Sexual Power in the Former Prophets

Israel Comes of Age

**Premise**

The Former Prophets evoked a vision in me of great households moving across the desert, nurtured under the care of a powerful and loving God in an ordered society that cares for each child; destined to be a great light to others. But they are threatened by a violent storm, the source of which is the very freedom and power granted to them as children of Yahweh.

As the defining element of social configuration and familial survival, sex plays a powerful role in this very human drama. Regardless of the cultural or ethnocentric implications of reading manuscripts from a distant time and place, much is revealed by the patriarchal society of the Former Prophets about human sexual power and inversely about our sexual vulnerability. Sexually charged stories in the Deuteronomistic History all seem to highlight abuse of power. Attempts to defend against and also to wield the double edged sword of sexuality numb our sensibilities in stories like the Levite’s concubine of Judges 19.

It’s telling that Judges 19 starts with “In those days there was no king in Israel…,” and the book ends the phrase with “…all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” The use of sexual power in the Former Prophets can be seen as a metaphor for Israel’s coming of age under the covenant of Yahweh and also as a direct demonstration of the far reaching results of sexual power abuse. When the teenager Israel chafes under God’s covenant yoke and fails at the mature application of the powers it already has, more control is demanded. Will it be easier to get what they want from a human king?

Self will and selfish abuse of power, particularly in the sexual arenas, becomes the norm and an indicator of Israel’s immaturity in the partnership with Yahweh.[[1]](#footnote-1) In order to be a good partner, it seems Israel must learn to totally submit in faith. This requires vulnerability to God as partner- the same kind of vulnerability represented by our sexual selves. It also requires a particular kind of relationship, one based on trust and yielding to the needs and desires of the other. But fear of the other can completely block trust.

Where is Yahweh in all this? Is Yahweh also vulnerable to us in some way? I would say only voluntarily. If humanity in general and the chosen Israel in particular doesn’t respond to the needs of the divine covenant partner, God can eliminate divine vulnerability with a single flood in a single second and is often angrily tempted to do so. But that would leave Yahweh without a partner, alone in the earthly creation. It seems this was not Yahweh’s original intent and, besides, so far God listens to those who plead our case (Noah, Moses, the prophets).

Yahweh can appear at first glance to be as brutal a partner as humankind; yet Yahweh persists in making good on promises and chooses to use what human actions are available (even violent tyrants) to that end. I’m taking the point of view that humans are the ones who initiated violence as a means to an end (Num 21:1-3) and Yahweh concedes to (or must) make use of whatever human action is available, including violence.[[2]](#footnote-2) God protects us from our own missteps by meting out warnings and corrections and (only as a last resort) punishments meant to save what remnant can be redeemed in order to implement the divine plan.

Thankfully, we do not see Yahweh use divine power (which has been demonstrated to be vast in the Pentateuch) to overrule the people’s free will choices,[[3]](#footnote-3) Yahweh is the loving mature partner who seems to wish only good for the divine creation and responds in a corrective way to whatever the thus far immature partner, Israel, attempts- but within limits. For example, Yahweh grants Israel’s request for a king anyway with the warning: “…if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well, but if you will not heed the voice of Yahweh…then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This makes abuse of sexual power by the king even more heinous. Yahweh also has needs; to carry out the divine plan and to be worshipped and loved as lord. Yahweh expects surrender to the divine needs, which have been clearly set out in Leviticus regarding use of sexual impulses.

This paper assumes a point of view that the Deuteronomistic History of Joshua through Kings is a battle waged between the divine will of Yahweh for the mature surrender of the human will of Israel. Since Genesis, all of humanity, including Israel, has been testing its use of God granted powers in the physical realm, which include violence and sex along with vital attempts to grow crops and husband animals. When humans do not act in accordance with Yahweh’s guidance, things go worse than poorly. The world becomes a brutal environment of scarcity, greed, and fear. All are set against each other and this is particularly evident with regard to sex.

It is beyond the scope of the paper to comment on all the numerous examples of incidents involving sexual power or its overtones (Caleb’s daughter, Rahab, Jael and Sisera, Jephthah, Hannah, Tamar and Amnon, Eli’s sons etc) and all the times that sexual language is used to emphasize disloyalty[[5]](#footnote-5) or disobedience. Stories of Samson and King David will be looked at in more detail with regard to sexual power questions. Sexual power is not the only issue addressed in these stories that also have other social, political, religious, and military implications (only be considered if they intertwine with the relevant sexual issues).

Examples of abuse of sexual power will be drawn (women against men, men against men through women, men against women) over against examples of what surrendered human will (to God) should look like. It will be put forth that fear and lack of faith undergird the need to create human security by the use of force. And that the way to safety is counterintuitive- by being vulnerable in accordance with divine will.

**Samson[[6]](#footnote-6)**

Samson’s future parents provide an example of those who have properly surrendered to Yahweh, possibly because they have suffered under the curse of both Philistine rule for forty years and the curse of the wife’s barren condition. James Crenshaw[[7]](#footnote-7) points out that the folklore motif of the barren wife is common in early Israelite narratives, establishing the high value of childbearing. The opening of the barren womb[[8]](#footnote-8) is a blessing and in this case is accompanied by an assignment; Yahweh’s messenger makes clear the divine plan, a Nazarite vow is required for Israel’s deliverance. Samson’s mother responds with not only with complete compliance but also without fear regarding Yahweh or her husband’s reaction to this visit from a “man of God.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Her lack of fear when surrendered is highlighted by a literary contrast, the folklore motifs of “Terror over Theophany.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Samson’s father, Manoah, eagerly asks Yahweh to instruct him in the plan for the future son; then proceeds to treat the returning stranger (the angel messenger to his wife) with proper hospitality. Manoah prepares for Yahweh a burnt offering which prompts the revelation of the angel’s identity. When Manoah realizes he and his wife may have seen God, he responds with fear. This is contrasted with the wife’s reassuring lack of fear.

The overall literary affect of this episode is to emphasize the terror of theophany and to demonstrate how safe one is when in compliant obedience- there is no threat of abuse in this story, from Manoah towards his wife or Yahweh towards either of them. Nor does the wife try to hide anything from her husband. All are vulnerable- Yahweh to the rejection of the divine plan by the couple and the husband and wife to each other when it is implied the stranger could be part of why she is pregnant. All act in faith and the result is a blessing.

This is then contrasted further with Samson’s behavior which serves to give opposite examples of what happens when humans forgo Yahweh’s instructions and take things into their own hands. Yahweh’s result will be realized but it will be a tragedy for the humans involved.

In the story of Samson and Delilah[[11]](#footnote-11) we find Crenshaw’s folklore motif of “Hero Helpless before a Woman’s Wiles,” an example of female abuse of sexual power.[[12]](#footnote-12) Samson, who Yahweh still stands by at this point- despite the breaking of parts of his Nazarite vow-,[[13]](#footnote-13) is now in love with Delilah which immediately puts him in a vulnerable position. It is not made clear if she loves him or not, but Delilah does accept the bribe to “coax” him (presumably no bribe would be necessary if she didn’t have a choice).

The literary device of her failing to persuade him three times before her success serves to emphasize his vulnerability and her power (implied to be sexual because his head is in her lap at the critical moment and her nagging personality has been revealed). She symbolically castrates him, but not from his genitals; from something much more devastating, his relationship with Yahweh. Samson is then sexually humiliated by being forced to do women’s work- grinding, and by “making sport” as an entertainer (like a dancing girl would?).

It is possible to conclude that Yahweh is vulnerable here too; Yahweh must have needed the purity of one under the Nazarite vow to defeat the evil of the Philistines. Even though Samson’s strength returns and he martyrs himself in a valiant effort to carry out God’s mission, God does not return to him. [[14]](#footnote-14) And it is certainly not the last we hear of the Philistines, who have not been defeated once-and-for-all during the transitional leadership of the judges.

**David**

Yahweh grants the immature Israel its wicked desire[[15]](#footnote-15) to have a king and continues on the path of the divine plan for deliverance of Israel from the Philistines. After stories that re-emphasize the dangerous power of God through the ark (reinforcing the terror of theophany), the prophet Samuel acts as the voice of Yahweh to anoint and continuously admonish Saul. King Saul fails to surrender to Yahweh and becomes increasingly self-reliant and afraid until he suffers divine rejection. David is indicated as Saul’s replacement.

In the unfolding drama of Israel’s kings we find two relevant examples of how things can go wrong with using sexual power against God’s will. First in the story of Saul, David, and Michal we see lessons about men using sexual power against other men by co-opting women’s sexual value. Second, we see the far reaching consequences of what happens when David does not surrender his sexual impulses to Yahweh’s law in the story of Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite.

Ken Stone[[16]](#footnote-16) makes the case that conflicts (I would say power struggles) between male characters play a role in the sex related stories of the Deuteronomistic History. Stone’s thesis that men use the control of women’s sexuality (daughters, sisters, wives) to convey their own power and honorable status to each other is clearly supported in the case of Saul trying to usurp his rival David (against God’s will) through his daughters. First Saul (in exchange for military service that might get David killed) offers and then withdraws a marriage alliance[[17]](#footnote-17) through his daughter Merab’s hand- possibly humiliating David who has humbly protested his worthiness for such an increase in honor, or possibly David has maintained the upper hand by having refused.

To set the next snare, Saul then elects to use the love of his daughter Michal for David. Saul requests a bride price of a hundred Philistines foreskins which is seemingly guaranteed to result in David’s death. David is successful in the quest because the Lord is with him. Saul realizes he can’t control his daughter’s love for David and Saul is rightly terrified of the Lord’s allegiance to David. Michal betrays her father by warning David and tricking him with an idol in their marriage bed. The humiliation of Saul in the setting of his daughter and David’s marriage bed and the subsequent naked frenzy of Saul before the Lord could be interpreted as prophetic admonishment for the improper attempt to use human (sexual) power against Yahweh’s will.

The literary device of contrasting Jonathan’s behavior towards David with Saul’s reinforces the idea that vulnerability is required in divinely guided relationships. Jonathan’s love for David is portrayed as innocent and surrendered. As first born son, Jonathan could rightly claim his father’s kingship (a “sexually transmitted” vs. divine succession). But Jonathan makes a covenant with David and displays complete surrender to God’s will. The act of stripping himself of his robe, armor, and weapons[[18]](#footnote-18) displays Jonathan’s extreme and correct vulnerability in the situation. This action feels right and good in contrast to Saul’s fearful manipulations; it is representative of how relationships between men should be in God’s eyes (“…the Lord shall be between me and you…”).[[19]](#footnote-19) Jonathan continues to display surrender to Yahweh’s will and David can thus trust him. But Saul, grasping to maintain control, feels compelled to attack both his son and David in a sexual manner, by insulting Jonathan’s mother and giving Michal[[20]](#footnote-20) away to another.

The theme of vulnerability and abuse of power continues in the story of David and Bathsheba. Stone points out that this blatantly sexual affair ultimately results in murder, prophetic speech, and continuing warfare for generations of the house of David.[[21]](#footnote-21) God’s divine purpose is clearly not served by King David’s actions in this case. Stone points out that the Prophet Nathan’s declarations from Yahweh come after the death (murder) of Bathsheba’s husband; in what Stone purports is not Yahweh’s reaction to David’s attempt to cover up illegal sexual misconduct, but his unjustified murder of Uriah- a male to male confrontation.[[22]](#footnote-22)

I think Nathan’s speech also speaks to the struggle between Yahweh’s will and human will and says some very specific things with regard to sexuality and abuse of power. The incident that culminates in Nathan’s speech is based on the king not having any special exemption from Yahweh’s law with regard to sexuality. David can’t claim innocence; he clearly knew the names of Bathsheba’s parents and husband[[23]](#footnote-23) before he acted on his desire to have intercourse with her and then in fear (of losing his progeny?) to kill her husband.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Nathan’s speech is not limited to Uriah’s murder as a transgression but includes taking Bathsheba as a wife; therefore the repercussions include David’s wives. The public significance of Yahweh’s earlier warning about the surrender of kings to the divine will is highlighted by the public exposure of David’s sin.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Even though the Lord “puts away David’s sin,” implying forgiveness, death and damage continue to ricochet through subsequent generations in sexual motifs (Bathsheba’s first born, Tamar and Amnon, Absalom and David’s concubines, Solomon’s idolatrous foreign wives) We are well aware of the generational consequences of sexual abuse in our modern world. It is also significant that David’s sin does not keep Yahweh’s love from Solomon, the issue of this devastating relationship[[26]](#footnote-26) and a future instrument in God’s plan to build the temple. There is no doubt who has all the power.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The theme that Yahweh forgives but can’t let evil run rampant[[28]](#footnote-28) is echoed throughout this long saga. Sons continue to commit the sins of their fathers, which leads to punishment for turning away from God’s will.[[29]](#footnote-29) An important point here is that love of God- David’s true heart- can’t be “sexually transmitted” from generation to generation, while the damage of sin can.[[30]](#footnote-30)

What is clearly demonstrated from David on is how attempts by kings to wield human power, offensively and defensively, does not work to achieve protection. Human kings, even attached to great kingdoms, are vulnerable creatures. [[31]](#footnote-31) Neither sex nor a sword “between me and you” is an effective protection for human frailty. Only Yahweh and Yahweh’s voice (through prophets) stays loyal and dependable while fragile human obedience ebbs and flows with fear and temptation during a fractured human kingdom.

**Conclusion**

The tales in the Deuteronomistic History demonstrate that sexual rhetoric is powerful, not just because of its sensationalism or metaphorical value, but because it goes to the heart of our core human vulnerabilities. We are fragile creatures subject to earthly desires and fears, confronted by a terrifyingly powerful God. When we realize our only hope is to surrender in complete faith and obedience; the phrase “fear of God” takes on a whole new meaning. We are at the mercy of God’s voluntary curbing of divine power.

As sickening (literally) as it is, I don’t believe the gendered sexual violence in these texts should be tempered. They flash a clear signal about how devastating it can be to create oppressive godless structures that protect our human vulnerability. However, Renita Weems[[32]](#footnote-32) has noted that texts which terrorize us must be read with awareness, lest the story imply or encourage endorsement of the included behavior.

All things considered, it seems the only way to maintain a safe sexual environment is not to build more defenses between men and women or men and men or humans and God, but to put down our weapons and be more vulnerable, surrendering to “the Lord between me and you.”

Bibliography

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1. Josh 22:17 “Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves…” (all Biblical references in this paper are from the NRSV) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Having given this domain over to human will and care in Genesis 1:26-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jephtath’s vow (Judg 11:30) is a difficult case in point and do we want God’s interference really? [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1 Sam 12:14-15. There is also a longer warning in 1 Samuel 8:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Judges 8:33 for example; “…the Israelites relapsed and prostituted themselves.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Judges 13-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James L. Crenshaw, *Samson: A secret betrayed, a vow ignored* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978) 41-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It should be noted that God doesn’t always use one method to bring specially selected servants into the world. It is also significant that those who are barren are pleased with the conception of a child, we don’t have examples of God forcing childbearing on the reluctant, which could fall into the category of abuse. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Crenshaw makes the point that barren women could go to extraordinary lengths (including harlotry during the time of Genesis) to conceive a child and we could imagine that this story could as easily have gone the way of an angry accusation of adultery on Manoah’s part, resulting in death for the wife. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Crenshaw, 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Judges 16:4-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the death of Sisera at the hands of Jael in Judges 17-22. It could be argued that Samson and Delilah is a story of the Philistine men co-opting Delilah’s power to use on Samson, but for illustration purposes it seems she still has a choice (4 times) to betray him or not. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Evidence of which is the provision of water by Yahweh in Judges 15:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. More episodes of women using their power follow the Samson story: the mother making a silver idol, and then the Levite’s concubine of Judges 19, who leaves him of her own accord and then is brutally abused to death. It’s hard to tell if the order of these stories is intentionally related to Delilah’s use of sexual power or not; in any case the effect is unmistakably frightening, powerful, and sickening. Perhaps the escalation of depravity is meant to increase the urgency of the purported need for a king or a metaphor for Israel’s continued denigration in rebellion. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 1 Samuel 12: 17 Samuel says: “…and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of the Lord is great in demanding a king for yourselves.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ken Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A common means of securing political power at the time of ancient Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 1 Sam 18:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 1 Sam 20:42 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. When David takes her back, Michal’s attempt to sexually scold David (2 Sam 6:16) for dancing before the Lord (essentially she is trying to compete sexually with Yahweh for David’s attention?) backfires on her and results in her barrenness. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Stone, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 2 Sam 12:11 notes that Yahweh is angry because David “…struck down Uriah…with the sword of the Ammonites…”. This caused me to wonder if it is Yahweh’s prerogative only to use another’s sword? [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 2 Sam 11:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 2 Sam 11:6-24 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 2 Sam 12:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 2 Sam 12:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. David foreshadows this earlier in 2 Sam 3:39 “…I am powerless, even though anointed king…” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 2 Sam 3:39, “The Lord pay back the one who does wickedly in accordance with his wickedness. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For example: 1 Kings 15:1-5, 1 Kings 52-53 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 1 Kings 15:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 1 Kings 16:31 for example: “As if it had been a light thing for (King Ahab) to walk in the sins of Jeroboam…he took as his wife Jezebel…and went and served Baal…” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Renita Weems, *Battered Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)