

**Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, University of Chicago Press, 1997 (excerpts)**

***Chapter Two — OWNING IDENTITY: LAND (pp. 62-76)***

**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 and 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." 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 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. 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. 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 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 .2' 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." 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.

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 an 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.

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.

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 (*tohum*) and the woman is like the field (*tarla*) in which it is planted." 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." 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." "Monogenesis implies monogamy at least for women." 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. "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"; 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." 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." 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.

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.

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.  
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" (*hesed*), 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. 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 exclusive 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. But the sexual possession so deeply entrenched in monotheism assumes its most explicit form, not in these metaphors of owning land and being exiled from it, but in another way of constructing Israel's identity, through kinship.

## **Chapter Five – Inscribing Identity: Memory (pp. 175f.)**

To open the biblical canon is my concluding call, and by that I do not mean some partial commentary of sanctified unalterable authoritative texts, but a genuine rewriting of traditions: new creation stories, new exoduses, new losses, and new recoveries of what is lost. Despite the intransigent and tragic scarcities that are part of our condition in the world, at least memories need not be in short supply. While there can be no easy causation between the proliferation of memories and the politics of communities, nonetheless, the fact that the communities that identify themselves with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all claim versions of these stories, adding to them, revising them, and that other communities continue to rewrite them in a secular vernacular, suggests that we may not be able to completely escape biblical myths as our cultural inheritance, and so the best we can do is rewrite them in a new key. And so here I have offered my small contribution to that far more illustrious history of rewritings, one in which Luther read all of the Bible through his belief that faith is the promise of redemption, in which Milton read the Bible as asserting individual moral victories in the face of constant struggles against the chaos of sin, in which Blake read the Bible through the lenses of an oppressed imagination trying to free itself from the chains of creation's order, and in which Freud read the Bible as a drama of a primal horde's ambivalent struggle with patricidal urges. My re-vision would produce an alternative Bible that subverts the dominant vision of violence and scarcity with an ideal of plenitude and its corollary ethical imperative of generosity. It would be a Bible embracing multiplicity instead of monotheism. And I hope that this description of the Bible will also serve to describe its future, that it will not only tell of proliferation, but that new versions, decrying the violence of monotheism, will proliferate. When I began this project, I anticipated concluding with the injunction from Augustine to "close the Book." For him, faith had superseded it; for me, its ancient agonistic values are far too dangerous to continue authorizing. But I have come to understand that same urge in a new light. The old "monotheistic" Book must be closed so that the new books may be fruitful and multiply. After all, that was the first commandment.