what genre the text is best suited as: for example, as history, myth, or legend. The literary structure is examined for key features of narrative: setting, plot, theme, characters. Elements of interest include repetitive phrasing, narrative parallels and 'gaps' within the text. Other elements include narrative perspective; narrated and direct discourse; the plot, setting, theme and characters of the narrative, and point of view.[85]

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[81] Gerda De Villiers, 'Interpreting Texts and the Matter of Context : Examples from the Book of Ruth', *Verbum et Ecclesia* (Pretoria) 40, no. 1 (2019): 1, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1925.

[82] Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, 'Texts and Readers, Rhetorics and Ethics', in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 228.

[83] P. Satterthwaite and G. McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Histories* (SPCK, 2007), 2:541.

[84] P.D Miscall, 'Introduction to Narrative Literature', in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. L.E. Keck (Abingdon Press, 1998), 2:541; Cynthia Long Westfall, 'Narrative Criticism', in *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Routledge, 2007), 237–38; Patricia K. Tull, *Narrative Criticism and Narrative Hermeneutics* (Oxford University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/acref:obso/9780199832262.013.0073.

[85] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981); Robert Alter, 'Literature', in *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods*, ed. Ronald Hendel (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Cambridge Core, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511778056.003; Richard G.

The following literary elements will be important in our own analysis, and so a brief introduction to these may be helpful:[86]

1.) The *setting* of a narrative provides the reader with a context, or foreground in which the plot unfolds, and the characters develop. The setting may include geographical location, temporal location, social location and historical scene.

2.) The *plot* is the story's beginning, unfolding, climax, and conclusion. It is the sequence of events of the story. Plot can be studied at a micro level (pericope) or macro level (whole text). Plot involves attention to the literary arrangement of events of the narrative. This includes attention to temporal or thematic discontinuity.

3.) The *language* used within the narrative provides implicit commentary, taking the reader through the story and colouring the narrative with language devices such as symbolism, repetition and irony.

4.) The *characters* of a narrative, protagonists and antagonists, are identified and studied according to their characterisation, motives and development and narrative perspective. [87]

Narrative criticism is often viewed as a subcategory of rhetorical criticism — an approach seen in the work of, for example, Phyllis Trible.[88] Trible is an established forerunner in feminist biblical studies and in literary-critical approaches, with her preferred method being rhetorical criticism.[89] Rhetorical criticism is a branch of literary criticism that focuses on the structure of the text, the structure of the passages, and the ways in which words are employed to convey meaning and imagery. Trible is a notable scholar in the rhetorical critical approach with contributions including *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*[90] and *Texts of Terror.*[91] These significant works demonstrate Trible's feminist perspective and utilise a literary critical approach to biblical exegesis. For Trible, the task of feminist critique in biblical study is to recognise and define patriarchal ideas and convict readers into an awareness that 'historically societies have used gender and sex to advocate male domination and female subordination'.[92] Feminism in biblical studies is thus a form of opposition to paradigms of domination. The domination implicated is not only that of male dominance over the female but

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Bowman, 'Narrative Criticism. Human Purpose in Conflict with Divine Presence.', in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*., 2nd Edition, ed. Gale A. Yee (Fortress Press, 2007), 22–32; Westfall, 'Narrative Criticism', 237.

[86] Westfall, 'Narrative Criticism', 237.

[87] For a more in-depth look at narrative criticism in Biblical narrative see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

[88] Tull, *Narrative Criticism and Narrative Hermeneutics*.

[89] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 23.

[90] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Fortress Press, 1978).

[91] Trible, *Texts of Terror. Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*.

[92] Phyllis Trible, 'Five Loaves and Two Fishes: Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology', *Theological Studies* 50, no. 2 (1989): 280.

extends further to include master over slave and humankind over the earth.[93] Focusing on the rhetorical critical method, Trible suggests, allows the text to engage readers directly and thus has the potential to yield varying interpretations. In this method, there is no sole privileged community of interpretation. Therefore, the interpreter employs the text to address contemporary issues and concerns and is not primarily concerned with external factors such as the historical and sociological milieu or authorial intent. For example, Trible's influential work *Texts of Terror*, includes looking at Hagar's story (Gen 16:1-16;21:8-21) in light of contemporary issues of oppression, particularly in its three forms of nationality, class and sex.[94] For Trible, moving the concern for a text's historical and social context to the background allows a freedom in bringing texts from different literary and historical backgrounds together to interact and engage with each other — the focus being topical rather than chronological in arrangement.[95]

1.2.2. The World Behind the Text: Historical-Critical Approaches

While the primary mode of engagement in this study is rhetorical and literary, we are also concerned with the world *behind* the text, with a particular focus on the cultural and social facets of the ancient Near East, and the roles of women in this broad context.

'The world behind the text' relates to a study of the time, culture and context that gave rise to the text as well as historically-focused issues that shape the narrative world of the story in its narrative setting. This approach is most commonly seen in historical-critical approaches. Carol Meyers is an example of a scholar engaged in historical critical research while drawing on feminist concerns. Her important monograph *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* brings feminism, biblical studies and social-scientific methods into conversation.[96] In this monograph, Meyers places Eve as an archetype, symbolising Israelite woman in the Hebrew Bible. She stresses the challenges of examining the 'pristine Eve', meaning, the Eve not touched by, or influenced by the agendas of the religious communities. To approach Eve's narrative, Meyers emphasises the importance of connecting the story in the biblical text to the lived experience of the Israelite woman in the ancient Near Eastern context. Therefore, the Eve of Genesis 2 and 3 is not only illustrative of historical women, but she is also a construction of the ordinary everyday life lived by women in that broad historical era. Meyers suggests that the everyday conditions of women in ancient Israel makes it clear

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[93] Trible writes, 'Sex, race, and ecology intertwine as issues' (Trible, 1989, p. 281).
[94] Trible, *Texts of Terror. Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, ch. 2.
[95] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*; Bird, 'Authority and Context in the Interpretation of Biblical Texts*', 326.
[96] Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve. Ancient Israelite Women in Context.* (Oxford University Press, 1988). *Discovering Eve* Meyers, *Discovering Eve*. was later reworked under the title *Rediscovering Eve. Ancient Israelite Women in Context* Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

that the biblical figure of Eve reflects the broader social realities governing women's lives. Thus, Eve serves not merely as an archetypal first woman but as a representative figure for the ordinary Israelite woman whose experiences anchor the world of the Hebrew Bible.

Engaging with questions of the 'world behind the text' allows the scholar to draw on culturally cued readings that focus on the social world from which they emerged.[97] As Meyers writes:

'The social realities of everyday life provided the raw materials from which the biblical narrator forged the now famous tale. The artful crafting of that simple yet powerful narrative is inextricably linked to the life experience of the Hebrew author. The world around him contributed to his choice of words, characterisations, and motifs. It also constitutes the audience, the social group to be addressed by and moved in some way to respond to the multifarious messages of the story.'[98]

Meyers does however caution us against imposing the constructions of biblical women onto the lived reality of Israelite women, reminding interpreters that literary figures cannot be uncritically mapped onto the lived social realities of ancient communities. Socially-cued reading is like looking through a hazy window. 'To assume we can see nameless women in the activities of the named ones is to believe we can see an entire structure when only a fragment of it is visible'.[99]

There is a dual purpose in the challenge that Meyers presents. First, she calls us to bring awareness to these unnamed and unseen Israelite women through the biblical narrative. And second, she calls us to unveil that muted existence.[100] By using socio-historical insight into the world inhabited by women in the ancient world, the research is enriched by the addition of contextual and cultural perspectives to the analysis already found in the text by way of a narrative and rhetorical approach.

1.2.3. The World in Front of the Text: Reader Centred Approaches

While text-immanent approaches are focused on structural or narrative analysis of the text in deriving meaning, reader-centred approaches — which deal with 'the world in front of the text'— engage the subjectivity of the reader in interpretation.[101] Writing from a uniquely African perspective, Zoro Dube writes that 'the meaning of the biblical text has often been a tug of war between Western scholars' cultural presuppositions and the needs of African readers who see the academy reifying and

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[97] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 24.
[98] Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 4.
[99] *Ibid. 5.*
[100] Carol Meyers, 'Archaeology', in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 5–6.
[101] De Villiers, 'Interpreting Texts and the Matter of Context : Examples from the Book of Ruth', 3.

distancing the meaning of the Bible from their daily life experiences'.[102] While Dube writes of Africa and African readers, this point can be made for readers across all contexts. Reader-centred approaches to narratives in the HB allow the readers to engage directly with the text through the lens of their respective cultural and contextual backgrounds. In employing reader-centred approaches, interpretation of a text is established at the intersection where the story and the reader meet. Interpretation of the narrative takes its cue from the context and the reader's lived experience. This means that the task is decisively unobjective.[103]

A particularly pertinent example of reader-centred interpretation and one that resonates strongly with the concerns of this thesis, is the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) tradition developed in South Africa by Gerald West and the Ujamaa Centre.[104] Grounded in participatory engagement with communities affected by poverty, gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS, and other forms of social precarity, CBS intentionally foregrounds the lived reality of marginalised readers in the interpretive process. Meaning is generated at the point where the text is read with and through the experiences of those for whom questions of agency, survival, and resistance are not abstract but visceral. In this model the reader's context is not a bias to be eliminated but the decisive catalyst that enables the text to speak into, and out of, concrete crisis conditions. This approach aligns closely with the focus of this thesis, which seeks to understand women's agency in situations of extreme social disruption; CBS demonstrates how women in precarious contexts actively negotiate meaning and authority "in front of the text" in ways that illuminate their own strategies of resilience and action.

A similar dynamic is evident in mujerista biblical interpretation, particularly the work of Ada María Isasi-Díaz, whose reading communities of Latina immigrant women interpret biblical narratives through the prism of labour exploitation, cultural identity, and communal struggle.[105] These examples show that reader-centred interpretation is not merely subjective but relational, embodied, and ethically charged, a process in which the narrative becomes a site for articulating agency under conditions of constraint. Together, CBS and mujerista hermeneutics underscore that reader-centred

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[102] Zorodzai Dube, 'The Ethiopian Eunuch in Transit: A Migrant Theoretical Perspective', *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* (Pretoria) 69, no. 1 (2013): 1–2, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2019.

[103] Dube, 'The Ethiopian Eunuch in Transit: A Migrant Theoretical Perspective', 1–2.

[104] See Gerald O. West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993); Gerald O. West, "Interpreting 'the Exile' in African Biblical Scholarship: An Ideo-Theological Dilemma in Postcolonial South Africa," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 1 (2015): 147–65; and Gerald West and Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela, "The Bible as a Site of Struggle: The Ujamaa Centre and the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender," *Theology Today* 69, no. 2 (2012): 188–200.

[105] See Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Mujerista Biblical Hermeneutics: Creating a New Space for Reader-Centred Interpretation," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 3, no. 2 (1995): 5–20; and Jeanette Rodríguez, "Latina Women and Biblical Interpretation: A Mujerista Reading," *Feminist Theology* 10, no. 2 (2002): 173–82.

approaches are most illuminating precisely where crisis, vulnerability, and resistance converge, making them an apt methodological parallel for the present study.

1.2.4. Threefold Approach: The World of the Text, the World Behind the Text, and the World in Front of the Text

This study employs a threefold analytical framework that attends to the narrative shape of the biblical accounts, their ancient socio-historical foundations, and the interpretive agency of contemporary readers.

1.) The world of the text**:** The biblical narratives are first read as literary compositions, with close attention to their narrative dynamics, rhetorical structures, and thematic patterns. This approach seeks to understand how the story itself constructs meaning. The analysis is complemented by contemporary case studies of women navigating crisis, allowing narrative features to be read alongside lived experience without collapsing one into the other.

2.) The world behind the text**:** The cultural, social, and historical contexts of the ancient Near East are then brought into conversation with the narratives. This socio-historical dimension draws on what is known about women's roles, social constraints, and the broader textures of ancient life, thereby grounding the reading in the world that produced the text

3.) The world in front of the text**:** Finally, the study considers how contemporary readers, especially women whose lives are shaped by crisis, precarity, or systemic constraint bring their own experiences, questions, and interpretive horizons to the narrative. This reader-centred dimension recognises that meaning emerges at the intersection between the story and the reader's lived reality. Contemporary case studies and theoretical insights into crisis-driven agency therefore function as interpretive catalysts, enabling readers to discern new layers of resonance, tension, and possibility within the biblical accounts.

The project thus draws on an eclectic fusion of socio-historical, narrative and rhetorical, and reader-response approaches when examining the texts under discussion. This will allow for a multi-layered exploration of agency, power, and gender in the two biblical narratives under consideration: Exodus 1—2:1-10 and Judges 4—5.

While these approaches offer essential tools for examining the various ways in which biblical texts can be read, such methods often leave the deeper ontological and sociopolitical dynamics embedded within biblical narratives unexamined. To engage more critically with the operations of power, embodiment, and subjectivity within these texts, it becomes necessary to shift the analytical lens towards the category of agency. Far from being a self-evident or static concept, agency is a contested theoretical terrain and is implicated in the questions this thesis draws attention to regarding structure, power, and gender. The next section identifies several conceptualisations of agency, before outlining the framework used in this study. Drawing on the work of social theorists, the following section proposes that a robust interrogation of biblical figures – particularly women situated within contexts of crisis and liminality – requires a nuanced account of how agency is constructed, constrained, and enacted. Here, agency does not merely describe action, but rather, it reveals the embedded negotiations between power, identity and the limits of choice.

2. Introducing Contemporary Theoretical Frameworks

2.1. Key Theoretical Concepts: Crisis and Liminality

This study deals with two concepts that often intersect or correlate, namely, crisis and liminality. For this study, 'crisis' is an umbrella term referring to an event or situation that threatens a group of people or an individual's life, livelihood, safety, or welfare. A crisis would include events such as war, violence, and conflict; the anticipation of war or violence; the liminal spaces of unrest and disrupted social structures; and the tumultuous periods following a crisis.[106] Liminality, derived from the Latin term '*limen'* meaning 'threshold', describes 'an ambiguous, transitional state and denotes a space of possibility'. [107] The term was conceived by Arnold van Gennop in 1909 and was used to describe the transitional or 'in-between' phase of a ritual process.[108] For example, when a person transitions from one social status to the next – e.g. a girl to a woman – the 'in between' phase of this transitional process is liminal; 'the individuals involved are understood to be 'no longer' and simultaneously also 'not yet''.[109] Following the term's translation into English, 'liminality' was adopted as a core tenet of Victor Turner's research of Ndembu rituals.[110] However, Turner had a more expansive and flexible

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[106] Ursano, *Textbook of Disaster Psychiatry*; Holladay and Coombs, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication.*

[107] McDowell and Crooke, 'Creating Liminal Spaces of Collective Possibility in Divided Societies: Building nd Burning the Temple', 324.

[108] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (University of Chicago Press, 1960); 'Liminality', Oxford University Press, 2002, https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195123715.013.0972; John Scott, 'Liminality', Oxford University Press, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199683581.013.1275.

[109] Harry Wels et al., 'Victor Turner and Liminality: An Introduction', *Anthropology Southern Africa* 34, nos 1–2 (2011): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2011.11500002.

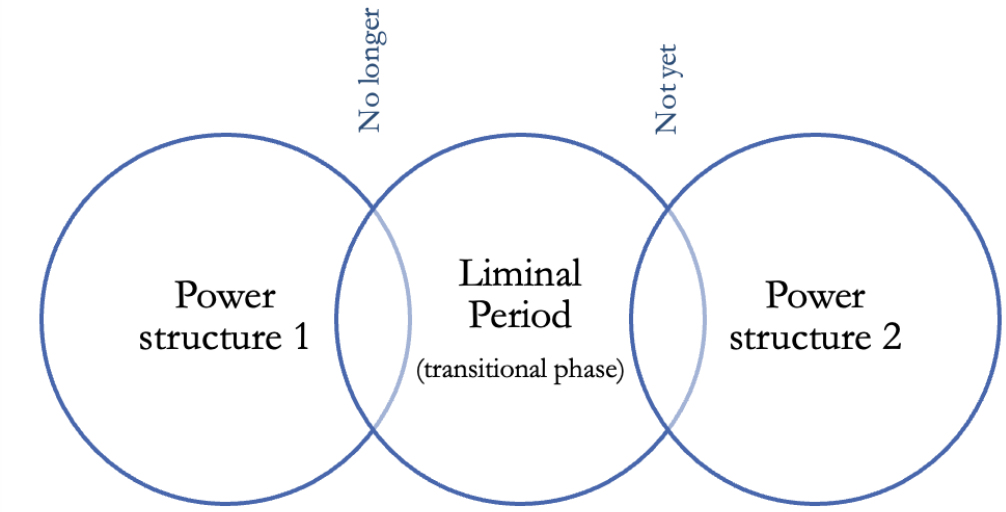
[110] Victor. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols : Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Cornell University Press, 1970).

definition of liminality. A liminal phase could, therefore, 'refer to almost anything in which there was a normally short lived period of upending of a prior hierarchy and during which power reversals occurred, or at least appeared to have occurred'.[111]

In this study, a liminal period is the transitional time and space proceeding from a disruption of social institutions or a breakdown of prevailing power structures due to a crisis (see *fig.1*). These periods of liminality allow for shifts within society that were otherwise not possible or plausible within the context of the previous power structure or regime. The shifts, whether social or political, are brought upon or derive momentum from the event of war or other momentous crises.[112]

Fig 2: The liminal period represents the transitional phase from one power structure to another. The liminal space exists paradoxically – no longer existing as power structure 1 while simultaneously not yet as power structure 2. This transitional state allows for shifts in society.

Figure 2: The liminal period as a transitional phase



[111] Wels et al., 'Victor Turner and Liminality: An Introduction', 1.
[112] This directly correlates to the theoretical shift hypotheses taken from the research of Webster, Chen, and Beardsley, discussed later in the chapter. Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment'.

2.2. Between Two Worlds: Ancient and Contemporary

The concepts of crisis and liminality are applied here to two distinct contexts, the ancient and the contemporary. In biblical scholarship, contemporary theories have long been applied as interpretative lenses through which ancient and biblical texts can be explored. Careful application of contemporary theories in biblical studies is a valuable and insightful tool in promoting dialogue between past and present.

Placing ancient biblical narratives in dialogue with contemporary case studies enables a fuller understanding of how women navigate crisis across different contexts. As Claassens notes, bringing these worlds together allows both sets of crisis narratives to illuminate one another, revealing shared patterns of vulnerability, survival, and resistance.[113] This approach does not collapse historical distance but highlights structural parallels in how oppressive systems operate and how women act within them. However, such careful application includes an immediate disclaimer: ancient societies are not present-day societies. A more precise articulation of this methodological caution is offered by Pioske who reminds us that 'knowledge about the past is itself historical, determined by the normative assumptions of a period that facilitate and limit what can be known about former times'.[114]

His point is crucial for the present study; any interpretative claims about ancient contexts – such as those explored in the Exodus (chapter 3) and Judges (chapter 6) narratives – are not neutral recoveries of *what happened*, but rather reconstructions shaped by the assumptions and perspectives of the time in which we are reading. In this sense, Pioske's observation emphasises the methodological stance underpinning this thesis: bringing contemporary theoretical frameworks into conversation with ancient texts does not conflate past and present, but recognises that our access to the past – and the interpretative tools we employ – are themselves historically conditioned. This awareness warrants the careful use of modern theory, not as an imposition of present concerns onto ancient contexts, but as an honest acknowledgment that all historical interpretation is shaped by the situated perspectives through which we approach it.

One challenge that comes with applying a contemporary theory in the study of ancient texts is imposing a present-day hermeneutic onto an ancient context. In reference to trauma theory and its study in the HB, Daniel Smith-Christopher reminds us that there must be careful consideration in

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[113] L. Juliana Claassens, Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation, Bible and the Modern World 74 (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2020), 4.

[114] Daniel Pioske, 'An Archaeology of Ancient Thought: On the Hebrew Bible and the History of Ancient Israel', *The Harvard Theological Review* (New York, USA) 115, no. 2 (2022): 173, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816022000141.

the use of contemporary theories, such as a trauma studies, as there exists a risk of reducing the unique experiences of all peoples into a type of 'generic trauma experience'.[115] And yet, as Smith-Christopher goes on to note: 'In our attempts to carefully and critically remember that ancient societies are *not* modern societies, and that we must be careful in making comparisons, we run the equally serious risk of denying the human reality of traumatizing experiences of fellow humans, even if those humans experience these events over 2500 years ago'.[116]

Taking this into consideration, the shift hypotheses and, to a lesser extent, trauma theory, both of which will now be explained, contribute in the analysis of the HB narratives and their paired contemporary case studies. These theories show how contemporary research might provide a fresh perspective in biblical studies, but more so, these theories bridge the distance between the ancient world and the contemporary in ways that show their respective relevancy in light of the other.

2.3. The Shift Hypotheses

The three shift hypotheses, to which we now turn, are taken from the research of Webster, Chen, and Beardsley.[117] Their work analysed existing multinational data from 1900 - 2015 with particular detail on cases in El Salvador, Liberia, and China. The authors found that the disruption of social institutions caused by warfare led to a rise in women's empowerment, at least in the short to medium term.[118] These opportunities for women's empowerment emerged from mechanisms related to social and political shifts which were brought upon, or derived momentum from the event of war or major conflictual crisis. This research contributes to the growing corpus of insight that informs our understanding of how periods of conflict and the liminal periods of pre- and post-war affected gender dynamics and carved out spaces for women's empowerment.[119]

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[115] David L. Smith-Christopher, 'Reading War and Trauma: Suggestions Toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts.', in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, E-book, ed. Brad E. Kelle et al. (Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 269, https://hdl-handle-net.dcu.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb.31321.

[116] Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, 'Reading War and Trauma: Suggestions Toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts.', in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritchel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright, E-book (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 269, https://hdl-handle-net.dcu.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb.31321.

[117] 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019.

[118] It is important to ask questions relating to power when drawing up a meaning of empowerment. These questions include the nature of power as constant or varying, the notion that an individual's empowerment results in the disempowerment of another, and whether power manifests as action or manifests as a feeling, Ajit Chaudhuri, 'Understanding "Empowerment"', *Journal of Development Policy and Practice* 1, no. 2 (2016): 123, https://doi.org/10.1177/2455133315612298.. For this study, women's empowerment is a result of women's agency 'when its exercise questions, challenges, or changes regressive norms and institutions that perpetuate the subordination of women' Hanmer and Klugman, 'Exploring Women's Agency and Empowerment in Developing Countries: Where Do We Stand?', 237–38. The issue of power is discussed further, below.

[119] Hughes and Tripp, 'Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010'; Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 255–56; Mehmet Gurses et al., 'Women and War: Women's Rights in Post-Civil War Society', *Civil Wars* 22, nos 2–3 (2020): 225–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2020.1765542.

While the hypotheses of Webster, Chen, and Beardsley consider the variable of warfare or armed conflict as a cause of social disruption, I extend this to include broader variables of crisis as defined above. In chapters 3 and 4, I explore the hypotheses in relation to the biblical texts and case studies. For now, it will be helpful to introduce each of these shift hypotheses.

2.3.1 The Demographic Shift Hypothesis

Traditionally, men are mobilised in times of warfare and stand on the frontlines of combat.[120] This gendered disparity informs the demographic shift hypothesis which states that periods of crisis, such as warfare, result in a decrease in the male population due to loss of life. In turn, this changed demographic leads to increased opportunities for women's empowerment in post-war periods.[121] Even in cases where women are among soldiers or combatants, there is statistical evidence that men are more likely to risk their lives in combat. This resulting demographic shift leaves spaces for women to take over the social roles in society initially occupied by men: 'In this case, the clear prediction would be that wars with large male population losses should be correlated with women's empowerment increases'.[122]

2.3.2 The Role Shift Hypothesis

The role shift hypothesis is closely related to the demographic shift hypothesis. This hypothesis states that regardless of whether a crisis results in a drastic demographic alteration or not, the absence of men – due to participation in war, loss of life in active combat, or I would add, displacement and migration in economic crisis – carves out spaces for women's increased participation in society. This allows women to take on new social roles and identities and provides opportunities for women to integrate more fully into the labour sector. Because men can no longer monopolise the usual habitus of the disrupted social structure, a major crisis might prove the necessary catalyst for a transformational change of entrenched gendered social order and roles.[123] One example would include women's participation in active combat, where before 'when women are excluded from combat roles, they are denied the opportunity to achieve the same levels of prestige afforded to their

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[120] Reed M Wood and Jakana L Thomas, 'Women on the Frontline: Rebel Group Ideology and Women's Participations in Violent Rebellion', *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 1 (2017): 32; Dorothea Hilhorst et al., 'Gender, Sexuality, and Violence in Humanitarian Crises', *Disasters* 42, no. 1 (2018): 6–7, https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12276; Jakana L. Thomas and Reed M. Wood, 'The Social Origins of Female Combatants', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* (London, England) 35, no. 3 (2018): 215, https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894217695524.

[121] Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 261.

[122] *Ibid. 261.*

[123] Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 261–63; Bakken and Buhaug, 'Civil War and Female Empowerment', 983.

male counterparts'.[124] In this way, women gain recognition for their ability and capability as combatants — and furthermore, are represented as the *protector combatant* instead of the *protected civilian*.[125] Another result could include the participation and agency of women in social movements and civil rights movements, such as resistance protests.[126] It is significant that with transformation or change to something as fundamentally entrenched in society as gendered social roles, there is a much higher likelihood for the continuity of the practice of this change long after a war or crisis is over; 'a new social equilibrium implies durability'.[127] The role shift hypothesis finds expression most prominently in the narrative concerning Deborah and Jael in Judges 4-5 and the case study of the women of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

2.3.3 The Political Shift Hypothesis

The 'political shift' hypothesis states that with the conclusion of war or a major disruptive crisis, there is an increased potential for regime change, the ramifications of which can mean an increase in opportunities that promote women's empowerment. With the shift in power and entry of new political actors, there is a need to make or restructure new political and governing systems from the ashes of the old. New political governing bodies, in attempts to identify as a separate and distinct entity from the old regime, often undergo fundamental changes in law, rule, and structure, which in turn can result in windows of empowerment for women.[128] Structural changes that can offer new realities, such as dismantling a gendered division of labour, provide a means for women to participate in society more fully and sustainably.[129] The political shift hypothesis is prominent in both biblical narratives and their sister case studies. This will be discussed in each respective chapter analysis, but is most relevant to the political resistance of the midwives of Exodus 1-2:1-10 and the women medical practitioners in the Holocaust.

While the shift hypotheses map how crisis reorganises social and gendered structures, they do not yet account for how crisis is lived, felt, and endured. The following section therefore turns to crisis and trauma theory to examine the interior impacts that accompany these structural shifts.

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[124] Thomas and Wood, 'The Social Origins of Female Combatants', 217.
[125] Hilhorst et al., 'Gender, Sexuality, and Violence in Humanitarian Crises', 7; Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 262; Aniruddha Mitra and James T. Bang, 'Gender Disparities in Post-Conflict Societies: A Cross-National Analysis', *Feminist Economics* 27, no. 3 (2021): 139, https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2021.1901128.
[126] Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 262.
[127] *Ibid. 262.*
[128] *Ibid.* 263.
[129] Thomas and Wood, 'The Social Origins of Female Combatants', 217–18.

2.4. Crisis and Trauma Theory

In light of the interconnectedness of trauma and gender, feminist scholarship has cross-examined the profusion of sexual violence and gendered abuse stories.[130] Besides the apparent gender-based violence narratives in the HB, there are also less overt manifestations, such as patriarchy, a form of structural violence, which has a direct impact on the oppression of women.[131] This continuing trauma as a result of structural violence presents in the HB literature on aspects related to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and class.[132] In short, "With its transdisciplinary scope, a hermeneutics of trauma can reframe ancient narratives and past experiences in ways that a new generation of audience can understand".[133]

Trauma is defined as 'an experience of one or more catastrophic events that can produce several kinds of disruptive responses, as well as both conscious and unconscious ways of reliving the experience'.[134] Traumatic events include death, warfare, and terror-inducing scenarios. While this project is not primarily based on trauma theory, it is helpful to reflect on contributions from the field when dealing with crisis situations and contexts (a component that is seen in the biblical narratives and their sister case studies in the chapters that follow). As previously explained, crisis refers to any event or situation that threatens a group of people or an individual's life, livelihood, safety, or welfare. This can therefore result in a collectively or individually felt trauma. Trauma theory examines the effects – psychological, emotionally and otherwise – on these individuals or communities and therefore it is worthwhile investigating the intersection of crisis and trauma theory which can provide insight into the ways individuals and groups respond to and navigate traumatic events.

Trauma theory, as defined by Kathleen O'Connor is a broad, interdisciplinary dialogue that explores the consequences of violent and traumatic events upon individuals and communities. Disciplines such as anthropology, literary criticism, and psychology are among the many research fields that contribute towards the application of trauma theory.[135] When applied in biblical studies, trauma theory is used as a supplement in cross-disciplinary research, alongside contributions from psychology, postcolonialism, and even refugee studies – or in terms of this project, theories of power

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[130] L. Juliana Claassens, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation*, Bible and the Modern World 74 (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2020), 4.
[131] Claassens, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation*, 17.
[132] *Ibid.*
[133] *Ibid.* 6.
[134] Brad E. Kelle, 'Dealing with the Trauma of Defeat: The Rhetoric of the Devastation and Rejuvenation of Nature in Ezekiel', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009): 483, JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/25610197.
[135] Kathleen M. O'Connor, 'Stammering Toward the Unsayable: Old Testament Theology, Trauma Theory, and Genesis', *Interpretation* 70, no. 3 (2016): 303, https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964316641040. O'Connor's research on the book of Jeremiah has extensively examined the link between the study of exile and trauma. See 'Lamenting Back to Life' (O'Connor, 2008).

and agency in times of crisis and social disruption.[136] Various biblical texts refer to the impact of both collective and personal disasters, including natural disasters, war and imperial violence. Claassens highlights that biblical trauma narratives "serve as a means by which we as readers may bridge the vast divide in space and time that exists between our own context and that of the biblical writers so many centuries ago."[137]

Trauma theory emerged through cross-disciplinary study of biblical research and psychology.[138] With the advancement of modern psychology in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, biblical scholarship expanded to include more psychoanalytical and diagnostic approaches to studying biblical literature. These approaches often stemmed directly from the prophets' peculiarities in the Hebrew Bible.[139] For instance, the book of Ezekiel provided a wealth of material for psychological approaches and analysis because of the prophet's erratic behaviour and the violent content of the text.[140] Scholarship has attempted to provide a mental diagnosis of the prophet, whose words and actions are seemingly erratic and obscure. For example, scholars Hermann Gunkel and Edwin C. Broome proposed a psychoanalytic reading of the text as a solution to the problematic and grotesque images in the book.[141] Speculative diagnoses have included schizophrenia, hysteria, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – the latter a direct product of trauma.[142] Scholars such as David Carr turned to the study of post-traumatic stress disorder and the rifts that traumatic experiences produce in a sufferer's psyche.[143] Exilic texts like Ezekiel are therefore studied with focus on how language and imagery may have functioned as an articulation of the historical and theological significance of communally-felt trauma of exile.[144]

In *Holy Resilience*[145], Carr examines how communally-felt trauma would have played a central role in producing the religious texts of Judaism and Christianity. Garber explains that trauma literature is not constitutive of any particular genre but rather evidences certain formal features that allow one to identify its purpose as such. He further states that *'the commonality between trauma literatures is not one of*

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[136] Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, 'Reading War and Trauma: Suggestions Toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts', in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts.*, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritchel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 257, https://hdl-handle-net.dcu.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb.31321.

[137] Claassens, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation*, 5.

[138] David G. Garber, Jr., 'Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies', *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 1 (2015): 25, https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993X14561176.

[139] Garber, Jr., 'Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies', 25.

[140] The prophet Ezekiel experiences mystical and disorientating visions (e.g.: Ezek 1:4-28; Ezek 8; Ezek 10), is rendered mute (Ezek 3:26) and falls into paralysis (Ezek 4).

[141] Hermann Gunkel, 'The Secret Experiences of the Prophets', *The Expositor* 9, no. 1 (1924): 427–35; Edwin C. Broome, 'Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 65, no. 3 (1946): 277–92, JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/3262666.

[142] Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins*, 267–68.

[143] Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins*, 267–69; Garber, Jr., 'Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies', 25.

[144] Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins*, 6–7; Garber, Jr., 'Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies', 32.

[145] Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins*.

structure, but one of inception'.[146] Thus, trauma texts are all birthed as a response to a traumatic event or experience – and it is this particular event that informs the text's content in a significant way.[147] In its broadest definition, trauma literature is a textual response or testimony produced in reaction to, and in the aftermath of, a traumatic or devastating experience.[148] As Claassens notes, 'Given the fact that ancient Israel found themselves repeatedly invaded and occupied by one empire after another, much of the biblical literature that emerged from Israel's traumatic past can thus be characterized as trauma literature'.[149]

2.4.1 Trauma Theory in the Study of Ancient Trauma

How does one take a contemporary theory, such as trauma theory, and apply it as a lens for a focused interpretation on ancient religious text (in the case of trauma theory, the study of ancient trauma)? For Smith-Christopher, trauma studies (including refugee and forced migration studies) is rooted in the general social scientific approaches to biblical literature. His focus, which is directed specifically on the events of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 597/587 B.C.E., began with an interest in understanding the possible dynamics of historical events in relation to the biblical literature. This interest shifted to an emphasis on comparative work that employed contemporary examples of forced migrations from across the world and organically progressed into the study of the literature of the emerging fields of trauma studies, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) literature, and refugee studies.[150] In examining the text of Ezekiel through insight into the socio-political environment of the time, Smith-Christopher demonstrates how the text, as trauma literature, reflects exilic circumstances: 'In a profound sense, reassessments of the Babylonian exile, and indeed, the potential for psychological assessments of the experience of warfare in ancient Israel are products of the significant changes in social, psychological, and anthropological analysis of the contemporary world. That biblical studies itself, as a discipline, is closely integrated into wider contemporary cultural and social thought could hardly be better illustrated'.[151]

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[146] David G Jr Garber, "'I Went in Bitterness": Theological Implications of a Trauma Theory in the Reading of Ezekiel', *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 4 (2014): 348, https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637314557242.

[147] Therefore, for Garber, 'Ezekiel is a text that always stands in the shadow of the destruction of Jerusalem. As such, it displays some characteristics of the experience that texts testifying to other experiences also display' (Garber, 2014, p. 348). Kelle's work is supportive of this understanding; the application of trauma theory in the study of the book of Ezekiel is not a means of garnering psychological diagnosis of the prophet, but rather its contribution lies in providing a foreground to the traumatic events and experiences of sixth century Judeans and the prophet himself (Kelle, 2009, p. 470).

[148] Garber, "'I Went in Bitterness'", 348.

[149] Claassens, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation*, 3.

[150] Smith-Christopher, 'Reading War and Trauma: Suggestions Toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts.', 255–56.

[151] Smith-Christopher, 'Reading War and Trauma: Suggestions Toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts.', 256.

Recent biblical scholarship has expanded the scope of trauma theory from a study focused on exilic texts, such as Ezekiel, to other areas of the Hebrew Bible. As Garber writes: 'The impact of trauma is no longer the sole purview of an exilic approach, but is part and parcel of the human condition that lies beneath the production of a wide variety of biblical texts'.[152]

Cross-disciplinary research offers a number of opportunities. In cultivating a cross-disciplinary approach that places trauma theory in dialogue with the biblical text, the biblical text can be seen to present an underlying emphasis on trauma as it relates to the human condition.[153]

Trauma theory, as seen in the study of exilic texts from the Hebrew Bible, serves as a reminder of the benefits of cross-disciplinary study and the use of contemporary theories as a lens of interpretation into the past. Trauma theory often draws on contemporary case studies as examples for comparison which combined with insight from trauma studies (and other social science literature), can surely shed light to the biblical text regarding questions about war and violence, and exile, a reality evident in both the ancient world and the contemporary.[154]

"As in the ancient world, the contemporary world is one in which the reality of trauma is evident. The recognition that we live in a so-called 'trauma paradigm' or 'trauma culture', has become an integral part of contemporary society, which requires new tools to help us make sense of the scourge of traumatic events that have been impacting both individuals and communities".[155]

Although this study does not employ trauma theory as part of its theoretical framework, the brief engagement above provides an example of *how* a contemporary theory can be effectively applied as an interpretive lens through which we view the biblical text. The discussion now turns to the primary analytical focus, without pursuing trauma theory further.

3. Cross-Disciplinary Study: Gender, Agency, and Power

The contemporary issues at the heart of this research are agency and power dynamics and how these relate to questions of gender. It is worth briefly outlining what I have in mind when I employ these concepts, and how they will be utilised as part of this project.

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[152] Garber, Jr., 'Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies', 25.

[153] Smith-Christopher, 'Reading War and Trauma: Suggestions Toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts', 257; Garber, Jr., 'Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies', 24; Claassens, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation*, 5–6.

[154] Smith-Christopher, 'Reading War and Trauma: Suggestions Toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts', 264; Claassens, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation*, 6.

[155] Claassens, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation*, 5–6.

3.1. Writing Gender

The research inquiry that motivates this study establishes a gendered dimension from the outset.

Gender is a complex issue, and academic writing has progressively shifted to include gender-neutral and inclusive terminology.[156] 'Historically, researchers have used categories that assume a binary cisgender identity, which is a practice that has often conflated, as well as erased, identities'.[157] The binary parameters of gender and sex in research and writing are challenged, 'given the continually evolving ways that LGBTQ+ individuals socially construct gender identity and sexual identity labels'.[158] Multiple studies have given credence to the complexity, fluidity, and diversity of sex and gender identities.[159]

I base my research on two source corpora of literature: The Hebrew biblical text and contemporary case study material. 'Writing' gender in this project reflects the way the source literature presents gender. For example, my research focuses on a close reading of the Hebrew biblical text, and therefore gender is linguistically implied:

Hebrew	English translation	Parsing	Reference
היא שפטה	'she was judging'	*Third person feminine singular + qal participle verbal form in feminine singular*	Judges 4:4

Table 1: Gender in the HB

[156] The United Nations and UN Women provide online resource tools for writing with examples of inclusive and neutral terminology United Nations, 'UNITED NATIONS Gender-Inclusive Language', United Nations, accessed 31 May 2022, un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/; UN Women, 'GenderTerm: UN Women Online Resources on the Use of Gender-Inclusive Language', UN Women, accessed 31 May 2022, https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/genderterm.. An online glossary of LGBTQ+ terms can be sourced from The Human Rights Campaign website HRC Foundation, 'Glossary of Terms', Human Rights Campaign, accessed 31 May 2022, hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms.

[157] J. J. Garrett-Walker and Michelle J. Montagno, 'Queering Labels: Expanding Identity Categories in LGBTQ + Research and Clinical Practice', *Journal of LGBT Youth*, Routledge, 11 March 2021, 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2021.1896411.

[158] Garrett-Walker and Montagno, 'Queering Labels: Expanding Identity Categories in LGBTQ + Research and Clinical Practice', 1–2.

[159] Silvia del Pilar Castro Borrego and María Isabel Romero Ruiz, *Identities on the Move : Contemporary Representations of New Sexualities and Gender Identities* (Lexington Books, 2015); Christina Richards et al., 'Non-Binary or Genderqueer Genders', *International Review of Psychiatry (Abingdon, England)* (England) 28, no. 1 (2016): 95–102, https://doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2015.1106446; Eske M Derks, 'The Biological Contributions to Gender Identity and Gender Diversity: Bringing Data to the Table', *Behavior Genetics* (New York) 48, no. 2 (2018): 95–108, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10519-018-9889-z; Heino F. L Meyer-Bahlburg, '"Diagnosing" Gender? Categorizing Gender-Identity Variants in the Anthropocene', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (New York) 48, no. 7 (2019): 2027–35, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1349-6; Ben Vincent, *Non-Binary Genders : Navigating Communities, Identities, and Healthcare*, Policy Press Scholarship Online (Policy Press, 2020), https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.46692/9781447351931; Garrett-Walker and Montagno, 'Queering Labels: Expanding Identity Categories in LGBTQ + Research and Clinical Practice'.

Likewise, regarding the analysis of contemporary case studies, gender will be treated as represented in the case study literature.

3.1.2. Judith Butler: Gender as Repeated Performance

Judith Butler's intervention into feminist and gender theory pivots on her reframing of gender not as a stable essence or inner truth, but as a stylised repetition of acts. Butler writes in Gender Trouble that gender is 'not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time.'[160] This radical claim dissolves the notion of a pre-existing 'woman' or 'man' and replaces it with an ongoing performative process: gender is constituted through the reiteration of socially sanctioned performances. She writes: 'gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing'.[161] Central to Butler's argument is then iterability, a concept referring to the way gender norms are constituted through repeated acts.[162] Gender is not an expression or a stable identity; rather, it is a sequence of gestures, behaviours, bodily stylings, and modes of speech that draw on pre-existing cultural norms. Each performance of gender is thus a reiteration of a social script. However, this repetition is never perfect. Because every act of reiteration occurs in a specific context and cannot fully replicate the norms it cites, the norm is exposed as inherently unstable and open to variation.[163] In this formulation, the performative dimension of gender also becomes a site of subversion. Because gender is achieved through repetition rather than given once and for all, it can be differently repeated; the "how" of repetition matters: "The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.'[164] This opens up the possibility of resignification: by deliberately repeating gendered acts in a slightly different way, the very structure that sustains gender norms can be shown to be contingent, unstable, and open to reinterpretations open to variation: "agency," then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition.' [165]

3.2. Agency

Although commonly used in public and academic discourse, the concept of agency has been described as 'frustratingly elusive to pin down', 'a source of increasing strain and confusion in social

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[160] Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity / Judith Butler.*, 191.
[161] *Ibid. 34*.
[162] *Ibid.* xxv.
[163] *Ibid.* 198.
[164] Butler, 202–3.
[165] *Ibid. 198*.

thought', 'replete with nuance' and a term that 'defies its being fixed'.[166] One of the main challenges in defining agency is the plurality of ways it has been conceptualised across various disciplines and fields of study.[167] For example, agency has been understood in relation to free will, rationality, resistance, performativity, power, and structures.[168] Furthermore, agency is a contentious and complex topic in the scholarship on religion and gender, and their points of intersection. To demonstrate the complexity of defining agency, we turn to a few prominent conceptualisations of the term below before outlining the way agency is used in this study.

3.2.1. Agency as Free Will

Edinburgh-born philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) is best known for conceptualising agency as free will. In *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, he writes:

'By liberty, then, we can only mean a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will…if we chuse to remain at rest, we may; if we chuse to move, we also may. Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains.'[169]

In this conceptualisation, agency is understood as an actor's capacity to perform intentional action, enabling them to fulfil their goals. Agency is, therefore, a type of power that the actor possesses; an approach that links agency to a state of mind that assumes the actor has possession of their faculties, for example, intentionality or rationality[170]. There is, however, a challenge to this approach. By equating agency with 'socially unfettered free will'[171], this approach fails to properly engage with the 'social nature of agency and the pervasive influence of culture on human intentions'.[172]

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[166] Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, 'What Is Agency?', *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 962, JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.1086/231294; Colin Campbell, 'Distinguishing the Power of Agency from Agentic Power: A Note on Weber and the "Black Box" of Personal Agency', *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 4 (2009): 407, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2009.01355.x; Adam Rafalovich, 'Conflict and Complementarity: Medicalization, Criminalization, and the Question of Human Agency', *Deviant Behavior* 41, no. 7 (2020): 869, https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2020.1734747; Adriana Zaharijević, 'On Butler's Theory of Agency', in *Bodies That Still Matter: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler*, ed. Annemie Halsema et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 21, Cambridge Core, https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048552504.002.

[167] Katherine Frank, 'Agency', *Anthropological Theory* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi) 6, no. 3 (2006): 281, https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499606066889.

[168] Laura M. Ahearn, 'LANGUAGE AND AGENCY.', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (2001): 114–16, Academic Search Complete; Frank, 'Agency', 281; Mary Evans, 'The Meaning of Agency', in *Gender, Agency and Coercion*, ed. Sumi Madhok et al., Thinking Gender in Transnational Times (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 49.

[169] David Hume (1711-1776), *David Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 2007), 69.

[170] Ahearn, 'LANGUAGE AND AGENCY.', 114–15; Campbell, 'Distinguishing the Power of Agency from Agentic Power: A Note on Weber and the "Black Box" of Personal Agency', 408; Zaharijević, 'On Butler's Theory of Agency', 22.

[171] Ahearn, 'LANGUAGE AND AGENCY.', 114.

[172] *Ibid. 114*–15.

It is essential to acknowledge the contentious role gender has played in the past in shaping human agency. For example, in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* the eighteenth-century writer and advocate for women's rights Mary Wollstonecraft fervently argued against the presumption that only men be considered rational agents. Her criticism extended to women of the upper middle classes, accusing them of accepting such a rationale and relying on men and priding themselves on their so-called weaknesses of body and mind.[173] This was reflected much later in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, who asserted that women intensified their powerlessness and impotence by refusing to recognise or accept responsibility for themselves.[174] These are but two historical examples in which a disparity in thinking about agency and gender is made apparent.[175]

3.2.2. Agency as Resistance

Conceptualisations of agency as resistance are often represented in fields such as feminist studies and anthropology. In this model, agency is defined as it relates to its opposition to a structure. Agency is therefore a power of social actors, and this power is harnessed to operate independent of the limitations of social structure.[176] As noted by Ahearn, however, 'While one can certainly understand the impulse behind equating agency with resistance, agency should not be reduced to it. Oppositional agency is only one of many forms of agency'.[177] The challenge in this approach is that there tends to be an overemphasis on resistance and minimal focus on demonstrating the constraints of power structures, both past and present.[178]

3.2.3. The Absence of Agency

What has remained consistent in the conceptualisations thus far is the idea of the human as the active agent. But what happens when the subject of agency is disputed even as the human carries out said agency? Echoing Foucault in subject matter, Adam Rafalovich's analysis of the social processes of medicalisation and criminalisation provides an insightful reflection on human agency, and its role within two prominent institutional practices – both of which exert varying measures of social control. These processes are thought of as binary and perceived as such based on their understanding of

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[173] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (Floating Press, 1792), http://capitadiscovery.co.uk/dcu/items/dda-17/EBC563875; Madhok et al., *Gender, Agency and Coercion*, 1.

[174] Simone de Beauvoir et al., *Feminist Writings* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 46, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=3414439.

[175] Mary Evans draws attention to the central concern surrounding the term 'agency', that 'is the question of the implicit (and on occasions explicit) 'gendering' of the meaning of 'agency' and with it what Madhok has described as 'the intellectual lens... of individualism, self-sufficiency, voluntarism, unencumberedness and free action' (Evans, 2013, p. 49).

[176] Ahearn, 'LANGUAGE AND AGENCY.', 115; Campbell, 'Distinguishing the Power of Agency from Agentic Power: A Note on Weber and the "Black Box" of Personal Agency', 408.

[177] Ahearn, 'LANGUAGE AND AGENCY.', 115.

[178] Ahearn, 115.

human agency: 'Indeed, we see many examples of deviance that at one time were firmly criminalized, but are now increasingly seen as medical problems; hence, shifting from one side of the binary to the other'.[179] For example, what was once considered a criminal action such as drug possession, becomes medicalised by reattributing agency from the human onto the nonhuman agent – addiction as an illness. This legitimisation of medical explanations and diagnosis has a huge effect and influence in shaping of public policy and the general discourse surrounding our understanding of human agency.[180] This conceptualisation adds a new dimension to identifying the subject of agency when a human is involved.

3.2.4. Other Conceptualisations of Agency

Thus far, I have noted three conceptualisations of agency. However, these approaches may be used as spring boards for more developed or discipline-specific and focussed conceptualisations of agency. For example, Ahearn's interest lies in analysing language and linguistic contributions in the study of agency. Her provisional 'bare bones' definition of agency states that 'agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act', and stresses action as a sociocultural arbitrated mechanism. For Ahearn, this is applicable to both the production and interpretation of the concept of agency.[181]

Emirbayer and Mische define agency 'as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.'.[182] Emirbayer and Mische's formulation of agency is particularly useful because it emphasises agency as dynamic, temporarily situated and relational, rather than as a fixed personal capacity or a simple act of resistance. Their definition highlights that agency emerges through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, each activated differently depending on the constraints and possibilities of a given historical moment. This triadic model recognises that actors do not exercise agency in a vacuum; rather they draw upon past patterns of action (habit), envision alternative futures (imagination), and assess present contingencies (judgement) to respond to shifting social conditions.

Campbell's approach to agency draws a distinction between the terms 'power of agency' and 'agentic power'. In Campbell's analysis, the 'power of agency' refers to the actor's capacity for action – both

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[179] Rafalovich, 'Conflict and Complementarity: Medicalization, Criminalization, and the Question of Human Agency', 868.
[180] *Ibid. 868–69*.
[181] Ahearn, 'LANGUAGE AND AGENCY.', 112–13.
[182] Emirbayer and Mische, 'What Is Agency?', 970–71.

their ability to initiate and to maintain an action. 'Agentic power', on the other hand, refers to the actor's ability to act independently of the limiting or determining power of structure and power systems. Campbell's analysis emphasises that these two concepts are separate from each other. Thus, 'it is perfectly possible for individuals to be possessed of considerable power of agency while lacking agentic power, and vice versa'.[183]

Bringing in a feminist perspective, Judith Butler's approach to agency argues that it is fundamentally embodied and social, a conceptualisation that is 'emphatically political and tightly related to the notion of performativity, in itself implies a capacity for change, while at the same time remaining firmly in medias res of the social…agency is a power, a contingent, and a historical one'.[184]

Butler's approach to agency is interwoven with her theory of performativity, particularly in regards to gender. She presents her theory of performativity in her work *Gender Trouble.*[185] Her theory argues that gender should be seen as a repeated performance rather than an inherent quality or biological category. According to Butler, gender is constructed through a series of actions and behaviours that are performed by individuals in their everyday lives. These actions are influenced by societal expectations and standards – all of which present the illusion that gender is a stable and natural category. Butler argues that rather than this being the case, gender is fluid and in a state that can be constantly negotiated. Her theory of performativity, as it relates to gender, challenges gender as a fixed category and argues that individuals have the agency and power to disrupt and redefine gender through their actions.

According to Butler[186], essentially, if gender is established by actions that do not necessarily follow a consistent pattern, then what seems like a stable identity is a constructed identity achieved through repeated performance. This performance is something both the everyday social audience and the individuals themselves come to accept and enact as genuine. If the foundation of gender identity lies in performing certain actions repeatedly over time rather than having an inherent, unchanging identity, then the potential for gender transformation lies in the random connections between these actions. It is in the chance to repeat these actions differently or disruptively, breaking away from the established pattern.

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[183] Campbell, 'Distinguishing the Power of Agency from Agentic Power: A Note on Weber and the "Black Box" of Personal Agency', 408–10.
[184] Zaharijević, 'On Butler's Theory of Agency', 21–24.
[185] Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity / Judith Butler.*
[186] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', 520.

Following Butler's conceptualisation of agency, we can think of agency as the ability to act within the constraints of societal structures with the potential to subvert and resist those structures. Her approach highlights the complex relationship of individual action and societal structures and suggests that agency emerges through a process of consistent negotiations and contestations of norms.

The desire for an overarching conceptualisation of agency that satisfies all fields of study is arguably unrealistic. In presenting the above conceptualisations of agency, I have sought to emphasise that agency cannot be reduced to a fixed model or singular expression. Rather, it manifests in diverse and contextually contingent ways, resisting any definitive account of what agency 'looks like'.

Furthermore, understanding the actor's exact social action and exercise of agency is intrinsically linked to knowledge of that actor's interpretation of a situation – that is, knowledge of their subjective view regarding a given situation or circumstance.[187] The conceptualisation of agency is not only dependent on the context of, and factors external to the actor/s, but furthermore dependent on the individuality of the actor/s and what their capacity for agency and exercise or exertion of agency looks like.

3.2.5. Agency in this Study: Human Action Shaped by Structure

In this study, the notion of agency will draw on several conceptualisations discussed in this section, but more specifically, that of agency as human action shaped by structure.

In social theory, agency is seen as a relationship between human action, societal structures, and culture. This idea, which emphasises social influences on agency, is reflected in Anthony Giddens' structuration theory.[188]

A primary tenet in Giddens' structuration theory is that all actions of people are determined by the social structures that forge or affect them. This shaping and influence of all actions can be a limiting and enabling process, and produces what Ahearn calls a 'recursive loop consisting of actions influenced by social structures and social structures (re)created by actions'.[189] For Giddens, agency is a multi-layered concept comprised of three levels of consciousness as it relates to the human agent. Giddens' conceptualisation of the human agent draws upon Freud's tripartite system of id, ego and

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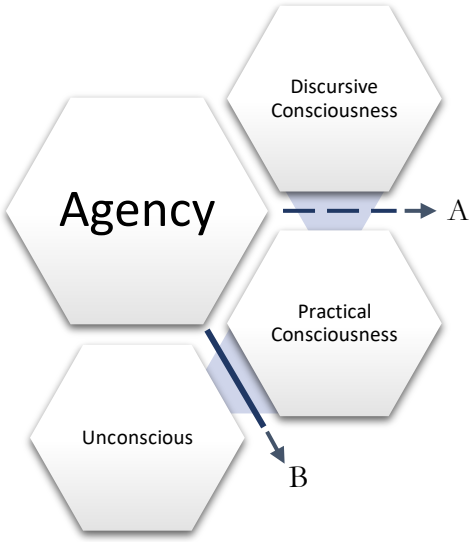
[187] Madhok et al., *Gender, Agency and Coercion*; Gil Richard Musolf, 'Oppression and Resistance: A Structure-and-Agency Perspective', in *Oppression and Resistance*, Studies in Symbolic Interaction (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), 48:4, https://doi.org/10.1108/S0163-239620170000048001.

[188] This study excludes Giddens' work post 1990 which has been criticized as being incompatible with the nature of his structuration theory. Brian O Boyle, 'Reproducing the Social Structure: A Marxist Critique of Anthony Giddens's Structuration Methodology', *Cambridge Journal Of Economics* (Oxford) 37, no. 5 (2013): 1028-1029,1032, https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/bes092.

[189] Ahearn, 'LANGUAGE AND AGENCY.', 117.

super-ego.[190] In the figure below, I have illustrated Giddens' agency model from *The Constitution of Society*.[191]

Figure 3: Giddens' three dimensions of agency.



Giddens' model of agency comprises of *discursive consciousness*, *practical consciousness*, and the *unconscious*:

1. *Discursive consciousness* refers to the articulated reasons employed by social actors to justify their actions, behaviours, and motivations. In other words, discursive consciousness lies in the agent's articulation of their knowledge.[192]

2. *Practical consciousness*, according to Giddens, is the most significant dimension of agency because, through practical consciousness, social actors monitor their actions in a 'continuous flow of conduct' in the world. Practical consciousness relates to a social actor's unarticulated 'stocks of knowledge'. The social actor uses these stocks of knowledge to position and orientate themselves contextually in their environment as well as interpret the actions and

[190] Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, XIX (1923), https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_SE_Ego_Id_complete.pdf; Steven Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens* (Pluto Press, 2003), 52, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=3386235.

[191] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5–14.

[192] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5–14; Kenneth Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory* (SAGE Publications, 1998), 80–81, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=483410; Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 52.

behaviours of others. In other words, practical consciousness involves all the necessary information the social actor requires to 'make life happen'.[193]

3. The final dimension of agency is *the unconscious*. In Giddens' agency model, the unconscious is linked to memory, and also represents the unconscious motivational characteristics of action.[194]

The relationship between the three levels of agency is illustrated by the design of the line positioned between each un/consciousness in figure 1. Line A, which lies between discursive consciousness and practical consciousness 'is fluctuating and permeable'[195], whereas line B strongly differentiates the unconscious – 'that which cannot easily be put into words and resides beneath our conscious existence',[196] from the discursive and practical consciousness of the agent.[197]

Giddens' stratification model of the agent roughly reflects the compartmentalisation of agency as discussed above. To clarify, Giddens's conception of an agent is that of 'an intentional, purposive and, on the whole, rational being who behaves according to what he/she knows or believes will be the outcome of his or her action'.[198] However, Giddens's stratification model of the agent ascertains that while an action may be intentional, the outcome of that action may be wholly unintended and something the agent did not expect to occur. From this process, the unintended consequences of an action may actually become the unacknowledged conditions of further or future actions by the agent.

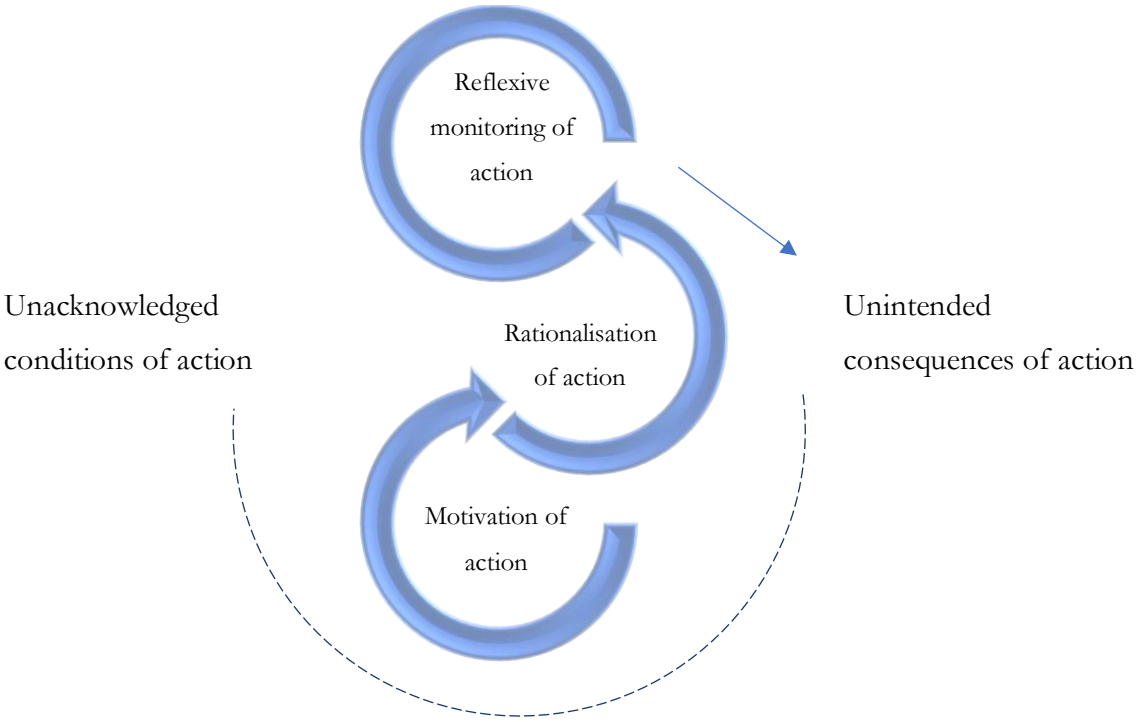
In this next model, Giddens describes the actions of the agent in terms of *reflexive monitoring* of action, *rationalisation* of action, and *motivation* of action.[199]

I provide an illustration of Giddens' stratification model of the agent in figure 4.[200]

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[193] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5–14; Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*, 76, 80–81; Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 52.
[194] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 4–14; Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*, 80–81; Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 52.
[195] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 4–5.
[196] Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*, 81.
[197] It should be noted that practical consciousness is not necessarily available to the discursive articulated consciousness of the agent. Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*, 76.
[198] Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 56.
[199] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5–14; Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 53.
[200] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5.

Figure 4: Giddens' stratification model of the agent



1. The *motivation* of an action is not necessarily something that is known by the actor. In reality, these motivations may very well fall beyond the scope of the actor's conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious. Thus, Giddens draws a distinction between the motivation of action from both the rationalisation of action and reflexivity of action.[201]

2. *Rationalisation* of action, which is associated with practical consciousness, refers to the process of actors whereby they 'routinely…maintain a continuing 'theoretical understanding' of the grounds of their activity'.[202]

3. Associated with the discursive dimension of consciousness, *reflexive monitoring* of action refers to the ongoing self-examination of action by the social actor. This process includes potentially modifying behaviour and action.

Giddens' stratification model of the agent supports the way the actor is permanently affixed to a social structure that situates them in time and space.[203] This model is representative of a process that Giddens refers to as the 'durée of day-to-day life', a process which 'occurs as a flow of intentional

[201] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5–14; Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 53.
[202] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5.
[203] Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*, 76.

action' and may produce unintended consequences that 'may systematically feed back to be the unacknowledged conditions of further acts'.[204]

Whatever the consequences of an actor's actions – actions that may be either unintentional or intentional – 'are events which *would not have happened* [own emphasis] if that actor had behaved differently'. Regardless of what the motivations behind the action were, the consequences 'are not within the scope of the agent's power to have brought about'.[205] However, 'these unintended consequences in turn become for the agent the unacknowledged conditions of future actions'.[206]

Giddens refers to his conception of the relationship of agency and structure as the duality of structure.[207] It is this duality of structure which has drawn some critique. Giddens argues that conflicts along 'time-space edges' generally lead to social change. But a challenge to Giddens' approach is that he faces a dilemma in explaining how 'social reproduction becomes social transformation'.[208] As Boyle notes, Giddens' argument restricts structure to something produced entirely through human action, leaving social relations with little independent causal influence. For Boyle, Giddens's duality of structure 'is thus an overly idealistic account of social interaction, unable to transcend the long-standing dualisms that Giddens sets out to dismantle'.[209] As Boyle observes, Giddens' view that structures are shaped by human action can be seen as downplaying the independent power of social forces, making them seem like secondary effects of individual agency. This leads to the criticism that Giddens' framework ricks idealising social interaction and fails to fully transcend the dualisms it seeks to resolve.[210]

However, this study chooses to draw primarily on Giddens' conceptualisation of agency as human action shaped by structure, not because it is unproblematic, but because it offers a pragmatically rich and flexible framework for analysing agency within biblical texts and contemporary cases. While Boyle's critique highlights theoretical tensions, particularly around causality and transformation, the application of structuration theory in this context does not depend on resolving those debates in the abstract. Instead, what is valuable for this analysis is Giddens' emphasis on agency as embedded, reflexive, and constrained yet enabled by structures. The strength of Giddens' theory lies in its capacity to illuminate the embedded nature of action; how individuals operate *within and through*

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[204] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 8.
[205] Giddens, 11.
[206] Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 56.
[207] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 17–19.
[208] Ahearn, 'LANGUAGE AND AGENCY.', 118–19; Boyle, 'Reproducing the Social Structure: A Marxist Critique of Anthony Giddens's Structuration Methodology', 1024–25.
[209] Boyle, 'Reproducing the Social Structure: A Marxist Critique of Anthony Giddens's Structuration Methodology', 1020.
[210] Boyle, 'Reproducing the Social Structure: A Marxist Critique of Anthony Giddens's Structuration Methodology', 1020.

structural limitations to effect disruption or continuity. In this way, the so-called limitations of structuration theory become less consequential for this study which does not seek a grand theory of transformation but rather a nuanced reading of agentic action in its situational and relational context.

Giddens' structuration theory offers several strengths in understanding social stratification and agency within society, namely:[211]

1. **Integration of Structure and Agency**: The theory highlights the interplay between structure (social systems and institutions) and agency (individual actions and decisions). Unlike theories that prioritise either structure or agency, Giddens argues that both are intertwined and shape each other. This conceptualisation allows for a nuanced understanding of how social structures constrain individuals while also being reproduced and transformed through their actions.

2. **Duality of Structure**: The concept of the duality of structure is presented, which suggests that structures both enable and constrain human agency. Structures provide resources and rules that individuals draw upon to act, yet these very actions reproduce and potentially transform those structures. This duality helps in analysing how social stratification systems are maintained and changed over time.

3. **Emphasis on Practices:** The theory focuses on social practices — the routine activities and interactions through which social life is organized. These practices are both enabled and constrained by social structures, influencing how individuals experience and reproduce social stratification. By examining practices, Giddens provides insights into the micro-level dynamics of stratification.

4. **Temporal Dimension:** The theory incorporates a temporal dimension, emphasising that social structures and practices are not static but are constantly evolving over time. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding how social stratification systems change and adapt in response to broader social, economic, and political developments.

5. **Agency and Power:** The theory underscores the role of agency in social change and the distribution of power within society. Individuals are not simply passive recipients of structural constraints but actively engage in shaping social structures through their everyday actions.

[211] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.*

This aspect of the theory allows for a more dynamic and interactive view of social stratification processes.

Overall, Giddens' structuration theory provides a comprehensive framework that integrates the agency of individuals with the structural constraints of society, offering a rich understanding of social stratification and its implications for social change and stability.

A loose template of Giddens' stratification model of the agent (*fig. 4*) is used in my analysis of social structure with a particular interest in the unacknowledged conditions of action and unintended consequences of actions. Key issues which this study will explore include:

(a) identifying women's agency in response to a crisis – this refers to the *power* to exercise action to achieve an outcome or goal,

(b) *recognising the structures* that constrain, limit, disempower, or empower women in their exercise of agency corresponding to their respective contexts, including the unacknowledged conditions of action, and

(c) drawing attention to what work their agency does; that is, what is the outcome of their agency and what are the unintended consequences of action?

For this study, I have identified types of agency by the themes they represent, or rather, the manifestation of what the agency 'looks like' for the texts and narratives being explored. In the table below, I present the particular theme of agency employed for the analysis of each paired biblical narrative and contemporary case study in the chapters that follow.

Type of Agency	**Biblical Narrative**	**Comparative Contemporary Case Study**
The Power of Maternal and Female Bodily Agency amidst a Crisis	Exodus 1—2:1-10	Jewish women medical practitioners in the Holocaust
The Violence of Female Agency Amidst a Crisis	Judges 4—5	Female militants in Sri-Lanka

Table 2: Theme of Agency

3.2.6. Maternal and Bodily Agency

In the context of this study, maternal and bodily agency refers to the ability of the mother, and other female actors, to make decisions and take actions that influence and impact the lives of unborn and born children in times of crisis. These actions include the ability to make decisions surrounding the act of childbirth and the life of the child. In this study, agency is focused specifically on the pregnancy and childbirth phase rather than the long-term raising of the child and the motherhood experience.

In the biblical account of Exodus 1—2:1-10, the maternal agency of five women is explored where the natality of a nation is under threat by the political regime. To quote Lorraine Krall McCrary: 'Where political institutions do not respect natality, the interpersonal act of bearing witness to natality can offer a profound political critique'.[212] Thus, descriptions of the actions of these women are explored in ways that show sites of political resistance and refusal. The agency in the biblical account is compared to the maternal and bodily agency of two women medical practitioners Auschwitz.

In both the Exodus narrative and the Auschwitz case study, pregnancy and childbirth become a form of political resistance and a disruptive force against the political regime in power.

3.2.7. Agency as Violence

A second theme that this study explores is violence as a form of female agency. The narrative of Judges 4-5 is centred around active warfare and an assassination. Both women are perpetrators of violence: Deborah, in her capacity and authority as Judge, endorses and then accompanies the general of the army into battle, and Jael murders the general of the Canaanite army, Sisera, by driving a tent peg through his skull.

In a parallel to the biblical women, the agency of Sri Lankan women of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is explored. In the same way that the biblical women subverted the patriarchal structures of their world through militancy and violence, we also see a similar trajectory in the LTTE. Violence as agency is a paradoxical and morally grey area. The meanings associated with women and ideas of femininity are questioned and re-examined in times of crisis where actions of violence are used to address the circumstances: 'the armed woman has unsettled conventional beliefs of

[212] Lorraine Krall McCrary, 'Bearing Witness to Natality: The Politics of Birth at Auschwitz.', *New Political Science* 44, no. 3 (2022): 409, Academic Search Complete.

inferiority, weakness, innocence, and the resultant fragility and victimhood of women, especially in conflict situations'.[213]

3.3. Power, Foucault, and Feminism

The ways in which agency is interpreted often reflect deeper tensions in social theory – especially when it comes to the idea of power. The variability in how agency is defined frequently parallels broader debates over the function, source, and visibility of power in social life. As one scholar aptly states: 'What is so striking is…the contrast in definitional approaches to the concept of agency mirrors that which has long characterized the standard treatment of power'.[214] This overlap is important because it shows that discussions of agency and power are closely linked and should be explored together.

To fully understand agency, we need to look at how it operates within broader systems of power, not just in opposition to them. French social theorist and philosopher (1926-1984), Michel Foucault's formulations of power, especially when read through a feminist lens offers critical insight into how agency can be reimagined not simply as resistance to domination, but as embedded within the very circuits of power it seeks to contest. Instead of seeing power as something that is held or used by a few people over others, Foucault describes power as something that moves through everyday practices, institutions and relationships. Within this view, agency is not simply about resisting power; it is shaped by and exists within the very systems it responds to. In a reflection of how agency has been conceived, power has been similarly conceptualised: the ability of an actor to execute their will, and the ability to do so in opposition of resistance. As seen in the agency section of this chapter, there is a close correlation or relationship between power and human action. Power dynamics are intimately tied to social structures.

The work of Foucault, more specifically, his treatment of power, sexuality and the body, has garnered significant interest in feminist circles, and been dealt with extensively in feminist scholarship. In engaging with Foucault's theoretical framework of power, this study draws on the feminist perspectives engaged in his work and examines how his work has been received in feminist circles. One of the main Foucauldian ideas was in understanding the body and sexuality as cultural constructs

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[213] T N K Meegaswatta, 'Violence as a Site of Women's Agency in War: The Representation of Female Militants in Sri Lanka's Post-War Literature', 29.

[214] Campbell, 'Distinguishing the Power of Agency from Agentic Power: A Note on Weber and the "Black Box" of Personal Agency', 409.

as opposed to being of natural consequence, a paradigm that has featured heavily in the feminist critique of essentialism.[215]

The work of Foucault, which would later be defined as 'Foucauldian archaeological analysis', is essentially an analysis of the production of knowledge and discourse. This discourse analysis, being a constructionist approach, focused on constructing the meaning of social actions, practices and narratives through the lens of power relations. The analysis examined the connections between different systems and the conditions from which they emerge as seen in history. In other words, Foucault's archaeological analysis concentrated on the discursive conditions that shaped the past. This archaeology of knowledge laid the groundwork for his later method of analysis called *genealogy*.[216] Following the 1960s, Foucault's work increasingly turned toward examining how systems of knowledge are organised and how these systems are inseparable from operations of power.[217] Rather than treating knowledge as neutral or purely descriptive, Foucault argued that every field of knowledge is shaped by underlying power relations that determine what can be thought, said, or known within a particular historical moment. His analyses therefore focus on the internal structure of discourses – how they classify people, regulate behaviours, and normalise certain 'truths' – and on the ways these discursive formations create forms of social control. This shift in his work allowed him to explore how individuals and societies are shaped by subtle, pervasive mechanisms of power that operate not only through laws and institutions but also through everyday practices, norms, and forms of expertise. Included in this analysis, Foucault examined the processes of how truth is formed and the conditions under which a particular version of knowledge came to be seen as truth and then normalised as the 'way things should be'. This truth-making process is a discursive process in which power relations are embedded, and an individual engages in constructing their subjectivity. *The History of Sexuality* (1977) is an example of genealogical analysis and was concerned with the functions of power and describing the history of the present.[218] In this context, 'history of the present' means using

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[215] Patricia Amigot and Margot Pujal, 'On Power, Freedom, and Gender: A Fruitful Tension between Foucault and Feminism', *Theory & Psychology* (London, England) 19, no. 5 (2009): 648–49, https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354309341925; Amy Allen, 'Feminist Perspectives on Power', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2021, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/feminist-power.

[216] 'Archaeology', in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, ed. John Nale and Leonard Lawlor (Cambridge University Press, 2014), Cambridge Core, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139022309.005; 'Genealogy', in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, ed. John Nale and Leonard Lawlor (Cambridge University Press, 2014), Cambridge Core, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139022309.033; Allen, 'Feminist Perspectives on Power'.

[217] See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), for his methodological turn toward analysing how discursive systems organise knowledge; and Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 109–133, for his articulation of the intrinsic relationship between knowledge and power.

[218] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978), 1, http://prism.librarymanagementcloud.co.uk/dcu/items/346451; Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume Three*; 'Power', in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, ed. John Nale and Leonard Lawlor (Cambridge University Press, 2014), Cambridge

historical analysis to explain how our current social arrangements, norms, and power structures came to be and to show that they are not natural, inevitable, or timeless. Therefore, 'history of the present' refers to Foucault's genealogical method, which investigates the past in order to uncover how contemporary norms, identities, and power relations were constructed over time. Rather than seeking origins for their own sake, Foucault uses history to make the present intelligible – to show that what we take as natural or self-evident is, in fact, the outcome of specific historical struggles, discourse, and power operations.

Foucault's historical constitution of desire was formulated through genealogical analysis. He theorised that power shapes sexual desire and influences it according to the day's societal and cultural 'truths'. The differences of sexuality between periods or geographical locations are reasoned by their particular cultural and social structures and relations. Power is thus defined as that which creates and produces sexual desire and that which can suppress or discipline it. In essence, Foucault's theory proposed that cultural and social forces construct our sexual desires so that what may be sexually desirable or charged in one place or era may not be in another.[219] An essential tenet in modern feminism is the idea that the nature of interests are products of social construction. This is emphasised in a Foucauldian approach to power, because when power is centralised, 'essentialist subjectivity' is contested.[220] When Foucault argues that centralised power contests 'essentialist subjectivity', he means that systems of domination destabilise the idea that people possess fixed, inherent identities that predate social forces. Instead, powerful institutions – states, medical systems, religious authorities, or disciplinary regimes – actively shape how individuals understand themselves, what kinds of identities are available to them, and how those identities are regulated or constrained. In a Foucauldian framework, subjectivity is not something one simply *has*; it is something one is continually *produced into* through networks of power and discourse. [221]

Therefore, any choices, desires, or interests that may be construed as part and parcel of what it means to be 'woman' are actually social constructions. This idea resonates in the work of Judith Butler.[222]

Core, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139022309.066; Kevin S. Jobe, 'Foucault and the Telos of Power.', *Critical Horizons* 18, no. 3 (2017): 191–213, Academic Search Complete.

[219] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1; Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love. A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*. (Continuum, 2006), 19–20; 'Desire', in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, ed. John Nale and Leonard Lawlor (Cambridge University Press, 2014), Cambridge Core, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139022309.021.

[220] Davina Cooper, 'Productive, Relational and Everywhere? Conceptualising Power and Resistance within Foucauldian Feminism', *Sociology* 28, no. 2 (1994): 439–40, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038594028002005.

[221] Cooper, 'Productive, Relational and Everywhere? Conceptualising Power and Resistance within Foucauldian Feminism', 439–40.

[222] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', 520.

In the same way that power – via cultural normalisation and discourse – provides the lens through which we conceive and understand our sexuality, so too does power produce our conceptions of other realities. What, for Foucauldian thought, forms the foundation is that power is intrinsically connected to knowledge.[223] On this, Foucault writes:

'I would like to show how the political relations have been established and deeply implanted in our culture, giving rise to a series of phenomena that can be explained only if they are related not to economic structures, to the economic relations of production, but to the power relations that permeate the whole fabric of our existence.'[224]

A requirement for any sociological understanding of society is to examine how agency and structure play out within it. Social structure ensures that those who control 'the means of administration and violence to make and enforce policy', are those in power: 'Policy constrains everyone. Policy makers, interpreters, and enforcers, whether corporate, legislative, judicial, executive, ecclesiastical, or royal, control rules and resources that shape social relations and can devastate lives'.[225] For Foucault, power is always relational: it exists only in the interactions between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised – that is, individuals or groups whose actions, bodies, or possibilities are shaped by that power. This analysis of power has two relevant claims: 1.) power is understood in terms of power-over relations, and 2.) power is defined in terms of its actual exercise. In Foucault's conception of power, power has the characteristic of being diffuse, that is, unstable and flowing from multiple points at once. Thus, power operates through all levels of society:Foucault's focus on the local and capillary nature of modern power clearly resonates with feminist efforts to redefine the scope and bounds of the political, efforts that are summed up by the slogan "the personal is political." [226]

Of interest to this study are themes featured in Foucault's work that have received constructive attention and treatment in feminist scholarship and that reflect the conceptualisations of agency already discussed: namely, 1.) subjection, 2.) discipline and normalisation, and 3.) resistance.

The nature of subjection, according to Foucault, that is, the way in which becoming a subject means at the same time being subjected to power relations, is a strong premise in Judith Butler's critique of gender norms. Butler's analysis of Foucault takes subjection as a lens through which she focuses her critique of the category of women. Foucauldian insight into the nature of subjection thus forms the

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[223] Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume Three*; Allen, 'Feminist Perspectives on Power'.
[224] Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume Three*, 17.
[225] Gil Richard Musolf, *Oppression and Resistance: Structure, Agency, Transformation*, Studies in Symbolic Interaction ; 48 (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), 3, http://capitadiscovery.co.uk/dcu/items/934177.
[226] 'Power'.

basis for Butler's trenchant critique of the category of women, and for her call for a subversive performance of the gender norms that govern the production of gender identity.[227]

3.3.1. Biopolitics, Surveillance, and Agency in Contexts of Crisis

Foucault's theorisation of modern power provides a critical vocabulary for analysing how crises, especially those instituted or intensified by the state, reshape the conditions under which agency becomes possible. In his 1975–1976 Collège de France lectures, Foucault describes a historical transition from sovereign power, organised around 'the right to take life or let live,' to biopower, a modern political rationality that 'makes live and lets die'.[228] This shift does not abolish older forms of coercion but overlays them with techniques aimed at regulating life itself. Biopower centres on what Foucault later calls 'the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life': the governance of birth, death, reproduction, health, and population-level vitality.[229] Under biopolitical conditions, the biological existence of human beings becomes a domain of political calculation, particularly acute during periods of social or political emergency.

Surveillance forms one of the most pervasive mechanisms by which this governance operates. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault shows how disciplinary power relies on observation, examination, and continuous visibility to produce compliant, regulated subjects.[230] The panoptic schema, in which individuals internalise the possibility of scrutiny, demonstrates that surveillance does not merely repress but also constitutes particular kinds of bodies and behaviours. Crisis heightens this dynamic: the home, the intimate sphere, and the reproductive body become increasingly subject to monitoring and intervention. In such moments, reproductive capacity becomes one of the most intensively policed sites of biopolitical governance, as the management of life converges with the political anxieties of the state.

Yet, as Foucault repeatedly insists, power is never absolute. "Where there is power, there is resistance".[231] This resistance is neither exterior to power nor necessarily revolutionary; instead, it consists of dispersed, local and tactical counter-practices that arise within the very networks

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[227] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 3–9, 22–34, 174–180, for her Foucauldian account of subjection and critique of the category of women; and Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), for her further development of subjection as the basis for subversive performances of gender norms in Chapter 1.

[228] Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003, 240–247.

[229] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 140.

[230] *Ibid.* 195-228.

[231] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 95.

through which power circulates.[232] These micro-practices, which are quiet, embodied, and often situational, reveal the fissures in systems that otherwise appear totalising. Their significance lies not in overthrowing structures but in interrupting or subverting the operations of power at decisive points.

It is at precisely this intersection of biopolitical pressure and intimate vulnerability that female agency in crisis becomes most legible. When reproductive life is targeted through coercive policies of birth or death, through the suppression of maternal autonomy, or through surveillance of the domestic sphere, women often enact forms of agency that are incremental, improvised, and fraught with risk. These actions do not seek to dismantle the apparatus of power but to interfere with it: through concealment, refusal, strategic compliance, or the preservation of life under threat. Such practices resonate strongly with Foucault's notion of counter-conduct, understood as situated acts that divert or reorient the pathways through which power seeks to govern bodies and populations.[233]

Thus, biopolitics and surveillance do not simply restrict agency; they shape the very terrain upon which agency is enacted. In contexts of extreme crisis, such as when the state's regulatory mechanisms converge on the bodies of women and the lives they carry, the technologies of power ironically generate new sites of resistance. Female agency emerges not despite biopower but through its fractures, revealing that even under the most stringent regimes of discipline and surveillance, life retains the capacity to act, improvise, and resist.

As positive an engagement with Foucault can be, feminist scholarship has not shied away from highlighting the limitations of his analysis of relations between power and the body. In feminist political critique, for instance, a Foucauldian understanding of power can be seen as reducing social agents to docile bodies.[234] Regardless of the limits of Foucault's scope, 'Foucault's depiction of power as a relation between forces resonated for feminists concerned with the pluralistic and overdetermined nature of inequality: the intersection of class, race and gender; while his work on the body and sexuality supported theory which emphasised the importance of power relations irreducible to the sphere of state and economy'.[235]

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[232] *Ibid.* 96.

[233] Foucault, Michel. Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978. Edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 196-214.

[234] Allen, 'Feminist Perspectives on Power'.

[235] Cooper, 'Productive, Relational and Everywhere? Conceptualising Power and Resistance within Foucauldian Feminism', 435–36.

Foucault's conception of power is foundational for understanding how agency operates within deeply coercive systems. As he argues, power is not a possession held by institutions or individuals, nor a singular force that consolidates everything under a unified centre; rather, it is produced from one moment to the next at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere'. [236]

In this sense, power is not an entity, but an effect, the outcome of countless interactions, repetitions, and resistances that constitute the social field. [237] To call something 'power' is to name 'a complex strategical situation in a particular society'.[238] This reconceptualisation is crucial for this study: it foregrounds the fact that power is diffuse, relational, and constantly in motion, which, in turn, means that resistance is not external to power but co-produced alongside it.

Building on Foucault's account of power, the analysis now turns to consider how these dynamics take form within broader social architectures. Whereas Foucault highlights the micro-level circulation of power, approaches centred on social structure clarify how power becomes stabilised in institutional hierarchies, norms, and embodied dispositions. This shift in focus allows the analysis to move from power's minute operations to the larger structural fields that shape, constrain, and enable the forms of agency examined throughout this study.

3.4. Power Structures

According to Bourdieu and Johnson, structure is the organisation of social positions by hierarchical fields with a disparate distribution of power.[239] These fields are defined as structured 'systems of social positions' which can either be occupied by individuals or by collective groups. The nature of these fields prescribes the positions occupied by those holding social positions. Each structured field functions under certain constraints, rules, and logic, and individuals and groups belonging to these fields are expected to conform to these regulations. This knowledge and adherence to these rules determine an individual's membership in that field and structure.[240] As these rules and regulations are often left unquestioned, the practice of these rules becomes social law, which in turn becomes embodied law, what Bourdieu refers to as 'habitus' – a term defined by Bourdieu as a property of actors (whether individuals, groups or institutions) that comprises 'structured and structuring

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[236] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 1:93.
[237] *Ibid.* 92–93.
[238] *Ibid.* 93.
[239] Pierre Bourdieu and Randal Johnson, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Policy Press, 1993), 6, http://capitadiscovery.co.uk/dcu/items/74333.
[240] Bourdieu and Johnson, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 6.

structure'.[241] This can be understood through the lens of Judith Butler's performativity, in which gender is constructed through the repetition of action.

Structure can thus be defined as any social facet or institution over which an individual has limited to no control and that which constrains (or adds to) the individual's agency.[242]

It is widely agreed that gender hierarchy 'is embedded in social structures and reinforced by both explicit and implicit norms and practices'.[243] In this way, a departure from gender inequality and disparity in power may necessitate an event of immense social disruption, such as war or conflict. It should be noted however, that the power shifts in societal structures due to social disruption are not necessarily permanent. Furthermore, change may come at an exceedingly high cost to women and society, for example, the cost of change may include loss of life during war. As noted by Webster, Chen, and Beardsley, 'the process of women's empowerment is not likely clean or linear and may exacerbate other social hierarchies, such as those based on race or class'.[244]

Underlying the agency of the women in the biblical narratives discussed below is the breakdown or disruption of social structures that enable or advance courses of action that place them in traditional male domains of political space.[245] Employing theories that focus on the disruption of social structures via crisis, and the consequences/opportunities that are left in the wake, we are given a lens through which the agency of the women we encounter in the biblical narratives and the contemporary case studies can be analysed in ways that demonstrate power as productive and possibly transformative through unintended consequences of action.

4. A Framework of Gender, Power and Agency with Giddens, Foucault, and Butler

Understanding power dynamics and agency in ways that account for both the individual and the social is a complex endeavour that has engaged the attention of numerous social theorists. This study explores an approach which intersects theories of gender, power and agency from Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler.

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[241] Michael Grenfell and Pierre Bourdieu, *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts, Second Edition* (Acumen, 2012), 50, http://capitadiscovery.co.uk/dcu/items/951093; Punam Yadav, 'Can Women Benefit from War? Women's Agency in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies', *Journal of Peace Research* (London, England) 58, no. 3 (2021): 451, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320905619.

[242] 'Race, class, sex, ideology, institutions, division of labor, organizations, hierarchy, groups, geographical location, period of history, mode of production, generational cohort, family, culture, norms, and roles characterize social facts' (Musolf, 2017, p. 3).

[243] Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 260.

[244] *Ibid.* 261.

[245] Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman. Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (JSOT Press, 1985), 14.

Giddens' structuration theory is based on the idea that social structures and individual agency are interrelated. His work highlights the duality of structure in that social actions both reproduce and transform structures. Giddens' theory suggests that individuals are not passive subjects of structures and social systems, but rather individuals actively participate in the reproduction and transformation of social structures through their everyday acts of agency.

In the work of Michel Foucault, his conception of power rejects the notion that power operates only through top-down repression. Rather, Foucault argues, power is dispersed throughout society and thus operates from different points at multiple levels. In his idea of biopower (the way power is exercised over society through techniques of normalisation and regulation), Foucault highlights the productive elements of power – how power produces knowledge, discourse and shapes subjectivities.[246]

In Judith Butler's theory of performativity, she focuses on ways that gender is constructed and enforced through repetitive performances. Her work explores how power operates through the regulation of gender norms and policing of bodies. In this way she highlights the ways individuals both resist and internalise these norms through their performances of gender.

The above theories offer the possibility of a productive intersection of ideas. In Giddens' structuration theory, we are given a framework for understanding how individuals navigate and negotiate power relations within a society. Through this emphasis on the active role that individuals take in shaping social structures, Giddens provides a nuanced understanding of agency that complements the ideas put forward of Foucault and Butler. Foucault's conceptualisation of power as dispersed and productive resonates with the duality of structure from Giddens' work, in that it highlights how power operates through the reproduction and transformation of social practices. Butler's theory of performativity further complicates the relationship between power and agency by foregrounding the role of performance in the construction of identity.

By bringing together the insights of Giddens, Foucault, and Butler, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interrelationship of power and agency within society. These theories challenge us to critically examine the ways in which power operates through social structures, discourses, and performances, and to consider the possibilities for resistance and transformation. Their relevance extends directly to the biblical and contemporary narratives explored in this thesis: each story is embedded within systems of constraint that shape, limit, and occasionally enable

[246] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 1:92–93.

women's actions. Reading them through these theoretical lenses therefore illuminates not only what these women do, but how their agency becomes thinkable within particular configurations of power. In this way, the theories provide essential conceptual tools for interpreting both the ancient and modern case studies, allowing a deeper appreciation of the structural, performative, and biopolitical dynamics at work in moments of crisis.

5. Conclusion

This chapter serves as a literature review of the various areas of focus that govern this project. It outlines the approaches used in engaging the questions that are fundamental to this study: What is the relationship between female agency and times of crisis in the HB? How do we account for an increase in female agency during times of crisis? What happens when we read biblical narratives and contemporary world contexts in light of this phenomenon, intending to explore female agency?

The review of literature has demonstrated that this study is situated in the field of feminist biblical scholarship, and draws on various approaches within feminist biblical studies, namely, narrative and rhetorical criticism, socio-historical and culturally-cued readings, as well as reader-centred perspectives. The biblical narratives that have been briefly outlined – Exodus 1-2:1-10 and Judges 4—5 – will be re-examined in the following chapters in light of these approaches. Further, each biblical narrative has been paired with a contemporary case study for comparative reflection on the convergence of female agency and crisis, as a way of bringing the ancient and contemporary into conversation with one another. Finally, contemporary theories of crisis, power, and female agency will inform the discussion which follows, including the aforementioned shift hypotheses as well as research exploring the intersection of power, gender, and agency

The works of Butler, Giddens, and Foucault provide the integrated theoretical architecture that will be employed in the comparative analysis of the four chosen narratives, both biblical and contemporary. Alongside this framework, the shift hypotheses offer a complimentary lens for examining how crises open new social, demographic, and political terrains for women's participation.

This literature also underscores the importance of methodological caution when placing ancient and contemporary narratives in dialogue. Scholars such as Meyers and Pioske remind us that reconstructions of the past are always historically situated and mediated through modern interpretive frameworks. Yet it is precisely this reflexive stance that allows for a meaningful comparative project: not by flattening differences across time, but by attending to the recurring patterns through which women navigate crisis, vulnerability, liminality, and social disruption.

The review thus prepares the ground for the analyses that follow. It offers both the theoretical scaffolding and the vocabulary through which the four narrative contexts – Exodus, Auschwitz, Judges, and Sri-Lanka – can be examined. In doing so, it clarifies the intellectual commitments of this thesis: to explore how women act within and against structures of power and domination, how agency emerges in liminal and precarious spaces, and how the interplay between crisis and power reshapes the possibilities for women to act.

Section One

THE POWER OF MATERNAL AND FEMALE BODILY AGENCY IN CRISIS

On June 24, 2022, the controversial and divisive ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113, on January 22, 1973, and its subsequent revisiting in *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833, in 1992, were officially overturned by the US Supreme Court. In *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 597 U.S. __ (2022), the court held that the Constitution of the United States does not confer a right to abortion. Abortion is a contentious issue that lies at the heart of American politics. While the technicalities of the case are not the focus of the present study, the ruling highlights a prominent and universal issue – the politicisation of the female body. In this, we see reproductive and maternal agency come to the fore, with questions about bodily autonomy, human rights, and the state's ability to exert measures of control, or a form of biopower, over an individual's body.

The politicisation of childbirth is illustrated in various ways, such as rights of inheritance, preferences on the biological sex of the unborn child[247], and state intervention regarding reproductivity, such as the aforementioned *Roe v. Wade* and *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* court rulings.[248] The relationship of power and production, with emphasis on childbirth and the female body as productive labour, will be explored over the following several chapters as it pertains to the female reproductive and bodily agency of women in the HB, in conversation with the actions of two medical practitioners in the death camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau during the Holocaust of the Second World War.

In Exodus 1 – 2:1-10, issues of reproductive, bodily, and maternal agency are explored in relation to a national crisis – Pharaoh's sanctioned infanticide of Hebrew boys born to the enslaved Hebrew people. The actions of five women are examined, individually and through their unintentionally collective effects, to protect a degree of bodily, reproductive, and maternal autonomy and power.

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[247] Gunnar Andersson et al., 'Gendering Family Composition: Sex Preferences for Children and Childbearing Behavior in the Nordic Countries', *Demography* (United States) 43, no. 2 (2006): 255–67, https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.2006.0010; Eleanor Jawon Choi and Jisoo Hwang, 'Transition of Son Preference: Evidence From South Korea', *Demography* (New York) 57, no. 2 (2020): 627–52, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-020-00863-x; Claus C. Pörtner, 'Birth Spacing and Fertility in the Presence of Son Preference and Sex-Selective Abortions: India's Experience Over Four Decades', *Demography* (United States) 59, no. 1 (2022): 61–88, https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-9580703.

[248] Daniel Rosenblum, 'Unintended Consequences of Women's Inheritance Rights on Female Mortality in India', *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 63, no. 2 (2014): 223–48; Xiaoying Qi, 'Neo-Traditional Child Surnaming in Contemporary China: Women's Rights as Veiled Patriarchy', *Sociology* 52, no. 5 (2018): 1001–16, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516688613; Sonia Bhalotra et al., 'Women's Inheritance Rights Reform and the Preference for Sons in India', *Journal of Development Economics* 146 (September 2020): 102275, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2018.08.001; Garance Genicot and Maria Hernandez-de-Benito, 'Women's Land Rights and Village Institutions in Tanzania', *World Development* 153 (May 2022): 105811, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.105811.

These women are two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah (Exodus 1:15-21); a mother and daughter (Exodus 2:1-9); and an Egyptian princess (Exodus 2:5-10).

The crisis and resulting agency demonstrated by the women in the Exodus story is compared with the experiences of two medical practitioners during the Holocaust of the Second World War – Jewish doctor Gisella Perl and Polish Catholic midwife Stanisława Leszczyńska. This thesis aims to bring ancient texts into conversation with the present day, exploring ideas that overlap and complement one another despite the temporal divide. Through the study of an ancient text like Exodus 1—2:1-10, we see several episodes that echo the trajectory of female agency in times of crisis in the more contemporary stories of Perl and Leszczyńska.

The episodes, both biblical and contemporary, include the use of traditionally feminine spaces, vocabulary, and imagery to assert control over situations impacted by a power structure; the use of trickery and cunning to undermine authority and overtly stall a negative and life destroying outcome; the collaborative efforts of women to further advance their cause or agenda; the function of professional opinion or prognosis to assert power and lay claim over a particular space and push out the intruding opposing force of power; and finally, the reclaiming of power – albeit a limited or temporary power – over the right to reproductive, maternal and bodily autonomy, as well as the right to human life. The emphasis on female agency across these episodes helps us revisit previous (mis)representations of women as passive recipients of societal or institutional power structures. While the outcome of the crisis may not be wholly positive, the resistance of the women in the narratives explored shows aspects where power, while limited, is reclaimed, even in secret, and the dominant power structure is undermined.[249]

[249] Madhok et al., *Gender, Agency and Coercion*.

Chapter 3

BIRTHING AGENCY: WOMEN, CRISIS AND THE PRESERVATION OF LIFE IN EXODUS 1—2:1-10

The biblical story in Exodus 1:1–2:10 reveals themes of power and agency in five women: the two named midwives, Shiphrah and Puah; the mother and sister of the infant Moses; and, lastly, the unnamed Egyptian princess, the daughter of the Pharaoh. The name of Moses' mother is later revealed from the genealogy of Moses and Aaron in Exodus 6:20 (NRSV) as Jochebed: 'Amram married Jochebed his aunt, and she bore him Aaron and Moses, and the length of Amram's life was one hundred thirty-seven years'.[250] In Exodus 15:20, Miriam is named as the sister of Aaron: 'Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing'.[251] She and her mother are also identified by name and relation to Moses in Numbers 26:59: 'The name of Amram's wife was Jochebed daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt, and she bore to Amram: Aaron, Moses, and their sister Miriam'.[252]

The book of Genesis concludes with the deaths of two prominent individuals: the patriarch Jacob, known also as Israel (Gen 49:28-33), and his son Joseph (Gen 50:26). Exodus 1:8 – 2:10 is the centrepiece of the prologue proper to Exodus, which comprises three distinct parts:[253]

1. Exodus 1:1-7: Transition from the patriarchal period in Genesis.

2. Exodus 1:8-2:10: The problem of Egyptian oppression and persecution is set forth. Amidst these events is the birth narrative and survival story of an infant boy, Moses – a character who will later be instrumental in the resolution of Egyptian oppression.

3. Exodus 2:11-25: Events occurring when Moses is an adult.

The book of Exodus draws a line of continuity back to Genesis by mentioning the sons of Jacob and their families in the prologue; an entire people group represented by 70 ancestors.[254] The theme of the genealogical line is raised from the familial to the national level, as the story shifts its focus from

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[250] ויקח עמרם את־יוכבד דדתו לו לאשה ותלד לו את־אהרן ואת־משה ושני חיי עמרם שבע ושלשים ומאת שנה:

[251] ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן את־התף בידה ותצאן כל־הנשים אחריה בתפים ובמחלת:

[252] ושם אשת עמרם יוכבד בת־לוי אשר ילדה אתה ללוי במצרים ותלד לעמרם את־אהרן ואת־משה ואת מרים אחתם:

[253] J. Cheryl Exum, 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live: A Study of Exodus 1.8-2.10', in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner, The Feminist Companion to the Bible 6 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 38.

[254] The number seventy in the Hebrew Bible represents completeness.

one particular family to the larger nation. The upbeat tone of a thriving people dwelling in the land of Egypt is first introduced in Exodus 1:7 'But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.' Genesis is represented in the opening chapter of Exodus. The imperative to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' (Genesis 1:28) is evident in the growing Israelite population, highlighting the nation's obedience to God's divine instruction. In so doing, Exodus 1 can be understood as a tale of another creation – the creation of a nation.[255]

Verse 7 introduces the theme of population growth with the word רבה (meaning to 'be, or become much, many') repeated throughout the chapter. This root word is used in verse 7 וירבו; and then is repeated in verse 9 רב; in verse 10, ירבה; in verse 12, ירבה; and in verse 20, וירב. Repetition is a characteristic literary device that, when used in Hebrew narrative, establishes a theme, 'in this case the increase of Israelites and the concomitant escalation of the Egyptian's strategies to deal with the perceived threat.'[256] The positive perspective of verse 7 is interrupted as Exodus 1:8-11 sets up a distinct tone of oppression, and furthermore, links Israelite suffering to the repressive political programs of a superpower. It is interesting to note that the first time Israel is spoken about as a 'people' is when the new king of Egypt distinguishes them as such: עם בני ישראל – 'the people of the sons of Israel'. Thus, in the world of the text, the origin of Israel is inextricably linked to the tyrannical policies stemming from the seat of political power.[257] Chapter 1: 6-11 reads as follows:

> "Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.
>
> Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape the land." Therefore they sent taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.'

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[255] Carol Meyers, ed., *Exodus*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 33, Cambridge Core, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806377.005.

[256] *Ibid.* 33.

[257] Alter and Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 56; Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 33; Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins*, 111.

The story goes on to describe how the Pharaoh is threatened by the Hebrew population in Egypt. In response, he takes three separate measures to deal with the increasing population. Each measure taken by the king is of notable progression of severity from the last.[258]

The first tactic of Pharaoh to manage the growing Israelite populace is oppression by harsh, laborious, physical toil. I quote Michael Waltzer's analysis concerning the nature of this oppression:

> Certainly, it wasn't slavery itself, at least, not chattel slavery. The Israelites were not bought and sold in Egypt; nor is slavery in this sense barred (though it is extensively regulated) in the legal code that comes out of the Exodus experience. We might better say that the Israelites were guests in Egypt, later on, guest workers, later on still, state slaves, subjected to a kind of *corvée*.[259]

The oppression faced by the Israelites can be seen as an exercise of tyrannical rule from the seat of political power. Through corvée, Egypt would be the beneficiary of profit from Israelite labour, and the Israelites in turn would suffer a reduced social and economic status.[260] The Hebrew word for 'with rigour' is בפרך and only occurs one other time in this form in the Torah. In Leviticus 25:43 (NRSVUE), 'You shall not rule over them with harshness (*rigour*) but shall fear your God'.[261] The chapter concerns laws for the treatment of Israelite slaves and the word for 'with rigour' brings to mind a negative contrast – to avoid ruling over slaves in the manner of the Egyptians.[262]

Michael Waltzer and Ilana Pardes both explore ways in which bondage distorts and undermines reproduction. Bondage denotes work without end – a process that exhausts and degrades the slave. This tyranny not only sought to profit from the exploitation of the people but also intended to embitter the lives of the Hebrews.[263]

In Exodus 1:12, we read, 'But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.'[264] A paradox becomes evident early on in the oppression of the Israelites – that of growth during this rigorous oppression. This can be understood

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[258] Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 33; Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 83–84.

[259] *Exodus and Revolution* (Basic Books, 1985), 26.

[260] Waltzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 25–26, 32; Ilana Pardes, 'The Biography of Ancient Isreal: Imagining the Birth of a Nation', *Comparative Literature* (Durham) 49, no. 1 (1997): 29.

[261] לא־תרדה בו **בפרך** ויראת מאלהיך: ; *rigour* – own addition and emphasis.

[262] Waltzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 27.

[263] Waltzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 27; Ilana Pardes, 'The Biography of Ancient Isreal: Imagining the Birth of a Nation', 29–30.

[264] וכאשר יענו אתו כן ירבה וכן יפרץ ויקצו מפני בני ישראל:

as evidence of God's support of the Israelites against Egyptian persecution and affliction, which introduces the theme of birth and survival into the narrative.[265]

In realising that harsh slavery has not thwarted the growing Israelite populace but instead catalysed it, the Pharaoh takes a far more severe measure. As Masenya observes, 'When the king's war against the Israelite male bodies did not bear the desired fruit, he decided to enter the sacred feminine sphere, the sphere traditionally and biologically reserved for women'.[266] Pharaoh, in his failure to adequately subdue the Hebrew men, enters the 'sacred feminine sphere' and profanes a life-giving domain with life-taking violence. He orders two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all sons born to Israelite women. They are to do this while the women are yet at the birthing stool: 'The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live"' (Exodus 1:15-16).[267]

As horrific as this decree may be, there is an almost comical aspect to the lunacy of Pharaoh's logic. After his own failure to subdue the Hebrews and stop their numbers from increasing, he tasks *two* midwives with an entire *nation* of expectant Hebrew mothers.[268] Not only are the midwives ordered to attend to these women during the delivery of the child, but they are further commanded to murder the male newborns – an act entirely contradictory to the life-giving vocation of midwifery.[269] The midwives, however, do not obey their orders to participate in infanticide. Instead, they are recorded as acting courageously. They defy the orders from Pharaoh, refusing to bow to the feet of tyranny. The text indicates only one reason motivating their defiance – their fear of God. The text calls to mind a theme in which resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.[270]

However, when questioned by the Pharaoh as to their failure to comply with his orders, they deceive him by saying: 'the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give

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[265] Alter and Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 59.

[266] Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), 'Whose Reading Matters? Rereading Exodus 1 in the Context of African (South African) Women', *Dialog : A Journal of Theology* (Gettysburg) 59, no. 2 (2020): 111, https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12547.

[267] 15 ויאמר מלך מצרים למילדת העברית אשר שם האחת שפרה ושם השנית פועה:
16 ויאמר בילדכן את־העבריות וראיתן על־האבנים אם־בן הוא והמתן אתו ואם־בת היא וחיה:

[268] Scholars have proposed the idea that perhaps the two midwives were overseers of a guild of practioners, however this reasoning is merely speculative and lacks evidence. Sarna Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (Schoken Books, 1996), 25.

[269] Esther I. Feijen-de Jong et al., 'Perceptions of Nearly Graduated Fourth Year Midwifery Students Regarding a "Good Midwife" in the Netherlands', *Midwifery* 50 (July 2017): 159–60, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.midw.2017.04.008; Frances E. Likis, 'A Million Ways to Midwife', *Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health* (United States) 62, no. 5 (2017): 519–20, https://doi.org/10.1111/jmwh.12696; Dianne Bloxsome et al., "'I Love Being a Midwife; It's Who I Am": A Glaserian Grounded Theory Study of Why Midwives Stay in Midwifery', *Journal of Clinical Nursing* (England) 29, nos 1–2 (2020): 208–20, https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15078; Gale A. Yee, 'Midwives in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Ancient Israel: An Intersectional Investigation', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 52, no. 3 (2022): 147–48, https://doi.org/10.1177/01461079221102970.

[270] Waltzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 32.

birth before the midwife comes to them.'" (Exodus 1:19).[271] Despite the peculiarity of the excuse – and possibly because Pharaoh, as a man, has no cause to doubt what he does not have any knowledge of – Pharaoh accepts the excuse of the midwives, and Shiphrah and Puah are not held accountable for any wrongdoing. It should be noted that, while the narrative records the midwives' actions as primarily motivated by fear of God, their professional motivation and moral conscience should also be considered. The principal function of a midwife is, first and foremost, to bring life into the world and to ensure the safety of mother and child.

In an artfully ironic twist, the women receive a great blessing from God that mimics the life-giving opportunities they provided for the Hebrew women: 'So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families' (Exodus 1:20-21).[272] Through their brave and noble actions, Shiphrah and Puah become potent symbols of resistance, standing in for the collective people of Israel.[273]

Midwives of Defiance: Shiphrah and Puah

The midwives and heroines of our tale are introduced as named characters. On this point scholars such as Exum have noted the importance of named characters, particularly women: 'The risks they take to preserve the lives of male babies, especially Moses, guarantee that these women will be honored for generations to come; thus the names of the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, are recorded, and the story later supplies the names of Moses' mother Jochebed and sister Miriam'.[274]

The named midwives also provide a stark contrast to the unnamed Pharaoh – a paradox where the women's importance supersedes that of a king of Egypt. Historically, the kings of Egypt stood at the pinnacle of Egyptian society. The king was the most important figure, responsible for maintaining the country's security and for holding back the forces of chaos, especially those of foreigners. Politics and religion were deeply enmeshed. The gods appointed the king, and thus he had control over all aspects of the state, including the appointment of officials and leasing of land. The health of the

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[271] ותאמרן המילדת אל־פרעה כי לא כנשים המצרית העברית כי־חיות הנה בטרם תבוא אלהן המילדת וילדו: 19

[272] וייטב אלהים למילדת וירב העם ויעצמו מאד: 20

ויהי כי־יראו המילדת את־האלהים ויעש להם בתים: 21

[273] Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus : A Critical, Theological Commentary / Brevard S. Childs.*, Old Testament Library (Westminster John Knox Press, 1974), 14–15; Boesak, *The Riverbank, the Seashore and the Wilderness: Miriam, Liberation and Prophetic Witness against Empire*, 1; Mary J Obiorah, 'Moses' Mother in Exodus 2:1-10 and Mothers in Personal Names among the Igbo People, South-East Nigeria', *Acta Theologica* (Bloemfontein) 40, no. 1 (2020): 85, https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v40i1.6.

[274] J. Cheryl Exum, 'Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8-2.10', in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner, The Feminist Companion to the Bible 6 (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 80.

country was closely tied to the status and effectiveness of the monarchy, and periods of decline were often accompanied by problems within the monarchy.[275]

Historically, the king's formal status was based on his identification with Horus, which was reflected in his five-fold titulary. Later, he was usually known by his prenomen, associated with the sun god Ra and enclosed in a cartouche. The king was known as "Pharaoh", which derived from per-aa, meaning "great house", a title that began to be used during the New Kingdom period. As Pharaoh, the king played a significant role in temples, serving as an intermediary between humans and the divine. While the cult was delegated to local priests, the king's status and role as provider of resources made the temples important conduits of control. Despite discussions of temples as an alternative power base in opposition to kingship, they were dependent on the king for resources.[276] Pharaohs exercised direct power through a network of civil administration officials. The Vizier was the senior official responsible for administrative matters, and the Chief Justice was the senior official responsible for judicial matters. Below the Vizier were specialised departments covering public works, finance, grain storage, and agriculture. The king also had a military role as Egypt's guardian against the forces of chaos.[277]

In a socio-cultural context, the depiction of the midwives and other women in Exodus can be better understood through historical, anthropological, and archaeological research of the ancient Near East.[278] Furthermore, as references to midwifery in the HB are scarce, it is worthwhile to conduct a 'comparative analysis of midwives in the structural and hegemonic contexts of the wider ancient Near East.'[279] Carol Meyers highlights the importance of connecting the story in the biblical text to the lived experience of Israelite women in the ancient Near Eastern context. This context provides a culturally-cued lens that can enrich interpretations of ancient narratives. In Ancient Near Eastern cultures, older women with medicinal knowledge and experience served as midwives during childbirth and provided aftercare for the mother and child.[280] Midwives could also serve in religious functions through the offerings of prayers and blessings. It was therefore more common for a woman of status to request the specialised services of a midwife. Peasant women would typically be assisted

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[275] Aidan Dodson, 'The Monarchy', in *The Egyptian World*, ed. Toby Wilkinson (Routledge, 2007), 75.
[276] Dodson, 'The Monarchy', 75.
[277] *Ibid. 77*.
[278] In this study, the narratives in the HB are not read as historical accounts, but as narratives that are historically situated. These issues have been reflected on in chapter 2.
[279] Yee, 'Midwives in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Ancient Israel: An Intersectional Investigation', 148.
[280] Claudia D. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1-18* (Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 63; Kristine Henriksen Garroway, *Growing up in Ancient Israel : Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 51, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=5575013; Yee, 'Midwives in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Ancient Israel: An Intersectional Investigation', 147.

in childbirth by a woman helper, such as a female relative or a close neighbour, who provided the mother with verbal and hands-on support during childbirth.[281]

Sources from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt indicate that the birthing process included ritual birthing objects, such as birthing bricks used as a kind of stool.[282] It has long been known among Egyptologists that during labour, it was customary to position special bricks as a support stool for a woman squatting during the birthing process. These bricks seem to be alluded to in the Exodus narrative (Exodus 1:16) where the midwives are said to deliver babies on the birthing stool (על־האבנים).[283] The BDB ties the word אבנים to אבן (potter's wheel/disc) due to the 'likeness to potter's wheel; on custom of labor upon stool', that is, similarly, clay is supported upon the potter's wheel, as a woman in labour is supported on the brick stool.[284] Kristine Henriksen Garroway describes this birthing process as follows:

> 'Since labor is a painful process that can take a long time, the bricks or chairs support the woman in labor. When the time comes to push the baby out, the woman leans forward onto a stack of bricks or squats on the chair. The ground beneath the chair or the bricks is dug out, allowing the midwife to have room to catch the baby; after she has done so, the hole can act as a receptacle for the afterbirth.'[285]

Garroway writes on the creation of a safe space for the birthing ritual in the ancient context. This safe space would exclude men who were not permitted to participate in the process, and thus, the entire labour ritual would be navigated by women.[286] Considering the above and the gendered space surrounding childbirth in relation to the narrative, Shiphrah and Puah would have been in a position of power, at least in the immediate context of their profession. As midwives, they occupied a space solely purposed for women, and, as knowledgeable midwives dealing with vulnerable mothers, they would have occupied a role in which their authority was recognised and deferred to. This is true not only regarding the women who were attended to by the midwives, but also in terms of the men, who

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[281] Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1-18*, 63; Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, 173; Garroway, *Growing up in Ancient Israel : Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts*, 51; Yee, 'Midwives in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Ancient Israel: An Intersectional Investigation', 147.

[282] Roth, A. M., & Roehrig, C. H. (2002). Magical Bricks and the Bricks of Birth. *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, *88*, 121–139. https://doi.org/10.2307/3822340, Wegner,. Josef "The Magical Birth Brick" *Expedition Magazine* 48.2 (2006): n. page. *Expedition Magazine*. Penn Museum, 2006 Web. 03 Apr 2023 <http://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/?p=10031>Wegner, Josef. "A Decorated Birth-Brick from South Abydos." Egyptian Archaeology 21 (2002):3-4.

[283] Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1-18*, 63; Garroway, *Growing up in Ancient Israel : Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts*, 52.

[284] Francis Brown et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Snowball Publishing, 2010).

[285] Garroway, *Growing up in Ancient Israel : Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts*, 53.

[286] *Ibid.* 52.

respected the gendered space and process; the absence of men in the narrative is attributed to their acquiescence and deferral of those in charge of the birthing ritual. Even the Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, respected the midwives' prognosis of the Hebrews' birthing process and how it differed from Egyptian birthing practices. This could also have come from a place of prejudice, racism or xenophobia – the Hebrews being seen as lesser and inferior to Egyptians; nevertheless, the expertise associated with midwifery would have been held in high esteem, and thus the word of the midwife is trusted. The Pharaoh does not question Shiphrah and Puah further; instead, the text suggests that their contrived excuse was accepted as truth and that no further interrogation or proof was needed. In this narrative, we see how the midwives employ a traditionally feminine space and the function of their profession to cunningly assert power and control in a crisis.

Two issues come to the fore and add to the unprecedented nature of the midwives' presence in the narrative: first, midwives would typically have attended women of status, leading to questions about why Shiphrah and Puah were tasked with attending enslaved women. And second, peasant women would typically be attended by family or neighbours. The presence of two midwives would undoubtedly be suspicious, especially if it were known by whose authorisation they were sent – why would Pharaoh deign to send midwives to Hebrew women in labour? [287]

Another factor to consider is the ethnic identity of the midwives, which would further complicate the midwives' attendance to Hebrew mothers. The identity of Shiphrah (שפרה) and Puah (פועה) is ambiguous (Ex 1:15) – and perhaps purposefully.[288] Grammatically, there are differences between the Masoretic and Septuagint texts of Exodus 1:15, and it is unknown whether Pharaoh speaks to the 'Hebrew midwives' or to the 'midwives to the Hebrews'. In the Masoretic text, the former is a more consistent reading with the attributive adjective; however, in the Septuagint, 'Hebrew' is used in the genitive case. The Septuagint indicates that Shiphrah and Puah may be of a different nationality, with some scholars speculating their nationality as Egyptian.[289]

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[287] Rosalind Janssen, 'A New Reading of Shiphrah and Puah – Recovering Their Voices', *Feminist Theology* 27, no. 1 (2018): 12, https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735018789129.

[288] B. S. Kerr, 'Finding Exodus: An Exegesis of Exodus 1:8-21', *Studia Antiqua* 7, no. 2 (2009): 29, https://doi.org/https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol7/iss2/4.

[289] Childs, *The Book of Exodus : A Critical, Theological Commentary / Brevard S. Childs.*, 15–16; L. Juliana Claassens, 'Memories of Midwives', *Journal of Biblical Literature* (Atlanta) 134, no. 4 (2015): 879, https://doi.org/10.1353/jbl.2015.0046; Janssen, 'A New Reading of Shiphrah and Puah – Recovering Their Voices', 12.

Masoretic Text	ויאמר מלך מצרים למילדת העברית אשר שם האחת שפרה ושם השנית פועה:	**And the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives**
LXX	και είπεν ο βασιλεύς των Αιγυπτίων ταις μαίαις των Εβραίων	And said the king of the Egyptians to the midwives of the Hebrews

Table 3: Masoretic Text vs Septuagint

It might be plausible to consider the text intentionally ambiguous regarding the midwives' ethnicity, casting the two women as intermediaries between two people groups.[290] If Shiphrah and Puah were Egyptian, their presence as midwives to Hebrew women would be shrouded in mistrust. It seems irrational that Hebrew women would trust Egyptian midwives to have their best interests at heart when they are being persecuted under Egyptian tyranny. Regardless of these speculations, it seems peculiar that the Pharaoh would employ the services of a profession devoted to bringing life into the world, as the means to ending life.[291] The nature of midwifery might also lead us to wonder whether this vocation is a leading motivation in the midwives' refusal to abide by Pharaoh's genocidal decree. Raveh, however, includes gender – 'their being women' – as a further motivating factor.[292] For Raveh, the heroism of Shiphrah and Puah is more than rebellion or defiance; they are representative of 'the feminine moral imperative to give and nurture life, in the struggle against the hegemonic male framework, whose moral imperative is more abstract and may countenance—and even command—the taking of life'.[293]

Janssen pushes this discussion further by challenging the Hebrew/Egyptian binary altogether. Drawing upon Egyptian material culture and papyrological evidence, especially Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446, she demonstrates that both Shiphrah and Puah bear Northwest Semitic names common among Semitic populations living in Egypt in the early second millennium BCE.[294] This evidence helps clarify their likely Semitic origin, but does not reveal whether these women occupied elite,

[290] Kerr, 'Finding Exodus: An Exegesis of Exodus 1:8-21', 29.
[291] Obiorah, Mary J. "Moses' Mother in Exodus 2:1-10 and Mothers in Personal Names among the Igbo People, South-East Nigeria." *Acta Theologica* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 83–101. doi:10.18820/23099089/actat.v40i1.6., pg 85.
[292] Inbar Raveh, "'They Let the Children Live": The Midwives at a Political Crossroads', *Nashim : A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* (Jerusalem) 24, no. 24 (2013): 12, https://doi.org/10.2979/nashim.24.11.
[293] Raveh, "'They Let the Children Live": The Midwives at a Political Crossroads', 11.
[294] Janssen, 'A New Reading of Shiphrah and Puah – Recovering Their Voices', 13–14.

servile, or other positions within Egyptian society. Janssen's most striking contribution is her proposal that Shiphrah and Puah belonged to the royal harem as Hebrew overseers of midwives.[295]

Locating them within the palace resolves several narrative puzzles – why Pharaoh speaks to them directly, why only two midwives are named, and how they possess enough social leverage to defy him – while explaining their ability to move between Egyptian and Israelite spaces. [296] In this way, Janssen preserves the text's intentional ambiguity while offering a historically plausible reconstruction that intensifies agency: Shiphrah and Puah resist not from the margins but from within the reproductive centre of Egyptian power.

Regardless of ethnicity, Shiphrah and Puah not only provide an active supporting role in aiding the Hebrew mothers through the vulnerable process of birth, but also function in a symbolic role, aiding the birth of a nation – Israel. Threatened by a growing nation, Pharaoh sought to politicise the birthing space of the Hebrews. The actions of Shiphrah and Puah reclaim this gendered birthing space, but because of the structure enforced around Hebrew childbirth, they cannot rid it of its political nature. Instead, the actions of the midwives exploit the politicisation of childbirth in favour of the Hebrew nation.[297] The newborn children are thus a politically reimagined future for the enslaved people of Israel: 'Instead of being a tool in the king's hands and killing the Hebrew infants at birth, they mount a powerful resistance against the repressive and authoritarian forces symbolized by the regime. Their insistence on the perpetuation of life is a revolutionary act in the context of slavery.'[298] Ilana Pardes is another scholar who sees birth as a revolutionary act in this context, noting that births symbolise a reimagined and hopeful future for the newborn infants: 'it means to reclaim subjecthood, to turn the birth of the oppressed into a meaningful event that needs to be recorded and narrated.'[299] Masenya's analysis reveals a gendered invisibility beneath the text's celebration of Israelite growth. She suggests that although the narrative highlights Israel's increase as a sign of divine power and resistance against the Egyptian power, this growth relies on the largely unnamed and unseen reproductive labour of women. The 'womb' becomes vital to the nation's survival, yet the women bearing this physical burden remain marginal in the text. Her interpretation complicates

[295] Janssen, 'A New Reading of Shiphrah and Puah – Recovering Their Voices', 14–16.
[296] *Ibid.*
[297] Ilana Pardes, 'The Biography of Ancient Isreal: Imagining the Birth of a Nation', 30.
[298] Raveh, '"They Let the Children Live": The Midwives at a Political Crossroads', 12.
[299] Ilana Pardes, 'The Biography of Ancient Isreal: Imagining the Birth of a Nation', 30.

triumphant readings of Exodus 1 by questioning the costs to female bodies, especially when women's reproductive roles are used for collective survival, but not fully acknowledged.[300]

What Pharaoh attempts when entering the feminine space is collusion with women who hold power there. He tasks them to be his inner agents – to tread where no male is permitted. Pharaoh's arrogance in his power gives him confidence that women – and midwives – will serve *his* interests in a space reserved for women. In this, Pharaoh fails to realise that the threat to his power lies not in the (newborn) male but rather in the very gender he assigns to carry out his mission. Childs offers a further element to consider, stating: 'The writer underplays the circumstances surrounding the command *[of Pharaoh to the midwives]* by omitting both the elements of threat or the response of the midwives to a scheme which was to require action diametrically opposed to their office as bearer of life.'[301] It should not be ignored that the midwives would not have been in a position to deny Pharaoh, and thus had to find a way to resist his orders in a way that could be 'reasoned'. These points along with Pharaoh's failure to see that 'the people who had the capacity to enable or frustrate the birthing processes, that is the midwives, feared God (Exodus 1:17)', underscore the bravery and intent of Shiphrah and Puah's agency.[302]

While the brave and protective actions of the midwives would have been a relief to the Israelites, it becomes clear that the protective measures provided by Shiphrah and Puah are only temporary. In an escalation of his previous failed plot against the Israelites, Pharaoh commands his people to throw every newborn Hebrew boy into the Nile (Exodus 1:22): 'The narrative now moves quickly to its conclusion. Pharaoh throws off the cloak of secrecy. He commanded all his people: "Every male child [Hebrew is surely understood] shall be thrown into the Nile"' The pogrom has reached its height. All Egypt has been recruited to destroy the population explosion of the enemy.'[303]

However, once again, Pharaoh shows his ignorance by continually misidentifying the actual threat against his reign. He assumes once again that male Israelite offspring present the greatest danger to Egypt. Unbeknownst to Pharaoh, his misplaced fears are once again proven incorrect when women act in resistance, defiance, and even an unintentional unity to undermine his command – as

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[300] Masenya, Madipoane. "Whose Reading Matters? Rereading Exodus 1 in the Context of African (South African) Women." *Dialog : A Journal of Theology* 59, no. 2 (June 2020): 107–14. doi:10.1111/dial.12547, pg 110.

[301] Childs, *The Book of Exodus : A Critical, Theological Commentary / Brevard S. Childs.*, 17.

[302] Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), 'Whose Reading Matters? Rereading Exodus 1 in the Context of African (South African) Women', 111.

[303] Childs, *The Book of Exodus : A Critical, Theological Commentary / Brevard S. Childs.*, 17.

exemplified by the efforts of an Israelite mother and daughter pair, and even his own daughter, the Egyptian princess.[304]

Here, Shiphrah and Puah inaugurate the narrative's first breach in Pharaoh's power – a rupture initiated not by warriors or statesmen but by women whose authority lies in embodied knowledge and gendered space. Their defiance sets the tone for the unfolding drama of subversive femininity in Exodus, where each subsequent female figure enlarges the scope of resistance. Our next character duo, Jochebed and Miriam, extend this resistance into the intimate domestic space of the household. Here, maternal ingenuity and youthful cunning transform survival into a carefully choreographed act of defiance.

Woven Courage: A Mother- Daughter Conspiracy of Survival

In the events that follow Pharaoh's latest murderous decree, the narrative filters down from the national crisis to focus on one particular Hebrew family and the birth of their son (Exodus 2:1-10). The midwives' resistance to obeying Pharaoh's orders is paralleled in the narrative by the actions of a mother and daughter. Jochebed and Miriam are introduced into the narrative, and mother and daughter act in partnership regarding the welfare of the son and brother. With the escalation of Pharaoh's plot against the Hebrews, the boy's mother hides her child for three months. When she is unable to conceal her son further, Jochebed ironically complies with Pharaoh's order to throw Hebrew sons into the Nile – albeit in a very nuanced way.[305] She places the child in a basket among the reeds of the Nile River bank (Exodus 2:3). Alter writes, "The basket in which the infant is placed is called a *tevah,* ark, the same word used for Noah's ark. (It may be an Egyptian loanword. Such borrowed terms abound in the story, giving it local color. The most prominent is the word for 'Nile,' *ye'or*.) As numerous commentators have observed, the story of Moses begins with a pointed allusion to the Flood story".[306] It is interesting to note that in Genesis, a worldwide flood destroys the human race, except for Noah and his family. Alter presents a parallel to the Exodus narrative in Pharaoh's decree to *drown* Hebrew male infants. He goes on to say: "As the ark in Genesis bears on the water the saving remnant of humankind, the child borne on the waters here will save his imperiled people".[307]

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[304] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 84–86; Raveh, "'They Let the Children Live": The Midwives at a Political Crossroads', 13; Obiorah, 'Moses' Mother in Exodus 2:1-10 and Mothers in Personal Names among the Igbo People, South-East Nigeria', 85.

[305] Obiorah, Mary J. "Moses' Mother in Exodus 2:1-10 and Mothers in Personal Names among the Igbo People, South-East Nigeria." *Acta Theologica* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 83–101. doi:10.18820/23099089/actat.v40i1.6, pg 86.

[306] Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 'The Book of Exodus'.: 318

[307] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, 'The Book of Exodus'. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 319.

There is a very blatant kind of irony in the child receiving protection on the water – the very water Pharaoh had imagined would be the means to destroy the Hebrew male infants.[308] In an act of defiance, Jochebed reimagines and reinterprets the way in which she is forced to surrender her child under the power of Pharaoh. Not only has Jochebed forestalled the child's fate by hiding him for a period of three months, but she has also controlled the manner in which the boy is 'thrown into the Nile' – in the safety and protection of a treated basket placed in the dense foliage of the reeds. The boy's sister is then introduced into the narrative as a guardian and protector as she stands 'at a distance to know what would be done to him' (Exodus 2:4).[309] In the combined efforts of these two family members, one can understand why Raveh likens their acts of resistance to a sort of guerrilla war.[310] Jochebed and Miriam join the ranks of the midwives as the inside, invisible threat to political power.[311]

Their defiance is neither spontaneous nor naive; rather, it reflects a mode of improvisational agency often exercised by women in crisis settings, in which survival depends upon reading shifting power dynamics with precision.[312] Miriam's vigilance, positioned at the threshold between danger and deliverance, embodies this wisdom.[313] Her watchfulness also reflects what Bal terms a 'narrative strategy of female foresight', in which women perceive openings in oppressive structures before male characters do.[314]

Beyond their immediate acts, the mother-daughter duo participates in a broader biblical motif in which women safeguard the future of Israel not through overt power, but through quiet acts, and embodied agency. Their strategies stand in stark contrast to Pharaoh's reliance on militarised control. The women's interventions, by contrast, rely on concealment and harnessing of liminal spaces – strategies consistently associated with successful resistance in ancient Near Eastern literature.[315]

Jochebed's use of the *tevah* is thus far more than practical ingenuity; it symbolically reframes the Nile, transforming a site of death into a site of possibility. Scholars such as Propp highlight that this act reclaims the river from Pharaoh's biopolitical reach, asserting a counterclaim over Hebrew life and

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[308] Cat Quine, 'Pharaoh's Daughter: The Adoptive Mother's Sacrifice', *Feminist Theology* (London, England) 29, no. 2 (2021): 103, https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735020965164.

[309] Later, Miriam takes up the mantle of prophet and leader following the events at the Red Sea. She is also established as a 'prophetic challenge to power in the wilderness' Boesak, *The Riverbank, the Seashore and the Wilderness: Miriam, Liberation and Prophetic Witness against Empire*, 1.

[310] Raveh, "'They Let the Children Live": The Midwives at a Political Crossroads', 12.

[311] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 19-28.

[312] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 9-16.

[313] Obiorah, Mary J. "Moses' Mother in Exodus 2:1-10 and Mothers in Personal Names among the Igbo People, South-East Nigeria." *Acta Theologica* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 83–101. doi:10.18820/23099089/actat.v40i1.6, pg 87.

[314] Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 34.

[315] See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 19–31, on the motif of women safeguarding Israel's future through subtle, embodied agency; Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 9–12; and Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 28–33.

its future.[316] Likewise, Miriam's liminal position, between concealment and revelation, demonstrates how a young girl can destabilise imperial power through adaptive, relational agency. Yet ensuring the survival of Moses does not remain solely within the hands of the Hebrew woman. The narrative performs an unexpected displacement, shifting from the margins of Hebrew domestic life into the very heart of Pharaoh's own household. Where the mother-daughter pair extend the chain of female resistance inaugurated by the midwives, operating in liminal spaces that Pharaoh neither perceives nor controls, it is precisely at this liminal threshold – between concealment and discovery, between the riverbank and the palace – that another woman enters the story. The Egyptian princess emerges as the next and most improbable agent of subversion in this continuum of resistance – her compassion subtly fractures the empire from within.

Royal Disruption: The Egyptian Princess

While bathing in the river, the Egyptian princess discovers the boy in the basket among the reeds and takes pity on him (Exodus 2:6). In this critical climactic moment, her compassion crosses the boundary between the Hebrews in slavery and the Egyptian people. Undoubtedly knowing that her father has decreed the murder of Hebrew sons, her compassion and maternal agency lead to her impulsive decision to adopt the boy as her own, bringing a Hebrew boy, a son of slaves, into the palace and seat of power. Irony is once again used as a narrative device in a member of Pharaoh's household adopting a Hebrew child.[317] Of the princess, Quine writes, 'not only does she play a vital role in Moses' survival and upbringing, she also represents a rare example of an adoptive mother in the Hebrew Bible.'[318] Her presence thus introduces a distinctive maternal figure whose agency disrupts the genocidal decrees of Pharaoh. Unlike the previous women characters, whose actions unfold under immediate threat, the princess acts from a position of privilege. Paradoxically she exercises her power in solidarity with the oppressed. In rescuing the boy, she becomes the unexpected hinge upon which the narrative turns, embodying a form of elite subversion that complicates the Israel-Egypt binary.

'The baby boy is eventually given the name Moses, yet the women remain unnamed, characterised by their relation to the male child (birthmother, sister, adopter).'[319] This literary anonymity further accentuates the disruptive presence of the princess, whose anonymity stands in tension with the authority of her actions. Her anonymity does not signal insignificance but rather intensifies the

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[316] William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 153.
[317] Quine, 'Pharaoh's Daughter', 103.
[318] *Ibid.*
[319] *Ibid.* 104.

universalising quality of her role: she becomes an archetype of compassionate defiance within a system structured for violence.

In another layer of irony, Moses' birth mother becomes his wet nurse. However, this information may also serve as a narrative device to affirm the Egyptian princess's parental claim to the boy. As Child notes in the context of the Ancient Near East, the legal prerogative over a child was understood to lie with the individual who financed the child's upbringing.[320] Within this framework, Exodus 2:1-10 demonstrates an awareness of established adoption conventions. The inclusion of the wetnurse's role – specifically the period of weaning – with the provision of wages, and the phrase 'when the boy grew up' (Exodus 2:10), all suggest the presence of a structured, time-bound arrangement. According to Childs' work, these narrative cues imply that the daughter of Pharaoh, despite entrusting the care of Moses to his biological mother, retained legal maternity through a formal adoption process.[321]

Bridge draws attention to the significance of maternal naming practices in the biblical tradition, noting that it is more often the mothers—rather than the fathers—who are involved in naming children.[322] Of particular relevance is the scene in Exodus 2:10, where it is not Moses' birthmother or father, but rather Pharaoh's daughter, the Egyptian princess, who assigns the child his name. Although the name *Moses* is Egyptian in origin, commonly appearing as the *-mose* element in New Kingdom theophoric names, the narrative provides a Hebrew etymology ("because I drew him out of the water" – drew out (Hebrew *mashah*)), functioning as a literary reinterpretation of an Egyptian name rather than a literal reflection of the princess's linguistic ability.[323] The name she bestows upon the infant anticipates the child's destiny, and his royal upbringing legitimises Moses' eventual dual identity as Israelite liberator and a figure with privileged access to the Egyptian court. Here we see the cultural cross-currents that many exiles face while living as cultural minorities. They take on foreign names and/or customs while maintaining ties to their own cultures".[324]

In this way, Moses' name serves as a linguistic and symbolic fusion of Egyptian and Hebrew elements, mirroring the boy's dual heritage. The act of naming, carried out by an Egyptian woman for a Hebrew child, may be read as signifying his belonging to both communities.[325] While some

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[320] Brevard S. Childs, 'The Birth of Moses', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 112.
[321] Childs, 'The Birth of Moses', 112–14.
[322] Edward J. Bridge, 'A Mother's Influence: Mothers Naming Children in the Hebrew Bible.', *Vetus Testamentum* 64 (2014): 389–400.
[323] See William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 158–161; Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 25–26; and Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 38–40, on the Egyptian etymology of "Moses" and the Hebrew narrative reinterpretation in Exodus 2:10.
[324] Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins*, 112.
[325] Quine, 'Pharaoh's Daughter', 105; Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 44, Cambridge Core, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806377.

scholars interpret this as a narrative device to foreshadow Moses' future role in leading the Israelites through the Red Sea or to provide an etymological explanation for his name, such readings do not preclude another plausible interpretation: that the daughter of Pharaoh, by naming the child, is portrayed in the text as assuming a maternal role.[326] Moreover, the narrative subtly frames naming as an authoritative gesture that counters Pharaoh's own decree. Where Pharaoh declares death over Hebrew sons, his daughter pronounces identity and life. Her naming becomes a counter-discourse to her father's edict – a performative act that signals her alignment with life-preserving agency rather than state violence. In turning a space of death (the Nile) into a site of rescue, and a child marked for annihilation into one marked by name and identity, the princess embodies a form of royal dissent that reverberates through the unfolding narrative. Her intervention does not merely save an infant; it reconfigures the political landscape in which Israel's deliverer will emerge.

There is narrative significance in the Egyptian princess's capacity to traverse ethnic boundaries. This feature is central to the unfolding of Moses' origin story. The princess's actions stand in direct contrast to her father's genocidal decree, in that she chooses to preserve life where he orders death. Her decision to act compassionately against both patriarchal authority and imperial policy, reveals a character whose morality outstrips the violence of her social environment. In this way, the princess becomes the narrative hinge on which Moses' survival turns, functioning as both the disruptor of Pharaoh's political will and the unexpected guardian of Israel's future liberator.

Her participation in the naming scene – traditionally a maternal act – signals her assumption of a parental role despite the ideological distance between her and the enslaved Hebrews. It is therefore interesting that the biblical text refrains from calling the Egyptian princess Moses's mother. Even after her apparent adoption of the boy in Exodus 2:7-8, the narrator records that the boy's sister 'went and called the child's mother.' The narrative thus holds her at a distance: the princess is undoubtedly central, yet her motherhood remains narratively muted.

There are several plausible explanations for this narrative choice. One reason is that the absence of personal names for the three women may necessitate continuing to use the term 'mother' to clearly distinguish Moses' birthmother from the Egyptian princess. Second, this may be a subtle effort to acknowledge Moses' Egyptian upbringing while ultimately disavowing it. A third, and possibly most compelling, explanation may reflect what Yee identifies as a form of resistance

[326] Quine, 'Pharaoh's Daughter', 106–7.8/25/2026 10:50:00 AM

literature, in which women are positioned as agents of national preservation in the face of imperial violence.[327]

Yee goes further, arguing that the midwives, Moses' mother, and his sister operate with intelligence and cunning. In contrast, the Egyptian princess is presented as naïve – her decision to take in the infant being one of sentiment, not strategy. [328] However, there are other ways of understanding her role. The princess's actions not only subvert the Pharaoh's orders but also, more importantly, her pity and compassion in taking in the child and raising him as her own suggest moral conviction rather than naivety or foolishness. Her risks are real, not symbolic: she takes into her household a child of a despised slave population, in full awareness of her father's decree.

Nonetheless, the erasure of her maternal identity remains striking and Moses' formative years within the Egyptian palace are omitted from the narrative. When Moses reappears in Exodus 2:11, he is suddenly a grown man, ready to engage in violent resistance. The lack of reference to his adoptive upbringing may reflect an intentional effort to downplay imperial beneficence – or perhaps this narrative approach is a literary strategy designed to resist foreign royal intervention in Israel's foundational history.[329]

The motif of vulnerability and exile is picked up throughout the narrative of the Hebrews in Egypt and carries over into the more detailed story of the baby Moses. The Moses character is developed so that his individual life and experiences reflect the vulnerability of the Israelite people. As Carr notes: "Not only is he born, like many exiles, in a foreign land. Not only does his mother avoid having him murdered by Egyptians by setting him loose, as a three-month-old baby, in a basket on the mighty Nile. But he then is taken up from the river by an Egyptian princess and grows up in an Egyptian household. The child Moses of this story thus lives like an exile amidst foreigners, even as his mother is hired as his wet nurse (Exodus 2:5–9)…Here we see the cultural cross-currents that many exiles face while living as a cultural minority".

The boy's sister, Miriam, approaches the Egyptian Princess and suggests that a nursemaid be fetched from the Hebrew women, the actual mother of the rescued son. The Princess agrees to this arrangement, and when the child is older, takes the boy as her own son.[330] It should be noted

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[327] Gale A. Yee, "'Take This Child and Suckle It for Me": Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (London, England) 39, no. 4 (2009): 185–88, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107909343550.

[328] Yee, "'Take This Child and Suckle It for Me": Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel', 185–88.

[329] Yee, "'Take This Child and Suckle It for Me": Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel', 187–88; Quine, 'Pharaoh's Daughter', 106–7.

[330] Alter and Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 59; Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins*, 112–13.

that, in the ancient Near East context, it was not unusual for elite or royal women to use the services of a wet nurse; however, it would certainly not be a wet nurse selected from enslaved people.[331] This detail heightens the subversive tone of the narrative: a Hebrew slave woman becomes woven into the royal household through maternal labour, collapsing social boundaries for the sake of the child's survival.

Placing the women side by side, we see a striking contrast: 'a Levite, Hebrew woman who has to give up her child in fear of his life, and…an Egyptian princess who defies the pharaonic order and rescues the child despite realizing he is a Hebrew. Their joint care for the male baby, however, brings them together'. [332] Thus, as Raveh highlights, 'the rescue and adoption of Moses is a women's rebellion, staged in a feminine way. It involves cooperation between Hebrew and Egyptian women—between uneducated daughters of slaves and a princess, the product of a royal upbringing. Together, they defy the king's authority, crossing boundaries of socioeconomic standing, education, nationality and religion, in order to save the life of a single boy'.[333]

What I want to draw attention to regarding the Egyptian princess is her demonstration of maternal agency. Her agency is very much in the form of motherhood – most prominent in her naming of the child and in the boy's adoption and subsequent care. It is through her motherhood that Moses survives. Indeed, her maternal act is the narrative catalyst that enables Israel's story of deliverance. In the Hebrew text, the Egyptian princess seems to fall through the gaps in relation to motherhood. Quine reasons that this may be in part because the Hebrew biological mother, rather than the Egyptian princess, is explicitly named 'mother'. Quine writes: "In addition, while her association with the Pharaoh and Egypt is vital for the narrative, it leaves a lingering suspicion over her character. No matter the kindness she shows, she is inextricably tied to those who are in opposition to Israel. These elements seem to contribute to a certain ambivalence towards her found in biblical scholarship, which at times does not seem to afford this adoptive mother the same positivity as the birthmother receives."[334]

The role and portrayal of the women in these initial chapters of Exodus is rich and multi-layered. Gale Yee, for example, explores the potential power dynamics in the story of an Egyptian princess

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[331] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 84–86; Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, 173; Raveh, "'They Let the Children Live": The Midwives at a Political Crossroads', 13. As with the case of the midwives in the ancient Near East, wetnurses were most commonly used by elite or royal women, whereas peasant women unable to breastfeed would be helped by another lactating woman within their close circle of family or neighbours Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, 173.

[332] Quine, 'Pharaoh's Daughter', 104.

[333] Raveh, "'They Let the Children Live": The Midwives at a Political Crossroads', 13.

[334] Quine, 'Pharaoh's Daughter', 111.

and her Hebrew slave and wet nurse. Through a socio-historical examination, Yee discusses the power relations 'in which an empire exploits enslaved foreign women for the products of their bodies'. She categorises Exodus 2:1-10 as resistance literature 'in its subversion of the usual social expectations for wet nurses in antiquity'.[335]

The work of Yee and others reminds us that, in the opening chapters of Exodus, the women characters are central to the larger story of Israel, particularly at this moment of crisis. However, the interrelationship of gender, power, and agency in this case is complex; the subject of their activity and agency is male and ultimately fulfilled in the infant boy, Moses. Cheryl Exum's observations on the matriarchs of Israel in Genesis are worth considering regarding the yet-unnamed Jochebed, mother of Moses. She notes that despite the attention given to the matriarchs, 'their actions are allowed to advance the plot only insofar as they have important consequences for their sons'.[336] This is an interesting point when considering that the unnamed mother's actions culminate in the survival story of her son, who will soon be revealed as Moses. With the preservation of Moses, the women fade into the background of the story as mere supporting characters, while Moses emerges as the main character. Shiphrah, Puah, and the Egyptian princess do not reappear following the events of Exodus 2, and the mother of Moses is only named in the genealogy of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 6:20; Num 26:5). Miriam is the only female character from the narrative of Exodus 1:8-2:10 that is permitted a role in the subsequent Moses narrative. However, in comparison to the opening chapters of Exodus, this revised role Exum suggests is suppressed and even discredited.[337]

And yet, a thread of comedic irony underpins the entire narrative and binds it to a gendered discourse. Pharaoh presumes the Hebrew male to be the threat. His actions are compelled by his fear of Hebrew men and the potential of newborn boys. He feels so threatened that he responds in cruelty. He does whatever is in his power to destroy them. He oppresses them harshly through physical labour and slavery, and demands that newly born boys be thrown into the Nile. Yet the most consistent threat to his power comes from women. In this, Pharaoh is transformed from a man of power into an object of ridicule, as time and time again these women exert agency during this time of crisis and oppression.[338]

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[335] Yee, "'Take This Child and Suckle It for Me": Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel', 180.
[336] J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 163 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 103.
[337] Exum, 'Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8-2.10', 75.
[338] Raveh, "'They Let the Children Live": The Midwives at a Political Crossroads', 12.

This narrative progression – from midwives, to mother and daughter, to the daughter of Pharaoh – forms a cascading chain of female agency that repeatedly disrupts, redirects, and ultimately undermines the power of the Egyptian king. Each woman occupies a different social location, yet all three nodes of resistance share a common thread: their actions emerge from liminal, gendered spaces that Pharaoh neither perceives nor controls.

Chapter 4

ANATOMIES OF AGENCY: GISELLA PERL AND STANISŁAWA LESZCZYŃSKA AND THE LABOUR OF SURVIVAL IN AUSCHWITZ

Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter. [339]

The Holocaust is historically and phenomenologically unique in that 'never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy, to annihilate physically every man, woman, and child belonging to a specific people'.[340] Genocide was conducted on an industrial scale and executed in a chillingly systematic, pragmatic fashion. While primarily targeted at the Jewish people, the Holocaust included the persecution and execution of other marginalised people groups, such as those with disabilities, homosexuals, Romani, Soviet prisoners of war, and other minority groups. This unprecedented breadth of persecution laid the groundwork for one of the darkest manifestations of modern political power.

In the aftermath of the First World War (1914- 1918), the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) of Germany found itself in crisis, with a collapsing economy and heightened social upheaval. In the midst of a shattered German psyche, a reappropriation of a once-glorious historic national identity became a welcome and compelling reprieve from the reality of humiliation and defeat. Certain corners of extremist right-wing German society began to propagate a nationalist mysticism and history of a superior race, the Aryan peoples from which the Germanic people emerged. Indeed, before the end of the nineteenth century, the phenomenon of 'anti-Jewish prejudice, antisemitism, emerged that blended religious prejudice, traditional folklore, cultural stereotypes, and economic resentment with

[339] Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (The Orion Press, 1959).
[340] Steven T. Katz, 'The Uniqueness of the Holocaust: The Historical Dimension', in *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, 3rd edn, ed. Alan S. Rosenbaum (Westview Press, 2009), 39.

new pseudo-scientific theories about race.'[341] This racially motivated movement would reach its full and devastating potential under Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist (Nazi) Party. Here, the intersection of political instability and racial ideology created the conditions in which antisemitism could be transformed from prejudice into state policy.

The Third Reich was marked by a dangerous, almost mythological sense of entitlement intrinsically bound to national identity and pride, and these ideas were insidiously incorporated into German policy from 1933 to 1945.[342] The use of race as a qualifier for a group's social cohesion is not a new phenomenon. However, under Nazism, racial categorisation became not merely a social marker but the cornerstone of political and biological governance.

Anti-Semitism was far from a new phenomenon in Germany, having existed before and during the First World War. However, in the aftermath of the war, with this necessity for a renewed sense of nationalism, scapegoats were readily supplied by right-wing populists in the form of Jews and Bolsheviks. To quote Longerich:

> 'Above all a concept of nation that was based on common ancestry and shared culture remained open to the kind of radical anti-Semitism propounded by the the völkisch movement and especially to the argument that Jews did not form a proper part of the community of the German people because of their distinct culture and alien ancestry. Before 1918 the völkisch idea was mostly the province of sectarians, outsiders, and nutcases, but this new context gave it the chance to take centre stage in the process of founding a new German national identity.' [343]

Among the reasons credited for Germany's defeat in WWI were erroneous reports of the demographic of German-Jews in the service of the army during the war. This anti-Semitic rhetoric stated that the German Jewish soldiers had not served in a manner that paralleled the exemplary service and sacrifice of the 'German' soldiers. Instead, the Jews were traitors to the cause.[344] These

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[341] David M. Crowe, 'Holocaust', in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture.*, ed. Judith Reesa Baskin, The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism & Jewish Culture (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 230.

[342] Adolf Hitler and Ralph Manheim, *Mein Kampf / Adolf Hitler ; with an Introduction by D. Cameron Watt ; Translated by Ralph Manheim.* (Pimlico, 1992); Crowe, under 'Holocaust', 230–33.

[343] *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

[344] Hitler and Manheim, *Mein Kampf / Adolf Hitler ; with an Introduction by D. Cameron Watt ; Translated by Ralph Manheim.*; Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews*, 11–12; Jane Caplan, ed., *Nazi Germany: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2019), ch. 2. Black reports that 'more than 100,000 German-Jewish and 320,000 Austro-Hungarian Jewish soldiers served during the war and one in eight died. Most Jews were not pacifists, and the calls of nationalism, duty, and honor encouraged military service' Jeremy Black, *The Holocaust : History and Memory* (Indiana University Press, 2016), 9, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=4605930..

myths, repeated with increasing ferocity, allowed antisemitism to shift from the margins of German discourse to its political centre.

Austrian-born Adolf Hitler (1889 - 1945) would become the infamous face and leader of Nazi Germany. In the communists, and most especially the Jewry, Hitler identified the 'enemy within' and a ready scapegoat for the current state of Germany. Hitler's vitriolic views would become a central theme in the motivations of Nazi Germany, and the escalation of Hitler's intentions for Jews, from emigration to complete extermination, reflected the radicalisation of this ideology into genocidal action.[345] Under his leadership, antisemitic sentiment was weaponised into a bureaucratic machinery of annihilation.

Auschwitz was a compound situated in Poland, and was comprised of subcamps and three main camps – Auschwitz I, II, and III.[346] It was in the camps of Auschwitz that the Nazis murdered 'almost a million Jews, along with 70,000–75,000 Poles, 21,000 Roma, and 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war'.[347] The conditions of these camps were filthy, inhumane, and claustrophobic.[348] In terms of medical aid and support, 'in the camps it was a matter of the dying caring for the dying'.[349] This stark reality underscores not only the brutality of the camp system but also the absolute collapse of any form of humane ethics within its confines. It is within this brutal and disintegrating world that both Dr Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska carried out their work—one as a Jewish prisoner-physician forced into impossible moral decisions, the other as a Polish midwife refusing to surrender the dignity of childbirth. The extremity of their setting is not incidental but constitutive: Auschwitz forms the crucible in which their respective acts of care, resistance, and moral agency took shape.

The conditions of the concentration camps were dire. In the co-authored *Report on the Sanitary and Medical Organization of the Monowitz Concentration Camp for Jews*[350], chemist Primo Levi and medical practitioner Leonardo De Benedetti — both survivors of concentration camps — provided an

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345 Black, *The Holocaust : History and Memory*, 13.

346 Judith Reesa Baskin, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture / Edited by Judith R. Baskin.*, The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism & Jewish Culture (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 45. The main camp (Stammlager) was Auschwitz I and held one gas-chamber crematorium. Auschwitz II – Birkenau was the death camp and held four gas chambers and crematorium complexes. The slave labour Auschwitz III–Buna/Monowitz was a camp purposed for slave labour and manufactured synthetic rubber Baskin, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture / Edited by Judith R. Baskin.*, 45.

347 Baskin, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture / Edited by Judith R. Baskin.*, 45.

348 Primo Levi and Leonardo De Benedetti, *Auschwitz Report*, ed. Robert S. C. Gordon, trans. Judith Woolf (Verso Books, 2006), 41; S. Leszczyńska, 'A Midwife's Report from Auschwitz', trans. T. Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, *Medical Review –Auschwitz*, 21 August 2018, 1–2, https://www.mp.pl/auschwitz/journal/english/193055,a-midwifes-report-from-auschwitz.

349 Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz : A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 51, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=180456.

350 Levi and De Benedetti, *Auschwitz Report*.

account of camp conditions and a record of medical ailments and diseases.[351] No preventative or combative measures were put in place concerning infectious diseases – of which there were many – 'typhus and scarlet fever, diphtheria and chickenpox, measles, erysipelas, etcetera, not counting the numerous skin infections, such as tineas, impetigo and scabies'.[352] Disease was not merely an outcome of neglect but became an unofficial tool of extermination, as the lack of intervention ensured a continual thinning of the prisoner population.

Holocaust survivor, author and psychologist Hédi Fried (1924) was born in Romania and transported to Auschwitz in 1944.[353] Regarding illness in the camps, she wrote: 'It was important not to fall ill. We would only survive for as long as we could work, and were we to become ill they would have no use for us. We knew that if we were deemed useless, the gas chamber awaited'.[354] Her testimony encapsulates the cruel logic of the camps, where survival depended on maintaining the illusion of usefulness within a system designed to eradicate.

Bodily condition emerged as a key determinant of survival.[355] Those who appeared young, strong, and capable of labour were more likely to be selected for work; those who seemed weak, ill, or dependent were quickly marked for death. Mothers with small children were exterminated immediately, regardless of their own physical fitness, because their maternal status rendered them 'unusable' within the camp economy. Here, gender was not simply an identity but a functional category tied to exploitability and disposal.

The performance of gender roles consequently acquired heightened significance. Behavioural cues, gestures, and even small objects associated with femininity or masculinity acquired classificatory power, often outweighing biological markers. In this sense, the camp intensified hierarchies already embedded in broader society, reaffirming rigid gender binaries even as the prisoners' own bodies deteriorated. Gender became a disciplinary apparatus through which the SS sorted, controlled, and

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[351] Leonardo De Benedetti was born in Turin in 1898. He worked as a medical practitioner until the anti-Semitic Racial Laws resulted in his loss of work. In 1943 he was arrested and deported to Auschwitz. Primo Levi was born in Turin in 1919 and worked as a chemist. In 1943 he was arrested and taken to Auschwitz Levi and De Benedetti, *Auschwitz Report*, 22.

[352] Levi and De Benedetti, *Auschwitz Report*, 43.

[353] Hedi Fried, *Questions I Am Asked about the Holocaust*, trans. Alice E. Olsson (Scribe Publications, 2019).

[354] Fried, *Questions I Am Asked about the Holocaust*, 65.

[355] Marta Karwowska demonstrates that gender in the Nazi camp system functioned not as a purely biological category but as a culturally interpreted one, with prisoners classified according to how their bodies were read and coded within camp ideology rather than by anatomy alone. See Marta Karwowska, "Gender and the Body in the Nazi Camps," in *Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones: From the Ancients to the Modern World*, edited by Elizabeth Heineman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 137–155; and Marta Karwowska, "Women's Luxury Items in Concentration Camps," in *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges*, edited by Andrea Pető, Louise Hecht, and Karolina Krasuska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2016), 63–76, esp. 65, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=4898004.

dehumanised the inmates.[356] For women in particular, the camps constituted a space of radical unmaking. Their personhood was systematically dismantled through the shaving of hair, the destruction of clothing, and the imposition of tattooed numbers in place of names. The filthy conditions, rampant disease, and extreme malnutrition eroded the very bodily integrity upon which social identity is ordinarily grounded.

Pregnancy and childbirth at Auschwitz-Birkenau were influenced by changing but consistently brutal camp policies. In the early period of the women's camp, pregnant prisoners were considered undesirable because they were not suitable for labour; and under Action 14f13, this often meant their murder via phenol injections or transfer to gas chambers. Women found to be pregnant in the camp hospital were marked with "sb" (Sonderbehandlung, meaning "special treatment") on their registration cards, indicating they were marked for death. Even when women successfully concealed their pregnancies and gave birth, both mother and child were frequently killed soon after. The maternity barracks thus functioned as part of the larger genocidal mechanism, making childbirth itself a site of violence, loss, and constant threat of extermination. Starting in spring 1943, however, practices shifted slightly and varied by race: Aryan babies were no longer automatically killed at birth but were registered as prisoners. Jewish infants, however, remained victims of immediate extermination; they were drowned by camp staff after birth.[357]

It was in such conditions that we encounter the two central figures of this chapter: the Jewish gynaecologist, Dr Gisella Perl and the Catholic Polish midwife, Stanisława Leszczyńska.[358] Their stories emerge not simply as individual accounts of survival, but as profound testimonies of resistance and agency within a space engineered for destruction. The discussion turns first to Dr Gisella Perl, whose experiences expose with particular clarity the gendered brutality of the camp system and the extraordinary forms of embodied agency that emerged in response.

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[356] Bozena Karwowska, 'Women's Luxury Items in Concentration Camps', in *Women and the Holocaust : New Perspectives and Challenges*, ed. Andrea Pető et al. (Wydawnictwo Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2016), 67–68, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=4898004.

[357] Teresa Olearczyk, The Moral Skills and Professional Attitude of Midwives: The Pedagogical Implications of the Moral Attitude of Stanisława Leszczyńska, a Midwife from Auschwitz-Birkenau, Biografistyka Pedagogiczna, Year 8 (2023), No.2.

[358] Both women were imprisoned and worked in the women's camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau (Auschwitz II). Leszczyńska was imprisoned in Auschwitz from 1943 until liberation in January 1945. Gisella Perl was deported to Auschwitz in 1944 and assigned by Josef Mengele to work as a prisoner physician in the women's camp hospital system. Because Perl arrived later, in 1944, there was an overlap period during which both women were active in Birkenau, however there is a lack of archival evidence proving direct personal interaction between the two women.

Dr Gisella Perl

Dr Gisella Perl's (1900 - 1988) harrowing experiences in Auschwitz epitomise the constrained yet profound agency a woman could exert under conditions of extreme crisis and social disruption.[359] Amidst a genocidal regime that stripped inmates of autonomy and humanity, Dr Perl managed to leverage her medical knowledge in acts of covert resistance and care. Her story – told vividly in her memoir highlights how gender and power intersected in the camps, forcing agonising moral dilemmas but also allowing for courageous, if heartbreaking, choices. Her testimony, therefore, serves not only as a personal narrative of survival but also as a critical lens through which the gendered dynamics of the Holocaust can be understood with greater nuance.

> 'No one will ever know what it meant to me to destroy these babies. After years and years of medical practice, childbirth was still to me the most beautiful, the greatest miracle of nature. I loved those newborn babies not as a doctor but as a mother and it was again and again my own child whom I killed to save the life of a woman… And if I had not done it, both mother and child would have been cruelly murdered. God was good to me. By a miracle, which to every doctor must sound like a fairy tale, every one of these women recovered and was able to work, which, at least for a while, saved her life. [360]

Hungarian gynaecologist, Dr Gisella Perl, along with her husband, son, and parents, was arrested by the Gestapo in March of 1944. They were taken from their home of Maramaros Sziget – in what is today's Romania – to Auschwitz in Poland.[361] Her deportation placed her directly in the heart of the Nazi medical system, where her professional identity became both a burden and a lifeline. Rather than protecting her, her medical expertise exposed her to heightened scrutiny, yet it simultaneously enabled her to carve out small spaces of intervention that would otherwise have been impossible.

Brozane records that when Perl's father, Maurice Perl, was led away, he carried a prayer book. This prayer book held special significance as it symbolised a vow Gisella had previously made to her father. "At age 16, Gisella Perl had graduated first in her secondary-school class, the only woman and the only Jew. She asked her father to send her to medical school, but he refused at first because he was worried that his daughter would break away from Judaism. Several months later, she again

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[359] Brown, Adam. "'No One Will Ever Know': The Holocaust, 'privileged' Jews and the 'Grey Zone.'" *History Australia* 8, no. 3 (January 1, 2011): 95–116. doi:10.1080/14490854.2011.11668390.

[360] Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (1948), pg. 82.

[361] Roni Peleg, 'Gisella Perl: A Jewish Gynecologist in Auschwitz', *Journal of Women's Health (Larchmont, N.Y. 2002)* (United States) 14, no. 7 (2005): 588, https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2005.14.588.

approached him holding a prayer book he had given her. She vowed on the book 'that wherever life will take me, under whatever circumstances, I shall always remain a good, true Jew'". [362] Perl was thus allowed to enrol in medical school. On the day she received her first payment from a patient, she purchased another prayer book with her father's name engraved. Again, she swore to him that she would remain an observant Jew regardless of where life takes her. Maurice Perl carried that prayer book with him into the crematorium in Auschwitz. This intergenerational thread of faith and duty became tragically inverted in the camp: what once symbolised the promise of a hopeful medical profession became a final relic of familial annihilation.

Perl's harrowing testimony as a Jewish medical practitioner during the Holocaust is recounted in her memoir, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*.[363] As a gynaecologist, Perl's medical experience and expertise led to her placement in Auschwitz as a physician in an infirmary. This assignment, while fraught with danger, also positioned her in one of the few locations within the camp system where it was still possible to shield, however minimally, the most vulnerable women from immediate death.

Her time in Auschwitz, and her role as a medical professional within the camp, put her in a position where she witnessed first-hand the fate awaiting pregnant and vulnerably ill women – the gas chambers. However, her role as a medical practitioner became an act of resistance in and of itself. Perl's daily work thus oscillated between the bureaucratic machinery of Nazi medical control and an underground ethic of care that sought to preserve life wherever possible. This duality reveals how the very structures intended to enforce extermination could, in rare instances, be tactically appropriated by prisoners with specialised skills.

In total, Perl was one of only five doctors and four nurses in the Auschwitz women's camp. These medical practitioners were forced to work in inhumane conditions with no medical support. No medication or basic medical resources were provided, bar a few rolls of paper bandages.[364] Perl worked in covert ways of resistance. In instances where typhoid could be diagnosed, Perl and other doctors would substitute their own blood for testing to save the lives of those with the illness from execution.[365] Such ingenuity, born of desperation, thwarted Nazi plans to cull the infirm. In true dark irony, Perl did her utmost to bar all the 'unacceptable' sicknesses out of the rudimentary hospital.

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[362] Nadine Brozan, 'Out of Death, A Zest for Life', C, *The New York Times* (New York), 15 November 1982, https://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/15/style/out-of-death-a-zest-for-life.html.

[363] Gisella Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz* (International Universities Press, 1948).

[364] Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*, 70–71.

[365] Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*, 94; Zvika Orr and Anat Romem, 'Teaching the Holocaust in Nursing Schools: The Perspective of the Victims and Survivors', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (Basel) 18, no. 17 (2021): 2–3, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18178969.

'Skin diseases, typhoid, malaria and insanity' were sicknesses that, if reported, would immediately sentence the patient to death.[366] By manipulating diagnostic categories and exploiting the gaps in SS medical oversight, Perl transformed medical knowledge into a subversive tool – a subtle yet potent form of sabotage that undermined the genocidal logic of the camp.

Nazi biopolitics in the camp cruelly targeted women's bodies and reproductive capacity; pregnant women were routinely marked for death or sadistic experiments. Dr Josef Mengele – the infamous "Angel of Death" – ordered Dr Perl to report any pregnant prisoners, deceitfully claiming they'd receive better nutrition elsewhere. Perl soon discovered the truth – these women were sent to Mengele's lab as guinea pigs, then "two lives would be thrown into the crematorium". Horrified, she "decided that never again would there be a pregnant woman in Auschwitz". This pivotal moment marks the point at which her medical role became inseparable from political defiance: by refusing to comply with Mengele's orders, Perl directly disrupted the reproductive violence central to the camp's gendered killing regime.

Perl turned the meagre authority she had as a camp doctor into a shield for the vulnerable. Her position was paradoxical – though a prisoner herself, she occupied a liminal space with access to the infirmary and a shred of influence, which she exploited to help others survive. In Holocaust scholar Primo Levi's terms, Perl became an example of the camp "gray zone," a prisoner forced into morally ambivalent roles yet using them to alleviate suffering. Her agency thus embodied what Langer termed "choiceless choices", 'where crucial decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing.'[367] Within this gray zone, her medical actions served as a form of resistance and a bid for survival both for herself and for countless other women. Perl's work, therefore, illustrates Levi's insight that even within systems designed to erase moral choice, fragments of ethical agency persisted.

Expectant mothers were among the first chosen for medical experimentation or rounded up for the gas chambers and destined for immediate execution. Perl tried her best to conceal pregnancies in the camp, often admitting women to the infirmary under the pretence of pneumonia or hiding them in the infirmary until such a time as she could secretly perform the abortions that would permit the women to return to the workforce.[368] For Perl, to save the lives of pregnant women, she would

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[366] Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*, 72.
[367] Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (State University of New York Press, 1982), 72.
[368] Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*, 71.

inevitably need to interrupt the pregnancies and end the life of the unborn child. She often performed these abortions in secret, on the latrine floors under the cover of darkness and in extremely unhygienic conditions.[369] She ended hundreds of pregnancies with her bare hands, without anaesthesia or instruments. These procedures were improvised and perilous, yet every woman treated in this manner survived – a temporary reprieve from execution as long as she could return to work.

In this way, Perl's medical work subverted the camp's gendered killing regime. Each surreptitious abortion or premature delivery was an act of defiance against Nazi control over female bodies. However, as Adam Brown notes: 'sometimes she provided foetuses for Mengele's medical experiments, exemplifying the ambiguous nature of her actions'.[370] The ethical tension of her actions underscores the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust, where the preservation of life demanded acts that would be unthinkable outside genocidal conditions.

In a particularly haunting memory, Perl was approached by the infamous S.S. woman Irma Grese for an abortion.[371] Grese (1921 -1946) was a senior female SS officer at Auschwitz, and her sadistic tendencies earned her the moniker 'the Angel of Hell'.[372] Knowing Grese would not want anyone to know of her pregnancy, Perl was sure she would be killed shortly after the procedure. However, Grese spared her life, and when Perl was left alone in the aftermath, she 'remembered all the pregnant women in the camp whole life depended on my skill, courage and readiness to help…and suddenly I knew why I had been spared. I was responsible for those women…I had to remain alive so as to save them from death…I was their doctor'.[373] Perl not only faced the horrors of survival and self-preservation, but she also faced the added burden of being medically responsible for the lives of countless women. With these many other lives came psychological distress and ethical dilemmas. In Perl's context, she was faced with choosing to end the life of an unborn baby to preserve the life of a mother, or see the alternative, the execution of the mother and the unborn child.[374] Her reflections after Grese's unexpected restraint reveal the profound self-understanding that emerged from these impossible choices: in a world where traditional medical ethics have been

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[369] Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*, 70–71, 80–81; Orr and Romem, 'Teaching the Holocaust in Nursing Schools: The Perspective of the Victims and Survivors', 2–3.

[370] Brown, Adam. '"No One Will Ever Know': The Holocaust, 'privileged' Jews and the 'Grey Zone."' *History Australia* 8, no. 3 (January 1, 2011): 95–116. doi:10.1080/14490854.2011.11668390, pg

[371] Irma Grese was accused of war crimes including the execution of 45,000 women prisoners. Grese was found guilty of war crimes and sentenced to hang in 1946. Frank McDonough et al., *The Holocaust* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2008), 154, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=4763116.

[372] McDonough et al., *The Holocaust*, 154.

[373] Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*, 65.

[374] Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*, 71; Orr and Romem, 'Teaching the Holocaust in Nursing Schools: The Perspective of the Victims and Survivors', 2–3.

annihilated, she reconstructed a new ethics grounded in the preservation of women's lives under conditions of totalised violence.

When Auschwitz was evacuated in January 1945 due to approaching Russian forces, Perl was moved to a camp near Hamburg, and then eventually to Bergen-Belsen. After the camp's liberation, she found out her husband and teenage son had both perished. Her grief led to a suicide attempt by poison and she was taken to a convent in France to recuperate. In March 1947 she arrived in the US as an 'ambassador of the six million'. She was encouraged by Eleanor Roosevelt to begin practicing as a doctor once more. She was granted citizenship in 1951 and resumed practice in Manhattan. She joined the staff of Mount Sinai Hospital where she delivered 3000 babies and became an infertility expert. In 1979 she relocated to Israel where she lived in Herzliya with her daughter Gabriella Krauss Blattman – who was hidden during the war with a non-Jewish family.[375] That Perl returned to obstetrics – the very field the Holocaust had weaponised against her – speaks to an extraordinary reclamation of identity. Her post-war career became a final act of resistance, transforming a history marked by enforced abortions and death into one defined by healing and birth.

While Dr Perl's testimony exposes the agonising moral dilemmas faced by a trained physician operating within the gendered machinery of Nazi biopolitics, her experience represents on one facet of women's medical resistance in Auschwitz. Turning now to Stanisława Leszczyńska, we encounter a different yet equally compelling form of agency: that of the midwife whose unwavering commitment to preserving life stood in stark defiance of a system designed to extinguish it.

Stanisława Leszczyńska

> I delivered over 3,000 babies. In spite of the appalling filth, the teeming vermin and the rats, in spite of the infectious diseases, the lack of water and other dreadful, indescribable things, something that was most extraordinary went on there. [376]

Stanisława Leszczyńska (1896-1974) was a catholic Polish midwife and prisoner, held at the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In Leszczyńska's report, which she wrote 'on behalf of the mothers and children—those who could not tell the world about the wrong done them'[377], she recalls an experience that echoes many of the horrors recounted in Gisella Perl's testimony as a medical practitioner in the midst of a death camp. However, there are marked differences in the

[375] Brozan, 'Out of Death, A Zest for Life', 20.
[376] Leszczyńska, S. (2018) 'A midwife's report from Auschwitz', *Medical Review – Auschwitz* [Preprint]. Translated by T. Baluk-Ulewiczowa, pg 3.
[377] Leszczyńska, 'A Midwife's Report from Auschwitz', 5.

forms of agency displayed by these two courageous and self-sacrificing women. Where Perl's agency took shape through covert sabotage and agonising moral compromises, Leszczyńska's manifested through the steadfast refusal to participate in killing and through the preservation of life (however short-lived) under impossible conditions. In this contrast, the multiplicity of female medical resistance in Auschwitz becomes strikingly clear.

Stanisława Leszczyńska was born on May 8, 1896 in the Polish town of Łódź. She was raised by her mother and father. Her father was in the Russian military and her mother worked in a factory. In 1908, her family relocated to Brazil and Leszczyńska attended school in Rio de Janeiro where the primary language of instruction was German and Portuguese. In 1910, Leszczyńska and her family returned to Poland where she completed her schooling. From 1914 – 1916, Leszczyńska worked for a poverty relief committee. She then married Bronisław, a typesetter who worked at the Kotkowski printing house in Łódź, and with whom she had four children. In 1920, she received training as a midwife at Państwowa Szkoła Położnicza in Warsaw. After completing the two year course she became a midwife by profession.[378] Her pre-war career, marked by service to impoverished communities, later shaped her uncompromising ethic in the camp: midwifery for her was not simply a profession, but a calling grounded in the sanctity of life. This vocational identity deeply informed the nature of her resistance in Auschwitz.

In February of 1943, Leszczyńska, along with two of her sons – Henryk and Stanisław – and her daughter Sylwia were arrested under suspicion of Bronisław's involvement forging papers for those wanted by the Gestapo. While Bronisław managed to escape the Gestapo arrest,[379] his wife and three of their children did not. Henryk and Stanisław were sent to the Mauthausen-Gusen men's concentration camp and Leszczyńska and Sylwia were sent to the women's concentration camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau.[380]

It was in Auschwitz-Birkenau that Leszczyńska, prisoner No. 41335, would serve two years of her life. Leszczyńska's profession as a midwife, along with her daughter's status as a medical student, ensured that both women were stationed at the camp's 'infirmary'. Yet, as with all so-called 'infirmaries' in Auschwitz, this label masked a site of profound deprivation, where the pretence of medical care concealed the systematic neglect and extermination of prisoners. In Leszczyńska's account, she describes the three blocks which she oversaw as a medical practitioner. These blocks

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[378] S. Kłodziński, 'Stanisława Leszczyńska', trans. W. Chłopicki, *Medical Review – Auschwitz*, 19 March 2019, 1, https://www.mp.pl/auschwitz/journal/english/206159,stanislawa-leszczynska.
[379] Bronisław later died in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Kłodziński, 'Stanisława Leszczyńska', 2.
[380] Kłodziński, 'Stanisława Leszczyńska', 1.

were structurally similar and each held wooden barracks which she approximated as 40 meters in length. The barracks walls were riddled with crudely gnawed gaps caused by the ever-present infestation of rats and vermin. Each barrack was lined with three story bunks, and each bunk had to accommodate three to four sick women at one time. These cramped living quarters would mean extreme discomfort for patients already suffering with sickness and extreme malnutrition. The sick women would have to curl up or arrange their limbs in awkward positions to share the single bunk, effectively lying on nothing more than a board crudely recycled from old furnishings of demolished buildings. The mattresses, if not completely deteriorated, were thin and stained with blood and faeces. When it rained, the camp's low-lying position would result in flooding. Leszczyńska recounted that this caused up to 20 centimetres of water to stagnate on the floor.[381] Her meticulous descriptions of these conditions serve not merely as testimony, but as a stark indictment of the deliberate neglect and engineered suffering that characterised Nazi medical spaces.

The conditions were extremely cramped, and the block where Leszczyńska worked held between 1,000 to 1,200 women, with 10 to 20 lives being claimed daily.[382] The loosely termed 'maternity ward' was comprised of the thirty bunks closest to the stove – with the childbed running lengthwise along the middle of the barracks in the shape of a trough.[383] From her recollections, it is evident that the women were made to give birth in appalling and unsanitary conditions, and the role of the midwife was extremely difficult, with little to no medical supplies or medications on hand. In Leszczyńska's block, the only medication dispensed was a daily ration of a few aspirin tablets. Despite this, she insisted on observing midwifery practices as faithfully as circumstances allowed, thereby restoring fragments of humanity and ritual to births.

Her work was mostly done solitarily, and therefore she was forced to deal with any medical complications during the birth process to the best of her ability as a non-doctor. The German doctors – named Koenig, Rhode and the infamous Mengele – would not have deigned attend a non-German, and thus Leszczyńska shouldered all the responsibility for prisoners in her ward. On several occasions she was aided by two Polish women doctors – Dr Janina Węgierska and Dr Irena Konieczna – and when Leszczyńska herself contracted typhus, Dr Irena Białówna looked after both Leszczyńska and Leszczyńska's own patients. Of the doctor-prisoners in Auschwitz, Leszczyńska writes:

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[381] Leszczyńska, 'A Midwife's Report from Auschwitz', 1.
[382] *Ibid.* 2.
[383] *Ibid. 1.*

> 'These doctors fought to save lives that were doomed, and for those doomed lives gave their own. All they had to treat their patients was a handful of aspirins and their own, great hearts. They were not working for the sake of a grand reputation or blandishment, nor to satisfy their professional ambition; all these incentives had vanished. What was left was just the physician's duty to save lives in all the cases and any circumstances she or he happened to encounter, augmented by the need to show sympathy for their neighbour'. [384]

This passage reveals Leszczyńska's moral vision – a commitment to life that endured even when medical success was nearly impossible. In her account, care itself became an act of resistance, a refusal to allow Nazi dehumanisation to define the terms of birth or death.

As with other doctors and nurses in Auschwitz, Leszczyńska would deceive the SS physicians by writing false diagnoses in patient's medical records. All serious diseases would result in the execution of the patient and thus deception was used as a form of covert resistance against the gas chamber selections. Although not overt sabotage, this bureaucratic manipulation constituted a crucial survival strategy – one that depended on intimate knowledge of camp procedures and the courage to exploit them.

In a striking parallel to Exodus when Pharaoh questions Shiphrah and Puah on the births of the Hebrews, Leszczyńska was called to report on the mortality rate of new mothers and new-borns in the camp. Her report accounted no fatalities in labour; she writes that the Lagerarzt 'looked at me in disbelief and said that even the best German university hospitals could not boast of such a success rate'.[385] Against all odds and despite the very unfavorable conditions, all babies born in the concentration camp under Leszczyńska's care, were born alive and appeared to be healthy at birth. Like the midwives of Exodus, her success subverted the logic of a system built on infanticide, revealing how birth could become a site of resistance within genocidal structures.

The post-war legacy of Leszczyńska has grown steadily in Polish memory and Catholic discourse. Considered by some a candidate for sainthood, she is venerated not only for professional courage but for embodying the Church's ethic of life. Yet her prominence in broader Holocaust studies remains comparatively muted, overshadowed by more visible acts of armed resistance. Her story urges a reframing of what constitutes defiance: not all rebellion is explosive.

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[384] Leszczyńska, 'A Midwife's Report from Auschwitz', 2.
[385] *Ibid. 3.*

Her narrative joins those of other women who resisted through care: Dr Lucie Adelsberger, Dr Ella Lingens-Reiner, and the countless women whose mothering to one another created fragile networks of survival. Their shared ethic of compassion reveals a form of resistance enacted not with weapons, but with hands extended in tenderness. As McCrary notes: 'They did not articulate a hope that their actions would overthrow the Nazi regime, but an inability to change the regime did not lead them to accept and live according to the dictates of the Nazis. Their resistance was to recognize and bear witness to the natality that the Nazis attempted to eliminate."[386]

The dynamics surrounding birth in Auschwitz resonate deeply with the Exodus narrative, where the survival of Hebrew infants challenged Pharaoh's decree and became a vehicle for divine disruption. In both contexts, birth represents a defiance of the political order and a theological assertion that life persists despite state-engineered death. As Bergmann notes of childbirth in the HB, it signifies 'a special divine favour granted by God who overcomes human impossibilities'.[387] In Auschwitz, birth could therefore function as a quiet, personal revenge against totalitarian power. A striking example is Aliza Baruch, a Greek Jewish woman subjected to sterilisation experiments. After liberation, she bore children, becoming the only known Greek Jewish female experiment victim to give birth post-war. Her motherhood stands as a bodily repudiation of Nazi medical violence. [388]

Taken together, the testimonies of Perl and Leszczyńska reveal two women navigating the same machinery of annihilation through different forms of agency, each forged under conditions that pushed the human body to its limit. Perl's agonising choices and Leszczyńska's uncompromising refusal to participate in selections represent divergent, yet deeply embodied, strategies of survival and resistance. Yet both women belong to a longer historical continuum in which women's bodily agency has served as a quiet but potent counterforce to regimes structured around death. In contexts where power sought to extinguish life at its very source, their actions, though distinct in method and moral terrain, disrupted these structures by demonstrating, through the smallest embodied acts, that life would endure despite every effort to erase it.

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[386] Alicia McCrary, *Natality as Resistance: Jewish Mothers and the Politics of Birth in the Holocaust* (PhD diss., Emory University, 2022), 112.

[387] Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1-18*, 63.

[388] Yitzchak Kerem, 'Greek Jews in Auschwitz', in *Jewish Medical Resistance in the Holocaust*, ed. Michael A. Grodin (Berghahn Books, 2014), 202, ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=1644358.

Chapter 5

THEORISING AGENCY FROM EXODUS TO AUSCHWITZ

The analysis that follows aims to bring into conversation two seemingly separate narrative worlds: the biblical account of Exodus 1—2:1-10 (chapter 3) and the stories of the medical practitioners, Dr Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska (chapter 4). At first glance, the gap between these contexts may seem unbridgeable. However, both are narratives of women whose bodies, choices, and agency come to the fore amid crisis and social upheaval.

The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, the yet unnamed mother of Moses (Jochebed), Miriam, and the Egyptian princess in Exodus, confront a genocidal decree aimed at eradicating a people's future through the destruction of their male infants. Similarly, Perl and Leszczyńska faced perversions of medical care under Nazi biopolitics, forced into impossible decisions regarding the preservation – or extinction – of life. In both cases, agency is shaped by conditions of radical crisis in which conventional moral categories break down.[389] This theme strongly resonates with Langer, who wrote: 'In the absence of humanly significant alternatives—that is, alternatives enabling an individual to make a decision, act on it, and accept the consequences, all within a framework that supports personal integrity and self-esteem—one is plunged into a moral turmoil, but cannot paralyze all action, if one still wishes to remain alive.'[390]

A central thread in this comparative study is liminality – a condition of in-between existence marked by rupture, uncertainty, and transition. Liminality, if not treated as a discrete section of analysis, appears throughout, shaping how each figure negotiates structures of power and sites of possibility. For the women of Exodus, liminality manifests in the precarious space between Pharaoh's genocidal decrees and God's divine promise of liberation; for medical practitioners enduring the Holocaust, it is inscribed in the 'choiceless choices' of Auschwitz, which Langer describes: 'In the absence of humanly significant alternatives– that is, alternatives enabling an individual to make a decision, act

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[389] In this study, 'conventional moral categories' refer to the normative ethical frameworks that structure human judgement about right and wrong. This is particularly in relation to obedience, loyalty, compassion, and violence. In both the Exodus and Holocaust narratives, these frameworks collapse under the weight of crisis, and this forces moral reasoning into liminal spaces. For example, under Pharaoh's decree (Exodus 1:12-22), the expected moral order is inverted. Ordinarily, midwives are bound by social and professional ethics to preserve life and adhere to authority. Yet Shiphrah and Puah's refusal to kill Hebrew infants subverts this ethical hierarchy. Their *disobedience to power* becomes an act of moral righteousness. Similarly, Jochebed's concealment of her child and Pharaoh's daughter's defiance of Pharaoh's orders, blur the lines between loyalty and betrayal.. Thus, the conventional moral categories are destabilised: deception becomes a form of faithfulness, and civil disobedience becomes an ethical imperative.

[390] Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit*, 73–74.

on it, and accept the consequences, all within a framework that supports personal integrity and self-esteem– one is plunged into a moral turmoil that may silence judgment… but cannot paralyze all action, if one still wishes to remain alive'.[391]

This shared space of crisis and liminality emphasises how female agency can arise not in spite of, but within and against constraints. To shape this inquiry, the chapter uses shift hypotheses as interpretive tools: demographic, role, and political shifts caused by crises. These hypotheses shed light on how women in both narratives reshape gender expectations and exercise agency. Additionally, the analytical framework incorporates theories from Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Anthony Giddens. Foucault's ideas on power and biopolitics reveal how control over bodies – especially female and reproductive ones – underpins both Exodus and Auschwitz. Butler's concept of performativity offers a critical lens on how gender is enacted, challenged, and redefined during crises. Giddens' structuration theory, emphasising the duality of structure and agency, helps explain how women both reproduce and challenge the constraints shaping their social environments.

In summary, these lenses form a comparative approach that highlights their common ability to reveal the edges of power, gender, and agency in extreme situations. This chapter not only points out the crises themselves but also emphasises the intricate ways in which women's agency is expressed, limited, and rearticulated within these contexts.

Identifying Crisis

Extreme crises expose profound human vulnerabilities, which can compel or catalyse ethical disruptions.[392] Both narrative examples involve genocidal crises which elicit actions of disruption and resistance. The resistance of the women of the Exodus narrative and Holocaust survivors Stanisława Leszczyńska and Gisella Perl highlights the potential openings for agency to emerge at the precise moment when vulnerability becomes visible.

When examining the Exodus narrative, four crises emerge. The first crisis is one of political oppression (Exodus 1:8-14). When a new Pharaoh arises 'who did not know Joseph', the Hebrew population is redefined as a threat. Pharaoh subjects the Hebrews to forced labour, which breaks down both livelihood and safety. For the women, this political oppression produces a liminal crisis: the disintegration of social structures, as family units are disrupted by harsh enslavement. Women

[391] Lawrence Langer, 'The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps', in *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and John K. Roth (Paragon House, 1989), 225.
[392] Judith Butler et al., eds, *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance* (Duke University Press, 2016), 14–15.

are caught in a world where their ability to protect their families is undermined. This is a structural crisis, as the oppressive system itself destabilises the Hebrew people's welfare and survival.

A second crisis is identified in the state-sanctioned violence against Hebrew male infants (Exodus 1:15-22). Pharaoh escalates the oppression of the Hebrew people into genocidal violence by commanding that the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, kill all male infants at birth. The midwives' crisis lies in the pressure to enact violence against the very lives their occupation is called to protect. This is both a moral and existential crisis, threatening their identities as life-givers and their own safety should they disobey the orders of Pharaoh. The mothers' crisis lies in the anticipation of pregnancy and birth, as these become infused with fear. Instead of marking continuity and blessing, childbearing becomes a context of danger. This crisis threatens both their children's lives and the women's psychological stability, forcing them into a liminal space between natural maternal roles and survival strategies under oppression. This crisis links strongly to the next: the crisis of infanticide and maternal loss (Exodus 2:1-4).

The decree that Hebrew male infants must be cast into the Nile (Exodus 1:22) crystallises in the story of Moses' mother. She faces an acute maternal crisis: the life of her newborn is directly endangered by the state. Her identity as a mother is jeopardised. Her strategy, hiding the child and placing him into a basket in the Nile, is an act of resistance, but it also represents a liminal state of grief and hope. She relinquishes him to dangerous waters, a symbolic gesture of both surrender and trust. For Miriam, Moses' sister, this is also a crisis of agency. As a young girl, she navigates a tense and dangerous situation at the riverbank, stepping into adult responsibility amid uncertainty and violence.

Finally, the crisis of cultural and familial displacement is seen in Exodus 2:5-10. Pharaoh's daughter discovers Moses, initiating a reversal: the child marked for death is saved within Pharaoh's household. For the Egyptian princess, there is a crisis of loyalty and identity. By rescuing a Hebrew infant, she undermines her father's decree. This is a liminal act – caught between the power of her father's empire and her compassion for the vulnerable. For Moses' biological mother, there is a profound emotional crisis – she becomes her own child's wet nurse under the employ of the very regime that sought to kill him. Her motherhood is simultaneously affirmed and estranged, her agency constrained by the imperial system.

Turning to Auschwitz, a place of systematic destruction, Dr Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska faced a genocidal system that used medicine and maternity as tools of death. Their

actions—clandestine abortions to avoid certain executions in Perl's case, and a firm dedication to dignified birth and refusal to kill in Leszczyńska's—serve as acts of resistance that arise especially where vulnerability is most apparent.[393]

Four crises are identified when looking at the medical testimonies of Perl and Leszczyńska. The first is the crisis of biopolitical control over female bodies and reproduction. The camp regime redefined pregnancy and birth as liabilities to be eliminated. This transformed obstetric care into an extension of state violence. Pregnant women prisoners were routinely selected for death, and infants were killed before or soon after delivery. Perl's infirmary work unfolded within a system that demanded complicity in reproductive annihilation, and Leszczyńska's barracks practice took place under explicit prohibition against preserving newborn life.[394] This demonstrates a structural crisis wherein medical knowledge and reproductive practices were commandeered by a machinery of death. The punitive withholding of water and basic food resources, the overcrowded and disease-ridden barracks, the scarcity of sanitation and medical care, and the routine selections of infants and mothers for execution all point towards this harsh reality.[395]

A second crisis is presented in the form of what Langer terms 'choiceless choices'.[396] Under coercion, ethical categories were fractured. Perl's decision to perform abortions ("it was again and again my own child whom I killed to save the life of a woman") names an impossible position in which every option entails loss.[397]

These choiceless choices identify the distinctive moral injury that follows from action under duress.[398] Leszczyńska's refusal to terminate pregnancies, coupled with her insistence on washing and blessing infants she knew would likely be killed, marks a different but equally severe ethical extremity: a commitment to care that exposes her to harm while ensuring dignity in the face of annihilation.[399]

Third, there is the crisis faced by a profession under constant surveillance. Auschwitz transformed medicine into a spectacle of inspection and punishment. Perl navigated the infirmary under constant threat, disguising procedures, performing medical care in secrecy, and improvising with

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393 Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*; Jane Beal, 'Stanislawa Leszczynska: The Midwife of Auschwitz', in *Midwifery Today (Eugene, Or.)*, no. 102, Midwifery Today, Inc, 2012; Peleg, 'Gisella Perl', 589.
394 Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*; Beal, 'Stanislawa Leszczynska'; Peleg, 'Gisella Perl', 589.
395 Levi, *If This Is a Man*; Levi and De Benedetti, *Auschwitz Report*.
396 Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (Yale University Press, 1991), 72.
397 Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (1948), pg. 82.
398 Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, 72.
399 Leszczyńska, 'A Midwife's Report from Auschwitz'.

no instruments or proper medical resources.[400] In this way, her clinical acts doubled as evasions of surveillance. Leszczyńska delivered babies in overcrowded barracks with minimal supplies, contending with the SS oversight that penalised unauthorised care.[401] This is a crisis of profession under surveillance – to remain a physician or midwife at all meant resisting the camp's efforts to redefine care as complicity.

Lastly, we have the crisis of memory and post-war survivorship. What followed the camps was lingering trauma. Perl's attempted suicide and later memoir testify to the long tail of moral injury and the difficulty of narrating actions that invert ordinary medical ethics.[402] Goldenberg's 'gentle heroism' helps name the paradox: acts of care that preserved meaning and solidarity amid degradation, yet left survivors to reckon with grief that cannot be neatly reconciled.[403] This is a liminal crisis that extends beyond liberation: how to carry forward a professional and maternal identity shaped in conditions where humane action required breaking ordinary rules.

The stories in Exodus 1—2:1-10, along with testimonies from Dr. Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska, unfold amid a complex, multi-layered crisis. Both case studies highlight women operating within systems aimed at suppressing life. In the Exodus account, the genocidal order against Hebrew male infants (Exod. 1:15–22) triggers an existential upheaval that reshapes family units, bodily practices, and community survival tactics. The midwives Shiphrah and Puah face a direct imperial demand to manipulate childbirth as a weapon. Conversely, Jochebed, Miriam, and the Pharaoh's daughter must navigate a political environment where maternal care becomes a form of resistance. The crisis involves state violence and reproductive threat.

Liminality pervades both the Exodus narrative and the Holocaust case study. The women of Exodus operate in liminal spaces – the riverbank, the threshold between Hebrew and Egyptian spaces, and the boundary between concealment and exposure. Likewise, in the concentration camps, Perl and Leszczyńska inhabit a liminal medical role in that they are both prisoners and practitioners – both subject to, and administrators of, bodily care. Across both contexts, crisis thus produces a space in which agency is neither guaranteed nor extinguished; instead, it is renegotiated under conditions of extreme constraint.[404]

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[400] Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*.
[401] Kłodziński, 'Stanisława Leszczyńska'; Leszczyńska, 'A Midwife's Report from Auschwitz'.
[402] Brozan, 'Out of Death, A Zest for Life', 20.
[403] Myrna Goldenberg, 'Lessons Learned from Gentle Heroism: Women's Holocaust Narratives', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Philadelphia) 548, no. 1 (1996): 78–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716296548001006.
[404] A few notes on crisis in social theory: according to Giddens (1984), crisis situations disrupt established social routines and reveal vulnerabilities within oppressive systems. Pharaoh's genocidal decree in the Exodus narrative, and the events of the Holocaust,

The crises described above do more than place women in these narratives into situations of extreme vulnerability; they also reveal the structural breaks that allow for the emergence of agency. When threats intensify, they destabilise social frameworks and challenge the gender norms that usually dictate behaviour. To understand how these breaks create opportunities for agency, the analysis now adopts the shift hypothesis theory. These models help explain the larger sociological patterns through which crises can lead to demographic changes, role shifts, and political adjustments, thus highlighting the structural conditions that support women's actions within and in opposition to crisis contexts.

The Shift Hypotheses: Demographic, Role, and Political Shifts

When read through the lens of the shift hypotheses, interventions of the women of Exodus 1—2:1-10 illustrate how crisis destabilises entrenched power structures and creates openings for women's agency.[405]

The Demographic Shift Hypothesis

The demographic shift hypothesis posits that crises such as war and violence result in a disproportionate loss of men, thereby creating space for women to assume expanded roles.[406] While Exodus 1 does not explicitly describe a demographic imbalance due to male death in battle, it portrays Pharaoh's edict to kill Hebrew boys (Exodus 1:16, 22) as a targeted strategy of demographic control. This creates a threatened demographic imbalance where the survival of male infants – and thus the future of Israel's patriarchal lineage – is placed in jeopardy. Shiphrah and Puah resist this imposed demographic restructuring by refusing Pharaoh's command. Their disobedience is both a preservation of male life and a subtle empowerment of women, since they, rather than men, determine the community's demographic fate. In this way, their actions fit the demographic shift model: in the absence of men, women step into a decisive role of sustaining the population. Jochebed's concealment of Moses (Exodus 2:2-3) further reinforces this pattern, as her maternal ingenuity directly counters Pharaoh's attempt to alter the demographic order.

represent extreme crises that exposed structural weaknesses and opportunities for individual resistance. The women in Exodus, as well as Leszczyńska and Perl, used their respective crises as opportunities to assert individual agency, leveraging their specialised roles to subvert genocidal policies and preserve life. Their actions highlight how crises provide critical moments for individuals to challenge oppressive systems. In a similar vein, Foucault demonstrates how crises reveal vulnerabilities in power structures with provide opportunities for resistance (Foucault 1978). As mentioned above, the crises in both narratives expose structural weaknesses which the women capitalise on, exploiting cracks within the oppressive structures to assert agency. The women's actions affirm that crises, though devastating, offer potential avenues for significant agency and resistance.

[405] 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019.

[406] Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 261.

The Role Shift Hypothesis

The role shift hypothesis argues that crises reconfigure gendered labour and identity roles, since men's absence (whether that is through death, displacement or exclusion) creates opportunities for women's participation in previously restricted spaces.[407] Here, Exodus 1—2:1-10 resonates most clearly. Miriam, a young girl, takes on a proactive, almost diplomatic role by approaching Pharaoh's daughter and arranging for Jochebed to nurse Moses (Ex 2:7-8). In a context where adult male Hebrews are depicted as subjects of slavery and violence (Ex 1:13-14), Miriam assumes an unexpected public function of negotiation and mediation. This is a temporary role shift generated by the disruption of social structures.

Similarly, the Egyptian princess disrupts the conventional roles of Egyptian elite women. Instead of embodying loyalty to her father's genocidal decree, she acts as rescuer and protector of a Hebrew child. Her actions model the protector-combatant dynamic described by the role shift hypothesis, in which women emerge not as passive civilians but as active participants in resistance and preservation.[408] In both cases, the crisis carves out new spaces for women's agency, altering the usual habitus of gender relations.

The Political Shift Hypothesis

The political shift hypothesis highlights how regime change or crisis-induced restructuring can create openings for women's empowerment.[409] While Exodus 1—2:1-10 does not yet depict a political transition, the women's agency and actions foreshadow Israel's eventual liberation and the collapse of Pharaoh's oppressive regime. Shiphrah and Puah embody a kind of proto-political resistance. By disobeying state law, they undermine Pharaoh's authority and reassert divine sovereignty ('they feared God' Exodus 1:17). Their resistance can be read as a micro-political act of agency that anticipates Israel's broader emancipation. Similarly, the Egyptian princess's adoption of Moses symbolises a fissure within the Egyptian order itself as the very household of Pharaoh becomes the site of subversion, with a Hebrew child raised under royal protection.

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[407] Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 261–63; Bakken and Buhaug, 'Civil War and Female Empowerment', 983.

[408] Hilhorst et al., 'Gender, Sexuality, and Violence in Humanitarian Crises', 7; Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 262; Mitra and Bang, 'Gender Disparities in Post-Conflict Societies: A Cross-National Analysis', 139.

[409] Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019, 263.

Thus, while the political shift hypothesis is not fully realised until the Exodus event, these women exemplify its early stages. Their defiance and alternative actions drive cracks in the regime's power, creating windows for new socio-political realities.[410]

Taken as a whole, the women of Exodus 1—2:1-10 are not neatly confined to one hypothesis. Instead, their actions embody an interplay of demographic, role, and, to a degree, political shifts. Shiphrah and Puah resist Pharaoh's demographic manipulation; Miriam and Jochebed assume new social roles; and the Egyptian princess initiates a political subversion within Egypt's royal household.

What is striking is that these shifts occur before the formal Exodus event. The crisis of infanticide and oppression catalyses a pre-emptive restructuring of social order in which women emerge as the first actors of deliverance. Their empowerment, born of crisis, sets the narrative trajectory – without their interventions, Israel's liberator would not have survived. The women of the Exodus narrative do not merely adapt to crisis; they reshape the trajectory of Israel's history. In this sense, Exodus 1—2:1-10 exemplifies how periods of oppression can paradoxically serve as moments of empowerment for women, anticipating long-term transformations in gendered roles and authority.

Just as the women in Exodus reveal how crisis can fracture sociopolitical orders and catalyse unexpected forms of agency, the case studies of Dr Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska likewise expose how extreme conditions generate similar patterns of demographic, role-based, and political shifts. By moving from an ancient narrative of imperial violence to a modern context of genocidal biopolitics, the same shift hypotheses illuminate the continuities – and disjunctions – in how women inhabit, resist, and reconfigure structures of oppression.

The Demographic Shift Hypothesis

The Nazi biopolitical regime aggressively targeted Jewish reproduction: pregnant women were routinely selected for immediate execution, infants born in the camps were killed either at or shortly after birth, and reproductive capacity was diminished through starvation and selections.[411]

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[410] Thomas and Wood, 'The Social Origins of Female Combatants', 217–18.

[411] See Goldenberg's analysis of women's experiences and strategies of survival in Auschwitz and other camps, which emphasises the gender-specific dimensions of persecution and resistance; and Baumel's foundational study of Jewish women's coping mechanisms, agency, and daily life under Nazi rule: Myrna Goldenberg, *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* (New York: University Press of America, 2003); Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998).

In this context, Perl and Leszczyńska operated within a reproductive void where traditional demographic continuity was violently severed. Perl's secret abortions aimed to prevent the definite loss of pregnant women's lives, representing a desperate effort to save as many lives as possible. In this way, Perl's efforts support the demographic shift hypothesis, positioning her as a protector of the few remaining lives amid systematic extermination. Similarly, Leszczyńska's refusal to kill infants—despite explicit orders—places her work in a demographic crisis where births were harshly restricted. Although nearly all infants she delivered were later murdered, her dedication to safe childbirth and human dignity defies the regime's attempt at demographic erasure.[412] Both women, therefore, embody demographic resistance: the preservation of female life, the assertion of maternal care, and the refusal to allow demographic destruction to remain unchallenged.

The Role Shift Hypothesis

The role shift hypothesis proposes that crises destabilise gendered labour divisions, compelling women to assume responsibilities traditionally reserved for men. Auschwitz dismantled every normative social structure, including medical hierarchies and gender roles. Under ordinary circumstances, obstetric surgery, triage, and reproductive decision-making fell under male medical authority. Yet, in Auschwitz, these tasks were delegated (or imposed) upon women, often in isolation and under threat of death.

Perl exemplifies this shift dramatically. As a gynaecologist, she carried out clandestine abortions that contravened both her medical oath and religious ethics.[413] The crisis forced her into a role in which she functioned simultaneously as a physician, protector, strategist, and resistor. Leszczyńska's expanded role similarly reflects crisis-induced reconfiguration. As a midwife, she assumed responsibilities of hospice care, psychological support, and religious ritual. Her refusal to perform abortions or participate in selections placed her in a position of moral counter-authority, resisting the violence of state-sanctioned infanticide. The crisis forced her into an ethical and professional role, one that transcended traditional boundaries of midwifery and challenged Nazi constructions of maternal value.[414] Both women illustrate how crisis destabilises fixed gender roles and compels women into unprecedented and improvised forms of agency.

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[412] Barbara Dobrowolska et al., 'Wanda Ossowska (1912-2001) and Stanisława Leszczynska (1896-1974): Polish Nurses Working under Nazi Occupation', *Journal of Medical Biography* 19 (November 2011): 168–70, https://doi.org/10.1258/jmb.2011.011007; Incorporated Berghahn Books and Myron Winick, *Jewish Medical Resistance in the Holocaust* (Berghahn Books, Incorporated, 2014), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=1644358.

[413] Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (1948), pg. 82.

[414] Beal, 'Stanisława Leszczynska'; Leszczyńska, 'A Midwife's Report from Auschwitz'.

The Political Shift Hypothesis

In Auschwitz, women's political resistance did not take formal forms but rather embodied acts of refusal and efforts to preserve life. Perl's secret abortions served as an act of resistance. By stopping the birth of children destined for immediate execution, she actively challenged Nazi reproductive policies. Her actions undermined the camp's biopolitical systems from within—what Foucault might refer to as *counter-conduct*—small but meaningful acts of defiance that weaken the regime's authority.[415] Perl's work thus becomes an act of political resistance enacted through medical skill and bodily risk.

Leszczyńska's stance was explicitly political. Her open defiance of orders, refusal to kill infants, and confrontation with the SS doctors, including the infamous Mengele, constituted overt political resistance. She transformed the birthing barracks into a space of counter-power: a place where the Nazi project of dehumanisation was met with rituals of dignity, naming, prayer, and maternal care. Her work challenged not only individual orders but the ideological structure underpinning Nazi racial power.[416] Both women show that political agency in crisis is not always expressed through organised uprisings; it can be demonstrated through embodied and life-preserving (albeit temporary or limited) actions that undermine oppressive regimes by refusing to conform to their logic.

Like the women in Exodus 1—2:1-10, Perl and Leszczyńska do not fit neatly into a single shift hypothesis. Instead, their actions uncover a dynamic mix of demographic, role, and political shifts that surface through crisis. Perl's secret abortions helped with the survival of the mother; Leszczyńska's focus on safe birth symbolically challenged demographic erasure. They both engage in forms of political subversion: Perl through hidden acts of counter-conduct, and Leszczyńska through overt defiance—precisely when the regime aimed to remove their agency.

The extreme conditions at Auschwitz did not wipe out agency; instead, they transformed it. The demographic crisis led to resistance, role disruption gave rise to new acts of care and defiance, and political terror created unforeseen opportunities for moral action. Like the women of Exodus, Perl and Leszczyńska exemplify a paradox of crisis – women who, amidst systems designed for death, became agents of life and disruption. Their stories show how atrocity can fracture oppressive systems in ways that allow women's agency to not just survive but reshape the moral landscape, even under the threat of annihilation.

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[415] Michel. Foucault and Michael Senellart, *Security, Territory, Population : Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 94.

[416] Beal, 'Stanislawa Leszczynska'; Leszczyńska, 'A Midwife's Report from Auschwitz'.

While the shift hypotheses shed light on the structural reconfigurations that crisis makes possible they do not yet explain *how* these shifts are enacted at the level of embodied practice, social negotiation, or the management of life itself. The hypotheses illuminate the contours of change, but they remain limited in accounting for the micro-processes through which women inhabit, perform, and contest those altered conditions.

This analysis now explores the contributions of Judith Butler, Anthony Giddens, and Michel Foucault, each enriching the conceptual landscape in unique but complementary ways. Butler highlights the performative aspect of female agency, demonstrating how women re-enact and subtly modify gendered roles in ways that become subversive during crises. Giddens shifts the focus to the social structures of action, emphasising the ongoing interaction between structure and agency that allows women to act differently even within restrictive systems. Foucault examines the biopolitical and disciplinary regimes that control bodies, visibility, and reproduction, showing how women's actions serve as localised forms of resistance within mechanisms designed to control life and make specific populations expendable. Together, these theories broaden the interpretive scope of the shift hypotheses. Their insights facilitate a move from analysing structural changes to understanding the embodied practices, social negotiations, and power dynamics through which women's agency is recognised and feasible in times of significant upheaval and crisis.

Judith Butler

1. Performativity, Maternal Scripts and Subversive Embodiment in Exodus 1—2:1-10

Judith Butler's performativity theory offers a comprehensive interpretive framework for examining the women of Exodus, especially in how their behaviours expose the fluidity and construction of gender norms amidst violent crises. Butler contends that gender is not an innate quality but a 'stylized repetition of acts' that manifest norms on and through bodies.[417] These norms seem natural mainly because they are reinforced within organised social settings. A crisis, then, serves as a moment where the processes shaping gender are revealed – and where the cycle of repetition can be challenged. In Exodus 1—2:1-10, the crisis caused by state-enforced infanticide creates conditions in which women's daily roles- such as midwifery, motherhood, sisterhood, and royal femininity- can be re-enacted in ways that disrupt their usual meanings.

[417] Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity / Judith Butler.*, 191.

The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, serve as the first example in the narrative of gendered performativity that challenges sovereign authority. Pharaoh's order seeks to turn midwifery – traditionally linked with care – into a tool for genocide (1:15–16). The roles expected to reinforce normative femininity (such as service, obedience, and reproductive oversight) are instead used as acts of resistance. Their refusal to kill stems from a 'fear of God' (1:17), but socially, it signifies that they are reenacting their vocation in a way that defies the patriarchal state's attempt to redefine their gendered labour. Even their claim, 'the Hebrew women are vigorous' (Exodus 1:19), functions as a performative statement that leverages the regime's ethnographic assumptions to hide their disobedience. In Butler's terms, this is an act of subversive citation: the midwives draw on existing gendered expectations (their presumed knowledge and the Pharaoh's limited understanding of childbirth) and reshape these to undermine the power the state seeks to wield over them. Their speech not only describes reality but also *creates* a reality in which their resistance remains unseen, making it ultimately effective.[418]

The maternal figures undergo similar reconfigurations. Jochebed's carefully designed concealment of her infant – hiding him for three months and placing him among the reeds (2:2–3) – forms a maternal script significantly shaped by coercive circumstances. Butler emphasises that gendered acts acquire meaning within a social context that interprets them.[419]

Jochebed's maternal actions now have political significance, with her body and labour redefined within a framework that criminalises Hebrew motherhood. Miriam also enters the social sphere as a young girl demonstrating decisiveness and watchfulness. Her distant observation (Exodus 2:4) reflects an interpretive stance that anticipates and responds to future events. Simultaneously, her prompt offer of a wet nurse (Exodus 2:7) elevates an overlooked girl into a political intermediary, shaping the royal household's response. These actions reveal that femininity, even when socially constructed, holds inherent potential that emerges when norms are challenged by crisis.

The Pharaoh's daughter perhaps exemplifies the most overtly Butlerian moment in the narrative, as she embodies Egyptian royal femininity in a way that contradicts the regime's racialised logic. When she recognises the child as Hebrew (Exodus 2:6), she still chooses compassion, challenging the state's biopolitical classification of the infant as someone to be killed. Her maternal act of naming Moses and adopting him (Exodus 2:10) blurs ethnic and political boundaries. Butler's later work on 'grievability' is especially relevant here: by recognising the Hebrew infant as a life deserving of

[418] *Ibid.* 191.
[419] *Ibid.* 191.

preservation, the princess rejects the state's normative view of whose lives are worth saving.[420] In doing so, she performs a version of maternity that is neither compliant nor oppositional in any simple sense; it is a resignification of her elite status into a form of protective agency.

Exodus 1—2:1-10 demonstrates Butler's idea that gender norms gain strength through repeated performances, but this repetition also provides opportunities for resistance. Practices such as midwifery, motherhood, sisterhood, and royal femininity are performed in varied ways, creating spaces for agency within a system intended to suppress it. By re-enacting gendered roles in distinct manners, these women expose the fragility of categories (gender, ethnicity) that underpin their world. Viewing the story through Butler's lens, it emerges as a record of subversive femininities that protect life amid a genocidal threat.

2. Performativity, Embodiment, and the Reconstitution of Agency in Auschwitz

Judith Butler's performativity theory provides a valuable lens for examining the actions of Dr. Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska, particularly in how their bodies and practices question traditional notions of gender, motherhood, and medical ethics in coercive environments. As mentioned earlier, Butler views gender as a continual series of acts that sustain norms through bodily behaviours.[421] Performativity becomes especially visible when normative structures collapse; it is in conditions of rupture – precisely the conditions of Auschwitz – that the fragility of gender norms is exposed.

Perl and Leszczyńska operated within a regime that weaponised gendered bodies. Nazi biopolitics regarded Jewish women and other minorities as reproductively threatening and disposable, aiming to neutralise their reproductive roles. In this context, both women challenged and reshaped gendered roles.[422]

Dr. Perl's secret abortions reveal a complex performative tension. By framing abortions not as an ideological rejection of motherhood, but as an extreme form of maternal preservation, Perl redefines the concept of the 'mothering body.' She blurs the boundaries between destruction and care, demonstrating that these categories are shaped by history, especially under genocidal conditions. Her statement: 'it was again and again my own child whom I killed to save the life of a woman' exemplifies

[420] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009), 13–15.
[421] Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity / Judith Butler.*, 191–92.
[422] *Ibid.* 191.

the performative contradiction Butler later explores, that is, the transformative potential within the gap between a norm and its actual practice.[423]

Leszczyńska's actions stand in contrast to Perl's in a performative and inverse way, yet both are equally defiant. She baptised newborns, believing in the sanctity of life and the dignity of every child. These baptisms were allegedly permitted with consent by Jewish mothers, who reportedly agreed and found comfort in them, providing solace amid the camp's dangers.[424]

This was a deliberate, rebellious re-creation of care within a space designed to eradicate both maternity and meaning. Applying Butler's framework, Leszczyńska's actions expose how Nazi policies shaped ideas about which lives were deemed 'grievable' and which were not.[425] By treating newborns as fully human and fully mournable, she disrupted the camp's performative regime that sought to render those lives socially null.

Both women demonstrate how gender norms are reinforced and challenged through repeated actions. Their bodies served as sites of resistance: Perl's body became a vessel of knowledge opposing the Nazi use of medicine, while Leszczyńska embodied a maternal presence that refused to let meaning be erased. Each woman enacted a version of femininity and caregiving that was not submissive but boldly resistant. Therefore, both women used performativity as embodied resistance, asserting agency in spaces where conventional moral and gender roles broke down.

3. Comparative Synthesis

Across both contexts, Butler's account of gender as a *stylised repetition of acts* clarifies how women re-perform socially legible roles, resignifying them under duress.[426] In the Exodus story, midwifery, motherhood, sisterhood, and royal femininity are performed with a twist – care challenges norms, concealment turns into political action, and naming becomes an act of resistance. Similarly, in Auschwitz, this dynamic deepens: Perl's abortions redefine motherhood as safeguarding maternal life

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[423] Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (1948), pg. 82.

[424] The issue of Leszczyńska's reported baptisms must be approached with nuance. Olearczyk's research situates Leszczyńska's midwifery work within a Catholic moral and vocational context, drawing on her *Raport położnej z Oświęcimia* and subsequent biographical materials. However, the baptism of Jewish infants during a genocidal period raises ethical questions, especially since Jewish identity was already systematically under threat of erasure. Regarding the broader post-war debate over baptised Jewish children, the work of Michael R. Marrus on the Vatican and the custody of Jewish child survivors after the Holocaust can be considered. While not directly addressing Leszczyńska, his work offers a valuable comparative perspective on why baptism involving Jewish children during the Shoah cannot be regarded as a neutral or solely devotional act.
Teresa Olearczyk, The Moral Skills and Professional Attitude of Midwives, Pg 369; Marrus, Michael R. "The Vatican and the Custody of Jewish Child Survivors after the Holocaust." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21, no. 3 (2007): 378–403. doi:10.1093/hgs/dcm059.

[425] Butler, *Frames of War*, 13–15.

[426] Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity / Judith Butler.*, 191.

rather than just biological reproduction. Meanwhile, Leszczyńska's liturgical midwifery reaffirms the 'grievability' of lives that the regime dismisses as insignificant. In both contexts, gender is neither an essence nor simply a constraint; it is a recurring pattern that can be challenged by its own repetition.[427]

While Butler's framework reveals how gender is performatively constructed and highlights the subversive potential within repeat acts, it also emphasises the female body as a site of restriction and a space for potential change. Yet, fully understanding how these acts relate to the larger social structures that both shape and constrain them requires a shift in analytical approach. In this context, Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration offers a helpful complementary view. While Butler focuses on the micro-politics of gender performance, Giddens emphasises the ongoing interaction between individual agency and systemic structures. His idea of the duality of structure – that social systems are both the medium and result of human practices – allows us to see these narratives not just as acts of resistance but as complex negotiations within deeply embedded networks of power. Using Giddens' structuration theory, the women in Exodus and Auschwitz can be viewed as agents who, even under coercion, reproduce and subtly modify the very systems that imprison them.

Anthony Giddens

1. Structuration, Constrained Agency, and the Duality of Structure in Exodus 1—2:1-10

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory provides a compelling way to interpret how the women in Exodus 1—2:1-10 navigate and reshape the socio-political structures that constrain them. According to Giddens, human action does not arise from complete freedom or total structural domination, but from the duality of structure: structures both enable and limit action, while action, in turn, reproduces and modifies those structures. During crises, this dynamic becomes more apparent, illustrating how agents utilise available resources – material, social, and symbolic – to 'act otherwise,' even under strict restrictions.[428]

Exodus 1—2:1-10 illustrates how structure functions effectively. Pharaoh's harsh policy of infanticide creates a brutal system aimed at controlling the Hebrew population (1:15–22). This system operates through bureaucratic channels, from Pharaoh to the midwives, turning birth into a tool of state control. Yet, within this framework, the midwives find resources to resist. Their medical expertise, knowledge of childbirth, and social awareness about midwifery become tools that can be redirected for rebellion. Their explanation to Pharaoh ('the Hebrew women are vigorous') matches

[427] *Ibid. 191.*
[428] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 17–19.

the regime's assumptions but subtly manipulates them to avoid punishment (1:18-20). This showcases Giddens's concept of reflexive monitoring: the midwives assess power dynamics, anticipate responses, and act strategically within constraints.[429] Their resistance is not external to structure but enabled by their embeddedness within it.

Jochebed's actions highlight the duality of structure. Faced with the decree to produce her child, she creates a substitute: a basket waterproofed with bitumen and pitch (2:3). The Nile – intended by Pharaoh as a mass grave – becomes a route of salvation through her intervention. She alters the physical environment in a way that challenges its assigned meaning within the state's classification system. Similarly, Miriam demonstrates adept navigation of social structures: her ability to approach Pharaoh's daughter and influence the outcome (2:4-8) illustrates her skill in mobilising interactional rules—such as deference and kinship—to change her family's status. When viewed through the lens of Giddens, these women possess a clear understanding of the structures shaping their world and skillfully leverage them to forge new possibilities.[430]

Pharaoh's daughter exemplifies structuration from the perspective of a privileged position. Her royal status grants her access to authoritative resources – the ability to make decisions without immediate repercussions. Yet her choice also transforms the structure from within. By adopting Moses (2:10), she undermines the state's attempt to impose rigid boundaries of ethnic and political control. Her decision, though personal, changes the social trajectory of the child and indirectly influences the future of Israel. Giddens notes that agency always involves the possibility of unintended consequences, and the princess's choice serves as a narrative example of how individual actions can reshape large-scale social patterns.[431]

Structuration theory emphasises the intricate nature of agency in Exodus 1—2:1-10. Agency is depicted as embedded rather than autonomous; it operates within constraints and is exercised through strategic interactions with structures. While not revolutionary, it has transformative effects. The women do not overthrow the Egyptian regime, but their actions lead to new structural conditions – such as preserved infants, redefined kinship ties, a Hebrew wetnurse employed by an Egyptian royal, and Moses' integration into the royal household. These outcomes illustrate that agency during a crisis is neither insignificant nor omnipotent; instead, it involves deliberate interventions that gradually reshape the social landscape from within.

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[429] *Ibid.* 3–4.
[430] *Ibid. 3*–4.
[431] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 7–8.

2. Structuration, Constraint, and the Duality of Agency in Auschwitz

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory enables a nuanced analytical approach in understanding how Perl and Leszczyńska exercised agency within the seemingly structurally pervasive constraints of Auschwitz. For Giddens, human agency is never simply free will nor mere submission to structure; rather, structures are both the 'medium and outcome' of social practices.[432] Agency emerges from the capacity to 'act otherwise', even under extreme constraint, by drawing upon available resources and reconfigurable rules. Auschwitz, though designed to extinguish agency, still produced micro-spaces in which women could act with reflexivity and purpose.

Perl's role in the infirmary exemplified this dynamic. The infirmary was a highly structured environment governed by surveillance and racialised policy. Yet within this structure Perl mobilised her medical knowledge – normally a resource shaped by institutional norms – into a tool for resistance. By performing abortions to prevent pregnant women from being murdered during selection, she transformed the function of medical expertise. Giddens' emphasis on the duality of structure helps explain how Perl's knowledge, shaped by the institutions of medical education, became a site from which she actively contested the lethal structures of the camp.[433] Her agency was not external to the system but arose in critical tension with it. Even her self-description of moral injury – her sense of having violated her deepest values – revealed the recursive interplay between internalised norms and the necessity of action under coercive structures.

Leszczyńska's approach to structuration is equally instructive but manifests in a different manner. Her decision to refuse performing abortions, based on Catholic ethics, is also an act of agency within the same camp structures. She relied on the rules of her religious and professional traditions to create a counter-structure – an alternative normative universe in barracks 17 and 18, where she helped deliver over 3,000 infants. Her actions exemplify what Giddens would call the mobilisation of authoritative resources (such as moral authority and professional identity) and allocative resources (like equipment, water, and blankets when available) to rebuild a domain of meaning within the camp. Her midwifery became a performative act that reaffirmed social order amid the institutional collapse caused by Nazi policies. Crucially, both women's actions demonstrate Giddens' argument that even under strict structural constraints, individuals still have the ability for reflexive monitoring – assessing situations, predicting consequences, and adapting practices. [434]

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[432] *Ibid.* 25.
[433] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 24–25.
[434] *Ibid.* 25; Loyal, The Sociology of Anthony Giddens, 56.

Perl monitored the changing patterns of selection, the attitudes of SS guards, and the medical state of patients to determine when intervention was possible. Leszczyńska reflexively adjusted her practice in response to shortages, violence, and the constant threat of inspection, yet continued to perform rituals that affirm dignity. Their agency is therefore not heroic autonomy but structurally mediated resistance – emerging from, shaped by, and directed against the rules and resources of the camp itself.

3. Comparative Synthesis

In both ancient and more recent contexts, agency is structurally mediated rather than external to structure. Exodus' women activate the very rules and resources that limit them – professional credibility (midwives), environmental affordances (Nile as conduit), and status (royal daughter). Similarly, Perl and Leszczyńska draw on institutional knowledge (clinical skill, ritual authority) and situational resources (hidden spaces, improvised materials) to act differently within a highly policed system.[435] In both cases, reflexive monitoring is evident: the women constantly evaluate risk, anticipate responses, and adjust their practices.[436]

The duality of structure leads to clearer, narratively supported transformation in the Exodus story, such as new structural roles like wages for a Hebrew nurse and Moses' integration into the palace. Conversely, in Auschwitz, structural reproduction dominates, and women's actions produce minor changes- like saving a mother or ensuring a dignified birth- without altering the overall system, emphasising local over systemic effects. Additionally, the unintended consequences Giddens discusses are portrayed differently: in Exodus, they often follow redemptive paths, while in Auschwitz, they tend to involve tragic compromises and moral harm.[437]

Giddens' structuration theory explains *how* actors navigate the constraints that bind them. Foucault, however, shifts the focus by questioning *why* these constraints exist and examining how power operates through bodies and surveillance. Moving from Giddens to Foucault shifts the analysis from how agents negotiate within systems to understanding the biopolitical frameworks shaping those systems and hierarchies. This perspective allows us to explore not only how women act within oppressive regimes but also how such regimes regulate life itself – evident in examples like infanticide

[435] Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 56.
[436] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 3–4.
[437] *Ibid.* 7–8.

in Exodus and exterminatory medical and biological practices in Auschwitz. It also reveals how women's actions serve as localised acts of resistance within a broader system of power.

Michel Foucault

1. Biopolitics, Surveillance, and Local Resistance in Exodus 1—2:1-10

Michel Foucault's analysis of biopower and disciplinary mechanisms provides a strong framework for understanding the Exodus narrative's dynamics. Pharaoh's order to kill Hebrew male infants exemplifies what Foucault describes as the biopolitical shift in state authority: moving from sovereign power, which 'takes life or lets live,' to modern power, which 'makes live and lets die' through population regulation.[438] In this passage, the Egyptian state claims authority not just over individuals, but over the reproductive future of an entire population, turning birth into a point of political concern and intervention.[439]

The midwives occupy the first critical space of biopolitical struggles. Pharaoh tries to co-opt their traditional knowledge – usually seen as women's communal work – into a surveillance system aimed at eliminating Hebrew males at birth (1:15-16). From a Foucauldian perspective, this strategy seeks to turn midwifery into a disciplinary tool, where bodies are examined, categorised, and destroyed under state policies. However, the midwives' refusal represents local resistance: a form of opposition not from external authorities but from their own practical actions. Their fear of God (1:17) indicates a counter-discourse challenging the state's effort to deem Hebrew children as disposable. Their behaviours, and the positive portrayal of these actions (1:20-21), reveal the boundaries of biopolitical domination.[440]

Moses' body moves through space in ways that mirror how bodies are managed within modern disciplinary systems. The home acts as a place of concealment (Exodus 2:2), the Nile River is designated by the state as a zone for death (Exodus 1:22), and the reeds serve as a liminal area where surveillance becomes ambiguous. The basket is more than merely a container; it functions as a form of counter-technology and resistance, redirecting the biopolitical flow regulated by the state.[441]

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[438] Michel Foucault 1926-1984, *Society Must Be Defended : Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76* (1st ed. New York : Picador, 2003., 2003), 239–40, https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999938640202121.

[439] Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume Three*, 131.

[440] Michel Foucault et al., *Power/Knowledge; Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (The Harvester Press, 1980).

[441] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd edn, trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, 1995); Michel Foucault, '"Panopticism," from Punish & Discipline: The Birth of the Prison', *Race/Ethnicity : Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 1 (2008): 1–12; Foucault and Senellart, *Security, Territory, Population : Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*, 6–7; Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended : Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, 247; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (Schoken Books, 2002), 27–28.

Jochebed's choice of pitch and bitumen, the materials used for Nile transport, reverses the intended function of the river as a disposal site, turning it into a space of potential life. This reflects Foucault's idea that power dynamics always produce resistance within the same conditions that enable them.[442]

Miriam's careful watch from a distance (Exodus 2:4) underscores how the story subtly touches on ideas of surveillance. While surveillance is usually managed by the state, here a young Hebrew girl observes her mother's covert act despite oppressive regimes. Her role challenges the view of the river as just a space of state control. As a covert participant, her watchfulness enables her to act at the right moment. Her recommendation to find a wet nurse (Exodus 2:7) turns the state's biopolitical efforts into a chance to protect family life. She cleverly repurposes Egyptian oversight mechanisms into tools that support life targeted by destruction.[443]

Pharaoh's daughter adds an additional layer of complexity. As part of the ruling class, she represents the sovereign authority, yet she chooses not to follow its strict logic. Her act of compassion upon seeing the child (2:6) challenges the biopolitical categorisation of Hebrew infants as non-persons. By naming Moses (2:10), she performs a counter-inscription, affording the child an identity that the state sought to erase. In this context, naming is a form of power – what Foucault might describe as the creation of a subject through discourse.[444] By rescuing Moses, she intervenes in the state's control over life, challenging the death-centred order embedded in the decree.

Under Foucault's perspective, the Exodus story illustrates an early example of biopolitical conflict where the state seeks to control life via reproductive policies and surveillance. However, the women's actions showcase constant micro-resistances: refusals, reappropriations, and tactical interventions that subvert the spaces and technologies designed to uphold control. Their agency indicates that even within systems of widespread dominance, power remains never fully absolute; it is constantly negotiated and challenged.

2. Biopolitics, Surveillance, and the Technologies of Power in Auschwitz

Michel Foucault's ideas on biopolitics and disciplinary power offer a framework for understanding Perl and Leszczyńska's actions, which took place within a camp system that exemplifies Foucault's concepts of the 'administration of bodies' and 'the calculated management of life'.[445]

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[442] Foucault et al., *Power/Knowledge; Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*.
[443] Foucault, "'Panopticism,' from Punish & Discipline: The Birth of the Prison'; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison.*
[444] Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume Three*, 131–32.
[445] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 1:140.

Auschwitz operated as a biopolitical system, overseeing reproduction, punishing pregnancies, exterminating infants, and transforming medical environments into sites of selection, torture, and scientific mistreatment. In this setting, medical practices were closely linked with state power structures.[446]

Perl's role in the infirmary illustrates how power operates through medical knowledge. The SS took control over life and death decisions, but Perl intentionally challenged this authority. Her secret abortions serve as examples of resistance emerging from within the existing power structures.[447] She repurposed the medical techniques valued by the regime for a contrasting goal: safeguarding women prisoners from biopolitical extinction. Her expertise served as a form of resistance. She turned the 'medical gaze' into a tool against the oppressive structures that aimed to exploit it.

Stanislawa Leszczyńska's actions serve as small acts of resistance against the camp's extermination policies. By delivering infants destined for immediate death, washing them, and blessing them, she restored the dignity of life within a system that sought to erase both biological and symbolic existence. Foucault suggests that power determines which lives are recognised as biological and which can be discarded; Leszczyńska's midwifery challenged this logic. Her affirmation that every birth holds meaning, as she described in postwar interviews, directly opposed the camp's sovereign authority to deem certain lives unworthy. In this way, her work represented a significant act of biopolitical sabotage.[448]

Both women navigated surveillance systems designed to prevent unauthorised medical procedures. Perl's account of secretly performing abortions in hidden areas of the barracks or disguising them as unrelated procedures demonstrates how disciplinary control functions through the threat of inspection and punishment.[449] Leszczyńska's approach to midwifery involved navigating panoptic spaces where guards, kapos, and nurses monitored any deviations from expected behaviour. Both women's actions exemplify small acts of defiance that collectively challenge authority.[450]

In both cases, female medical practitioners exercised biopolitical agency by reappropriating power tools instead of fleeing. Medicine became a space for authority to be exercised and contested. Their

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[446] Berghahn Books and Winick, *Jewish Medical Resistance in the Holocaust*; Noa Gidron, 'Jewish Women Medical Practitioners Who Rescued Fellow Jews during the Holocaust', *Nashim : A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* (Jerusalem), no. 36 (2020): 39–59, https://doi.org/10.2979/nashim.36.1.04.

[447] Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume Three*, 94.

[448] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended : Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ch. 11.

[449] Foucault, '"Panopticism," from Punish & Discipline: The Birth of the Prison'.

[450] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 1:96.

bodies, knowledge, and actions served as instruments of life in a regime focused on death. Perl and Leszczyńska's actions are more than ethical or maternal choices; they raise profound questions about power: who governs life and defines humanity.

3. Comparative Synthesis

Both stories demonstrate state-led biopolitical control—Egypt's decree targeting male infants and Nazi policies on reproduction and selection. In both instances, women engaged in strategic local resistance: midwives refused orders, Jochebed used the basket as a form of counter-technology, Miriam resisted surveillance, and the princess challenged classification through naming; Perl and performed clinical practices, and Leszczyńska attempted to restore dignity within a death-centric system.

Conclusion

The comparative study of Exodus 1—2:1-10 and the Holocaust testimonies of Dr Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska reveals how women's agency emerges and evolves in extreme crises. Though these stories come from vastly different contexts, both highlight how systems of oppression target critical areas of power: the body, reproduction, kinship, and gendered roles. The women featured are not merely passive figures; they act as interpreters and negotiators during crises, transforming structures designed to restrict their agency into acts of resistance.

In both contexts, crisis acts as a revealing force. It exposes the fragility of political systems that seek to control life, whether through Pharaoh's decrees or Nazi biopolitics. Simultaneously, crisis uncovers the hidden potential within ordinary roles to become sites of resistance. These women did not act outside the existing framework but *within* it, using resources such as embodied knowledge, ritual practice, family duties, social intuition, and moral conviction. Therefore, crisis is not merely a backdrop but the very condition that fosters new forms of agency. Their actions demonstrate that agency in extreme situations is rarely heroic in the conventional sense; rather, it is often quiet, strategic, relational, and deeply embodied.

The shift hypotheses show that threats from demographics, social role changes, and political system fractures create opportunities for women to lead transformative change. In both narratives, women often act as agents of continuity, using their efforts to preserve, conceal, negotiate, and care as a foundation for broader liberation paths, even when freedom isn't immediately achievable. These

hypotheses are not rigid categories but interpretive frameworks that emphasise the complex ways women adapt and influence their environments amid structural breakdowns.

Viewing these women's actions through the lenses of Butler, Giddens, and Foucault highlights their complexity. Butler demonstrates that gender norms are not fixed and can be challenged through repeated acts that redefine meaning. Foucault notes that biopolitical initiatives, even violent ones, harbour resistance within their frameworks. Giddens describes the duality of structure, emphasising that small acts of defiance or care can influence the social fabric from within. While there is some overlap among these perspectives, collectively they suggest that agency in a crisis is not an illusion or simply a reversal of oppression but a dynamic, relational process where women repurpose mechanisms designed to oppress them. Applying these theories together offers a richer understanding of how and why agency can develop in such situations.

This chapter emphasises that women's agency during genocidal crises is not just a result of the crisis but because of it. The stories of women in Exodus and the medical practitioners of Auschwitz demonstrate that acts of preserving life, medical care and medical intervention are forms of resistance that challenge the dominant narratives and mechanisms of death designed to suppress them. While these actions may not completely eliminate suffering or resolve moral dilemmas, they create moments in which dignity and humanity are preserved. By linking these stories, the study reinterprets crisis as more than a destructive event – it becomes a testing ground for alternative forms of agency. This agency challenges existing power structures and highlights the innate worth of life, even when it has been systematically stripped away.

Section Two

THE VIOLENCE OF FEMALE AGENCY IN CRISIS

Nothing about being socially constituted as women restrains us from simply becoming violent ourselves.[451]

Despite women serving in U.S. combat roles for over ten years, the debate over their inclusion has resurfaced. In an article posted by *The War Horse*, investigative reporter Sonner Kehrt, examines the contested history and present tensions surrounding women's participation in combat roles within the U.S. military.[452]

Most recently, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered a review of physical and combat standards, sparked by concerns that standards may have been lowered or implemented with gender-based exemptions. Hegseth has since removed all members of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Service (DACOWITS), historically instrumental in women's integration, raising alarms among advocates who view the move as environmentally retrogressive. Many women veterans, by contrast, argue the standards remain rigorous, with no evidence that gender has diminished effectiveness. As example, Sonner notes the story of Emelie Vanasse, whose gruelling experience at Army Ranger School illustrates the physical and psychological demands of elite combat training. Her eventual success, alongside those of Capt. Kristen Griest and 1st Lt. Shaye Haver in 2015 and other female soldiers since, evidences the ability of women to endure the same conditions as their male counterparts. Indeed, the graduation of 160 women from Ranger School over the past decade has been widely regarded as the definitive answer to debates over whether women can withstand the rigours of combat.[453]

Despite this, the article argues that progress is neither linear nor secure. Recent decisions by Hegseth, under the guise of restoring a 'warrior ethos,' have re-opened the question of women's place in combat. These include ordering a review of the standards by which women have entered combat

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[451] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence / Judith Butler.* (Verso, 2004), 42.
[452] Sonner Kehrt, 'Women Have Served in Combat Roles for a Decade. The Pentagon Is Reopening the Debate', The War Horse, 28 April 2025, https://thewarhorse.org/military-standards-women-in-combat/.
[453] Kehrt, 'Women Have Served in Combat Roles for a Decade. The Pentagon Is Reopening the Debate'.

arms, removing female four-star officers from leadership, and dismantling the DACOWITS. The symbolism is powerful – within months, the military was left without a female four-star officer, and an advisory body that had advocated for women since the Truman era was summarily dismissed. The erasure of diversity-oriented initiatives and the removal of content celebrating women's achievements from Department of Defense platforms reinforce this pattern of retrenchment. This regression is presented as both political and ideological rather than operational. Advocates note that the assumption of lowered standards is unfounded. Combat roles, particularly within special forces such as the Rangers, have remained gender-neutral since integration. All candidates are subjected to the same requirements, with no adjustments for gender or age. Officers and veterans stress that women who have completed such training demonstrate not only physical resilience but also cognitive, tactical, and leadership skills under extreme duress. As former Army officer Kris Fuhr observes, 'lethality' is a multidimensional quality: while physical ability is one element, the capacity to lead under pressure, build trust, and problem-solve in dynamic environments is equally vital. Lt. Gabrielle White's recent participation in the *Best Ranger* competition, where she ranked fourteenth alongside her male partner, exemplifies this broader definition of combat effectiveness.[454]

The article situates these debates within a longer genealogy of women's integration into the armed forces. From the 400,000 women who served in World War II, through the 1948 Women's Armed Services Integration Act, to DACOWITS' establishment in 1951, progress has historically been incremental, contested, and susceptible to political shifts. DACOWITS in particular became an institutional memory for women's advocacy, influencing policies on everything from maternity and childcare provisions to properly fitting uniforms and equipment. That nearly 95% of its recommendations were adopted over seven decades illustrates its effectiveness in shaping the lived realities of servicewomen. Its abrupt dismissal thus signals not only a change in policy but also the deliberate erasure of an institution that safeguarded women's voices in military decision-making.

Furthermore, the article underscores the risks of reopening a settled debate. Surveys show that male service members who serve alongside women overwhelmingly support a gender-integrated force. Even the Marine Corps, long resistant to integration, has begun training mixed-gender battalions. To question women's place in combat at this juncture, then, is less a reflection of rank-and-file attitudes and more a product of 'top-down, imposed, artificial concerns,' as one female Ranger put it. Such a

[454] Kehrt, 'Women Have Served in Combat Roles for a Decade. The Pentagon Is Reopening the Debate'.

reversal risks alienating women at a moment when the military struggles to recruit and retain personnel.

Kehrt also highlights the paradoxical relationship between inclusion and exclusion in military history. Women who fought in earlier generations – the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) during World War II, for example – were later written out of military aviation for thirty years. The delay in recognising their service and developing basic resources for women, such as in-flight bladder relief systems, demonstrates how systemic neglect can inhibit both innovation and operational effectiveness. The present moment, marked by the dismantling of gender-equity initiatives, risks repeating this cycle of erasure.

The central argument is clear: the question of whether women can serve in combat has already been answered in practice. The persistence of the debate reflects not women's abilities but the volatility of institutional recognition, shaped by political ideologies and cultural anxieties. The fragility of progress is evident in the dismissal of female leaders, the disbanding of DACOWITS, and the symbolic removal of women's contributions from public record. By reframing 'lethality' in narrowly physical terms, current policies risk undermining the very operational strength they claim to preserve. The article ultimately suggests that the true battle is not over standards of combat performance but over the politics of memory, visibility, and inclusion within the armed forces.

The above section critically highlights how the revisiting of gendered standards – long thought settled – reflects the fragility of established norms of gender inclusion. What emerges most strongly from this article is the theme of women's agency in liminal moments of conflict and the contested legitimacy of that agency within patriarchal structures. These themes will be investigated further in the next two chapters: just as the narratives of Deborah and Jael in Judges 4–5 illustrate how women could exercise decisive leadership and violence in contexts of crisis – only to have their actions framed ambiguously by the broader socio-religious tradition – so too do the accounts of LTTE women combatants show how female participation in armed struggle is simultaneously valorised as essential and problematised as transgressive. The present debates in the U.S. military echo this dynamic. Women such as Vanasse, Griest, and Haver have already demonstrated their capacity to embody the military's most exacting ideals, yet their legitimacy is persistently questioned, undermined, or erased by institutional memory and political manoeuvring. In each case, women's contributions to war-making are tolerated in moments of necessity but remain precariously dependent on structures of power that seek to reassert male normativity once the immediate crisis subsides.

Studying the text of Judges 4-5 gives us an opportunity to explore a biblical narrative that focuses on the role of female agency in times of crisis. The comparative contemporary story, explored in the following chapater, demonstrates a similar theme showcases the Birds of Freedom, specifically the Female Black Tigers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) where Jordan and Denov found that females played a significant active role in the armed struggle since 1985.[455] Both these stories of female agency, their role in violence and the glorification of their actions despite being socially and culturally non-conforming will be explored in this section of the thesis. The comparison is offered as a means of illuminating recurring patterns in how women occupy – and destabilise – militarised spaces across radically different historical contexts.

[455] Kim Jordan and Myriam Denov, 'Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 9, no. 1 (2007): 42–62.

Chapter 6

BATTLEFIELDS OF AGENCY: DEBORAH, JAEL AND VIOLENT DELIVERANCE IN JUDGES 4—5

As the title indicates, the book of Judges is about judges, the Hebrew term: שופטים. The people who take up this title are those responsible for the deliverance of the Israelites from political or military danger, rather than other aspects of the root שפט which suggest legislative and juridical practices.[456] The book of Judges thus narrates the exploits of the judges of Israel – the protagonist characters – in a particularly unstable and transitional period of biblical history.

The book as a whole demonstrates a cyclical narrative pattern – with repeated themes of Israel's disobedience and then Israel's deliverance by God through the judges. Violence is a significant theme, and regularly resurfaces throughout the book of Judges. In this way, violence as a theme functions to reinforce the anarchic and chaotic atmosphere of the period. Violence is presented as commonplace in the lives of the people, including women, and Judges features women who are *both* perpetrators *and* victims of violence.[457]

The importance of women figures in the book of Judges is emphasised by the role of women near the beginning of the book as well as the end of the book. Women are presented as individuals as well as groups taking on a variety of roles, "as agents and as objects, as autochtones (indigenous) and as allochtones (foreign), in stories as well as in short notes".[458] This chapter explores two of these characters. Deborah, an Israelite judge and prophetess, and Jael, a Kenite woman, are presented in strikingly unconventional roles. It is significant to note, that while many women characters in the book of Judges remain unnamed, Deborah and Jael are among the few exceptions.[459]

This narrative positioning is far from accidental: the authorial choice to elevate these two named women within a book otherwise structured around male judges intensifies their symbolic significance

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[456] Athalya Brenner, 'Women Frame the Book of Judges—How and Why?', in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee, Texts @ Contexts Series (Fortress Press, 2013), 126–27; Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 1–4; Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel. The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 105; Daniel Skidmore-Hess and Cathy Skidmore-Hess, 'Dousing the Fiery Woman: The Diminishing of the Prophetess Deborah', *Shofar (West Lafayette, Ind.)* (West Lafayette) 31, no. 1 (2012): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.2012.0110.

[457] Hackett, 'Violence and Women's Lives in the Book of Judges', 356.

[458] Athalya Brenner, 'Women Frame the Book of Judges—How and Why?', in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee, Texts @ Contexts Series (Fortress Press, 2013), 126–27; Alter, *Ancient Israel. The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.*, 105.

[459] Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee, eds, *Joshua and Judges*, Texts @ Contexts Series (Fortress Press, 2013), 128–29.

and foregrounds their agency as pivotal to national deliverance. Deborah and Jael are thus introduced amidst this complex reality, each taking up the mantle of national saviour while simultaneously being complicit in, or perpetrators of violence.[460]

Situating Judges

The book of Judges presents a liminal period in the story of Israel, a tumultuous exercise in statehood preceding the eventual establishment of Israel's monarchy.[461] As a whole, Judges is thus an account of the formative stages of political transition of the Israelite nation. This liminal period presents a political landscape of frequent conflicts enmeshed with covenantal prescriptions that directly affect the circumstances and political standing of Israel. For Israel to flourish, obedience to God is paramount and peace is directly dependent on their ability to do so.

Judges 1:1-3:6 serves as the introduction to the book as a whole. It first recounts what appear to be the concluding phases of Israel's occupation of the promised land, thereby partially echoing the book of Joshua. The emphasis in Judges however, shifts to the inhabitants who remained undriven from the land (1:27-36). This theme is then reframed theologically by the angel of the Lord, by the Lord himself, and by the narrator. Israel's tolerance and accommodation of the Canaanites is presented as a direct threat to Israel's covenantal relationship with God – a compromise that will result in spiritual decline. This deterioration is outlined programmatically in Judges 2:11-19, which functions as a type of theological précis of the book.[462]

Judges 3:7-16:31 presents the cycle of the judges, who either adjudicate within Israel and/or deliver the people from oppression. These include Othniel (3:7-11); Ehud (3:12-30); Shamgar (3:31); Deborah (Judges 4-5); Gideon (Judges 6-8); Tola and Jair (10:1-2, 3-5); Jephthah (10:6-12:7); Ibzan, Elon and Abdon (12:8-15); and finally, Samson (Judges 13-16).[463]

The larger episodes in Judges are framed by a recurring rhetorical pattern, often summarised in six elements:

1. Israel commits evil before the Lord;

2. The Lord delivers Israel into the hands of oppressors;

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[460] Brenner and Yee, *Joshua and Judges*, 128–29.
[461] Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 1–8.
[462] Alter and Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 104.
[463] *Ibid.*

3. Israel cries out to the Lord;

4. The Lord raises up a deliverer;

5. The saviour defeats the enemy;

6. The land enjoys peace and rest.

This cycle appears first in 2:11–19 and resurfaces at key points in 3:7, 3:12, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, and 13:1. Yet the formula is not rigid. At times, certain elements drop out or shift emphasis. For example, in the Gideon and Samson narratives the land does not return to 'rest' (element 6), while in Samson's case the people do not even cry out to God (element 3), and his story ends with his own death in captivity rather than victorious deliverance (a break with element 5). These disruptions draw attention to the instability of Israel's spiritual condition and prepare the reader to recognise Deborah and Jael's story as a deliberate reconfiguration of expected narrative arcs. The very instability of the pattern suggests that its function is not only to provide narrative cohesion but also to signal its own subversion. The variations offer interpretive clues, drawing the reader's attention to theological tensions and the possibility that the Judges cycle is as much about Israel's failures as about divine rescue.[464]

Among the simplest linking devices in the narrative are two stylistic features that stand out. The first is the recurring variation of the introductory formula. Initially, the text declares: *'Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord'* (2:11 NRSVUE). Yet in subsequent cycles the phrase is intensified to read, *'The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord'* (3:12; cf. 4:1, 10:6, 13:1), emphasising the repeated, cyclical nature of Israel's disobedience. The second device is the phrase 'after him', which functions as a literary marker to introduce and sequence the so-called 'minor' judges (3:31; 10:1, 3; 12:8, 11, 13). Together, these elements provide cohesion to the book's paratactic style, while also underlining its rhetorical insistence on Israel's recurring failure and the Lord's repeated intervention.[465] This literary scaffolding creates the expectation that deliverance will arise from unexpected quarters – an expectation that Deborah and Jael will fulfil.

Situating the Narrative

The events of the battle between the Israelites and Canaanite forces are uniquely presented in the book of Judges. The account is first provided in the form of prose narrative in Judges 4. In Judges 5,

[464] Alter and Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 104–5.
[465] *Ibid. 105.*

the account is presented in the form of poetry or song.[466] If Judges 4 narrates deliverance, Judges 5 curates its memory.

The prose of Judges 4 and its poetic retelling in Judges 5 together tell the story of the conflict between the militant forces of Israel, under the leadership of Deborah and Barak, and the Canaanite army of Jabin and their allies in the north, under the leadership of the commander Sisera. It is this battle for control over the strategically located Jezreel Valley that frames the subplot of the assassination of Sisera by the woman, Jael.[467] The accounts presented in both Judges 4 and Judges 5 is noticeably female oriented and driven. Both Deborah and Jael take on roles that would, culturally, be more masculine. Through the actions of the women, the men take up secondary and subordinate roles. It is interesting to note how the double presentation of narrative (Judges 4) and song (Judges 5) functions to amplify the uniqueness of the women characters' profile within Judges, inviting comparison of voice, agency, and memory.[468] This dual composition also allows the reader to perceive not only what happened, but how it was socially remembered, positioning Deborah and Jael as central figures in Israel's collective imagination.

In Judges 4:1-24, the narrative account of events revolves around a battle for control over the strategically located Jezreel Valley. This battle frames the subplot of the assassination of Sisera, by the woman, Jael.[469]

The Jezreel Valley was not only a fertile agricultural province, but also a key trading and transportation route between the coastal plain and the Jordan Valley. It is possible that the Canaanite forces would have set their sights on controlling the Jezreel Valley as a matter of seizing power and influence over a much-coveted area. The Israelites thus may have been trying to protect their territory and rid themselves of Canaanite dominion by driving the forces of Jabin out from the land.[470] Within this context, the text subtly positions the Canaanite threat as not only a military obstacle, but also a challenge to Israel's autonomy and identity.[471] The Israelites' struggle is thus more than a territorial dispute, it becomes a fight for survival where the actions of Deborah and Jael tip the scales of history.

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[466] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 102; Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament.* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 176.

[467] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 102; Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 64; Webb, *The Book of Judges. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament.*, 176.

[468] Tyler Mayfield, 'The Accounts of Deborah (Judges 4—5) in Recent Research', *Currents in Biblical Research* (London, England) 7, no. 3 (2009): 306–8, https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993X09104456.

[469] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 102; Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 64; Webb, *The Book of Judges. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament.*, 176.

[470] Webb, *The Book of Judges. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament.*, 176.

[471] Joel N. Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen : Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation*, Siphrut ; 2 (Eisenbrauns, 2009). See Lohr for some of the challenging issues related to Israel's conquest.

Within this context of events, the focus shifts to its dramatis personae. The interplay between primary and secondary characters not only advances the plot but also reveals the text's negotiation of power, gender, and divine agency. What follows therefore turns to key figures whose roles shape the narrative's gendered contours, beginning with the more minor characters in these chapters.

Canaanite Kingship: Jabin as Symbolic Sovereign of Crisis

Jabin's seat of power was based in Hazor. While Jabin is introduced into the story as the face of the oppressor of Israel in verse 2 of the prologue to Judges 4 (verses 1-3), the king is actually only present as a background figure and the story has to remind the reader of the character of Jabin in verse 7, verse 17, and with the repetition of Jabin's name and title in verses 23-24 (*own emphasis added*):

[7] I will draw out Sisera, the general of ***Jabin's*** army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand."'

[17] Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between ***King Jabin of Hazor*** and the clan of Heber the Kenite.

[23] So on that day God subdued ***King Jabin of Canaan*** before the Israelites.[24] Then the hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on ***King Jabin of Canaan***, until they destroyed ***King Jabin of Canaan***.

The prologue therefore, almost immediately shifts focus from Jabin, King of Canaan, onto the main antagonist character, the commander of Jabin's army, Sisera.

Thus, although Jabin appears as the titular oppressor in Judges 4, his role is largely emblematic rather than active. As introduced in the prologue above, Jabin represents the structural and systemic power arrayed against Israel. This narrative strategy reflects a common literary device in the Deuteronomistic History, wherein kings often serve as symbolic figures while real dramatic tension is mediated through their generals or proxies. The repeated mention of Jabin's name at key junctures (4:7, 17, 23–24) serves two rhetorical purposes. First, it anchors the narrative within the political geography of Canaan, as Hazor was historically the dominant city-state in the north. Second, it frames the story's resolution in covenantal terms: while Sisera's death marks a decisive turning point, the ultimate subjugation of Jabin (4:23-24) reaffirms the Lord's deliverance on a national scale. In other words, Jabin embodies the macro-level threat that necessitates divine intervention, whereas Sisera

personalises that threat in narrative form.[472] Jabin thus belongs to the register of 'kings brought low' while Sisera becomes the vehicle through which that downfall is narratively enacted.

Chariot to Tent: Sisera at the Edges of Defeat

The narrative introduces Sisera as based in Harosheth-haggoyim, and an individual with nine hundred iron chariots at his disposal. This information is repeated in verses 13 and 16 when the events of the battle unfold. The reference to iron chariots signals not only Sisera's military dominance but his technological superiority within the ancient Near Eastern context.[473]

Sisera functions as Jabin's field commander and the immediate antagonist whose defeat resolves the crisis presented in Judges 4. The prose (Judges 4) and the song (Judges 5) present complementary perspectives; read together they locate the crux of victory not in set-piece battle but in the collapse of Sisera's honour and household. Halpern underlines how the Song curates memory by apportioning praise and blame among tribes and leaders, situating Sisera's downfall at the poem's moral centre.[474]

Sisera's nine-hundred iron chariots are emblematic of Canaanite superiority and Israel's vulnerability; yet the narrative attributes the turning point to God who 'routed' Sisera (4:15). The Song translates this as theophany and storm (5:4-5, 20-21), a rewriting of chariot-power as fragile before divine agency. [475]

The prose tracks Sisera's flight 'on foot' from chariot to Jael's tent (4:17), shifting the locus of combat from public war-space to a domestic site. Assis contends that this unusual emphasis on Jael's act over the battle itself signals the interpretive key of the narrative: victory is sealed by a woman's hand.[476] Similarly, Fewell and Gunn argue that Judges 4-5 displace the 'authority of violence' from the expected male hero to female actors; Sisera's narrative value lies in being surpassed – first by divine route (4:15), and finally by Jael's strike (4:12; 5:24-27).[477] In this sense, Sisera is both formidable and expendable. His technological advantage heightens the drama of Israel's vulnerability, yet his ultimate function is to fall before a mode of agency the text constructs as surprising, in gendered terms.

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[472] Webb, *Book of Judges*. 149–50.
[473] *Ibid.* 176.
[474] Baruch Halpern, 'The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography', *The Harvard Theological Review* (New York, USA) 76, no. 4 (1983): 384–86, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000014115.
[475] Halpern, 'The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography', 384–86.
[476] Elie Assis, '"The Hand of a Woman": Deborah and Yael (Judges 4)', *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 5 (2005): 6–7, https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2005.v5.a19.
[477] Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Cary, NC) 58, no. 3 (1990): 396–97.

Window of Complicity: Sisera's Mother and the Gendering of Violence

The Song's final tableau stages Sisera's mother at a window, misreading his delay in terms of plunder and captive women. Thelle interprets this as a deliberate juxtaposition of motherhood: Deborah and Jael embody effective agency, while Sisera's mother represents what Thelle characterises as ornamental naivety and elite violence.[478] Cultural-historical readings further illuminate how 5:28-30 encodes elite material culture (textiles, the 'woman-at-the-window' motif) to shame the enemy household.[479]

When read in light of the other female characters, Fewell and Gunn note that gender dynamics reassign honour through these female actors: Deborah authorises, Jael consummates, and Sisera's mother is rendered ironic. The narrative thus relocates honour and shame in explicitly gendered terms.[480] Thelle shows that the window-scene (Judges 5:28–30) recasts motherhood in two registers: Deborah and Jael model efficacious, public agency, while Sisera's mother embodies ornamental domesticity that rationalises sexual plunder (textiles, 'a womb or two,' and delay fantasies).[481] Read with Wong's claim that the Song is a polemical artefact targeting non-participants and legitimising those who 'offered themselves willingly,' the mother's speech becomes more than irony – it is purpose-built polemic. Her misreading of delay (because she imagines rape-loot) is not merely tragic; it supplies the foil that validates the Lord's rout and the honour of the mobilised tribes. In short, motherhood is the poem's ideological hinge: a domestic voice weaponised to indict enemy culture and to canonise Israel's victory.

Thelle's reading clarifies how that relocation is ratified in the song's closing tableau – the enemy's highest female voice is exposed as ethically hollow, so that female agency on Israel's side (Deborah's summons and Jael's blow) accrues honour while female voice on the enemy's side becomes a site of shame.[482] This dovetails with Wong's claim that the Song assigns praise and blame to secure communal boundaries – Sisera's household is the narrative instrument by which that honour economy is taught. The contrast between mothers is not incidental: it crystallises the text's broader concern with how women's speech can either collude with or resist structures of violent domination.

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[478] Rannfrid Irene Thelle, 'Matrices of Motherhood in Judges 5', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (London, England) 43, no. 3 (2019): 436–52, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089218772576.
[479] Thelle, 'Matrices of Motherhood in Judges 5'.
[480] Fewell and Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5', 408–9.
[481] Thelle, 'Matrices of Motherhood in Judges 5'.
[482] Thelle, 'Matrices of Motherhood in Judges 5'; Fewell and Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5', 408–10.

Borrowed Courage: Barak and Dependent Masculinity

The ambiguous or negative portrayal of men is not limited to the Canaanites. Barak's role in Judges 4–5 is central to the military outcome, yet his characterisation consistently resists straightforward heroic typologies. When Deborah summons him to lead Israel's forces against Sisera (Judges 4:6-7), his initial response reveals hesitation: he will only go if Deborah accompanies him (Judges 4:8). Fewell and Gunn interpret this demand as symptomatic of a narrative strategy in which male leadership is deliberately destabilised, creating space for female figures to emerge as decisive actors.[483]

Deborah's prophetic authority mediates Barak's agency. Barak is portrayed as obedient, yet dependent on Deborah's presence, a dynamic that Halpern suggests is deeply connected to the compositional theology of the narrative, where victory belongs not to military prowess but to divine initiative mediated through unexpected figures.[484] The narrator underscores this by declaring that honour will ultimately belong to a woman (Judges 4:9), fulfilled through Jael's decisive act.

In the poetic retelling of Judges 5, Barak's presence is reframed: his leadership is remembered not for personal glory but as the rallying point for the tribes who 'offered themselves willingly' (Judges 5:2, 9). Thelle notes that the Song deliberately foregrounds communal participation and female agency, while Barak's role recedes into the background.[485] Thus, Barak is remembered primarily as a functional leader whose dependence both enables and limits him.

Barak's characterisation illustrates an 'economy of honour' in which hesitancy carries consequences. His obedience is commendable, but his insistence on Deborah's presence leads to his displacement from the locus of glory. This, as Fewell and Gunn argue, is not merely a critique of one leader but a narrative device that dismantles conventional associations between masculinity and victory.[486] In this way, Barak functions as a foil against whom the agency of Deborah and Jael becomes all the more visible, highlighting the narrative's counter-cultural reallocation of honour. His story thereby exposes the fragility of traditional heroic masculinity when measured against the text's alternative examples of faithfulness and responsiveness to divine word.

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[483] Fewell and Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5'.
[484] Halpern, 'The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography'.
[485] Thelle, 'Matrices of Motherhood in Judges 5'.
[486] Fewell and Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5'.

Mother of Battle: Deborah and the Reordering of Power

As noted above, the story is set against the backdrop of a crisis from the offset – that of Israel's oppression by Canaan (Judges 4:2-3). From this context, we learn that Deborah is a judge in Israel (Judges 4:4) and the text categorically emphasises her differences: she is (a) a woman — a named woman, (b) a strong leader and military strategist, and (c) a revered judge and prophetess.[487] Deborah is immediately introduced in a manner that makes her stand out as her description is contrary to the more common roles associated with biblical women, such as mother, wife, or daughter.[488]

Alter reflects on Deborah's introductory descriptors, noting how her gender is emphasised four times in the first verse (Judges 4:4).[489] The Hebrew noun 'prophet' נביאה, although already presenting Deborah as female, is added to with the additional term 'woman' אשה. This awkwardly results in 'prophetess-woman' in the Hebrew.[490] Yet another 'woman' is then connected to 'Lappidoth' לפידות. And then again in the next clause 'she was judging Israel', the feminine pronoun in unnecessarily repeated in the beginning of the next verse. The authorial intent thus emphasises gender, and enforces the idea that gender is an important issue to the reader.[491]

The term נביאת, meaning *prophetess*, is central to understanding Deborah's character. The designation of prophetess in Judges 4:4, places Deborah in a significant position within the narrative. Unlike male prophets who speak on behalf of God, Deborah is shown as a leader who combines both spiritual and judicial authority. This term sets her apart as an individual endowed with divine insight and the authority to mediate God's will to the people of Israel. The use of נביאת implies a direct connection to God, conferring upon her a role typically occupied by male figures, thus highlighting her exceptional status in a male-dominated space. Furthermore, Deborah's role as a prophetess emphasises her connection to the divine, as she not only hears God's will, but also delivers it to the Israelites, guiding them in times of crisis. This reflects the broader narrative themes of divine election and authority within the biblical narrative, where leaders are chosen by God to fulfil specific roles.

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[487] Brenner and Yee, Joshua and Judges, 128–29.

[488] David J. Zucker and Moshe Reiss, 'Subverting Sexuality: Manly Women; Womanly Men in Judges 4–5', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 45, no. 1 (2015): 33, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107914564823.

489 ודבורה אשה נביאה אשת לפידות היא שפטה את־ישראל בעת ההיא

[490] Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*.

[491] Sara Järlemyr, 'A Tale of Cross-Dressers, Mothers, and Murderers: Gender and Power in Judges 4 and 5', *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 81, no. 1 (2016): 50, https://doi.org/10.58546/se.v81i1.15370.

The term נביאת elevates Deborah's character beyond a mere political leader, portraying her as an intermediary between God and Israel, with profound influence on the nation's destiny.[492]

In her capacity as judge and prophetess, Deborah receives an oracle from God and calls upon her general Barak to mobilise the Israelite army accordingly. She instructs him to gather his men and wage war against the Canaanite commander Sisera and the forces of Canaan (Judges 4:6-7).[493]

Barak agrees to this charge provided that Deborah accompanies him on this mission. In this way, Deborah's command exposes a gendered negotiation of honour. Barak's conditional obedience – that he will go only with Deborah – relocates symbolic capital from the male general to the woman whose presence signifies divine sanction. Fewell and Gunn read this as part of the book of Judges' broader 'authority of violence' economy in which male power is displaced or reframed through female actors.[494] In the Song retelling of Judges 5, this redistribution of power is poeticised by balancing pairs – 'Awake, Deborah…arise, Barak!' – and by yoking Deborah to other decisive women (Judges 5:6-7:24), as if to say that victory emerges from a coalition of voices in which gender no longer defines or restricts the capacity to act.[495] Niditch comments on this unique role of Deborah as a prophet: 'That she is female and therefore not expected to lead in a military context only enhances the impression of the judge as one raised by God, inspired and unusual, beyond the workaday roles of men and women'.[496] This comment underscores Barak's desire for Deborah to accompany him into battle. It is not necessarily her prowess as a warrior that he requires, but rather the symbolism that comes with her presence —the endorsement of the Lord.[497]

Deborah is also referred to as 'a woman of Lappidot' אשת לפידות, and this phrase has been traditionally interpreted to mean she was married to a man named Lappidot. In fact, much hinges on how the word 'Lappidot' לפידות is understood. As Beckmann writes, 'She can be "Deborah the wife of Lappidoth," "Deborah from Lappidot," or "Deborah the woman of fire"'.[498] Interpretations that suggest 'lappidot' לפידות might not be a proper name but rather a common noun meaning 'flames' or 'torches' would result in Deborah being described as a 'woman of torches…a fiery, spirited

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[492] Sydney Beckmann, 'A Typology of Judges 4-5 and Its Relationship to Other Prominent Biblical Women', Journal of Academic Perspectives 1 (2019): 19.

[493] ותשלח ותקרא לברק בן־אבינעם מקדש נפתלי ותאמר אליו הלא צוה יהוה אלהי־ישראל לך ומשכת בהר תבור ולקחת עמך עשרת אלפים איש מבני נפתלי ומבני זבלון:
ומשכתי אליך אל־נחל קישון את־סיסרא שר־צבא יבין ואת־רכבו ואת־המונו ונתתיהו בידך:

[494] Fewell and Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5', 389-393,400.

[495] *Ibid.* 400.

[496] Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 65.

[497] Hackett, 'Violence and Women's Lives in the Book of Judges', 357.

[498] Beckmann, 'A Typology of Judges 4-5 and Its Relationship to Other Prominent Biblical Women', 7.

woman'.[499] This understanding seems more fitting when one considers the meaning of Barak, that is, 'lightning'.[500] Therefore, 'woman of flames' could describe Deborah's passionate and charismatic nature, fitting her personality without linking her to any husband or man, including Barak.[501] This interpretation effectively disentangles her identity from any association to a man and effectively positions her as wholly autonomous within the narrative.[502]

Deborah is portrayed as judging Israel while seated beside a palm tree and organizing a defensive war against Israel's enemies. Her judicial setting "under the palm", situates her authority in the open, not cloistered. She summons Barak and appoints him to lead the battle (Judges 4:4). Her triumphant song, which describes six tribes rallying for the nation – a display of unity not seen elsewhere in the Book of Judges – is a remarkable piece of biblical poetry. This unique account of the war, narrated in both poetry and prose, provides valuable insights into the social and political conditions of those turbulent times as depicted in Judges.[503]

Deborah is portrayed as a mature woman (4:4), and a mother (5:7), but most importantly, as a prophetess and judge in Israel. She serves as a conduit for male decisions and directives, acting as the Lord's agent and deliverer, and inspiring others to take action. Guided by divine authority, she judges the Israelites and summons men to her, but she relies on Barak, a man, to fulfil her prophecies. While she accompanies Barak to the battlefield, she does not engage in the fighting; instead, she brings together the male forces (4:6-7) so that the Lord can act through them (4:15).[504]

Early in the prose account, Deborah is shown to exercise divine authority as she summons Barak and commands Israel into battle (Judges 4:4-7). Her 'mothering' language in Judges 5, meanwhile, suggests a maternal figure who mobilises the tribes into action – not through domestic nurture, but through public vision.[505] Thus, Deborah's leadership is both charismatic and structural, bridging devotional impulse and political mobilisation. Fewell and Gunn analyse how Deborah breaks

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[499] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 102; Eliyahu Assis, *Before There Were Kings : A Literary Analysis of the Book of Judges / Elie Assis.*, First edition., Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement Series (Eisenbrauns, 2023), 101, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781646022540; Skidmore-Hess and Skidmore-Hess, 'Dousing the Fiery Woman: The Diminishing of the Prophetess Deborah', 3.

[500] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 102; Skidmore-Hess and Skidmore-Hess, 'Dousing the Fiery Woman: The Diminishing of the Prophetess Deborah', 3.

[501] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 102.

[502] Leila Leah Bronner, 'Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources', in *A Feminist Companion to Judges / Edited by Athalya Brenner.*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan, The Feminist Companion to the Bible ; 4 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 78.

[503] Bronner, 'Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources', 78–79.

[504] Lillian R. Klein, 'A Spectrum of Female Characters in the Book of Judges', in *A Feminist Companion to Judges / Edited by Athalya Brenner.*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan, The Feminist Companion to the Bible ; 4 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 25; Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*.

[505] Fewell and Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5', 402.

normative binaries – she is authoritative, yet maternal, prophetic, yet martial.[506] Her embodiment of these seemingly incompatible roles destabilises the rigid gender coding of leadership and positions her as a paradigmatic figure for thinking about agency under crisis.

Halpern argues that the poet of Judges 5 functions as a resourceful historian, weaving together tribal assemblies, divine appearances, and the taunts of the enemy into a unified national narrative.[507] In Judges 5, often called 'The Song of Deborah', we find a poetic declaration of Israel's victory over the Canaanites. The word שיר, meaning 'song', is essential in understanding Deborah's role as both a leader and a cultural figure. The song is not merely a recounting of events but serves as a liturgical declaration of God's deliverance, an act of praise that emphasises God's sovereignty and Israel's redemption.[508]

The poem/song celebrates those willing to offer themselves, and denounces apathy, encoding a political theology of mobilisation under crisis in which Deborah's voice delivers the final judgment on matters of honour (Judges 5:2 ,9, 23).[509] In a landscape where, as Hackett stresses, women in Judges are 'both perpetrators and victims of violence', the Song frames women as agents who reallocate honour and shame.[510] Sisera's mother becomes a negative mirror: her imagined speech domesticates conquest as sexual plunder – 'a girl or two for every man' (Judges 5:30) – only to be overturned by the reality of male defeat at the hand of a woman.[511] Deborah's rhetoric thus exposes and subverts the gendered logic of war: the poem legitimises female victory while emphasising the masculinist economy that trivialises women as spoil. Through poetic performance, Deborah not only recounts the events but also interprets them, assigning theological meaning to the violent events that have unfolded.

Tent of Subversion: Jael and the Hammer of Deliverance

Jael enters her role as a national saviour by happenstance. However, this does not undermine her agency in seizing an opportunity through her quick and strategic thinking. After providing Sisera with a false sense of security, Jael murders Sisera in an assassination borne from opportunity. Jael's successful manipulation of Sisera rewards her with a legacy that inspires a national level of respect

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[506] Fewell and Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5', 402.
[507] Halpern, 'The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography', 378–86, 395–401.
[508] June F. Dickie, 'Jael: Mighty Hero or Slippery Man-Slayer', in *Violence in the Hebrew Bible: Between Text and Reception*, ed. Jacques van Ruiten and Koert van Bekkum (BRILL, 2023), 174.
[509] Halpern, 'The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography', 396–401.
[510] Hackett, 'Violence and Women's Lives in the Book of Judges', 356–58.
[511] *Ibid.* 359–61.

and validation from the divine. In Judges 5, Jael is linked to a period that is clearly understood in the collective memory of Israel: "in the days of Jael".[512]

As noted above the book of Judges dedicates two chapters—one in prose and the other in poetry—to Deborah's triumph over the Canaanites, with Jael playing a significant role in both accounts. Deborah and Barak lead the Israelite army to a decisive victory against the Canaanite forces, with divine intervention evident as the stars are said to have fought against Sisera, and the Kishon River swept away the enemy. Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army, which boasted nine hundred iron chariots, finds his chariots rendered useless by heavy rains. Fleeing the battle, Sisera arrives at the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Sisera then orders Jael to stand watch at the entrance of the tent so if anybody comes to ask for a man, she can respond in the negative. In Sisera's directive, it is interesting to note that he uses the male imperative עמד (to stand) when directing her. While Järlemyr suggests Sisera's state of mind might explain his carelessness with grammar, it could also be an intentional colouring of the text. Another perspective could imply a gender-reversal: 'if Jael is male – then what is Sisera?'.[513]

Jael invites him in, saying, "Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid" (Judges 4:17). When Sisera requests water, she instead gives him milk. Under the guise of sanctuary, Jael capitalises on the opportunity that arises to be more than a passive bystander. She draws Sisera into her tent, where her calculated hospitality sets the stage for her dramatic intervention. Feminist and literary readings emphasis how Jael weaponises the grammar of hospitality; milk, blanket and tent become instruments of subversion.[514] The manner in which Jael ultimately kills Sisera is detailed in two versions: the prose version is more detailed, while the poetic version is more dramatic. And yet, the biblical text is clear that Jael used a mallet to drive a tent peg through Sisera's skull while he slept in her tent.[515]

While the prose and poetic accounts of Sisera's demise differ in their stylistic flourishes, both accounts place Jael at the centre of a narrative inversion – Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army, is undone not by the sword of a general, but by the hand of a seemingly powerless woman and outsider. Regarding Jael's status, she is introduced as the wife of Heber the Kenite, a member of a non-Israelite, semi-nomadic group with ancestral tries to Midian (Judges 4:11). Her position as a

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[512] Hackett, 'Violence and Women's Lives in the Book of Judges', 357.
[513] Järlemyr, 'A Tale of Cross-Dressers, Mothers, and Murderers: Gender and Power in Judges 4 and 5', 53.
[514] Järlemyr highlights Jael's behaviour as maternal, citing how she tucks the general in and brings him milk, similar to how a mother would bring a child a drink. Järlemyr, 'A Tale of Cross-Dressers, Mothers, and Murderers: Gender and Power in Judges 4 and 5', 53.
[515] Bronner, 'Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources', 86.

Kenite situates her at the margins of Israelite identity and political allegiance. As Niditch observes, the Kenites function in Judges as liminal figures, occupying a space neither fully inside nor entirely outside the Israelite sphere. This status enables Jael's unexpected yet decisive intervention in the narrative.[516] The inversion is not merely literary, but also resonates thematically, and disrupts expectations of gendered power. The figure of Jael becomes a lens through which to examine the intersections of gender and violence. Her intervention challenges the traditional binaries of hero and villain, victim and agent, and opens the narrative to contemporary questions about the roles women play in both preserving and upending social order. Despite being a Kenite woman, she is depicted as a saviour of the Israelites, taking on the daunting task of eliminating the formidable general Sisera.

Not everyone understands Jael's actions in a positive light. Instead of seeing her as a heroine, some modern scholars consider her cruel and treacherous, emphasising that she violates the sacred laws and ethics of hospitality – an ethic regarded as foundational in the ancient Near Eastern context.[517] For these scholars, the biblical narrator's lack of moral censure is troubling, creating what they perceive as an unresolved ethical dissonance within the narrative.[518] Although the text does not explicitly state this, it suggests that Sisera crossed socially accepted boundaries; Sisera should have gone directly to Heber, not to Heber's tent. By doing so, Sisera not only disrespects Heber's authority but symbolically dishonours Jael. His arrival at her tent should have immediately alerted Jael to something amiss. Even so, Jael maintains the Semitic hospitality protocol by covering Sisera and offering him something to drink.[519] These divergent readings highlight the ethical complexity of her agency: it can be viewed either as a troubling breach of hospitality or as a justified act of protection within a moment of acute crisis. This instability arises in part from Jael's liminal identity as a Kenite woman situated at the edges of Israelite society, a position that blurs the boundaries between ally and outsider. Because the biblical text does not supply an explicit moral judgement, Jael's story naturally invites interpretive tension.[520]

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[516] Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*.

[517] Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death.* (Indiana University Press, 1992), https://hdl-handle-net.dcu.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb.30774.; Lillian R. Klein, 'The Book of Judges: Paradigm and Deviation in Images of Women', in *A Feminist Companion to Judges / Edited by Athalya Brenner.*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan, The Feminist Companion to the Bible ; 4 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

[518] Bronner, 'Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources', 87.

[519] Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death.*; Carleen Mandolfo, 'Women, Violence, and the Bible: The Story of Jael and Sisera as a Case Study', *Biblical Interpretation* (Leiden | Boston) 27, no. 3 (2019): 340–53, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-00273P02.

[520] For this research, acknowledging these differences is important, as they expose how women who act outside conventional expectations are frequently judged through frameworks shaped by patriarchal norms. Jael's ambiguous agency thus becomes representative of the morally complex spaces in which women operate during times of crisis.

The manner of the killing is described in both Judges 4 and Judges 5. In both accounts, the tent peg and the hammer are employed, as well as the action of Jael driving the tent peg through Sisera's temple. In Judges 4, Sisera is described as lying down, and asleep. There is a slight variation in Judges 5, where he is described as standing up and falling as Jael pierces his temple with the tent peg. Beyond the practical implausibility of driving a tent peg through a man's skull while he stands, the poetic emphasis in Judges 5 seems deliberately placed on Sisera's collapse 'between her feet'. The Hebrew term for feet or legs – רגל– carries a sexual resonance, and some scholars argue that the phrase here is not a euphemism for intercourse but rather an allusion to childbirth. This imagery frames Jael not only as the agent of Sisera's death, but as a mothering figure – her violent act intertwined with themes of maternal nurture. The connection is reinforced by the subsequent verses of the song, which shift attention to Sisera's own mother, awaiting a son who will never return.[521] Another perspective examines the symbolic uses of the word רגל ('foot' or 'leg') linked to themes of sovereignty and subjection. The enemy is ultimately brought low beneath the feet of the victor, with Sisera's death marking the climactic moment in both Judges 4 and Judges 5. While the Song continues with the introduction of Sisera's mother, her presence functions chiefly to underscore the finality of his demise. She is portrayed as naïve as she waits for a son who will never return. This closing vignette, then, is less an expression of compassion for Sisera's household than a literary device designed to heighten the irony and reinforce the victory narrative.[522]

Although the narrative provides only sparse detail, Jael emerges as a remarkably complex figure. Her actions are unpredictable, embodying at once maternal qualities and the ruthless precision of an assassin. The text withholds any explicit explanation of her motive, leaving interpretive space for speculation. On the one hand, her people are depicted as living in peace with the Canaanites, yet she transgresses this alliance by siding with Israel. This could suggest an acute awareness of the political situation and the injustices suffered by the Israelites, or alternatively, an instinct for self-preservation that happens to align with the interest of Israel. Regardless of her rationale, Jael welcomes Sisera into her tent – whether by her own volition or under cultural expectation – and her subsequent actions starkly contradict the hospitality first extended. The narrative withholds any description of her appearance or age, allowing readers to project their own interpretive variations. While interpretations have construed her as a seductress based on euphemistic readings of her invitation to Sisera, this is purely speculative. What is clear is that Jael lulls Sisera into a false sense of security, tending to his

[521] Järlemyr, 'A Tale of Cross-Dressers, Mothers, and Murderers: Gender and Power in Judges 4 and 5', 53.
[522] *Ibid. 54*.

needs until he feels safe enough to sleep, and only then enacts her decisive and violent act. [523] Jael's role in Judges 4 and Judges 5 is intriguing, particularly in relation to her portrayal as both a warrior and a woman who uses domesticity as a tool for subversive action.[524]

Conclusion

Taken together, Deborah and Jael form a paired portrait of female agency in which prophetic leadership and domestic subversion converge to produce deliverance. The text refuses the resolve the ethical ambiguity of the violence, instead emphasising the necessity of their actions of Israel's survival. We have outlined how the biblical narrative of Deborah and Jael demonstrates key issues concerning the relationship between war, violence and gender. Speaking on 'the location of violence and female militancy within an ambivalent space of agency in narrative literature', Meegaswatta notes that there is often a disruption of conventional representations of war in gendered terms.[525]

The rise of women's visibility in conflicts worldwide reflects a shift from traditional beliefs that depicted women as fragile and victims. This reality is evident in literature, particularly in works created after Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war (1983-2009), where themes of women, violence, and terror are prominent. The portrayal of women as armed and outspoken challenges patriarchy and the idea of women as delicate symbols of home and hearth, which are often used to justify war. This shift prompts critical examination of the rhetoric urging men to 'defend' women, children, and a vulnerable motherland. However, it also raises the risk that women's violent empowerment could lead to oppressive practices seeking to restrict them.[526]

In the same way that the biblical women subverted the patriarchal structures of their world through militancy and violence, we also see a similar trajectory in the agency of the women of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It has been reported that the LTTE were responsible for more than half the suicide bombings worldwide, with female LTTE suicide bombers accounting for 40 per cent

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[523] Järlemyr, 'A Tale of Cross-Dressers, Mothers, and Murderers: Gender and Power in Judges 4 and 5', 55.

[524] June Dickie's research is valuable for interpreting Jael because it examines Judges 4–5 through the perspectives of South African women affected by violence and trauma, including inmates at Pollsmoor prison. By engaging in communal reading and performance, Dickie demonstrates that such readers often view Jael's violence as rooted in survival, which adds complexity to interpretations that see her either as a national hero or a deceiving murderer. The article offers a useful framework for interpreting Jael's actions as ethically ambiguous yet influenced by violence and crisis. Refer to Dickie, June F. "Reading Jael with Women from a Traumatized Community." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 52, no. 3 (August 2022): 136–45. doi:10.1177/01461079221107857.

[525] T N K Meegaswatta, 'Violence as a Site of Women's Agency in War: The Representation of Female Militants in Sri Lanka's Post-War Literature', 28.

[526] *Ibid.* 40.

of suicide ventures.[527] How should we as scholars confront the figure of the female militant – especially in cases where agency, in the form of political violence, situates the women militant at the uncomfortable intersection between empowerment and pawn in a patriarchal narrative? Through her violence, the female militant occupies a juxtaposed space of power and victimhood, an issue further discussed in the following section.[528]

[527] T N K Meegaswatta, 'Violence as a Site of Women's Agency in War: The Representation of Female Militants in Sri Lanka's Post-War Literature', 29.

[528] Kirk-Duggan, 'Inside, Outside, or in Between: Feminist/Womanist Hermenuetical Challenges for Joshua and Judges', 78; T N K Meegaswatta, 'Violence as a Site of Women's Agency in War: The Representation of Female Militants in Sri Lanka's Post-War Literature', 28–29.

Chapter 7

WEAPONISED AGENCY: THE MILITARISATION OF FEMININITY IN THE LIBERATION TIGERS OF TAMIL EELAM

In the brutal crucible of Sri Lanka's civil war (1983–2009), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) carved out an insurgent identity that was both nationalist and radical in form. Among its most controversial and complex legacies is its deployment of women—not only as fighters, but as suicide bombers. The image of the Tamil woman in military fatigues, or rigged with explosives, disrupted traditional narratives of gendered victimhood in South Asia. Yet behind this disruption lay a deeper struggle: one of agency, power, and the manipulation of gender for militarised ends.

The Sri Lankan Context

Sri-Lanka, known as Ceylon until 1972, is a small island nation located in South Asia, just off the southeastern coast of the Indian subcontinent. Geographically, Sri Lanka lies in the Indian Ocean, separated from India by the Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar. To the north of the country lies the southern tip of India, the state of Tamil Nadu. Sri Lanka's position places it along major sea routes, historically making it an important hub for trade between the East and the West.[529]

[529] Sinnappah Arasaratnam and Gerald Hubert Peiris, 'Sri Lanka', Encyclopaedia, Britannica, 1 October 2025, https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka.



Figure 5: Map of Sri Lanka. University of Texas Libraries (n.d.) *Sri Lanka Maps*. Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection.

During the civil war period, Sri Lanka's demographic composition was dominated by four principal communities: Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, and Sri Lankan Muslims. In the 2001 census, the national estimates placed the Sinalese at 74.5 percent, Sri Lankan Tamils at 11.9 percent, Indian Tamils at 4.6 percent, and Sri Lankan Moors at 8.3 percent of the population.[530] Beyond these major groupings, smaller minorities exist, including the Burghers (a community of mixed European decent), Parsis (migrants from western India), and the Veddas, who are generally regarded as the island's indigenous inhabitants. Together, these communities represent less than one percent of the population.[531]

These groups are also regionally concentrated. The Sinhalese form the demographic majority across the southern, western, central, and north-central regions of Sri Lanka, particularly dominating the rural communities of the Wet Zone lowlands. By contrast, the Sri Lankan Tamils are most heavily concentrated in the Jaffna Peninsula and the adjoining districts of the northern lowlands, with additional, although smaller settlements, along the eastern littoral, where their presence is interspersed with that of Muslim communities. The Indian Tamils – most of whom remain engaged in plantation labour – are found in substantial numbers in the elevated districts of the Central Highlands.[532]

Among Sri Lanka's principal ethnic communities, linguistic and religious affiliation serve as the primary markers of identity. The Sinhalese speak Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan language, while the Tamils use Tamil, a Dravidian language. In terms of religion, over 90 percent of the Sinhalese population adhere to Buddhism, whereas both Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils are predominantly Hindu. The Muslim community generally speak Tamil, while Christianity – embraced by roughly 7 percent of the total population – draws adherents from the Sinhalese, Tamil, and Burgher groups. Ethnic relations in Sri Lanka have long been marked by recurring tensions.

Post-Independence Political Landscape

Sri Lanka attained full independence on 4 February 1948 under the 1947 constitution, which established a bicameral legislature consisting of an elected House of Representatives and partly nominated Senate. Executive authority rested with a cabinet led by a prime minister, while the governor-general represented the British monarch as head of state. Where the constitution was silent,

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[530] statistics.gov.lk

[531] Arasaratnam and Peiris, 'Sri Lanka'. The Sri Lankan population is estimated to be around 21 million; 'about 74 per cent of the population are Sinhalese, 12 per cent are Sri Lankan Tamil, 8 per cent are Muslim, and about 5 per cent are Indian Tamil and some small minorities' Peng Wang, 'Women in the LTTE: Birds of Freedom or Cogs in the Wheel?', *Journal of Politics and Law (Toronto)* 4, no. 1 (2011): 100–101, https://doi.org/10.5539/jpl.v4n1p100.

[532] Arasaratnam and Peiris, 'Sri Lanka'.

the conventions of the United Kingdom served as precedent. Initially, the United National Party (UNP) held a commanding majority and consolidated its hold on government. Yet the new political order was built upon the cultural assumptions and values of the English-educated elite, alienating the wider Sinhalese and Tamil population, particularly through its perceived neglect of indigenous languages, religions, and cultural traditions. This energised revivalist and nationalist movements, especially among the Sinhalese majority.

Economic pressures intensified dissatisfaction. Population growth, rising consumer imports, and an expanding but underemployed educated class strained the economy. By the mid-1950s these frustrations converged with political dissatisfaction, empowering S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP). His 1956 electoral victory marked a decisive shift towards Sinhalese nationalism. The Sinhala Only Bill institutionalised Sinhala as the sole official language, while Buddhism and Sinhalese culture received explicit state patronage. Bandaranaike linked this cultural nationalism with a state-driven socialism designed to promote equality and development. However, the reforms generated opposition from Tamils, who resisted language discrimination, and from Christian communities who objected to changes in education. Even among the Sinhalese, religious and cultural reforms created fractures.[533]

Bandaranaike's assassination in 1959 left the nationalist movement fractured, but his widow, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, assumed leadership of the SLFP and in 1960 became the world's first female prime minister. Her administration extended state control over education, nationalized schools, and attempted to promote local industry. Economic stagnation, however, led to rising unemployment and inflation, paving the way for the UNP's return to power in 1965 under Dudley Shelton Senanayake. His focus on private enterprise and agricultural expansion exacerbated social inequality, fueling criticism.

The political pendulum swung again in 1970 as Sirimavo Bandaranaike, leading an SLFP-Marxist coalition, implemented sweeping nationalising measures targeting private industry, foreign plantations, and trade networks, alongside redistributive land reforms. Although such measures benefited the underprivileged, they failed to resolve structural economic weaknesses, particularly the widening trade deficit. Rising frustration among the educated but unemployed youth culminated in

[533] Ambalavaner Sivanandan, 'Ethnic Cleansing in Sri Lanka', *Race & Class* 51, no. 3 (2010): 59–65.; Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) uprising of 1971, a radical armed rebellion that, though unsuccessful, underscored the mounting volatility of the island's political and social order.[534]

Constitutional Change

The 1972 Constitution transformed Ceylon into the Republic of Sri Lanka, preserved membership of the Commonwealth, abolished the office of the governor-general, and replaced the bicameral legislature with a unicameral National State Assembly. It also introduced a presidency but effectively retained executive power within the prime ministerial cabinet. The Constitution entrenched Buddhism's privileged status and reaffirmed Sinhala as the sole official language – further institutionalising the religious and ethnic hierarchies already fuelling Tamil discontent.

Economic decline persisted through the 1970s, with state dominance over resources nurturing corruption. By 1977 unemployment hovered near 15 percent. A resurgent UNP (United National Party) under J.R. Jayawardene swept to power, reversing statist economic policies, encouraging foreign investment, and drafting the 1978 constitution. This constitution renamed the state the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and introduced an executive presidency consolidating authority in the president as both head of state and government. Though Sinhala and Tamil were recognised as national languages, Sinhala retained primacy as the official language.

Descent into Civil War

The 1980s were marked by escalating political unrest, particularly the rise of Tamil militancy. Insurgent bases developed in the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka, as well as in Tamil Nadu, India, where separatist groups received varying degrees of support. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), formed under Vellupillai Prabhakaran, emerged as the dominant force, though rival Tamil organisations also operated with frequent inter-group hostility. As the state escalated military repression, Tamil youth found militancy an increasingly viable avenue of political expression. Tensions erupted into large-scale anti-Tamil violence in July 1983 (known as Black July) when Sinhalese mobs carried out systematic attacks on Tamils in Colombo and other areas. These riots displaced thousands, both within Sri Lanka and across the Palk Strait to Tamil Nadu. Black July became the definitive rupture that transformed localised insurgency into full-scale civil war.

The Jayawardene government, faced with both Tamil separatism and a renewed Sinhalese insurgency by the JVP, sought Indian mediation. The Indo-Lanka Accord of 29 July 1987 proposed autonomy

[534] Arasaratnam and Peiris, 'Sri Lanka'.

for a merged north-east province and elevated Tamil to co-official language status. To enforce the agreement, an Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) was deployed. Yet disputes between the Sri Lankan state, the LTTE, and the IPKF over disarmament and implementation soon collapsed into renewed hostilities, with the LTTE engaging in armed confrontation against the IPKF itself.

In 1989, Jayawardene retired and was succeeded by Ranasinghe Premadasa who oversaw the withdrawal of the IPKF by March 1990 before resuming the war against the LTTE through the Sri Lankan army. On 1 May 1993, Premadasa was assassinated by an LTTE-linked suicide bomber. After a brief transitional presidency, Chandrika Kumaratunga assumed the presidency in 1994, becoming Sri Lanka's first female head of state. Her presidency was plagued by ongoing insurgency, including a failed LTTE assassination attempt in 1999. A ceasefire agreement concluded in 2002 raised hopes for a negotiated settlement, but by the mid-2000s violence had resumed, rendering the truce effectively void.[535] The civil war intensified until 2009, lasting 26 years and leaving approximately 65,000 dead and over a million people displaced. The civil war only concluded after the Sri Lankan government launched a decisive military offensive that resulted in the defeat of the LTTE and the killing of its leader, Prabhakaran.[536]

Gender Dynamics of the LTTE

As discussed above, the radicalised Tamil youth coalesced under the leadership of Vellupillai Prabhakaran to form the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, an organisation that developed both political and military structures with specialised operational and service units. These units were divided by gender with female cadres reporting to female wing leaders, reflecting an internally differentiated organisational hierarchy. As the conflict intensified, the LTTE increasingly took on a militant and insurgent form, evolved into a prolonged separatist struggle marked by terrorism and counter-violence. Anti-Tamil violence in Sinhalese-majority areas during 1983 further inflamed hostilities which fuelled the trajectory towards civil war. Importantly, the Tamil secessionist project also encountered resistance from other ethnic communities, who opposed the partitioning of the Sri Lankan state, adding further complexity to the emerging conflict landscape. [537]

The LTTE's employment of female combatants must be situated within the broader context of the Sri Lankan civil war. Sri Lanka's economy and infrastructure were left severely damaged. Intense

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[535] Arasaratnam and Peiris, 'Sri Lanka'.

[536] Arjuna Gunawardena, 'Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?', *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality*, 2006, 81–90; Jordan and Denov, 'Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.

[537] Arasaratnam and Peiris, 'Sri Lanka'; Jordan and Denov, 'Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.

conflict marked by increasingly aggressive attacks were perpetrated by the LTTE, while the Sinhalese counter-attacked the Tamils' civilians, including gender-based violence such as the rape of women.[538] As a result of manpower shortages in the LTTE, women and girls were actively recruited out of necessity, initially in supporting roles but from 1985 playing a more active role in combat.[539] The recruitment of women into the LTTE was shaped less by a commitment to gender emancipation than by pressing operational needs within the movement. Although the LTTE's female combatants – publicly celebrated as 'Birds of Freedom' – were frequently portrayed as empowered agents, research indicates that their participation was driven by a wide spectrum of motivations. Many women joined voluntarily in response to domestic abuse, poverty and sexual violence, and nationalist loyalty rather than ideological feminism. In this sense, nationalist imperatives and individual survival strategies outweighed any explicit pursuit of women's liberation.[540] Pirabaharan himself emphasised the symbolic value of women's participation, declaring: 'Today young women have taken up arms to liberate our land. They have made supreme sacrifices to this cause to the amazement of the world. I am proud to say that the birth, growth and expansion of the women's military wing is a remarkable achievement of our liberation movement, an achievement which marked a historical turning point in our struggle'.[541] His statement demonstrates how the LTTE framed female combatants as icons of nationalist resolve, reinforcing the movement's legitimacy rather than articulating a feminist project.

Gunawardena's research further complicates the LTTE's rhetorical emphasis on female empowerment. While joining the movement did provide some women with access to forms of authority and social respect otherwise denied to them, the widely used label 'Freedom Birds' functioned largely as a propaganda device. It projected an image of female emancipation to external audiences, yet it was not a term commonly used by the cadres themselves – nor did it fully reflect the constrained nature of women's roles within the organisation.[542]

Within the LTTE, a specialised unit known as the Black Tigers – made up of both male and female members – generally understood to be a suicide squad, emerged as a vital component of the movement's military strategy. Although all LTTE members carried cyanide capsules to avoid capture, only a small group undertook suicide missions, and membership in the Black Tigers was not enforced. Rather, volunteering for such operations was framed within the organisation as a honourable choice,

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[538] Gunawardena, 'Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?'; Jordan and Denov, 'Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.
[539] Jordan and Denov, 'Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.
[540] *Ibid.*
[541] Adele Ann, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* (LTTE International Secretariat, 1993).
[542] Gunawardena, 'Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?'

embedded in a discourse of martyrdom that advanced the LTTE's broader political goals. The motivations behind volunteering were multifaceted, shaped by intersecting pressures such as peer pressure, social stigma, economic constraints, and commitment to the nationalist case. Significantly, women were not marginal to these operations: between 1987 and 2006, approximately 24 percent of Black Tiger operatives killed in action were female, underscoring the gender-inclusive – though not gender-neutral – nature of LTTE militancy.[543]

The mobilisation of women within the LTTE provides a striking case study of female agency during crisis, particularly when women are drawn into spaces of militant nationalism. At its peak, female combatants made up an estimated one-third of LTTE members.[544] Stack-O'Connor has demonstrated that the LTTE's use of women was both strategic and symbolic. Women were deployed not only for tactical military advantage but also as potent figures of nationalist propaganda. Their presence destabilised conventional gender hierarchies by positioning women as front-line soldiers and suicide bombers, yet at the same time their mobilisation served to reinforce a vision of Tamil nationalism where women's bodies and sacrifices were inextricably bound to the movement's goals. In this sense, women's agency was simultaneously expanded and constrained – shaped by a liminal moment of crisis where gender norms could be temporarily suspended, but ultimately redirected to serve a patriarchal and nationalist agenda.

The gendered dimension of LTTE militancy invites a broader reconsideration of women's participation in armed struggle, extending the discussion beyond the organisational structure of the LTTE to the wider scholarly debates on female combatants. Armed conflict has traditionally been perceived as dominated by males, while females are usually identified as the victims of such conflict.[545] However, females play a vital role not only in localised armed struggle or civil conflicts but also in global conflicts.[546] These female roles are multidimensional and vary from being "perpetrators, actors, porters, commanders, domestic servants, spies, bodyguards, human shields, and sex slaves".[547] Females have demonstrated that they are instrumental to the functioning of armed forces and in

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[543] Gunawardena, 'Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?'

[544] Alisa Stack-O'Connor, 'Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: How and Why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Employs Women', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Abingdon) 19, no. 1 (2007): 43–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550601054642.

[545] Carolyn Nordstrom, *Girls and Warzones: Troubling Questions* (Citeseer, 1997).

[546] Dyan E. Mazurana et al., 'Girls in Fighting Forces and Groups: Their Recruitment, Participation, Demobilization, and Reintegration', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2002): 97–123.

[547] Jordan and Denov, 'Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam', 43.

certain instances have been actively recruited to legitimise or enhance symbolic power surrounding the conflict.[548]

However, some have argued that the recruitment campaigns, including coercive recruitment, may have had little to do with female fighters' participation and involvement in the LTTE, or less than is often assumed. The female fighters lived experiences with militarisation (pre-recruitment) and state oppression tended to shape their political identities, which later was mobilized through various socialisation processes to influence the commitment levels of the fighters.[549]

Perceptions of female empowerment within the LTTE vary according to interpretive lens: some view these women as heroic agents who actively participated in Tamil liberation, while others regard them as victim of structural coercion and patriarchy. Female cadres were perceived to achieve emancipation by way of non-gender stereotyped roles and responsibilities as females are considered as equals in the movement. Females achieve a certain sense of independence from the traditional Tamil lifestyles of women. LTTE female cadres were often glorified, respected, and considered heroes within the community. And yet, although females participate in the armed struggle, which is a significant behaviour adjustment for Tamil women, meaningful emancipation is hindered due to underlying prevailing gender construction patterns in the LTTE movement.[550]

The core values of the LTTE movement reflected traditional Sri Lankan values such as discipline and loyalty, the denunciation of sexual relations outside of marriage and the encouragement of LTTE members to inter-marry. Recruits were perceived to have a strong sense of devotion to the movement and joined voluntarily.[551]

However, the very conditions that normalised violence and drew women into the struggle did not dismantle the patriarchal norms embedded within the LTTE itself. The movement's acceptance of women as fighters coexisted with structural limits designed to preserve the masculine image of its military culture. Although the LLTE movement actively recruited female members, it was still a male-dominated movement in terms of numbers, ensuring that the military culture's image was not undermined. Incorporating females was a successful strategy; however, limiting female numbers was also beneficial to the movement so as not to hamper the appeal amongst males.

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[548] Jordan and Denov, 'Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.
[549] Nimmi Gowrinathan, 'The Committed Female Fighter: The Political Identities of Tamil Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (Abingdon) 19, no. 3 (2017): 327–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2017.1299369.
[550] Jordan and Denov, 'Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.
[551] *Ibid.*

The ability for females to take on revolutionary new roles and responsibilities disrupted the traditional gender constructs. In addition, the hero-like status of and admiration for female fighters by the public strengthened the perception that females represent the saviours or nurturers of society and in so doing maintain their traditional roles as care-givers. Emancipation was therefore attained though females embracing masculine behaviours as opposed to changing the military to a more feminine subculture. However, taking on these new roles and responsibilities did not liberate women from the expected traditional obligations. Women's status remained secondary to men, in that female agency in the military movement was allowed as long as they did not disrupt the image of the movement's masculinity. Furthermore, the female fighters were in essence fighters submitting to orders which in itself is not necessarily empowering nor does it allow for self-expression even if some form of emancipation is achieved.

Female self-sacrifice within the LTTE has been framed as an extension of motherhood, rendering women's willingness to die – whether as mothers or non-mothers – an acceptable and even valorised offering to the nationalist cause.[552]Although female bombers offered clear tactical advantages – particularly because women are often perceived as non-violent and therefore less likely to arouse suspicion – evidence indicates they were not inherently more effective or more dangerous than their male counterparts. Consequently, the strategic appeal of deploying women in suicide operations appears to have diminished over time. [553]

Birds of Freedom: The Politics of Militarised Agency

> 'It is women and children that are affected most in a war, that is why women make better soldiers.' – *Malathy, LTTE soldier.* [554]

More recent scholarship has focused on the cultural and representational dimensions of LTTE women. Vindhya Buthpitiya analyses the iconography of the so-called 'Birds of Freedom,' the female fighting wing of the LTTE, within both LTTE propaganda and state counter-narratives. Through visual analysis, she demonstrates how the image of armed Tamil women became a contested site of meaning, embodying both empowerment and containment. These images, while elevating women as

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[552] Clara Beyler, 'Messengers of Death: Female Suicide Bombers', *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism* 12, no. 02 (2003); Gunawardena, 'Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?'

[553] Gunawardena, 'Female Black Tigers: A Different Breed of Cat?'

[554] 'Sri Lanka's Female Tamil Tigers', *Al Jazeera English*, with Kylie Grey, Al Jazeera, 31 July 2007, News Broadcast, 3:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYr3n7Yta5Q&ab_channel=AlJazeeraEnglish.

warriors of the nation, also circumscribed their identities within a militarised framework, leaving little room for alternative articulations of agency outside of nationalist struggle.[555]

Buthpitiya's work shows how female combatants became a symbolic battleground, not only during the war but also in the post-war imagination, where their visibility continues to evoke unresolved tensions about gender and nationhood. The post-conflict period underscores the fragility of such militarised agency. While wartime crisis temporarily expanded the boundaries of acceptable female roles, peacetime re-stabilisation saw women pushed back into marginality, often stripped of both recognition and social legitimacy. This regression illustrates the contingent and liminal nature of their wartime agency, which was tolerated, and even celebrated, only insofar as it served the imperatives of nationalist survival.

Taken together, these studies illustrate how the LTTE case exemplifies female agency forged in the crucible of crisis but circumscribed by the structures of militarisation and nationalist discourse. In their roles as fighters, propagandists, and post-war 'remnants,' LTTE women challenge static notions of gender, yet their experiences also reveal the persistent ambivalence surrounding female power in patriarchal societies. Their agency is best understood as both real and constrained, a liminal performance that unsettled existing norms but was ultimately reabsorbed into wider structures of control. Against this broader backdrop of militarised representation and contested agency, individual life testimonies offer a more detailed understanding of how Tamil women navigated these pressures. One such figure is Thamizhini, whose trajectory from schoolgirl to LTTE leader reveals how personal aspiration, structural violence, and collective struggle converged in shaping female militancy. Thamizhini remained a member of the LTTE for eighteen years. Within the movement, she served as a combatant, educator, writer, and eventually as the head of the women's division of the Political Wing. She participated in frontline battles, directed political education for cadres, and became an influential voice at the 2002 Norwegian-brokered peace talks, particularly through her role in the Subcommittee on Gender Issues.[556] Her memoir, In the Shadow of a Sword is both a personal testimony and a broader reflection on the intersection of war, gender, and national struggle.[557]

Shadow of a Sword: Thamizhini and the LTTE

Thamizhini, born Chandrika, grew up in northern Sri Lanka. She was born at a time when the Tamil people were engulfed by war, and her earliest memories marked by the conflict's relentless intrusion

[555] Vindhya Buthpitiya, 'How to Capture Birds of Freedom: Picturing Tamil Women at War', *Trans Asia Photography* 13, no. 1 (2023).
[556] Thamizhini, *In the Shadow of a Sword*, trans. Nedra Rodrigo (SAGE, 2021), x–xi.
[557] *Ibid.*

into daily life.[558] She describes her childhood as one marred by aerial bombardments and an atmosphere of siege.[559] Yet even as violence and instability deepened around her, her vision for the future remained grounded in education and service. She nurtured a singular ambition: to study at university, secure a stable career, and provide financial support for her fatherless family.[560]

At school she distinguished herself not only through academic success but through active engagement in public life. As secretary of the Student Council and a prefect, she became a visible figure within her community, admired for her leadership and discipline. From an early age she embraced public speaking, poetry, debating, and drama, earning recognition from teachers, officials, and peers across schools. These pursuits reflected not only her intellectual curiosity but also her determination to carve out a path beyond the limitations imposed by her circumstances. In those years, her mind held no thought of war or militancy; it was filled instead with the promise of education and the hope of a more secure future.[561]

That hope, however, was slowly consumed by the realities around her. Many of the young men who had studied alongside her had already joined the Movement, and rumours spread of girls who had quietly gone missing to enlist. The community whispered of women in the ranks, the 'Freedom Birds,' who had emerged in the time of Thileepan's hunger strike in Jaffna.[562] By the 1990s, these women appeared in person—dressed in camouflage, carrying weapons, and walking openly among the people. Though initially disparaged by the community, their presence was gradually normalised, and the sight of female cadres became part of everyday life. In her own village of Paranthan, the women fighters visited homes and mingled with families, collapsing the distance between ordinary life and armed struggle. To her, they seemed at once extraordinary and ordinary – courageous, yet women who might have been her classmates, neighbours, or even friends. She admired their fearless way of life and longed to be counted among them.[563]

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[558] Thamizhini, *In the Shadow of a Sword*, 30.
[559] *Ibid. 29*.
[560] *Ibid. 32*,38.
[561] *Ibid. 38*.
[562] Thileepan (R. Parthipan), a senior LTTE political leader, undertook a fast-unto-death beginning on 15 September 1987 in front of the Nallur Kandaswamy Temple in Jaffna, demanding that India fulfil its obligations under the Indo–Sri Lanka Accord. His five demands included the release of Tamil political prisoners, halting Sinhalese colonisation of Tamil areas, suspending rehabilitation activities until an interim administration was established, ending the establishment of new police posts, and disarming Home Guards in Tamil districts. Despite appeals to Indian officials, his demands were ignored, and Thileepan died after twelve days without food or water on 26 September 1987. His death provoked widespread grief and was later memorialised by the LTTE as a moment of profound sacrifice, symbolising both the community's frustration and the movement's claim to moral legitimacy in the struggle for Tamil rights (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994, 124; Swamy 1994, 178–79; Wilson 2000, 165; Whitaker 2015, 92).
[563] Thamizhini, *In the Shadow of a Sword*, 39.

Her connection to the Movement soon turned personal. During a visit to a camp with school friends, she discovered her younger sister had already joined. The revelation bound them together in secrecy, each promising never to reveal their clandestine ties at home. Meanwhile, her own engagement with the struggle deepened through her role as leader of the school band. She and her peers were called to play funeral music at the memorials of fallen Tigers. Against Tamil custom, which barred women from entering graveyards, she found herself standing at gravesides as fighters lit pyres for their dead comrades. These rituals moved her profoundly. They were not only solemn commemorations but vivid reminders of the daily sacrifices being made by young men and women of her generation. The experience stirred a deep sense of guilt – she was only a spectator while others gave their lives.[564]

The burden of that guilt hardened into conviction. She came to believe that if one child from each family stepped forward to fight, the others might be spared. It was an act of substitution she was willing to embrace: she would go, rather than see her younger siblings die. The decision was hers alone, made without consulting family or friends. Leaving home was an agony, but she steeled herself with the certainty that she would never return. On the day she enlisted, she lied to her mother, claiming she was attending afternoon lessons, before cycling to the female fighters' camp in Kanagapuram, Kilinochchi.[565] On 29 July 1991, Thamizhini formally joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam as a fighter. On her enlistment, she wrote: "I enlisted in the Liberation Tigers' Movement as a fighter on 29 July 1991. At that time, and under those circumstances, I did not see myself as having any other choice. I truly believed I had made the right decision with my life. Our senior political leaders proclaimed war from their platforms, and the younger generations' lives were made sacrificial offerings in the funeral pyre of war. Thousands of young people were eagerly heading towards those flames".[566] In that moment, she felt there had never been another path available to her. War had closed the doors to education and a conventional future, redirecting her ambitions into the crucible of armed struggle. She, too, entered that fire, believing with conviction that she had made the only choice possible for her life.[567]

Thamizhini's early encounters with bombings, displacement, and the deaths of those close to her instilled in her a sense that peaceful survival was impossible under the Sinhala-majoritarian state rule. Thus her decision to join the LTTE at the age of 19 must be read against the wider backdrop of systemic discrimination against Tamils in post-independence Sri Lanka, coupled with cycles of state

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[564] Thamizhini, 40.
[565] *Ibid.* *40*–41.
[566] *Ibid.* 41.
[567] *Ibid.* 41.

violence in the north and east. Her decision was not driven by thrill or adventure, but by a belief that armed struggle was a necessary path for justice and survival. Thamizhini describes her enlistment as both a political awakening and a personal calling to protect her people. For Thamizhini, combat was an extension of community service – defending Tamil civilians who faced displacement, economic embargoes, and daily insecurity.

Once inside the movement, Thamizhini underwent weapons training, battlefield duties, and later political education work. She stressed the LTTE's role in enabling women to transcend conventional domestic roles, offering them prestige and authority otherwise denied in Tamil society. The creation of all-female brigades such as the Malathi and Sothiya units symbolised this shift, as women fought alongside men in major operations including Mullaitivu (1996) and Jayasikuru (1997–1999).[568] Yet, this empowerment was ambivalent. While women were celebrated as martyrs, their authority as survivors remained contested. As Kumari Jayawardena (1986) observed in a broader South Asian context, nationalist struggles often mobilise women as symbols of sacrifice but retract autonomy once the crisis subsides. Thamizhini herself lamented that although society embraced women as fighters, it rejected them after the war, with returning cadres being told they 'should have died' rather than live on. [569]

Her narrative also highlights contradictions within the LTTE itself. On one hand, she portrays Velupillai Prabhakaran as supportive of women's autonomy, encouraging women to take leadership and insisting that female cadres write about women's issues in the movement press. On the other hand, she acknowledged that such autonomy was dependent upon his leadership, and feared that women's empowerment would erode after his death.[570] Scholars such as Nimmi Gowrinathan emphasise this paradox: female militancy simultaneously destabilises and reinforces patriarchal nationalism. Thamizhini's reflections resonate with this tension—combat gave women status, but the LTTE's rigid hierarchy and authoritarian discipline curtailed full gender equality.[571]

Perhaps the most striking dimension of her memoir is her retrospective critique of armed struggle. While she does not deny the LTTE's role in protecting Tamil civilians, she concedes that the movement ultimately failed to protect the Tamil people and prioritised weapons over political aims.[572] She insists that the next generation must not return to armed conflict, but instead pursue justice

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[568] Thamizhini, *In the Shadow of a Sword.*
[569] *Ibid.*
[570] *Ibid.*
[571] Gowrinathan, 'The Committed Female Fighter: The Political Identities of Tamil Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.
[572] Thamizhini, *In the Shadow of a Sword.*

through intellectual and peaceful means. This transformation from militant to critic places her within what Cheran describes as the post-war Tamil genre of life writing that resists simple narratives of triumph or victimhood.[573]

Thamizhini's life offers a critical case study in the intersection of gender and violence in nationalist struggles. Her account underscores how Tamil women joined militancy both out of political conviction and in response to gendered vulnerabilities, and how combat simultaneously empowered and constrained them. The LTTE opened spaces for women's participation unprecedented in Tamil society, yet these gains were fragile, dependent on wartime necessity and male leadership. Her memoir thus complicates the binary of women as victims or heroines, revealing the precarious agency of female militants in contexts of protracted war instead, highlighting agency during times of crisis and liminality.

[573] R. Cheran, 'Foreword: Writing Life, Writing War', in *In the Shadow of a Sword*, trans. Nedra Rodrigo (SAGE, 2021).

Chapter 8

THEORISING AGENCY FROM JUDGES TO SRI LANKA

The pairing of Judges 4—5 with the contemporary case of Sri Lankan women combatants in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam again links two narratives that are historically and politically distant. Like Exodus and Auschwitz, both contexts focus on women whose agency emerges during profound crises. In Judges 4—5, Deborah, a prophet and judge, and Jael, the Kenite woman who kills Sisera, exist in an Israelite landscape fractured by Canaanite domination and oppression. Within a patriarchal, militarised environment, they act decisively. Similarly, LTTE women soldiers navigate a complex space of militancy and resistance, transitioning from civilian marginalisation to highly militarised roles in an ethno-nationalist insurgency. They challenge and blur traditional notions of femininity, sacrifice, and nationhood. In both cases, the female body becomes a political and moral site, simultaneously influenced by and subverting power structures. Deborah's authoritative speech and Jael's lethal hospitality complicate gender norms in a patriarchal society, while Tamil women fighters embody a militarised femininity that both challenges and reproduces nationalist and patriarchal narratives.

A common theme in these narratives is liminality—a threshold state in which normal roles and identities are suspended or transformed. In Deborah and Jael's case, liminality is shown through the reversal of prophetic and martial roles: women taking on leadership and violence roles usually assigned to men. For the LTTE women soldiers, liminality is seen in their dual roles as both nurturers and fighters, life-givers and life-takers, within Tamil nationalism's ideological framework. In both cases, this liminal space becomes a site of ongoing negotiation, where agency is neither entirely free nor completely fixed but constantly performed and redefined amid crises.

This chapter uses the shift hypotheses as a framework to analyse how crises transform social, political, and gendered structures. The demographic shift hypothesis highlights how war and the absence of men create opportunities for women to participate more broadly; the role shift hypothesis examines how wartime disruptions reshape gendered labour and identity; and the political shift hypothesis analyses how moments of structural upheaval open doors for women's empowerment within or outside existing regimes. These hypotheses reveal how figures like Deborah, Jael, and the women of the LTTE operate in spaces of radical change, where traditional hierarchies break down and new power structures temporarily emerge.

Taken together, these frameworks provide a comparative methodology that reveal the deep continuities in how women navigate structures of power during times of crisis, constructing agency from within constraint. By juxtaposing the ancient world of Israelite warfare with Sri Lanka's contemporary conflict, this chapter examines how women's acts of survival illuminate the complex intersections of agency, gender, power, and crisis.

This chapter mirrors the approach of the previous theoretical chapter (chapter 5) by first identifying the crises that shape these narratives and then analysing them through the lens of shift hypotheses—demographic, role, and political. It then synthesises insights from Judith Butler, Anthony Giddens, and Michel Foucault with Judges 4—5 and LTTE material, before offering a comparative overview.

Identifying Crisis

This analysis begins by highlighting the crises that create the conditions for agency in both Judges 4—5 and the LTTE narratives. Both contexts are set against warfare, social upheaval, and ideological struggles, where gendered bodies are intertwined with political efforts for survival and sovereignty. In the Judges narrative, crisis occurs through Canaanite oppression and the breakdown of male military leadership, opening the way for Deborah's authority and Jael's disruptive violence to appear. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, long-term civil war and nationalist movements have reshaped gender roles, with Tamil women taking on combat and leadership roles previously unavailable to them. Comparing these crises shows how war both destabilises and sustains patriarchal structures, creating liminal spaces where women's agency can emerge.

When looking at the Judges 4—5 narrative, there are four types of crisis identified. First, we see a crisis of political rupture and failure of leadership. The oppression under Jabin and Sisera (Judges 4:1-3) signals more than foreign dominance; it reveals the fragility of Israel's decentralised tribal grouping. Niditch argues that Judges reflects a polity whose mechanisms of collective action are unstable, with tribes frequently unwilling or unable to act in concert.[574] The Song of Deborah accentuates this fragmentation by exposing the tribes that respond and those that refrain (Judges 5:14-18). This fragmentation constitutes a crisis in collective responsibility and tribal solidarity. This selective mobilisation exposes deep fissures in Israel's social cohesion, creating a crisis in which traditional male-led militarism falters. This fracture of authority is crucial: agency becomes available to atypical actors because the normative structures of leadership are unwilling or absent. Deborah

[574] Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*.

functions as a judge, prophet, and military strategist – roles that would typically fall within male domains. Deborah does not simply arise, she arises into a vacuum.[575]

The Canaanite oppression represents a second layer of crisis. Judges 4:3 notes that Sisera's army cruelly oppressed Israel for twenty years. Militarily, Canaan's iron chariots symbolise technological superiority and a militant dominant regime. Brettler observes that such prolonged military pressure destabilises internal structures and compels extraordinary leadership responses.[576] This external threat intensifies the crisis of agency: the usual mechanisms of tribal and patriarchal control are compromised by the magnitude of the military danger. In this liminal moment, Deborah and Barak form a partnership that subverts traditional hierarchies, and Jael's act of killing Sisera becomes a decisive political intervention.

A third crisis is that of gendered disruption. The Song of Deborah positions the women of Canaan – particularly Sisera's mother – within a discourse of sexual violence, depicting them as expected war spoils ('a womb or two for every man' Judges 5:30). This normalisation of sexual violation reveals the gendered stakes of warfare, where women's bodies signify both vulnerability and victory.[577] Against this backdrop, Jael's killing of Sisera is a radical inversion of gendered expectations: rather than being the victimised 'womb', she becomes the agent of Israel's victory. Her act is possible precisely because the crisis has destabilised normative boundaries of gender and violence. Furthermore, Barak's dependence on Deborah's presence ('If you will not go with me, I will not go' Judges 4:8) is symptomatic of a broader collapse of patriarchal authority. Deborah's self-presentation as a 'mother of Israel' (Judges 5:7) can thus be read as intervening in a moment where traditional patriarchal leadership structures have collapsed. Motherhood becomes a political idiom because conventional masculine idioms have ceased to function. War destabilises boundaries between public and private, masculine and feminine, domestic and martial spaces. Deborah's authority in the public sphere and Jael's lethal appropriation of the domestic sphere indicate that gendered norms are under pressure.

Finally, there is crisis of covenant identity. Judges 4—5 is embedded within a theological premise: In Judges 2:11-19, covenantal infidelity leads to foreign oppression, which then leads to divine intervention. The Song of Deborah complicates the standard formula by further attributing Israel's vulnerability not only to divine judgement but also to inter-tribal apathy and socioeconomic

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[575] Robert G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary.*, Anchor Bible 6A (Doubleday, 1975).
[576] Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Book of Judges* (Routledge, 2002).
[577] Trible, *Texts of Terror. Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*.

breakdown: 'Village life in Israel ceased' (Judges 5:7), 'Zebulun risked their lives…but Dan stayed with the ships' (Judges 5:18). Thus the crisis is not only divinely imposed; it is socially produced. Israel's covenantal identity is under threat not simply from Canaanite oppression, but also from social dysfunction and disintegration.

The crises in Judges 4—5 are therefore interlocking breakdowns in political legitimacy, gendered boundaries, and covenantal coherence. These ruptures create a liminal space where female agency becomes both necessary and possible. Crisis, in this context, is not merely destructive; it is generative of new social configurations that Deborah and Jael occupy with strategy and decisiveness.

When looking at our contemporary case study of women combatants in the LTTE, the most obvious crisis is that of postcolonial tensions and the breakdown of civic life in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's crisis emerges from layered historical conflicts: colonial legacies, Sinhala majoritarian nationalism, and Tamil demands for autonomy. Scholars such as Sharika Thiranagama emphasise that by the late 1970s and early 1980s, Tamil communities in the north and east experienced systematic marginalisation, discriminatory language and education policies, and escalating state militarisation.[578] This civic breakdown functions similarly to the tribal fragmentation in Judges: traditional structures of authority were overwhelmed or delegitimised by violence. New actors emerged, including militant youth movements and this emphasises the second crisis – warfare and political oppression.

The Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009) generated a profound political crisis that fractured Tamil society. Systematic state marginalisation and military campaigns by the Sri Lankan government created a political order defined by militant threat. For Tamil women, this crisis translated into a dual displacement: as victims of state violence and as subjects of national mobilisation. The LTTE's recruitment of women into combat and leadership roles emerged within this crucible of oppression, reframing women's identities as both symbols of the nation's vulnerability and instruments of its resistance.[579] The LTTE arose partly because existing political mechanisms failed to protect Tamil populations. Militarisation became the primary organising structure of Tamil resistance. As Seoighe notes, militarisation not only reshaped political structures but permeated everyday life.[580] This is a crisis of political representation as Tamil civilians found themselves with no functional mediating

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[578] Sharika. Thiranagama and Gananath. Obeyesekere, *In My Mother's House : Civil War in Sri Lanka*, 1st ed., The Ethnography of Political Violence (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812205114.

[579] Neloufer De Mel, 'Body Politics: (Re)Cognising the Female Suicide Bomber in Sri Lanka', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA) 11, no. 1 (2004): 75–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/097152150401100106; Wang, 'Women in the LTTE: Birds of Freedom or Cogs in the Wheel?'

[580] Rachel Seoighe, *War, Denial and Nation-Building in Sri Lanka* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

institutions. The LTTE filled this vacuum, presenting itself as the sole legitimate defender of the Tamil people.

As with the Exodus narrative, in the context of the LTTE, gendered disruption operates at the heart of the crisis. The movement's female combatants – as armed soldiers, snipers, suicide cadres, and field commanders – transgress the ideological and bodily boundaries of traditional Tamil femininity. Their militarised participation, while framed as patriotic sacrifice, simultaneously unsettled cultural codes of chastity and motherhood. The result is a paradoxical space in which women's liberation was both enacted and instrumentalised: they were empowered through combat yet contained within a nationalist rhetoric that sanctified their deaths more than their lives.

Many Tamil women entered the LTTE after experiencing the loss of family members, sexual violence by state forces, or the destruction of their homes. Thiranagama writes that familial annihilation created conditions where daughters became extensions of the community's survival instinct stepping into militant roles that would previously have been unthinkable.[581] Unlike Judges, where violence opens a momentary gap for women's agency, the LTTE institutionalised women's participation. De Mel notes that the LTTE constructed a symbolic female militant figure: disciplined, celibate, and ideologically pure – a response to crisis that simultaneously empowered and constrained women.[582] Agency therefore emerges through, not against, a militarised nationalist ideology.

In both the narratives of the Judges and the LTTE, crises arise not as isolated incidents but as layered conditions involving political subjugation, gendered disruption, moral tension, and cultural liminality. Each crisis destabilises established structures and marks moments when women's agency becomes visible, though often fragile. Whether in Deborah's leadership and Jael's act of violence, or in the LTTE women's redefined roles as fighters and martyrs, crisis serves as a paradoxical force – both destructive and creative. It reveals fractures in systems of power while also showing the ability of women to act within and against them, turning moments of vulnerability into acts of defiant significance.

The crises examined clarify that moments of social disruption not only threaten existing social orders but also reveal the fault lines where agency can emerge. When normative structures break down, women are forced to develop new methods of action. These ruptures encourage a transition from simply describing the crisis to analysing its structural repercussions. Therefore, the discussion now

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[581] Thiranagama and Obeyesekere, *In My Mother's House : Civil War in Sri Lanka*.
[582] Neloufer De Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Sri Lanka* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

shifts to the shift hypotheses, which provide an understanding of how extreme social upheaval can lead to demographic changes, reallocate gendered roles, and create unexpected political opportunities. By identifying these patterned changes, the shift hypotheses serve as an interpretive link between the crises themselves and the forms of agency that arise afterwards.

The Shift Hypotheses: Demographic, Role, and Political Shifts

The concept of shift hypotheses as outlined by Webster, Chen, and Beardsley identify how crises transform socio-political structures, thereby creating altered conditions in which women's agency becomes visible and strategically deployed.[583] In both Judges 4—5 and the Sri Lankan civil war, crisis catalyses three key types of shifts: demographic, role, and political. These shifts underpin the emergence of women such as Deborah and Jael, and the Tamil women combatants within the LTTE.

The Demographic Shift

Judges 5 depicts a society where villages had collapsed (Judges 5:7), trade routes were unsafe (Judges 5:6), and population displacement was escalating. Such demographic pressures would weaken patriarchal structures that depended upon stable kinship systems and this demographic instability created conditions in which non-normative actors could emerge as leaders. With men absent due to battle, death, or retreating loyalties (Judges 5:17), there was a vacuum in public leadership. This demographic contraction paradoxically expands Deborah's influence: fewer viable male leaders heightens the need for charismatic authority.

Likewise, Jael's tent setting (common among nomadic or semi-nomadic kin groups) permits demographic scarcity to combine with spatial chance. A household lacking male protectors becomes vulnerable to political violence.

In Judges 4-5, Israel's oppression under Jabin the Canaanite king, and the paralysis of male leadership (Judges 4:8-9), generate precisely such a demographic and symbolic vacuum. Deborah's emergence as judge and prophet, and Jael's decisive act of killing Sisera, occur in a context where traditional male authority has faltered. Deborah's authority articulated through both judicial pronouncement and martial command, indicates a reconfiguration of gendered leadership during demographic crisis. The prophetic refrain 'village life ceased' (Judges 5:7) underscores the social disruption that precipitates

[583] 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', 2019.

her rise – a moment when survival demands the reconstitution of communal identity around alternative forms of leadership.

The Role Shift

The role shift hypothesis contends that crises restructure gendered labour and social functions, generating opportunities for women to enter spheres previously closed to them. The crisis of leadership causes a destabilising of traditional gender roles. Deborah and Jael embody this transformation. Deborah's dual role as prophetess and commander is unprecedented in Israel's narrative historiography. Her leadership over Barak destabilises the normative division of gendered power, and her prophetic voice 'Has not the Lord gone out before you?' (Judges 4:14) reconfigures the discourse of divine authority through a female medium.[584]

Jael's act of violence, carried out with domestic tools, further illustrates a role inversion: the implements of care become weapons of deliverance. She weaponises domesticity. In the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), this inversion is celebrated rather than censured, revealing that crisis legitimises forms of female agency that would otherwise be unthinkable within normative patriarchy.[585]

The Political Shift

In Judges 4-5, Deborah's leadership is explicitly political, governing under divine sanction during a period of dysfunction: 'She used to sit under the palm of Deborah…and the Israelites came up to her for judgment' (Judges 4:5). Her authority represents an early instance of female governance in the HB – a form of political agency arising within, rather than outside, patriarchal structures. Jael's actions, though less formal, are equally political in consequence. By killing Sisera, she delivers Israel's enemy into defeat, performing an act of political subversion from the margins of power. The text's closing verse 'So may all your enemies perish O Lord' (Judges 5:31), integrates her act into a national-political narrative of divine justice.[586]

Deborah and Jael exemplify how demographic fragility, shifting social roles, and political rupture converge to create unexpected openings for women's agency in Judges 4—5. Deborah's authority crystallises precisely because the crisis has rendered traditional male structures insufficient. Jael, positioned at the margins of Israel's political world, transforms the domestic sphere into a site of

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[584] Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*.
[585] Fewell and Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5'.
[586] Trible, *Texts of Terror. Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*.

national deliverance, her act of killing Sisera arising from the fluidity produced by inter-tribal tensions and collapsing alliances.

What is striking is that these shifts unfold before the formal victory over Canaan is secured. Crisis does not merely accompany women's actions; it precedes them, catalysing a reconfiguration of Israel's social landscape in which women become the first decisive agents of change. Their interventions reshape the trajectory of the conflict long before Barak's forces rout Sisera's army. In this way, Judges 4—5 illustrates how periods of turmoil unexpectedly generate conditions for female empowerment that foreshadow later developments in Israel's memory of leadership and deliverance.

Just as the crises of demographic fragility, role disruption, and political fragmentation in Judges 4—5 create the conditions for women's agency, similar patterns emerge within the Sri Lankan civil war. Although separated by vastly different historical and cultural landscapes, the LTTE context likewise demonstrates how crisis reshapes gendered possibilities and forces a reconfiguration of social roles.

The Demographic Shift

In Sri Lanka's civil war, demographic shifts enabled women's mobilisation within the LTTE. High male mortality rates and protracted displacement disrupted familial and social structures, prompting the movement to incorporate women into combatant roles from the early 1980s onward.[587] These women not only filled the demographic void but also came to symbolise the regenerative potential of the Tamil nation. The LTTE's rhetoric of the 'mother-warrior' positioned women as embodiments of demographic survival amid existential threat.[588] Yet, as in Judges 4—5, the demographic opening was temporary and paradoxical – expanding women's agency only within the limits defined by nationalist and militarised imperatives.

The Role Shift

Within the LTTE, role shifts were both ideological and operational. Tamil women, previously confined to domestic or reproductive roles, took on roles in combat and intelligence units. The Birds of Freedom, the LTTE's all-female combat wing, performed tasks that symbolically and materially redefined femininity.[589] The LTTE women's military participation was justified through nationalist

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[587] De Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Sri Lanka*; Miranda Alison, 'Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam', *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (2003): 37–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698240308402554.

[588] Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, 'Between Reality and Representation: Women's Agency in War and Post-Conflict Sri Lanka', *Cultural Dynamics* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi) 16, nos 2–3 (2004): 141–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374004047741.

[589] Alison, 'Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.

rhetoric of protection and sacrifice rather than emancipation, echoing Deborah's and Jael's instrumentalised heroism – necessary for victory, but ultimately framed within patriarchal lenses.

The Political shift

In the Sri Lankan context, the LTTE's inclusion of women reflected a political restructuring born of existential crisis. Women's participation in the movement was publicly celebrated as evidence of Tamil modernity and equality.[590] However, scholars have argued that this political opening was instrumental rather than transformative; while women exercised military authority, their political agency was circumscribed by the LTTE's hierarchical, male-led command.[591] The women's political subjectivity thus mirrored Deborah's paradox – empowered within crisis yet absorbed into a system that reinstates male dominance once the crisis resolves.

Comparative synthesis

Taken together, Judges 4—5 and the narratives of the LTTE women reveal that crisis prompts overlapping demographic, role, and political shifts that reshape gendered power structures without necessarily dismantling them. In both contexts, women's agency is both reactive and creative: born from rupture yet producing new social meanings. Deborah and Jael, like the Tamil female combatants, enact forms of leadership and violence that redefine feminine capacity within patriarchal frameworks. Yet their empowerment remains liminal – sanctioned by necessity and withdrawn by normalcy.

What emerges is a pattern of contingent female empowerment, where crises temporarily suspend gender-based hierarchies, allowing women to act as agents of rescue or defense. Once stability returns, these hierarchies are reestablished. The demographic gaps caused by Canaanite oppression and Sri Lankan warfare, along with the changed roles of prophetess and soldier, and the fleeting political opportunities, all demonstrate how women's agency is shaped within – rather than outside – power structures. From the perspective of the shift hypotheses, both stories reveal the paradox of female agency during crises: it is both revolutionary and emancipatory, yet still limited by the very systems it challenges. These patterns prompt a larger discussion on how gender is influenced during times of crisis. Judith Butler's concept of performativity offers insight into how female agency is both enabled and restricted by existing power frameworks.

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[590] De Mel, 'Body Politics: (Re)Cognising the Female Suicide Bomber in Sri Lanka'.
[591] Rajasingham-Senanayake, 'Between Reality and Representation: Women's Agency in War and Post-Conflict Sri Lanka'.

Judith Butler

1. Performativity, maternal scripts, and subversive embodiment in Judges 4—5

Judges 4–5 provides a concentrated site for exploring Judith Butler's theorisation of gender as a repeated, socially intelligible performance that both materialises and destabilises norms.[592]

In this narrative complex, femininity and masculinity are expressed through surprising arrangements: domestic acts turn deadly and a woman embodies military authority. Like in Exodus, gender appears neither innate nor fixed but is shaped by repeated actions whose significance becomes unstable during crises.

Deborah's role in Judges 4-5 complicates conventional paradigms of gender and power. Deborah is cast as prophetess, judge, and military catalyst simultaneously and she speaks from within a highly masculinised narrative space. Despite this, she neither mimics male power nor conforms to passive femininity. When read through Butler's theory of gender performativity, Deborah emerges not only as an exception within a patriarchal framework but also as a deliberate enactment that both reveals and disrupts the construction of gendered authority. [593]

In Butler's view, gender is a stylised repetition of actions; a performance that produces the illusion of stability through habitual practices.[594] Deborah's prophetic identity – sitting beneath a palm tree to provide judgements (Judges 4:5) – is deeply symbolic in this regard. She performs the expected position of prophetic and legal wisdom, yet her embodiment of these roles unsettles gendered expectations.

Deborah speaks not merely as a woman with divine insight, but as a voice that enacts divine will. Deborah's power is not enforced through physical force, but through speech acts that carry divine and judicial weight. She summons Barak, issues commands, and, in Judges 5, sings a war hymn that reframes the battle narrative through female memory. Using Butler's terms, this linguistic agency constitutes a radical performativity: Deborah's authority is produced in and through her performance of it. She does not inherit power, but she enacts it into being through prophetic utterance and strategic timing.

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[592] Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity / Judith Butler.*, 191–93.
[593] *Ibid.*
[594] *Ibid.*

What is most striking in the portrayal of Deborah is that her gender is neither neutralised to secure authority nor exaggerated for symbolic emphasis. She does not abandon gendered imagery nor becomes masculinised to lead. Instead, she maintains a stance that is both recognisably feminine and firmly authoritative. Her self-description in Judges 5:7: 'I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel', functions not as biographical disclosure but as a political metaphor.

This maternal framing combines protection, and national responsibility into a single rhetorical act, enabling Deborah to express her leadership in familiar relational terms without reducing it to biological roles.

Using Butler's theoretical framework, this declaration exemplifies the performative quality of gender; the way identities are produced and reiterated through speech and cultural scripts. Deborah's use of the term 'mother' is not an appeal to essentialist femininity, but a strategic citation of a socially revered role that lends her prophetic and judicial leadership moral resonance. Her agency as 'mother' becomes a form of gendered intercession – a way of standing between Israel and crisis, not as a warrior, but as one who nurtures the nation into order.

Butler explains that such roles are never fixed or natural, rather they are discursively constructed, dependent on repetition, and therefore open to reconfiguration.[595] Deborah's invocation of motherhood performs precisely this function, in that it reinforces a recognisable identity while simultaneously expanding its political utility. Her gender is performed with intention and offers a model of agency that is quietly revolutionary in its refusal to be assimilated into male paradigms or tokenised within female ones.

Barak's hesitancy and conditional obedience ('If you go with me, I will go,' Judges 4:8) produces what Butler identifies as a performative rupture: a moment where a gender script falters, revealing its contingency.[596] By insisting on Deborah's presence in battle, Barak shifts the source of military authority from male bodily prowess to prophetic authority. In doing so, his reliance reframes masculinity not as independent command, but as cooperative responsiveness. This subtly disrupts the usual norms of Israelite warfare.

Jael's actions exemplify the most radical Butlerian subversion within the story. Her acts of hospitality – offering milk and covering Sisera with a blanket (4:18–19) — reference traditional

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[595] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory'; Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity / Judith Butler.*, 191.

[596] Judith. Butler, *Bodies That Matter : On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (Routledge, 1993).

domestic femininity, a role centred on care and protection. However, this display transforms into a deadly disguise, through which Sisera's death is carried out. The hammer and tent-peg, common tools of nomadic household work, are repurposed as weapons of violence. Butler's idea of subversive citation fits well here: Jael repeats the gestures of hospitality but imbues them with an opposing purpose, revealing gender as a flexible performance rather than a fixed truth.[597] Her actions reframe femininity as strategic violence, blurring the distinction between nurturing and killing.

The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) intensifies this performativity through poetic celebration. Deborah is twice named "a mother in Israel" (5:7), a designation that resignifies maternity as martial vocation. Through this metaphor, the maternal body becomes the symbolic locus of national resistance. The song's depiction of Sisera's mother imagining her son's return (5:28–30) sets up a counter-performance in which motherhood is associated with the spoils of war rather than liberation. Butler's work on grievability illuminates these contrasting maternalities: Deborah's and Jael's actions elevate vulnerable Israelite lives as preservable, whereas Sisera's mother's imagined spoils normalise violence against women.[598] By comparing these maternal performances, Judges 5 exposes the cultural labour through which lives are mourned or disregarded.

Judges 4–5 serves as a record of rebellious femininities. It presents domestic and maternal roles with variation; a woman embodies martial authority; and the usual gender expectations break down. Using Butler's perspective, the story shows how crisis disrupts gender norms, allowing actions that reveal and reshape the meanings of gender and violence.

2. Performativity, Combat Femininity, and Embodied Agency in Sri Lanka

Judith Butler's framework similarly sheds light on the actions of female combatants in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), whose embodied practices radically destabilised gender norms within both Tamil society and the militarised state.

Tamil society before the civil war largely defined femininity through domesticity and chastity. The LTTE's recruitment of women – including suicide units and elite brigades – caused a significant shift in these norms. Their very participation as fighters acted as a performative contradiction: women were demonstrating martial violence, which has traditionally been the symbolic core of hegemonic

[597] Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity / Judith Butler.*
[598] Butler, *Precarious Life.*

masculinity. Butler's idea that bodies are only understood within normative frameworks helps explain why the LTTE developed a new aesthetic of militarised femininity.[599]

This redefined femininity not only mirrored masculine narratives but also transformed them. Female suicide bombers, including Thileepan's female successors and operatives like Thenmozhi Rajaratnam, represented a deadly combination of sacrificial martyrdom and political motherhood, as portrayed by LTTE propaganda as the supreme maternal sacrifice for the Tamil nation.[600] Here, Butler's analysis of grievability is crucial: the LTTE framed these women as 'grievable' martyrs within Tamil collective memory, even as the Sri Lankan state positioned them as ungrievable terrorists.[601] Their deaths expose the performative mechanisms through which political communities determine which lives count and which deaths signify.

Other combatants enacted a more sustained re-performance of gender. Women in the Malathi and Sothiya brigades performed drills, weapon maintenance, battlefield manoeuvres, and hierarchical discipline – daily reiterations of martial scripts that materialised a new form of Tamil womanhood.[602] Yet these acts also revealed the instability of the LTTE's own gender ideology. The celebrated 'equality' of female fighters masked the regime's simultaneous policing of sexuality and reproduction, which were tightly regulated to maintain military cohesion.[603] Butler's concept of performative constraint – that the same norms enabling agency also restrict it – is vividly illustrated: LTTE femininity created space for unprecedented female agency while reinforcing the movement's authoritarian control over women's bodies.[604]

The bodies of Sri Lankan Tamil women became sites of counter-performance. Their disciplined martial practices challenged nationalist ideas of Tamil femininity and their involvement in suicide missions embodied a femininity willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. These can be interpreted as Butlerian resignifications: the repeated enactment of gendered acts in ways that alter their symbolic meanings and create new political opportunities.

3. Comparative Synthesis

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599 Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*.
600 Alison, 'Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'; De Mel, 'Body Politics: (Re)Cognising the Female Suicide Bomber in Sri Lanka'.
601 Butler, *Precarious Life*.
602 Alison, 'Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'; De Mel, 'Body Politics: (Re)Cognising the Female Suicide Bomber in Sri Lanka'.
603 De Mel, 'Body Politics: (Re)Cognising the Female Suicide Bomber in Sri Lanka'.
604 Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*.

Across Judges 4–5 and the Sri Lankan LTTE context, Butler's understanding of gender as a stylised repetition of acts explains how women re-perform socially recognisable scripts in transformative ways. In Judges, Deborah repeats leadership scripts with prophetic authority, Jael reiterates hospitality with lethal subversion, and the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 reinterprets maternity as the symbolic centre of national deliverance. In Sri Lanka, LTTE women re-enact martial scripts with a difference, thereby resignifying femininity as militant and sacrificial.[605]

These comparative reframings also reveal the boundaries of Butler's analytical approach. While Butler emphasises the micro-level disruptions caused by repeated actions, she pays less attention to the larger structural frameworks that shape and limit these performances. Deborah operates within the socioreligious system of charismatic judgeship; Jael's resistance relies on nomadic domestic tools; LTTE women's agency is simultaneously enabled and restricted by militarised structures that recruit them. Therefore, although Butler explains how gender norms break down in crises, a comprehensive understanding of how these performances interact with deep-seated political and military systems benefits from integrating Anthony Giddens' structuration theory.[606]

Where Butler examines gender's performative aspects, Giddens presents agency as the recursive interaction between individual actions and institutional structures. His concept of the duality of structure — that human actions both reproduce and subtly transform the systems that constrain them — allows for a reading in which Deborah, Jael, and LTTE fighters are not only challenging gender norms but also renegotiating the broader power networks in their worlds. With this combined perspective, the women of Judges and Sri Lanka emerge not merely as resistors of gender norms but as agents who actively reshape the social systems that seek to limit their possibilities.

Anthony Giddens

1. Structuration, Constrained Agency, and the Duality of Structure in Judges 4–5

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory provides a useful framework for analysing how Deborah and Jael navigate and subtly reshape the socio-political structures around them in Judges 4–5. According to Giddens, social life is formed through the duality of structure: structures act both as the medium and the result of human practices.[607] Agents operate within constraints, yet their actions can reproduce or modify the rules and resources that define their possibilities. The Canaanite oppression

[605] Alison, 'Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'; De Mel, 'Body Politics: (Re)Cognising the Female Suicide Bomber in Sri Lanka'.
[606] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.*
[607] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 17–19.

crisis in Judges 4–5 highlights these dynamics further, showing how Israelite actors strategically leverage available resources—ritual, environmental, relational, and symbolic—to 'act otherwise.'[608]

Deborah offers the clearest textual example for examining how structuration occurs in practice. As judge and prophet (Judg. 4:4–5), her authority arises within a socio-religious framework that typically values male leadership. However, she draws on the recognised institutional resources of prophecy and judicial authority to act in ways that alter the military and political landscape. Her call to Barak (Judges 4:6–7) exemplifies Giddens' concept of authoritative resources: capacities based on social position that allow an individual to influence others. Deborah's authority does not dismantle existing Israelite structures; rather, her actions reproduce the judge-prophet system while also broadening its gendered possibilities.[609]

Barak's actions exemplify another aspect of Giddens' theory: reflexive monitoring. His statement – 'If you go with me, I will go' (Judges 4:8) – reflects his evaluation of risk and societal expectations. His dependence on Deborah indicates a shift in traditional masculine military roles, showing that structures are flexible and subject to negotiation. Although Barak is limited by Canaanite military dominance and Israel's divided tribal system, his partnership with Deborah introduces a new, collaborative authority that changes the nature of Israelite warfare. His hesitation is not just weakness; it's the process of actively assessing and responding to the constraints of existing structures.[610]

Jael's actions reveal the duality of structure with notable clarity. Her identity as a Kenite woman places her outside the central Israelite political systems but within a network of inter-tribal alliances (Judges 4:11). Hospitality norms – offering drink and shelter – form a strong social framework guiding her interactions with Sisera. Yet within these norms, she recognises resources (a tent peg and hammer) embedded in her domestic environment and redefines them as instruments of political violence (Judges 4:21). Jael's act is not external to structure but arises from a deep familiarity with the practices that shape her world. In Giddens' terms, she utilises the rules of hospitality and the material resources of nomadic domesticity to transform the geopolitical landscape from within. Her actions produce unintended outcomes: the fall of Canaanite leadership and a shift in the course of Israelite liberation.[611]

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[608] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5–14; Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*, 80–81; Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 52.
[609] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.*
[610] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5–14; Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*, 80–81; Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 52.
[611] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5–14; Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 53.

The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) highlights structural negotiations. Deborah is described as 'a mother in Israel' (Judges 5:7), a metaphor that shifts a kinship bond into a political identity (as noted earlier). By portraying leadership in maternal terms, the song both preserves existing symbolic resources and broadens their structural significance. Its poetic retelling serves as a structuration event in which memory and identity are reshaped through liturgical performance. The song transforms Jael's domestic tools into symbols of warfare (Judges 5:24-27), embedding her actions into Israel's collective memory and establishing new norms for female agency.

Judges 4—5 demonstrates how structure and agency are interconnected. Characters are constrained but still navigate various rules and resources—such as judicial roles, prophetic authority, domestic objects, and kinship metaphors—to produce outcomes that subtly influence political and social structures. The story depicts incremental change rather than revolutionary overthrow: Jabin's system weakens (Judges 4:24), tribal alliances shift (5:2–18), and Israelite leadership is redefined. Using Giddens' perspective, Judges 4–5 reveals that agency in crisis arises through strategic engagement with, rather than escape from, structural conditions.[612]

2. Structuration, Constraint, and the Duality of Agency in Sri Lanka

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory also provides a powerful analytical framework for understanding how female LTTE combatants navigated and reshaped the militarised social orders of the Sri Lankan civil war. Tamil women operated within constraints: patriarchal cultural norms, ethnonational state violence, and the rigid authoritarian structures of the LTTE itself. Yet, as Giddens argues, even highly coercive systems provide rules and resources that agents can mobilise to act otherwise.[613] Female fighters' agency thus emerged not despite structural constraints but precisely through their strategic engagement with them.

Tamil society historically encoded femininity in the idioms of domesticity and purity. These norms constituted the structural environment that shaped women's social trajectories. The LTTE simultaneously reproduced and reconfigured these structures. On one hand, its strict regulations regarding discipline and bodily control intensified the policing of female bodies.[614] On the other, its recruitment of women into combat roles provided authoritative resources – such as training and military status – that enabled women to perform forms of agency previously inaccessible.

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[612] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5–14; Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*, 80–81; Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 52.
[613] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 17–19.
[614] Alison, 'Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.

In Giddens' terms, LTTE women's practices exemplify allocative resource mobilisation. Firearms, uniforms, cyanide capsules, and martial training – material resources normally associated with men – became tools through which women re-oriented their structural position. Their performances of drill and battlefield manoeuvres reproduced the organisational structure of the LTTE but simultaneously expanded the gendered possibilities within Tamil nationalism.[615] They did not dismantle the LTTE's hierarchical structure; they became agents through whom its structures were enacted and subtly recalibrated.[616]

Female suicide bombers exemplify a particularly intense form of structuration. Their roles were influenced by the LTTE's martyrdom ideology, which promoted self-sacrifice as the highest expression of nationalist virtue. Through participation in suicide missions, women contributed to a significant change in the political landscape. Their actions also support Giddens' idea that structure can lead to unintended results: female martyrdom challenged traditional Tamil gender roles while simultaneously reinforcing the LTTE's authoritarian control over women's bodies.[617]

The daily actions of female fighters exemplify reflexive monitoring. Women regularly evaluated risks posed by changing battlefield situations. They adjusted their behaviour to satisfy LTTE's needs while also dealing with state surveillance and community expectations. Their agency was always limited, and constantly negotiated within these restrictions. Even perceived moments of freedom – like taking part in armed activities or appearing publicly - relied on adherence to organisational rules.

The LTTE women's agency operated within a system that restricted their autonomy. Nonetheless, their actions brought about localised changes such as alternative ways of Tamil womanhood.[618] These changes did not dismantle the overarching conflict structures but instead reconfigured them from within, demonstrating the ongoing interaction between structure and agency, a core concept in Giddens' theory.

3. Comparative Synthesis

In both Judges 4–5 and the Sri Lankan civil war, agency arises not from structural escape but from structural engagement. The women of Judges utilise the rules and resources within their world (prophetic authority, domestic tools) to reshape political reality. The LTTE women fighters employ

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615 *Ibid.*
616 Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 56.
617 De Mel, 'Body Politics: (Re)Cognising the Female Suicide Bomber in Sri Lanka'.
618 Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 5–14; Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*, 80–81; Loyal, *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*, 52.

organisational legitimacy and nationalist discourse to reconfigure gender roles within a highly militarised system. In both contexts, Giddens' concept of the duality of structure is clear: action is shaped by structure, but structure is also continuously reproduced and changed through action.[619]

The results, however, vary. In the Israelite context, there is a clear narrative shift: Canaanite power wanes and Israel's political trajectory changes. In Sri Lanka, the focus remains on maintaining existing structures; women influence social narratives and local environments but rarely impact broader power systems. Their agency mainly appears in small-scale change rather than extensive systemic reforms.

Giddens explains how women operate within constraints, while Foucault expands the analysis to reveal the origins of these constraints and how power discipline and shape subjects. Transitioning from structuration to biopolitics exposes the underlying structures influencing bodily regulation and militarised femininity in both Judges and Sri Lanka.

Michel Foucault

1. Biopolitics, Surveillance, and Local Resistance in Judges 4–5

Michel Foucault's account of biopower and disciplinary control offers a compelling framework for analysing Judges 4—5, where the Canaanite system under Sisera and King Jabin operates as an apparatus designed to enforce submission. Although the text predates modern bureaucratic states, it nonetheless depicts a political environment in which life, death, mobility, and territory are managed through coercive technologies that echo what Foucault describes as the shift from sovereign power – the right to take life or let live – to biopolitical power, which seeks to 'make live and let die'.[620]

The oppression described in Judges 4 is evident in how life is managed: trade routes are blocked, surveillance is militarised, and submission is enforced (Judges 5:6–8). Deborah's leadership is evident here. As a prophet and judge (Judges 4:4-5), she questions traditional gender and political roles in Israelite society. Her judicial authority, referred to as 'under the Palm of Deborah' (Judges 4:5), serves as a counterpoint to Canaanite oversight. Although Canaanite authority restricts movement and visibility, Deborah creates a space for community gathering and decision-making that challenges these spatial boundaries. Her call to Barak (Judges 4:6–7) is an act of counter-governance: she

[619] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 17–19.
[620] Foucault and Senellart, *Security, Territory, Population : Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*, ch. 11.

transforms Israel's scattered social body into a united, active collective, weakening Jabin's effort to fragment and immobilise the population.

Deborah's prophetic authority functions as a discursive force that challenges the prevailing martial notions of power, allowing Barak to act within a framework that has left Israel militarily powerless. In Foucauldian terms, Deborah offers an alternative 'regime of truth' – a discursive space where action is considered possible.[621]

Jael's action exemplifies local resistance within a biopolitical framework. The tent, symbolising domestic femininity, transforms into a liminal space for discipline. Hospitality practices create an illusion of obedience that diminishes Sisera's defensive vigilance (Judges 4:18–19). However, the domestic tools – tent peg and hammer – are repurposed as deadly weapons (Judges 4:21). This vividly demonstrates Foucault's idea that power inevitably produces conditions for resistance: the very technologies designed to uphold nomadic domesticity are turned into means of political rebellion. Jael does not operate outside of power; instead, she weaponises the micro-technologies embedded within her structural role.[622]

The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) enhances understanding of these dynamics by narratively reinterpreting bodies and actions. The poem creates a discursive framework that portrays Jael's killing (5:24–27) as divinely approved, framing her work as an act of militancy. The depiction of Sisera's mother (5:28–30) highlights another aspect of biopolitical logic: she views women's bodies as spoils, emphasising their reduction to reproductive and sexual roles. Through the song, the text reveals the ideological basis of Canaanite power – its gendered governance and distribution of vulnerability – and counters it with an alternative classification that redefines agency and celebrates resistance. From a Foucauldian perspective, Judges 4–5 show micro-resistances that break down systems of gendered control and militarised surveillance.[623]

2. Biopolitics, Surveillance, and the Technologies of Power in Sri Lanka

Foucault's theories of biopolitics and disciplinary power provide profound insights into the experiences of women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), especially regarding how their bodies were mobilised and repurposed within a dual system of state and insurgent authority. Sri

[621] Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume Three*, 131–32.
[622] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 1:95.
[623] Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume Three*, 131.

Lanka's civil war created a landscape marked by surveillance and bodily regulation – conditions that exemplify Foucault's idea of the calculated management of life.[624]

The Sri Lankan state's counter-insurgency apparatus used surveillance networks to classify Tamil bodies as suspicious and restrict movement. Tamil women faced increased scrutiny, their bodies marked both as potential sites of insurgency and as targets of ethnic suspicion. This aligns with Foucault's assertion that power disciplines populations by identifying certain bodies as threats to social order.[625]

The LTTE mirrored and inverted many of these technologies of power. Its regulation of female combatants—control of sexuality, prohibition of marriage, uniformed discipline, mandatory carrying of cyanide—functioned as a form of internal biopolitics that aimed to create a militarized and sacrificial body.[626]

Women were simultaneously empowered and disciplined: granted access to combat yet subjected to strict bodily control. Foucault's concept of disciplinary optimisation – the creation of bodies that are useful and docile – is clear in the LTTE's training regimes and surveillance of its female cadres.[627]

Yet within these biopolitical systems, Tamil women generated forms of counter-conduct. Combatants often used the LTTE's own disciplinary structures to reposition themselves socially: acquiring martial training and performing roles previously denied to them in Tamil society.[628] Their agency was not external to power but emerged from its internal contradictions. Foucault emphasises that resistance is inscribed in the heart of the power relationship and LTTE women exemplify this through their tactical negotiation of both state repression and insurgent discipline.[629]

Suicide bombers embody the sharpest link between biopolitics and resistance, with their bodies serving as literal tools of political intervention. The LTTE's internal rhetoric sanctified these women as martyrs, turning their deaths into symbolic assets for the Tamil struggle.[630] From a Foucauldian perspective, this exemplifies a kind of counter-biopolitics that takes the state's logic of death-as-control and transforms it into a form of self-directed political action. However, this agency is highly

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[624] *Ibid.* 137, 142, 146.
[625] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*; Foucault, "'Panopticism,'' from Punish & Discipline: The Birth of the Prison'.
[626] Alison, 'Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.
[627] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, 140.
[628] Alison, 'Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam'.
[629] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 1:95.
[630] De Mel, 'Body Politics: (Re)Cognising the Female Suicide Bomber in Sri Lanka'.

ambivalent: although it challenges state authority, it also exposes how the LTTE has co-opted women's lives for nationalist purposes.

Daily actions of non-suicide fighters expose subtle forms of resistance. Women used their martial skills to bypass checkpoints and transmit intelligence. They increased their visibility in ways that challenged patriarchal Tamil norms, yet also became recognisable within the LTTE's biopolitical framework. Their agency emerges not from fleeing biopower but from understanding its operations and cleverly repurposing its tools.

3. Comparative Synthesis

Judges 4–5 and the Sri Lankan case study both portray worlds governed by biopolitical regimes that exercised power over bodies.[631] In both narratives, women developed strategic forms of resistance that undermined the technologies used against them, such as Jael's use of household tools as weapons and the LTTE women fighters' adaptation and repurposing of surveillance methods.[632]

Both contexts illustrate that power is never singular. As Foucault noted, it is constantly flowing, shaping identities, and encountering resistance at every level.[633] In Judges, small interventions break a militarised system and help establish a new form of Israelite governance. In Sri Lanka, women's actions interfere with surveillance and shift symbolic economies, though they do not completely dismantle the larger structures. This comparison reveals a consistent pattern: women's agency evolves within the systems designed to regulate them, transforming spaces of domination into spaces of resistance.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of Judges 4–5 and Sri Lanka's female combatants reveals that women's agency in violent and unstable situations develops through a complex interplay of social roles and political divisions. Despite substantial differences in culture and scale, both contexts demonstrate how crises reshape what is possible. Women, often on the margins of the broader social narrative, emerge as key actors, challenging and transforming the structures that seek to limit them.

In both contexts, crisis exposes the weakness of established power structures. Under Canaanite rule, Israel's mobility and kinship ties are broken; in Sri Lanka, civil war alters gender roles and prompts

631 Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume Three*, 137; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, 140.
632 Foucault and Senellart, *Security, Territory, Population : Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*, 196–214.
633 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 1:93.

new militarised demands. These forces do not just restrict women; they also reveal hidden potentials in everyday actions – such as leadership, hospitality, surveillance, and martial discipline - which can become unexpectedly influential. Women in Judges and LTTE combatants demonstrate that in times when systems break down, gendered roles are not erased but reshaped, creating opportunities for transformative change. Thus, crisis functions as a spark for new kinds of agency, acting as the testing ground for political and social innovations.

The shift hypotheses clarify how demographic pressures, reconfigured responsibilities, and political ruptures create openings that women can and do occupy. In Judges, these shifts elevate Deborah's leadership, enable Barak's dependence on her prophetic authority, and transform Jael's domestic environment into a site of political intervention. In Sri Lanka, shifts occur through the LTTE's redefinition of martial identity, the structural strains placed on Tamil families, and the breakdown of traditional gender roles amid civil war. In both cases, women exercise agency that both challenges and utilises the structures around them, becoming participants in broader political trajectories even when formal power remains out of reach.

Analysing Butler, Giddens, and Foucault clarifies the complexity of these women's actions. Butler highlights how gender is constructed, with Deborah's authority, Jael's violence, and the LTTE women's martial practices challenging traditional norms and destabilising expectations. Giddens explains that these changes are influenced by structures but originate from conscious interactions with rules and resources – such as Deborah's legislative role and the LTTE's training. Foucault's insights show how power technologies shape these contexts, controlling bodies yet also providing room for resistance.

Ultimately, the women in Judges and Sri Lanka show that agency during violent upheaval often involves transforming the ordinary. Their actions may not directly dismantle oppressive systems, but they alter the environment in which those systems function. Whether through prophetic leadership, domestic resistance, or militancy, these women create powerful spaces within settings designed to marginalise them. By examining these stories together, this chapter demonstrates that crises can act as moments of reorientation – where women's usually overlooked practices become vital to community survival and political change.

Chapter 9

CONCLUSION

'At its most general level power is energy, or a capacity for action, which is fundamental to agency. When an agent makes a difference in the social world, they have power.' [634]

During times of social dysfunction, crises disrupt normal structures and blur the boundaries that typically limit women's roles. As shown in chapter 1, these disruptions highlight the flexibility of gender norms and make women's actions, often hidden in stable times, visible. Historical examples support the idea that crises not only disturb stability, but also uncover hidden potentials for agency.[635]

Ancient biblical texts reflect this pattern as well. They depict stories in which female agency emerges in moments of profound instability, showing how crises create liminal spaces where gender, power, and social structures are renegotiated. Yet, as the opening chapter noted, the connection between female agency, crisis, and power has rarely been examined together as a single analytical approach within biblical studies. This thesis fills that gap by examining how extreme crises enable women to assume influential roles that challenge and undermine existing disciplinary and ideological systems.

Using a comprehensive theoretical framework that includes Butler's performativity, Giddens' structuration theory, Foucault's biopolitics, and the shift hypotheses of Webster, Chen, and Beardsley, this study explored how gendered agency develops as a negotiated, embodied practice in various contexts. These perspectives helped to clarify key questions: how women behave during crises, how crises inspire new forms of agency, and how embodied actions challenge existing structural and power systems.[636]

The four case studies- two from the Hebrew Bible and two from modern history- were selected to be intentionally diverse. However, they all highlight a key insight: women's agency is not born out of

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[634] Mark Haugaard, 'The Four Dimensions of Power: Conflict and Democracy', *Journal of Political Power* (Abingdon) 14, no. 1 (2021): 153, https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2021.1878411.

[635] Marie E. Berry, 'Women's Political Mobilization in Rwanda', in *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108236003.004; Szczepanikova, 'Chechen Women in War and Exile: Changing Gender Roles in the Context of Violence'; Kaitlyn Webster et al., 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment', *International Organization* (New York, USA) 73, no. 2 (2019): 255–89, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818319000055; Tripp, *Women and Politics in Uganda*.

[636] Judith Butler, 'Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics'; Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*; Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Power*.

crisis but emerges from the opportunities that crises create. By integrating contemporary theories with ancient texts, the project showed the benefits of a cross-disciplinary approach. Feminist biblical scholarship offered readings that emphasise women's strategic and resistant actions, while modern comparative material enhanced the interpretative scope of the biblical texts. At the same time, the ancient texts added conceptual depth to understanding modern expressions of gendered agency.

Chapters 3 and 4 highlight how reproductive and maternal agency become central to crises, illustrating women's resistance and subversion of biopolitical control in diverse contexts. The Exodus narrative (Exod. 1–2:1–10) and testimonies of Dr Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska at Auschwitz demonstrate that when oppressive systems target the female body for surveillance, regulation, and destruction, women often respond with embodied, morally complex forms of agency that challenge those systems.

In Exodus, Pharaoh's fear of Israel's population growth makes reproduction a political weapon, with birth becoming a source of concern. However, midwives Shiphrah and Puah, who work within a gendered domain beyond Pharaoh's reach, choose not to carry out the genocidal order.[637]

Their embodied knowledge and reverence for God enable them to challenge royal authority from within the birthing room. Jochebed and Miriam extend this resistance into the household through concealment, improvisation, and strategic actions across Hebrew and Egyptian boundaries. The chain of resistance culminates in Pharaoh's daughter, whose choice to save and adopt Moses turns a river of death into a channel of life, subtly undermining her father's order. Collectively, these women create a chain of agency that moves from the margins of servitude to the heart of Egyptian power, even as their visibility diminishes once Moses becomes the story's central focus.[638]

Chapter 4 demonstrated how comparable dynamics emerge under the severe conditions of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nazi policies aimed at the female body through dehumanisation and reproductive destruction, attacking both biological function and personal identity.[639]

Nevertheless, within this destructive system, Perl and Leszczyńska demonstrated agency influenced by their professional skills.[640] Perl's secret abortions, falsified reports, and concealment of illnesses

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[637] Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes. Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 84–86; Raveh, "'They Let the Children Live": The Midwives at a Political Crossroads', 13; Obiorah, 'Moses' Mother in Exodus 2:1-10 and Mothers in Personal Names among the Igbo People, South-East Nigeria', 85.

[638] Raveh, "'They Let the Children Live": The Midwives at a Political Crossroads', 13; Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*, 103.

[639] Caplan, *Nazi Germany: A Very Short Introduction*; Crowe, under 'Holocaust'.

[640] Perl, *I Was a Docter in Auschwitz*; Beal, 'Stanislawa Leszczynska'; Kłodziński, 'Stanisława Leszczyńska'.

illustrate what Langer's 'choiceless choices': decisions made in a moral landscape where all options are compromised, but some still save lives. Leszczyńska's refusal to engage in infanticide and her commitment to dignified birth practices despite harsh conditions turned care into a form of resistance. Although their ethical paths differ, both women challenged the camp's biopolitical control over women's bodies.

Chapters 3 and 4 together laid the groundwork for the thesis. They show that crisis situations affecting reproduction and female identity create liminal spaces where women use their roles—such as midwives, mothers, daughters, and physicians—to protect life and challenge systems meant to suppress it. Their agency is gradual, embodied, and morally nuanced, yet it collectively challenges the power structures trying to restrict them.

Chapter 5 compared the narratives of the Exodus and Auschwitz, illustrating how crises affecting the body challenge social structures and create spaces for women to exercise new agency. Although these contexts are historically and culturally distant, both examples showed that female agency arises not outside oppression but through the vulnerabilities and divisions these systems produce.

A key link between the two stories is liminality. The women in Exodus stand at thresholds between hiding and revealing, Hebrew and Egyptian spaces; similarly, Perl and Leszczyńska are both prisoners and practitioners, manoeuvring roles reshaped by surveillance and ethical extremity. In each situation, crisis shifts the meaning of everyday acts like midwifery, motherhood, and medical care, making them politically and symbolically significant. Though these women lack institutional authority, they repurpose the systems that restrict them, turning limitation into opportunity.

The shift hypotheses shed more light on these changes. Demographic threat, role disruption, and political fissure operate in different configurations across both stories. In Exodus, concerns about population increase unintentionally give women the chance to act in life-saving ways. In Auschwitz, reproductive destruction and the breakdown of moral norms force women to take on duties beyond usual limits. These changes offer brief opportunities for agency to emerge and be impactful, though not fully liberating.

The perspectives of Butler, Giddens, and Foucault shed light on the complexity of agency. Butler's concept of performativity shows how gendered scripts are re-enacted in subversive ways during crises. Giddens' structuration emphasises that women don't act outside of structure but instead navigate and subtly change it. Foucault's analysis of biopolitics reveals how power focuses on bodies and reproduction, and how embodied practices create pockets of resistance within seemingly

totalising systems. Together, these theories illustrate that agency under extreme constraints is incremental, embodied, relational, and often morally complex, yet it can lead to change, whether lasting or temporary.

The connection between Exodus and Auschwitz is not about equivalence but about pattern recognition. In both contexts, women react to devastating disruption by identifying and inhabiting structural cracks, where oppressive authority breaks down. Whether their actions are subtle or desperate, they destabilise the illusion of complete control and show that human agency endures even in environments of annihilation.

Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrated how women's agency is most evident in militarised and politically unstable settings, where social fragmentation and the breakdown of traditional leadership offer opportunities for women's unexpected involvement. In both Judges 4–5 and the Sri Lankan civil war, women function within systems marked by violence, instability, and disputed authority, yet they adapt their roles to influence their communities' future paths.

In Judges, Israel's political and spiritual chaos sets the scene where Deborah and Jael emerge as key figures. Deborah's role as prophet and judge arises when male leaders falter, making her crucial not only for the battle but also for its theological interpretation. Jael, on the fringe of Israelite identity, turns the domestic space into the decisive battleground, using hospitality and everyday tools to kill Sisera. Their combined portrayal shows how crisis shifts power from traditional male leaders to women, as the battlefield moves to the tent, challenging gender norms and highlighting female agency.

Chapter 7 highlighted that during Sri Lanka's long civil war, women in the LTTE became symbols of national resistance even as they operated within a highly hierarchical and patriarchal militant system. Factors like the breakdown of civilian life, high male casualties, displacement, and militarisation led women to take on roles in combat, logistics, political mobilisation, and suicide operations. Their involvement challenged traditional Tamil notions of femininity and strengthened the movement's ideological stance, but their empowerment was always conditional and limited. During peacetime, many faced stigma and marginalisation, which underscores the fragile nature of agency created by crisis.

Thamizhini's memoir intensified this ambivalence. Her progression from an average student to a senior member of the LTTE's political wing demonstrated how structural pressures and nationalist ambitions influenced women's paths into militancy. However, her later critique of the movement

exposed deep ethical conflicts surrounding female agency in armed conflict. Women gained the highest honour through martyrdom, yet their authority remained constrained by male dominance.

In both chapters, liminality remains a productive concept. Deborah and Jael navigate between religious and military worlds, while the women of the LTTE exist at the boundaries between civilian life and soldiering. Within these transitional, liminal spaces, identities become more flexible and individuals gain the potential for agency.

Chapters 6 and 7 together demonstrate that crisis-driven agency within militarised settings is both transformative and fragile. Women's actions challenge traditional gender roles and impact political results, yet their authority can be easily erased once stability is restored. These chapters support the broader argument that, during system failures, women fill the void- not by fleeing structure, but by manoeuvring through and reshaping its vulnerable points.

Chapter 8 broadens the thesis's comparative framework by comparing Judges 4–5 with the experiences of LTTE women in Sri Lanka, illustrating how women's agency becomes most apparent during crises that disrupt political, social, and gendered systems. Despite the significant historical and cultural differences, both contexts demonstrate that when current systems break down, women step in to influence collective survival and reshape political perspectives.

Both narratives demonstrate that crisis acts as a force dismantling normative limits, enabling women to assume militarised or violent roles. However, their empowerment remains complex: they are hailed as icons of resistance but also subjected to strict patriarchal oversight and later sidelined during peacetime. In both stories, liminality serves as a key condition for creation. Deborah and Jael oscillate between the roles of prophet and mother, and of hostess and warrior, respectively. The LTTE women exist at the boundaries between civilian and soldier, nurturer and militant. In these liminal spaces, identity becomes flexible, and agency can emerge.

The shift hypotheses explained how demographic pressures, disrupted gendered labour, and political divisions necessitated and facilitated these interventions. Israel's paralysis and demographic vulnerability provided the opportunity for Deborah's leadership and Jael's decisive action. In Sri Lanka, male mortality rates and nationalist mobilisation facilitated women's integration into the military. However, as shown in earlier chapters, these changes were temporary; once stability was restored or authority reestablished, women's expanded roles diminished.

In both case studies, Butler, Giddens, and Foucault's theoretical perspectives highlight that agency does not come from ignoring structure but from engaging with, re-enacting, and subtly altering it. During crises, gendered scripts and roles are re-enacted in ways that challenge their traditional meanings. Women operate within the frameworks that limit them, generating pockets of resistance within systems that assume their conformity.

Chapter 8 reaffirmed a core idea of the thesis: women's agency during militarised and political crises is both transformative and fragile. It arises through structural breaks, influences the direction of community survival, but stays susceptible to disappearance when the crisis subsides. The comparative analysis thus reinforces the main argument that across different periods and settings, crises reveal underlying structural vulnerabilities in which women develop new, though frequently temporary, forms of power.

Having explored the comparative, theoretical, and contextual aspects of the four case studies, it is now important to revisit the main questions that guided this research and to synthesise the evidence to answer them clearly and coherently.

Addressing the Central Questions of the Study

1. How does women's agency emerge, adapt, and subvert power during moments of profound crisis, and what interpretative insight is gained from reading four diverse case studies through an integrated theoretical framework?

In all four case studies, agency emerges from within oppressive systems rather than outside them. Women adopt assigned roles—such as midwife, mother, healer, prophet, or militant—to reveal contradictions in oppressive regimes and to sustain life in threatening circumstances. Their actions show that crises not only enable agency to continue but also transform it, making everyday roles politically powerful and subversive.

2. To what extent do extreme crises disrupt gender norms, social structures, and regimes of power in ways that enable women to enact transformative forms of agency?

Extreme crises can temporarily disrupt or weaken existing hierarchies, creating brief opportunities for women's leadership, resistance, and strategic moves. However, these gains are usually short-lived, as patriarchal structures tend to reassert themselves once the crisis subsides, highlighting the temporary nature of empowerment during crises.

3. How do women mobilise their bodies and social positions in times of liminality and crisis, and how do the theoretical lenses reveal the structural, performative, and biopolitical dimensions of that agency?

Women utilise embodied practices and social roles, like reproductive labour, caregiving, prophecy, and combat, to challenge concentrated power. Butler, Giddens, and Foucault demonstrate how these actions reshape gender norms, repurpose structural limits, and influence biopolitical systems. The shift hypotheses elucidate why these interventions become apparent during periods of instability. Overall, the framework shows that agency is built into social structures, performed through action, and charged with biopolitical significance.

These answers not only address the main questions that defined this research but also enable the thesis to highlight its unique contributions to feminist biblical studies and comparative interdisciplinary projects.

Contributions

This thesis enhances understanding in feminist biblical studies by providing a comparative, theory-based exploration of female agency that goes beyond isolated texts or historical viewpoints. By examining Exodus 1–2 and Judges 4–5 alongside testimonies from Gisella Perl and Stanisława Leszczyńska, as well as the experiences of LTTE women in Sri Lanka, the research shows that women's agency during crises is neither accidental nor rare. Instead, it is systematically patterned, embodied, and repeated throughout history.

A key aspect of the project is its reframing of well-known biblical stories. It emphasises women as vital agents whose decisions ensure Israel's survival during times of political and social upheaval. By examining the connected actions of Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter, Deborah, and Jael, the thesis challenges androcentric readings that see these women as secondary figures. Instead, it demonstrates that, when viewed through the themes of crisis, liminality, and power, these stories depict women as strategic and resourceful.

This integrated theoretical framework enhances this understanding. Butler, Giddens, and Foucault, along with the shift hypotheses, provide a multi-layered view of how agency is exercised, limited, and changed under pressure. The thesis shows that these frameworks are not only used to interpret texts but also examined and expanded through them. Maternal, medical, and militant forms of agency reveal the boundaries of performativity theory, highlight the micro-level dynamics of

structuration, and deepen the biopolitical analysis of reproductive violence. Consequently, the study offers a versatile conceptual model for analysing gendered agency in various crises, both ancient and modern.

Methodologically, the project offers a disciplined approach to comparative work that neither dismisses historical differences nor weaponises trauma. By maintaining an ongoing dialogue among the four case studies, it uncovers recurring patterns, such as the politicisation of the female body, the emergence of agency within oppressive systems, and the ambivalence of empowerment, while respecting the individuality of each context. This method illustrates the hermeneutical significance of comparative analysis. Contemporary crises and theories shed new light on biblical texts, and biblical stories offer conceptual frameworks for understanding modern structures of power, gender resistance, and agency.

The thesis further enriches crisis discourse by depicting female agency as inherently embedded within structures, rather than as isolated acts. In all four contexts, women operate within systems designed to limit them, creatively reinterpreting domestic, religious, professional, and military roles to challenge domination. Their agency is morally intricate and often developed under conditions of 'choiceless choice', blurring the lines between victim and hero, or even between victim and perpetrator. The analysis highlights that although crises can temporarily broaden women's roles, these opportunities remain fragile and easily lost once stability returns.

Limitations and Considerations of Scope

Every scholarly project is shaped by its inherent limits, and this thesis is no different. Although it provides a layered analysis of female agency in crisis, various constraints influence its conclusions. Recognising these limitations helps define the scope of interpretation and points to directions for future research, as well as the strategies used to address each issue.

The first limitation relates to the scope of the case studies. Exodus 1–2:1-10, Judges 4—5, testimonies of medical practitioners in Auschwitz, and female militants in the LTTE were chosen for their conceptual depth and their capacity to shed light on the research questions. However, they only cover a small subset of the possible biblical and contemporary scenarios where crisis-driven female agency might be examined. This limitation was addressed by deliberately selecting diverse cases from different historical and cultural contexts. Their varied selection helped identify emerging patterns without asserting that these are universally applicable.

A second limitation concerns the framework's theoretical selectivity. While Butler, Giddens, Foucault, and the shift hypotheses offer a solid analytical foundation, they tend to emphasise specific aspects such as gender performance, structural negotiation, biopolitics, and crisis-driven change. This focus leaves other areas such as trauma theory, intersectionality, memory studies, and postcolonial criticism less explored. To address this, multiple theories were integrated, resulting in a layered analysis. Nonetheless, the thesis acknowledges that alternative theoretical perspectives could enrich or expand its findings.

The third limitation stems from the methodological tension in comparative studies. Comparing ancient biblical stories with modern crises can lead to oversimplified similarities or overlook key differences. To address this, the thesis employed a conceptual comparative method rather than one based on direct equivalence, focusing on recurring patterns and resonances without undermining historical context. This method facilitated constructive dialogue while safeguarding the uniqueness of each context.

A fourth constraint involves the ethical and representational challenges of working with Holocaust testimonies and wartime militancy. These accounts are deeply rooted in personal trauma, which increases the risk of exploiting suffering or making broad generalisations from individual stories. The study addressed this by emphasising the moral complexity of agency, especially in situations of choiceless choices, and by avoiding simple definitions of victimhood and heroism. Perl, Leszczyńska, and LTTE women were approached with care and respect for the seriousness of their circumstances.

The thesis notes its limited focus on intersectionality. Although it recognises gender's connections with ethnicity, class, religion, and social power, it does not thoroughly analyse these interactions. Instead, it integrates intersectional ideas into ethical reflections and uses diverse case studies to illustrate how various identity markers interact. However, a deeper, ongoing intersectional analysis is a key area for future development.

Ultimately, the study is limited by the temporary nature of crisis-driven agency. It demonstrates that women's agency tends to grow during upheavals but is often at risk of being erased once stability is restored. The enduring social impacts of such agency- whether in biblical Israel or post-conflict Sri Lanka- extend beyond the study's timeframe. This constraint was alleviated by incorporating sociological insights on how normative systems reassert themselves after crises,

recognising both the transformative potential of women's actions and the structural forces that limit their long-term influence.

Overall, these limitations illustrate the inherent difficulties of examining agency across different temporal, cultural, and political contexts. They do not undermine the main thesis but place it within a clear scholarly framework. By employing a multi-theoretical approach, selecting diverse case studies, and using a careful comparative method, the project addressed these challenges. It resulted in a responsible and insightful analysis of female agency during crises.

Horizons for Future Inquiry

The findings of this thesis open several fertile avenues for further scholarly exploration. By tracing patterns of female agency across ancient and contemporary crises, this study has demonstrated the conceptual value of comparative, theory-driven analysis. However, the terrain is still extensive, and this project is just one of many entry points into the wider discussion on gender, power, agency and crisis.

This thesis highlights how crises reveal and intensify female agency in both ancient and modern settings, opening many avenues for further research. Future studies could explore beyond Exodus and Judges to see if the patterns found here hold true in other crisis-related texts. Exilic and post-exilic stories such as Esther, Judith, Ruth, and Ezra–Nehemiah, along with prophetic writings that use feminine imagery to depict national trauma, provide fertile ground for examining how political and religious instability and displacement shape gendered agency. Scholars such as Brenner and Meyers highlight the complexity of women's roles in such transitional contexts, but the application of crisis theory and biopolitical analysis remains underdeveloped.[641] This work could help determine whether the modes of agency observed here are common across other genres or whether various crises trigger unique types of intervention.

A second approach involves deepening the understanding of intersectionality within the analysis. Although this study recognised that gender is intertwined with ethnicity, class, religion, and embodied vulnerability, employing a more explicitly intersectional framework would clarify how complex identities influence agency during crises. Historical examples such as enslaved Israelite women in Exodus, prisoners in Auschwitz, and Tamil women in the LTTE all experienced forms of oppression that were both gendered and ethnically or politically targeted. Future research could

[641] Brenner, *The Israelite Woman. Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*; Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*.

incorporate ideas from Crenshaw, Sjoberg and Gentry, and Yuval-Davis to explore how intersecting vulnerabilities and privileges shape the potential for action in various crises.[642]

A third aspect involves the longevity of crisis-induced agency over time. The thesis indicates that women's roles often significantly expand during upheaval but tend to shrink back once stability returns. However, the lasting impact of such agency- whether it is remembered, ritualised, challenged, or forgotten- remains underexplored. Combining insights from memory studies and trauma theory can help reveal how societies either preserve or conceal women's actions after a crisis, and how textual editing or cultural memory influence their visibility. While this pattern is recognised in sociology and conflict studies, biblical scholarship has yet to thoroughly examine the temporal aspect of agency.[643]

The method introduced here could be applied to a wider range of genocidal and conflict situations, including Rwanda, Bosnia, apartheid-era South Africa, and current Middle Eastern conflicts. These cases present varied examples of women dealing with coercive systems, reproductive violence, and militarised nationalisms. Comparing these with biblical stories could enhance our understanding of how the extent and type of oppression influence the kinds of agency women can exercise. Scholars like Agier and Hinton offer methodological and ethical insights for examining agency in extreme violence contexts.[644] Such comparative research could refine our understanding of the relationships among crisis type, the scale of oppression, and the forms of agency available to women.

An additional area for development is biopolitics and embodiment. While this study emphasised reproductive agency during crises, future studies could explore governmentality in biblical kingship, analyse reproductive politics in other ancient Near Eastern sources, or include feminist biopolitical theorists like Federici, Puar, and Mbembe to enhance cross-disciplinary insights into how bodies are used as sites of both control and resistance. Incorporating more work from feminist biopolitical

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642 Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Intersectionality and Feminist Politics', *The European Journal of Women's Studies* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi) 13, no. 3 (2006): 193–209, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065752; Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, 'From Private Violence to Mass Incarceration: Thinking Intersectionally About Women, Race, and Social Control', *UCLA Law Review* (Los Angeles) 59, no. 6 (2012): 1418; Caron E. Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores : Thinking about Women's Violence in Global Politics*, 1st ed. (Zed Books, 2021), https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350218628.

643 Miranda. Alison, *Women and Political Violence : Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict*, Contemporary Security Studies (Routledge, 2009).

644 Michel Agier, *On the Margins of the World : The Refugee Experience Today* (Polity, 2007); Devon E. Hinton and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Genocide and Mass Violence : Memory, Symptom, and Recovery*, Gale eBooks (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

scholars like Federici, Puar, and Mbembe would expand the biopolitical analysis presented here and deepen the understanding of bodily sovereignty and resistance across disciplines.[645]

Finally, further attention to narrative structure could reveal how literary techniques influence the depiction of agency. Narratology, rhetorical criticism, and performance theory provide methods for analysing how texts emphasise or downplay women's actions, how pacing and focalisation craft crisis narratives, and how oral or liturgical performances alter the perception of female agency over time. This approach extends the work of Fewell and Exum, encouraging a more detailed examination of storytelling as a form of power.[646]

Instead of concluding the inquiry, this thesis opens a range of intellectual and ethical research paths. Further interdisciplinary investigation can shed light on how crisis narratives, from ancient to modern times, shape societal views on gender, power, resistance, and the fragile nature of agency.

Final Reflections

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that the link between power, gender, and female agency is complex and influenced by context. During crises, women often undertake extraordinary acts of resistance and leadership, challenging established power structures and societal norms. The stories of the five Exodus women, Stanisława Leszczyńska, Gisella Perl, Deborah, Jael, and the female LTTE militants exemplify women's resilience and creativity in confronting oppression. By exploring these narratives together, this work enriches our understanding of biblical and historical texts and encourages modern reflections on female agency and resistance.

In this regard, the study reaffirms its starting point: that female agency in times of crisis is neither a historical anomaly nor solely a product of extreme events. It is a current, ongoing reality, demonstrating that women across all eras persistently act with a resolve that surpasses and reshapes the circumstances they face.

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[645] Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004 ; Puar, Jasbir K. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017; Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." Public Culture 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.

[646] Fewell, 'Reading the Bible Ideologically: Feminist Criticism'; Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*.

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