

Regina M. Schwartz

NOTICE: THIS MATERIAL MAY BE
PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT
LAW (TITLE 17 U.S. CODE)

Chapter Two

OWNING IDENTITY LAND

Do not covet your neighbor's field.—Exodus 20:17

This land is your land; this land is my land
From California to the New York island
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.
—Woody Guthrie

POSSESSING LAND

Monotheism does not simply define a people as a covenanted community, however complex that definition turns out to be. It is in delineating a people another way, as those who belong to a land, that monotheism has left its deepest, most lasting, and undoubtedly its most troubling political legacy. In Bosnia, several peoples who conceive of themselves as having distinct identities lay

claim to the same piece of land. Each believes that its right to that land is historically demonstrable and, in any case, more ancient than historical memory. Moreover, that claim is divinely sanctioned. God seems to have willed the same territory to be the unique inheritance of each of these peoples. In Israel, several peoples who conceive of themselves as distinct entities lay claim to the same piece of land. Each believes its right to that land is historical, ancient, and divine. Again, somehow God has willed the same territory to be the inheritance of each people. So achingly familiar, so ubiquitous, is the notion of possessing land that it is difficult to call attention to how odd it is, difficult to imagine, for instance, explaining to a civilization on another planet who live on it without any urge to carve its surface into pieces and label and assign ownership to them, why we earth creatures obsessively delineate territory, build walls, plant flags, and marshal our best technological resources to do so. Science fiction fails that imaginative effort, for it only projects the idea of possessing land onto whole galaxies, where futuristic territorial disputes are waged ceaselessly. And historical examples are rife. Whether the territory in question is big or small, the land is fertile or barren, or the impulse to possess it is long- or short-lived, horrific acts of human violence have been committed and continue to be committed in the service of what is after all an idea: the notion that a "group" (an imagined community) must "possess" (how can land be owned?) a "piece" (note how the earth is imagined in pieces) of land. The history of warfare since antiquity tells a complex story of a phenomenon that is not so very complex—territorial disputes—and in our century alone, two generations have been ravaged by world wars that were fought largely to reconfigure maps. As various borders contract and expand in these struggles, all that is consistent is that land is deemed more precious than life itself.

Is this border-obsession some extension of the borders of our personal identity? Is our skin not adequate border enough? Or does calling to mind another natural image, that of fields planted and fenced in, help to explain this madness? That is, do peoples fight over land rights because they are fighting over rights to the produce

of the soil? How then would we explain the fact that the most devastating territorial wars have occurred in a global economy? Perhaps it is less the reality than the myth of scarcity that propels these disputes, the belief that resources are scarce, that there is not enough land, and so what land there is must be ruthlessly acquired, perpetually defended, and at all costs, fiercely possessed. But people do not possess land. Such a notion of land possesses them, for the land becomes soaked in the blood of the peoples who claim it.

We cannot really own anything, despite (or because, since desire is propelled by lack) of the overwhelming desire to do so. Objects of possession can be taken away by others. They can defy being owned on their own accord—they can break, wither, and die—so that despite persistent efforts to appropriate land, dwellings, women, and portable property, somehow all of them stubbornly resist being owned. Land is especially frustrating for those who would possess it because their territorial claims turn out to be, with more or less perspective, only temporary squatter's rights. And if the desire to own territory has its source in a desire to own the produce of the soil, the land can still fail to cooperate. It can seem willfully "barren" (a term also applied to women who are similarly possessed for their produce). And so, with land resisting both permanent conquest and a guaranteed yield of its fruits, it flaunts the lie of ownership in the faces of those who claim it.

With more and less subtlety, biblical narratives fully elaborate the notion that a defining feature of a people is its divinely ordained right to land. Despite the haunting protests that frequent the biblical narratives against Israel ever becoming a nation "like the nations," and despite the frequent celebrations of nomadism that punctuate the narratives, ancient Israel has bequeathed to later generations in far-flung climes the authoritative grand myth that will be used and misused by nations, ethnic groups, and religious communities for their own purposes. In this apparently compelling myth of identity, the divine promise of land to a people creates them as a people.

Despite this biblical obsession, the ancient Israelites did not invent the idea of defining a people by land. Their fortunes and misfortunes depended upon the movements of the much larger empires who

Chapter Two

filled the theater of the ancient Near East—Akkadian, Amorite, Assyrian, Egyptian, Persian, and Roman—empires that have left not just literary but monumental testimony to their wars of expansion. Those stones bear witness to how very strong the commitment to binding identity to land was throughout the ancient world—Assyrian reliefs carved with scenes of battle, Egyptian tombs recording victories on pyramid walls, Persian stelae devoted to the conquests of Cyrus, Roman arches sculpted with reliefs of the looting of Jerusalem—but it was through the accidents of religious history that the perishable book of a small persecuted people came to speak far more authoritatively about land to future generations. Its message has not perished. That book records the wish of a people in exile to be landed, of a homeless people to have a home, and it depicts their aspiration as synonymous with the very will of God. Monotheism has left a troubling legacy of the belief in land entitlement, one that continues to ghost territorial disputes.

The story of Israel proper begins with Genesis 12. After the primeval myths of Creation, Fall, Flood, and Babel—a prehistory that generally charts disobedience and disaster—the people of Israel are formed as a new start, to serve as an example to the peoples of the earth. But their existence is subject to a contract: their God demands loyalty from them and in return promises them numerous descendants, a mighty nation, and land. The ensuing story is devoted to the gradual acquisition of the promised land, the building of the nation in wars of conquest and defense, setbacks in that progress, and the destruction of the nation with the loss of the once-promised land. Throughout, these fortunes and misfortunes are not attributed to the strength or weakness of surrounding nations, but to Israel's obedience or disobedience to its God. Faith in the deity is the guarantee of a land grant.

Yahweh said to Abram, "Leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name so great that it will be used as a blessing." (Gen 12:1-2)

And when Abram arrives in the land of Canaan, Yahweh tells him,

Look all round from where you are toward the north and the south, toward the east and the west. All the land within sight I will give to you and your descendants for ever. I will make your descendants like the dust on the ground: when men succeed in counting the specks of dust on the ground, then they will be able to count your descendants. Come, travel the length and breadth of the land, for I mean to give it to you.
(Gen 13:14–17)

If in this passage the people and the soil are related by a simile—the people are like the dust of the soil—elsewhere, that likeness deepens into sameness. Man is actually made from the soil: “Yahweh fashioned man of dust from the soil. Then he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being” (Gen 2:7). Again, the biblical term for human, *’ādām*, is derived from the Hebrew term for soil, *’ādāmā*. To be human is to be made of land.

Adam is born into a garden irrigated by rivers and told to till and tend it, and he is exiled from that garden when he is disobedient to his God. The Israelites are promised a larger garden, the land of Canaan watered by the mighty Jordan, and they are exiled from it when they are disobedient to their God. Whatever other ideas about collective identity are proliferated in the Bible—a kinship community, a community united by collective memory, a monarchy, a covenanted community—a people are “a people” by virtue of the promise made to them that they will possess a land, and promise is the key word here, for that possession is elusive. The Israelites will lose Israel. From promising beginning to bitter end, the narrative is preoccupied with Israel’s identity as landed. Even as lack, land is defining.

As if anticipating the perils of the idea of attaching land to identity, the biblical writers have also included a critique of it. Their alternative vision embraces the values of nomadism, is suspicious of settled agriculture, and even idealizes the wilderness. A closer look at that intimate etymological relation between man, *’ādām*, and land, *’ādāmā*, reveals that it is between human beings and all land. Man-

kind does not derive its etymology from the other biblical term for land, *'eres*, the term that signifies a political and national territory. This use of *'ādāmā* marks a departure from the dominant idea that a people are specified by a particular land, for it suggests that if man is a creature of land, he is an "earth-creature" who is not tied to one piece of it.¹ Furthermore, it is likely that the Israelites compose this myth only after they are in exile. Only landless do they imagine themselves as a people who have inherited a land. And so, built into the very fabric of the logic that imagines Israel as a landed entity is also an Israel that is a landless entity. Lodged deeply in this nomadic ideal may be the admission that the very goal being upheld—possession, of land, of anything—is an impossible fiction, if by it we mean having exclusive rights to it.²

There is a dangerous consequence of attaching identity to territory: when a people imagines itself as the people of a given land, the obvious threat to its identity is loss of that land. Precisely that fear drives the plot of biblical narrative. While it depicts the people coming into possession (or conquering) the land, that triumph is undermined, surrounded as it is by accounts of losing land. In the first "loss," the Exodus, the people *choose* to leave a land. Enslaved and ill-treated in Egypt, their leave-taking is depicted as a victorious expression of freedom. In the next loss, the exile, the people are forced to leave the land, painfully exiled by the Babylonians. Joining the theology that God owns the land to this plot produces embarrassing complications. How can the people of Israel suffer exile from the land when their God has promised it to them and the land belongs to him to dispense as he chooses? In this most peculiar narrative, God saves the Israelites in the Exodus, enables the conquest of the land he promised, but then allows—even instigates—the defeat of the exile. Whether their God leads the Israelites out of Egypt or out of the promised land, his omnipotence is kept intact, and protecting that omnipotence is clearly paramount for the biblical writers. What, then, is the payoff for humanity to have an investment in transcendence? Or to put it another way, why bother subscribing to a myth of omnipotence when it still leaves one vulnerable to defeat?

When Israel was a child I loved him;
and I called my son out of Egypt.

In a touching image of paternal nurturing, the deity is imagined as bending down to lift his child, only to turn against him later, sending him to his Egyptian and Assyrian enemies; feeding an infant gives way to a devouring sword.

I was like someone who lifts an infant close against his cheek;
stooping down to him I gave him his food.
They will have to go back to Egypt,
Assyria must be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.
The sword will rage through their towns,
wiping out their children,
glutting itself inside their fortresses.

(Hos 11:1-6)

The terms of the contract, complete obedience, have been violated.

Let us have no rejoicing, Israel,
no exulting like the other peoples;
for you have deserted God to play the whore,
you have enjoyed the prostitute's pay
on every threshing floor.

(Hos 9:1)

And so a God who once promised them a land flowing with milk
and honey now threatens famine.

Neither floor nor vat will nourish them,
the new wine will disappoint them.
They will no longer live in the land of Yahweh;
Ephraim will have to go back to Egypt,
and in Assyria they will eat food that is unclean.

(Hos 9:2-3)

This is a strange myth indeed, of a god who offers a people liberation and grants them victory over their enemies only to turn into their deadliest enemy.

Yahweh the God of Israel says this, "Look, I will bring disaster as to make the ears of all who hear of it tingle. . . . I will cast away the remnant of my inheritance, delivering them into the power of their enemies, and making them serve as prey and booty to all their enemies because they have done what is displeasing to me and have provoked my anger from the day their ancestors came out of Egypt until now." (2 Kings 21:12-15)

Having invested everything about a land in the will of the deity, the narratives concede that the will of the deity can take it all away. And they vividly depict him taking it away. He makes the prosperity of the land wither, he revokes Israel's possession of the land, and he threatens to tear Israel to pieces like a wild animal.

Yet I am Yahweh your God since the days in the land of Egypt;
you know no God but me,
there is no other savior.
I knew you in the wilderness;
in the land of drought I knew them, and they were satisfied;
once satisfied, their hearts grew proud,
and so they came to forget me.
Very well, I will be a lion to them,
a leopard lurking by the way;
like a bear robbed of her cubs I will pounce on them
and tear the flesh round their hearts;
the dogs shall eat their flesh,
the wild beasts tear them to pieces.

(Hos 13:4-8)

What appeared at first like a rather neat exchange of authorizations—ancient Israel projects its identity onto a deity who in turn sanctions Israel to take the land—becomes instead the source of Israel's vulnerability when radical monotheism unleashes its fury against pluralism. In the myth of monotheism, pluralism is betrayal,

punishable with every kind of exile: loss of home, loss of the land, even alienation from the earth itself. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

Granted that collective identity and land, whether possessed or desired, are deeply implicated with one another, how does *transcendence* bear upon the question of land, that is, upon the *immanence* of the earth? In short, what does God have to do with it? God owns the land. It is only leased, with conditions he stipulates, not bequeathed, to the Israelites. Palestine was a tiny strip of land battled over in various times by Syrians, Assyrians, Philistians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, and Romans, to name only the more familiar contestants, and yet it was a notably poor, drought-plagued land, leaving its inhabitants to struggle not only against invaders from without but against famine from within. In this unstable atmosphere, it is little wonder that the ancient Israelites came to conceive of the ownership of land as transcendent. Even the fertility of the land is subject to the will of God.³ Egypt is watered by the fluctuations of the Nile, but Israel's rain falls at the behest of Yahweh.

For the land that you are to enter and make your own is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, where you sowed your seed and watered it by tread like a vegetable garden. No, the land into which you are to cross to make it your own is a land of hills and valleys watered by the rain from heaven. Yahweh your God takes care of this land, the eyes of Yahweh your God are on it always, from the year's beginning to its end. And it is most sure that if you faithfully obey the commandments I enjoin on you today, loving Yahweh your God and serving him with all your heart and all your soul, I will give your land rain in season, autumn rain and spring, so that you may harvest your corn, your wine, your oil; I shall provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and have all you want. (Deut 11:10-15)

Everything about the land—who lives on it, who tills it, whether it is watered, whether it yields its fruits—is divinely ordained.

Such transcendence would seem designed to protect Israel's land

Chapter Two

from either the might of marauders or the blight of drought (unless, that is, the Almighty willed those disasters). This omnipotence doubtless offered some yearned-for stability amid all the political and economic chaos in the ancient Near East, guaranteeing that the forces of history and of nature were not arbitrary. According to the biblical myth, whatever else we mortals do not understand about the powers of life, death, prosperity, famine, and war, we do understand what an eternal, immutable, omnipotent God requires of us: obedience.⁴ Transcendence offers epistemological certainty. Yet in Israel's theology, that formidable condition of obedience is always attached to the comforting stability held out by transcendence.

Take care your heart is not seduced, that you do not go astray, serving other gods and worshipping them, or the anger of Yahweh will blaze out against you, he will shut up the heavens and there will be no rain, the land will not yield its produce and you will quickly die in the prosperous land that Yahweh is giving you. (Deut 11:16-17)

In the end, this requirement of absolute allegiance to the One exposes the instability of the whole design: God and the people are meant to "belong to" or to own one another in some sense. Ownership is vested in divine possession of the people: "I will be your God if you will be my people." But when that ownership proves impossible (as it must), transcendence no longer safeguards Israel's identity nor its land.

If you violate the covenant which Yahweh your God has demanded of you, if you go and serve other gods and bow down before them, then Yahweh's anger will be roused against you and you will quickly vanish from the good land that he has given you. (Josh 23:16)

The difficulty of holding onto the land, even land bequeathed in perpetuity by Permanence itself, is not solved by recourse to transcendence after all. Instead, that inevitable precariousness is woven into a biblical theology in which the land is in serious jeopardy if Israel does not obey her god. Fidelity to the one God persistently frames the discourse of land.

If you are willing to obey,
you shall eat the good things of the earth.
but if you persist in rebellion,
the sword will eat you instead.

(Is 1:19-20)

The devouring sword of God will turn on Israel when the boundaries of her loyalty, and consequently of her identity, prove to be as fragile as those of her land.

What may seem like colorful prophetic metaphors (Israel as an exiled whore) or arcane Levitical law (obedience as the condition of having the land) becomes the stuff of narrative, arguably, our most potent cultural narrative, in the story of the Fall of humankind. It was that story that began this inquiry, and that story has now led us, not to sin, but to *land*. While later Christian exegesis lays heavy stress on the sexuality of the original sin, in the Hebrew narrative about the first parents, the emphasis is on land, from the opening pun on man's name—formed as we saw, from the land (*'ādāmā*)—to the conclusion of the curse: “from dust were you taken and to dust will you return.” The fall of Adam and Eve is a story of becoming alienated from a paradisaal land, of its fecundity made barren.

Accursed be the soil because of you.
With suffering shall you get your food from it
every day of your life.
It shall yield you brambles and thistles,
and you shall eat wild plants.
With sweat on your brow
shall you eat your bread.

(Gen 3:17-19)

Man is forcibly removed from the garden: “so Yahweh expelled him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he had been taken” (Gen 3:23). He is condemned to exile for disobeying a rule, and as the myth tells it, being exiled from the land, from the community, and from God are virtually the same exile.

In the story of the fall of Adam and Eve, a particular people are

not banished from a particular land; rather, humankind itself is condemned to a general exile from a perfect land. From Genesis on, the entire human condition is portrayed as one of exile from a mythical paradisaal "home." The idea of exile presupposes that one is at home somewhere, with exile being the forced exclusion from that home. To be in exile is not to choose a place to reside but to be deprived of one's chosen place. Under the law of scarcity, that deprivation is conceived of as a punishment. But what is this at-homeness? Residing in a land temporarily or permanently? Owning the land? What is the difference between a sojourner and a stranger? From this universal perspective, exile is the hinterland devised for those who do not embrace monotheism, the no-man's land assigned to those whose identity is not single or singular in its devotion. Exile is the wilderness imagined by those who insist upon attaching a single circumscribed identity to a homeland. Yet it is the condition everyone inhabits. In addition to this universal curse, Adam's exile also foreshadows the particular exile of a particular people, the Israelites. The paradisaal garden is an idealized, and lost, land of Israel. In this sense, "exile" is the condition of anyone who does not conform to a strict definition of what Israel is.

A system of thought that assumes that land is a desirable possession offers two alternatives: Home (Israel, Obedience) or Exile (outside Israel, Disobedience), and anyone who does not obey the law is condemned to Exile. "Yahweh is God. . . . Keep his laws and commandments as I give them to you today, so that you and your children may prosper and live long in the land that Yahweh your God gives you for ever" (Deut 4:39-40). But a third approach would imagine a very different relation to land. The assumption that land is never to be possessed at all, that land is an imagined idea that could be shed, would lead to an idea of sojourning, that is, of freely choosing rather than being condemned to wander over the earth. With no need to inhabit a specific territory, both home and homelessness would wither away as categories and "exile" would be refigured as nomadism.⁵ One scholar has already explored how biblical narratives are driven by the conflict between the shepherd and the farmer, between the nomadic ideal and agriculturalism, and another has

pointed out that to an exiled people, pastoral nomadism would be a logical ideal, for it imagines land that cannot be taken away.⁶ Jerusalem will be captured by the Amorites, its population deported. In a remarkable passage, the pastoral alternative is brought into relief in the context of the failure of the land-holding paradigm.

The word addressed to Jeremiah by Yahweh in the days of Jehoiakim son of Josiah, king of Judah: "Go to the clan of the Rechabites and speak to them; bring them into one of the apartments of the Temple of Yahweh and offer them wine to drink". . . . They replied, "We do not drink wine, because our ancestor Jonadab son of Rechab gave us this order: 'You must never drink wine, neither you nor your sons; nor must you build houses, sow seed, plant vineyards, or own property; but you must live in tents all your lives, so that you may live long on the soil to which you are alien.'" (Jer 35:1-7)⁷

In contrast to a system of thought in which people can become exiled, then, is another way of thinking that imagines them as perpetual sojourners.

The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land. (Lev 25:23-24)

The ancient Israelites never lay claim to the land as natives; on the contrary, their story tells of a people who originate elsewhere. The father of Israel must leave his homeland and embark on a long journey in order to found the nation of Israel.

Yahweh said to Abram, "Leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you." . . . So Abram went as Yahweh told him. . . . Abram passed through the land as far as Shechem's holy place, the oak of Moreh. At the time the Canaanites were in the land. Yahweh appeared to Abram and said, "It is to your descendants that I will give this land." (Gen 12:1-7)

Chapter Two

The prophets imagine the wilderness, not as a place of exile, but as an idealized place of innocence before the corruptions of the territorial state and a place to return to heal from those corruptions (Jer 31:2, Hos 2:14, Amos 5:25, Jer 2:2-3). The system of thought that conceives of the Israelites as forever sojourners and strangers in the land is incompatible with the one in which the people become exiles outside Israel. They were always sojourners, never exiles.

But in the end, biblical nomadism is contaminated by the dream of possessing land. The nomadic ideal fails as a genuine alternative to the corruption of the territorial state because one is always implicated in the other. The exile becomes the conqueror; the fugitive becomes the captor.⁸ With the wilderness narrative literally wedged between narratives of exodus and conquest, narratives that presuppose the desirability of having territory, the nomadic ideal is encompassed by and therefore compromised by the land-holding ideal. Consequently, a forty-year period of wandering is framed, not as nomadism, but as purging, a punishment and a cleansing, in preparation for land acquisition. Wandering in the wilderness is filled with the expectation that the wanderers will hold land again and by the disappointment that they have lost land. What could be seen as a choice of pastoral nomadism is repeatedly imagined as a punishment. The ideal of a "home" assumes a central place within the whole nexus of thinking about monotheism, singular allegiance, and scarcity. Cain is cast out, Esau is exiled, and Moses is not allowed to enter the promised land. But perhaps instead of seeing Moses as a scapegoat for the sin of the people, we could re-imagine him as the great leader of the Israelites because he was the figure of their *desire*—one who looked but did not take possession of land—rather than of their *punishment* (as the narrative more overtly suggests).

"My Lord, may I not go across and see this prosperous land beyond the Jordan?" . . . "Enough!" he said, "speak to me no more of this. Climb to the top of Pisgah; let your eyes turn toward the west, the north, the south, the east. Look well, for across the Jordan you shall not go." (Deut 3:25-27)

The belief that God owns all the land should work against this elaborate way of thinking about possession.⁹ Owned by a transcendent, inviolable principle, the land is virtually "off the market" for human possession. That understanding of land as a trust or inheritance instead of a tradable commodity is dramatized vividly in the story of Naboth's vineyard.¹⁰

Naboth of Jezreel had a vineyard close by the palace of Ahab king of Samaria, and Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard to be my vegetable garden, since it adjoins my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it, or if you prefer, I will give you its worth in money." But Naboth answered Ahab, "Yahweh forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors!" (1 Kings 21:1-3)

When Ahab's queen, Jezebel, engineers the murder of Naboth to obtain the land, the crime is punished: "Thus says the Lord: 'Have you killed and also taken possession? . . . In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will lick up your blood'" (1 Kings 21:19). For the eminent biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, "the god of Israel is a God who gives land, and Israel is a people that holds land in alternative ways. The core tradition is intended to promote an alternative to the imperial system of land known both in the Egyptian empire and in the Canaanite city states."¹¹ Signs of this alternative tradition are that boundary marks must be obeyed, "Remove not the ancient landmark that your fathers have set" (Prov 22:28), and that land must not be seized, "Do not remove an ancient landmark; do not enter the fields of the fatherless; for their Redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you" (Prov 23:10-11).¹² Such passages "articulate a theory of land division that assumes inheritance and the right to hold land, as in the case of an orphan without social power, simply because one is entitled as a member of the community."¹³ In theory, the theology of the land as "inherited" protects its heirs against those who would seize it by force.¹⁴ But in practice, Israel's attractive refusal to think of land as a tradable commodity is attenuated by its very understanding of community. Israel's

Chapter Two

inalienable inheritance secures its land *for* Israel and *from* outsiders. If the boundary markers are protected within the community of Israel, the boundaries designed to protect other peoples are not even recognized as such.

Instead of a belief in transcendence having the effect of removing land from the concerns of owning and losing, possessing land and being exiled from it, in the end, nowhere are those concerns more apparent than in monotheism. In biblical theology, the divine ownership of the land does not so much remove the land from the human sphere of contestation over property rights as it transfers land to another sphere, obedience to the divine order. As we have seen, the deity will bequeath the land as a gift to the people *if* they are faithful to him, and he will revoke it *if* they are not. A self-enclosed circular system is thereby instituted: to be "a people" is to be God's people is to inherit his land, and if they are not the people of God, they will not be a people, and they will lose the land. Any collective identity depends upon both: if they are not the people of the land or the people of God, they are not a people. In this formulation, identity is wholly dependent upon the notion of possessing the land—whether in promise, in realization, or in memory.

Even so, the same theology that stresses that identity is land-bound puts its emphasis on the *promise* of having land and the yearning for a return to land rather than on the middle term, actually possessing the land. That middle term is decidedly less appealing than the happier days of desire. Once it is possessed, the land does not yield what it should, its borders are perpetually threatened, but most important, the very possession of the land that should guarantee the identity of the people seems to prompt them to violate the terms of its possession: they are no longer faithful to their God. Possession of the land and idolatry go hand in hand. An opposition widens between prosperity and morality, with the nation depicted as luxuriating in moral corruption. The people love their God so long as they want something from him. When they get it, they invariably forget him. Moses' warning in Deuteronomy becomes a description:

Take care you do not forget Yahweh your God, neglecting his commandments and customs and laws which I lay on you to-day. When you have eaten and had all you want, when you have built fine houses to live in, when you have seen your flocks and herds increase, your silver and gold abound, and all your possessions grow great, do not become proud of heart. (Deut 8:11-14)

On balance, Israel's identity is tied less to possessing the land than to desiring to possess the land. They are not the "people of the land," but the "people of (frustrated) desire for land."

EXODUS AND CONQUEST

Possession implies domination. Defining identity in terms of territory produces two myths that are the two consequences of possessing (or dreaming of possessing) land: either a people take land from another people (conquest) or the land is taken from them (exile). Narratives of conquest and exile are the logical elaborations of a doctrine of land possession. But conquest and exile are not simply opposites. Exile also serves as a kind of retrospective justification for conquest. The logic runs something like this: because we were (or will be) made homeless, we can seize another's home; because we were (or will be) conquered, we can conquer. Domination is the price exacted for having been dominated. In such retributive thinking, re-seizing the identical piece of land from the actual conquerors is unlikely—the peoples in question who inflict and therefore "deserve" pain are rarely the same—but historical memory is both so long and so dim that it is quite willing to confuse the identity of oppressors in order to allow the process of compensation (or revenge) to proceed. A Lebanese guerrilla fighter said in a recent interview that the Israelites had been his enemy for two thousand years, and a Serbian funeral oration praised the deceased for dying for Serbia just as his ancestors had died in the battle of Kosovo Polje against the Turks in the fourteenth century. Never mind the details of what must be re-

paired and who must make the reparation against whom. Substitution is the soul of revenge.

According to this hazy retributive logic, then, one way to read the haunting biblical myth of the Exodus, wherein ancient Israel is rescued from slavery in Egypt by her God, is to read it cynically, as a massive justification of ancient Israel's conquests. In the exodus narrative, Israel is held in captivity in a foreign land, released from that oppression through divine intervention, and then given a homeland by divine right, the land of Canaan, which Israel proceeds to seize by force, defeating her enemies (not Egyptians here, but Canaanites). In this sequence of events, the Exodus serves as the best of all moral justifications for the Conquest. With the captivity in Egypt and the Exodus from it positioned first, Israel is a victim before she is an aggressor. The Hebrews are a powerless group of people preyed upon by an evil mighty empire, and their deity offers them a homeland as a refuge from the terrors of history. The divine sanction of the conquest—these are Yahweh's swords and bows, not Israel's—makes it all the more justifiable.

When you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho, those who held Jericho fought against you, as did the Amorites and Perizzites, the Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I put them all into your power. I sent out hornets in front of you, which drove the two Amorite kings before you; this was not the work of your sword or your bow. I gave you a land where you never toiled, you live in towns you never built; you eat now from vineyards and olive groves you never planted. (Josh 24:11–13)

If a vague sense that Israel is somehow undeserving of this land hovers over this passage—she lives in towns she did not build and eats from vineyards she did not plant, she vanquishes a people without her own sword or bow—so too does the sense that she is not guilty of the blood of the sword and the bow or of usurping the land. With the design and execution of her history all vested in a divine principle, Israel is not culpable.

The rhetoric of victimization—the land as a refuge, as a haven

from aggressors—infuses much of the language of nationalism; a rhetoric that speaks more often of one's "homeland" in the sense of a safe place rather than a native land. It is a land that a people have fled to, not one of their birth. Serbians tirelessly invoke abuses sustained six hundred years ago to justify their seizure of land, Irish nationalists detail wounds inflicted by the British, Greeks remember every injury by the Turks. And this invocation of a persecuted past to legitimate present policy is not only a rhetorical tool used by small nations struggling for national autonomy; it is also the way in which mighty empires have whitewashed their consciences. As they invaded Ireland, the British rehearsed their freedom from French oppressors with Shakespearean eloquence; as they seized the natives' land, the American colonists erected a founding myth of liberation from the persecuting British; during its terrifying expansions, Nazi Germany rehearsed its injuries in World War I. And so it goes: conquest after conquest is justified by a myth of exodus.

And what about the biblical narrative? Should we hold it culpable for emblazoning this desire for land acquisition on its readers, inscribing deep into our culture the primordial myth of an exodus that justifies conquest? From one perspective—that of the history of the text—the conquest narrative is only a wild fantasy written by a powerless dispossessed people who dream of wondrous victories over their enemies, of living in a land where milk and honey flow, and of entering that land with the blessing and support of an Almighty Deity. But from another perspective—that of the text's political afterlife—there is another story that is less appealing and considerably less innocent, telling of creating a people through the massive displacement and destruction of other peoples, of laying claim to a land that had belonged to others, and of conducting this bloody conquest under the banner of divine will.

What determines the greater or lesser sympathy with which we approach these formulations, other than the greater or lesser attractiveness of the conquered and conquering subjects? Surely, there is all the difference between reading the conquest as an impossible fantasy of a disempowered people and reading it as an act of empowerment by an imperial people. And surely, a powerless people cre-

ating a myth of their liberation and subsequent conquest differs markedly from a powerful people justifying their real conquest with recourse to such a myth. But how? Are the dynamics of power always so clear-cut that the oppressed and oppressors are readily distinguishable? And if so, how is it possible that they both have had recourse to the same myth? That insight leads to the troubling implication that the narrative itself might assist one to become the other, that a strong cultural myth that links the Exodus to the conquest could help to turn victims into victimizers.

The relation between a given cultural inheritance and politics is not transparent.¹⁵ Oppressed peoples write utopian myths of conquest. Peoples in exile write fantastic tales of land acquisition. But conquerors also pen celebrations of their conquests; and empires write of subject peoples as indeed subjected. While historical events give rise to narratives in complex ways, the historical afterlife of a given narrative is equally convoluted: Cromwell invoked the Exodus to describe the overthrowing of monarchy during the British Civil War, while Dryden invoked it to rally behind his monarch during the Restoration.¹⁶ The widely divergent uses of the conquest myth in the official rhetoric of the United States demonstrates similar paradoxes. At the country's founding, the Exodus celebrated liberation during the American revolt against the British oppressors, while the conquest was invoked during the invaders' seizure of Native American land. During the Civil War, Lincoln's forceful invocations of the Exodus reemerged to free the slaves even as the South invoked the conquest in order to justify the perpetuation of slavery. The exodus/conquest story leaves itself wide open to both liberating and oppressive uses because it has yoked two opposing myths together, and the sheer durability of the narrative is such that they have become impossible to disentangle, lending our myths of domination the rhetoric of liberation and giving our myths of liberation the dark side of a fantasy of domination. Clearly, the consequences of overlapping and confusing the exodus and conquest paradigms are deeply troubling. As one Native American has phrased it, "As long as people believe in the Yahweh of deliverance, the world will not be safe from Yahweh the conqueror."¹⁷

Biblical narratives themselves offer two different explanations for taking the land of Canaan. Yahweh instructs Abraham to leave his home in Ur in order to go to "a land that I will show you." So, on the one hand, the conquest motif has its origins in a promise made to Abraham, a promise that is reiterated to his heirs, Isaac and Jacob, who continue the sojourn toward the land.

To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the Great River, the river Euphrates, the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites. (Gen 15:18-21)

A different version of the origin of the quest for land appears in the Book of Exodus where the promise to Moses is made out of the burning bush as a response to the suffering of the Hebrews in Egypt.

I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow, the home of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now the cry of the sons of Israel has come to me, and I have witnessed the way in which the Egyptians oppress them, so come, I send you. to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, my people, out of Egypt. (Ex 3:7-10)

And then there is an extraordinarily clumsy passage that calls attention to these distinct traditions and self-consciously tries to collate them by harmonizing the promise to Abraham and the promise to Moses, the god of Abraham with the god of Moses, and the hope of conquest with the release of the exodus. It claims that the God of the exodus was unknown to the patriarchs by his name Yahweh, but he was the same deity nonetheless.¹⁸

God spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am Yahweh. To Abraham and Isaac and Jacob I appeared as El Shaddai; I did not

make myself known to them by my name Yahweh. Also, I made my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land they lived in as strangers. And I have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel, enslaved by the Egyptians, and have remembered my covenant. Say this, then, to the sons of Israel, 'I am Yahweh. I will free you of the burdens which the Egyptians lay on you. I will release you from slavery to them, and with my arm outstretched and my strokes of power I will deliver you. I will adopt you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that it is I, Yahweh your God, who have freed you from the Egyptians' burdens. Then I will bring you to the land I swore that I would give to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and will give it to you for your own, I, Yahweh, will do this!'" (Ex 6:2-8)

The passage begins with Yahweh asserting that he has disclosed himself in two different manifestations. He proceeds to invoke the memory of an ancient promise that was made by one version of himself to Israel's forefather; then, as this more recent manifestation, he acknowledges his earlier promise to free the distressed enslaved people, to adopt that people (you will be my people, I will be your God), and to deliver them and give them a land (the land sworn to their ancestors by the other Yahweh, El Shaddai). It concludes with a proud declaration of who will do all of these favors, the one powerful deity. In this editor's account, El Shaddai and Yahweh are thoroughly conflated, just as deliverance and conquest are thoroughly commingled. The nexus of exodus, conquest, monotheism, and possession and the intractable logic that binds them together are set in stark relief: a people are possessed, they are delivered from oppression, they are conferred a land, and all are a ringing endorsement of monotheistic omnipotence.

The appropriation of the myth of exodus/conquest for widely divergent purposes is replicated in biblical scholarship.¹⁹ According to some scholars, the promises of the land are a late creation, dreamed of and written in exile when possession of the land was imperiled. Others argue that the promise of land should be dated

earlier, that it was used to justify claims to the land made by settling Israelites. But this dispute only scratches the surface of a deep scholarly controversy over the conquest of Palestine, a subject that has been the chief preoccupation of biblical scholars for the last century. These scholars, skeptical of the biblical account of the conquest of Canaan with its boast of tearing down Jericho's walls at the blast of trumpets, of the sun standing still so that the Canaanites could be finished off, have developed alternative theories of the conquest of Canaan, ones that rely heavily on archeological data. But the data never seem to point in a conclusive direction; rather, the evidence becomes strangely compatible with the political biases of the scholars analyzing it. Marxists tend to produce theories of peasant revolts; according to their account, a large constituent of the so-called Hebrews were really oppressed Canaanites overthrowing the domination of their city-state overlords. Germans have tended to favor a theory of gradual settlement, maintaining that immigration and assimilation of Hebrews with Canaanites occurred because the seasonal migration of seminomads entailed agreements between herders and farmers. The dominant school of thought in the United States produced theories of invasion of the indigenous population in a massive conquest by outsiders—here, the destruction of key cities in the late thirteenth century offers archeological proof despite our not knowing who or what forces led to that destruction. But all of these historical versions of Israel's taking the promised land turn out to be less violent, less oppressive, and less morally repugnant than the version in the biblical narrative: "and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them" (Deut 7:2).

Replacing this aggression with a more congenial version of the conquest certainly makes the Bible more palatable, but the historian's sleight of hand begs a question of ethical accountability. What happens to the cultural life of the narrative when experts rewrite it, relying on archeology? Does the cultural effect of the violent narrative really diminish? "People who read the narratives read them as they are, not as scholars and experts would like them to be read and

interpreted. History is no longer with us. The narrative remains."²⁰ Narratives like the following:

The people answered, "We have no intention of deserting Yahweh and serving other gods! Was it not Yahweh our God who brought us and our ancestors out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery, who worked those great wonders. . . . What is more, Yahweh drove all those peoples out before us, as well as the Amorites who used to live in this country. We too will serve Yahweh, for he is our God." (Josh 24:16-18)

The story of an oppressed people overthrowing their overlords in a fantasy of conquest produces new difficulties: "If indeed the Canaanites were integral to Israel's early history, the Exodus narratives reflect a situation in which indigenous people put their hope in a god from outside, were liberated from their oppressors, and then saw their story of oppression revised out of the new nation's history of salvation. They were assimilated into another people's identity and the history of their ancestors came to be regarded as suspect and a danger to the safety of Israel. In short, they were betrayed."²¹

In other words, we need to take the ethics of these stories seriously because such stories are the cultural locus where, if anywhere, ethics are encoded. If at first it seems that reassigning the myth of conquest to a disempowered people makes it less offensive, on reflection, using history to rewrite, or write away, the violent narratives may be irresponsible. In the end, whether the people who generated the myth were empowered or disempowered—and making ethics contingent upon power makes a mockery of ethics as an independent court of judgment—whether they were conquerors or oppressed victims seeking liberation, they have bequeathed a myth to future generations that is ethically problematic at best, a myth that advocates the wholesale annihilation of indigenous peoples to take their land.

POLLUTING THE LAND

Denounce your mother, denounce her,
for she is not my wife

nor am I her husband.
Let her rid her face of her whoring,
and her breasts of her adultery,
or else I will strip her naked,
expose her as on the day she was born;
I will make a wilderness of her,
turn her into an arid land,
and leave her to die of thirst.

(Hos 2:2-3)

A stubborn emphasis on oneness asserts itself in preoccupations with purity. Whether as singleness (this God against the others) or totality (this is all the God there is), monotheism abhors, reviles, rejects, and ejects whatever it defines as outside its compass. "Defilement," writes the anthropologist Mary Douglas, "is never an isolated event. It cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas. . . . the only way in which pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought whose key-stone boundaries, margins and internal lines are held in relation by rituals of separation."²² Monotheism is just such a "total structure of thought" that legislates separation: "I am set apart and you must be set apart like me" (Lev 20:26). "Be Holy for I am Holy" is how that divine command is often translated. "Holiness," then, is literally set-apartness, and that which is set apart is also spoken of as pure or clean.

Classifying land as either clean or unclean is pivotal to this system. Leviticus asserts that the land must be kept undefiled or else its inhabitants will be ejected, "vomited" out of the land. The purity of the land is determined by its people following all the laws, especially the law of fidelity to one deity. When Israel is not monotheistic, it is filthy and it pollutes the land.

You must keep all my laws, all my customs, and put them into practice: thus you will not be vomited out by the land where I am taking you to live. You must not follow the laws of the nations that I expel to make way for you; they practiced all these things and for this I have come to detest them. I have told you already: You shall take possession of their soil, I myself

Chapter Two

will give you possession of it, a land where milk and honey flow. I, Yahweh your God, have set you apart from these peoples. Therefore you must set the clean animal apart from the unclean, the unclean bird apart from the clean. Do not defile yourselves with these animals or birds, or things that creep on the ground; I have made you set them apart as unclean. (Lev 20:22-25)

The things that are set apart are not only certain animals, specific birds, things that creep on the ground, and God. All of these purity laws are designed to set *Israel* apart, to create its discrete identity.

Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, "I am Yahweh your God. You must not behave as they do in Egypt, where you once lived; you must not behave as they do in Canaan, where I am taking you. You must not follow their laws. You must follow my customs and keep my laws." (Lev 18:2-4)

Monotheism/monogamy/land become a nexus in a system of ownership wherein Israel, women, and land are owned so they can be delimited, and delimited so that they can be owned. Women must be monogamous and Israel must worship Yahweh alone, or the land will be polluted. Furthermore, foreign marriages defile the land; alliances with other peoples defile the land; syncretistic worship practices defile the land; and the land must be held in perpetuity—with no pieces of it cultivated by foreigners—or it is defiled.

Be very careful, as you value your life, to love Yahweh your God. But if you prove faithless, if you make friends with the remnant of those peoples who are still left beside you, if you form kinships with them and intermarry, then know for certain that Yahweh your God will no longer drive these peoples before you; instead, they will be a snare and a pitfall for you, a scourge to your sides and thorns in your eyes, till you vanish from this good land which Yahweh your God has given you. (Josh 23:11-13)

The stipulation that Israel retains the land only on the condition of obedience is surrounded by "holiness codes," rules for observing

purity in sacrifice, sexual practices, social intercourse, and specific ritual laws for the priesthood.²³ Leviticus enumerates sexual practices considered so detestable that to commit them defiles both the offender and the land. In this remarkable passage, the wholesale ejection of foreign peoples is attributed to their unclean sexual practices. Israel is forewarned:

Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these practices, for it was by such things that the nations that I have expelled to make way for you made themselves unclean. The land became unclean. I exacted the penalty for its fault, and the land had to vomit out its inhabitants. (Lev 18:24–25)

Sexual practices might seem a rather unusual justification for conquest until we delve deeper into the logic that binds sexuality and the land together in both biblical law and narrative, a logic committed to erecting carefully drawn boundaries of identity.

When Leviticus enumerates the violations that would result in being vomited from the land, it primarily specifies various understandings of incest.²⁴ The first is generic: "No one may approach a woman who is closely related to him, to uncover her nakedness. I am Yahweh" (Lev 18:6). Those relations are further specified: father, mother, father's wife, sister (mother's or father's daughter), daughter of son or daughter, daughter of father's wife, father's sister, mother's sister, father's brother or his wife, daughter-in-law, brother's wife, a woman and her daughter. Finally, homosexuality and sodomy are prohibited. For all of the many injunctions elsewhere against exogamy—you shall not marry a foreigner or she will be a snare, a thorn, and so forth—here the emphasis is curiously on regulating endogamy. Distinctiveness draws boundaries at both ends of the spectrum, exiling the Other and prohibiting the Same, and whether the foreigner or the close relative is off-limits, the principle holds: distinction making is the key to holiness. Incest is threatening because it blurs distinctions as surely as intermarriage does: if a son slept with his sister and she conceived, would their offspring be a sister or a daughter? In this light, it is interesting that homosexuality and sodomy are not listed with exogamous threats but with endogamous

Chapter Two

ones: both same-sex partners *and* animals are too close. Laws that take such pains to specify which sexual partners violate distinctive boundaries are trying to define an equally specific identity for Israel, one forged in that carefully delineated zone between the foreigner and the relative.

The link between sexuality and land pollution reaches a frenzied pitch in the obsession with that most heinous of offenses, prostitution: "Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute; thus, the land will not be prostituted and filled with incest" (Lev 19:29). A body/land analogy governs the rhetoric that describes women and land as possessions (of one man/deity), women and land as faithful or idolatrous, women and land as monogamous or adulterous, women and land as fertile or barren. But women and land are not only analogous; they become causes and effects in this system of monotheism/monogamy. When Israel worships a foreign deity, she is a harlot, the land is made barren, and she is ejected from the land. Yahweh speaks to Israel:

Lift your eyes to the high places and look!
Is there a single place where you have not offered your body?
You waited by the roadside for clients
like an Arab in the desert.
You have polluted the country
with your prostitution and your vices:
this is why the showers have been withheld,
the late rains have not come.

(Jer 3:2-3)

The laws collude with this metaphor of Israel as a subjugated and disobedient woman: in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22, both the man and the woman who engage in adultery must die; in Deuteronomy 22:20-21, a bride who cannot prove her virginity must be stoned to death. "Adultery in this larger context is understood not only as an aberration of personal behavior, but also as a social disorder with religious implications: adultery is a disturbance of the order of social relations established by God.²⁵ The "alien woman"—another man's wife—has forgotten the covenant of God

(Prov 2:17), and the link between such faithlessness and landlessness is overt: Those who go to the foreign woman "delight in the perversities of the wicked whose paths are crooked" (Prov 2:14-15).

For her house bows down to death, and her tracks to the departed. All going in to her do not return, nor do they reach the paths of life. . . . For the upright shall live (in) the land; and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth; and the transgressors shall be rooted up from it. (Prov 2:18-22)

The biblical "alien woman" has been described succinctly: "she is an archetype of disorder at all levels of existence."²⁶ A word for the outcast, the Other, *zārā*, is also used to refer to this alien woman.

This thinking about possessing land and women explains what otherwise may seem like an odd law stipulating that a divorced woman, once remarried, cannot return to her former husband without defiling the land (Deut 24:1-4). First, the familiar analogy: like the land, the woman must not be cultivated by foreigners; but analogy deepens into causation: because the woman is cultivated by strangers, she pollutes the land. Finally, analogy and causation deepen further into outright identification. The land itself must be faithful, or it will be disinherited as surely as King Lear's ungrateful daughter: "nothing will come of nothing."

If a man divorces his wife
and she leaves him
to marry someone else,
may she still go back to him?
Has not that piece of land
been totally polluted?
And you, who have prostituted yourself with so many lovers,
you would come back to me?—it is Yahweh who speaks.
(Jer 3:1-2)

My allusion to Lear is not incidental. In Jeremiah, it is not only the husband or lover who is betrayed, but also the father by his daughter.

Chapter Two

A perceived scarcity of love—"I had thought you would never cease to follow only me"—issues in a scarcity of property.

And I was thinking:
How I wanted to rank you with my sons,
and give you a country of delights,
the fairest heritage of all the nations!
I had thought you would call me, my father,
and would never cease to follow me.
But like a woman betraying her lover,
the House of Israel has betrayed me—
it is Yahweh who speaks.

(Jer 3:19-20)

And when Jeremiah envisions Israel returning from exile, it is as a disloyal daughter reformed and as a disloyal wife returning to her husband.

Come home, virgin of Israel,
come home to these towns of yours.
How long will you hesitate, disloyal daughter?
For Yahweh is creating something new on earth:
the Woman sets out to find her Husband again.

(Jer 31:21-22)

A disloyal son and an unfaithful wife: these are immensely resonant metaphors. Freud would have had a heyday with the family drama they are symptoms of: peacefully inheriting versus oedipal rivalry, the elevation and degradation of women, and demands of loyalty enforced with castigation. This intimacy between the biblical and Freudian family scenarios, one I elaborate in the next chapter, is no accident, for both rest on the same principle, the belief in scarcity. Psychoanalysis is not the only discourse that has tried to critique these monotheistic assumptions about property, women, and ownership, only to replicate them. Western culture is laced throughout with a variety of institutions, marriage laws, laws concerning the rights of so-called minors, sodomy laws, and a less overt but equally insidious bourgeois morality that specifies which sexual practices and

partners are permissible as strictly as Leviticus. These institutions that reduce women to property—wives owned by their husbands, daughters owned by their fathers—are stubborn institutions that are the heirs of the monotheistic thinking about scarcity that have kept misogyny alive and well long after the biblical period, institutions that regard a sullied property—a land shared by a foreigner, an adulterous woman—and other variations of multiple allegiances (multiple gods, if you will), as anathema. The tentacles of the injunction “you shall have no other gods before me” reach throughout our social formations, structuring identity as a delimited possession with a remarkable grip.

WHORES IN EXILE

Ezekiel 16, the extended allegory of Israel as a whore, brings the relation between whores, exile, and monotheism (adultery, defiled land, and idolatry) into sharp focus. It is the story of a child being born and growing up wild and unloved in the field, and when she matures into puberty, of her being owned, sexually and materially, by Yahweh.

And I passed by you and I looked on you and behold, your time was the time of love. And I spread my skirt over you and I covered your nakedness. And I swore to you and I entered into a covenant with you and you became Mine.

She is now washed, anointed, dressed, wrapped, covered, and adorned with silks, fine linen, embroidery, gold, and silver. “And you were very beautiful and you advanced to regal estate. And your name went out among the nations, because of your beauty; for it was perfect, by My Splendor which I had set on you.”

But then young Israel commits adultery with the nations: with Egypt, Assyria, Canaan, Chaldea—with, not incidentally, all of Israel's enemies.

At every head of the highway you have built your high place and have made your beauty despised, and have parted your feet

to all who passed by, and have multiplied your fornications. You have whored with the sons of Egypt. . . . You have whored with the sons of Assyria without being satisfied. You have multiplied your fornication in the land of Canaan.

But this adulteress has not, strictly speaking, been a harlot, for she has not taken wages; instead, she has done all the giving, even paying her lovers for their services. "The adulterous wife: instead of her husband, she takes strangers. They give a gift to all harlots, but you give your gifts to all your lovers, and bribe them to come to you from all around, for your fornication." Presumably, Israel the harlot would be superior to Israel the adulteress, for she would receive property instead of giving her property away, and that careful distinction offers a clue that, throughout this harangue against the adulteress, the issue is less sexual morality than ownership of property. The emphasis on property is underscored by the punishment of the adulteress. She will be stripped of her garments, of her wealth; Israel will be stripped naked and then brutally stoned and stabbed.²⁷

Because your lewdness was poured out and your nakedness was bared, in your fornications with your lovers and the idols of your abominations . . . therefore I will gather all your lovers with whom you have been pleased, even all whom you have loved with all whom you have hated, and I will uncover your nakedness to them, and they will see all your nakedness. . . . They shall also strip you of your clothes and shall take your beautiful things and leave you naked and bare . . . and they shall stone you with stones and cut you with their swords.

It is worth noting that the word for "uncover," *galâ*, also means "go into exile." No longer "covered," the adulteress is no longer "owned" from one point of view, no longer "protected" from another. Israel has become a whore in exile.²⁸

A fascinating anthropological field study of Turkey relates a "monogenetic theory" of procreation—the idea that the male is the creator and the woman the vessel or medium of growth—to monotheism, exploring the symbolic relationship between procreation and

creation, between genesis at the human and the divine level. Muslims characterize the male and female roles in the procreative process in terms of seed and field (*tehom ve tarla*). "The man is said to plant the seed (*töhum*) and the woman is like the field (*tarla*) in which it is planted."²⁹ The Qur'an legitimizes this use: "Women are given to you as fields to be sown, so go to them and sow [your seed] as you wish" (Sura 2:223). The seed-soil theory of procreation is projected onto God where, "omnipresent and invisible," it justifies the dominance of men as the natural order of things. Men/god create. Women are the soil, or to be more precise, the field, and that distinction is important: soil is spoken of as either barren or fertile but is not otherwise demarcated; in contrast, a field is defined, enclosed, "covered" by ownership—like a woman who wears a head scarf is covered, closed, that is, under the ownership of a man, whether father, husband, brother, or son. "A woman who is uncovered is open, hence common property, promiscuous."³⁰ And an open field, like an open woman, requires closing or covering, that is, owning. At the heart of the extreme measures taken to "protect" women in Muslim societies—veiling, early marriage, seclusion, and clitoridectomy—are efforts to possess them. These are "various methods to enclose the human fields, like the earthly ones, in order that a man may be assured that the produce is his own."³¹ "Monogenesis implies monogamy at least for women."³² And projected onto divinity, it also implies monotheism.

Monotheism, then, is not simply a myth of one-ness, but a doctrine of possession, of a people by God, of a land by a people, of women by men. The drive to own property issues in the deep homology between possessing a woman's body and possessing land. Both are conquerable territory, it would seem, connected not only by the familiar fertility imagery of plowing and planting but also by the property images of boundaries and borders. In the Bible, this assumes the shape of a preoccupation with physical wholeness, with not allowing borders to leak even though they are everywhere open. A host of bodily emissions, from blood to semen, are considered unclean.³³ "A menstruating woman is considered impure for seven days and contaminates anything upon which she sits or lies during

that period. Anyone who has contact with her or with anything she has contaminated is considered impure";³⁴ and notably, Israel is compared to a menstruating woman, considered unclean due to having foreign inhabitants (Ezra 9:11). In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas has forcefully demonstrated the imaginative correlation between boundaries of the body and boundaries of society: "the threatened boundaries of [the] body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity, and purity of the physical body."³⁵ Nuancing this insight further by asking why some bodily emissions are contaminating while others are not, another scholar has concluded that, in ancient Israel, the impurity laws reflect what "poses a threat to the integrity of Israelite lineage." Incest, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and the prohibition against intercourse during menstruation are linked together as prohibitions because they threaten the clarity of lines of descent. "Concern that the social body be perpetuated was inscribed in worries over losses to the human body."³⁶ Sexual possession and prohibition are devoted to defining and delimiting the identity of a people, even a people who insist upon blurring lines of descent, that is, on participating in other identities.

But the effort to produce communities through possession and prohibition backfires. Rather than the peaceful exchange of intermarriage to forge cohesive communities, the impulse to define, to delimit, and to possess propels violence. Cognizant of the violence inhering in ownership, the ascetic tradition joins its commitment to peace to renunciation of sex and possessions. In contrast, the Serbs offer us a terrible modern example of the violence of binding collective identity to the conquest and possession of land and women. As Serbs have taken over territory inhabited by Muslims, they have murdered men and systematically raped women, holding them in captivity during their pregnancy in order to claim not only land but progeny. Still, the quest to own both land and women is perpetually frustrated, and when the impulse to own them is unsuccessful, that very frustration becomes a source of violence, against women and against the other men who claim them. It seems we kill in order to own and we kill because we cannot own. And this has been given legitimacy in religion: while biblical theology insists that Israel is the

possession of the Lord, the narratives suggest that Israel cannot be so possessed. Even the Almighty kills his people because he cannot command their loyalty, cannot, that is, fully own them.

Later elaborations of monotheism sought to avoid this frustration by elaborating a version of loyalty that was not given (or exacted) under threat of violence, but made inevitable, planted in the very hearts and souls of the faithful. In the biblical prophets' efforts to reinvigorate Israel's identity through monotheism, they describe allegiance to Yahweh as an inscription on Israel's very heart.

See, the days are coming—it is Yahweh who speaks—when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel (and the House of Judah), but not a covenant like the one I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine, so I had to show them who was master. . . . No, this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel when those days arrive. Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they will be my people. (Jer 31:31–33)

I will give them a different heart so that they will always fear me. . . . I will make an everlasting covenant with them; I will not cease in my efforts for their good, and I will put respect for me into their hearts, so that they turn from me no more. (Jer 32:39–40)

That covenant will not be in stone, but in the “fleshy tables of the heart.” John Donne shockingly depicts such a physical inscription of divinity as rape, even if it is a bondage he relishes.

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except y' enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.³⁷

To be devoted to God, the poet and divine says, demands an act of violent identity transformation in which the individual will is made captive to divine will. The religious life is one of complete possession and utter subjection.

Chapter Two

In the Book of Hosea, two completely contradictory images of Israel's relation to the land are elaborated. The land is depicted as both a prostitute and a wilderness: as a prostitute, because Israel worships foreign gods; as a wilderness, to reflect the nomadic ideal of wandering over land, rather than owning it. Both metaphors depict a margin—a social one in which a woman is not an exclusive possession and a territorial one in which land is outside the boundaries of possession. One image is reviled—the land as a prostitute violates the contract that Israel is the exclusive possession of Yahweh—while one is celebrated—the land as a wilderness depicts a nostalgic return to the birth of Israel. Born in the wilderness, the hope is that Israel will be reborn there. But we cannot plausibly read Hosea as a ringing endorsement of an unlanded ideal, for in the end, the period in the wilderness is cast as an interim, a precondition to reentering the cultivated land—the *owned* land—and when the woman is sent into the wilderness, it is hardly to acknowledge that she is not an object of possession. Instead, it is to purge her so that she can be more completely possessed.

That is why I am going to lure her
and bring her out into the wilderness
and speak to her heart.

I am going to give her back her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a gateway of hope.³⁸

Then she will answer there, as in the days of her youth, and as
the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt.

.....
I will betroth you to me for ever.

Yes, I will betroth you with righteousness and in judgment,
with mercy and in compassion;

and I will betroth you to me in faithfulness,
and you shall know Yahweh.

And it shall be in that day—it is Yahweh who speaks—I will
answer.

I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth,
and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil,

and they shall answer Jezreel.
I will sow her in the earth,
I will love Unloved;
I will say to No-People-of-Mine, "You are my people,"
and he will answer, "You are my God."

(Hos 2:14-23)


Psalmists, rabbis, priests, and theologians have all waxed eloquent about the moving sentiments contained herein. The notions of the "tenderness" (*hēšed*), love, mercy, and compassion of God are the hallmarks of Hosea's prophecy as surely as his inveighing against Israel's whoredom is: nonetheless, all of these sentiments are in the service of an unrelenting ideology of possessive monotheism.³⁹ The prophecy of Hosea begins with God renouncing Israel, a rejection that is acted out symbolically by the prophet, who is told to marry a whore and then repudiate her and her children.

When Yahweh first spoke through Hosea, Yahweh said this to him, "Go, marry a whore, and get children with a whore, for the country itself has become nothing but a whore by lusting away from Yahweh." So he went; and he took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, who conceived and bore him a son. "Name him Jezreel," Yahweh told him, "for it will not be long before I make the House of Jehu pay for the bloodshed at Jezreel and I put an end to the sovereignty of the House of Israel. When that day comes, I will break Israel's bow in the Valley of Jezreel." (Hos 1:2-5)

That first allusion to Jezreel refers to the place where the descendants of (the wicked) Omri were massacred by Jehu. But in a later passage Jezreel is invoked in a different context of forgiveness and conciliation in which Yahweh takes Israel back; there, the etymology of Jezreel, "God sows," is called to mind. Jezreel asks that God sow the earth, and the appeal he makes is now answered: "I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel." This renewed divine commitment to Israel's prosperity issues in an exclu-

Chapter Two

sive eternal bond with Israel, "I will betroth you in faithfulness," and in the possession of Israel, "You are my people." And then, in that stark image of Yahweh taking Israel to him, the conjunction of the land's fertility to sexual possession is crystallized: "And I will sow her to me in the earth." A long and rich tradition of theological speculation idealizes love in Hosea, depicting it as a love freely given in contrast to one exacted, celebrating fidelity to God as the highest of human endeavors, but the distinction between a voluntary fidelity and being owned blurs troublingly when we note that it is only when Unloved says "My God"—acknowledging his possessor—that he is loved, and that this so-called love is manifest when Yahweh says to No-People-of-Mine, "You are my people." Israel must be the exclusive possession of her deity. Her identity is defined and her land is confined by that possession, and multiple allegiances are prohibited, are, in fact, the grounds for exile and even extinction.



The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
© 1997 by Regina M. Schwartz
All rights reserved. Published 1997
Printed in the United States of America
13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 5 4 3

ISBN (cloth): 0-226-74199-0
ISBN (paper): 0-226-74200-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schwartz, Regina M.

The curse of Cain : the violent legacy of monotheism /
Regina M. Schwartz.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-226-74199-0 (alk. paper)

1. Ethnicity—Biblical teaching. 2. Ethnology in the Bible.
3. Violence—Religious aspects—Christianity. 4. Mono-
theism—Controversial literature. I. Title.

BS661.S35 1997

221.8'3036—dc20

96-43269

CIP

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum require-
ments of the American National Standard for Information Sci-
ences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI
Z39.48-1992.